

The Village Among the Clouds Chapters 1-3

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A long time ago, when the world was younger than she is today, ages before the Great Kingdoms united, when magic and wonder abounded. This is where my tale takes place. In the north-west third of the old Mist Continent, which was then under the rule of the Kingdom of Burmecia, there the capital city, also known as Burmecia, was located. The armies of nearby Alexandria ruined the once great city, the people were scattered. But, the year after peace was made between the Kingdoms, the people started returning. They rebuilt the city, made it even more majestic than before. But a single building was left untouched throughout the rebuilding: the castle. The once beautiful halls were strewn with rubble; the slender towers were nothing but a memory. The only part of the castle left un-touched from the attack was a single tower, the highest tower in the city. It was the home of the royal family, and the homes of all that were in want. Throughout the disaster and the rebuilding, the cleansing rain fell, as if nothing had changed.

But my story doesn't begin here.

It begins on a plateau, almost a day south of the Great City, and high up on the mountainside. On this plateau was a single house, a modest farm-house, and an acre of fields surrounding it. There lived a family called the Clearwaters, Allen and Cecile with their three children: David, Kendra, and Geoffry. My story begins with Allen working in the field with his oldest son David . . .

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Allen stood up, holding a carrot in each hand. He turned and deposited them in the handcart standing behind him, then he leaned back, and looked up into the cloudy sky. Or rather, he tried to look up. A thick mist was draped over the plateau, but it was just regular, water-mist. Not the cursed mist that had enveloped the entire continent many years ago. It was a nice day out, compared to the cascading rain that usually fell. The mist felt good on a body's skin. Cool, refreshing, almost better than a draft of good, old ale. Almost. He looked around, checking to see where David was, and how he was doing. He jumped when he heard a rustling sound behind him. He spun around, ready to defend himself against one of the savage beasts that sometimes roamed the field. It was rare that they ventured so close to the house, but not unheard of. David stood up, holding another two carrots and a head of cabbage. He tossed them on the cart and bent over again. Allen mentally shook himself. Of course there was nothing wrong, only the largest of beasts had enough gall to come this close, and he'd have heard it long before now. He turned back to the even rows of vegetables and continued pulling carrots from the ground. He was almost at the end of the row, and David was just throwing the last armload of vegetables onto the cart. David was tall, almost six feet. His fur wasn't light gray like his parent's was, but a golden brown that would shine in the rare moments that the sun graced the plateau with her bright rays. His eyes were his most unusual feature; one was the sparkling sky blue of his mother, the other was the emerald green of his father.

Allen straightened his back, stretching from the long hours of stooping work. He reached down with his tail, and continued pulling carrots from the ground.

"Go ahead David, I'll finish up here," David nodded, and taking a giant leap, took off running towards the house. Shaking his head with a laugh at the teen's energy, Allen deposited the last of the vegetables onto the cart and walked around to the front. Putting his fingers to his lips, he whistled shrilly. In the distance a bright scarlet bird came running towards him. Allen waved down the bird, and hitched it to the cart. Mounting the chocobo, he whispered a command into its ear, and they were off. The chocobo bounded across the field, and slowly turned towards the barn.

"Kweh!" The chocobo called out, as the cart hit a small stone. It slowed down as it came close to

the chute on the side of the house. Allen slid off the bird, and unlocked the cart. He lifted the edge, and all the produce on the cart fell down the chute into the basement. Allen un-hitched the chocobo, and guided it towards the barn. This wasn't one of the big farms, like the ones outside the capitol. It had only three buildings: the farmhouse, the barn with its single stall, and a shrine dedicated to the gods on top of the short cliff behind the house. Allen pulled open the barn door with his tail, and led the chocobo into the barn. Maneuvering the large bird into the stall, he closed the door, and reached into a jar next to the door.

"You've been such a good boy lately, that I have a present for you!" Allen withdrew his hand from the jar, holding a gyshal pickle.

"K-K-K-KWEH!" the chocobo called, seeing and smelling it's favorite food. Allen tied the pickle to a string hanging from the roof next to the stall where Mikey could reach it' with a little work. Allen walked out, and closed the door behind him.

