

## SPOILER WARNING: FFXIV SHADOWBRINGERS

This is my first ever fanfic and is set during the final events of Shadowbringers storyline. As a 'what if' piece, this is a departure from the actual storyline, but still contains a section of script from the game (which I did not write), as well as themes and ideas which are generated over the course of the game's plot.

If you play Final Fantasy XIV or ever intend to (and I recommend it most heartily), and have not yet completed Shadowbringers, please set this aside and return once you have done so.

This story will still be here, waiting for you.

## THE RETURNING LIGHT

"Urianger, wait."

He pauses, looking back at me with his head tilted to one side. Y'shtola passes him with a glance, but says nothing. I wait for Thancred and Ryne to slip out of earshot, watching the three of them join the twins outside the towering doors of the Capitol building. They're nervous. They're right to be nervous. Urianger opens his mouth to speak, but I cut him off.

"The auracite. Better let me carry it."

For a moment I think he's going to refuse – he's far more competent with aetherial magic than I am after all – but he slips it free of its pouch and drops it neatly into my outstretched hand. His face is a tapestry of curiosity, and I know I have to give him a reason or this all falls apart right here.

"He's expecting me; invited me in. He wants me alive, but he probably doesn't care one way or the other about the rest of you. I have the best chance of getting close to him."

Urianger nods. "'Tis a sound reason. I trust thou wilt take care, however?"

"Of course." I force myself to smile, my first betrayal complete. "Let's join the others."

~oOo~

"This really is unacceptable. I gave you very specific instructions."

"Emet-Selch..." Alphinaud tenses as the Ascian appears in front of us, and tendrils of purple-black smoke fade around him like clinging fingertips.

"My invitation was for an abomination, ripe with the power to bring about the world's annihilation.

Not this half-broken... thing. Whatever am I to do with you?" He glances towards the others, not bothering with eye contact. "And I see you insist on keeping the same familiar company. Are you so lost without them?"

"It is not we who are lost without the familiar." Y'shtola tells him, voice clear even in the cavernous room that rises above us like a mausoleum. "Not content with remaking an entire city, you aim to fill it with the reconstituted souls of the dead."

"I may have gotten a *little* carried away, in my attention to detail. Added a few unnecessary flourishes... Weeell, there's no point trying to hide it. Yes. Once the rejoining of worlds is complete, Zodiark will regain His full strength, and shatter His prison." His golden eyes glitter with zealous fervour, and he raises his arms like a priest before his flock. "Then we shall offer up the Source's remaining inhabitants in sacrifice, that we might resurrect our brethren who died to bring Zodiark into existence."

The others say nothing; I can feel them tense, ready for what they think comes next.

Emet-Selch breaks from his momentary reverie, and looks down at us. "But what was it that *you* came here to do, exactly?"

"We came for the Exarch."

"Well you can't have him. The wisdom that man guards may open up new worlds of possibilities. He has unlocked the secrets of travel across the rift – and through time as well, it would seem. Quite an accomplishment for one of his 'incomplete' nature. I must explore the limits of his capabilities, and harness that power for the Ardor."

"Even if I can offer you something better?" I take a step forwards, away from the others.

"Oh? And what would that be?"

Another step. "Me."

"What are you *doing*?" Thancred hisses from behind me.

Emet-Selch laughs; a brightly cheerful noise so incongruous to the pounding of my heart against my ribs that I flinch, but I force my feet to keep moving.

"Lovely though you are, and as capable, you can't give me what he can. To get what I want from *you*, all I have to do is wait."

I shake my head, now halfway across the gap between the Scions and their enemy. "I can give you something better."

"And what is that, pray?" He looks at me, mouth quirked in the start of a smile that might be amusement or curiosity.

"I can show you how to find the Exarch before he became powerful, and let you make him your creature from the start. I have the light of four wardens, with which I can undo the Oracle's error and restart the flood. And I have this."

I take the white auracite out of my pocket and hold it out. Emet-Selch's jaw clenches.

"Call it a gift of good faith."

Behind me, the Scions are caught between letting me play out what they must surely hope is a trick, and their panicked realisation of what I truly mean to do.

