

WHEN JEUNO FELL

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*A firsthand account
from the boy who lost it
all to end the War for
Vana'diel.*

Entries

<i>Foreword</i>	7
<i>How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Aim for the Head</i>	8
Day T-9 - The Calm.....	8
Day T-3 - The Good in the Bad.....	8
Day 0 - Hell's Mouth	8
Day 1 - On The Good Ship Lollipop	9
Day 6 - Around The World in 5 Days	9
Day 7 - A Note	10
Day 8 - It's Not Easy Being a Mage	10
Day 9 - The Black Mage Cannon.....	10
Day 10 - Our Mission (Should we choose to accept it...)	10
Day 11 - Yeah, we had to accept it.....	11
Day 12 - Parley.....	12
Early Morning	12
Midday	13
Evening	13
Day 13 - Let The Bodies Hit The Floor	14
Day 14 - Almost Easy	15
Day 15 - The Power of the Mithkabob	15
Day 16 - Somebody Set Up Us The Bomb	15
Day 17 - Don't feed the animals.....	16
Day 18 - Working Men.....	16
Morning.....	16
Night.....	17
Day 19 - Tribal Traditions	17
Noon	17
Evening	18
Day 20 - A Mathematical Error	18
Morning.....	18

Afternoon.....	19
Day 21 – This is the Day that never ends	19
Early morning.....	19
Morning.....	20
Day 21 – Limit Break.....	20
Noon	20
Night:	21
Day 24 – A Different Sort of Army	22
Dawn.....	22
Night.....	22
Day 25 – Insomnia.....	23
3:25am.....	23
Day 27 – Everybody Was Kung–Fu Fighting.....	24
Breakfast	24
Dinner	26
Day 35 – How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Aim for the Head.....	27
<i>A Thousand Shades of Blue</i>	<i>29</i>
Day 47 – Welcome to the Jungle	29
Day 48 – The Pain of Life and Death.....	29
Day 49 – One Last Breath	29
Day 50 – Whispering in the Wind	30
Day 53 – The Road East.....	30
Selim	31
Day 63 – Alive, Not Well	32
Day 64 – White Winds	32
Day 65 – Cute as a Quilt	32
Day 66 – He’s Just a Poor Boy	33
He Needs No Sympathy	33
Easy Come, Easy Go.....	34
Little High	34
Little Low.....	35

Nothing Really Matters To Him	35
Day 67 – The Art of War	36
Day 71 – He Who Sits Behind the Rows	36
Day 72 – Of Mice and of Men.....	37
Day 75 – War Drums.....	39
Day 77 – Back in Black.....	40
Day 78 – A Change of Seasons	41
Part 1	41
Part 2	42
Part 3	43
Part 4	45
Part 5	46
Day 79 – With A Little Help From My Friends	48
Day 80 – Business, As Usual	49
Day 81 – Our Final Hours.....	49
Day 82 –A Thousand Shades of Blue.....	50
A Final Goodbye	51
<i>On A Pale Chocobo.....</i>	<i>52</i>
Day 85 – Waterlogged	52
Day 86 – Asking Questions, Searching For Clues	52
Day 87 – The Fourfold Battle	53
Morning.....	53
Noon	53
Evening	55
Day 88 – Like Scooby and the Mystery Inc., Let’s Split Up Gang!	56
Noon	57
Sunset	57
Day 90 – Death and Disorder.....	58
Day 92 – Like Fire, Hellfire.....	59
A Long Evening, of the Undesirable Kind	59
Like A Scene From A Memory	63

In The Real World	65
The Road No Longer Traveled.....	66
Day 93 - Cleanup Committee	67
Early Evening	67
Betwixt and in Between The Days	68
Day 94 - Welcome Home	69
Morning.....	69
Mid Noon	70
Evening	72
Day 95 - A Day Cut Short	73
Dawn.....	73
Noon	75
Day 99 - With Love from Jack and Tony.....	75
Recap - Part 1	75
Recap - Part 2.....	76
Recap - Part 3.....	77
Recap - Part 4.....	78
Recap - Part 5.....	79
Recap - Part 6.....	81
Recap - Part 7.....	82
Recap - Part 8.....	84
Recap - Part 9.....	84
Recap - Part 10.....	86
Recap - Part 11	87
Recap - Part 12.....	88
Recap - Part 13.....	90
For Real, Now	92
Late Evening	93
Day 100 - On A Pale Chocobo	93
Early Morning	93
Evening	94

To Those Who Stood By Me	96
<i>Tears of Scarlet, Tears of Gold</i>	97
Day 104 – Tales of Black and White	97
Day 107 – Memories of Light and Waves	97
Day 108 – A Word from Our Sponsors	98
Maje	98
Sectumsempra.....	99
Day 115 – Terror Tactics	99
Sectumsempra.....	99
Maje	100
Day 118 – Caving In	100
Day 119 – Aggressive Negotiations	100
Day 120 – Breaking	103
Day 121 – The Fall of a Peoples	105
Day 127 – Against My Orders	105
Day 128 – Nice Hair	106
Day 130 – Maybe She’s a Lion	107
Day 132 – Animal I Have Become.....	107
Recap	108
The Realm of the Living.....	109
Day 135 – The Taming of the Shrewd	110
In The Land of Twilight.....	110
Trapped Inside My Self	111
Under The Moon.....	111
Day 142 – For The Bad of the Good	112
Day 149 – Better This Way	114
Revvng The Engine to 88MP/h.....	114
Across The Universe	115
Day 152 – Planning Ahead.....	116
Day 164: Tears of Scarlet, Tears of Gold.....	116
The Final Pages	116

Funeral For A Friend, Love Lies Bleeding; Scarlet and Gold	118
<i>Kaleidoscopic Memories</i>	120
Day 191 - Tundra Diving.....	120
Day 193 - Plotting Demise	120
Day 198 - The First Step.....	120
Day 199 - Reflection	122
Day 200 - Counsel of Elders	122
Day 201 - Close Calls.....	123
Day 203 - Filth	123
Day 209 - Curiousness.....	124
Day 211 - Forgotten Days	124
Day 212 - Crazy Nights	126
Day 215 - Accidentally Easy	131
Day 218 - The Hunt.....	132
Day 219 - Convulsions and Revelations.....	132
Day 220 - Kaleidoscopic Memories	133
<i>Finale</i>	137

Foreword

There are many individuals in this world that do great deeds, and there always have been, but there are few that go so totally above and beyond what a person of *any* race should have to do to that we call them heroes. There have been a handful of great heroes, some of whom are compiling this very work, but so very few throughout time simply rose to the crises out of the world's sheer need for them, with nothing really to gain. Sectumsempra was just a boy when the *War for Vana'diel* first broke out. There was no military, there was no militia; there was simple him and a "motley crew", as he used to refer to it, of people that were expected to kill the familiar faces that now wanted to destroy them.

When he had first come to the Eastern Empire on an airship, he was a timid child that was quickly down the path to having a full emotional breakdown. The second time he came back, he had been on the verge of life and death, and when he recovered he had ended the problems The Eastern Empire of Aht Urhgan had at great personal sacrifice to his own wellbeing, going so far as to push his body to a point where the only thing binding him to his own life was his will to save his old life. He was a man that Aht Urhgan is forever in debt to.

He kept fighting, even when his hope was lost or his will—or various body parts—had been broken. He kept trying to save the world because he felt like no matter how many times that he had been wrong that everyone deserved another chance. He even went so far as to return to the Southern Continent of Olzhirya after being tortured profusely in order to finally show them what they were facing.

He was more than a hero; he was a peacemaker. He had united various races and species without discrimination; he cared not if it was said that Altana made a creature or Promathia did. He parleyed with Beast Men, and forever regretted what he had to do in my own continent because of the profound sin against life he felt he had committed. He was a pure heart in a time where purity was being defiled at every turn.

He had fallen many times, and each time he rose again because he was forced to or because he truly believed that he could not afford to stay down. I am not simply proud to say that I met Sectumsempra, I am absolutely in *awe* of having met him.

He may have been part of a Strike Team, he may have led an army that I had given him, but the War truly ended by his hands, and his hands alone.

Above all others, he is the one being that I will never be able to forget, for everything. The only regret I have in my life is that the world could do so pitifully little for the one that saved it.

How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Aim for the Head

*Extracted from the first recovered diary of
Sectumsempra.*

Day T-9 - The Calm

I've been hearing some odd talk lately about some sort of rabies going around; reminds me of when the black wolfs around Bastok got crazy a few years back and started coming out during the day and biting any who they crossed. I hear over yon in Bastok, Cid's been busy trying to find some sort of cure or reason for it with the help of an Elvaan doctor from Jeuno. Sure as hell hope that it's nothing, because I can't take the hit; soup just doesn't make nearly as much money as sushi, and I really gotta pay to finish my schooling in Windurst.

Day T-3 - The Good in the Bad

Well, I was able to afford a new staff and ring because everyone is panicking and stocking up on soups or medicines (oh boy, Megan Fox is really fortunate I let her set her use my shop to start herself off a few weeks ago; she'll be ready to open alone in no time). The customers, they really won't tell me much; even though I'm their cook, I'm still just a kid to most of them. A new customer wandered in today--I do believe his name was Lu Doggy--and told me that he was being followed during the night by something creepy, but couldn't figure it out.

Day 0 - Hell's Mouth

Today, I killed my best friend. Everything happened so... so fast. Last night and early into this morning Jeuno was flooded with travelers from all over. I heard a few of them were pretty messed up and taken into hospitalization on the upper parts of the city. My shop was kept so busy today that I had to hire a few tarus off the street to help out. People were grouping together to stay safe. I figured that whatever was going on, Jeuno would be fine; right? It was the massive city of our world.

Then it happened. Around midday, everything went crazy from tension. People started attacking each other over simple arguments; an Elvaan ranger held me at gun point around one in the day and told me to empty out my safe as he gathered all the supplies. Unfortunately for him, Wolfgang just so happened to be on a supply run for Doctor Monberaux, whom had just arrived back from Bastok a few hours ago.

Later on, Meg came back from a break with a bite mark on her arm. We cleaned her up best we could. She said that some creep came out of the shadows and attacked her. She was pretty shaken up, but we got her disinfected in time. I could only think, though: they said that whatever was going around was like rabies: could that mean...

It did mean that. By dinnertime, Jeuno was a mob scene. There was a fire ravaging through Ru'Lude gardens and people were attacking each other. I didn't understand what was going on until I heard some groans coming from the back of the shop where Meg was laying down. I locked up my door again and went to see if I could do anything for Meg.

She had "turned" to something of nightmares. I saw her hovering over the body of one of the tarus I employed that day and...

I can't. I can't say it, but I can write it. Just... need a second.

She was digging into its stomach with her teeth, just ripping it to shreds with those sharp Mithran teeth of her's. She saw me and dropped the taru and started walking towards me.

I panicked, really, really badly. I called out to her to stop but she kept walking. Looking back, I should have bound her and gotten the hell out of there.

But I didn't. She lunged at me and all my lessons flew through my head at once as my time learning dark arts took over. I grabbed my stave and held it out, and she was stunned. I looked her in the eyes and saw nothing left of my friend in them. With a flourish and an incantation I began casting a spell that I knew would kill her.

I electrocuted Meg, my best friend, with such power that her body crumbled. I stumbled to the door and ran through the chaos.

It was hell out there. Jeuno was overtaken by lawlessness and "turned." Now here I am, hiding out on an airship with a few other survivors led by the Ducal Guards. We'll have to dock for fuel in a few hours, but for now we're all left wondering: what the hell was going on?

Day 1 – On The Good Ship Lollipop

Pherimociel, one of the Ducal Guards, almost got us all killed. While the others slept, "safe" aboard our airship, he also "turned." Apparently, even the spit of those that have been "turned" can turn someone else. I was awake, sitting on the back of the deck and writing in this book. It's all I've got left. Pherimociel stumbled down to the deck and began sniffing the air like a wolf looking for prey. I think the turned can smell fear, because he looked where I was (even though I wasn't in sight with only the faint traces of light there were) and began stumbling to me. I grabbed my stave, but my throat locked up. I wasn't a killer: I couldn't do this. I couldn't even scream. That was when I heard the voice of a tarutaru yell out, "Not the boy, you son of a bitch!" and watched as Pherimociel suddenly exploded. The taru's name was Dasva, and I owe my life to her. All I remember was finally passing out then.

Day 6 – Around The World in 5 Days

Bastok was almost empty. I'm starting to get used to all the dead bodies hanging around. We tried to appeal to the Empress of Al Zabi for sanctuary last night but she refused: she could not risk

bringing the plague to her own lands. She offered condolences and resupplied us with fresh food and materials, which was great because we were pretty much out. The survivors and the ducal guards had a meeting while we were docked, talking about the need to stick together and help ourselves run. I'm the only one on the ship that has a massive background of cooking, so I've been elected the chef of the ship. We keep trying to hang on to some vestiges of society, despite the rumors over the intercoms from the other airships that life is pretty much destroying itself down there.

Day 7 – A Note

We're going to have to dock back in Jeuno. Oh god...

Day 8 – It's Not Easy Being a Mage

This morning Wolfgang organized another meeting where he split us up by our talents fighting. When I had reached the front of the line to tell him my credentials he put his hand on my shoulder and asked if I was hanging in there. I guess being a kid in the middle of all this makes people care a bit more about you. He asked what I was trained in besides crafts, to which I could only reply "I can cast almost every spell, white or black or forbidden, but I've never finished formal education in any one of them." Wolfgang looked at his list, stroking his chin, and simply said, "Then you're part of our special op's unit. That makes two. Go to the captain's cabin."

So I went, and who would have thought: the only other person there was the taru that saved my life, whom I now know to be Dasva.

Day 9 – The Black Mage Cannon

Our "Special Ops Unit" consists of a handful of people that are to go on the most suicidal of missions. One of them is a mithra ranger that could probably kill me fourteen ways by the time I could cast a stun spell--my teacher says I need more fast cast. She's the leader of our group and answers only to Wolfgang. She doesn't talk much, but I think her name is Alyria. Wolfgang spoke to Dasva and I in privacy; Dasva, apparently, was wanted for a slew of crimes and was offered total amnesty if the world was ever to go back to normal. Part of this deal was that Dasva would get my mage skills into shape so that we could start to assemble a "Cannon." Dasva knows much, and so long as I show willingness to listen and learn, I sense that I will have no problem with my new "teacher." Wolfgang also made me write down the hundred or so recipes I could remember off the top of my head in case I died in battle. Joyous.

Day 10 – Our Mission (Should we choose to accept it...)

Yesterday was the first "mission" for my team. We docked in Port Jeuno and the sound of an airship attracted all those who had turned. Our mission: secure Delkfutt's Tower. They were going to drop us off and come back in 10 days. On the tenth day, we were supposed to guide them to Delkfutt. The others were going to mob-raid on Bastok to rescue Cid, who sent a distress beacon out. My group and I

massacred Port Jeuno. There were a few survivors left in the Mog Houses that gave us what little we could. Thank God for showers... we smelled pretty bad.

While we showered Alyria had apparently gone on to Lower Jeuno and managed to grab clothes and possessions that belonged to those of us who lived there permanently before this plague. I had to hold back tears as she held up Meg's Caduceus and alchemy set and asked if it would help us. I'll be setting up the alchemy portion in Delkfutt for public use: Meg would like that, her work helping people.

Day 11 - Yeah, we had to accept it...

We set out for Qufim in the morning and were absolutely amazed at what we saw. The Turned had already infiltrated Qufim by the hundred and seemed to be attempting to fight the current life there to take over. Though I was never fond of pugil--they had nothing good to cook with--I found myself strangely disheartened as I saw them losing the fight against The Turned.

We fought through the tunnels to find that the archane Weapon fiends were successfully fighting off a hoard of the Turned on their own. We had time, time enough for--on Alyria's orders--Dasva to teach me how to cast a tier III fire spell that would torch an entire lot of them at once. Dasva, she took out a good thirty of them in one stroke and then started to run as those that only got splashed on the outskirts began chasing her.

Now mind you, Tarus can run fast for creatures that have no visible knees. I listened to the tips that Dasva had been giving me passively since we met and began to chant the same spell.

It wasn't as pretty or powerful as Dasva's and was only a bit more powerful than a tier II spell, but it did the job. For a first time, I'd suppose I did fine. That group of the Turned had been finished.

We left the tunnels and Alyria took one of the others in our Special Op's Group to take point. Stikle, a beastmaster and dragoon by trade, was talented in spears, axes, and the critters of the world. Dasva and I rested as we watched Alyria pull out a gun and slowly walk towards the exit to the tunnels. She motioned to Stikle to hold back until her first shot was fired.

Stikle clicked his tongue on the roof of his mouth three times and his wyvern awoke, whom had been riding on his pet crab. It would appear as though the wyvern and the crab took turns guarding each other; the wyvern stayed awake at nights and hunted for the crab, who allowed him to ride on his back during the day. It was a little funny, in a way: the animals were more peaceful with each other than we were.

I digress--

Alyria exited the cave and fired a shot into the air that was so loud that the Turned could be heard gathering from far away. They murmured, groaned, and sometimes shrieked when in large groups. She turned to Stikle, nodded, and the two climbed up onto the rock pillars on the small opening before the open island. Stikle's wyvern flew forth to scout for more of the Turned and round them forth.

His crab began to run forward upon a command from his master. Crabs, apparently, can run at about the same speed as a Taru. When I next saw the crab it was being chased by a group of The Turned.

Stikle and Alyria massacred the group. I was beginning to get used to this: killing was slowly becoming the norm, rather than the exception.

Dasva and I were backing the other two up when we began to see Gigases in the distance approaching us as the night set in. I paused, a little frightened now: a Turned Gigases would be very, very dangerous.

The Gigases, like the Weapons, had been fighting The Turned. Alyria and Stikle had decimated the Turned that had shown up and were simply watching The Gigases as they approached.

Alyria mounted her gun and aimed at the head of one of them. When they could see us, one of the Gigases had stopped and raised his two hands in the air, his palms open. The other carried a large pelt, and also stopped. I watched as Alyria began to pull her trigger...

"Don't do it," I said. I had a growing suspicion that Gigases were not so dull as they seemed. She glanced at me, her gaze as sharp as daggers. "I think they mean to parley."

It was one of the first times I ever heard her speak as she said, "You do it then; don't blame me when you die. I don't have time for bleeding heart children."

I stopped. Two weeks ago, this would have seemed impossible.

I took my rucksack off my back and rummaged through it. I had a cape, a trophy from a rat I had once defeated on a trip to Zabi with a few of my dearest friends, that would serve the purpose of showing a peace offering. I left my rucksack behind; if I was bludgeoned to death, it was more use to the others for the food and ammunition.

I had the feeling that Alyria almost hoped I was smashed as I walked over to the Gigases, holding the cape out in my hand, and stood in front of them. I placed the cape on the ground and stepped a few feet back.

The other gigas placed the pelt on the ground and did the same. The other one slowly said, "Lea.Der. Speak. And. You. Lea.Der." He took the cape and I took the pelt as he said, "Come."

I paused and turned around. I heard Alyria swear under her breath, the wind carrying it to me, as I called out, "Go on without me; I'll meet you at Delkfutt."

Day 12 - Parley

Early Morning

I had heard rumors that the Gigases came from a faraway land on massive boats, but I did not quite believe it until they led me through a swarm of Turned and down a mountain path to the beach where the Sea of Shu'Meyo met Qufim. There were a few enormous boats in the sand, each at least four times the size of the ferry between Selbina and Mhaura. I was taken aboard and we sailed to a strip of land just off the coast of Qufim. I suppose that the Gigases understood the dangers of The Turned and got the hell out of there when they could.

They led me to a particularly ugly Gigas with a crude iron helmet on his head that sat on a strangely articulate chair made of timber. Attending him was a particularly small Gigas, seemingly a runt. I handed the uglier one the pelt that I had been given, unsure of what else to do.

At this point, the runt shocked me by speaking in more than half formed grunts.

"Adventurers and Gigas once enemies. Flesh-monsters not adventurers. Not taste like, not scream like, not smell like. Flesh-monsters kill many Gigas to eat. Why? Gigas eat flesh-monster, Gigas die; Gigas eat Gigas."

I was a bit stunned, but managed to answer to the best of my ability that we had no idea what was going on. The runt relayed that to the ugly one, who said something in Gigan.

"Adventurer and flesh-monsters enemy. Gigas and flesh-monster enemy. Gigas afraid."

I simply replied, "Adventurers afraid, too. Adventurers run, hide, no win fight. Want hide in Tower. Make Tower safe."

The runt relayed that, and then relayed a message that could possibly have changed the course of our history as we knew it:

"Adventure, Gigas, friend. Tower for adventurer, tower for Gigas. No eat adventurer, no kill Gigas."

"No eat adventurer, no kill Gigas," I said. Perhaps this whole ordeal with The Turned had opened my mind a bit and jaded it, but this hardly seemed surreal to me.

It seems like the Gigases understand that we could be wiped out and that they would soon be overwhelmed.

I guess it's time to put the history of the war 20 years back behind us and figure out what the hell is going on now. All I know is that I'm on the path back to Qufim and this time I've got a fleet of Gigases following me.

I have a vague feeling Alyria is going to hate me for this. I'm more than a bit afraid of her gun.

Midday

We arrived back at Qufim to notice that there was an eerie lack of Turned on the shore and the sounds of battle not far off. A small battalion of Gigas had now started to fill the shore, amongst them was the Runt. I spoke to the Runt and told him that I would leave now to find my own people.

The Runt, despite being a runt, seemed to be in a position of social power. He was able to tell a few other Gigas to accompany me for protection and for assistance.

So there I was, marching through Qufim Island, with four armored Gigases, looking for my Unit. I followed the ruckus to the pond and saw that they had been bottlenecking a group of the Turned by blocking off all but one path with rocks--I could only presume that Dasva had seen to that part--and had been killing The Turned as they slowly blocked themselves into that one path.

The Gigases and I cut through the Turned from behind. I was right: Alyria was pissed. She actually smacked me across the face for being a weak, overly empathetic person and said there was no room for people like me in her unit.

I gritted my teeth, but simply said, "We'll be sharing Delkfutt with our friends; we're in this one together."

She sighed and simply started walking away with the rest of the unit. I followed, and we killed more of the Turned. At least the Gigases are good company. They don't talk back, they just kind of grunt, laugh, and like to fight stuff.

Evening

The trip to Delkfutt from there was a simple game of See Turned, Kill Turned, Walk more.

Every so often The Runt would take out a horn and give a bellowing call, attracting more of the Turned, as well as calling forth Gigases that had been hiding.

We set up a rudimentary camp in the entrance hallway of Delkfutt's first floor. There's supposed to be some sort of elevator and a certain Gigas leader that holds a set of keys for it. The Runt gave us a large pelt with white scratch-markings on it and told us to deliver it as a peace offering. There were Turned visible throughout the tower but there was enough open space to mostly avoid them.

Alyria sent our ninja, Rumaha, to deliver the offering and come back with a key. For now, Dasva and I set up magical flames to form blockades to burn the Turned; tonight, we rest.

Rather, we would, except for the fact that the Gigas snore awfully loud.

Day 13 – Let The Bodies Hit The Floor

The Turned don't have a terribly good sense of balance and they seem to fall down holes rather easily. There are a great many holes in the floor and there were a great many piles of Turned that had fallen down to their... re-death(?) below them.

We saw piles of Turned that had just walked into the railings of upper floors and tipped themselves to falling some thirty feet. I watched three of them explode by doing this. Though I was getting used to these thoughtless, bizarre, once-adventure beings, it was disturbing watching them fall.

Their limbs kind of separate from the force of the impact and one of them fell face first, causing his entire head to just shatter. I almost lost my stomach, but we were repelling them slowly but surely with the help of the Gigases from the top floor and down. Rumaha was successful enough and so we simply took the elevator up to the top floors.

I recognized some of the Turned, and that's the most disturbing part to it: watching customers and acquaintances and friends with the vacant, blood-hungry look.

There was a Mithra, Eliniel, that I recognized. She had turned and was eating through a pile of her own, unholy brethren; apparently not caring that they were plagued of some sort. I watched her as she chomped away at a limb that had fallen off one of the railing-hoppers.

Dasva taught me my first "Ancient Magic" today; taking her out in one shot made it easier for me to shake off. There was no time for whatever was left of her to feel any sort of pain.

I don't know how I'll be able to live with myself if we find a cure, but all I know is that the only way I can live with myself now is knowing that this is the only way we know to save ourselves: just keep surviving, and killing those that would kill us.

I'm also starting to fear that I'm growing apathetic to the act of killing what were once my friends. I killed Megan, and now Eliniel; how many more would I have to kill to secure this tower? I'm getting kind of tired of this.

Alyria's using her whopping ten words of the day now and telling me to "Stop scribbling, now: it's a waste of time and energy."

'till next time, if there is such a thing.

Day 14 – Almost Easy

Delkfutt's tower has been secured almost too easily. Alyria is growing bored and looking for more Turned and spends her days scouring Qufim Island for more. She says that in three days we're going to split up; half of us are going to resecure Port Jeuno, which we assume has been overridden again as half of us continue to comb Qufim and keep it clean.

I have been learning much from the Gigases. Every morning more and more of them flock onto the shore; The Runt tells me that when this problem started they sent ships to the North to alert the Iceland Gigases. Everyday I begin to think more and more that our simpler, giant friends were much more practical in how they handled this situation.

The Gigases bring wood from Altana-knows-where and have begun to fortify the front. We treat each other with a sort of mild, silent understanding. Rumaha, Stikle, and Dasva have taken to fishing with the Gigas when we have eradicated any Turned that have shown up.

There is one other person in our Special Op's Unit that I've had no real cause to mention; an elfaan samurai named Caiyuo. We've taken to trying to prepare Delkfutt for livability, as well as figure out if there's some sort of control system that works all those cermet doors we keep finding. We keep trying to occupy ourselves. Whenever I have time to think, I find myself thinking back to killing Meg.

I'm sure that Caiyuo has his own reasons, because he's been antsy as well. Tomorrow, we'll be setting up Meg's alchemy set.

Day 15 – The Power of the Mithkabob

I keep having nightmares about being ambushed by a Turned and losing myself to this plague. I woke up during the night to find Alyria glaring at me.

"Stop whimpering, or I'll cut your throat and stop it for you," she whispered, before promptly going back to sleep.

Personally, I think she liked the kabobs I made last night too much to do that, though she'll never admit to that. She talks tough, and she definitely fights tough, but I think she has to admit that I'm moderately useful, and that puts me yalms ahead of our Turned companions.

It was a slow day. Dasva decided that I didn't run properly, so she spent the day chasing me and lighting my shoes on fire if I didn't run fast enough.

I believe I shall have a fear of tarus soon.

Day 16 – Somebody Set Up Us The Bomb

We're even less alone than we thought.

Demons landed on the coast today and began battling with the Gigases. Rumaha reported this over an impromptu breakfast this morning. On her orders, he took Alyria to where he had been watching it all as Cai, Stikle, and The Runt began organizing and informing the other Gigases that had taken to the Tower as their home. Dasva and I had been giving the odd task of magically sealing a room with an anti-warp spell.

Magical seals are hard to prepare, but Dasva made sure I didn't fuck it up. She only had to threaten biting my ankles off once.

Alyria and Rumaha came back with an unconscious Marquis Demon. The Marquis was bleeding to death due to a particularly large bullet that Alyria sent through his shoulder. She had Dasva and I escort her to the room we sealed off.

After she had me heal him back to consciousness, Alyria had me leave the room and kept Dasva. Judging on the gunshots, shrieks, and maniacal laughing of a taru, the Marquis was being tortured to his breaking point. Two hours after we first brought him in we heard one loud boom and Alyria walked out, flicking bits of demon brain off of her clothes. Dasva looked incredibly disappointed.

Those two females scare the hell out of me.

She stepped out of the room and explain that the demons were there to wipe out the Gigases due to their resistance to this plague and therefore the only real threat left to the Demons. She was unable to find out anything about the nature of the plague.

We didn't need to be told how we'd spend the rest of the day; we simply suited up and got ready to fight demons.

I imagine that it'll be easier to kill the demons, at least from an emotional standpoint. They don't share our faces, or the faces of those that were once our friends.

One thing is for certain, though: Alyria looks absolutely thrilled with this change of pace.

Day 17 – Don't feed the animals

Cai slices demons in an almost artistic and serene matter, but the kill of the day by far goes to the crab and flying turkey duo: there is something hysterically wrong about watching a crab trip a demon and then jump on his chest over and over as a flying turkey begins to bite it to death.

I have lost count of how many guns Alyria has, or where she keeps all of them. As the Gigases and ourselves began to win, she ordered me to take The Runt and go kill the worms by the pond for enough ore to make some more bullets.

I know she's doing this 'cause she thinks I'm weak and hates me for it but I really don't think I can care at *this point: I've killed too many things that were once people and too many things that aren't anywhere near people in the last twenty days to think about it too much. I don't know if I'll be able to live with myself like this.

I can only hope that this will end soon, but I'm really starting to doubt it.

Day 18 – Working Men

Morning

The Demons retreated during the night.

Strategically, that was a horrible mistake for them to make; the Gigases demolished them with their massive battleships.

Cai and I are staying at the Tower, now quasi-fortified, and I'm tending to wounded Gigases while the others go out and resecure Port Jeuno. We'll be setting up the alchemy set later and preparing some accommodations for the others that will take shelter here. Cai and I both have a bit of background in woodworking, so I guess we can make a few beds and benches with what the Gigases had leftover.

I think these little side projects, these last grasps to emulate society, are what keep me going. I keep thinking back to when everything around my life smelled like ginger cookies and mithkabobs. Now the smells are blood and Gigas.

I may like them on our side, but by Altana, please let them discover bathing soon. At least every day or two Dasva and I go out to light a flare into the pond to make it into a temporary hot spring to bathe in; why can't they jump in the ocean?

Night

God damn, I want a marron glace and a nice Yag Drink. When this crap ends, Cai said he'd introduce me to my first hard drink.

Despite how much she hates me, I cannot deny that I feel a bit uneasy without Alryia. Also, I thought the lack of female Tarus threatening to light my heels on fire would be pleasant; it's really not.

It's quiet, and something doesn't feel quite right.

Day 19 - Tribal Traditions

Noon

The Gigas Chieftain succumbed to the wounds he received during the battles with the demons. Upon inspection we found out that he had a venom bolt stuck in his arse and failed to mention it.

As such, the Gigases spent the past twelve or so hours competing over who would be the next leader. They're so god awful loud that Cai and I headed down to the basement for some peace and quiet.

That was where we ran into the first peculiarity; the dolls had been immobile before, and now they most certainly were changed. Attempting to massacre us counts as mobile, I'd say.

Cai and I managed the first one with some difficulty. The second one, quite a bit harder, managed to knock Cai sideways, across the room, and into a wall.

To which he turned his attention to me and started rushing at me.

Now, I'm a bit squishy; I was never the heavy armor type for the most part--besides that one time I tried the eastern ways and found that it just wasn't for me, but I digress--and was nowhere near as sturdy as Cai. Therefore I did the only thing I knew how to do: panicked.

I was more afraid of the doll than the Turned because this was an enemy that I was not familiar with that seemed like I was no match against. At least the Turned were slow, stupid, and just as squishy as I was. Demons were more focused on trying to take the Gigases and Alryia out and were more human sized.

This doll was at least two times my height, moved quickly, and was able to knock Cai out on the first unparried blow.

So of course, that meant I would probably die on the first blow. Jolly.

I managed to stun it to buy myself the precious seconds I needed to think. Without much of any other idea, I thought back to when I had traveled the world a bit as a Red Mage; my friend and I had beaten a sea monster and I had gotten a sword that was in my bag.

I took the sword out of the sack on my back along with some shihei and began to fall back into the ways of the duelist as the stunning spell wore off.

The problem with dueling is that you have to keep track of terribly much in your head; how many shadows you have left, how long until your haste spell wears off, what spells of enfeeblement you have to cast, and so on and so forth. I was never too good at all that.

But at the same time, knowing that one wrong move would wind up with a dead Sect and Cai duet made me both entirely too nervous to try this and entirely too desperate not to.

It worked. For a while, that is. By "a while" I mean to say, long enough for me to toss a few curing spells at Cai until he suddenly jolted back to reality.

Then I ran out of shihei, and all I knew was darkness after that.

Evening

Cai yelled at me for writing and threatened to knock me out for good if I didn't stop; in a sort of fraternal, only half serious way, that is. Apparently, you're supposed to rest if you spent your morning bleeding out the back of your head.

Fancy that.

From what I could gather, Cai went into some kind of berserk rage and fucked the doll up badly. I remember glimpses of trying to open my eyes and feeling like I was moving, which must have been him carrying me back to safety.

But, I digress.

According to Cai, there was a demon down there that seemed to have been using the dolls as marionettes that hid once spotted.

The dolls, for now, have gone back to being their usual, passive, ugly selves.

I'm tired, but Cai says I have to try and stay awake for a while. He's reading passages out of Meg's alchemy book to see if there's any sort of notes on medicine. He found a ton of stuff on how to make a potion, but none on when which is needed.

Besides, there's also the problem that I'm kind of the only one of us that has any experience stewing a cauldron and brewing potions; Meg made me help her out.

Everytime I mention her name, I feel sick.

Day 20 – A Mathematical Error

Morning

Cai refused to wake me up this morning and instead went back to investigate the basement alone. I estimated that Alyria and company would return in the late night or early morning with any survivors.

Cai came back as I ate breakfast and said that he found the demon walking around some sort of room that had a map of each floor in the tower. He quickly retreated before he could be seen, lest the demon retreat further into the tower.

Meanwhile, the competitions for a new Gigas Chieftain continue. I wish I had some saruta cotton to stuff in my ears. Altana only knows what they're comparing now. Before they appeared to be arguing over who had the most spikes on their club.

They had to stop; they realized that they couldn't count on beyond four, and so declared it a stalemate on that account.

Afternoon

I'm growing a little stir-crazy in the tower, so I'm writing this outside, grunting with the Gigas Guards, wondering what to do.

Cai is having some tea I managed to brew using a bucket as a makeshift kettle. It feels almost like a crime, but there's not much I can do.

I keep thinking back to things I saw in Jeuno that night. It's been almost a month now, and I still can't shake the images of people eating people. I can't shake the images of me blowing Meg's body to bits, or Dasva wrecking the body of the ducal guard who was going to kill me.

Sometimes, when I'm alone, I can almost swear that I see Meg out of the corner of my eye or just barely hear her.

All I've got left is this motley crew and a bunch of Gigases; I think I'm losing the will to live through whatever is going on. If things don't pick up soon, I think I may pitch myself off the top of Delkfutt.