Walking slowly over to one of the rain barrels, he looked in. A farmer of about forty looked back out at him. His muzzle was covered with short grayish white fur had a slight downward slope, his eyes, a deep green, had a twinkle, as if he was always smiling. His shoulder length hair was brown, streaked through with silver, and held back by a leather strap. His ears, not on the side of his head like humans were, but protruding straight up through his hair. He was clothed simply, wearing a tan colored shirt, covered by a leather vest. Completing the farmer's garb were loose black pants, cutting off to just above his elevated ankles. He reached into the water, washing the pickle juice off his hand, and brought a handful of water up to his face. Washing thoroughly, he reached over for a towel. He dried off his face, and hung the towel back up in its alcove, away from the rain. He turned, and walked slowly towards the house. Passing the door, he walked around the corner and looked into the kitchen window. Looking back out at him was his mate, Cecile. She too was dressed simply, wearing a dress that had been patched so often that it was almost impossible to tell what color it was originally. Covering the dress was a heavily stained white apron. Her brown hair was carefully braided and tied up in a loose knot in the nape of her neck. Allen spoke quietly,

"I'm going to the shrine for a while,"

"Alright, dinner will be ready in about an hour," Allen smiled and continued walking. He reached a high cliff, and, ignoring the stairs he jumped twelve feet straight up, not even straining himself. He walked the short distance to the shrine. It was a small building, but it was the most carefully crafted building on the farm. It was built from rare red wood that was only found near the upper exit of Gizamaluke's Cavern. The stones that made the floor and most of the walls were cut from the stair in the cliff. Upon entering, Allen dipped his clawed feet into the shallow bowl by the door. Drying them off, he walked across the polished marble floor. He knelt before the altar, and steepled his hands. Allen stayed there, motionless for several minutes. Then, standing slowly up, he took a step backwards. Checking to see if anyone was around, Allen waved his hands, and made a lifting gesture. From what looked like a solid marble floor rose up a huge stone block. Walking to the edge, Allen jumped into the darkness beneath the stone, which floated gently down after him.

Cecile looked out the window, waiting patiently for Allen to come down the narrow stair in the hill coming from the shrine. When he didn't come, she turned away. Reaching for the fur lined pot-holders, she walked across the kitchen. The smell of roasted hare permeated the house. She opened the oven and put the roaster holding the hare on the table, covering it with a towel.

"Geoffry!" she called through the door. "Go up to the shrine and fetch your father. Tell him dinner is ready,"

"Yes Ma," Geoffry answered from the other room. He was heading for the window when his mother's voice again came from the kitchen,

"And don't jump through the window!" Geoffry changed direction in mid-stride and walked out the door. He walked around the corner of the house and jogged to the stairs. He'd tried on many

occasions to jump up the cliff like Father, but he could barely make it any higher than half his own height. Geoffry jogged up the stairs, and entered the shrine. Father was kneeling at the foot of the statue on the altar. The shrine was a small one, just enough room for the whole family to gather in at once. The floor was green marble, polished to the point that one could see one's self reflected in its depths. At one end of the room Father had placed a slab of marble with many strange symbols carved into it. Perched upon the altar was a small statue of Quetszealcoatl, the goddess of the rain and storm. Geoffry was about to dash across the room when Father said quietly, without lifting his head

"Clean your feet," Geoffry dipped his clawed feet into the small bowl by the door, and dried off with a towel. He then walked across the stone floor and knelt beside Father. It was like this every Friday. Father came up here for hours on end and prayed. What about no one knew, for Father didn't even tell Mother things he said to the gods. Father, as if Geoffry wasn't there, continued praying. Finally, he stood up. Geoffry sprang up right behind him.

"Mother said that dinner's ready," Allen reached down and ruffled his son's sandy brown hair.

"I'm sure it is. You go ahead, I'll be right there," Geoffry needing no further encouragement ran out of the shrine, just barely remembering to kneel with respect before exiting. Allen walked out behind him and just barely saw Geoffry jump off the small cliff. Shaking his head, he took off at a run. Just before he reached the edge of the cliff, he jumped straight out. Before tucking into a double flip, Allen saw Geoffry running madly for the house. Allen laughed, and braced for landing. He hit the ground next to the door seconds before Geoffry and walked calmly into the house. He dipped his feet in the crucible next to the door, and was drying them off before Cecile came storming out of the kitchen.