Alisaie starts towards me, the sound of her boots stuttering on the floor is immediately recognisable,

even without turning. "You can't mean to do this! You're the Warrior of Light! You... you *save* people!"

I don't turn around to look at them – seeing their expressions now might break my resolve. Instead, I fix myself on Emet-Selch, using his face as an anchor, still closing the distance between us. "Yes. I save people. I save them, over and over and over again, and it's never enough. How many wars have we prevented? How many disasters? In our world and in this one – and then the next day it's *another* disaster. We aren't enough. But Amaurot... this place was a utopia, and we can help bring it back."

"By killing countless millions?" Aphinaud's voice is pale with shock.

"Their lives are measured in days, and will be full of grief. He says they're nothing, that *we're* nothing... and I don't completely disagree. How much more powerful than us were the Amaurotians? How much more have *we* proven ourselves to be than the people we've saved? Those who stumble blindly through the world, howling like animals and scratching at the surface of a pallid existence? But out there even now are the remain of the sundered; the last true civilisation. We can bring them back to themselves, save them, bring back *paradise*. One last world to save, one last disaster to overturn."

"How can you be sure he's not playing you?" Ryne asks. She's on the edge of tears, I can hear it. "He's done it before."

I reach Emet-Selch's side. He raises an eyebrow, as if to validate Ryne's question, and I find I don't need my anchor any more. This is no frivolous decision, lightly made. This is a choice, to kill one population or to deny life to another. The Scions will die too if this goes my way, and my heart will break. I turn back to them, meet their eyes one by one, then settle on Urianger. My friend. The first one I betrayed, who only a day ago knelt in the sunlight reflecting from the crystal tower to ask forgiveness for his own deception.

"I can't. I can't be sure. But I've been played by my friends as well as my enemies before. This place – it's a shadow, a memory. It's not real. But there are lessons here. Truths. There are things here that even he doesn't know about. Things like Hythlodeus."

The Ascian doesn't move, not even a flicker, but I feel the cold shock roll off him in a wave. I wonder if the others feel it too. I lift a hand towards him, still looking at the Scions from the other side of the room.

"He has raised empires by his will alone. He has directed the destruction of entire worlds, fought impossible odds, and all to do *exactly what we would have done in his place*. To save his world. He still can save it. He can make us more than the nothing we've become - all we have to do is stand aside and let him work."

"But he's a monster!" I don't even see who says it. The light pulses behind my eyes and I stifle a noise that might sound like indecision. I can't see, but I will not buckle. I will not.

"He is a *god*. As you would know if you'd paid attention. The Amaurotians could create by thought alone, and he was one of their most powerful. He pulled Y'Shtola from the lifestream unharmed and fully clothed just by looking for the colour of her soul and snapping his fingers – one soul among a number so high it's beyond my capacity to imagine! He's done more than we can fathom, lost more than we could ever bear to. It's amazing he's still standing, let alone fighting."

Emet-Selch bristles, and his voice is suddenly venomous. "You offer me *pity*?"

I turn to look at him, face creased, vision still swimming. "You have no need of pity – mine or anyone's. I offer my admiration. To have walked so far, carrying so much... I don't know that I could have done it."

Emotions flicker across his aspect like firelight, and I look down, unable to maintain his gaze.

"Don't do this, please. Don't make us fight both of you." Y'shtola whispers.

"I'm sorry, Y'shtola, truly. But *this* is what my heart decrees. However much it hurts, whatever the peril, I will fight for this one last miracle. This is the path I choose."

I turn my back on them for the last time, and drop the auracite into Emet-Selch's waiting hand. His face betrays his surprise, and I realise that both he and they were waiting for this to be a trick. They still are. With no other way to show my honesty, I take a knee.

"I'm with you."

Thancred is in motion before the others; he always was the most ready to believe the worst of people, and he has the greatest reason of all the Scions to hate the Ascians. His running steps are as easy to identify as Alisaie's were; pounding towards me, then a snap of cloth as the footsteps cease, and I know he's in the air, sword raised, ready to bring his own hellfire down on either his betrayer or their new master. I wonder which one it will be.