Day 21 - This is the Day that never ends

Early morning

It is much easier to find the will to live when your life is in danger and you can either let it snuff out or do that whole "Fight or Flight" thing Cid once lectured about.

When Cai had finished his tea he came out to check on me again and we stayed out a bit to enjoy the frigid, yet somehow comforting salty air that Shu'Meyo brought to us. Daylight was leaving us.

That was when we saw four flares light up in the air around Jeuno and in the distance it seemed like Ru'Lude had gone on fire.

We ran back into Delkfutt and alerted The Runt that we think our crew was in danger. He would keep order there with the help of whatever new Chieftain and keep Qufim secure.

Cai and I ran like never before and reached Port Jeuno a bit before midnight. We heard screams of terror pouring out.

Jeuno had become a destination point for both survivors and Turned and it seemed as though the Turned were winning this time around.

This time around, they also moved faster, and they were beginning to look a little less like humans than they used to. Cai and I immediately got ready for combat.

And that was when we heard a familiar voice bellow out "Finally you bastards got here! Took your sweet time, didn't you?" as the head of a Turned nearby essentially exploded.

I had enjoyed my days without blood and bullets, but now I was back on the field and had to accept that. I saw Dasva running towards us with a small crowd following her and dive behind us as Stikle, his pets, and Cai rushed forth to cut them down.

"Hiya!" Dasva said to me. "Got a new trick to teach you, lookit here!" As she began to chant an incantation at double the speed she normally did. "I'll teach ya' later, we've got to get back up to Ru'Lude."

I'm about to pass out now, I'll finish the rest later. It was a very, very long night; at least now, we understand a bit more.

Morning

Rumaha somehow woke me up this morning. It was the first time I had been in a bed in three weeks and it felt good.

I'm writing this as we have our first real, substantial meal since this fiasco began.

You see, the demons did not, in fact, retreat the other day: instead they swooped around Qufim and started raising all hell in Jeuno. Esha'ntarl, the acting Arch Duke of Jeuno since some fiasco or another happened to the oddly dressed Duke and his brother, had been convincing people to take refuge in Ru'Lude and seal off the lower levels until they could figure out some way to regain Jeuno.

When she heard the ruckus that Alyria and the others had been causing she immediately set out herself to investigate it; the Turned just didn't have a tendency to taunt, seemingly lacking the ability to do more than groan.

Upon hearing that there were in fact more survivors and that the Ducal Guard had gone mostly unturned, Esha'ntarl immediately began making plans to move the people to Delkfutt.

That was the part where the Demons arrived with a whole new brigade of Turned; it appeared as though they had raided a ship full of adventurers looking for safety.

Last night, we learned that there was a new trick: reanimating dead Turned.

Imagine, if you will, decimating a group of what was once adventurers. We're talking body parts all across the floor.

Now imagine watching as the a demon mage of some sort began chanting and the body parts rolled, still bleeding fresh, and began to form a monstrous, giant, mismatched undead freak of nature.

Then, and only then, will you be able to begin to fathom what last night was like.

May you never have to.

Day 21 - Limit Break

Noon

You see, the demons, they can turn themselves if they know they're going to die, apparently.

They must have been working on this for twenty years, since the war ended. I thought that those who have turned were bad enough on their own; toss in their puppeteers and it's so much worse.

No matter how many demons we killed there were always two more to take the place; some of the demons, even after being blasted back to hell, would be half revived by mages and combined together until an utterly feral, deadly killing machine was rampaging at one of us.

We had split up, for the most part. Stikle and his monsters were holding their own while Rumaha, Cai, and I worked on trying to cut the demons and their puppets down at the entrance to Lower Jeuno; Dasva had lit a sort of magical flame, sealing off Port Jeuno for now. We figured that the demons trying to rush there would be most vulnerable; they were pretty much bottlenecked at that one point.

At one point I ended up being forced back in a fight with two demons and a turned while Cai and Rum held position without me. Whether it was by a random fluke or not, we ultimately ended up back in my shop.

I didn't actually realize it at first; there was blood all over the walls and it had been raided thoroughly. Recipes littered the floor, shattered plates and cups on the tables.

And then I was pushed backwards some more as I parried a blow and tripped over something.

That something was the decaying body of Meg. I felt my heart stop as I glanced at her; I had ripped off her charred arm by tripping over her.

All I remember was that in that moment I felt more rage than I ever felt in my life. It was as if every fiber of my being desired blood.

I wondered if this was what being turned felt like, but I realized that I was still in control of my body.

There was a scimitar that I kept on display, it was part of a coat of arms. The next thing I recall was walking out of my shop covered in blood, holding the head of a demon and tossing it into the crowd of demons. Apparently, I killed an important one.

Night:

The rest of last night went by in a blur, but supposedly I "scared the little taru pants" off of Dasva at one point.

I remember at one point pinning down a demon general and hacking off his limbs one by one, demanding information from him that I don't even recall.

Judging on the fact that Alyria is acting like she likes me a hell of a lot more today than last time we met, I'd say I must have gotten something important out of him. Either that or she's afraid I'll snap again and go chop-suey on her, too. She could probably shoot me dead before I got within five feet though if that happened.

Anyways, we've stopped now at a very tentative resting grounds: Castle Oztroja. You see, this afternoon the team and I were told by Wolfgang to escort Cid to Windurst.

For the first time in my knowledge, Cid was wearing more than an apron and pants. He ditched the engineer clothes and was wearing what I can only describe as some sort of lightweight, mechanically augmented skeleton.

He confuses me, that man, but whatever.

I ditched my old dueling swords; instead, before writing this, I sharpened my scimitar after I cleaned it again.

It feels good in my hand, but I need a better one. For now, all I know is that Rumaha and Cid are parleying with Tzee Xicu, explaining what happened, and that the Yagudo are eyeing us hungrily. They got hit hard by this atrocity, too.

Part of me would love to see what would happen if we got everyone to scurry to Delkfutt and form some sort of union.

Part of me would love to just get out there and chop up another demon. I'm not sure what happened inside me last night, but since then all I want to do is keep chopping.

I guess I am in fact going crazy. The truth is, I don't really care if I am or not. I know that if I keep going and don't die, sooner or later I will kill the person that made me kill my best friend, and that's all I really want to do.

Day 24 – A Different Sort of Army

Dawn

In addition to Cid, we are now also escorting "Her Holiness Tzee Xicu" through Sarutabaruta. Our progress was slowed due to the fact that the Yagudo refuse to let Xicu walk by herself and constantly move in an armored guard formation.

On the plus, however, we are leading the entirety of Castle Oztroja with us. Every single Yagudo, warrior or not, walks behind us.

We are leading an army of great potential. It is a shame, truly, that our fortune won't hold up with the other beastmen: I hear that the Quadavs have almost been fully exterminated and that the Orcs are fully aligned with the demons.

Either way, who cares?

I don't; I just keep slicing away. Dasva has deemed it useless to teach me more magic. Most of the others just stay away from me now.

Conversation is diminishing, but I don't quite mind. It gives me more time to think.

Night

We arrived at the Federation of Windurst to find out that the Tarutaru and Mithra had only lost one part of their city in the fight with The Plagued, and that was by their own choice.

The walls around their city provided them with an extreme tactical advantage: they were able to safely band together and send meteors falling from the sky.

The downside of this is that Sarutabaruta was turned even more barren and is totally unusable now. It resembles the mountain range of Meriphataud more than ever. I suppose that everything has a cost.

They would have destroyed us, too, had Xicu herself not sent up a magical flare into the sky that took on the symbol of the the wolf, Fenrir.

My group, Xicu, and her closest guards were taken into the city, being carefully watched by a battalion of Windurst's greatest hundred black mages, ready to decimate us instantly if need be. We were

taken into the Cloisters of the Star Sibyl, the entirety of the Mithran Guard baring their bows--and claws, and teeth mind you--at us. I recognized some of the people from my time spent studying in the city.

The Star Sibyl bid us entrance into her most guarded chamber and asked us, quite simply, what an army of Yagudo and a team of humans were doing.

Cid spoke up first and explained what The Turned were.

Xicu went to speak next and explained that the Yagudo were as much prey as the Tarutaru.

Alyria went to speak next, but the Sibyl cut her off and looked directly at me.

Her voice had an eerie sadness to it as she asked "You, too, have been infected by this plague, haven't you?"

I heard Alyria's gun instantly cock and every weapon turned to me. I said nothing as every piece of clothing was ripped off of me, bar none, by Xicu's guards. I said nothing, and simply stood their apathetically as my entire body was put up for show in front of everyone.

There were no cut marks, no bites, I was virtually unscathed for all that I've been through; only bruises from the battle inside Delkfutt and burns from the fighting with the demons.

Hesitantly, I was allowed to put my clothes back on.

"I can see the damage," the Sibyl continued, in that same strange and sad voice, "I remember your spirit as it used to be; tell me, what infected your soul?"

I could say nothing. It was, shockingly, Xicu who answered for me.

"The same as Karaha-Baruha, kyahyahyah, his soul has turned. Paid a tribute, something forever broken, kyahyahyah!

"Gone," I said simply. "Not broken."

It was with that that I spun around on my heel and let the adults talk about whatever unimportant things that they had to. The necessary path was glaringly simple in my eyes: kill Turned, save those not Turned.

"Not broken," I whispered as I walked away. I wasn't sure if it was a prayer.

Day 25 - Insomnia

3:25am

I don't really feel like sleeping anymore. It's not like we'll be leaving Windurst anytime soon, anyways. I'm just laying here in the same bed I used to sleep in while studying at the academy, thinking.

I saw myself in the mirror after I was able to shower for the first time since I was in Jeuno. My body is definitely changing. By trade, I am--I was, I guess--a chef; we're a bit pudgy by nature 'cause all we do is make food, taste food, and sell food. There's always food around.

Always tons of sweets, to top it off. Meg loved my cinna cookies.

Some time, a few minutes after midnight, the Star Sibyl entered my room and asked me if it was true.

I simply looked at her and asked "Which part?"

I was expecting her to ask me if it was true that I destroyed Meg. Instead, she asked, "That she tried to kill you."

I turned away from her and the first thing I saw was myself in the mirror. I found my hand placing itself on its reflection as I sighed.

"She had no idea who I was," I said. I don't know if I was trying to convince myself or the Sibyl. "She wanted to kill me, bite me, claw at me; she wanted to eat me. When I found her, she was chewing on a taru that she killed."

The Sibyl placed her hand over her mouth and gasped ever slightly.

"This plague is an awful thing," she said.

I turned and glared a dagger at her, a person I was supposed to have utmost respect for. "What would you know? You've been staying high and guarded in your precious little tower while people like me have to kill everyone we held dear, or die. I watched Jeuno fall. I watched an empire deny us refuge. What do you know?"

My words hurt her, I could tell.

"It's true..." she admitted.

There was a knock on the door, sparing her from having to continue. I opened the door to find no one there.

However, Rumaha was suddenly behind me. He is a crafty one, that ninja.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but the War Warlocks have made their decision: Windurst shall stay, not flee to the towers, and Xicu's forces must go. However, as a gesture of good will, they are allowed ten days to make plans and resupply."

The Sibyl nodded, and Rum placed a hand on my shoulder. "There's someone here I must bring you to see. An old acquaintance of mine. Come before morning," he said, and with that he was gone, a slip of paper suddenly in my hand.

I looked at the Sibyl, whom had sat at my desk and buried her face in her hands.

"Oh, what could be done?"

I simply shrugged.

"Keep fighting back. Kill them all. Kill their leaders. Kill their young."

It seemed like a plan at the time.

She left a bit after that, thanking me for letting her come in.

Alyria peered into my room two times, and each time I threw a book at the door and told her that if she wanted to come in, she damn well better.

Stikle's creatures walked in at one point, but I think that's 'cause I had a fireplace going and it was chilly out. They're still asleep, and I guess I better get going. I've got till morning to go to the part of town described on the paper Rum gave to me.

Day 27 – Everybody Was Kung-Fu Fighting

Breakfast

The first trial had been darkness; or so I had been told later on. Fortunately for me, I had taken my scimitars: you never know when a Turned may show up, or a demon invasion.

The more I walked the darker it became outside, as though the fog of war itself was rolling in. That should have been the first clue that it would be a rather long day.

I recalled the area that Rumaha had described and navigated through there out of memory and habit. You see, Windurst has a few secrets. One of these is a hidden island.

If you jump off the boards that surround the cooking guild and wade through the water for some time it gets quite deep and you have to actually swim between the trees that surround the area. I'm a fairly quick swimmer, having spent a lot of my time in the lakes and ocean around Windurst on my time off, and so it takes me around fifteen minutes of swimming to go where I was headed.

Such is where I went: to a small, hidden island of sorts in the middle of all this water. If I had to guess I'd say you could probably fit a small house on the island.

I used to go there to think in my free time. Sometimes I'd take a few friends and we would catch a few fish.

It was really dark around the island but I found it just the same. I pulled myself to shore and dried myself with a spell.

I couldn't see more than a few feet but I was definitely able to hear the soft pitter patter as rain began to fall.

And then all of a sudden I heard another person breathing nearby.

I turned to the breathing and found that there was a katana only a few hairs away from my head.

I should have been scared, but I don't think I cared at the time.

"Hello to you, too," I simply said.

The katana lowered. "You swim too loud."

It was a female voice that had an almost childish quality to it.

"I was sent to find someone, and if my swimming made you show yourself so quickly, I'd say it doesn't really matter."

She giggled.

"He was right, you really don't care about anything," the voice said. The figure approached.

All I could tell was that it was a rather svelte girl some two inches shorter than myself dressed in the entirely black, trademarked garbs of a ninja.

I stood still as she walked around me and inspected me as though I were a piece of furniture she was considering buying.

"I'm Marzbarz, an old friend of Rumaha," she explained. When she was in front of me once more she held out her hand.

We shook hands and I felt a slight change in how tight she gripped my hands. The hair on the back of my neck stood up and I felt her suddenly try and pull me to the ground at the exact moment I mouthed a stunning spell.

I let go of her hand and smirked. "Try something like that again and I'll kill you, too," I said. I felt oddly calm and satisfied at the thought of slaughtering her.

And that was what scared me most.

Her eyes were glancing from side to side nervously, waiting for me to release her from the spell.

I took the scimitars off my back and released the spell.

"God, you don't have to be so mean about it, I was only testing you!" she whined, stretching slightly. "I could have sworn he said you weren't a fighter, but you've got some hot blood."

I gripped my scimitars a bit tighter. She was a nutter.

"So why did he want us to meet?" I asked.

She gave a childish shrug. "Dunno!" she said.

With that there was a crashing sound as if someone had done a cannonball out of the water and Rumaha came tumbling next to us.

"Because something happened that night in Jeuno, and she's the only person I know that can confirm my suspicions," he said.

I paused before looking at him dead in the eyes and simply said, "Cannonballing out of the water? Really, Rum?"

"I noticed it first after you killed the Arch Demon General; you, a kid who had almost no formal training, was suddenly able to perform a quadrastrike."

I raised an eyebrow and looked at him. "I'm not sure what you mean by that, I was just--"

"--just killing to feed the empty gap in your soul," Marz finished.

I turned back to her. "Not exactly what I was going to say, but yes, I suppose that fits," I said.

Marz came awfully close to me and tantalizingly whispered, "You feel angry, tormented, don't you? Like a whipped beast trapped in a cage," as she stared me directly in the eyes.

I bit my lip again and nodded.

She jumped backwards four feet or so and she and Rumaha were standing side by side. "Then show use your anger!" she taunted, before they both rushed at me, katanas drawn.

I had just enough time to feel a smirk grace my face and I felt the same bloodlust overtake me that had come over me in Jeuno. It's almost the same feeling that I get when I look at bacon: the urge to juts assault the plate.

Dinner

All I remember was that one moment we began fighting and the next moment I can recall the sun was shining brightly and Rumaha was prying me off of Marz, my scimitar just about to slice her neck off.

"Damn it Sectum, snap out of it!" he was shouting.

I felt like every part of my body was beating. My line of sight was receding slightly with each heartbeat for a few moments as I stopped struggling and Rumaha dragged me away.

I closed my eyes and when I opened them the entire landscape was the same foggy setting as when we had started, albeit a tad bit brighter. Rumaha was pulling Marz up to her feet and whispering rapidly.

"--don't think he knew--" was all I was able to hear Rumaha say, Marz nodding in agreement.

After a few moments of privately conversing, they both turned to me. I noticed that Rumaha had taken my scimitars away. It was probably a good idea.

"Shall you explain or shall I?" Rumaha asked her.

"I wanna! I wanna!" Marz said, strangely excited for a woman I just tried to decapitate.

Rumaha nodded, and she began.

"You know of the Eastern Empire, Aht Urhgan, right?" she asked. I nodded, and she continued. "Over yonder, there's a group of people willing to split their souls and throw parts of them away, and in return they take the souls of slain enemies inside of them."

It sounded an awful lot like the demons and the Turned, to be honest.

"These people, The Immortals, are the personal guard for the Empress. The years and years of bloody struggle in the East have made people willing to shatter their souls to attain this power, as well as their ferocious loyalty to The Empress."

"Where do I fall into this?" I asked, stroking my nonexistent beard.

Marz flashed a sort of crazy smile. "You broke your own soul and did the exact same thing that the Immortals do, with absolutely no guidance or idea about it. I can tell in the way that the anger runs through you, and the way that you immediately adapt to the fighting styles of an enemy you've defeated; you didn't even have to kill Rumaha to suddenly start fighting on his level. Yet, you're not aware of it, and I bet if you tried, you'd have no clue how to even properly toss a shuriken at me unless--"

"Unless I was pushed past the edge again. Like how I can't remember anything about the fight that just happened."

She nodded ecstatically. "Exactly!"

I sat and thought about this for a few minutes. "Can I learn to control this?" I asked.

"Dunno, but we gotta try; imagine how powerful you'd be with proper training if you did this to yourself!" she said. She was reminding me almost of Alyria with her love of all things powerful.

I thought back to Lower Jeuno, the body of a friend that I stumbled over and tore.

"Let's do it."

Day 35 – How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Aim for the Head

I never realize how many pages I went through, but this is the last entry I can fit in this book.

I keep on reflecting how different life has become.

Right now, I'm on a boat with Marz and Cai. There's a giant serpent in the water cautiously following us and if it attacks again I get to fight it with the turrets again.

It's been a crazy sort of day. Currently we're traveling down the Pamtam Straights, headed for Olzhirya to warn the Mithran Kingdom about the plague and demon invasion. After that, we're stopping quickly on the Island of Tsahya to resupply and hopefully gain a few crewmen.

You see, we decided to renegotiate with the near-East: we know that their alchemists are on par with our own or better, and most of ours are dead or missing. We're going to request help; in return, they get to study the hell out of me and rip me to shreds if they'd like.

You see, Marz explained a bit about how the Empress' elite Immortal squad works, and it essentially boils down to a fundamental problem: by breaking their own souls and filling it with the souls of fallen enemies they are constantly tormented by those they've killed. I don't have that problem. I hear nothing. There's no demon whispering inside me, and if I try really hard I can remember the exact movements that the demon used to massacre an enemy in four quick slashes.

If I shut my eyes, I understand how to blend into the shadows like Marz can.

I wasn't able to tap into this information until I woke up one night, screaming in my sleep, and realized that there really was no point anymore. Life as I knew it, it was pretty much over. It was in that moment that I think I threw everything away. As I lay there, my hand reaching up, I realized that the time of the species was running short unless we did something drastic; my life was just a small part of what was once a large species, and the whole pool was getting smaller. If saving the pool meant dying, I was ready.

I'm ready now; I've found the will to care enough to survive but to be willing to die for what need be done. If that means I live long enough for the Empires' alchemists to shred me to bits studying me, then so be it.

Marz refused me from telling the team about our decision to flee to the East and petition for help until this morning. There was a mixed reception of concern and relief, to be fair. What shocked me most was Alyria, whom was taken aback so far by this that she grabbed me and dragged me half way across Windurst to have a private talk.

She took me to one of the old 'stary's that had been converted to a Mithran archery range and took out two beautiful Hellfires and taught me how to shoot. She refused to let me go until I could fire without trembling and reload calmly. She fired at me as I shot at targets in order to keep me fully aware that my decision meant at any given moment I may end up dead.

I understood entirely too well, and ultimately I was able to bring myself to shoot in her direction, though not at her; something about "providing cover fire" or something, I forget.

She let me keep the gun, simply saying, "I expect it to be your hands that bring me my darrrrlin' back."

It was bittersweet. Cai is coming with us because he claims to know some old friends in Tsahya that would help us out and he knows even more in the Empire. That will prove valuable if it is indeed correct.

I don't know if I'll ever reread this, or if anyone will, or if the ship will even make it to the next destination, but I know one thing: this journey so far, I've learned a lot on it. I don't know if I'll ever have time to write more, or if my limbs will even stay as hands instead of the tentacles of a soulflayer. I don't know when I'll even get paper again, or if I'll write when I do. Whoever you are, if you can read it, just know that this is a terrible world full of terrible things, but that you can't give up; you have to find something worth fighting for. Even though I think I've given up, I know that I have something I'm fighting for; I'm fighting so that no one will ever have to see what I've seen or do what I've done to their friends and family. I'm fighting for a better tomorrow, if there even is such a thing. I'm fighting for the world, and by god I will fight until I die.

If nothing else, whoever you are that may read this, know that this was how I learned to stop worrying and aim for the head.

A Thousand Shades of Blue

*Various structural writings and the second recovered diary
of Sectumsempra.*

Day 47 – Welcome to the Jungle

Why won't the voices *STOP* please help me help *me OH ALTANA HELP IM DYING THEYRE KILLING ME* oh altana save me *SAVE ME* this is all i have left please don't let them see this oh goddesse when they see the cut what will they say oh my *ALTANA DAMNIT HELP* everytime i move too much the slash opens its going black again i have to keep

Day 48 – The Pain of Life and Death

They let Marz and Cai see me and Marz started crying. They said that if I would only comply that they would let me free. Or, if I died. They've been torturing me nonstop, trying to figure out what role I played in kidnapping a Mithran official's daughter and where it was hidden. I have no idea what they want.

All I know is that if I do not get help soon, I will die here while my country burns. I don't know how much longer I can hold onto my sanity; they keep forcing a strange liquid down my throat that induces extreme pain and now I've got slashes all across my body. They couldn't get a particular spearhead out of me, but I managed to pull it out of my gut and am hiding it. That's what I keep writing with. I think I should be dead.

It's cold, and the salt water that comes with the extreme winds through the bad ceiling burns. I hope it doesn't wash this away. I hope someone rescues me. I hope the Runt is okay.

Day 49 – One Last Breath

My execution date is tomorrow at dawn. There was a slight complication in the torture chamber this morning involving. You see, they decided to see how long I'd last before I crack with three spider eating away at me.

I remember one of them slit up my entire body and before I knew it, despite being tattered and torn to shreds, I had ripped its jaw off and began to slash away at the other two spiders. I almost killed the Galkan tortured that tried to subdue me. Almost. He slammed me back in here and let me bleed half to death.

They're just too damn big.

This is my last meal, they say. They actually cooked me a real crab dinner. I'll find a way out of this mess.

This spear head is going to come in handy. I can tell already. What the Galka never realized was that I managed to get a hold of something in that room; a small container of the pain inducing liquid. I sense that tomorrow is going to be fun.

I hope I live through it. If not, just know that I had nothing to do with this; I just want to get out of here.

Day 50 – Whispering in the Wind

I sensed it before I heard the commotion. The Galka has passed away. It seems part of the jaw that I lodged into his gut wasn't able to be extracted.

I can hear him whispering in my ears, he's telling me he's sorry it had to be this way. I tell him I'm sorry that he's stuck with me for a while, but that he can sleep until I need him.

The following entries are copies transcribed from a journal in the possession of Empress Nashmeira, having been given to her from the writer as a promise that he would one day come back to her lands. The original may be viewed on request by renowned scholars, historians, and politicians of high status as a gesture of good will between the various nations.

Day 53 – The Road East

Where do I begin?

I'm currently in a caravan traveling East to the next port.

Cai picked me up this new journal in the town where I was being tortured. He said that it would give me something to do while I recovered and keep me from trying to move too much.

Well, about that, it's not like I can move anyways. Most of my body is stitched up and bandaged pretty heavily. Sometimes not even a white mage can fix the damage. All the torturing had left me holding onto my body out of sheer force of will. I was blocking off the pain as best I could so as to not go insane again.

I was able to communicate with the soul of the Galka I killed, and he was able to see everything I had ever done or thought of in my life. He knew my innocence and he knew what was going on in the other continents. He gave me a little secret: that pain syrum, if heated, turns into a gas and spreads out like wildfire. It was what they used for riot control.

I hid the vial deep in one of my gashes and made sure not to let it break by moving awkwardly as they pulled me to the gallows to be executed. There was a massive crowd watching. Apparently whoever I supposedly kidnapped must have been drastically important.

I was the only one who would hang that day.

I looked through the crowd and saw Marz and Cai in the back, nervously glancing around themselves. I made eye contact with Cai and he slowly pointed his eyes to my left. I slowly followed them and saw a pair of eyes looking at me from between the planks that made the gallows.

There was someone under the gallows. What the hell was going on?

Two Mithra grabbed me and pulled me up so that they could fit the noose around my head. Before they could tighten it I decided that I just didn't quite like that.

I was weak, and so I could not do magic so powerful, but when desperate humans are known to find strength. I bucked my hips in such a way that the vial of the liquid pain syrum squelched out of my torso and fell to the ground. At that precise moment, I focused what little energy I had left to start a pathetic little fire spell.

I'm pretty sure a two year old taru could have done better, but it managed to light just the tiniest fire on the plank below the vial.

I braced myself as the Mithra and the crowd realized what was about to happen.

And then the vial exploded and things got fascinating.

Selim

We had to stop for some water.

The small bloody vial absolutely exploded and I felt every fiber on my skin scream out in pain.

One would think I'd get used to it by now, but no. Not at all.

The thing is, everyone else was screaming too, which meant that it was a success. I felt someone wrap their arms around me and pull me downwards and drag me away as I screamed. I hoped to Altana that it wasn't an enemy.

I heard Cai's voice call out something and then I passed out from the pain I was in.

I woke up to find someone dumping me in a stream a few times.

"He's come to," I heard an unfamiliar voice call out, followed by two sighs of relief.

The water was warm and I felt the pain go away where it was, but it also opened up my cuts and started a whole new set of pain. I was just glad to be alive at this point.

They pulled me out of the water and laid me down on the grass. I saw Cai watching out in case we had been followed, but Marz assured him we weren't and he turned down.

I bit down on my lips as one of my many gashes sent a jolt of pain down my body. The unfamiliar man procured some gauze and bandage out of a bag and began applying it to me.

I had so many questions to ask but I was exhausted so I settled on the first one to come to mind.

"How long until we're off this continent?"

"Not soon enough," Cai said, shaking his head. "We warned the officials and they were most reluctant to believe us. Their loss, really."

I managed to nod. "Fair enough," I said. I looked at the unfamiliar man. "Thank you for saving me. I'm Sectumsempra."

The man patted my shoulder and said with a hint of an eastern accent, "I am Selim. We share our main enemy, so you are my friend."

It was an odd introduction, but I was getting used to odd events. "The demons will not take long to travel eastward if your kingdom falls."

I knew what he said was true, just as well as he did. "The rest of the world, too," I said, wincing as he bandaged up a particularly harsh wound.

"You are dying, you know," he said in a matter of fact tone. I wasn't surprised. "You have lost much blood and there is glass stuck inside of your gut. No doctors in this land will heal you."

"Can we make it to Aht Urhgan?" I asked.

No one replied for a decent minute before Marz said, "We don't think so."

I leaned my head back and shut my eyes, not sure of what to do now.

Day 63 – Alive, Not Well

I awoke to find myself being operated on.

They knocked me out again with a cloth and kept doing whatever it was that they were doing to me.

I haven't been awake much lately, by my own volition.

Cai and I had figured that the more I was awake, the faster I'd have my blood pumping. So we decided to do something stupid and deadly: alchemy and magic.

Selim had heard of some herbs that are used by natives to make a sedative of sorts. I remembered enough of what Meg did to explain to Cai how to extract the liquid from plants. Selim and Marz gathered a ton of them and Cai furiously made serum at my instruction. Common cooking knowledge also told me that all meat stays better when it's frozen.

So I froze my torso and prayed as I took the serum that I would wake up one day.

I guess it worked.

Day 64 – White Winds

We made it.

Aht Urhgan's winds are soothing.

Selim is by my side, his turn to keep watch over me. I'm not allowed to be alone until they think I won't start convulsing and need help.

It's been a hell of a trip.

Selim is telling me that the Turned and Demons have begun their invasion of the Southern Continent and in the panic they were able to convince a war vessel captain that it was safest with them. Most of the towns had managed to scatter in time before they were overrun. I suppose our warning hadn't gone totally unheeded; when they saw we were telling the truth, they knew to get the hell out of there.

I'm tired, but I'm not supposed to sleep all day, so I'm just sitting here with Selim, looking out at the ocean. It's night now and I see some war vessels out that are patrolling the area.

Cai is at a rare audience with Nashmeira, Empress of Aht Urhgan, explaining what the hell is going on. The alchemists and doctors took me in quick enough, though; it seems like not many people are fleeing to Whitegate now. I presume most people are dead, or here, already.

What a lousy world. I hope Alyria and the others are all right.

Speaking of which, I'm also glad that Marz had stolen my gear and clothes. Alyria would kill me if I lost that gun.

Day 65 – Cute as a Quilt

It's Marz' turn to watch me. She seems strangely at peace, being in East. Perhaps it is closer to her home and that brings her to a good place inside.

I'm not moving much; instead, I sit in something they call a "wheel chair" and am taken where I wish to go. The doctors of Aht Urhgan say that if I move I may cut up my stitches.

I used to stitch knitting patterns together. How odd.

So let's see. I came here to offer the secrets of a broken soul to the Immortals.

In my journeys, on the southern continent, I was accused of a crime and tortured.

During my escape, I cause a vial of some sort of pain serum to explode and sent glass flying into my gut, traveling further into my body because of the way the body combats stuff that's not supposed to be inside it.

It's been a long few weeks of pain.

This was a mistake. It was a giant mistake. We tried to trade me and in the process I became a useless, valueless, object.

What do I do now? I don't really know.

Meg would have liked it here. There's a lot of neat alchemy. They even made dolls that can talk, and much more properly tHaN tHe CaRdlaNs In WiNdY.

Day 66 - He's Just a Poor Boy

He Needs No Sympathy

Last night, yet again, everything changed.

I was taken in the night to see Nashmeira with a fleet of immortals to escort and guard me.

She questioned me some benign questions to cross check my story against Cai's and find a bit more about me.

Then she asked me what happened in Lower Jeuno when I slaughtered the demons. I explained that I don't really remember. An immortal vizier nodded furiously at this, taking notes.

Nashmeira was going to ask something, but the vizier motioned to stop her. He came towards me and the other immortals each unsheathed their scimitars and backed away.

"Every immortal has the spirit of a beast," he said, coming towards me in my wheelchair. "And every immortal will one day lose the fight to the beast and becomes a Soulflayer. Show me the soul that you think won't fall."

And with that, he picked me up from the chair and set a scimitar to my throat.

I felt a flash of surprise and panic overtake me, and then there was nothingness for a bit.

A few minutes later I came to and saw the vizier tossed aside to the floor.

"How curious," he said, brushing himself up to stand.

"Did I hurt you?" I asked him, to which case he shook his head.

"You have a person inside of you," the vizier said. I nodded.

The vizier turned to Nashmeira. "The samurai was telling the truth: this boy is beyond what we have here; he cannot control it yet, but he has already taken in souls that even our immortals can not touch. More than that though, he does not simply have part of the soul: he has entire souls trapped inside of him."

It was at that point I noticed that I was standing up on my own without pain. I felt my torso.

The cuts and wounds were gone, but my skin was slimy. It was at that point I noticed that one of my fingers was gray and resembling a tentacle.

I shook my hand and it became a finger again.

"Tell me," I said, "What is a Soulflayer? I'm just a boy who came from another land. A simple chef."

The room fell silent before Nashmeira explained. "An Immortal will one day fall to their inner beast, having called on the beast so often that their soul loses its very base. It is something like a sea monster and a human."

I glanced down at my hand and wiggled my finger. "Do they have tentacles?" I asked.

"Yes," the Vizier answered.

"And once you become a Soulflayer, there's no way to stop it?" I asked.

"Correct."

I paused and looked at my hand again. I don't know exactly how to describe what I did to myself, for it was a spiritual sort of motion inside my head.

The next thing I knew, my fingers were growing slimy and long and a sort of pinkish.

I felt the eyes of every Immortal on me as I held up my hand to show the vizier.

It was then that an interesting fact dawned in his head, too: I was standing up and I had a squid-esque hand.

"By the hammer of Alexander," he whispered.

I played around with my new fingers before willing them back to normal.

"It's quite useful," I observed. I lifted my shirt up. I was clean of all damage. "Is that a new trick?"

"Quite," was all the vizier said. He turned and whispered to Nashmeira.

"We will aid your country if you aid ours."

I kneeled down before the Empress. "Whatever I must do, I shall do it. I pledge my loyalty to your land if you pledge your loyalty to mine."

"You have my word. We will talk more tomorrow," the Empress said, and the meeting was over.

Easy Come, Easy Go

I just got a shiver down my spine that told me that somehow, somehow, Alyria just brutally murdered something with either her claws or her guns.

Is there any difference? Here I am just drinking some fine coffee, waiting for a man named Kushdeel to make me a set of clothes and for me to be contacted again.

Cai and Marz are out getting some rest. Selim is having coffee with me. I write during the silence of our conversations.

He and I are quite alike on many issues, it seems.

Little High

There is a bell ringing in the distance and there's talk that the Mamool Ja are about to attack.

Selim advises me to stay back for now until we're sure I'm healed. He is a wise man, I can tell, and so I figured I'd listen to him.

That was, at least, until three Immortals came and told me that the Vizier wanted to see how I'd hold myself.

I suppose I'll go follow them, although I don't think they'd be able to stop me if I didn't want to go. Besides, they said that they'd buy me some sutlac and coffee later if I showed a good show. Have you ever tried that stuff? It's absolutely amazing.

Little Low

I feel as though I'm going to be strangely good at this new job.

Strangely good indeed.

Something about the four bowls of sutlac I was given tell me they like what they saw.

Whatever, though. Watching a Lizard Man freak out when I strangled him with tentacles was absolutely hysterical.