"Allen!" She yelled, looking extremely intimidating. "You know what I think of your acrobatics. It's bad enough the boys do stunts like that, but I caught Kendra trying to do a flip off the cliff yesterday! You're making a horrible impression on the children," Allen looked as pitiful as he could, laying his ears flat, and looking down, his bright green eyes full of mock tears.

"You're right," he said, trying not to laugh on the look on Cecile's face. She was obviously trying to look angry, but the 'poor me' act was weakening her resolve. "You're right," he repeated, "I'm a terrible father,"

"Oh, stop that," she said wielding a wooden spoon like a weapon. "You love showing off. Now come and sit down, the hare's getting cold," Allen dropped the act instantly and, flicking a stubborn drop of water off the tip of his muzzle, he walked after his mate into the kitchen.

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After dinner, the family was sitting in the main room of the house, each doing their own thing. Allen was sitting quietly in a chair facing the hearth, puffing slowly on his pipe, and starrng into the flames. Cecile was sitting next to him, sewing a patch onto David's newly ripped jacket, and watching Kendra roll about on the floor, playing with the leather ball Allen had made for her. David was sitting in the corner, braiding a bull-whip out of the long grass he'd been drying for the last week. Geoffry was watching him braid with rapt attention. It was almost dark when Allen's ears pricked up. Her heard quiet rustling in the field. He stood up and reached for his own bull-whip and motioned for Cecile to keep the children quiet. David, his bull-whip just finished, followed Allen out the door. The pair stalked silently through the cornfield, keeping an eye out for trouble. Allen saw at the end of the row the outline of something crouching, as if getting ready to pounce. Motioning for David to stay where he was, Allen sidestepped into the next row. He ran as fast as he could and still remain silent. Reaching the end of the row, he kept going, only turning around after he was a good three yards away from the field. He turned and snapped his whip forwards, aiming for the front legs of the animal. He saw the whip wrap around the limb, but the next thing he knew, he was lying face down in the dirt. Looking slowly up, he saw dangerously clawed feet inches away from his face. Looking farther up, he saw standing before him a Burmecian Dragon Knight in full

ceremonial dress, and holding a dangerous looking trident. The knight extended a helping hand, and pulled Allen up off the ground.

"I'm looking for the owner of this farm," The knight said in a surprisingly familiar voice.

"Well you've found me Darren. Allen Clearwater at your service,"

"Darren Isthma at yours. Clearwater?!? But I thought "" David came running forwards to see if his father was alright. Upon seeing the Knight, David stopped in his tracks. "Darren Isthma, at your service young master,"

"D-David Clearwater at yours sir knight," David said nervously.

"Come inside Darren," Allen said, starting to walk back to the house. "I'll introduce you to the family," Darren followed Allen, with David close behind.

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Cecile couldn't sit still. She was pacing the room, her tail twitching nervously. It'd been a long time since she'd heard anything from Allen. When she heard the door open, she ran forwards to see what happened. Reaching the entryway, she froze to the spot. Standing there, framed in the doorway behind Allen was a Burmecian Dragon Knight! And she was standing there in her old work dress.

"Darren Isthma, at your service madam," the knight said, taking his hat in his hand, revealing closely cropped silvery blue hair and bowing low.

"Welcome to our humble home sir knight," Cecile said, completely forgetting to curtsy.

"Do you mind if I come in and sit down?" Darren said, leaning a frightening looking trident against the outside wall. "I've been walking all day,"

"Please do," Cecile said, moving aside. "Would sir like something to eat? We don't have anything much, but what we have is yours,"

"Thank you, but no. I've already eaten," Darren hung his hat on a hook near the door, walked into the main room, and sat down in the chair facing the door. Kendra was standing in the middle of the floor starrng at the knight sitting before her; the ball lay forgotten at her feet.

"MAAAAAA! Dere's a man sitting in you chair!"

"Shush Kendra. It's alright, I said he could," Cecile said, picking up the child. "I'm sorry, but we don't get many visitors up here,"

"It's quite alright madam. Who's this little dear?"

"That's our daughter Kendra," Allen said, walking into the room. "She's the youngest. Then there's Geoffry there in the corner," Geoffry, who had been sitting in the corner the whole time, sprang out of the chair.

"And you've already met David and Cecile. So Darren what brings you up here, so far from the city?"

"You know him!" Cecile exclaimed.

"Yes, we were friends when we were little. He enrolled in the academy, while I took over my father's farm,"

"But "" Darren began.