It's neither. Emet-Selch's fingers twist in a snap. There's a dull crunch as Thancred collides with an energy barrier that now surrounds the two of us, a thud as he hits the floor, somehow managing to roll to his feet, then everything is utterly silent. I glance around, confused. I can see the Scions moving, see the streams of aethereal energy pouring from Y'shtola's hands as she tries to break the barrier, see Urianger trying to talk - gods but I always knew he'd die talking.

"You know I intend to destroy this world and all the others." Emet-Selch crouches next to me, his voice a dark whisper.

"Yes."

"And you know I will kill you if you cross me."

"Yes."

"Well then." He stands. "You've become far more interesting than I expected. Although I must say, it took an interminably long time for you to *finally* see sense. Now get up off the floor. We have a world to end."

~oOo~

Nabaath Areng sits in dust as we step out onto the solidified wave of light that once threatened to roll over this whole world. Now, I've been brought here to make that wave move again. Far below us, the last masterless sin eaters roam thoughtlessly.

"Well?" Emet-Selch stands with his arms folded across his chest, all trace of confusion gone, replaced by his more usual indolent boredom.

I breathe deeply, maybe this world's last free air, then crouch, hands extending to the surface of the frozen flood. It's like touching nothing - I expected a crystalline hardness, something brittle and cold, but I feel nothing except a dull numbness. It takes me a moment to be sure I'm touching it at all. Eyes closed, I let my mind roll back into the echo, seeing Minfilia, hands outstretched. She had the abilities of an Oracle, the support of the Warriors of Darkness. I have a broken soul, tentative control over a power that will consume me if I misstep, and my only companion will in all likelihood stand idly and watch me die if I do so. But still... still. I don't have to fight the flood, I only have to do as I told the Scions: stand aside and let it work. The

light pulses and a coughing spasm wracks my tired body. I spit out white light that tastes like blood and feels like ashes. Another pulse, harder this time. The light pours out of me like vomit, and clings to the top of the wave. With as much strength as I have, I focus my aether, tethering myself to the light. Sweat breaks on my skin, my eyes open and bulge, and I fight against the urge to breathe. My companion watches dispassionately, one lip curled in disgust. I reach for the flood, calling to it, feeling desperately for it as though it were a candle in darkness, and I the match. With dawning horror, I realise that I have the ability, but not the power.

"Help... me..." I manage, forcing the words out between the galvanising spasms of my chest.

"No."

"Please..."

"No. Prove to me that you can do this. Prove you are worthy of my patronage."

I can't. Not alone. I've been in the company of the Scions so long that I didn't remember what true isolation feels like, but here it is. Light begins to pour from my eyes, my fingers, my whole body. But I did not betray my friends only to die at this first test. If he will not help me, I will *take* what I need. I reach for him, not with my hands but with my soul. Light wrapped and monstrous, I reach for him, scraping at his power, and he staggers.

"You *dare*..." he hisses.

But even so little of him as I have taken is enough.

"I dare." My voice is flat. Calm. Full of light.

I feel myself rise above the wave, feel it breaking, sluggish at first and full of somnolence, then regathering all its old strength. As the power of the wardens flows through me and over me, I reach again for the core of the flood with all the tattered brilliance I possess, all the potential of a soul reformed, and unleash the eighth umbral calamity.

~oOo~

We do not stand. There is nothing to stand upon. A world turned to whiteness. Countless lives lost. The first step on a path from which there is no return. We hover in this new emptiness; an abyss of light which I have created. The power of the wardens is gone, and in its place is something else; some strange sense of completion that I don't quite understand. It makes me think of Ardbert.

"Do not ever, ever do that again." Emet-Selch's voice is shaking, although if it's with amusement or anger I can't tell.

I look at him, confused.

"If I want to help you, I will do so. *You* do not choose when I will lend you my strength."

"I... sorry." I'm not even out of breath. I feel stronger than I ever have.

"Hmm. Well then." He shrugs, seeming to let it go.

"What now?"

His face curls into a glittering smile. "Now you go back to the Source and wait for me. When I'm

ready, we move to the next world. The work does not end here.”

I nod, silently grateful for the time that will give me to think.

Emet-Selch shakes his head, an amusement on his features that I don't quite understand. “A true Warrior of Light. Elidibus is going to *love* this.”

Laughing, he opens the passage between worlds, and we step through together, leaving the First in stagnant silence.