He feels a bit funny inside, kind of like I ate something I shouldn't have that I'm going to have to force down with water, but not entirely bad.

Did I mention I proceeded to spit fire?

How in the name of Altana does that work out?

Nothing Really Matters To Him

Sutlac doesn't really fill me up, despite how good it tastes.

No, I'm craving something else.

Now that I've had some time away from The Turned and Demons, I'm realizing that I crave the hell out of vengeance.

Every few hours I still find myself thinking about tumbling over Meg, or killing her. I think about the conversation with the Star Sibyl and I think about how screwed the nations are. Mostly though, I think about the Gigases.

The Gigases, in some sick way, were the only ones willing to set aside differences and work the problems out. They were the ones who got over the pettiness of humanity and they were the ones, even in their simple heads, to see that only by banding together did we even have a prayer of making it out alive.

What's wrong with us, the five races downright blessed by Altana, that we can't get along?

The Mithra and the Tarutaru, outside of my motley crew, are holing themselves up like cowards. Bastok was mostly abandoned. San d'Oria, I don't even know.

I'm just holding out hope that the people of Bastok managed to flee, as well as that the San d'Orians weren't fully wiped out. I hope to Altana that we can recover and find a way to beat back the Demons and their Turned army.

I've been thinking about what the best course of action would be. Would it be to a full defensive war? Raiding the Northlands and destroying their land? Assassination of their leaders?

Do they even have leaders?

The only way I can think of to find this out is to spy on them somehow, and I'm not sure we have any way to do that. Do we just follow them from a safe distance? A small crew? A one ninja army?

The bells are tolling again. I guess this is normal here.

It's going to be a long few days. I have another audience with the Empress tomorrow morning. After the previous fight, the Vizier told me that they're trying to allocate resources to spare for my home land.

I think it would be easier if we just killed the leadership of the beastmen here, first.

Day 67 – The Art of War

I spoke about the idea of killing the leadership of the beastmen here. The idea had been tried before, but apparently there are so many Mamools, and Trolls that they quickly just reorganize. The Undead? Well, it's just like at home: they kind of just reanimate.

It's a bit messed up how nothing ever really changes; it's the same at home as it is here.

The leadership here wants to perform a full frontal assault, but the problem is that if you do that the other two tribes would just march in and take over Al Zabi and there aren't enough people to split up and hold Zabi while the other half takes over a fort.

We seem to have two possible ways to work around this: an elite strike team, or an undercover operation. An Elite Strike Team, like exactly what I was a part of. Only this time, we're not fighting decaying enemies that move slow; we're fighting lively, fast, powerful ones.

Which got me thinking, what if we got them to act against each other? From what I can gather, Soulflayers generally stick around the Undead Army. If I can make my hand akin to a Soulflayer's, can't I make enough of me look like it that I can kill the leadership of a non-Undead army and make it look like the Undeads sent a powerful Soulflayer in order to take more power and land?

I didn't mention that idea, merely that we should reconvene at a later time.

What I've noticed is that the more souls I devour, the easier it is to "Go Flayer". I've got the plan and I've got the ability to do this. It's time to have some fun.

Day 71 – He Who Sits Behind the Rows

I'm starting to get a bit afraid of myself.

I'm hidden in what I assume to be the middle of Mamook. There's a dead Mamool Ja next to me. I had knocked him from behind and strangled him so he could make no noise, and I lifted him up and carefully took him into the small cave I'm using for cover. The part that scares me is that after doing this, I felt the undeniable urge to let myself "Go Flayer".

I gave way to the urge, and I came to some time later, my face covered in the green blood of the lizard man, my hands with bits of his flesh. I was eating him.

I have become the very enemy that which I vowed to destroy.

For a few minutes I had contemplated taking my tentacles and strangling myself to death, but a voice inside of me stifled it; it sounded an awful lot like Alyria, to be honest.

But the Galka from some three weeks ago chimed in; I heard him again for the first time since that final night I was in the cell. He told me that he could see what was happening to me, and that it was dangerous; it was dangerous, but that I could make it through.

I promised him I would try not to lose it. It's a bit odd, really. I killed him, I know that. I killed this spirit, and it sticks around inside of me, and it doesn't hate me for it. Why doesn't it? It's like he knows that I don't really want to kill people, that it's something else inside of me, something that's insatiable. Something that wants vengeance.

I guess he knows what I've lost. He knows what I've lost, and what I'm searching to gain. I guess, in the end, he knows that if I succeed I'm going to need to do the wrong things for one giant, almighty, "greater good."

It disgusts me, but I know that I'm only doing this to get back home with an army, and I think that I can deal with that. If not, then I'll figure out who caused this problem, and I'll kill them myself.

I wonder if the others are still searching for me. In my maps, I learned that there is a quick way to get back to the Bhaflau Thickets and into an Imperial Staging Point. I'll be banking on that to get home.

I should be back in Zabi soon. Tomorrow I flee home.

Tonight, I kill a Sage Lord.

The following entry has been recorded by Selim due to various complications that had occurred during the altercation.

Day 72 – Of Mice and of Men

When the boy had first fled, it was Caiyuo who had suggested that he would be attempting to do something reckless in order to try and speed up the entire process of getting an army to his home land.

There is a certain feeling that I get when I approach him; it is as though there is somebody screaming and flailing themselves upon a prison cell. I have learned that sometimes, it is best to simply follow the gut. So I had.

I had caught up to him by following the trail of dead bodies. He was getting sloppier, almost as though he was becoming too driven with the thought of killing to care if he had to kill, or as though he had begun to attain pleasure from the act of murdering. The last few corpses had been ripped open, parts of them shredded.

I watched him stop at a large mahogany door deep inside of Mamook. He leaned on the tunnel wall for a moment and his breathing sped up.

I watched as his clothing burst open and he turned into a Flayer.

It was, by far, the single most horrific thing I have witnessed in my life. His skin had seemed to stretch and his face, which was the last thing to change, had a look of pure torment on it. He was biting his lips hard so as to not scream. There was blood, some blue and some red, flowing from his lips. He was shaking, too.

And then his face began to grow tentacular and I watched as he waved his hand over his shredded clothes and they became deep blue robes.

He thrust his hand through the door and it shattered, and immediately I heard what seemed to be three Mamools scream out in shock.

One of them had a stave and stepped backwards behind the other two, who rushed forward to assault the cursed creature that the boy had become.

From what I could see, still trying to stay hidden as I knew this was a death trap in so many ways, the boy was toying with the two other Mamools. He was whipping at them and stabbing at them, but he was not killing them.

I heard, in the distance, Mamools talking in their own tongues. Patrolmen, I assumed, that had found the trail of bodies.

I then realized exactly what Sectumsempra was trying to do.

He had purposefully left the bodies. He wanted to be found.

There were Mamools hurrying now towards the tunnels our way, but it was a bit of a hike and I only knew they were coming because of the echoes.

Sectumsempra wrapped his tentacles around the throats of one of the Mamools and there was a loud crack as he broke his neck. I watched as the Mamool suddenly froze where he was, panic in his eyes.

And then Sectumsempra dragged him towards his mouth and tore into his stomach.

If he was trying to arouse fear, he was clearly working. He was eating the Mamool before it even had time to die.

There was a large ball of flame that assaulted him as the forgotten Sage Lord tried to kill him.

The Mamool Patrolmen were coming closer now.

The other Mamool guard without the staff was trying to take this moment to slice at Sectumsempra's tentacles. Two of them fell to the ground.

The boy glared at the other Mamool and opened his mouth, and fire spat out of it.

I do not like to advocate violence, but his tactic was so simple it was brilliant; he had roasted the other Mamool in their own manner of spitting fire. He was trying to create fear.

He was a walking terrorist in these moments as he dropped the first killed Mamool to the ground and the upper body of the second Mamool collapsed and turned to dust, having been heated so much. The Sage Lord was in a panic now.

Now was the time for the Sage Lord. Sectumsempra took a moment to take a heaving breath as another ball of flame came to him.

The boy held up the single tentacle left on his left hand and the ball of flame stopped where it was.

The patrolmen were almost here, and I had no choice but to jump into the room and hide in the chaos. It was a sort of theater setup, almost. The Flayer and the Mamool fought in the center of this sort of cavernous room where there were many tiers of stumps and half benches, as though he gave orders here or speeches.

It was funny to imagine a Mamool Ja giving a speech.

A few Mamools had come in through the shattered door and both the Sage Lord and Sectumsempra turned to them, and the ball of flame went to a good cause; it killed two patrolmen and badly singed a third, who ran away for backup.

As though this were exactly what he had wanted to happen, Sectumsempra then let out a deep cackle that sounded as though he was underwater. He lunged at the Mamool Ja.

With his one tentacle on his left hand, he speared out the eyeball of the Sage Lord and there was a shriek of pain. He took the Mamool's staff with his right hand in this moment of confusion and rammed the sharp bottom of it through him. Sectumsempra kept pushing it through him and pummeled him into a wall.

The Sage Lord, still alive, was writhing on his own staff some two feet off the ground. The boy, the flayer, the monster, whatever he was... he struck his tentacle into the other eye. He took his other hand and placed it into the Sage Lord's mouth.

I watched as the Sage Lord's body went limp and his skull shattered as the tentacles shot upwards.

More Mamools had arrived, and Sectumsempra took a moment to turn and face them. I saw in his eyes the urge to murder each and every one of them.

He removed his hand and used his tentacles to break through the Sage Lord's chest as the Mamools had stood still, frozen in raw fear. He ripped out the Sage Lord's heart, and bit into it.

One Mamool rushed at him, and Sectumsempra wrapped his tentacles around his skull as he approached and constricted his skull so quickly that his head had, essentially, exploded.

The other Mamools ran, and rightfully so.

The boy let out a monstrous scream and his body slowly began to revert.

I jumped down to him as his body molded back into a human form and his clothes reverted to normal. With bulging eyes, he glanced at his work, and bowed his head. I grabbed him as he fell to his knees.

"We've got to get out of here," he said between short, hollow breaths. "I've got enough in me to retrace my steps and take us outside of Mamook."

I remembered nodding as he clutched at my chest and said an incantation under his lips, and we disappeared in a flash of black.

We were in the Bhaflau Thickets.

I dragged him back to the Staging Point. He's currently back in the hospital.

There's already talk that the Mamools have withdrawn from their stations surveying Al Zabi and have begun to organize into legions.

Sectumsempra won't wake up; he simply screams and cries in his sleep.

I feel almost sorry for him. I know he chronicles everything, I see it all the time. I feel as though I must do this duty to him and record this for him.

I hope, if you ever read this, that you can understand why I did this. I feel as though if you do not make it that this story had to continue. Though horrific, your bravery may have saved a world.

Can we truly ask for more? If he can get the beastmen to fight themselves, though it is such a dirty tactic, he may yet end two wars.

Day 75 – War Drums

He still has yet to wake.

The Mamools are marching, away from Al Zabi.

Immortal scouts see them; they are heading en masse to the Alzadaal Undersea Ruins. There have been reports of them leaving into Lamia Territory, but the scouts dare not get too close.

Curiously enough, the Trolls have not attacked much lately. It's almost as though they know what's going on. There has been talk circling around that they are fortifying their own lands, under the impression that the Mamools are attempting to conquer.

It's a little sickening, and a little sad.

Yet at the same time, I have never seen the people of Aht Urhgan so happy, so at ease.

There is a girl who keeps visiting Sectumsempra at the clinic where he is resting. She says her name is Aphmau and that she is a simple Puppetmaster that he had befriended. I was not aware that he had met her. I'm keeping a close watch on her.

I barely know this boy, yet from what I have learned from Marzbarz and Caiyuo he is a brave, misguided, tragic boy that was once a simple, naïve chef of his land. Caiyuo explained to me the story of his friend that he had ended up killing due to the Plague.

It is a horrible thing. It has been over a month now, and he still has yet to return to his old group. They must think that the trio has died or forsaken them. I can tell in the way Cai and Marz pace restlessly that the situation is dire; perhaps too dire now to recover from.

Yet what can we do? All we can do is hope that the boy makes a speedy, second recovery and that the people of Al Zabi keep to their word and aid us with numbers and supplies.

He's started to scream again. This time, he's forming words.

"Make it stop!" he screams, over and over. His voice is begging us.

I wonder if he wishes for me to kill him. As he shrieks his left hand spasms in pain. It's a mess of blood, but he's got all his fingers still. I don't understand how it works out.

Aphmau is stroking his face, and it seems to calm him down. A tear falls from her eyes and she buries her face in the blanket covering him when he stops again, murmuring something that sounds an awful lot like, *"It didn't have to be this way."*

I'm not going to pretend to understand these two kids; it's been a long time since I've been their age, and I did not understand them any more then than I do now. I'm just a simple minstrel who's never forgotten what it's like to spend a childhood stealing to survive.

That's exactly how I got myself into this mess, anyways. Old habits die hard, I suppose. I was lurking around in my caravan of stolen goods, using Olzhirya as a pit stop between pirate ports as I tried to flee my way far Eastward, when I had passed by Marzbarz and Caiyuo. They had been so desperate, fleeing from the Mithra, carrying this poor boy that I caved in. I remembered what it was like to be so scared, so utterly distraught and afraid of the law, that I hid them and helped them flee.

I guess they're lucky I was fleeing the Turned, too. I suppose Altana had plans for us already made. I hope she guides us to safety.

Day 77 – Back in Black

I can't stop shaking.

I feel like near death experiences are beginning to happen a little too often for my own personal comfort.

These last few days I've been stuck in a nightmare. I keep killing, and every soul comes back, and they torment me. I know it's wrong. I know killing is wrong.

I don't want to kill, I don't want to kill, I don't want to kill...

But I keep killing.

Why can't I stop? Why can't I do it?

I start looking back at what I wrote, and I feel like that wasn't really me. It couldn't have been me.

But I know it was, and I know I felt those things. I know that I was so thirsty to kill, and I know that I started eating my enemies. I know it, and it scares me.

Oh Altana, it scares me so much. I don't want to be this. I don't want to do this anymore. I just want things to go back to the way they used to be. I just want to go home.

But home, home is gone. I don't know what to do anymore.

The word around town is that the Mamools are waging full outright war against the Lamia.

I guess I'm good for something.

But that's more death, and I don't want more death. I just want the stuff to stop.

But I know that stopping can only happen if we keep killing the Turned, and to kill the Turned I need an army, and that army had to come from this war.

I hear that the Mamools are winning the fight I started.

My hand hurts, a lot, and I can't stop shaking. I've been summoned to visit the Empress when I can muster the strength.

I'm getting flashes of what I did to the Sage Lord. It's just not me.

It's not me. It wasn't me. I did it, but that's not me.

I'm so scared. I'm so damn scared of what I'm becoming.

I'm just a boy, and I've got to rescue this whole world somehow, and there's no one to rescue me.

At least a bunch of citizens keep bringing me sweets. One man brought me a whole pot of tea and some biscuits.

I feel like such a traitor. I'm not even part of this land, and I started a war on its soil by playing two enemies against each other, all so that I could get some man power to help me on my own mission.

At least, for a little while, the voices in my head aren't bothering me. It's all a little calmer.

I think when I finish the tea, if I can find some warm clothes besides these clinical robes, I'll go visit the Empress.

Day 78 – A Change of Seasons

Part 1

An elvaan man named Kushdeel had robes ready for me. He said he had been commissioned to make sure I had clothes of the right kind ready. They were of the same general design of the Immortals' garbs, but instead were of a dark green, some truly earthy browns, and an even darker blue. There was also a great bit more gold gilded into it. I asked him who had paid, but he would not answer.

I did not have to wait long to answer. I had gotten changed into my new robes and had headed for my audience with the Empress. By now the doors were simply opened as I approached, and I was led into the Imperial Palace once more. As per usual I walked between the two lines of Immortal Guards that led to the throne that she sat on, hidden behind sheets of cloth.

She asked how I was feeling, to which I had no real reply.

How *was* I feeling? I realized that I wasn't sure.

She saw that I had no answer, and then things grew strange indeed. She requested that everyone, save myself, leave the room.

They filed out wordlessly, even the Vizier.

I saw the cloths part and a young girl with blond hair stepped forward, wearing the baggy red robes of a Puppetmaster.

She sat down on the steps leading up to her throne and patted the spot next to her.

I suppose it was an order, and so I followed it. I walked over to her and sat down.

It was all very awkward.

She was just staring at me. It lasted for a few minutes before she finally said, "So many lives were lost trying to protect us, and finally it was a stranger who saved us. I've seen your face; it was only fair to show you mine. We are strangers no longer."

The logic seemed to fit, and so I accepted it at face value.

Then she asked again how I was feeling, and I had an answer.

"Terrified," I admitted. I glanced down at my hands. "Absolutely terrified of what I'm becoming."

"You were a chef, were you not?" she asked. I nodded simply, not even bothering to wonder how she knew. "You lived a life where you made things, and now all you're forced to do is destroy."

I don't exactly know what made me start to tremble, but I know I started shaking.

She placed her hand over my shaking one, and suddenly I was crying. I suppose I just passed my threshold. I was trying to hold in so much that I broke.

So in front of the Empress of Aht Urhgan, I bawled my eyes out, and she comforted me with soothing words and gentle hands.

Part 2

I was still rather exhausted and, I suppose, my body was not fully recovered from the trauma I had put it through. I wept so much I tired myself out.

I'm actually ashamed to say it, but I basically passed out right there, probably leaning on her crying. I woke up some time later in one of what I can only assume is a palace guest room with an automaton watching me. Some guard it was, though; the thing was shaking to hell and back in a corner and when I woke up, it ran away. Quickly.

They run pretty strangely.

I noticed that some of my lacerations had opened again and made a mental note to gauze them up again later.

Upon opening the door I was led by two Immortals to a dining hall. Marz, Cai, and Selim appeared shortly after, and then a few moments later the Vizier appeared with a few Immortals. It was all very surreal.

We spoke about the current situation; the Mamools had absolutely massacred the Undead in a full frontal siege but sustained heavy casualties. The trolls were reported as digging deeper in the opposite direction of Al Zabi and preparing to have to outlast a siege from the Mamools at any moment.

The Vizier says that there are under four hundred Mamool Ja Warriors left standing and a pitiful amount of Undead... well, not alive, but you get the gist.

I was praised as a hero and after we were fed a stupid number of seafood and other exotic dishes, we were led away to another room with what appeared to be a number of higher-ranking Immortals that had been discussing the elimination of the Trolls.

They ultimately decided on attempting to make a truce between the Trolls under the guise of being scared of Mamool invasion and then using a combined effort to clean up the rest of the Mamool Ja.

Then, it was my turn. They asked my group and I to brief them on what the situation was in the West so they could figure out how many hundreds of Immortals were needed.

When I did, they settled on half a thousand Immortals now with another half a thousand when the Beastmen were totally finished.

A thousand Immortals.

It was all very surreal. Did I say that already? I did, but it was.

They said that the first group would attempt capturing various Turned and Demons and would learn about their enemy, and after that they would help us do a clean sweep through the three major cities and Jeuno and, if time allowed, would help us assemble our own people back into a giant militia with some rudimentary military training.

It all sounded too good to be true, and it only got better.

The Vizier then led us down to some deep chambers in the palace that he had to unlock with some form of magic. Ultimately, he took us to something that I still am unsure should be called an armory or a treasure trove.

The final door he opened up led to a room full of absolutely astonishing weapons and armors and gadgets and gizmos. He simply said, "In return for destroying the enemy that which we needed such weapons for, we offer them to you until your own fight is done." He then said, rather candidly, "No one is ever allowed to use these, take all of them you can carry because they're only collecting dust; the previous four Empresses hadn't even an idea that this cache existed."

Cai let out a whoop, and the gang raided what they could. Selim took some daggers, Marz took two sets of Katanas, and Cai started picking up some Great Katanas but didn't like any of them, so he started taking gear for the friends back home.

I'm not really a weapons expert so I figured I would wait for one of them to finish and explain to me what to look for. I opened up some giant, decaying cabinet.

The first thing that caught my eye was a Katana that looked like a miniature scythe. Marz let out an exclamation and started shouting, "Gimme! Gimme! Gimme!"

So I tossed it to her.

My eyes were locked on a long, golden sword. I picked it up and I liked it. I liked it a lot.

I figured it would do better than my old one that came out of a decoration, so I took it.

I left the room as they "ooo"ed and "ahhh"ed at the contents of the chest and probably took anything they could carry. As I walked out, a hand grabbed my wrist.

It was the Empress. She had a finger on her mouth in a "shush" motion, so I said nothing. Instead, I simply followed her as she led me elsewhere.

Part 3

She led me through the labyrinth hallways of the palace so far in that I lost track of how I would get back. Ultimately, I gave up. I would just have to trust the Empress.

She pulled me into a room and shut the door. It was quite a large room; looking back, it was probably her bedroom. It was the sort of room that was so obscenely grand and majestic that it had its

own little bed of rocks supplied by water that trickled down from a little rock waterfall, with some plants floating in it.

She closed the door behind me and locked it before sitting on a coffer that was in front of a rather large bed. She just saw there, smiling a mysterious sort of smile that had more than a hint of sadness to it.

She looked to the floor and looked back up at me, blushing slightly.

"I never really thanked you," she said.

"I didn't do it for the thanks; I did it so I could get some help," I think I said. It all got a little hazy in my memory, because by that point she had jumped up and latched on to me. This time, she was crying.

"I wanted to help, but I couldn't; the vizier didn't think anything would come out of this. I knew you'd do what you did, oh Altana I kept praying you wouldn't have to," she said, very quickly as she sobbed.

I didn't quite know what to do, so I awkwardly wrapped my arms around her.

"You stopped our war so quickly we barely knew what happened. You, just some outsider, you took all the blood of my hands and took it on your own," she said. She buried her head in my chest. "I was so scared of that, and you made it so that I would never have to face that myself. And you're so hurt yourself, that you shouldn't even be allowed out," she said. "You're the walking dead, and you saved us, all at your expense..."

She was running her hand up and down my chest now. Somehow, in the next few moments, we ended up on her bed, and this time I was the one doing the comforting.

When she calmed down, we laid on the bed a while before she started conversation back up.

"You know, we're both the same age," she said. She looked young, and I knew I was young. "Sixteen, almost seventeen. That's why... that's why I trust you like I do. That's why I feel so comfortable with you."

I said nothing, because that's pretty much what the normal for me at this point.

"We're both these kids that all the adults rely on. I'm at the brink, and you've been pushed so far beyond it..."

She clutched one of my hands and looked at me, her eyes absolutely begging to know.

"How do you do it? How do you deal with it?"

It was the sort of question I didn't have any answer to at first, but after I thought about it I knew.

"I know if I break down and quit, there's no one there to pick up the pieces. I owe... I owe the old life that much, trying to fight for it."

I sighed. "I'm not taking it well, at all. I keep going from feeling like a murderer to a scared little... what do you call them here, Quicorns?"

She let out a small giggle. "Qiqirns, silly!" she said, and squeezed my hand.

Now that I have had time to rationalize all that happened yesterday, I guess that I can understand why she grabbed me and why I went along with it.

We're just two kids, playing the adult's game, and it's killing us both to do it.

"Yeah, those," I said. "When I was doing... what it was I did, to the Sage Lord, I pretty much lost myself..."

My voice trailed off. "I had pretty much given up, and I was half hoping that I would have lost my fight. The only thing that kept me going was the sheer audacity of what I was doing. I can't describe what I did to myself..."

A shiver overcame me, and I choked up for a second as I remembered what it felt like for my entire body to just turn into something it downright should not have been.

She moved closer to me and squeezed my hand again.

I bit down on my lips, trying to hold composure, and I succeeded.

I went to go talk more, but she put her fingers over my mouth. "If it hurts too much, just throw it away, that memory, or find somewhere to put it where it won't hurt."

She took her fingers away. "How was life in the West before all this happened?" she said, to change the subject.

"It was great, I guess. No one had it really any better than I did, now that I think about it. I had my own shop, I did what I loved, and I was known as that good natured little boy down the block that made the good soup and pastries. Now that I look back, I guess I took it all for granted," I said.

She looked sad, and in some way a bit jealous. "I have to pretend to be a Puppetmaster when I want to get away," she said. "It's been this way for a long time."

She was easy to talk to. Really easy.

"Speaking of which, I think I scared one of your puppets before," I said. We both paused, then laughed again.

"Yeah," she said. "You did. He came running halfway across the palace to tell me that you kept shrieking in your sleep..." she trailed off again. "Nightmares?" she asked.

"Just one." I said. "One that keeps getting bigger, more vivid, each time. Every time I kill, every time I sleep, every time I do anything it gets a little more real."

I didn't want to tell her what the nightmare was about, so I stopped there.

We had inched closer, and I hadn't even realized it myself until then. We were staring each other in the eyes.

I think, for the first time, I slept soundly that night without screaming.

Part 4

And that was how I woke up this morning. I felt like I should have been guilty, but deep down inside the coldly logical creature I had developed told me that there was no point in feeling bad for fortune at this point. When I think about it, last night showed me how much I really have changed in the past 78 days.

I feel a little more at calm with the world now, and for the first time in weeks I feel like I once again have something worth fighting for and looking forward towards. I think I've made peace with myself, and as I woke up this morning in the tangled mess of sheets from that giant bed, I realized that I still had real feelings deep down inside. Whatever I had hoped and prayed about having a broken soul, that was all just to protect myself.

I remembered that it was okay to feel something, as long as I didn't let the feelings get in the way of what was important in life. And I guess, those things that you feel could be the important things. It's complicated, I guess.

She's still asleep as I write all this down. For the first time in forever, I can honestly say I feel rested. Spiritually, emotionally, physically, everything. I've still got some healing to do, but I think I can live with myself for now.

The voices in my head, the ones from those I killed, they're quiet. They're not gone, they're just... respecting me now, per say. There was one moment last night where I finally forced myself to face them and scream out in my skull, "You're in my head, and you'll play my rules."

And that's exactly what the voices are doing.

It's kind of cute and kind of creepy, watching her sleep. She hogs the sheets up and she's got this one strand of hair that keeps falling over her face no matter how many times I brush it away.

I guess, on this neck of the journey, I made more than one friend. Selim's an alright guy, and now I'm friends with the Empress.

She offered me last night that I could stay as long as I'd like. I was, essentially, pretty much the biggest hero in a while. She even joked that we could wait a few years and tie the knot, because there really wasn't anything else that had to be done if the Beast Men had stopped their assaults.

That's a bit of a scary premise. What was more scary was that I was tempted.

But ah well. The flowers she has in her little water garden, they glow. They're the only real lights on, the candles in the room have long since died out.

I guess in a few more days I head back to my homeland. The East is a pretty odd place, I guess. I've done some physically impossible things. But hey, it sure as hell beats the South any day of the week.

She just stirred slightly and gave me a small little smile and murmured to me, "What are you writing?"

I explained to her that I chronicled my journeys down since it helped me. Her face turned red and she sort of hid under the covers, but I laughed and she seemed reassured. I told her that before I go, I'd give it to her to remember me by.

Her eyes lit up as she asked me, "Will you come back one day?"

I smiled and nodded. "If you'd like," I said. She gripped my hand again. "I promise, when I'm done with my journey, I'll come back."

She smiled and now she's tugging at my arm again. She says it's still late at night and that morning is still far away yet.

Part 5

And that was all just yesterday still.

I'm currently sitting at the café, it's around noon, and Cai has shown up with some Mulsum for Selim and I. He refuses to let Marz drink, for fear that she'll go crazy and kill us all.

They keep tossing sideways glances at each other, and I find it hysterical to realize how much I was missing.

I feel good again, and that's why Cai is finally buying me a drink. I'm laughing, I'm eating right, and I'm smiling. I like this, a lot.

In a few days we ship out back West, and I couldn't be happier. I've been away from my home for a while, it was crazy, and I am worried about the others.

Something tells me they're okay though, and so I'm pretty alright with that. They know how to take care of themselves. They're grownups.

People keep coming up to our little motley crew, smiling and thanking us for everything. It's nice, in a way. It's nicer that we don't actually have to pay for anything. We're allowed to sleep at the palace, eat wherever we want, and pretty much everyone is treating us like heroes.

Which, I suppose, hey; we are, aren't we?

The bells haven't rung in days now. There hasn't been a single attack. The only Beast Men to even come have been a few troll ambassadors to parley.

They remind me of the Gigases. I hope the runt is okay.

But I digress. I'm developing a ferocious love for this eastern seafood. It's spicy, it's got some zing. I'm sure that I can get a few recipes. In fact, I'll go ask the chef as soon as we're done.

Mulsum is a bit too sweet for my tastes, and when I said that Marz giggled and pulled out a flask from somewhere in her ninja garbs.

Cai let out a mumble of defeat and looked like he was about to cry, all in good humor of course, as Marz took my Mulsum and downed it before refilling the drink with something that blew my mind away.

Apparently, that stuff is made out of rice. Cai, ever the mother of the group at the moment, insisted I drink some water and coffee, citing that he didn't want to totally corrupt me in one day; besides, he said, mixing those two was a surefire way to get me to vomit, and I still hadn't even tried a real San d'Orian drink.

A woman just came over with a child with a giant bowl of dried dates, insisting that she wished she could do more to thank us and that she hoped we liked it.

We thanked her profusely, insisted we didn't need anything, and then dove into the bowl.

Life is good.

It's really good, for a little while.

I figure that when we head back to the west we should dock near Windurst and make sure that the town is still secure, and begin our march once more. We'll purge the lands as we go, of anything we may see.

We'll secure the three towns and Jeuno again, and this time we'll start the offensive. We're ready. It's time.

Speaking of being ready, Cai said that the Vizier told him that those weapons were mostly from the cache of the legendary hero, Balrahn. Fancy that, eh? I guess they go from one hero to the next.

I just hope I don't get too comfortable with my new status.

On that note, I have verified that I have a bit more control over my transformations now. It doesn't hurt as much. It gives me a wicked headache, but I seem to be just fine. For now. I haven't tried "Going Flayer" fully, because that seems to require a considerable amount of healing time. It's just not worth it.

It's dark territory, that whole bit, but I'm sure that in time I'll find something darker to do. If there's a plague that turns people to mindless ghouls, there's obviously a whole field of dark arts that I'd never even dream about.

I'm going to put my book down for a while and enjoy myself. I'm only writing out of habit now. I don't feel like I need to do it; it was helping me escape what was going on by being able to rationalize it.

Besides, I notice a certain Puppetmaster watching me from the other side of the tea house. I can't help but smile.

Day 79 – With A Little Help From My Friends

This time I went to bed alone and when I woke up, Nashmeira was lying next to me, her arms wrapped around me, tugging me awake. I must be a sound sleeper now that I'm not running for my life.

She got out of bed and she slipped into her Puppetmaster's outfit. The sun was just barely up and we went to go get some tea and watch the sun rise.

We keep touching each other; I'd reach for her hand, or she'd lean her head on my shoulder or maybe if we were sitting across from each other she'd press her legs against mine.

I was a chef once, as I'm sure anyone reading this knows by now, and part of running my own store was that I got to observe people. I got to see a ton of couples, but was never really involved with anyone. I understand the body language well enough.

She made me promise that I'd come back one day. Now, I intended on it, anyways.

We made a stop off at Kushdeel's; he had an entire coffer of clothing for me. Nashmeira whispered in my ear that she read up on the West's geography and had him build a few sets of clothes for any of its environments, and a few more dressy versions for fancy parties.

Fancy parties?

I thanked her profusely; it was nice to have someone who cared about you for the sake of caring. Not only that, but now I can go back to rotating my clothes. It makes sewing up rips and tears that much easier.

We carried the coffer back to my hotel room and we were thinking about what to do then, but we got a bit distracted after that.

A few hours later I met up with the others. They were discussing the weapon cache they raided in the palace and local rumors about the weapons.

"We'll see soon enough how good they are," I chimed in as I walked into the private room they were in at some restaurant or another.

"Morbid as that may be, pretty much," Selim agreed.

He just kind of blended into the group. I'm assuming that while I was in those comas he bonded with the group. I owe him my life either way, and he's a nice guy.

"So, where've you been so often?" Marz prodded.

I shrugged, but I could feel my cheeks tinting red.

She was going to prod further, but a waiter came.

Thank Altana for that. I like my friends, we're going through hell together, but I don't think I have it in me to talk about my missing hours.

Cai, however, had some semblance of a clue. He asked me who she was as I stood overlooking the ocean. He told me that he could see it in my face.

I told him that it was just a Puppetmaster I met, and he chuckled.

"To be young..." he said.

I had to agree.

"You've been a lot better lately," he said.

I had to agree again. "I get by," I said, "with a little help from my friends. Nightmares only last so long. The voices, they're still there; but we've reached... an understanding."

He placed a hand on my shoulder. "You're a good kid, Sect; I wish that it didn't all happen to you."

"I'm kind of glad it did," I said. "I didn't go *totally* crazy yet; I think any other sixteen year old would by now."

He chuckled. "It's good to have you back."

"I'm sure that I'll grow a bit darker again when we go home," I said. He shrugged this time.

"I hope there's still a home there."

I said nothing, but silently I was hoping with every fiber of my existence that he was right.

Day 80 – Business, As Usual

I was inside most of today with Cai. We were discussing different tactics and how to respond to different scenarios that we may be faced with in the west. Our biggest fear is that there's nobody left, but that would pretty much be the simplest one to deal with; in that case, we simply slaughter everything on sight and sweep it out.

What we're realistically expecting to see is that Windurst is slowly withering away to hunger and starvation and that Jeuno is still basically just barely functional, if not overridden by demons and Turned.

Our major plan is to simply sweep through the cities, gather survivors, and position them in Delkfutt's Tower. We then intend on sweeping Northward to try and simply slaughter the demons.

We intend on using any and all means necessary to extract information on what the demons did to cause this, and what we have to do to stop this. If there's a way to purify Turned without killing them, I'm all for it.

What's a little more killing though?

What I'm curious to find out is this: if I kill a Turned, do I get something from who they used to be? If so, doesn't that mean that they're still themselves, and that we've been murdering people?

I'm not sure if I can live with that, but I've got to try.

Day 81 – Our Final Hours

I met her in the palace again. I'm pretty much allowed to come and go as I please.

Nashmeira absolutely assaulted me when we reached her room.

I'm leaving tomorrow morning, the Immortals are readied, and the Trolls have signed a truce with the Empress, formally now.

And all I can think about is how I have to leave her behind.

Am I leaving her behind, or am I just clearing the path in front of us?

I'm not sure. I feel like I'm being pulled back by destiny. It's a giant whirlpool. It's this mindless, shapeless, impossible to gauge force that I can't fight.

She's had rations, armor, and whatever else she can think of sequestered just for me. She says that she even has a special Chocobo that she helped raise set aside for me.

We're getting Chocobos. That's so cool.

She ordained me an ambassador of Aht Urhgan. I'm allowed to make treaties. I'm allowed to voice what I think she'd say in formal meetings. I'm the Hero of Aht Urhgan; I'm the Voice of the Empire.

All because she trusts me, and she needs me, and by Altana I need her.

I half wish that she could come with me, that we could continue what we've been doing. We're young, we're so easy to fall into this mess that we don't even know what it is, and I know that I don't care. It's nice. It's smooth. It's amazing. It's fresh. It's everything that the Turned took away.

Is this love? I don't know, I'm just a kid, and she's just a kid. We're just kids fooling around.

But no, in some way, we're not just kids. We can't be. We've done too much, we've seen too much. We shared that. We shared everything now. We just keep talking, when we're not occupied doing other things.

She just returned with a tray of chocolate covered strawberries. I'm not going to lie; what she's doing makes me reconsider love as a possibility *very* quickly. I sense a long night ahead.

Day 82 –A Thousand Shades of Blue

In another few hours I depart. I'm looking out a palace window, writing by candle light. Nashmeira is looking at me from the bed, sometimes smiling and sometimes crying softly because our time is up. It was some five days of clear skies for the both of us in our lives.

It's kind of bizarre, to be honest. She's just a kid, I'm just a kid, and we're scared shitless, and that's what brought us together in an instant. We kept talking.

That's what we're based off of, I think. We kept talking. We kept talking about anything we could, because when we spoke we forgot about the stupid reality we live in. And you know what? It helped.

It helped having someone to talk to. It helped having someone to listen, and to listen to. It helped having someone to be with.

We cried a lot, too. We cried so much that I think we ran out of tears, and then I think that's when it all got better for both of us, because we were never allowed to cry before that. It was all held back, 'cause we had to be strong. Then we had each other to be strong for and to let be strong for the other.

I'm going to miss her, a lot, and I'm half tempted on not going back home. I'm never going to forget how close we became. We've barely spent time apart this week. I guess it just kind of goes with the expectations; she's an empress, I'm a hero.

But I'm over most of my problems now, because everything is smooth now. She helped me smooth out my mind, my life, and whatever a soul may be. More than that, she made me remember why the fight was so hard before; I had nothing left to fight for. I was just fighting 'cause it was all I had to do. Now I've got something worth fighting for; it will always be in the back of my mind that if I don't stop the Plague in the West, that one day she too may be Turned. That thought alone makes me realize that I don't want to give up.

Now I've got her, and you know what? She's worth fighting for. I'll come back one day, because she saved me just as much as I saved this whole Empire.

She's beautiful, she really is. She's looking up at me with her eyes half opened, trying to stay awake and see me off, knowing that the second she falls asleep that I'm going to close this diary and go on my way.

She's almost looks like an adult with her hair down and with the sheets covering half her body, as she watches me, her eyes fighting sleep. She's so scared to never see me again, she told me herself. I'm scared of coming back and she's not here. I'm scared that Zabi will fall to a group of Turned or something.

But it's not the sort of scared that cripples me. It's the sort of scared that helps me keep going, this time. I'm more smooth than scared. My mind is clear, smooth, and at peace for now.

I'm pausing, waiting for her to fall asleep, because I know how hard it is to have to say goodbye to someone, and I'd rather that pain be shelved on me instead.

The final entry has been recovered through piecing together various copies that have been made, each being identified as one year apart each. The original, and many of the copies, are too smudged from what is assumed to be tears to be fully read.

A Final Goodbye

Nashmeira, I know that sooner or later you're going to read this, and I just want to thank you for what you've done for me. I hope you can forgive me for stealing one last kiss as you slept.

Everything is smooth now. As I look from the window and back at you sleeping, I realize that my soul's become as smooth as a thousand shades of blue in the ocean as the sun just barely comes up, and I want you to know that that beauty will always be bound to you and what we've shared in my heart, forever.

I'll come back, some day.

I promise.

On A Pale Chocobo

*Extracted from the third recovered diary of
Sectumsempra.*

Day 85 – Waterlogged

A few days at sea and I'm already bored.

Such is life, I suppose.

We decided to alter course and start off at Mhaura under the assumption that it was a relatively easy area for the town's people to defend if the Turned and Demons had come, and that if it was taken over that we could probably contain it quite quickly simply by staying on the boats and making the enemies waltz into the water and drown themselves.

Sometimes, life is simple.

Packed into my quarters was this blank diary. I found it yesterday as I looked through my coffer of clothes.

I never was too complex with clothes. I'm kind of glad that the only garbs I have left are just variations of the same basic outfit.

The diary was wrapped in red silk, and I think the perfume that I could have sworn I smelt was more than just from memories and longings.

The more I think about her, the more sick I make myself feel over the whole situation.

I keep telling myself that every emotion will pass in due time.

I wonder if that's good or bad?

The sword I picked out is very nice. I've been sparring with Cai.

It seems like I've just grown naturally better. Must be something to do with the fact that I killed a hell of a lot of Mamools, and a hell of a lot of them used swords. I guess that's a plus to it.

When you're living a crises, I suppose that any bit of good luck is amazing.

Day 86 – Asking Questions, Searching For Clues

I've been reading through my old diary.

Before I was tortured, I didn't hear the voices of those I had slain, but I could only work my abilities when in a panicked rage.

I had thought myself different from an immortal, and seeing as how I now act more like a Blue Mage than ever, I'm not really sure how any of this fits together with previous theories. So I took my sword and tried to think and realized that I could finally remember pretty much all of what the Demon did. I think before, it was just denial.

I was so scared of what I had become, I suppose, that I was in raw denial.

And yet I know I'm different from my peers that also steal souls. They say it themselves. They can't communicate with whats inside of them. They can't eat the souls of more complex beings like Galkas. They're tormented by what they're handling.

Why aren't I?

Day 87 – The Fourfold Battle

Morning

Mhaura is in sight now. We'll be able to start scoping it out in a few minutes.

Our plan is simple. If it is overrun, we massacre the town.

If it is safe, we prepare for them to open fire on us, assuming we are pirates or there to raid them, or kill them. We will send Caiyuo and Marzbarz on their own little boat with a white flag to go parley with them. If it's empty, we plunder for resources and set it up as a station.

I don't think it's empty. The hairs on the back of my neck are standing up in a way that means I'm being watched.

Whatever is there is already watching us.

I'm gripping my new weapon tightly. I have a feeling that I shall be drawing first blood with it soon.

I'll never really be ready to kill; I don't think anyone is every truly ready for it. I'm just as ready as I can be. I guess.

We lit off a flare to try and draw out any Turned.

Be back later. It's time for some blood.

Noon

We were greeted with a civil war.

Half of Mhaura had felt that they should have fled a long time ago and half was saying that they would never survive unless everyone stayed put.

At first we thought the fighting was Turned and Demons before we quickly suppressed the civil uprising. It took about four minutes for the villagers to stop. By that time, two boats of Immortals had unloaded. Cai, Marz, Selim, and myself at the front of the lines.

Everyone, on both sides, had weapons drawn.

"Drop the weapons, there's no more need for them; help is here," Cai said simply.

No one dropped a weapon. If nothing else, they gripped them tighter.

I heard a single word whispered in the crowd; "scavengers," someone had said.

I heard a gun cock and looked into the crowd to see a bearded human in the back of the line had loaded up a rifle and was aiming it at Cai.

"I don't think you want to do that," I said simply, and all eyes turned to me; as did the gunman. "You won't like what would happen."

I licked my lips. It was a habit I had formed.

I picked up a seashell that was on the floor of the dock, and I had my right hand go tentacular, and I shattered it. My hand returned to normal.

"I suggest," I began, "That you all calm down and listen. You're outnumbered, you don't want to start a fight with us, and we're not here to fight you."

"That's a damn lie!" said the man in the back with the gun.

He loaded the gun again, but this time his own people started to hiss at him to stop.

"I suggest you listen to them," I said simply.

He swung at a woman that was grabbing him.

I didn't have to give any orders; before anyone else could react, Marz had appeared behind him and with one swift blow from the knee had subdued him to the ground, his gun knocked a few feet away. She was kneeling on him and gripping him by the hair, her new katana held to his throat.

Cai was talking to the nearest two immortals and when he was done, they escorted the woman onto one of our ships.

"Who here would call themselves a leader of this location?" Cai called out. The townspeople split into two groups at that point; those who backed an elderly woman and those who backed the elvaan gunner.

Cai went over to the elderly women; Selim and I followed. "We're part of the Arch Duchy's Special Operational Team; we've returned from the East with reinforcements. Can you tell me what's happened in this area?"

She explained that they had managed to barricade themselves from the Turned and were living mostly on fish and desalinated water, but were growing restless and stir crazy. She said that there had been no contact for the last fifty days or so, when the whole thing began.

"We secured a location before we had gone for reinforcements," Cai said. "All are welcome there."

It was a fairly decent sized group. There were, I'd say, around seventy people left in tact there. "We'll be heading to Windurst next; you're people are welcome to join us or keep yourself holed up. We'll be clearing any Turned that we see," he continued.

Selim and I left at that point, allowing Cai to be the diplomatic one. Instead, we went to the group with the gunner.

"Thanks, Marz," I said, and she got off of him. He immediately scrambled for his gun. I briefly wondered why people were so damn silly. I rushed over to him as he got to it and with one fluid motion I had gripped the barrel and pointed it upwards as he fired again.

Everyone turned to face him.

"If you keep this up," I said simply to him, "I will kill you."

He scoffed. I know why; I'm just a boy, you know?

But it was wrong for him to try my patience.

I licked my lips again and this time my tentacles wrapped up the gun and to his hands.

"Gun or hand?" I asked him. "Pick one. Now."

He just looked at me, incredulously, confused.

It was at that point that I gripped him and snapped both of them.

I turned around as he howled in pain.

"Anyone else who thinks it would be wise to harm each other or one of us will find a much harsher fate."

The town grew still.

My hand returned to normal and I picked a splinter out of it from the gun.

"I'm offering you safety; all you have to do is stick with us. Any attempts to sabotage our march through Vana'diel will be met with swift and painful retribution."

The point was clear and I walked over to the bearded gunner and clutched his hand. He screamed in pain until I healed it, and then he scurried away.

"We leave for Windurst at dawn. You're either with us, or you're out of our way."

I marched back to the ship, and now I'm simply having tea with Marz. She's quite cheerful.

Evening

It all boiled over pretty quickly, largely in part due to the fact that someone heard scratching at the barricades. We had attracted Turned.

You see, that was a bit of our specialty now, and let us look like heroes.

We could fit a hundred and fifty immortals in Mhaura, and so we brought that many on shore.

Marz, ever the ninja, had a few grenades on her. We told the townspeople to whole themselves up and not come out until told.

They were eager to follow that order.

Marz blew the barricade open and it all began.

We had formed ranks before all this, of course, and had a strategy.

The Immortals had a great many tricks up their sleeves. The first we used had been a tactic they called "Diamondhide"; coating groups of themselves at a time in a magical shield. It lasted a decent bit.

The first line of offense was a group of immortals that could procure a frost breath; they had, apparently, imported raptors through the Tenshodo and had used them until they learned how to breath frigid cold.

And so when Marz blew the barricade away, the first line had started by freezing them.

There were hundreds of them. Absolutely hundreds of them, and they never got beyond the choke point that was the entrance from Buburimu.

If war could be golden, then this was mythril.

The bodies just piled up when we began the actual fighting.

By now we understood our enemy. Decapitation, combustion, brain elimination, electrocution, smashing them with giant rocks, or freezing them and shattering them; all that stuff, it worked.

I think Marz actually had the highest individual kill count, however. She was right up there in the front line, giggling in joy as she just pulled their heads right off with her new katana.

I've never seen a girl so happy. Well, that's not true anymore; however, I've never seen a girl so happy over an oversize bread knife.

But hey, we all have to get our kicks somehow, don't we?

The kill count came back. Four immortals wounded; three hundred and nine Turned have been eliminated.

Fortunately, we cannot find any indication of pierced flesh. We're lucky.

They're in quarantine, none the less; each in their own holding cell with guards outside. We procured some oil; the plan is, if any of them Turn, we light them on fire and be on our merry way.

I'm cleaning this sword. It's an amazing weapon; it's long, it's not too heavy, and it just makes me feel, well, more warrior oriented.

Cai's here with the food. We march for Windurst in a few hours.

'till then.

Day 88 – Like Scooby and the Mystery Inc., Let's Split Up Gang!

We only had to burn one of them. The others are still under surveillance, but they seem fine. I did it myself, because I know how hard it is to kill one of your own people.

We tasked the sailors to take the ships around to Bastok and left them with a hundred Immortals "in case of trouble."

We've headed towards Windurst for now. We're slowly marching through Buburimu's sand dune towards the Tahrongi Canyon. When we reach Windurst, we intend on taking an airship to Jeuno. If the Star Sibyl does not allow it, then we'll start the negotiations. I'm sure she'll see it my way by the end of it.

We've seen a great number of Turned. They seem to stay away from the large opened land. They congregate and eat each other on the beaches, in caves, and so on. They march over fallen allies and eat them, too, at times. They kind of just walk in circles and chase rarabs, when one hops out of hiding.

The rarabs are managing themselves just fine. The vultures are also just fine, they fly away and hide in trees when one comes.

What's hard to accept is the number of Dhalmels that are lying, half eaten. They're just there. Rotting. Dead.

We're starting to see Turned Goblins, too.

We're sweeping them clean, and we've got a system down for outside warfare.

We were supplied with a fair deal of Chocobos. We make a group of around twenty Immortals that mount up and head towards the large concentrations of Turned. They hear us, the Turned start mindlessly chasing them, and then we pick them off one by one.

Sword combat is risky. Breathing fire is pretty safe.

At the same time, we're also studying the three who did not Turn. From what I have found out, the one who fell to the Plague had always dealt with sickness badly.

Could it be that the Turned grow weaker as they rot, and that as they do it becomes safer to deal with them?

That would be fortunate.

That would be fortunate indeed.

I'm hoping that the others are okay.

I'm actually sort of enjoying myself this time.

The Turned, they're rotting away on their own accord. I don't think they'll ever die, but they're slower. They're falling apart. It's becoming easier to deal with. And more than that, I'm not hearing them inside my head when I kill them.

Slowly but surely, however, I'm feeling hunger return to me. The closer we get to returning to Jeuno, the more I feel it. I also find that I keep licking my lips like a psychopath before any bit of my goes Flayer.

We've all got our quirks, I suppose. It's time to continue the march. We'll be in the Canyon by noon.

Noon

Around half of Mhaura had decided to come with us.

We're having them camp by the outpost near the crevice that lets us enter the canyon, which is being guarded by a group of Immortals using it as a strategic choke point. We're taking a twenty minute breather.

Cai had decided to take Marz and Selim to go scout out the Canyon earlier on in the day.

The gunman from earlier has been traveling at the back of the group like a defeated dog. We're keeping an eye on him. There's the threat that we'll toss him to the Turned that keeps him in line.

Meanwhile, someone is reporting that there's some feint readings on a linkshell that they thought was previously abandoned. We've got a few of the Mhaura people waiting to hear if the voices come out again. If there are survivors, we are going to rescue them.

It will detour our plans for a little while, but that's a small price to pay. I'm more worried about Demons and survivors that want to kill us. I can deal with Turned a little easier now.

At the same time, I've got this feeling on the back of my neck that the worst is yet to come.

I keep looking back to the East. The sea is slowly leaving my sight, and I feel bitter about that.

I belong in the East. I belong in the West.

I don't even have a home to return to. What's the point?

Sunset

I've calmed down a little bit. I was frustrated before.

The linkshell readings were getting less feint as we went towards the Crag of Mea to set up our camp for the night.

We set up a few campfires and spared no noise.

We spent three hours on heavy surveillance, waiting for Turned to be attracted to the noise and light, and a few did come, but not many.

We found a bunch of them stuck in a ditch. Like, a few dozen of them, groaning, decaying.

Some of them had their limbs just ripped off. Some of them were twitching, no other movement.

I saw faces I recognized.

And then Cai gave the order to set them aflame, and it had been done soon after.

Cai's making this almost easy for me by saying what's hard for me to say.

I'm watching some of the villagers amuse themselves. Someone has pulled out a harp, another person a citar, and they mingle with the Immortals. There's two young Taru dancing to the music.

Cai and I think that we'll hit Windurst sooner than we know it.

Something is telling me to go to Jeuno. I voiced that with him.

"Then go," he said simply. "You feel guilty, don't you?"

"Very," I said, and it was true.

I felt guilty for enjoying a few days in the Empire, but moreso for ditching the group, essentially. For burdening them all.

But hey, I'd say I've repaid them now.

I called over for Selim and asked him if he'd like to go on a little journey with me.

He watches me from a short distance, usually. I have a feeling that Cai has told him to.

For better or for worse—who knows, really?—he's become as much a part of our crew as Alyria or Rumaha or Stikle or Cai or myself or anyone of us.

I've taken the linkpearl that's getting the feint readings, and I think I heard one familiar word come through.

"Garlaige."

It's worth a shot, isn't it?

Selim and I are going to head out in a few minutes. Cai is going to appeal to Windurst again, this time with the full backing of the Immortals.

All the same, though, there's a whispering in the back of my head that I've not heard before. It's guttural, dark sorts of speech.

I view the voices as a sort of fun little challenge now. The Galka, I wake him from time to time. The Sage Lord, I have to shut him up.

And sometimes, I can learn things from them.

The Sage Lord, I found my thoughts almost invading his own, and I could see things that he had lived.

I keep licking my lips. I can't stop that.

Will I have this hunger forever? Who knows.

At the moment though, if I have a complex fiend of sort in front of me that needs to be destroyed, well, I'm sure that I won't mind.

At least, once I stop feeling guilty over it.

And with that, our Chocobos are ready. We head for the Mountains.

Day 90 – Death and Disorder

Meriphataud Mountains. The land was always barren.

Not like this, though. Even the vultures are dead here.

The whole place smells like stale, decaying, feces. It's pretty nasty.

The sun has been so overbearing here that the Turned simply rotted at an extraordinary pace.

From the safety of my Chocobo, I pick off any that seem to need coercing to finally lose the rest of their life.

Selim and I are stopped for lunch. We're about halfway to Sauromuge Champaign.

It's much faster without the group.

However, it still is a brutal ride. I don't know how the Chocobos do it.

I can feel the sweat seeping into my jubbah. It must smell absolutely rancid.

Selim seems to not mind the heat. When we spoke about it, he explained that he spent enough time traveling tropical areas to not really mind; besides, he said, we were fortunate that this was dry heat and that there was no sandstorm. That would be a nuisance, to be sure.

I keep wondering what's in Garlaige, and I keep thinking that it's going to be bad. Think of it this way; so far, rotting outside in the exposed elements seems to be the best way to let the Turned just die out on their own accord. I was in Garlaige once.

It was dark. It was damp. It was creepy.

It would be the perfect place for people to flee to to try and barricade, and I've learned that no one is quite equipped to do that. Plus, there's supposedly a horrendously large scorpion in there that likes to eat people.

All it takes is one person to become infected and not realize it to destroy any hopes of safety for those who fled inside.

And I really bet they aren't rotting as fast.

It's getting a little harder to sleep at night, and I think I've realized that the worst thing I have to face is sleeping alone. It was nice to have...

A body next to me. A second heartbeat. The warmth of someone else.

I think though, mostly, it's the pressure I missed. The pressure of her arms around me. It gave me this sense that there was something grabbing me, anchoring me to the world, not letting me get sucked into this absolutely crazy vortex that I've become involved in.

Or the smell of her perfume. I smell it every time I unwrap this diary from the cloth it was bound in.

I asked Selim if he had a lover somewhere. He laughed, a lot, and said that he had spent too much of his life wandering around from place to place to find a lover.

I said to him that he probably should have found many. It didn't seem to bother him.

"Expect the worst, but hope for the best," he said to me, and the topic was over.

I wonder what she's doing right now. I wonder if I was just one of many that passed through in her life. I wonder if what we had was unique.

I cannot, however, let these thoughts preoccupy me. Even though the Turned are easier to deal with now, there's still a whole lot of danger.

Besides; who's to say that they can't be reanimated again? And again, and again, and again...

The guttural talking in the back of my head is growing louder. I'm letting it.

I want to know what it has to say. I just wish I could understand it.

Day 92 – Like Fire, Hellfire

A Long Evening, of the Undesirable Kind

My heart.

Won't.

Stop.

It's beating like crazy.

We arrived at Garlaige late into the evening. The doors were unsealed.

There were moans.

And there were shrieks.

There were people still alive in there.

Lots of people.

At first, we thought that it had been overtaken by Turned.

God damn, I wish that was the case.

We proceeded with caution, a gun in my hand and crossbow in his. Whenever I'd see something that was flammable, I'd light it up, because we needed some form of visibility.

We crept through, as silent as we could. The moans grew louder.

We passed by a doorway, and something grabbed me.

I'm not going to lie, I screamed bloody murder and jumped backwards. Selim grabbed me back and started pulling me away, firing bolts in the direction of whatever grabbed me.

He hit a pale arm and there was no scream.

We assumed Turned.

There was the rustling of feet slowly moving. I stumbled up, if you know what I mean, and we started backing slowly.

Then we heard the clanging of chains.

Then we heard marching feet, armored ones, approaching.

We turned in the directions of the march. It was a brigade of Elvaans, fully clad in battle armor.

They paused upon sighting us, and one of them at the front made a hand motion.

The next thing we knew, there were arrows flying at us.

I felt one go right through my arm.

And then things changed.

I started shooting, really, really quickly, with one arm. I was tossed backwards from the kickback and in four shots my hellfire had just flown out of my hand.

"If you come closer, I will kill you!" I remember shouting. The arrows had stopped and the Elvaans were not heeding that warning at all.

Selim was dragging himself away. I saw three arrows sticking out of him.

My left arm was bleeding freely, pretty badly. I had enough time to yank an arrow out of it as I licked my lips and reached for my sword.

My left hand exploded in tentacular goodness and my whole arm followed suit. I felt my face start to slime up, and the next thing I knew I had lunged at the closest Elvaan. I had rammed my sword through his chest and ripped off his breastplate. My left hand reached into the opening I made and started pulling stuff out.

I grabbed his halberd out of his hand as he screamed and tossed him to the side as I went for the next Elvaan as the others fled.

This one, I also impaled, but since the walls were stone I couldn't stick him into the wall. Instead, I pulled him closer.

"What's going on here?" I demanded, right up in his face.

He didn't answer.

He was still alive.

"*TELL ME NOW!*" I screamed at him, raising my Flayer hand to his face. I was panting. He said nothing, merely shook.

I mutilated his face and for the first time since the Mamool Ja Incident, I fed.

God, I dove right into him.

And as I did, I heard his voice screaming in my head, and I took two steps back and leaned against a wall and clutched my head and screamed into my skull, "*YOU'RE GOING TO TALK, NOW!*"

And he didn't talk, and so I shut my eyes and if you can fathom what this means, I invaded him with my own mind. It was like wrapping a whole new set of tentacles around him, ripping him to shreds, and taking his mind by force, and I saw everything.

The Elvaans had been driven out of their land. A set of the army had claimed Garlaige, and when refugees came, they accepted them for a while.

Until something changed; what, I did not know. Something changed and the Elvaan believed that the Humes were all carriers of the Plague, and that one of them had to know something about it.

I dragged myself out of my own mind, fighting to not lose myself in the stream of his memories, and looked around for Selim. He was cutting the arrowheads out of his body.

I was less tentacular now, and less slimy, and bloody and filthy. I grabbed my Hellfire.

"Selim, we're in a bit of a mess," I said simply as I ripped some clothes from the tunic under the armor of one of the fallen Elvaans off and wrapped it around his arm.

We looked back to where he shot the crossbow bolt before and saw the hand was still there.

It was slowly starting to dawn on me.

I slowly walked forward, facing the doorway this time, and took a look in.

There were at least a dozen Humes all chained together in this one room. They were mostly naked, pale, and I could see their ribs sticking out.

But their eyes gave it away; they all had a faraway look.

A faraway look I once had, I think.

One of them was mumbling under his breath, a blonde hume that was fairly young.

His whole back was whipped, and around his ankles and wrists were lacerations.

They weren't Turned; they had just been shattered.

Tortured.

Tortured so hard that they snapped.

I reloaded my Hellfire and we crept deeper into Garlaige.

This time, I had one thought on my mind: killing anything in my way.

We heard Elvaan voices coming from below, and so we climbed a half broken flight of stairs that ended up winding down towards a basement.

We saw two Elvaan guards standing post.

I went to fire, but Selim stopped me. He started treading so softly that I couldn't hear his footsteps.

And then he stuck a knife in one of their backs.

As the other turned he pulled the knife out and almost immediately tossed it into his throat.

I was amazed, and a little scared, but more so amused.

We crept in the shadows. We heard screams getting louder as we traveled deeper in.

And then we saw it.

A group of Elvaan headed by Prince Trion himself were hovering over a Hume that was tied to a chain on each limb.

Trion would say something, the Hume would say something, and then each chain would be pulled at once, a little further each time.

It was sickening.

This time, Selim let me aim the gun as he aimed his crossbow.

"Save Trion for last," I said, and he agreed.

And then we opened fire.

Two Elvaans went down immediately, and then Selim shot another one right in the throat before they scattered.

They ran further in, and I dove over to the gasping Hume as I reloaded and then untied his bonds.

"What's going on?" I asked him, shaking him before he could go into shock.

"Torturing! They think we did it!"

"Where are the others?" I asked, and he pointed a shaky arm in the same direction that the Elvaans fled.

"The coast is clear to get out," I said, and left him to his fate. I have no idea where he went, or if he's alive.

What I do know is that Selim and I reloaded again and started going deeper in. And what we saw...

Piles of children. Dead.

Pale. Bloody. Emaciated. Totally dehumanized. Naked.

I recognized the signs that they had been tortured.

And after the piles of children were walls upon walls of what I assumed to be the parents. They were chained to the walls, rotting away.

Dear Altana, what the heck were the Elvaans thinking?

We caught up with Trion as he and his chumps tried to get passed a Banishing Gate. We saw it open and heard them rush towards it, and we jumped in before they could see us.

And we waited.

The moment Trion entered the gate, I slammed into him as my hand once more went slimy and into its tentacle form, and I wrapped my tentacles around his throat.

Selim shot the two other guards dead.

"Selim, do we have any rope?" I found myself asking.

He rummaged through a bag and found some rope.

"Good," I said.

And then two tentacles came and ripped his eyeballs out, and we tied him up and have been dragging him ever since.

We found a group of seven people still alive, and the Elvaans quickly gave up when they saw what we did to Trion.

I took my scimitar and I cut open his clothes, in front of all the other Elvaans.

"Someone, start talking, now; otherwise..." I grabbed his hand. "One finger at a time. And then one joint at a time. And then, who knows?" I said.

I licked my lips.

I was enjoying this?

Trion would say nothing, simply stayed where he was. He wasn't even crying out in pain.

An Elvaan came forth and said that Trion had found proof that the Plague was being spread by human black mages and had ordered a witch hunt to figure out who amongst the Humes had been responsible. They had tortured, to death or to the point of being worse off than Turned, those who did not cooperate.

Those who died...

Whatever could be salvaged off them, had been. And I don't mean clothes or supplies.

I pulled his hair up and placed my scimitar over his neck.

And then I saw it.

There was a symbol carved on his neck that looked half as though it were burned in and half as though it were made from blood. The symbol, the rune, I couldn't tell what it was exactly, but it was clearly some very black magic.

That was the point where the guttural voice in my head started screaming full force.

And this time, I let it scream and I accepted the scream in all it was worth, and I dove into my own mind to figure out what it was.

The Demon had finally decided to talk, and talk it did.

Like A Scene From A Memory

It was like falling into a pond of lukewarm slime. Or rather, being pulled in by the ankle.

I felt like I was drowning this time. Selim says I started screaming like a demon—if only he knew at that moment, he'd have thought it was the perfect time for a pun— and that everyone panicked until he grabbed my gun and shot it in the air to get them to stop grabbing weapons.

Trion started screaming too, or so they say.

And then I fell into myself, per say.

Down into the slime of my own mind I went, as I screamed all the way apparently. Down, so far down, that I saw my own memories flashing through my mind.

I was going backwards.

Flashes of riding on the Chocobo through the sandy plains, of the fight in Mhaura. The boat to get there. Leaving Al Zabi. A woman on my bed. The memories lingered there for a moment.

Raiding treasures. Recovery. Killing the Sage Lord. Transforming myself into a Soul Flayer. Eating a Mamool Ja Lizardman. Battles in Zabi. The Fight with the Immortals in the Palace. Recovery, again. Operating table.

Cryogenics. Selim. Blowing up the vial of pain. Murdering The Galka. Blood, all over my walls, writing in it with my fingers. Torture Cell. Torturing.

The journey South. Marzbarz. The Sibyl, crying, because she was worthless. My clothing being pried off in suspicion. Xicu. Pulling the scimitar out of a demon I just cut the head off of.

That's when it all stopped.

The guttural scream turned to mild laughing.

I looked down in my own memories at the head that was not laughing and I saw the blood dripping over me.

The memory stopped being a memory now as I felt the guttural laughing stop as I stared at the head in my hand that I held from the horn. The eyes were alive.

The head licked its lips.

I dropped it and it rolled back to the body. The body picked it up and placed it back on its head.

"It is good that killers such as we meet in the struggle of life."

I had scarcely any clue what to say.

And then I realized he wasn't even speaking the language of the races of Altana. No, it was that this time, I could understand what he said.

So I said the only thing I could think of at the time.

"How come I can understand you?"

He let out that same laugh.

"When killers such as we meet such as we are meeting, you become as me as I become as you. Come, and you will see."

He started walking through my shop.

The hell?

But I followed. We went into the back where I slept and stood in front of my mirror.

And then I understood quite clearly. As I raised my hand, a demon in the mirror raised his hand. As I placed it down, the demon next to me licked his lips, and a mirror image of myself licked its lips.

"What do you want from me?" I asked.

The laugh again. "I wanted to be as you, with you not as me. However, you had almost beaten me, but I have beaten you as much, and so we both are victors over the losers. You have shattered my body. I have shattered your soul. I want the body. You want the soul. I have given you gifts, and you have taken them."

Gifts?

As I thought it, the arm on the mirror image of myself exploded tentacularly.

"I have made you strong."

And then everything made sense.

"I have made you strong. You have made me strong. We have both been made strong, and we have both lost as much as gained. Killers such as we lose much in life, as much as we take away. You know this now, as a killer such as we."

He was talking about me taking souls.

"I will give such as that what you desire if you can give me such as what I desire."

"What would killers such as we desire?"

He laughed, but differently, as though he was succeeding.

"Killers such as we desire our endings. We will destroy what torments you if we destroy what torments me."

"What torments you?" I asked him. He laughed.

"It's me, isn't it?" I asked after a moment.

"You torment me, and I torment you. You can destroy me, but I cannot destroy you. I can shatter your soul, but you cannot shatter my soul."

In some way, I understood, but I felt like we were keeping things on a need to know basis.

"You need me to save your world, and I need you to destroy me," he said. "I will help you, if you will help me."

I was making a pact with a demon. Great.

Absolutely joyous.

"How did you do this?" I asked.

Another laugh. "I entered you, but you entered me more and won our first fight."

The world around us started to fade.

"I will help you if you will help me," he said.

The world around us was turning black.

"I will help you if you will help me," I said.

In The Real World

And then I was back in the real world, screaming still. I stopped screaming, looked at Trion, and looked at the rune again. There was a whisper in the back of my head.

Burn it off.

And so I did, and this time, Trion started screaming.

He kept screaming.

"My eyes!" he shrieked. He kept shrieking.

"Sectum," Selim was saying, tugging at my shirt. I turned to him.

All the Elvaans were pointing their bows at us. Tables had turned while I was out of the loop.

But being me had advantages. Like knowing that I could regenerate minor wounds.

At a cost.

The voice in the back of my head reminded me that.

Yes, at a cost.

How many days would I not be able to walk this time?

The arrows were ready.

Someone was going to shoot, and quickly at that. But then I realized I may not have to go full way. Instead, no, I did things a tad differently. I collapsed my knees and fell to the floor, my hand on Trion's hair to pull him down, and spit fire at them.

It worked with smashing success due to the close proximity. Selim got hit by a stray arrow.

It's really not his day. I grabbed Selim as I lunged back to my feet.

I dragged Trion with me, kicking and screaming. So much for the nobleness of the Elvaans. I dragged the two of them with me to the nearest wall and set Selim down as he tried to take yet another arrow out of him.

I grabbed him by the throat and held him up against the stone walls of Garlaige's basement.

"You better start talking now, or I will make sure that you die a slow and painful death," I said.

I licked my lips.

He looked like an awfully tasty victim right there; an Elvaan prince, naked, beaten. It would be a vengeful kill. And then I could take whatever information he had by force.

I wiped my lips with my hand.

He sputtered for a moment, and began.

"The Undead Filth had infiltrated our City as refugees. We fought them off. Many of our people were lost to them. Demons came, we fought them off too, and Orcs. We lost the city. We ran. Demons followed us. I... don't..."

He clutched at his head. "I don't... remember... We took Garlaige, the humans attacked us, we suppressed the opposition," he finished. He clutched his head harder. "MY HEAD!" he suddenly screamed this time.

And then the voice in the back of my head said, let me speak.

I began speaking in tongues. Joyous.

But Trion stopped and stared at me with eyeless sockets.

And then I stopped speaking.

"Possessed?" Trion simply said.

"You won't lose all blame that easily," I snarled. "They can taint you, but they can't take all of you. What you did... that was still you."

He requested I kill him, and I almost did.

But no.

For all that I witnessed there, I had to admit that he was not fully in his own state of mind.

But seeing what I did... the children dead...

He deserved everything he got. He's lucky we put clothes back on him. He called off the guards and told them that we were all heading to Delkutt for refuge, after some "convincing."

We wrapped his eye sockets with a cloth. At least he looks better, now.

But we've attached him to strings all the same so he can't wander off. The last thing I want is to have to search for him. I guess I spent too much time with a certain Puppetmaster.

He has uses, still. He is now a tragic hero. His people will listen to him all the more if he can keep his composure, and I told him this, and that seemed to quell him for now.

There were a few survivors from the Elvaan torture camp. What shocked me more had been the group of at least fifteen Elvaans that were also shackled up for trying to rebel against what Trion was doing.

At least there's some hope left for that arrogant species. Meanwhile, we need to get back to our team and soon; Selim has seen enough action for quite a while, and I could do with not doubling up on the night shift for a few nights.

I just want to know they're all alive. Right now, that would be enough for me.

Well, actually, there's one other person I'd like to see, but let's not get too spoiled here...

The Road No Longer Traveled

We made it to Jeuno.

There were Turned stuck in shops, Turned stuck on stairs, Turned stuck in piles... but they weren't really a problem. It was almost too easy.

Jeuno was abandoned. We checked the residential areas and found a carving in the standard language.

Jeuno has fallen.

It was a dreary sort of uneventful day, mostly.

I had kind of expected Jeuno to be this way.

We purged what we could. Selim and I taught the Elvaans how to quickly dispose of the Turned. We did a sweep of Upper Jeuno and we took the dead bodies and burned them for warmth.

The survivors of Garlaige had raided some food from the residential area. I did not permit the Elvaans to eat.

Trion is simply being led by us. When we have to fight, we tie him to something.

It's so demeaning. I keep looking back at the event with mostly apathy. In this sort of environment, is there really any time to feel regret? Is it worth it?

No, we've got to keep our heads on our shoulder, and keep moving forward. We've got to just accept our sins.

It's hard for the big ones.

I feel bad that I dragged Selim out and he got so bloodied up. I shouldn't have come without backup.

But I did, so oh well.

I keep staring out at Delkfutt. I'm hoping for a flare. Oh god, how I'm hoping for a flare.

I'm comforted by the belief that what I may be seeing out there are campfires, but it's so far away... We'll know soon enough, though.

We're going to clean up Jeuno a bit more in the morning. We've discussed lighting it on fire and letting it burn to the ground this time. I'm half tempted on it.

Either way, we're going to head to Delkfutt starting tomorrow. I keep looking for a sign. Something, anything, that resembles life.

What do I do if Delkfutt is overrun?

Day 93 – Cleanup Committee

Early Evening

We were being followed, and we knew it.

The question was, by whom?

We traversed Qufim island slowly. It was a dead land, but there were still Turned hiding around. There were a few demons, too. But it seemed like they were unsure of what they were to do anymore.

We slaughtered them all.

We move slowly, because most of us are wounded or starving and we're all exhausted. We have to stop often, and it's dangerous in this biting cold. But it's a little friendly for me here. I feel strangely at ease, knowing that Delkfutt is in sight.

There is a rare aurora around the island. It's something to write about, at least.

I can sense that there's someone watching me, and so can the voice in the back of my head.

He talks to me. He has to make sure I don't die, I suppose. It's an odd sort of relationship. I'm playing with fire, I know, and he knows I know that.

Life is strange, I suppose.

Trion has grown silent and refuses to talk. Is it from the shame of being tied up and led? Is it from the guilt of knowing that he assaulted innocent survivors, tortured them, killed the children, and feasted on them?

How can I look at him with anything but pity? I want to be contemptuous, but am I not the same way? I'm hungry now, often, but not so strong. Yet whenever I see something that I know I have to kill... I get really, really hungry.

My lips are chaffing, and it's not 'cause of the cold.

We set up a campfire at the lake. We're almost at Delfkutt. I suppose in the morning we'll be there.

I'm going to go figure out who's tracking us, and if they're not friendly... well, I suppose we'll see how hungry I am.

Between and in Between The Days

Well, well, well.

I hid in the shadows and I felt his eyes watching me as I left camp.

One thing I had never factored in was that everything about me was different. My clothes were different. My walking had become more confident, my movements more sure of themselves and fluid. I'd suppose that even my scent had become changed, if I actually cared enough to ask someone. I'm slowly becoming a leader of groups. I'm taking charge.

I'm less hysterical. I'm less pudgy. I'm stronger. I'm faster. I'm different.

And so, it's small wonder that he had no idea who I was, and so he was tracking me.

I had left our camp alone, a dangerous thing to do, and I listened. He knew I was looking for him, because the feeling that I was being watched had left me. He had scattered.

Now, if you recall--I say that as though I have an audience reading this, mind you--I had spent much time in Qufim when this whole ordeal began. I know where to hide.

Qufim was home to a dozen or so valleys of rock, a few caves, and a lot of crevices. And so I had the upper hand here. Did he know that I knew?

I would stop often and listen, and sometimes I would hear a single breath, or what could have been a foot stepping on a twig.

And so I followed it.

I followed it into the depths of the night, and there was a fleeting moment where I heard the sound of an arrow being notched into a bow.

I froze, and turned my head to where I heard the sound.

"You'll get the first hit, but I'll win the fight," I said.

The person I could not see released the tension on the bow, judging on the feint sound I heard in the wind.

"Kiddo, is that you?" The voice was a bit rugged, a bit old, and a bit amazed.

I had heard that voice before. I racked my brain to place it.

A man came out of a shadow, placing his bow on his back. He pulled something out of his breast pocket and I heard a cracking sound as a series of blue sparks shot up into the air.

From the flare I could see the man I met right before all this began: Lu Doggy.

"They sent me to track you when some of our scouts reported fires in Jeuno," he explained.

My hand was resting on my sword, but he came forward with a hand extended out for me in a peaceful gesture. We shook.

"Yeah, it's me. What's the situation?" I asked him.

I think he shrugged, but it was too dark to tell. "We're managing. Food is scarce. We've got a system though that lets us get fresh fruits and vegetables every few days. We're keeping people busy, mostly."

There was a pause. "The rest of the team is under the belief that you, Caiyuo, and Marzbarz have died."

I gave a rough sort of laugh, a bitter one, but it made me feel better. "Not so far from what happened..."

We began to walk back through the dark Qufim island. "Do you have doctors, clerics, anything?" I asked him.

"A few of each," he said. "You have wounded?"

"A fair few."

I heard rustling behind me and we both stopped at once and turned, our weapons already opened.

I licked my lips.

We were never prepared for what we saw.

There was a baby Chocobo following us, limping.

"This world is a terrible place," Lu said with a sigh. I went towards the chocobo and scooped it up.

For some reason, I felt more horrible about the poor little bird than I did for any other casualty I witnessed. We brought it back to camp and are inspecting it to see if we can find claw marks or bite marks or what.

Day 94 - Welcome Home

Morning

In the grimmest of times, even the little things in life seem amazing.

They did things to Delkfutt that can only be classified as utterly amazing, given the circumstances.

There were hundreds of people there now. I think someone has a list of every person there.

We marched towards Delkfutt and the first thing I saw was that it was guarded. Four massive Gigases in full battle armor, each with a horn by their side that must have been half as large as myself, guarded the entrance. There were doors now, too. Large doors made of metal. I still have yet to figure out where they gained so much darksteel from.

Before we approached, Lu pulled a small whistle out of his jacket pocket and blew into it. I could just barely make the sound, but then we saw the gigas respond by turning to open up the massive doors as we approached.

We passed by them without a word, and the door shut behind us.

The first thing I had noticed was that it was noisy. Very noisy. I heard chatter. I heard people sounds.

I heard echoes, laughter. It was warm in the tower, both physically and in that emotional sort of way.

"Mr. Doggy, is there anyone from the Duchy Guard here?" I asked as he led the group and I through a few hallways.

"Call me Ludo," he said. "And yes. Military Personnel stays in the basement. I had a feeling you'd want to go there first."

We dropped the rest of the group off with a young Mithra with a checkboard that was taking their names and they were one by one led to see doctors. Ludo then led me to a locked door and inserted a cermet key into it. It opened and we began walking down a series of stairs to the basement.

"The Gigases are sticking primarily to the perimeter now. They find it easier to be outside. They've also taken to the large caverns and plots of land in The Dominion. We had a problem there at first but... well, let's not spoil the surprises..."

I could only imagine what lay in store.

And then I saw what was now a giant War Room. At first, we went unnoticed. It was hot, and so I took off my turban.

About a minute later, someone shouted out, "SECTUM!"

And then the whole room went silent. Rumaha was running towards me through a crowd of personnel.

"We've got a lot to talk about," I said when he caught up to me, after an awkward embrace. Ludo departed at that as Rum led me into one of the rooms that was sealed off.

"We really do. Where's Marz and Cai?" he asked.

"Alive, and better than ever. They're leading a group of survivors to make their way slowly here," I said. I wasn't going to mention the Immortals just yet.

As I walked into the room I immediately saw Wolfgang and Cid discussing over a map.

And then I heard a clattering as someone pounced on me from her chair.

"We thought you were deaders!" Alyria said.

And then she smacked the back of my head, really, really hard.

Not much has changed.

Mid Noon

The first order of business was showering.

They had managed to set up a series of bathes and showers in a few segmented areas. Rum was giving me the grand tour as I told the story what took us so long. I wasn't mentioning my new "talents", however.

I also glossed over Nashmeira.

I cannot help but sigh as I write that name.

We showered and spoke and caught up on the times.

People had flocked to Jeuno; their campfires had been sighted, and they had been contacted and gladly came to Delkfutt. The Turned would come every so often, but it was all slowing down. The basic report was the same as what I had seen: they were slowly decaying.

At the same time, there were still downright hundreds of thousands of them.

The Demons would sometimes be sighted, but there had been no major confrontations.

They had built a sort of martial society inside of Delkfutt with the survivors. Every time someone would leave the premise they would have to undergo a full body inspection and were placed under watch for four days after that.

There had been two people that had to be disposed of for that reason.

We discussed the current militant plans. There were spies sent Northwards that were attempting to see if the Demons were organizing. The first reports sent back stated that the number of Demons seemed to be preposterously large.

I told Rumaha about the lands being overridden in the South. I told him what had happened to me there, and how we picked up Selim.

He had taken relative interest in Selim, citing that he seemed vaguely familiar. Selim had wandered for a large part of his life and seemed familiar with the land and some of the people; perhaps, truly, the world is smaller than we had thought.

Out of nowhere, while I put my clothes back on--someone had been nice enough to clean them while I showered--Rumaha had asked me what made me change.

"What do you mean, change?" I asked him. "A lot has changed."

"You're not afraid anymore," he said.

I laughed, and I felt the monster inside of me laugh, too.

And then I looked around. We were alone still.

I dropped my voice.

"A lot has changed. You'll understand when the time comes. I had to come to terms with life, in more ways than you'd think."

I think he saw in my eyes that there was a certain jaded cynicism that had grown, and I think he understood that there were battles I had no intentions of talking about just yet.

"How 'bout that sword of yours?" he asked a few moments later as I inspected it. "That's a fine piece of craftsmanship."

"It was a gift," I said simply. "I'll explain when Marz and Cai arrive. I was considering going South to see if they're being held up. Does our team have any assignments?"

There was an awkward pause. "We were disbanded temporarily on the basis that we were forced to assume you and Cai had been killed. They've replaced us for now."

If only he would have known that it was almost true.

"We've already been commended for securing Delkfutt and making peace with the Yagudo and Gigases. We're almost regarded as heroes. It's kind of odd."

I gave a laugh. "Oh, you have no idea..."

We walked back down to the War Room. Cid and Wolfgang were eating lunch now.

Wolfgang looked at me with the same disdain that most humans with power did when dealing with traitors.

"You abandoned your squadron for some crapshoot mission," he said plainly. "That could be charged with treason."

I heard Rumaha inhale sharply but I gave him a glance that stopped him.

"With all due respect," I began, "I think you'll find that we're better for it. Shut the door."

Rumaha shut it.

I stood up and felt myself smile smugly as I walked over the to map of the known world.

"You are familiar with this land, are you not?" I asked, pointing to Aht Urhgan.

Wolfgang simply nodded.

"As an official ambassador of The Empire of Aht Urhgan, it is my pleasure to inform you that The Empire has agreed to supply us with a thousand Immortals to assist us in the elimination of The Turned and The Demons and resecurig our lands. In addition to that, I am positive that when we re-establish our nations an Open-Trade Policy will be easily negotiable."

There was a very, very long pause that was only broken by the slow laughter of Cid.

"Well I'll be..." was all he said.

I smirked. Wolfgang had nothing to say.

"In addition to that, I'd like to inform you that the War of the Astral Candessence has been ended and that due to that, if we need to relocate, we may be able to establish a nation in The East. If that is not enough, I also would like to demonstrate what I personally have achieved due to my time spent in The Empire."

I licked my lips and I had shown them the monster I had become.

Evening

We agreed that keeping what I had shown them a secret may be in our best interest.

It was a unanimous decision after I calmed them down.

I'm aching everywhere, though, and the voice in my mind is laughing at me and calling me an idiot for caring what "mere mortals" would think.

Rumaha has been mostly silent until a few minutes ago.

"Much has changed," he said.

"Yup," was all I could reply with for a moment. "At least I can assure you guys that I'm not crazy when I was blacking out and going crazy. Things have changed."

There was another awkward pause. "So what happened in Aht Urhgan that made... whatever that was... happen?"

I grew silent for a few minutes. We were in a sort of makeshift barracks, and there were not so many people around.

I dropped my voice anyways. "I found myself there. I found something worth fighting for. I fought before that."

I paused. "I'm going to stop giving you the run around. I assassinated the Mamool Ja Sage Lord. I pitted two Beastmen armies against each other, and in the process I had almost lost my life. I had ended the fighting there, and the third Beastmen army is allied with Al Zabi. I became close to the Empress."

He perked up at that last line.
"Oh?"
There was the awkward silence again.
"Oh."

Day 95 – A Day Cut Short

Dawn

This morning I crept out of bed and walked out of the tower and back into Qufim. I was restless. As I stared out at the wasteland, I heard footsteps creep towards me. They were normal footsteps. I was unconcerned.

There were fires in Jeuno. A new group of survivors, I supposed.

I supposed that Marz and Cai and the others would be there within the week, but I couldn't really see us waiting that long. With the team disbanded, I figured that we had no real obligations.

It was Alyria again. She wordlessly just stood there for a few moments, the same as myself really.

The sun was rising, slowly but surely.

She nudged me and handed me a chipped cup full of coffee. I thanked her. She had her own. We just stood there, looking out at what we could see, drinking stale coffee.

It was eerie until she broke the silence.

"I heard there was a commotion in the war room."

I took a sip and simply said, "Yes, something like that. Wolfgang was being a jerk, so I put him in place."

My voice was unnaturally cold. I was angry, thinking back to how the political nonsense mattered more to Wolfgang. As if he could bring back the world if he had someone to blame. It was sickening.

There was silence for another few minutes.

"You don't want to be here," she said.

I actually gave a small laugh before I sighed. "What gave it away?"

"You're rrrrestless," she purred. She was an awful lot nicer to me than she used to be. "You keep looking to the East."

I said nothing.

"So what happened that changed you so much?"

I glanced at the snow filled ground and waved my hand as I muttered a spell. The ground lit on fire for a moment and dried up for a good six or seven feet. With another motion and incantation, a gust of wind blew over it and cooled it.

With that, I laid down and stared at the still dim and dusty sky.

"When I went to your land, I was tortured. I was tortured so badly that I almost died. I started to go crazy. They confused me for some criminal escapee or something. It's a little hazy in my head. Do you know of the pain serum they have down there?"

She nodded as she sat down next to me.

"They had me drinking that down by the pint. At one point, a spearhead had broken off and was just floating inside my torso. And then, the spiders..." I trailed off.

"I killed the Galkan torturer with a jaw I ripped off from the spiders they were torturing me with. I was set to be executed the following morning. That evening I started to... 'hear' the Galka, for lack of a better term. I can still hear him if I need to. It was then that things began to become a little more understandable. That was the first step."

"We found Selim, and he helped us while we escaped. While in the gallows, I had blown up a vial of the pain serum that I had hid in my ruptured torso. I'm not sure what happened after that, because I pretty much passed out again. We fled Eastward. We had warned Olzhirya, and so I cannot find it in me to feel any pity when the Turned showed up. It was harder, though, for them to win there due to the terrain. They just don't work well in Jungles."

"The next thing I can remember, I was in Aht Urhgan, being operated on. It was a very, very harsh recovery for a few days, until Cai had managed to secure an audience with the Empress to discuss the situation. A few nights later, I was taken in to see the Empress, just myself and her guards and Vizier. I don't remember much of what happened there. It's strange. I was blacking out memories. The Vizier said that it was curious that I had a person inside of me, and that simply had never happened before. Ever. It intrigued him."

"What intrigued him more was that I, unlike his soldiers, had trapped the entireties of the souls that I had killed; not just fragments. I noticed that there was something different and that I seemed to have miraculously healed my wounds in the course of a few minutes, as well as that one of my fingers was just... wrong."

"Have you ever seen a Soulflayer?" I asked her.

"Twice," she said. "Terrifying creatures, those things are."

I smirked. "Yeah," I said. "But it was at that point that I realized that I could simply transform my hand into the same tentacle hand as a 'flayer. I had the same rapid regeneration power that their tissue had. It was like, for lack of understanding still, I had found a way to just control and transform myself. Like instead of totally losing my soul to the beast, I was simply rearranging the shattered pieces of it to go from Man to Beast. It was... bizarre. That secured the deal for them to send assistance."

"But the assistance could not come so easily while there was still war in those lands. I knew enough to know that a Soulflayer was generally affiliated with the Undead army that was assaulting Al Zabi, and I knew that there were two others. I did some local questioning and found out just enough information on their histories. At that point, I formulated a plan. I was to kill the Mamool Ja Sagelord."

I felt myself shivering. "And I don't really want to talk about what happened there."

I felt myself lock up for a moment. That hadn't happened for a while. I was stuck remembering the part where I had found myself ripping into the stomach of a Mamool, feasting on him, and I was scared again.

Oh, how I was scared.

But I continued.

"I was successful, and I had started a war between the Mamools and the Undead that had left both of their numbers utterly decimated. It took little more than a cleanup crew, I imagine, to demolish them

entirely. The Trolls were so scared at this point that they willingly Allied themselves with The Empire. I was stuck in a small coma at this point, yet again. It was like living inside a constant nightmare, and relief only came every so often. I woke up a few days later and was having nervous breakdowns every few hours. It was bad. It was really bad. I had seen things and experienced things by this point that just had me totally, totally overwhelmed. Yet, I was the hero of the land suddenly."

"I met with the Empress again, and this time she ordered her staff to leave and we were alone. She revealed herself to me, which I don't think was something that was to happen often. I guess she saw what I was going through. She... made it better, somehow. She coaxed me to talk about it. She walked me through what I felt. I lost it, again. I try not to cry so much, but it just happened. I just could not take anything any longer..."

I paused as I thought back to that first moment. Our first real moment together.

"They allowed us to raid a treasury of weapons and armor. Nashmeira was waiting for me outside of the treasury, and she took me to her room, and this time it was her turn to cry because she felt so guilty over how far I had broken myself in the process of saving her lands, just to get some help. And that was the start of it..."

Alyria actually let out an awww sound. I didn't think she had that emotion in her.

"That was when everything changed. I started to learn to live with myself. I started to learn what it meant to share a life and want to share it. It's hard to explain... but we were together most of the time I was there from that point on."

"She was your first?" she asked.

I nodded. "Yeah."

"That's adorrrable," she purred, and actually rumbled my hair. I gave as much of a shrug as could be given when laying on the ground. "You'll be back, some day."

"I hope so."

I really did.

Noon

Day 99 – With Love from Jack and Tony

Recap - Part 1

Just as I set my pen down before, things got a little crazy.

The Gigases had sounded their horns and began to play their drums, the signal that there was something amiss. Immediately, Wolfgang blew a whistle and we were ordered to get into our ranks. I was pulled to the side by Rumaha and he grabbed Alyria. We were technically decommissioned for now, so we just kind of got to stay together.

We headed to civilian quarters for now, because there was nowhere else to go. Stikle was there, as was Selim. They both came to us as they saw us. A few moments later, Ludo stumbled into the room.

We were silent for a moment before Rumaha glanced at Alyria and then Ludo. It appeared as though they were all aware of a plan and I was not, as though it was a dedicated place to meet when an emergency happened.

"Ludo, what's the situation?" Rumaha asked.

Stikle had stood up, looking suddenly rather much as though this was the first time he had not been bored in weeks. His crab crawled out from under a bed and the wyvern followed, stopping at me so I could scratch his ears first.

"Fourteen demon ships," he said. "Approaching in the distance. It's more than we can handle with what we've got here."

Stikle was grinning now.

I glanced at him but stopped when Rumaha said, "I guess it's settled, then."

I turned to Rumaha then.

"We're going to The Dominion. Now."

And then we walked out, and I followed. I found myself gripping my scimitar tightly.

These people, they confused me, but I trusted them. It seemed like all the odd people ended up in this circle, this team, and I should just get used to it. I suppose Marz and Selim were basically part of the team now. Dasva, I hadn't seen yet. They said that she just left one day and never returned.

Stikle seemed happy. Cai was coming, I hoped, and would be there soon. Life was just strange.

And it was about to get stranger.

Recap - Part 2

We fled to the Behemoths' Dominion, and why I did not know at the time.

The ships were still far now, and the forces were already mobilizing for guerilla warfare. We simply passed them by, basically having no attention heeded to us. Perhaps they were used to us going off the beaten path.

It took us almost half an hour to travel through the tunnels of Qufim and The Dominion, but it was definitely worth the travel.

When the clearing after the tunnel was in sight, we paused and let Stikle go first.

He walked slowly forward into the pale light of what seemed to be a relatively large field. We crept a bit forward to watch him.

And then came some of the loudest roars that I had ever heard, and we watched as Stikle simply stood still for a moment. There was rumbling now, as though something was charging towards him.

And then it started to make sense.

"You didn't..."

"We did," Ludo said.

Stikle took out a horn of his own and blew it, and the roaring and rumbling stopped almost instantly. He walked forward, out of our sight now. We heard what could only be described as the stamping of several enormous creatures slowly making their way to him.

Stikle called back to us, "It's safe, they still remember me."

There was a collective sigh of relief and we all began to walk out of the tunnels.

I had never seen a Behemoth before, and now before me were at least two dozen of them, all gathering around Stikle. Stikle was petting this one that was at least twice the size as the rest.

"That's their pack leader, or their King," he said, rubbing behind its ears. Its head was the size of his whole body, but it was bowing down to him to be scratched, as though it was just a chocobo.

"I'll take The King. Someone take Sect on one, the rest of you take your own," he said. He literally just climbed up its horn and sat on its shaggy head, holding on to its hair.

Alyria grabbed me by the shoulder and almost dragged me to one of the smaller ones. She was excited. Very excited.

If my mind wasn't so far blown, I may have been, too. Instead I kind of just went with it. The others each climbed up the horns of one of the Behemoths. Alyria almost tossed me up ours.

When we were all as mounted as one could be on a hulking mass of a monster, Stikle let out a few sounds that I cannot begin to describe in writing, and The King began to charge forward back towards Qufim.

Ours, naturally, followed.

And all the others did, too.

Recap - Part 3

And we rode.

Oh, how we rode.

I thought I was going to vomit by the time we reached Qufim. I was latching onto Alyria for dear life. She seemed to be enjoying the ride, though.

As our... mounted division(?) reached Qufim, she pulled her Hellfire off her back and held the Behemoth with one hand, looking through a scope she mounted.

"They'rrrrre docking," she purred. She seemed excited.

Maybe everyone was going out of their mind with boredom.

Stikle seemed to be enjoying himself, and as we rode past Delkfutt I saw another amazing sight revolving around him.

I watched as his Wyvern and crab saw him.

And then the crab kind of crouched.

And then the wyvern kind of grabbed it.

And they took off. Flying. Soaring through the air, straight for the master.

There was a wyvern carrying a crab, and they landed on The King Behemoth.

I mean really, what the heck was going on? Really. Truly.

But I digress. And I know, I say that a lot, but I digress.

There had to be two dozen Behemoth just headed right down towards the shores of Qufim.

The noise was unbearable.

And we made it to the shore, and there they were. Three ships had docked, and there were demons flooding out everywhere, assembling ranks.

And they were clad, this time. Clad in armor, clad in weapons. They were prepared for a full frontal assault.

But they were not ready for us.

I felt a flash in the back of my head as I saw one. It had a funny headdress on.

Him!

And before I knew it, as we rode towards them, I grabbed my scimitar.

Him. You have to get him.

I licked my lips as Stikle collide with the first line of the demons and sent them flying absolutely everywhere. But the Demons knew how to deal with Behemoths; there were flaming arrows suddenly pouring out from the ships.

But as the arrows came from the ships, I barely heard a voice that sounded like Cid cry out in the distance, *Fire!* and a series of cannons blew, assaulting the ships.

Within a moment, the shores had turned into an outright war, and for once, I had no idea how the tides would turn.

Him.

And then while Alyria and I reached the front line on our Behemoth, I stood up and launched myself into hell.

Recap - Part 4

The first thing I heard was Alyria screaming at me to not be a hero and get the hell back on.

But by that point, there was something in my head that was gone. Totally switched off, because there was a demon inside me--metaphorically and literally--that needed to get a job done, and I trusted it. I trusted it, because how could I not trust something that I shared my soul with?

Altana be damned, I was massacring. I was going through the lines like a fiend of my own. I was fighting dirty. My left hand had become tentacular and I could not even begin to place when that happened. I was grabbing Demons, pulling them forward, and then I was slicing their heads off. I was grabbing their weapons with a tendril.

I was murdering them now, because there's a difference between murdering and killing. I learned that in Mamook. I was enjoying the feeling I got as I killed them, and when I tired even a little bit all I had to do was dig my face into the throat of one of them and I would feel a lot better.

I was going from bad to worse, and I was letting it happen, and I knew it. I was playing in dark territories. There was a damned war going on around me. Literally.

I felt an arrow run through my shoulder and I pulled out out and slammed it into the eye of some demon or another. I liked the sound of its scream. I felt the ground shaking as I did all this, and I saw the Behemoths charging. I felt hands, familiar ones, trying to grab at me.

"Leave me!" I snarled, and I felt as though there were two voices snarling.

As I sliced another head off and sent it flying into a crowd of demons to panic them more, I found myself talking to the one inside of me.

Why do we need to get him?

There was the almost too cool, too calm, too all knowing voice of the demon to quickly reply. *For he is one who is like us. He, too, has killed many men, but he--unlike you and unlike I--used other men to kill the men.*

He's higher up.

There was just cackling as I said that, but I knew that I was right.

To him, The Prince fell. I am strong and you are strong, but he is stronger, and we are stronger.

I found myself smirking. I was slowly mowing my way down to the demon with his fancy hat. I think he knew I was approaching just for him.

Or maybe it was the shriek that I let out that was clearly not a language of Altana that led him on, but I watched as he took a step backwards and looked through the crowd until he saw me.

There were bullets flying everywhere. There were arrows, flaming and not, everywhere. There were Behemoths charging, some tumbling, one having fallen. There were demons littering the beaches.

But there were no Allied bodies, because we were playing it smart.

Would I be the first to fall? I thought so, to be honest.

But I had a goal. I would not fall until I took the fancy hat demon to hell with me.

And so I charged, and as I began the final pursuit forward to that particular high ranking enemy, I was joined by Selim and Stikle.

I suppose they realized that if you could not convince me to stop, you may as well join in for the fun.

"We need him alive!" I called out, as a tentacle pointed to the Demon that was trying to get more Demons to cover himself and allow him to flee.

I called out again in a language I knew not, but this time, I heard the words in my head.

Come now, brethren; for now, you too shall die, and you shall die for good!

Recap - Part 5

Selim had pulled out a crossbow and was firing as though bolts were going to go out of style, and Stikle was impaling two at a time. There were moments where I'm pretty sure he would be pushed backwards, only for his Wyvern to swoop down and grab him by the shoulders and force him up.

There was also a single moment where we heard a loud whistling through the air. I paused to look and saw that the crab was flying in the same exact trajectory as the cannon balls. I had a sinking feeling that his crab had been fired out of a cannon, of its own volition, no less.

And then the crab had come back to shore and was doing a lot of damage in its own regard.

I was assaulting the enemies in front of me, massacring them, and I felt like as long as I kept killing I would be alright.

And then before we knew it, our target was in front of us.

He must have known that fleeing was useless, as he had produced a massive scythe of his own and had thrown himself forward to meet me. And then we met.

"It is good that two killers such as we have met," I growled, and I could not help but smirk as his scythe met my scimitar, and I kicked him back.

There was a circle forming around us now, as though no one could believe that what I know now to be a leading Arch Baron was engaging in single combat with a boy. Stikle and Selim were keeping us covered, destroying any who came too close, and cutting the lines down further.

He struck again this time, harder, and I found myself struggling to push him back.

"You know nothing about killers," he said, and it was in standard this time.

He was almost forcing down too hard for me to repel, and so I gave in. I suppose the best offense was convincing the enemy they did not need to be defensive.

I allowed him to almost slice me by loosening my arms and letting him force me back. I stumbled backwards.

He swung again at what he was starting to view as an unworthy adversary.

And as he did, I was still on the ground, and I let him get close. Close enough that when he swung again he had to bend his body to get the right angle to impale me.

Enough that I could, if I so duly desired, swing my own scimitar behind my back and allow him to hit it dead on and send me flying right into his chest.

Which he was not, I must say, expecting.

I excel in extremely close combat fighting thanks to my tentacles.

I let loose my sword and grabbed him with my left hand first, wrapping it around his throat, and letting my right hand grab his wrist as it was sent flying backwards as the scythe ricocheted off my sword, which I had now dropped. I began to constrict around his throat as my right hand burst into a series of tentacles, flesh and blood spraying everywhere, and I snapped his wrist in a few seconds.

He howled in pain now, but I closed his throat a few moments later.

I let go of his hand and immediately reached up towards his face. Enemies were much easier to deal with when crippled.

Much, much easier.

I managed to pluck his first eye out, and before all who were watching--and the victim--I popped it into my mouth and mashed on it.

I swallowed it and grinned madly at him.

I was going to leave his other eye in. I wanted him ready, because I had plans for him. I wanted him to be able to see what was going to happen.

What I was not prepared for was for him to knee me in the gut.

I guess I got lost in the moment.

But screaming, gasping for air, he managed to grab his scythe and now he was swinging wildly.

And this time I was the one that wasn't prepared.

If he could actually see what he was doing and was using the proper hand to swing, he would have taken my left arm clean off. Instead, I escaped with a really, really bad slice that immediately started spraying blood everywhere.

I looked up at him as he went to slice again.

And then Selim was in front of me and had pinned a dagger in his shoulder before either of us could mentally register that he was there.

He swung around as the demon stumbled forward and pulled me up by my right mess of tentacles.

And then we began another assault on him.

Selim had produced a third dagger and had immediately tossed it into the demon's other shoulder.

"Let's do this," he said.

And we did it.

What did we do, you may ask?

As Selim produced his fourth dagger I managed to will my right hand back to be a hand and grabbed my scimitar.

We were almost twirling around each other now, as though we were part of a troupe of dancers, and without a word exchanged we each managed to duck and avoid the next scythe swing.

We were then both close enough to him to cripple him.

There was a dagger in his gut at about the same moment that I had managed to stick my scimitar into the back of his knee and twist it. He buckled to the floor and Selim kicked his scythe away.

And then we grabbed him as Stikle let out a whistle and a The King came running through the masses. Stikle jumped unto him and Selim and I tossed the Demon up to him before jumping up ourselves.

And we fled, for a few minutes.

Recap - Part 6

We fled for just long enough to explain to Cid that he was to be kept alive.

And then we went back.

I saw eight fallen Behemoths.

A few of our soldiers had died to arrows, but primarily, it looked as though we would be able to hold the beaches.

I could not spot Alyria or Rumaha in the mess of fighting, but I heard her Hellfire firing madly and figured she was holding her own.

I kept licking my lips.

I knew that there was something off. There was something different this time.

But I could not think too much about it, because in under few moments we were back on the beach, back in the hell that we had stumbled upon.

I was bleeding pretty badly at this point still, and everything was getting harder to focus on. There was no time for medical attention. There was barely time to think.

I had just enough time to take my turban off and wrap it around my arm and pray that I did not die in the battle.

Perhaps it was luck.

Perhaps it was fortune.

But there was something that happened that we did not expect.

There had been Demon ships a bit farther out that had finally made their ways towards the shore, and what was absolutely mind boggling was that they were firing upon the first group of demon ships.

There were battle cries to be heard.

Human ones.

Eastern ones.

And then it all made sense as they crashed to the shores and hundreds of immortals poured out, with Caiyuo giving them battle orders.

The tide of battle had tilted ever more in our favor.

And then I knew blackness.

Recap - Part 7

I came to some hours later, back in Delkutt. Someone was washing my arm, and I heard voices whispering all around.

"--did you see what he was doing--"

"--never saw anything like that--"

"--is it safe to be so close--"

"--is he even human?"

I tried to open my eyes, but I was too worn out. I managed to roll my head ever so slightly. The whispers hushed.

There was a voice with a slight eastern accent.

"His body could be undergoing a different form of rejection."

That sounded about right for how I felt. I felt in shock. As though I wouldn't be able to move if I wanted to.

"Can you hear us, monsieur?"

I managed to barely open my eyes a crack and tilt my head towards the speaker. I could barely make out a young Mithran woman.

I closed my eyes again and tilted my head back to a more comfortable position.

I began to realize that there were leather bindings holding me down to the bed I was on.

The mithra walked over to a door and opened it and a few more people walked in.

"Take those binds off, for Altana's sake! He's not an animal!"

It was Cid's voice, and I was thankful.

"Oui, monsieur!" the mithra squeaked. "I was just following orders!"

I felt pressure leave my wrists. That at least made me realize that I had more human features at the moment.

"Do you have any V.I.T. potions?" Cid asked. There was a short pause. "Inject him with one, he's in bad shape."

There was a moment of silence and then I felt a needle being pressed into my elbow and I felt it burn for a moment.

I opened my eyes, fully this time, and turned to where Cid was.

"You lost a lot of blood," he said.

"I had scarcely any idea," I said cynically, and started to sit up but half the room urged me down.

"Wolfgang almost had a canary," said another voice. I turned and saw Cai sitting down across the room.

It was good to see him alive.

"He doesn't understand why you did what you did. Fortunately, Cid managed to convince him not to kill the demon you brought up."

I turned to Cid. My throat was dry and it cracked as I thanked him. Someone procured a cup of water and it was being pressed to my lips within a moment.

I leaned back and shut my eyes again.

"If you're an Immortal, part of my squad, a friend, a friend of a friend, or called Cid, you can stay. Everyone else, leave please."

"Monsieur, I'm afraid I cannot--"

"Or a nurse."

People began to shuffle out of the room. I heard one of those nifty vertical doors shut and seal the room.

"You are not to repeat anything that I say from this point forward. Understand?"

There was a murmur of, "Understood."

"Does anybody remember when Jeuno was overrun and the squad had to overtake it? The particular night that something inside of me snapped?"

"Yes," Cai said.

"Clearly," said another voice. It was higher pitched.

I opened my eyes to see a familiar Taru standing on a chair.

"Guess you didn't die," I said to Dasva, who shrugged and I continued.

"I'm not sure about the total details, but the Arch Demon I had slain had successfully entered... or maybe been sucked into... my mind... soul... something like that. There is a demon inside of me. Literally."

There was a single gasp, I think from the nurse.

"We worked out an agreement. He needs me to kill him, I need him to help me save us."

I was neglecting to mention the implication that suicide seemed the only logical ending to me at the moment.

"He's been relatively helpful, to be fair. He shattered my soul. He's been tainting it, but that leads to all sorts of peculiar abilities, as I'm sure you've seen demonstrated. Mostly, it's helped me take more souls in. I take them in full. I can communicate with them, and I think if I let them, they can communicate through me."

I let myself relax for a moment and tried something new.

I called upon The Galka. I woke him up, and I asked him to talk.

My voice was deep and sandy.

"It is true. It is like a Talekeeper."

I opened my eyes again. "The Demon saw the one we captured and recognized him. He told me to take him alive. I trust him. He's got nothing to gain at this point."

"I intend on interrogating him. As I've determined, sentient creatures have a ferocious fear of losing their eyes. I've already deprived him of one eye; he'll be terrified if I try and pluck the second."

There was an eerie silence.

"This is war. If he does not crack, I will break him. It's not going to be pretty," I finished simply.

It was a lot of effort to talk.

"What's the situation outside?"

There was finally room for other people to talk. "The threat has been neutralized. Two Behemoths were killed, a dozen of our soldiers wounded. Three are deceased. Six Behemoths are being treated. Besides your captive, there are no Demons left," came Rumaha's voice.

"We had found the Demons south of Windurst. Under my suggestion, we chased them all the way up here in their own ships. We let them get a lead as they got closer here to make them think that they lost us. I suppose they figured they could secure Delkfutt and then trap us."

I gave a half nod. "Could be."

"You're all sorts of messed up," came Stikle's voice.

"Pretty much."

Recap - Part 8

That was what happened on the ninety-fifth day.

What I recanted last was late in the night. I must have been out for a few hours.

For almost a half of a day after that I was forbidden from moving around too much. I was starting to hate being in care.

When it came time for the nurse to swap with the next one, I simply walked out and headed to where Rumaha and I had set up our quarters. Rum was there, as was Cai, Marz, and Dasva.

"You should be resting," Cai said simply as I walked in.

"Don't care," was all I could think to say. "Where's my sword?"

Rum reached under my loft and pulled out my scimitar.

I glanced at them and finally settled on Dasva.

"Dasva, do you have a strong stomach?" I asked.

She nodded, unsure of where I was going.

"Good. Come on. We've got business to attend to."

I could hear the howlings of a demon this whole time echoing throughout the corridors of Delkfutt. I would figure out where they were keeping my prisoner.

She simply followed. I think she knew best what was about to happen.

I licked my lips.

I was oddly looking forward to this.

Recap - Part 9

With some wandering, Dasva and I found where they were keeping him. There were two Mithran Rangers standing guard at the door. After some convincing, we managed to get access to the room he was kept in. Before we did, I took a moment, shut my eyes, and leaned against a wall.

You're going to have to work with me.

There was that guttural laugh once more. *Would it not work against me to not work with you? You are brave, but you are young yet.*

Oh, can it already.

My scimitar still sheathed, I nodded to Dasva, and we entered the room. The red demon was chained to a wall. Thick chains. Heavy chains.

I took a moment as he thrashed against them to analyze the situation. He screamed out.

Work with me.

And then I opened my mouth, and we both began to speak.

"The only way out of this is to work with me."

I think the red demon was shocked that I could speak his damned language, because he stopped screaming.

"Killers such as we know that the only way out is death. There is no other way."

He was still.

"You can tell me what I want, or I can make you tell me. And if you will not tell me, then may Altana and Promathia bless your soul, because I will not."

Dasva was looking at me uneasily.

"What's the purpose of this Plague?"

There was no answer. I took a step forward and unsheathed my scimitar and walked up until I was mere inches from his face. I took the tip of my scimitar and ever so lightly traced the area around his remaining eye.

"It would be a shame to scramble that one. It was ever so tasty. Did you know that? I have already eaten part of you. Shall I continue? One part at a time? I could have some nice mulsum as I do it."

I could see in his single eye a look of ever so slight panic.

"I'll ask you one more time."

The red demon gave a heaving breath.

And then spit on me.

I snickered.

"Dasva, would you please light his left hand on fire? A slow roast, if you can," I said, taking a step backwards.

This was something that Dasva seemed to be familiar with; interrogations. Real ones.

She may have been sicker than I was, because she smiled and happily began the incantation. We stepped back as a fire slowly traced its way around his left hand.

And I laughed. Oh, how I laughed.

It was slime like this that had my country burning, and now I was giving the order to burn him.

He howled. He howled a lot, and I kept laughing.

"It stops when you talk!" we said.

I walked forward as he thrashed.

"A little hotter," I said, and the flame grew a little brighter.

He thrashed his hand at me, and in one quick movement I took off two of his fingers, and he howled more. This time, he screamed.

"You can still feel that, because we're not burning you up so much yet," we explained. Forcefully now, *"LOOK AT ME!"*

I picked up one of his claws as his eyes jumped to me, and began to chew on the fleshy part.

It was disgusting, but I pretended to like it anyways. I would rather eat another Mamool, because at least those didn't taste rancid; they were just sour.

Although with a little seasoning and some salt...

He shrieked again, and this time I took my scimitar and cut his whole wrist off. It tumbled to the ground, still burning.

Now I was once a mage, and I knew that there were some things you could fix. I tossed the claw I was chewing on to the side and picked up his wrist from the tip of another claw and placed it near where I sliced it.

With an incantation and a flash of light, it was back on, and he could feel the burning again. I should mention, I healed the part that was being burned, so he got to feel it all over.

I was enjoying myself. I was enjoying myself a lot.

I was enjoying myself so much that my left hand just burst into tentacles on the basis that it seemed like the thing to do at that moment in time. He was thrashing, screaming.

He lunged forward the full extent of his chains at me, which was highly convenient for what I was planning. He was making it easy.

I wrapped two tentacles up his face and a third jabbed straight through his skull. It ever so lightly graced the smooth inside of the top of his skull before I took it out. It was slimy and bloody.

I licked it off as I took a step backwards.

There was raw, utter, panic in his single eye.

"Blaze his hand off," I said.

And the fire increased tenfold and in a moment his left hand was gone. It was just a pile of ash on the floor.

"What part shall we do next?" I asked.

"Toes!" she cried out. She was adorable, being so giddy.

That was just the start.

Recap - Part 10

*The toe bone connected to the heel bone,
The heel bone connected to the foot bone,
The foot bone connected to the leg bone,
The leg bone connected to the knee bone,
The knee bone connected to the thigh bone,
The thigh bone connected to the back bone,
The back bone connected to the neck bone,
The neck bone connected to the head bone...*

I worked my way up according to a childhood song.

His bottom claws tasted horrific, but as I worked my way up the meat grew ever more tasty. It was almost sweet in some of the parts. It wasn't too filling, though. By the time we had gotten past the heel bone, we decided that we would need to introduce more than just fire and the mental anguish of being eaten alive.

"Dasva, he looks a bit toasty."

"I was thinking the same thing!" she said. She was enjoying this.

"Shall we cool him off?"

"Indeed!"

And then we began freezing him before we would roast him. His entire body was screaming. We could see it. I was going to take a more direct route soon.

A route I did not want to take, because I wanted a witness.

But there were always more painful routes.

One day I had gone to the market below port Jeuno and bought a chicken, live. They had to kill it for me, and I had to clean it up, and as I did I noticed that if I would touch some of the joints it would twitch. Meg, ever the scientist, knew exactly why.

I could hear her explanation echoing through my mind.

"Well, you see, there are some things called nerrrrves," she purred, smiling, and she explained the science of it.

All living things had nerves, and that was a fact. Those nerves were sensitive.

Very much so.

"It ends when you talk," we said.

The red demon still would not talk.

"Cut the spells," I said. "It's time for something new."

The elemental slaughter abruptly stopped.

I took my scimitar. I was getting very, very tired now.

I shouldn't have been doing this.

I sliced his entire left arm below the elbow off. He now had a stick of a limb just flailing about, howling.

I grabbed him by what was left of his left arm and began to stick my fingers into the area that was left open. The howling multiplied amounts I cannot even begin to describe.

"Make it stop!" it finally shrieked.

Progress was made. I licked my lips and took a step backwards.

"In standard," we said.

The demon shrieked again, "Make it stop!" in warbled, deep, harsh standard language.

Language that Dasva could understand.

Language that Cid and Wolfgang could understand.

There was a long pause.

"It is good that three killers such as we have met in the path of life and death," the red one said.

I smiled. It looked like we were all finally starting to understand each other.

I stepped out of the room and spoke to one of the rangers. "Get Wolfgang and Cid and anyone else who matters. He's ready to talk."

Recap - Part II

When the two head honchos arrived, we must have looked amazing.

Covered in blood, turban to boot. Sweating profusely. Dirty. My mouth was covered in black.

"He's ready to talk," I said, as I led them in.

Wolfgang gasped as he saw him, and Cid merely grew silent.

I wanted, I suppose, to prove that I wasn't crazy. Totally crazy, that is.

If they agreed that whatever was said was actually said, then I suppose I would be deemed sane. They would see that nothing I said was made up. It would explain my actions.

Almost.

There was an awkward silence.

"What is this plague that turns friends into enemies?"

The red demon was weary. I sensed that I had pushed his heart further than it should have been.

"It started off as a tainted brew... it sends them mad... it taints their body once their mind is corrupt. The brew makes their blood, saliva... everything becomes an ingredient made to create the same vile potion. They lust for flesh... they lose their souls, and go to hunt more. When the brew comes into contact with the final ingredient... it starts over."

"What is the final ingredient?" Cid asked.

He lolled his head and gave a laugh, blood sputtering a bit from his mouth.

"Your life blood."

Cid was filing all this to memory.

"Who do you answer to?" Wolfgang demanded.

He gave another laugh.

"Evil goes by so many names... why must we serve but one person?"

He gagged for a moment.

I stepped forward to him and my left hand did its thing again.

And then he shrieked as the slimy tendrils began to flick and poke at his opened arm.

"Answer his question and the pain goes away!"

When I turned next, Wolfgang was shaking.

"Answer him."

I saw it in his single eye that he was about to be lost.

"We had tried to resurrect our lord, and we failed. We Demons, we know old magic. Older magic than you would ever know... And we know that you can create a vessel, a damned body, if you try hard enough. While we tried to... we found that we could transfer His spirit from one body to another. Those who were 'Turned'... were simply vessels for the Shadow Lord's return. Every soul we tainted was simply another soul that would strengthen the Shadow Lord's..."

"And soon, enough will be Turned that he can simply come back on his own."

He cackled again, and this time his head lolled limp.

I spun to Dasva. "Electrocute him, *now!*"

And as Dasva did that, I saw his eye flail open for but a moment, and with my left hand I broke through his skull and bit down into his neck.

It was painful for me on both accounts. The electrocution was easier to tolerate.

Taking in the soul of a second demon was not so easy.

Recap - Part 12

Dasva and I cleaned ourselves up. I headed back to the medical room and the nurse swapped my bandages. I was supposed to be resting, and she harped on me for that.

"But monsieur, you are wounded!" she pressed. "You're just a child!"

I sighed. If most people knew what I had been through, they would stop thinking about me like a child.

I started to walk out of the room and as I did she suddenly grabbed me.

"Forgive me, monsieur!"

And then there was a needle in my arm and everything went fuzzy.

That was the ninety-sixth day.

On the ninety-seventh day, I awoke to find Wolfgang by my side.

He looked strangely mournful.

"Why the long face?" I asked, but I'm not sure if the words came out too clearly. He glanced up at me, looking a little shocked.

"You were screaming in your sleep. The nurses were too scared, and so I took you under my watch."

So it was getting worse again.

"My apologies," I said. I started to stretch but had to stop; my arm hurt entirely too much when I did that.

"Why did you do it?"

It was an odd sort of question. Why did I do what?

"You mean, why did I take the other demon?" I asked.

Wolfgang was unsure what I meant. "The part where you... bit him."

I stood up and gave a sort of sad sort of laugh.

"I had to make a judgment call. We were about to lose him; he was dying."

But then I realized that he didn't really understand what I meant still.

I gave a sigh.

"I took his soul, so that if I must, I can harvest information out of him. Or maybe it will have other effects on me..."

I glanced at my left hand.

It had become very scarred in the last few days.

"Then you are no different than them."

I could not deny that.

"I would rather corrupt myself than let our people fully fall. You don't trust me."

He was taken aback, but was equally truthful. "No, I do not."

"Then verify everything I said against any of the Immortals. Against anyone on my squad. Something happened in Jeuno, and a ton more happened in the Empire," I said. "I'm telling the truth. That's why I brought you in during the interrogations. So you could see that I'm not crazy. So I could see I'm not..."

I think it was at that point that Wolfgang realized that by sending me on the task that he did, he broke me.

I was a broken soul. I was chipper inside sometimes... but it was getting harder and harder every day.

"I'm sorry."

We both said it at the same time. It was a little bit awkward, very much so sad, and a little bit funny.

"I'm for our cause, Wolfgang. I'm probably the only weapon you guys have that they don't know how to counter, because everytime I take one of them inside, I gain their tactics. Their mannerisms. If I take enough of them... I may even be able to become one of them. I just want this over... There are so many places I'd rather be, but I'm here because I will not let our lands burn."

Wolfgang simply nodded glumly as I spoke. I think the magnitude of what I was dealing with had hit him.

"I've got a few ideas. If the Demons really are creating some sort of soul, then I'm the perfect candidate to fix that problem. You just have to promise me something."

"What?"

"If I ever fall to what I face, I want you to kill me and bring my body back to Al Zabi."

There was another very long pause.

"I do not understand, but I promise."

Recap - Part 13

I struggled against the nurse again, and she promised me that tomorrow I could go free, and she used the needle once more and I knew blackness once more.

And such was the ninety-seventh day.

When I awoke again she was changing my bandages and I was allowed to go, but I had orders not to push myself too far.

Like that would ever happen.

Cai was waiting for me and walked me back to our quarters.

It seemed like they kicked some people out and replaced them, because now the cots were just us.

Stikle was in the back, presumably because so no one would trip over his animals. He was bruised and sleeping. In the next cot was Selim, sharpening his daggers, and then was my cot. Across from me was Caiyuo, behind him was Rumaha, and Ludo was at the end across from Stikle. Alyria, Marz, and Dasva were all in their own little secluded cluster.

There were a few empty cots. I guess we had room for expansion.

"Have I missed much?" I asked, sitting on my bed.

"Stikle's been playing with Behemoths, trying to patch them up and get them to trust him again. Not much else," Rum said.

"The Immortals have set up camp all around Qufim. As their leader, I suppose you should fill them in on the current situation," Cai said.

"If I knew what it was," I murmured. "Has Dasva filled you in on what happened?"

"That information is highly classified," Selim said, sounding very bored. "So naturally, we all know. You screamed a fair bit out of it in your sleep."

That sort of information greatly disturbed me.

"What else have I been screaming?" I asked.

No one answered at first.

"Sect, let's go for a walk," Cai said suddenly. He grabbed a box from under his cot and headed for the door.

Confused, I followed.

We did not say much until we were all the way out at the pond in the center of Qufim. We were alone.

He opened the box and pulled out a glass bottle that had an auburn liquor in it. He also grabbed two small glasses and filled them up, handing one to me.

"You've been screaming names in your sleep," he said dryly after a moment.

I sputtered after the first sip. I thought my throat was burning.

"What sort of names?" I wheezed, more from the liquor than the statement.

"Names of people that you've killed. People that you would have never known the names of. Friends of ours... family... We figure that if you scream their name, that's like verification that..."

"Altana be damned..." I muttered, and took another sip.

I closed my eyes and tried to force myself to relax.

"I think... I think I took in more than I can handle this time. I think that demon was really high up."

"He could be. He could have been a direct link to... whatever it is," Cai said.

I looked into my drink and swallowed the rest in one sip. Everything inside of me started to burn. Cai refilled the glass.

"I don't hear him inside me. I wonder what's going on in there," I said.

Cai shook his head, taking another sip.

"Do you have a family, Sect?" Cai asked.

It was a question out of nowhere.

"When I was little, I had one..." I said. It was a delicate subject. All the bitterness I had ever felt was suddenly back culminating inside of me. "My mother left us, and then my father left us. I was too young to remember much of it..."

"Altana... I never had a clue," Cai said. "Siblings?"

"An older sister. One day she went out to look for mom and dad..."

There were some things that I never spoke about. This topic was one of them.

"She never came back for me. I was six years old. Without a trace, they all just left me. I've been alone since then."

Cai looked very troubled.

So troubled that he started to slowly weep and began to drink very quickly.

"Last night, as you slept, you started screaming... You started begging for forgiveness..." he was trying to dodge it.

I felt the icy, still feeling hit me and he didn't need to say it.

"You were asking your parents to forgive you," he choked. "You said you killed them."

We were silent.

I spent my whole life wondering if I would ever see my parents again, only to find out that I had screamed their names in the list of people that I had killed.

I killed my parents.

I grabbed the bottle from him and drank it all down.

"I'm sorry I had to tell you," Cai said.

I could only shrug numbly.

"Shit happens."

For Real, Now

When we returned, Cai kept bringing out bottles.

This morning, I wanted to die. Rumaha held my head over a bucket. He's such a nice friend.

Breakfast had been grits and some eggs, and I felt better after I ate.

Cai was still passed out. He looked rather elegant with the half filled bottle of nog by his side and a hat we had somehow procured covering his face.

I vaguely remember us all singing before Wolfgang came down and tried to shut us down.

I don't think he was successful, judging on the fact that he was currently passed out on the floor and his shirt was missing. I vaguely recall Cid showing up with some more liquor and we started playing poker with a Cardian Deck someone produced from a storage container. I think Cid also handed out cigars, because we all smelt like sweet smoke.

After we cleaned up--where the ladies went in this excursion, I have no idea, mind you--and found Wolfgang's shirt and armor and got him fixed up, we had a meeting. What was the path to take from there?

"We have an army of Immortals, and it will double in size at some point," Cai began. "I think we can begin a full frontal assault."

"We don't know their numbers, and they have home turf advantage and superior technology at the moment," Cid countered.

"Every day we don't do something, they gain more ground," Rum chimed in. "They were able to comfortably dock and start a battle here within moments."

What Cid said was on my mind.

The home turf advantage.

"We need to capture a Turned."

Everyone kind of stared at me.

"No, really, I'm serious. They've demonstrated that they can keep coming here with ease... but think about what Cid just said. Advantage of the home field. We need to figure out where they lose their advantage. To the map!" I said, and jumped up and we all gathered around the map.

"Jeuno was swarmed, and has been a constant attraction," I began. I grabbed a pencil and circled Jeuno and placed an 'X' over it.

"The Southern Continent was a cesspool for them," Cai said. "They were pretty bad. They didn't decay very quickly. I guess it was too humid. Too much shade. Too many places to hide."

We crossed the South off.

"They're just fine here; the cold seems to keep them fresh and clean," Cid said, grabbing the pencil and crossing off Qufim and the ever obvious Northlands.

"The East can't harbor us all yet; give it another few years for them to expand now that their war is over," I said, a bit too optimistically. Cai gave me a nudge and a smirk, but we crossed it off.

"They weren't doing so well on the way to Windurst from here, but Windurst itself is vulnerable because it's right on the water," said Stikle.

He drew a circle with a question mark inside of it.

"The Jungles of Elshimo will be the same as the South," I said, and crossed them off.

"San d'Oria is too close to their base, and so mild that they're not affected at all," Wolfgang said.

And we all stared at a single small continent.

"If they can barely stand the trip to Windurst, how can they survive Altepa?" I asked.

We placed a circle over it with a check in it.

"Are you saying to relocate everyone and everything?" Wolfgang asked.

"I think it's the most logical course of action," Cid said. "The sand will slow them. The heat will bake them. There's enough land that we can set up base far from the shore..."

"What about supplies?" Stikle asked.

Cid actually started laughing.

"We have the manpower, and a convenient tunnel straight from Bastok. All we have to do is route water out from the underground streams in Korroloka. It would take us a few weeks, but I think we can do it. There's also the whole remnants of the Caverns down there that we can secure..."

We all fell silent for a few moments, thinking about it.

"Let's reconvene tonight and discuss this further. This is a daunting task," Wolfgang said.

Cid gave another laugh.

"Oh, Wolfgang, you think so little of me..." and he walked away.

Late Evening

There was nothing else going on today, hence why I had time to write all that I did.

We decided that we did not need to capture a Turned.

Cid was not present this time around. We decided to send a group of people out to determine if Altepa was safe and habitable.

Do I really need to say what group was going to go?

We head out in a few days. Cid will be coming as our leader. We were naturally tasked with scouting for survivors and bringing them with us or sending them to Delkfutt.

We were honestly struggling with numbers by now. Wolfgang had rough figures estimating the total population before this crisis and also had an estimation for Turned that were eliminated. The numbers were entirely too skewed.

Really. We're talking that only a third of the population has been accounted for.

Where are the others?

Day 100 – On A Pale Chocobo

Early Morning

I kept thinking back to what Cai told me last night.

I felt more apathetic than anything, and that's what scared me. After the initial shock...

I mean, they birthed me. I owed my creation.
And I chopped their heads off, or something?
But the red demon--I really have to find out their names some time--said that the mind was lost when turned.

The demons inside of me were unnaturally quiet tonight.
So here I am, sitting back at that pond again, wondering what I feel.
More than anything, I feel lonely. Lonely in that I want to be back with The Empire. Back where I belong.

With her.
I wonder if there were others like me.
Was I just another hero that passed through?
Would another young man pass though, and maybe he would stay, and the empire would have an emperor?

These are thoughts that I don't like to wonder, but I wonder them anyways.
There are a few Immortals on the other side of the pond, skipping rocks. They are waiting.
One of them just nodded at me as our eyes locked.
I can't imagine how they feel. They were just ordered to save a land that wasn't their own.
Some of them had died saving it.
All of them had seen the horrors that belonged to us.
Yet at the same time, I have to admit, that if we failed here, the horrors would span to the West and East continents, too. The South had already fallen...

Whenever I think about the South I am always drawn back to a single plan that seems to be the only one that will work: burn the land. All of it.

There are too many trees, too many crevices. Trees can be replanted, flowers regrown, towns rebuilt... lives cannot be remade, though, and that makes them the highest priority.

I'm tired, not just physically.

The baby Chocobo I found is doing well. Stikle told me today that he's been taking care of it. Apparently we have a stable of Chocobos, between what was left from the Duchy and what the Immortals brought.

I'm so tempted on fleeing Eastward, but I know it's a silly thing to do.

Besides, I barely know what sort of danger I am now.

The headache isn't going away. If it keeps going on... I guess I'll search inward. Perhaps it's more than just my first hangover.

There's a whispering in the back of my mind that tells me I'm right.

If that's so, I foresee more sake tonight.

Evening

It was in the shower that it happened.

A flash of red, a flash of anger.

A flash of darkness, and I crumbled to the floor.

I came to a few moments later. Thankfully, I was alone. I quickly scraped myself up decided to get out of there before someone saw me. I could have sworn as I passed a mirror that there was something wrong in the reflection.

I was worried.

I started to walk through the hallways, nothing but a towel on, and back to my quarters.

I passed by an Elvaan on the way. It was a perfectly standard procedure. He was headed to get cleaned up, to shave I think.

I stopped as he passed and turned.

The only thing I wanted to do was push him against a wall and kill him.

I knew what was going on.

We're losing.

Was that my thought, or did it belong to the first demon?

I hurried back to my room, glad that I didn't see anyone else on the way. I got some clothes on.

I was scared.

I was very scared, and I still am.

I've been playing with fire; I don't want to burn someone else.

Cai walked into the room at some point, and the hardest decision ever was not telling him, because I was that scared.

We're going to lose. I cannot keep him back.

It looked as though I had finally bit off more than I could chew.

I managed to slowly suppress the urge to kill Cai from the moment I saw him. It was so difficult...

And when I saw Wolfgang? Forget it, that was almost too hard.

How do we stop this?

I kept asking inward, but he didn't know either.

We were both scared.

"Is something wrong?" Cai asked over dinner. I quickly shook my head, keen not to look at him.

"Tired," I mumbled, and went back to my popotos.

Kill him...

I was gripping my knife and I had been glancing at him without realizing it. I got out of there, quickly.

I rushed back to the room, glad that no one was there. I grabbed a rucksack and quickly tossed a few sets of clothing in there. I packed some rations, grabbed some pens and a few other diaries, and tossed them in. I basically took my necessities.

Every time I saw someone, I had the urge to bite into them and massacre them in every single way. I barely fought it. The only thing I could think to do was to get out, and get out now. I had become a danger to the people I wanted to save.

I searched around until I found the Chocobos, and I went to grab the first one that I saw. By sheer coincidence, there was one of the immortals there that was tasked with dealing with the Empire's birds. When he saw me going to mount a Chocobo he stopped me.

He took me over to one that was sequestered.

It was beautiful. It was a gorgeous white one.

"The Empress wills for you to use this one; she herself had raised it," he said simply.

She was too good to me, and now I was about to abandon all the people that she had given me, and everything she gave me.

"My thanks," I said. I placed my hand near the bird. As though it knew that I was its masters lover, it came right to me and let me rub its beak.

I left Delkfutt a few minutes later, riding out on the bird.

I'm not sure where I'm going to go, but I have a few plans.

Wolfgang is too slow to act, and so I shall force his hand to decision.

Tonight, Jeuno shall burn to the ground by my hand, and I'm not going to leave until there's nothing left. We're tethered where we are because there is a Jeuno. People come because there is a Jeuno.

The only way that which I can stop this and make them go to a safer land is to finally end the reign of Jeuno. Sometimes, you need to simply start over. If I cut off the emotional tie to this land, they will be forced to adapt and remember the reality of the situation.

Delkfutt has been a haven, and it still shall; but it is not for them to stay, now.

Instead, it is time for them to go to Altepa. The Turned do not excel there. I cannot see a Demon doing well in such heat; they are creatures of the icelands.

Is that where I am to go? To Altepa? To the icelands?

I'm not sure. As I stand here, my bird next to me, with the residential area to Jeuno in front of me, I cannot help but wonder if I am about to commit the right act.

It's time to close this book.

Where shall I be next? I'm not entirely sure. All I know is that I'm going to burn Jeuno to the ground, and then I shall ride out.

If no one else will, I'll finish this all alone, or I'll secure Altepa alone, or sit in the blazes I'm about to start and kill myself alone.

But if I do not kill myself, all I know is that I'm going to ride out on a pale Chocobo, and I have no intention on turning back until it's safe to be near me again.

And this time, I ride alone.

The following note was found attached to a Hellfire that is presumed to have been Sectumsempra's. It was placed in the center of where Jeuno was before it had been burned down.

To Those Who Stood By Me

Don't look for me.

I'm a danger now. I'm a liability, and I'm not in control.

If you see me, kill me, because by the time you find me, it will probably be too late.

But for now, beyond anything else, forgive me.

If you want to hunt me, look for the trails of dead bodies.

I'm trying to save you all, but I think I need saving, this time.

But don't look for me. Really.

Tears of Scarlet, Tears of Gold

The penultimate series of writings.

Day 104 – Tales of Black and White

Time means nothing to me. Time is measured in black and white.

Black; the times where I'm losing.

White; the times where I gain a little ground back, for a little while.

I have learned much during the darker times. I have begun to know the demon inside of me. The "good" one. Like his name.

He has a name that is too dark for me to write, and still hard for me to even say, so we compromised on a sort of friendlier name. I may call him Maje. He said my name was too hard, and so he also must make a name for me.

We call the second demon Crim, after the color of his skin.

I write because as I do, as I regain some focus. Crim loses a bit of ground, because it lets me remember myself. But never for too long. This is the first time I have been able to finish more than a few words.

At least he keeps the bird in tact; it's terribly useful, I suppose, and maybe too beautiful for even the demon to kill.

I have caught flashes of our journey. We're heading to San d'Oria, and why I do not know.

We are on the outskirts of Jugner now, almost at La'Theine. I do not think we are yet being followed. Yet.

There are no people here, and so we have not yet fed. To ease my own hunger, I find tasteless mushrooms and drink the water from the stream. Neither Maje nor I know what to do.

Do we resist? Do do we go off course? Do we try and fight back?

Or do we let him run his course, try and stay alive, and try and take over?

I think we know what's going to happen.

It's going to be a long while.

Day 107 – Memories of Light and Waves

I hunger.

Oh. How. I. Hunger.

I've regained a bit of myself again, and so I write.

Maje and I have made a little bit of progress in that we have found a safe chasm in my mind. A place he can't seem to touch, and when he does he hurts.

It's the broken part that lets me turn Flayer.

But that is also a place where we cannot stay forever.

It is hard to explain the intricacies of being inside yourself, trapped. Having a mental body, a spirit, but no physical attachment. Catching glimpses of your eyes as your body moves through the world.

And the inside of the broken part is a horrible place, full of bad memories and pain.

But there's something that lingers there. Something that gives me hope.

I suppose it's the memory of the one who took care of me.

Those memories seem to be the favorite of each of us.

Crim seems to try and hold them and twist them.

There is something sad about the way that Maje flips through them, searching for sustenance of his own, but never hurting them. He feeds off emotion.

I have become allied with this demon. I have become his friend.

And for me, those memories are the last thing I have linking me to a brighter world, and reminding me why I'm not giving up.

It's like a war inside of my head, feasting on parts of my soul. Emotions, drifting, being plucked and eaten.

I can see my own emotions.

Stuck in these memories, it's like they glow.

I can travel between my memories, and that seems to be how I can take control for a while.

I was back with her for a moment. We were on the bed, my head on her lap. Nashmeira was smiling, sucking on a chocolate covered strawberry. She took half a bite and then lowered it down to my lips. Only Altana knows where my shirt had gone to.

It was the memory of that strawberry on my lips that broke me free. It was warm. It was moist. It was sweet. In some ways, it was sultry. It was ours. And so here I am, trying to reminisce about her, to see if it keeps me here any longer.

I can feel myself getting a little stronger. A little more substantial.

I gave my Chocobo some water. I should really name him... her... whatever it is.

I'm trying to focus on anything. Everything.

Anything but the screaming in the back of my head.

Day 108 – A Word from Our Sponsors

Maje

My name is Maje, and this fight we shall not lose.

You who takes the body back, you who tries to win, shall never win. Over me you shall win. Over him you shall him. Never shall you win us both.

To one warning I give: we know that which he makes you observe. To try and claim him you try and learn him. But you shall not win, for you shall never understand what I have given him and what he has given me. I give you one option: parley with the human, or your days shall end.

Possessor of souls, we will possess you, and we will break you.

Sectumsempra

That is the first time that Maje has been able to take over.

I view this as progress in our theater.

We are figuring you out, he with skin of crimson; we do you not remember but six hours ago when you threw yourself from your Chocobo as you approached San d'Oria?

Though, truly, such a hassle; I would rather negotiate than waste both of our time any further.

I have a war to win, and you or I will simply be another casualty; what difference does it make now or later?

Day 115 – Terror Tactics

Sectumsempra

The following has been recovered from the left inside mountain walls of Horlais Peak. It appears to have been written in orc blood.

Did you really think that it would be so easy?

Did you really think you could get rid of us so easily?

Next time you get the body back, I want you to look at what you did.

That blood seal on my neck? That's a romp.

What do you think I am, some prince?

The chants of the Orcish Shaman?

What do you think this is, some sort of Fairy Tale?

You're scared.

And we know it.

But that's okay, because you don't even know we're here right now.

And you won't until morning. For all you know, you're just asleep, because this body sometimes needs it.

We're still here, and there's no way out this time.

But thanks for letting us know that the Orcs were in on this one.

They, too, will pay dearly for this one. They could have gotten by without the azure fury of an immortal army if they played it right.

Thanks, lovely.

I'll be sure to send a message to have my men slaughter the entire empire.

They'll never even know. It's not like anyone's left alive in this neck of the woods.

I hope you feel sick in the morning when you wake up, because I searched through your memories.

Not even you can make your magic dark enough to turn a body inside out.

But we, we are learning.

I look forward to our next message.

Oh, and don't you dare throw away any more of my books.

You'll regret it if you don't pick it up on your way to Davoi.

Maje

The following has been recovered from the right inside mountain walls of Horlais Peak. It appears to have been written in orc blood.

Killers such as we could have done great things.

Yet no longer am I so interested in killing so many; it is that of the few that I lust for.

It is a funny thing. You, who wishes to end their race for your Lord, have never realized the potential that a human soul harbors. Such foolishness came from myself one time, though now I see differently.

The soul of the races of Altana is a fragile thing, but the soul is such that it can do great things. Darker things than we know, we who never knew Light. Without Light, we had never known true Dark.

He will not kill you. He shall do things worse.

Do you not hear The Galka?

The Galka inside of him that he has not damned, that he has taken.

The Beastmen. The Elvaan. The ones he has broken. Their minds beaten.

When the time comes, you too shall fall.

We will parley, if you will.

But you are weak with fear now.

Day 118 – Caving In

Fine.

We shall parley.

Day 119 – Aggressive Negotiations

Negotiations were very, very rough.

I feel as though my life has become a series of ticking clocks. It is just as it was a few months prior, upon my days in the East. The feeling that I am on the edge of madness and sanity.

The voices in my head, they will not cease.

I have wronged them; wronged them greatly.

It is a funny thing to be aware of your own soul. It is something I may never get used to, even now with what can essentially be thought of as access to my soul at whim.

The ability to send myself into a sort of trance and lose this world. Am I crazy, or am I just literally between two realms?

It is late now, and I must file down what happened in negotiations soon, so that if I lose myself again that at least there will be some record of what has happened. Sometimes, I feel like these writings may be the only thing that may give me some chance, however slight, of the world understanding the monster I have become, and maybe forgiving the things that I have done in my life.

Is it forgiveness, or acceptance? I'm honestly not quite sure myself. I think I've come to terms now that the rest of my life is to be spent alone.

No, not alone.

That's what the voice in my head says, and I suppose it's right. At least I've got Maje.

He is a demon, but perhaps I was wrong about demons this whole time. I suppose as with anything, the more you get to know and understand, the better it seems to be.

It's so fickle, how we behave.

But that is not to say that the demons were not our enemies; no, it's easy to see that they tried to destroy us far too many times to forget. I think what it boils down to is that a creature can only be judged on the basis of who that particular creature is.

As demons go, Maje really isn't so bad. He had observed the humans with a careful eye, and from what he says, he only terrorized because that is simply what demons do.

But he also says that now that he's gotten to know me, he wouldn't kill me.

The demons and the five races, they share a lot when you think about it.

They are proud as the Elvaan; they are as cunning as the Mithra; they are as intelligent as the Tarus; they are as wise as the Galka; they are as ambitious as the Humes. And they are as arrogant, apathetic, cowardly, envious, and full of rage as the lot of them.

It's a little bit funny, truly, how similar we all are.

Did we not hate them on the basis of them being demons?

Imagine, if you will, the composition of a piece of pie.

You've got your Rolanberry pie filling, a good size one; we'll say it's in a massive bowl, just chilling out while I make the pie crust.

That's my soul.

Now imagine if you accidentally slammed a cabinet door and you sent a huge bowl of nuts tumbling off a shelf and it falls right into the pie. Okay, it's still salvageable, and it's functional. It's a Rolanberry pie filling, with nuts in it now. You stir it all together so that your friends think you made some crazy new invention and hope that it's good. But still, it's not the same. You can't get it out. It's like the shrapnel I hear that Cid had tested one day.

You just can never get all the nuts out. They were ground and roasted, too. Tiny. They become incongruous with the original filling.

That's Maje.

And then it becomes a disaster. Your Chocobo sticks its head in the window and knocks some a cup of Buburimu Grapes into the window.

Meh, it can still work.

That's the Galka. But he's kind of lumped off to one side, because there weren't too many grapes, you know?

Then one of your annoying Taru assistants trips and some bubble chocolate gets tossed in.

You're cursing now, and you know that there's no way in hell you're getting this Rolanberry Pie done, so you may as well just roll with the punches.

Those are the Mamools that I took the soul from.

At this point, the pie has changed colors, because those new ingredients are dyeing it. It's now blue.

You set your counter girl to stir the filling even as you go out for a breather to get away from the disaster. Alright, you see it; it's blue, but as it smooths out, you feel like it'll turn out alright. It's a nice blue; a thousand shades of it. Maybe it's still salvageable.

Yeah, right; the next thing that happens is that you come in and get pissed off at something, and you toss some spice in willingly. That cinnamon? Those are the Elvaans I broke.

But you can still manage.

And then just as you pour it into the pie crust and quickly run to the bathroom, you come back to see that one of your assistants put it in the oven for you to get it out of sight. You're thankful for a moment, and then you take it out of the oven a little while later when it should be done.

And you see that your oven was dripping oil and it ruined the whole pie. You've got a tar-colored mess now.

That's Crim. That's what he did to me.

That's what's happened to my soul.

But there's still yet magic in this world.

By this point in my life, I've done a lot of horrible things within the last hundred and nineteen days.

So we've got this oil stained pie. Okay, now what?

As I said, this is a world of magic.

Maje and I managed to win the fight for control of the body temporarily a few times, long enough to scare him, and that's what let us bring him back inside to talk.

That soul, still, while stained, was still primarily Maje and I.

And so when he came inside to talk, I let Maje do the negotiations.

I have so many souls stuck inside of me now that I fear sometimes I may go mad. Where are they? How are they tethered to me?

That much, I do not truly understand, but ultimately, I'm the one in charge; I suppose, as the chef and maker of the Rolanberry filling base, but whatever dark magic this is, I'm just a tad bit more powerful than the lot of them. Perhaps because I've been tethered to this body longest, or perhaps because maybe it all doesn't work like I think. Either way, I know that ultimately, I can wield them in some way.

I could silence them before, I could break them; hell, the act that I could extract them was proof enough.

And so when he entered the area that which we may all meet, the false reality in my heart, I had Maje do the talking as I prepared.

Maje, under the guise of being the one in control, made the negotiations ferociously, and they argued it out and beat their demands into the ground and what they were willing to give up.

Ultimately, though, the final act would have to come from either Maje or I; that's simply how this soul works now, somehow.

And so finally they reached some term or another, and we began to get ready for the tribulations that allowed for the repartitioning of the soul. I suppose that Maje and I underwent a sort of trial by fire the first time, now that I think about it; it was a little different.

But each time after I took a soul, there was some mutual understanding, a mutual pact.

I'll keep you in here, for the time, and I may use your memories and your powers and your ideas, but you stay with me.

And Maje and I, in the depths of my soul where Crim did not seem to be able to come, had planned around this policy.

As master of this false reality, this soul, ultimately I supposed that I could be the one to end the pacts and violate them.

And so as Maje and Crim became ready to split control over me, he glanced at me and I struck.

Imagine if every other soul that I have detailed in all my journals as having taken was suddenly brought to the table.

With one lightning paced motion, I lunged at Crim as Maje grabbed him and forced forth all the other souls.

The rules are a little different inside a soul. You can sometimes play around.

Like how I was essentially possessing the Galka, The Elvaans, the Mamools, all of them at once... and grabbing at Crim. Maje, too. Myself, too.

Our goal was to overpower him, and split him up between the lot of us.

And that's exactly what we did.

But now all the souls inside of me are howling in pain.

It's bought us some time, but not enough.

Day 120 – Breaking

But at least, mostly, it's Maje and I.

I can shut the voices out for a little while, but even Maje and I have a little bit of Crim in us now.

When we took our body back, we found ourselves--and my Chocobo, thank Altana--in Jugner, on the road towards Davoi.

It seemed as though the Orcs played some sort of important roll in this. I'll go investigate that now, while I still can.

Maje and I at least can tell one thing: I'm a ticking time bomb now. Next time Crim breaks through, that may be the last time. Unless I keep claiming souls and splitting him up inside of me.

I truly wonder if I will be alive for much longer.
I don't know how much more this body can take.

Day 121 – The Fall of a Peoples

Sleep is not coming so easily anymore.

I was up all night, but I'm not terribly tired. It's hard to explain.

I snuck into Davoi and prepared for the worst, and was met with essentially just that. Demons and Orcs were there; it seemed to be a station for them.

Used to be.

I'm becoming entirely used to sneaking into enemy strongholds and destroying creatures, it seems.

It was simpler this time.

Maje translated for me, and I was able to sneak pretty far in before having to kill the first few Orcs. We made it into their inner sanctum, the Monastic Cavern, and killed some more.

It was good to go tentacular for a bit. My sword was also getting thirsty.

I've relied too much on my tentacles though, and not so much on my own abilities. So I spat some fire, swung my sword like crazy, and soon enough I had found Overlord Bakgodek himself.

I'm sure you know what my interrogations are like by now, so I'll spare you any detail. Just know that the Orcs had a very large hand in the initiation of this plague.

Punish them dearly.

Any that I didn't kill that night.

Day 127 – Against My Orders

I have taken to wandering, unsure of what to do for now.

It was on this morning that I learned that my warning had been in vain.

I had thought that with the note I left in the ashes of Jeuno, it would be known that I was serious.

Don't follow me.

But they did not listen.

I was found by Ludo and Selim. They say they have been search the whole month for any sign of me and were only able to find me by following the scent of Orc blood that was littered across me.

They begged me to come back, or at least allow them to stay with me.

But Maje and I both knew that that was a bad idea.

I explained it to them, profusely, and I ultimately I simply mounted my Chocobo and left them.

I'm not to be trusted.

They could have been hallucinations for all I know, but I doubt it.

They say that the entirety of the populus had been safely moved to Altepa, very quickly. Wolfgang had lost most of his respect from the people, and now they answered only to Cid.

I couldn't say I was surprised in the least. Arrogance made Wolfgang impragmatic; ingenuity made Cid the logical choice to follow.

They say that there is currently a system being built to bring water from the underground streams that created Korroloka. I'm happy for them. Cid will be able to see to it that a stronghold is made, if no one else can.

Especially with the strength of the Gigases by their side.

Apparently they made record time by the Gigases offering to pull giant chariots of sort. They were simply able to jog for an hour, pulling a cart together in groups of two to three, take a break, and continue. They said that it only took three days to make it into the desert.

For now, I'm just fleeing. I see a fire in the distance; I'm in the Valkurm Dunes. I hear some tamborines, or something.

I can only pray that nothing comes of this.

But by Altana, I'm scared of myself at this point, because I'm hungry. That type of hungry.

And Crim, the little part of him in me, is hungry too.

Day 128 – Nice Hair

It was a nomadic group that's been surviving as their own little gypsy circle.

They say that some of them came from Norg, and others had been trying to get back to the Far East when Norg was fleeing, so they ended up on the same ships inwards.

They had heard that the situation here was diffusing, and so it was the more logical choice for survival. I can't say that I fault them.

For now, I'm going to stick with them for a few days because we're both heading North. I suppose that it may be time for me to investigate the icy prisons.

There is a particular female there, and it seems like I just attract all the characters. She's wearing lots of yellow garments and has this long red hair that absolutely radiates a perpetual desire for mating. She immediately came over to find out more about me.

Apparently, she's had her share of adventures, too. I told her a little bit about my last hundred thirty days or so. I've become more cold, more stoic, more icy, I suppose. I felt like there wasn't much to say. But she had a lot to say, and I had nothing better to do than listen. There was an old man with an eye patch eyeing me speculatively throughout, but she went over to talk to him and seemed to assure him that I was safe.

Which is funny, because I'm really not.

But still. She's alright. She's kind of cute, too. That's always good.

But still, nothing will come of that. My heart, if such a thing exists, is in Aht Urhgan. And it shall stay there, I hope.

I hope.

They watch me as I write in this book, not understanding much about me and my albino bird. We're stopped for now, probably for some food.

I don't eat very much anymore, or drink. I know what I want.

It's not very safe for these people, but I have no strong emotional attachment to them. Meh.

Day 130 – Maybe She’s a Lion

Her name is Lion. I suppose it's fitting, really; she's got the mane to match the name. I wonder if it's a nickname.

We've been traveling back northwards now. They say that they make rounds to and fro, not staying in one place too long for fear that if they do, the Turned will find them.

I remain mostly silent. It's really not the Turned they have to worry about. It's rare to see a group larger than a cluster of them now.

But the people fear them, all the same. I suppose they see how badly the population was devastated. When I was staying in Delkfutt I estimated less than two thousand people had made it there. Jeuno, by itself, had housed no fewer than five thousand people. Windurst's population seemed the most stable. The Humes? The Elvaans?

Only Altana knows. I heard talk that San d'Oria had fallen, for the most part and was decimated; there were rumors, however, that there may yet be a considerable population that had taken to their catacombs and mysteriously disappeared. I had also heard that a decent portion of Bastok's people may, in fact, have fled before the whole thing even began. To where? Who knows.

The main land, while not safe, is no longer as deadly as it was in the first few weeks where it was suicide to leave safety.

While we moved, and we moved slowly, mind you, northwards, I spoke of such things with Lion because she liked to talk so much and because, maybe, I could offer them the insight needed to settle down somewhere safe. I've learned enough though to know now that people just don't seem to listen to the good advice. Myself included.

Maje's laughing at that one. How true, he muses, but it's a flaw that's shared among even Demons.

And it will probably be their downfall.

She's very interested in me because I'm new; she said so herself. She keeps asking questions, but I offer up very little.

I don't want to get too attached to anyone, ever again.

Day 132 – Animal I Have Become

It was late two days ago when she had said it.

"There's somethin' different about you; I just can't figure out what. Somethin' inside of you."

I gave a shrug, but I knew that she was right.

I should mention, I suppose, that we had an Elvaan Clergyman with us. That will come to importance in a few more paragraphs.

It was on the night between the hundred and thirtieth and the hundred and thirty-first day that it happened. I settled down to sleep, curled up with my diary.

And that was when it happened.

Recap

I opened my eyes, and I stood up.

They were all asleep around me, except for the one person keeping watch around the fire. I walked over to him. "Long night," he said, making small talk.

I gave a small laugh. "Don't worry, your shift's over," I found myself saying. It just... it was my mouth, but not my words. I began to realize what was going on as he stood up and turned, thanking me, to walk off... only to find that a moment later that I was swinging my golden scimitar clean through his neck. His body simply fell to the ground, crumbling in a heap. I tried to stop moving. I couldn't.

I wanted to toss myself into the fire and end it all, but I could not bring myself to.

No one else had woken up yet. That was good.

It was with the arts of black magic--the kind I had not performed in a while now--that I ensured that none would get away. A circumference of flames rose up around our campsite. They started to wake up now.

There were a total of fourteen people left alive.

The younger they were, the easier they were to kill. It was the old man that gave me the most trouble. And, of course, how could I kill Lion? That dear, precious, sweet object of lust. No, she'd make it out alive... for the first part of the ordeal.

It was myself verse three young adults for a few moments, and I very quickly demolished them. That was before the old man, Gilgamesh of Norg, could realize what was going on. It's not like he could have stopped me.

Eleven left now, and I let loose to the urges to feed and my left arm went to its familiar flayer styled, organic weapon of terror. Two more met my tentacles. One had jumped and perished in the flames.

Eight now, and at that point, I grabbed one and fed on him. Seven.

The next three were quickly taken care of by my breathing fire, the trick I learned from the Mamools.

Five now, these were real warriors. Three and Gilgamesh, with my dear Lion trying to fight but being told to run. It was with utmost pleasure that I sparred with the old man and his two wakizashi. Unfortunately for him, you simply cannot destroy a creature that is so damned and unfair to fight against, I'd imagine.

The next two I simply fed on, keeping them alive long enough to watch the other get eaten.

And then there was one. My dear, sweet, little Lion.

She tried to fight, but she simply wasn't able to. The heat was getting to her, the trauma of watching so many others be barely able to even land a blow to me... people just weren't used to the dirty tactics of fighting like a demon, I suppose.

I could feel Crim inside of me. I could feel him taking over, and I knew this was him. Maje had lost the urge to do this to people.

I grabbed her and slapped her across the face when she struggled. Twice. The tears started welling up from the stinging. She was fragile. More fragile than she thought.

I ripped off that ridiculous excuse for a blouse. It shredded in a single tear. She tried to pull free again and this time I forced her to the ground. Next came her skirt and that awful headband.

She screamed an awful lot. It was a bloody mess. Absolutely terrible how stained my shalwar had gotten in the whole process. But by the end of it, I got her to just take it.

She was barely a hollow husk when I finally left her, naked, beaten, and thoroughly abused, there.

The Realm of the Living

I woke up, gasping for air.

I looked to my left.

There was no fire. There were no scorch-marks on the ground.

The man was still watching the fire.

My body was covered in sweat.

I moved my hand. It was still me.

He's coming back...

Maje was worried.

I was, too.

There was one other person awake, staring at me. The Elvaan priest.

"I know... I've seen it before..."

His words, scarcely more than a whisper.

"There are ways..."

He was clutching a miniature statue of Altana that hung on his chest from a platinum chain.

"Child, I can save you."

Could it be so simple?

I stared at him in mild shock for a moment.

Do it.

It was Maje. There was something in how he said it. Some half pause, some sort of wavering in it.

I stared at the priest.

"Tell me, Child, what is your name?" he said, slowly approaching. Trying to be fatherly.

I was scared of this priest, and I wasn't sure why.

"My name is Legion, for we are many..."

I laughed softly at my own joke, but I saw that he was aghast.

"There are so many inside of me..."

Do it.

It was Maje's voice again, and this time I understood.

"We can send them back to whence they belong," he said, sitting in front of me.

I was about to beg him to.

But I looked at my hands, and I wasn't sure why at first.

If Maje left, if my soul could be restored... then I would no longer be beyond human. Or below.

I would be human again.

And that meant that I could not save the world.

I stood up.

"I can't, sir."

Do it.

And I began to walk away. I turned back to him.

"I've got to end this all, alone. When this is all over... when it's safe to go out at night, travel alone, when the world is safe again and Jeuno is restored... tell them that they'll find my body in The North. It's time to finish the fight."

Do it!

Maje was screaming inside my head now.

DO IT!

But it was the sort of screams that someone screams when there's one bullet left in the Hellfire and all but two chambers have been tested and we're just waiting to see if the brains fall onto the table or not.

I refuse to put him, or any of the others, through that.

They can die with me. In peace.

Once more, I left, and I didn't look back. Into the night, I set out with my white chocobo.

And in my head, I felt Maje crying tears with emotions he never felt before.

Day 135 – The Taming of the Shrewd

In The Land of Twilight

It became a game of cat and mouse now.

I could tell that Ludo and Selim were still tracking me.

This time, they had chocobos, too. They were catching up quickly, too, because I have to stop. I have to write. I have to fight the demon inside of me.

It's a slow journey North, full of soul searching. Full of trying to regain myself.

Full of pain. Full of suffering. Full of ambition. Full of desire to end.

Full of hatred.

I'm so full of hatred. I'm not even sure if that's Crim now. Is it just me? Is it just me hating the world?

That didn't matter much.

What mattered was that by the time they were catching up, I was in the Ranguemont Pass.

I could hear their voices echoing from the start of the tunnels.

Have you ever formed a plan in an instant?

There were dead bodies everywhere. Absolutely everywhere. It was a slaughterhouse here.

They were still looking for me. They were marching through piles of dead bodies to try and catch up to me. To try and save me from myself.

They wanted me back. They wanted to save me.

I found myself... angry.

Not at them. I finally understood why I was angry.

I was angry because I have become a monster. I have become so far less than human that I let my soul be taken.

I grew angry, and because of that, Crim grew strong, because Crim was feasting on my negativity. I felt everything go a little hazy for a moment and I felt the struggle for my body begin once again.
Not this time, you son of a bitch.

I was clutching my golden blade.

Not this time.

I felt my hand turn tentacular, and the fun began.

Trapped Inside My Self

A moment later, I was inside myself again.

He was everywhere. I could see his face everywhere. I could see fragments of his body crawling to piece themselves together. I could see bits of flesh forming the body of a demon. A crimson demon.

I felt Maje next to me. He was weak, and I was strong.

"It is good that two killers such as we can fight together."

I grinned as I said it and I handed him my sword. My soul, I suppose. There was something about handing him that that... it was more than an act inside my mind. It was as though I was giving him the keys to my soul, trusting him with a weapon.

My left arm burst into the tentacles just as Crim finally formed. The fight began.

There were many of him, and there were two of us, but one must realize that many of the many of him were still very much souls that hated him.

Souls that knew I was just fighting the good fight.

I watched as the main embodiment of Crim tried to command the lesser ones to attack us, and they simply froze up.

And so, the two of us, began to approach him as he realized that I was finally taking over in full this time.

Imagine, if you will, becoming the universe. Imagine that you're suddenly everywhere, everything... everyone... every particle of existence.

Crim turned, and I was there. He moved, and I was next to him. He was, and I was like a shadow. I was everywhere. I was everything. I was him. Finally he understood that, and I understood that.

In here, I was everything, and everything was me.

And I was inside him, on a physical level almost. We did not need to land a blow. His gut suddenly exploded, and I was crawling out of it. And then out from inside of him, I laughed.

"It's time you learned who's the master here."

And I shall spare the details, for you already know how I kill and how I steal souls. Just know that this time, I broke him. I broke his sentience. His will. His spirit. Everything he had, except for his memories and his knowledge. Those, I kept.

Once and for all, the Crimson One was dead. Or so I had thought.

Under The Moon

For when I had opened my eyes next, I realized that everything was different. It was the light that I had first realized. It was all wrong.

Colors seemed to be extreme, as though everything were black and white before this. I could see in the dark terribly well. My senses were all extremely retuned and sensitive. I wasn't sure I understood it.

But I heard their footsteps approaching.

In a moment, I had a plan.

Have you ever had a plan from nowhere? A perfect plan?

I saw a body not too unlike my own. A young man.

I dragged it to the center of the room. I put my sack on it. I left everything except one last journal and a quill. My chocobo, mind you, had been left outside Ranguemont. I didn't want it to freeze to death. It would run away sooner or later.

"I'm sorry..." I breathed, and I took my golden scimitar and wrapped the dead boy's hands around it. I pulled it through his stomach, spilling the stuff of guts to the floor.

I let out a shrill scream.

"You can die with me!"

I immediately heard them start to run.

I lit the body in a blaze that I knew would strip it down beyond the bones in just a little over half a minute.

I calmly walked away.

Now, finally, I was free.

Day 142 – For The Bad of the Good

He explained everything to me after we fled.

I can see from what we learned from The Crimson One... and I understand. You, the races of Altana, are connected.

That was how the conversation began.

I had taken refuge in an ancient structure that was in Beaucedine. I had never been here before, but Maje knew it well.

There were many dead trees; I was burning wood from them.

Did you know that you all share a connection? I had not; I was not so important to be privileged with such knowledge.

"No," I said aloud. "I had no clue."

It makes sense, though; I should have realized when the samurai had told you about your parents. You seem to be in tune with the souls by way of the dead.

"Do I really now?"

There was a long pause. I could feel Maje thinking. It was curious.

And all the while, I could not help but stare in wonder at the world. I knew that there was almost no light besides the small fire I started in this structure, yet I could see perfectly.

"Maje, what about that? Why are my eyes wrong?"

Wrong? Child, they were wrong before, and now they are alright. Did your people not know that we see the world different?

"Well, I think we're the only human and demon that ever really struck up conversation," I said, leaning back and then just laying down on the stone floor.

Such is true. How are your other senses?

"Very sensitive. Painfully so. The snow almost blinded me, and the wind is giving me quite the headache."

It should pass, I suppose. You're simply not used to it. I do so wonder... I started the path that allowed you to transform yourself into the eastern Flayer...

He need not continue.

I experimented. With my left arm, I normally performed my tentacle trick.

But there was something telling me that that wasn't all now, and that Maje was right.

Let us see it.

I glanced at my right hand.

Shall I help you the first time?

"Please," I said. I wasn't exactly sure how to test this. Before, I simply... did it.

I felt my hand burning up and watched as the skin grew much harder. It began to turn red.

"Curious..." I said.

I had claws.

I could not wait for this fun, particularly as this occurred all the way up through my arm.

It almost ripped my shirt. I was becoming naturally muscular before; now my arm wasn't even proportionately muscular in this form. But mostly, the spines up my arm, I liked those. I liked them a lot.

It was like I was naturally wearing battle armor.

I liked this.

I liked it a lot.

"One last gift from Crim, eh?" I asked.

I would say so.

I relaxed my arm and willed it to turn normal. It would be a few more transformations until I could do it as quickly and naturally as my left arm, but I sensed great potential. Great potential indeed.

"It's going to be interesting from here on out," I said.

I would say so. We should take some time to teach you the rest of the abilities you may have inherited.

"Oh? There's more?" I inquired.

We demons have the ability to make a pact with another demon, and such our soul is shared. You know this; you and I, we have a pact, too. However, the five races, they all seem to have this bond, without a pact. I wonder if you, a mix of man and demon now... I wonder if you can see what we see.

"And what is that?"

We can see life and energy and souls. And with a pact, we can see... everything about that person. Such is how you and I share the same mind, now. You can feel what I feel; I can feel what you feel. We can share thoughts. If we so duly desired, our souls, we could become one.

"But we don't want that," I said.

We do not want that.

And I was curious now.

If it works as such, do you really want to see?

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked.

He laughed. *Before your little stunt, did you not realize what it would do? Your friends, your lover... they will be scarred forever. As they see it, you had been driven to suicide by a demon. Just a small boy, so frail yet so strong, and he fell to the demon.*

I had not realized it, and I did not care at first.

And then I thought about Nashmeira.

How she would react when she was told that I had fallen to my own, charcoal soul.

"Well, shit."

Well, shit. He echoed.

There was not much else to say that night.

Day 149 – Better This Way

Rewiring The Engine to 88MP/h

We're taking a few more days to rest, because we know we can afford it. It was a long road to get here, and it was honestly such a short time.

Five moons. A bit more, really.

Altana, I'm so tired.

So very tired.

It's been a fight, that's for sure.

I've met a lot of people, and I've killed a lot of people.

It was on this day that Maje and I finally decided to face my fears and see if I could see as two demons could see each through each other.

Not the lover, he advises. Not her first.

I had to agree to that; I was scared of what I may see.

What was my greatest fear? That she believed me dead? That she was with someone else?

The Samurai?

Caiyuo, he meant.

The Ninja?

Or maybe Rumaha.

The Hunter, the Knife Master?

Ludo, Selim.

The Mithra? The Woman Ninja? Who shall it be? The Master of Beasts?

Alyria. Marz. Stikle.

The Samurai and the Knife Master, you knew them best.

Such was true.

"Let us see... the Samurai."

I shut my eyes, and the only way I can describe what happened next was that I "willed myself to be neither here nor there."

*Maje says that's pretty accurate.

Across The Universe

Flying. I was flying. By Altana, I was soaring through the air. Down towards the earth, from the clouds, because he was so far. I could see where I was passing through. Flying from the Northlands to the South, to Kuzotz, to the desert region.

I could see the ground, so far below me, in such great detail, and as I began to descend I picked up speed. It was warm. It was amazing, it felt so warm and real on my skin. I missed the warmth.

And then I slowed as I slid through the desert floor and saw the walls of a cave around me, and I was pulled through a labyrinth of stone walls. And then I stopped.

I could see Cai in front of me. He was sitting in a dark corner. I could smell the whiskey on him; there was a bottle of it knocked over to his left.

But he was different. His eyes, while I could see that they were red, it was as though they were glowing. I could feel Maje whispering somewhere far back in the North that that was because he was alive. And in his chest, I saw a beating heart. It was as though I could see the very fabrics of his skin, all moving together as he breathed. It was strange; it was as though I had never seen a body before, and now I was seeing it in such great detail.

He hiccuped and then suddenly started to cry. He placed his head in his hands and just kept shaking his head and sighing.

The tears, they were the color of blood.

I could see as Rumaha walked over to him and sat with him. Ludo was across the room with Selim. When I saw their eyes, I saw the utter despair and torment that I myself had gone through. And then, finally, someone spoke.

"We were too late. Just seconds too late..." Selim kept muttering it.

I felt bad for them. I felt horrible for what I had done. But I knew that it was for the best.

It was Rumaha who seemed to think he understood and, in some way, accepted it.

"I think he knew... there was no way he could ever be saved," he said. "I think all hope was lost when we told him about his parents..."

Cai started crying all over again. He must have felt so guilty. Cai, whom had been with me for more of the journey than anyone else. Cai, whom had never given up hope. Whom had spent so many nights keeping watch when I was hospitalized. Cai, whom could have been, to me, a father.

I was pretty stupid, and pretty selfish.

It was then that I finally saw Alyria. She was a pitiful state. She was also looking like a shattered creature.

"I should have done something, I was his leaderrr," she cried out.

Marz placed a hand on her shoulder and tried to comfort her.

I moved near Caiyuo. He turned to the general area where I was, as though he could almost but not quite sense something.

I placed a hand on his shoulder. His eyes glanced to his shoulder. Panic? Could he feel me? "Don't worry," I said, scarcely harder than a whisper. "I'm better now."

Everyone in the room turned to where my spiritual being was "standing." Someone cried out, "What in the name of Altana--?!"

"Don't worry," I repeated, smiling slightly now, understanding a bit more about all this. "It's better that it happened this way."

Day 152 – Planning Ahead

We've been, shall we say, training and planning.

We figure that the easiest way to perform this next part is to infiltrate. Espionage. Assassination.

It almost made me giddy inside.

And so we've been working on slowly practicing walking, talking, and living like a demon. Exploring the customs, their powers, and the differences between demon and human.

If all would go well, I would be able to impersonate Crim personally.

According to Maje, whom has been kindly sifting through his memories and knowledge, Crim was one of the thirteen head demons in charge of this operation.

It's really a good thing that Maje possessed me and not someone else; now that we're friends, I can see that if I had gotten some stupid demon, I would have really committed suicide just to get him out of my skull.

Their methods towards bringing their lord back are a tad bit strange to explain. They will, essentially, be using the link between thirteen higher up demons and the links between those they killed and connect the two. The "friction" between the demon and human souls, it is said, should cause a sort of reaction that would rip through a small area and allow The Shadow Lord, as they call him, to be brought forth.

It's all very fascinating, to be honest.

Our plan?

I will kill the Demons and break them on the spot, not giving them time to possess me. Maje will take any information they have on how to perform this process, and he will take their souls this time.

And when all are dead, we will "cause the friction" to occur, and we'll do what I do best.

We'll take, and break, whatever comes out, and end this once and for all.

Jolly good idea, I think.

Day 164: Tears of Scarlet, Tears of Gold

The Final Pages

It seems as though when a diary runs dry, my life always changes anew.

When the first book ran out of pages, I began the trip that almost killed me.

The trip, also, that saved me and an Empire.

When the second book ran dry, I had mastered my fears and I had become a hero, and then I had gone home to lead an army to a war that never happened.

As I finished the third book, I had fallen to my foe, and to myself, and to all the demons inside me--both literally and figuratively. I had taken a chocobo and fled, and I alone had burned Jeuno to the ground. I had taken my home... and I destroyed it.

As this fourth book runs out of pages, I cannot help but look back to all the bad I have done.

I have killed so many people. Beast Men, animals, and those of the five races. I have killed so many people, so many souls, and I cannot regret each one at this point. There is simply too much that has changed. I have no room for regret.

I have taken a demon, and made him my own.

I share my body with a demon, now emphatically and now as a close confidante. A close friend. A sage in my own soul. And that same demon, he has come to see me much the same way. It is almost as if I had befriended The Runt.

I, just a boy, am so naive that I befriended beastmen and demons. And apparently, it was the wisest thing to do.

And yet I have destroyed the bonds that hold my friends together. I can see that while I travel across through the plane that only demons and spirits may see in.

How blessed I am to have claimed a demon into my very soul, this time under my subjugation! To be able to see as they see--literally, figuratively--has been such an amazing thing. The potential I behold...

It is a gift that I wish I could share, in some ways, but a gift that I know should not.

Maje says that the only reason I can probably even stand the journey between the two realms is because I have been so tainted. Tainted. Because we both know that no matter my disposition, the truth is that my soul has been beaten and raped in so many ways.

I have seen the darkness and horrors of this world, in so many ways. I have lived them.

I feel as though that this was all necessary. That this was meant to be.

I'm tired, and so is Maje. We know, though, that this is the last neck of our journey.

We've discussed a return plan for me, but we never could finish the conversation. I think in our hearts we both know that where we're going, there is no return.

I have become a husk. A husk in the same sense that I had left Lion in that nightmare. A husk. Like a husk from some discarded millioncorn. Like a discarded, bloody, bleeding, naked woman.

That image will haunt me as long as I am left alive, because sometimes I close my eyes and I see someone that is not Lion there.

Someone that I love.

I have, from time to time, checked up on all the others, but only once had I looked at her.

They are finally planning a war effort. Half the Immortals have sailed South, realizing that the situation had become much more manageable. Knowing that resources in the desert are too scarce to support a thousand, and hungry for blood; they had been warmed up for war.

The others... they had taken my "body" to Jeuno. They had summoned for Nashmeira.

Would you believe that I felt it? That a few days ago, I had felt it all before she even read a letter. I had felt her joy when she had been told that there was an important visitor from The West to see her. And then the pain. I had felt the pain so strongly that I'm still not sure if she had whisked my spirit to her for comfort.

A letter delivered, of all people, by a man named Wolfgang. A man who had disdained me in every way.

I suppose he had tried to fulfill our promise.

"If I ever fall to what I face, I want you to kill me and bring my body back to Al Zabi."

My body had begun to shake and cry as I saw Wolfgang walk through the doors, sullen, in ceremonial armor with a box, to speak to Nashmeira.

Funeral For A Friend, Love Lies Bleeding; Scarlet and Gold

"What word from The West?" she had asked him. She hadn't realized yet as he had walked through the doors.

He was silent for a moment. Wolfgang was a man that was too proud to lose composure, and it seemed as though it was finally time.

"The Western campaign has made considerable leaps and bounds thanks to the supplied forces of The Empire."

She was behind the curtains that she had to stay behind.

"It is good to hear that we could aid your lands as ours had been aided."

He nodded.

He sighed and seemed to want to walk around in circles, to dodge the point forever, but he would not. "It is with great regret, however, that I must request something from you, Empress..."

"What does The West require?" she asked. I could feel the curiosity in her voice.

He bit his lip. "The West requires nothing... however... I have an... invitation for you; from Cid, the leader of our peoples."

He held up a mahogany box.

An attendant had taken it to her, and she opened it.

I felt it then. I felt everything. I felt the color fade from her. I felt the scream before it happened.

"I'm so sorry to have to tell you this, Empress. Sectumsempra has fallen. We think it is only right that we not bury what we found of him before you may say goodbye."

I heard the scream. I felt, in that instant, what happens when a heart breaks. I heard her start screaming. I heard everything. I heard her shriek through down to my soul. I felt the soldiers that had grabbed Wolfgang and dragged him out of the room, and I had felt the chambermaids that had rushed in to comfort her.

I tried to speak. I tried to scream out "I'm here! I'm safe! I'm alive!" But I could not. I knew that no matter what happened, I would be dead; why should she see be comforted, only to find me dead in a another moon's time?

I stood there and cried, in a world that I could not cross through. I felt a claw on my shoulder.

I turned. It was Maje.

"It's better this way..."

He ushered me to turn around, and we went back to our physical world.

"Never have I seen so much pain..." I heard him say, and he brought me back.

Six days after that I had been pulled back into that realm in Jeuno to watch my own funeral. It was a beautiful affair. Truly beautiful. She was dressed all in black. Everyone was crying. Everyone had something to say during the eulogy. Everyone was saying such good about me. And it was there, that Nashmeira had confirmed to the world something that had finally given me a reason to try and survive.

She had said that she had been carrying my child.

I had watched as everyone had cried. It was there that I had almost seemed to become corporeal in front of them as I watched them cry.

It was then that I had seen something so powerful that blew my mind.

I began to see bits of their souls as they cried. The tears themselves had colors now.

Those not part of my team, they had cried tears of black; tears of black, Maje explained, for the hope that they had now lost.

My team? Scarlet tears, for the blood that had been spilled. The blood that we spilled together. The blood we bled for each other. The bonds of blood we shared. The bonds of life and death.

And Nashmeira... she cried tears of gold, for her heart, above all else, had been pure.

It was then that I too had cried with them, for I knew that all hope for my life was lost. I knew that I had hurt people in ways that would never be repaired.

And so we cried. We cried. We cried.

We cried so many tears.

Tears of scarlet, tears of gold.

Kaleidoscopic Memories

The final entries of Sectumsempra.

Day 191 – Tundra Diving

It has been a long, cold month, in so many ways.

But we're ready now.

At a whim, my body can be one of so many things. Maje and I have learned much from the shattered soul of Crim.

So much we have learned.

I do not know if I will ever get to write again. I doubt that I will ever see warm lands again.

I intend on finishing this fight.

Tomorrow, Maje and I begin the march to what may be our finest bloodbath yet.

Day 193 – Plotting Demise

We have decided to take a break for now and finish the trek inside tomorrow. We have debated marching straight in, proclaiming that I--under the guise of Crim for now--have fled captivity and have returned. Our other plan...

Well. That doesn't matter, it probably won't work.

If waltzing in seems like a bad idea, I'll infiltrate by nightfall and do this whole operation in secret.

The operation is simple: kill and shatter the soul of all the demons that are leading parts in this operation. If I shatter them on entry, I should be able to avoid possession.

What we have gathered is that there are twelve demons left.

Once I kill them all and gain their knowledge, and Maje parses their knowledge, we'll figure out the intricacies of how the resurrection process works.

I know I'm being redundant, but it's because I feel like if I write it enough, I'll hold to it.

I'm going to demolish their Lord as we resurrect him, unless we think of something better, and end this nonsense.

We have to.

No one else will.

Day 198 – The First Step

Infiltration is complete.

I sit on a throne now. The throne of a demon that went by the name *Shakula'methu*. A demon that I know closely by the name of *Crim*.

He has attendants, did you know?

There was someone sitting on the throne when I had walked in; they threw themselves off in fear. Apparently, until some proof of his death was recovered, there would only be a demon acting in his position; not actually in his position.

I would say that I was wearing a disguise, but my skin has essentially become his skin. I am as close to a perfect replica as can be.

I even included some new scars. Some new wounds that had to be treated. Some new muscles.

It's a little bit strange just how much control I've attained over my appearance. It seems like I can do a great many things to myself now, if it's within an "acceptable range" of the form I'm looking to achieve.

I'm fooling all my servants, and for now, that's good enough.

I'll settle in. They keep bringing me mutton and wine.

This could actually be a fairly good life. Kill some people, eat, drink, and have some servants attend to me.

In a joking matter, I write that of course.

One of the next things I saw disgusted the hell out of me.

After I had finished eating, some of my servants disappeared for a few minutes and returned with something I did not expect.

Two things, actually. One was a suit of battle armor, as a gift for my return. It would have gone to the demon acting in my position if I did not return soon and he took my place.

The second...

A group of slaves. Tied, shackled. Naked, of course.

Those hollow eyes I've seen too many times before.

Some women, some men. Most very young. Some were probably even younger than me.

They quivered as they saw me.

Apparently, this was my "usual choice" of people.

As they were released, and I sat on my throne, they one by one came up to me and began to touch me. Some stroked me. Some latched onto my arms and placed my hands on their breasts.

One of them reached down between my legs.

I was actually curious ever since I had taken this form...

But I digress; she placed her head there next and did things that I would have never even thought about doing with Nashmeira. They were all scared.

What could I do without blowing my cover?

So I went along with it, and ended up in a massive orgy with them by the end of it.

The servants, at least, left me be to my own privacy after some time.

They took the slaves away after I was done. There was more mutton and wine, and I retired to my inner quarters.

They left one slave, an elvaan woman, and she's passed out on a rug made from the skin of a tiger. There are guards outside my door, attendants to my every need.

And my need now is privacy, and so I can write now.

I had to transform my arm back to its humanoid form to do this; this is a risk, but it's one I'm willing to take. I feel as though if I don't finish these chronicles, I will lose my mind before I can see it through.

Day 199 – Reflection

It has almost been two hundred days since my journey began.

Imagine that?

I'm almost seventeen.

I had plans some time back of what I would actually do with my seventeenth birthday. I had hoped this would all be over by now.

I awoke in a similar manner to the after dinner activities last night.

Maje had no idea about these. I wondered if it was only reserved for the elite few, or if maybe Crim had a particular personal enjoyment for them.

The elvaan woman seemed almost confused as I dismissed her while she woke me up.

How am I to stay in character and keep to myself?

Am I to lose myself to continue our mission?

I know not.

So for now, I think I'll just try and do it as little as possible until I decide.

I can always tell any who ask that I don't need any distractions; that wheels are about to be set in motion now to change the fate of our species.

It is still morning yet, and I have plans for today.

Many plans.

Day 200 – Counsel of Elders

Today, I sat witness to a council of demons.

I was greeted and felt as though they were relieved. The plans that they had, well, planned for could now once more smoothly go into motion.

It was confirmation, at least, that the memories we extracted from Crim were not fabricated.

That in itself was more than a small comfort.

But the following question placed me on precarious waters:

"How had one such as you been captured? How had one such as you freed yourself?"

It was a question that we were preparing for, Maje and I, but one that still chilled us to our bones. This would be the ultimate factor as to see if we had any shot at succeeding. If we could convince them of our tale, then we were sure that we would be able to get close enough to them to slaughter them; one at a time.

Oh, such waters we must cross...

"Sectumsempra; a boy, a demon," we began. "This, even warlords such as we knew not."

There was a murmur of agreement. At least it seemed as though we had the vernacular down.

"Sectumsemptra, a boy, a demon; worse than me, worse than you, was his soul so shattered," I continued, stretching my arms out wide. "His speed, unmatched; his fury, like lard in a fire. Never have I seen such a foe. A master of beasts, a master of daggers with him; it took the three of them, and I was taken in. There was fire," I said, and I held up my hand. There were healing burns. "And there was pain," I said, holding up my arm to show new scars that were not there before. "And I faked death; such is easy for us. As they brought me out to ashes make me, I slaughtered two of them and fled."

"It has taken me some moons. I had to hide. I had to feast, but now, I have returned."

There was actually an applause.

Day 201 – Close Calls

I'm glad that I enjoy mutton.

I wonder who actually does the cooking.

I suppose that I must reintegrate into this society first before I can go around killing them.

There is a Mithra in my room this time.

I spent some time mingling with another demon that's involved in this. A black demon by the name of Kana'Vulu.

"It is good that killers such as we could once more cross paths in life before paths in death," he began as we walked out of our council.

I suppose that the whole "It is good that killers such as we" bit is the official greeting.

"Such is good," I had replied, walking back towards my quarters.

"It had been feared that we would have to harvest another tree for our forest; there are not so many people left that we can put so many souls into another, less demon."

"Such is good that I had lived," I replied.

"Such is good."

"There are few so talented to kill so many as you. Your soul feels fuller than ever before with the torment of Altana's children."

It was a sort of chilling comment. I had never factored in that perhaps they would judge my soul verse Crim's. I should have realized that when I had learned that I could almost see what a soul was.

But then I realized that I had Crim's soul, and so many more.

"A torrent more," I replied. "Many more have met their end by me as I was gone. Many souls have I shattered."

Kana'Vulu laughed.

"Such is to be expected from you. Mayhaps tomorrow we should celebrate your return."

"Mayhaps so."

I dread what that means.

Day 203 – Filth

Celebrating my return meant torturing live captives and raping them.

Tonight, I contemplated suicide.

I am a horror now; I have become what I hunt.

As I sat in my room, human in form except for one clawed hand, I wondered how much it would hurt if I took those claws and ripped my own throat out.

Whatever pain it would be, simply put, would not be enough.

And yet it was once more Maje who stopped me.

If you enjoyed it, I would let you kill yourself. But you have not, and you know as I know that we must masquerade for now.

There was a knocking on my door, and I went to open it, forgetting I was still human in form.

The carcass of that demon has been removed from my room. I suppose the process has been sped up; I had claimed he had immediately tried to kill me, and now everyone thinks there was just an assassination attempt on my life.

I have more guards now around me, and some slaves in my room.

The upper ranks are now unsettled; we now suppose that maybe me being captured in the first place was someone in our ranks defecting and trying to demolish our plan from the inside out.

Oh, if only they knew how right they are.

Day 209 – Curiousness

Two more demons have been killed, and this time I have had absolutely nothing to do with them. I am curious to know more.

I do not oft get time to write now, for I must have at least a single human hand to do so. With security so much tighter and with a constant parade of slaves around me to be used as human shielding if need be, I don't get much time alone.

Currently, I am back in my chambers and my slaves are asleep. They tire easily, although this body may just simply make it so that it's more that I simply *don't* tire as easily.

I can sense inside of the slaves that they are puzzled that I have become a gentler master.

If only, if only, they could know how much I hate this whole ordeal.

But on to business.

Maje and I have decided to put our plan into action.

Tomorrow evening, one of the other twelve will die.

Day 211 – Forgotten Days

Today, I woke up and realized something.

I turned seventeen yesterday.

Funny how that works, I suppose. Maje and I were too busy to even think about that.

We had laid out a trap. There are several parts of the Vahzl castle that are barely traversed.

When I had killed the demon that had seen me human I had taken and broken his damned soul on the spot. Maje had at first questioned this.

Yesterday morning, I stared into a glossy wall--we don't have mirrors, but there's this really glossy wall that I use as one--and let myself relax back into my human form.

Hey Maje, I had thought, do you feel what I feel? Physically?

Such do I not.

Lucky.

And I promptly willed my soul to take me back into a damned, demon form. Except this time, I didn't turn into Crim; I had taken on the body of demon that I had killed.

He was a relatively unknown, generic, unimportant demon. There must have been fifty of him walking around.

Oh child; how your ways have changed.

"I know," I said aloud, testing to see if my voice had taken on a different guttural tone. It had. "Besides the whole squid bit, though, I seem to be only able to go demon."

The Crimson One and myself must have given you enough of us for you to be as us.

I shrugged.

"Probably," I said.

With that, I left the room without a word and walked down the steps of my spire.

My plan was simple. Pit them against each other.

After a few minutes I had been climbing up the tower where another higher demon resided; this one, Jag Mae.

Jag Mae is a demon that neither I nor Crim ever really concerned himself with.

I introduced myself as a messenger of Kana'Vulu to the guards, to his chamber servants, and to everyone else I saw.

He had allowed me entrance to say my message.

"Kana'Vulu has sent me to warn of danger amongst the ranks," I had said to him. "Two amongst the ranks have betrayed us, though I know not who."

"What else has your master sent to say?"

I almost smiled.

"He wishes you to flee with him, for he believes you to be just to the cause."

There was a very stiff silence.

"It would be good to flee and kill the traitors."

"Such it would," I replied. "Kana'Vulu wishes to leave now. He will be leaving through the Southern wing. Pack lightly, speed is of the essence."

As I left, I could but hear Maje in the back of my mind.

The tongues of demons were thought to be cunning; you, my friend, place shame upon me.

You do what you can.

An hour later, I had heard footsteps approaching the Southern Wing; an area that is often scarce. There were no demons in sight, and in a shadow I hid as the Crimson one.

He had approached, slowly, cautiously.

I had crept out of the shadow slowly, as though I was afraid to startle him--to be fair, I had been--and slowly said, "Brethren Jag Mae, it is not safe, hurry!"

And he crept forward.

And that was the last mistake he ever had time to make.

Jag Mae shrieked inside of me until Maje and I silenced him forever.
There was a moment of pure rapture as I fed on him and learned his secrets, but his mind is for Maje to figure out.
And such was the previous evening.
Kana'Vulu is being tortured in the dungeons.
And so there are ten demons left to kill.
I have my plans for Kana'Vulu. For now, there are nine that which I must focus on.
I suppose the suspicion will be on myself soon. I come back, and this madness begins.
The moment I lose the element of surprise and the cloak and dagger methods fail, I will be killed; and while I can kill many demons, I will surely fall to a castle's worth of their finest.
Tonight, I aim to kill two more in the midst of this confusion; and this time, I shall not hide under the guise of a demon body.
If I am to keep my cover, I'll need them to be targeting someone else. A human boy assassin would be a fine target for them to look for.

Day 212 – Crazy Nights

At approximately half past nine in the evening yesterday I grit my teeth as I sliced my arm and flailed it around wildly to send my blood everywhere. I then proceeded to punch my window open, release a howl, and as my guards began to barge in I sent my bed flying into the door.

"An assassin!" I howled, and as my guards forced through the door I punched threw the window again, shattering what was left of it. All my guards had time to see was my demon self clutching its arm and gasping before I yelled to them, "Send warning! He is on the roof below!"

One of the guards ran to alert others, one forced himself through.

"We must stop him!" I called out, and I promptly tossed myself out the paneless window to the roof two floors below.

Oh, thank Altana that these demon bodies are *unnaturally* strong. That would have broken my limbs, but their exoskeleton makes them so easy to manage.

The guard followed suit.

The roof area we were on connected the North East Towers (where I resided) and the South West Towers.

I had a window of opportunity, I had figured, of around sixty seconds from the time my guard and I began to run to play this out properly.

I smirked. It was so terribly annoying to be running around in this demon body, and while it had its uses I still preferred my squishy flesh.

And so, as we ran, I suddenly shuddered and before my guard's eyes I suddenly turned back into my barely seventeen year old body of fleshy goodness.

With my golden sapara, the gift I took from Aht Urhgan.

My guard let out a howl of confusion and shock.

It was that moment of confusion that allowed me to continue the plan. I spun around to lunge at him and jabbed my sapara just barely into his throat.

We couldn't have him talking, but he needed to be alive long enough to be part of a crowd chasing me so that I could be known to be the assassin.

Oh, the lengths that Maje and I go to plan these excursions...

But I digress. Being in my own flesh for so long yesterday has left me in such an amazing mood, I'm so very excited.

I went back to running. I had gotten used to the heavier, stronger physique of Crim and being able to move so swiftly was an amazing thing.

It is good for you to be back in this body to fight, we shall need you to stay deft in your own skin for the final parts.

It was at this point that other demons began to jump onto the roof and join the chase.

When I saw five of them, I spun around and began to fight.

These were soldiers, and damn fine ones.

But even demons are scared when your arm turns into a batch of tentacles and rips a comrade's jaw clean off.

I left two of them alive, and heavily damaged, but still able to talk. I needed someone to verify my story that a certain human was seeking me to kill.

And I needed to move quick enough so that any who saw that Crim wasn't chasing me were killed.

I could have none going against my story.

The South West towers were within sight. The air was cold and it scraped my lungs, but I had to keep running.

The hard part was in that I could not jump through a window this time; I had to scale the three floors of the tower and kill or seriously maim everyone on the way.

Nothing new, to be honest.

But with now a tower alerted that there was a crazy hume assassin on the loose, I would have a hell of a lot of demons on my tail.

I would have to jump down a floor and then begin to work my way up.

No problem, I told myself. I didn't decimate the Mamools on luck alone.

I jumped off the roof once more and busted through the doors to the tower, and the slaughter began.

I traumatized those poor bastards from the start. Who would think that a human boy could spit fire?

Who could expect a hand of tentacles that ripped out eyeballs?

Who could stop a creature that was so far pumped with what Cid once called "adrenaline" because he knew if he stopped moving for but a moment, he was dead?

It was beautiful, the way the heads flew from their shoulders. This sword, this work of art was a wonderful thing.

And not to mention my magic.

The last time I had lit something on fire was to fake my death. Apparently, it was like riding a Chocobo; you just don't forget.

My goal wasn't to kill them all quickly and cleanly; it was to absolutely massacre them and leave some to live to tell the story.

And so some were left alive.

I scaled the tower, and it took me almost twenty minutes to get through them all. It would have taken much longer if I actually killed everyone in their; but since I was only taking the stairs, I was able to skimp out by blocking the doorways with piles of burning corpses.

The two guards at the top of the stairs, in the Arch Demon's inner chambers, were a fair bit of trouble. They were much more trained.

So it became a fight of three versus me as I broke through the door and the Arch Demon was forced into joining the fighting.

I don't even know what this one's name was. I didn't care to remember.

But alas.

It was almost an exact mirror of the Mamool Sage Lord's death. The Arch Demon ran at me with a spear.

I buckled my knees and dropped to the ground. He was tall, I was small, and the demon behind me was then impaled.

There was a howl of pain as I rolled to the side and hacked the Arch Demon's leg off as he tried to pull his spear out of his comrade.

What I did not expect was for his guard, with his dying breath, to buck away and try and ram himself into me as the other guard grabbed me.

It was my turn to shriek in pain and everything started to go black.

And then there was the screaming in my head.

YOU MUST NOT FALL!

It was Maje.

I gasped for air and forced myself not to fall into trauma.

It was hard to stay conscious, and every nerve I had was on fire.

If you pass out, you'll die!

I knew this to be true.

I gasped for air as the Arch Demon dragged himself towards us, my sword in his hand, ready to finish me. The guard in front of me was dead, the guard behind me dying, and I was going to join them.

Do you want her tears to be for nothing? Do you want to die before the world is saved?

I did the only thing I could think of: I let my right arm go demon and I snapped the spear.

The Arch Demon in front of me was temporarily stunned by what he had just seen.

I pushed the demon that impaled me off of me, and I fell to the ground with the other guard on top of me.

Maje what do I do!? I'm dying! I screamed in my head. I couldn't stop the panic; everything kept pulsing black around me.

I suppose it was Maje who used my body next, because I knew I didn't know what to do.

He took my arm and pushed me up so that I was on my side, the demon stuck behind me growing still.

And then he reached into the hole in my torso where the spear was and pulled it out.

FLAYER NOW!

And I could think of nothing but follow his order.

How could I have forgotten that that Flayer body rapidly regenerates?

Maje says it was simple panic.

All I know is that I fed on that Arch Demon, and that I left his head on the table. The next thing I had remembered was that I was human again, running down the tower, with no wound bothering me. There was a new series of bodies, most of them with their stomachs ripped open. I felt sick; I had, apparently, been feeding on them.

Unfortunately, you'll probably be addicted to feeding on creatures again. We had to feed on many of them.

It's a small price to pay, Maje.

And we fled to the second tower on our list for the evening.

I fed often as I ran up the next tower, and I felt better by the time I reached the top. It was the same as the previous tower, except this time I played safer: I burned the two head guards to death before they could even tell what was going on.

I paused before forcing the door open. The hairs on the back of my neck were standing up.

The next demon, Unhaku, was waiting for me to break down that door. I could tell.

I took a few steps back and burned the door down with but a few mutterings of black magic.

He came at me through the flames. Unhaku was not known for his intelligence; only his ravishing bloodlust.

What I had not anticipated was that a second of the higher demons came right after him. This one was another crimson demon; his name was Generon. I had to fight two of them at the same time.

Meh.

Even now that I was feeling taxed and getting tired, I was still much faster than these two.

Generon had a sickle. Unhaku had a great axe.

Now what do those two things have in common?

They're really big.

There's a particular thing about staircases; they're not known for being very spacious, you see.

It took them each around three swings to realize that they would only keep scraping the walls, and that they would have to ditch the weapons and fight close range. They would have to bite and claw at me to kill me, and I was fully prepared for it. I was small, and I was nimble; it was unfair, really.

Unhaku grabbed a torch off the wall. It was a mistake on his part.

Wood likes to burn.

With but a single muttering, I caused the flame to erupt tenfold and burned his right hand.

Generon was lunging at me, and I was jumping backwards down the stairs.

He lunged at me and managed to grab my shirt. I let him pull me forward as I thrust my sapara forward into his chest.

But he was strong; that didn't stop him. It did slow him down, however, and he let me go.

Unhaku swiped at me in pain as the fire died out on his hand.

These two, I would play with until more came to see the tale.

I wrapped my arm around Generon's neck and, as though I was one of those famous Buffalo Riders--or now that I think about it, when I rode that Behemoth--I used the fact that he was twice my size to swing around and wrap my legs around him.

He was flailing to get me off of him, and I reached over his chest and grabbed my sapara's handle, pulling it upwards. It sliced up through his stomach and pulled it out as he fell forward.

I scrambled up and turned just in time to parry Unhaku's next swipe at me. My goal now was to isolate him back into his room. With Generon down--dead or not, I'm not sure--I would be able to play with Unhaku as long as I could.

Good, child. Maje was telling me. Reassuring me that I was doing a lot better this time than last. I could hear hurried footsteps now of demons coming to try and kill me.

Unhaku was strong, but that doesn't matter if you can't hit your target.

He swung at me again and my left arm did its thing. The tentacles wrapped around his arm and constricted tightly. He let out a howl and his arm finally gave out and snapped.

Unhaku realized that he wouldn't be walking out alive at that point, and I saw a flicker of panic in his eyes for what may have been the first time in his life.

Two demons charged through the demolished doorway and directly at me. I grinned as I pulled Unhaku forward, still gripping his arm with my tentacle, and used him as a shield as I thrust my sword clean up through his throat and scrambling his brain in the process.

I pulled the sword out and I ran to the nearest window.

Just one step left...

As I ran through the window and tumbling downwards I immediately began to change back to my demon form. The exoskeleton **had** to take this hit.

And it took it nicely, and it was dark enough that they never saw that I turned back into Crim.

I was slower, and I was tired, but I had to do this final part. I had to be injured.

I tossed myself down to the snowy ground outside the castle; I was back in Xarcabard. I took my sword, gritted my teeth, and stabbed my left arm clean through the elbow.

I had to make it seem like I was a victim, too.

I tossed the sword into a cave, and I let myself bleed out, throwing myself into the snow. Someone would find me, and that would be that.

All I had to do was wait.

And that had been my previous evening.

I was found sometime the next morning, unconscious from blood loss.

To say that I am under heavy guard would be a slight under-exaggeration.

Maje's been sifting through all the information I absorbed last night. He says he's starting to understand the process that which the resurrection requires.

So I'm just sitting here, munching on some Mutton, as the few remaining higher up demons try and figure out what in the name of Promathia to do.

It doesn't really matter.

Maje and I think we may need some time to recover. We are fortunate that we ended up speeding up the process. There are eight demons left, and I assume that they all are probably paranoid now.

Well, not paranoid; in this case, there really is someone out to kill them.

Supposedly, a meeting will take place some time tonight amongst us to discuss how to rectify this situation. So far as they know, only four are dead and Kana'Vulu is the traitor.

Day 215 – Accidentally Easy

Sometimes, it all comes together by accident.

And sometimes, it all comes together in a single moment because *everything just went wrong*. The latter had finally happened. All our planning, honestly, was pretty much for naught.

A group of four of the remaining demons in the upper echelon had come down to the medical ward with the intent of killing me.

They had sent the guards and shamans and slaves away. That was the first clue.

There were four of them, and I was laying on a table just waiting to see what would happen. Of course I had my suspicions. I had learned it was best to take the approach that everyone was trying to kill you. You could barely even trust yourself.

There were no words exchanged. There was an awkward silence, and then one demon approached me. I stayed still; I could not let any emotion betray me at this point.

"Bifron, has he who works against us been killed?" I asked the approaching demon.

Bifron said nothing.

Guess that means us.

Such it does, I would imagine.

He stood before me for just a moment, looking me over, as though he were inspecting me.

"Your arm has met steel," he noted, picking it up to see.

"Such it has."

And then the next part happened very quickly.

He twisted my arm so quickly and so powerfully that it just broke on the spot. As I let out a howl of pain, two of the others ran to restrain me.

Bifrons took a step backwards and pulled a sword off his back.

"We have no room for weakness."

I glanced at my right hand. It was near the lower torso of one of the other demons.

"Such is good," I muttered. I gritted my teeth.

And then there was the usual explosion of flesh that happens as my arm does its thing and suddenly it's got tentacles like those poor blue eastern bastards.

They were all momentarily stunned and in that moment I pulled the demon to my right forward by his... extremities, we shall say.

With him releasing my right arm and the other demon jumped back in pure shock as he shrieked in pain I had thrust my hand forward and gripped Bifron's arm as he went to stab me.

"Such is very good," I said.

My face was grinning and I couldn't stop it.

Don't lose it... I heard Maje warning me.

But now, back in this sort of position, looking into the eyes of a prey... I lost it.

Everything went back to the bloodlust that I felt in the East.

My body molded right back to its human self as I smiled maniacally. And then the giggling began as I constricted his arm so tightly that it snapped.

The other three demons were genuinely scared and backing away as I began to cackle like a lunatic.

"How the tables turn!" I shrieked giddily, a human in their tongue, and with that I took the sword out of his now limp hand as he stood there, too shocked to do anything.

I butchered him in front of the others, whom were too petrified with fear to do a single thing.

I claimed their souls and filed them away, broken and shattered, for Maje to look at. I lit their bodies on fire. It took four hours for the ensuing blaze to die out; the whole medical ward fell to that.

Day 218 – The Hunt

It has become entirely a hunt now.

All the rage I have felt, all the suffering I have had, all of it has finally accumulated. All the friends I've lost, all the lives I've ended, all the horrors that I've had to endure have all led up to this one final stretch.

Espionage be damned. It's much quicker this way. How many remain? Bifrons and three comrades died; Crim had fallen so long ago; Unhaku and Generon fell together; Jag Mae and that other one fell too easily.

And Kana'Vulu is in the dungeons below. Alive? Dead? Who knows?

Nine of the thirteen are definitely dead.

I see campfires in the distance. I can only assume that either the demons are fleeing, or other forces are finally coming to join the fight.

It is no matter, though. I intend on burning this castle down, just as I had razed Jeuno. It is such a shame that so many broken and battered slaves will perish when I do that.

Yet such is life.

Tonight, the hunt shall recommence. By morning, who knows how many will be dead?

Day 219 – Convulsions and Revelations

My head is exploding.

Here I stand at the top of the world Altana has made, and I am faced with a grim truth: these next minutes are the last minutes I shall live.

And there is a grimmer truth ahead of me: where I go, Altana be damned, I must walk alone.

It had been the death of Kana'Vulu that had let me see the final pieces fall together. A true comprehension of life and of the life after life.

He had known all along that this would happen. Kana'Vulu had known that Crim would fall in Jeuno. He had known that Maje would first corrupt me. He had known everything. He had known that I would be the one to "stop" their plans.

He had known *everything*, and he had placed all the pieces onto the chess board.

He had known that there would be a boy in Jeuno who murdered his best friend, who would fall in and be so broken, trying to dehumanize himself to cope with what he had done. He had known, and as I walked down the stairs to the dungeon, body after body falling as demon after demon had come to try and stop me, and he had laughed because he knew.

He knew it was his ending, and that he was the last one.

Kana'Vulu, the demon whom had set this all in motion. A prophet amongst the demons, whom knew to never speak of this talent because if he did, when I killed another demon I would learn of it and stop in horror.

I was just a pawn all along. I had no *option*, I was just following the path that the cosmos had already set forth.

Yet then why, why can't I just brush off those I killed?

The plan that we had extracted from Crim's mind wouldn't work. Kana'Vulu knew it.

And that is where I came to play: a battered, broken soul that would house all the demons at once and start the wheels in motion for the real tearing between the worlds.

And now I write once more in my own blood, as I lay here on the floor of the dungeons, trying to steel myself to plunge my scimitar into my heart next time, rather than just take my remaining limbs off one by one so I become useless and dead at all costs, just as I had hacked off my left arm.

Yet there's a laughing in the back of my head. A taunting.

Would my suicide be the final step to open this portal, then?

WHAT THE HELL AM I SUPPOSED TO DO!?

Day 220 – Kaleidoscopic Memories

He had no say in the matter.

As we plunged our golden scimitar into our stomach and twisted, he was enveloped in a blackness and taken to the highest point of the castle: to the Throne Room of the Shadow Lord.

It had already been setup for this moment.

There was a flaming circle surrounding him, and we were laying in the center of it, gasping for air from the noble suicide he tried to perform.

Such was good.

And it was such at that moment that the left arm that he had hacked off mere moments ago had appeared before us, flaming as Jeuno flamed.

We watched through his eyes as the flesh around the arm began to unravel and the muscles began to unwind and tendrils of black shot from the floor and into the floating flesh, bone, and muscle.

We could but simply watch from his eyes.

The ground beneath us shook as a great pillar of darkness overtook us for a few moments, and when it left the arm was no more.

Instead, we saw what could have been a giant fetus that was trying to survive from the wound. A terrible, terribly creation before us, a sack of fowl flesh on the ground. Something that should not be. And every second, it changed into something darker and with more and more of a form.

I heard the boy mutter something.

"I'm taking you to hell with me."

With us! I tried to cry, With us!

For he was weak, and demons keep their promises, and in these moments I would not leave him.

We would die and go to hell together, then.

I felt our arm became, for the last time, that of a flayer. Through his eyes I saw his arm was different this time; the glow around it was no longer blue; it was a dark purple.

And I began to realize.

We had channeled so many lives that we were no longer a single organism. We had become so many that his body could no longer sustain so many.

The sack of fowl flesh was beginning to resemble the Lord that I had once worshiped, but no longer. Perhaps as I had corrupted the boy, the boy had purified me.

He dragged our dying body to the sack of flesh and tried to wrap his tentacles around its neck, but he was too weak now. He roped them into the creations mouth and tried to suffocate it.

We were almost dead.

I forced our eyes to stare at his arm for but a moment before I understood that we still had one last hope.

The boy had gathered so many souls that his body could no longer sustain them all.

I watched as he shook, trying so hard to clutch at the last tendrils of life.

I became aware of his entirety now, for he was dying and his mind was going dim.

He was bleeding everywhere. I was he. His blood was my blood.

His flesh was my flesh.

The arm that made the Shadow Lord was my flesh.

I was already outside of him, I had realized: all I must do is claim my part.

And in the same way that I had claimed Sectumsempra, in a moment more I was inside the creation that was the Shadow Lord, assaulting his mind and soul.

But this would not be enough, I knew now; each second he grew stronger, and soon he would be strong enough to cast me dead.

While I still could I grabbed the sword from Sectumsempra's gut and as the boy had done mere minutes ago I sliced the arm off the body I was in.

And as I did so, I cast myself out of this wicked body and into the arm, and much like the Shadow Lord I received a body from the flesh of Sectumsempra.

I saw his dimming eyes staring at me as he bled out and the Shadow Lord, almost with form now, grabbed the boy and bit his neck in the same way that the boy and I fed on others to sustain ourselves.

The golden scimitar from the East, a gift from his lover, in my hands, I took this final fight for my own.

And then as I saw the body of Sectumsempra tremble and he screamed I realized that the Lord was not going to absorb him: he was going to invade him, for he had proven to be a most useful vessel.

Yet I was a factor that was never meant to be.

I watched as Sectumsempra's body had sewn itself back together before my eyes and the Lord's body had begun to grow weaker looking once more; he was preparing Sectumsempra's body to be his newest vessel.

And I watched as his eyes flickered red for a moment as the Lord continued to transfuse with him.

And there was another factor that the Lord had not thought of: that Sectumsempra was stronger than he knew.

I watched as his eyes had become their piercing blue once more.

"Thanks for the fixing," he said, and laughed as he suddenly brought his Soulflayer Arm striking upwards and wrapped it around the Lord's neck, this time succeeding.

I rushed forth and stabbed the Lord through the torso.

And finally, we could fight as comrades in two bodies instead of one.

The arm of a Flayer, the sword of a lover, and the will to end this madness once and for all against a foe that could bring the world down to ruin.

For a one armed human boy that was on the verge of death a few seconds ago, Sectumsempra fought admirably. I could see in his eyes that he had a plan.

He was moving incredibly fast; he knew that he could not win by strength alone and that he would have to win some other way.

As the Lord grabbed him once more, a clawed hand reaching through his chest, I realized what he was going to do as his arm once more reached for the Lord's neck and raveled its way into his mouth.

In one clean strike I had struck away the arm that was reaching through Sectumsempra's chest and watched as the boy's tentacles suddenly shot out of my Lord's eyes and then retreated, and then shattered through his skull.

Sectumsempra blinked, and this time his eyes were red. He blinked again, and then they were blue.

The Lord's body fell to the floor, anticlimactically.

Sectumsempra reached for his chest, smiling very faintly. Softly, like the boy he used to be before this all.

"Don't fail me, Maje."

And then he blinked once more and his eyes were crimson as he threw himself at me, ready to kill me.

And I understood his plan: he knew that he would fall as Crim had fallen, and he knew that his body had a limit, and he would simply take over me next as he fell to the Lord's will.

Before I could fathom all this, he had grabbed his sword and had already begun to have at me. We fought, once comrades, now comrades still, and he was going to overtake me.

As his sword ripped through my heart, I stuck my claws into his chest and tore into his own.

And we collapsed to the floor together.

As we lay there, both dying, I could not help but turn to him.

*His eyes, no longer red, were gazing at me and his mouth tried to form words.
The only true friend I ever had, I knew what we would say, and I said it with him to ease his
passing.*

"It is fortunate..." He coughed, blood coming out of his mouth.

"It is fortunate that killers such as we can die in peace."

And with that, Sectumsempra closed his eyes.

*I hear the shells of cannons assaulting the castle. It will take some time for me to finally succumb
to death; but it is knocking at my door, and I must answer. They shall find our bodies.*

*I may only hope that the words I write in the final pages of his diary can do him justice. Yet I feel
myself collapsing, showing me the images of our journey together.*

It was a journey worth living, to be sure.

I was with him and saw how he learned to stop worrying and aim for the head.

I was there as he flung himself into the thousand shades of blue.

I was fighting in his head as he fled on a pale chocobo his lover gave him.

I cried as he cried and we saw tears of scarlet, tears of gold.

*And now, as his soul rests with mine, still connected, I travel with him down the route of death as
it flashes; all of our kaleidoscopic memories, so many colors flashing from all the souls we have seen,
repeating before our soul.*

And all of this is simply what happened when Jeuno fell, and a human boy had avenged it.

May Altana have mercy on his soul, because no one else ever did.

Finale

The Allied Forces had recovered his body four days later.

He had died, a sad smile on his face, finally at peace.

After some dispute, his body was taken in the East. Having no family to be buried, he was buried in Imperial Burial Grounds as royalty is.

Our child shows the same generosity, the same compassion for others, as his father.

He was a hero, a lover, and a compassionate human being until the very end of his life. Even in death, he had willingly sacrificed his life. Even in death, he had befriended a demon. He died as he lived: a noble, caring, pure soul; even being tainted, his soul was so undeniably pure.

The world may never see another Sectumsempra cross its path; maybe, though, as we read how he was, we may all stop and try and live a little more as he did.

Though my heart will never stop bleeding for him, at least I can sleep at night knowing that by raising our child to be the same, selfless soul that he was, ever compassionate and willing to look beyond differences, that I may in some small way help even out the debt that the world owes him.

And always remember, no matter how young, frail, broken, battered, small, insignificant you may ever think yourself to be, you too can change the world for the better as Sectumsempra did.

May Altana raise his soul amongst the celestial sky for all in the future to always see, and may he finally find peace and love amongst the stars forever. I know without a shadow of doubt that he shall always be loved amongst the races of Vana'Diel; I have no doubts that Altana, too, shall embrace him, despite what he thought in his final hours.