"Chevathke!" Allen said, interrupting Darren

"Allen, what's the matter?" Darren asked, perplexed at the use of such a strong command in the old tongue.

"Che ther matterin ke lina" Allen said in the old tongue,

<I haven't told them>

<But why?> Darren answered, also in the old tongue.

"I must have a word with you in private," Allen said, switching back to common. The two walked out the door, and started talking quickly and quietly in the old tongue. A few minutes later, they came back in. Darren sat down in the chair again, while Allen remained standing.

"Take Kendra to bed Cecile. Geoffry, you too," David was about to follow, but Allen said, without turning, "Sit down David," David turned around, and sat on the floor next to the armchair. Shortly, Cecile came back into the room. Without speaking, she sat down in the other armchair.

"There's something I have to tell you," Allen said in a somber voice. "You see, I'm not the man you think I am.

"There's something I have to tell you," Allen said in a somber voice. "You see, I'm not the man you think I am. I'm not Allen Clearwater,"

"Allen, wh-what're you talking about?" Cecile said, standing up. "Aren't you my Allen?"

"Yes, but I've lied to you for too long. My real name is Allen Wolfsbane," Cecile gasped, and promptly fainted.

"David," Allen said, "go get some water," David nodded and jogged outside. He soon returned, carrying a small pail of water. Allen took a corner of his sleeve, dipped it in the water, and started bathing Cecile's brow. In short order, her eyes fluttered open.

"Allen, is it true?" Cecile asked quietly.

"I'm afraid so," Allen said, in a somber voice. "If it upsets you so much, I can leave the tale for another time."

"No, I need to hear this," she said, sitting up straighter in the chair.

"Alright," Allen began, "I'll start at the beginning ""

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"I've known you for the last twenty years Cecile, and for the last twenty years, almost all I've told you was a lie. I really did grow up on this farm, but my father took ill when I was only eight, and we had to move to the city, because he couldn't work the fields. That's where I met Darren. We went to the same school, and when we were old enough, we enrolled in the Dragon Knight Academy together. By the time I was eighteen, I was at the head of my class. I captured the attention of the Academy's founders, Lady Freya Crescent and Lord Frately Iron-Tail. They took me in, for by now, my parent's couldn't afford to support me as well as my schooling. They adopted me as the son they never had. They trained me, harder than any instructor would. By the time I was twenty, I was the best knight Burmecia had, aside from my mentors. Upon receiving knighthood, I left Burmecia, and traveled the world. Five years later, I had accumulated a large amount of money, and an estate in uptown Burmecia. But like all good things, being the greatest knight in service had its downfalls. I couldn't go out without being mobbed by a huge crowd of fans wanting autographs. I had to disguise myself to keep from being recognized. I found among my possessions my old farm clothes. Thanking the gods that I was a tall youth at fifteen, I put them on, and snuck out the servant's exit. I was wandering the marketplace, thinking about buying Freya, my adoptive mother, something pretty, when I saw the most beautiful thing I've ever laid my eyes on."

At this, Allen clasped hands with his mate. He stared into her deep blue eyes

"I saw you Cecile. I remember it like it was yesterday . . ."

Allen took a deep breath. It felt good to be outside after hiding in the house for so long. It felt even better to be alone, away from the barrage of crowds pushing for an autograph, away from the praise of his parents, away from the reverence of the entire population of Burmecia. He sighed, relishing

the feeling of fresh water streaming down his face. He looked around to see where his wandering feet had taken him. To his surprise, he saw that he'd traversed the width of the city, and was standing in the marketplace. He'd been meaning to buy Lady Freya something ever since he'd forgotten her birthday. Allen was looking at a particularly ornate set of rings when his ears pricked up. Over the sound of the falling rain, and the quiet hubbub of the market, he heard a shopkeeper's voice yelling.

"NO! You can't return it if its off the vine!!!"

Allen, feeling that he might need to give the hapless customer some aid, Allen returned the rings to the stall, and went off to offer assistance. Homing in on the merchant's angry cries, Allen found the stand with little difficulty. It was a food stand, laden with fresh vegetable plants. A sign above the strongbox said in clear black lettering "If you pick it, you pay it!" Also standing near the strongbox there stood a beautiful woman. She had knee length brown hair, streaked through with honey colored strands, woven into a tight braid, and pinned up into a loose knot. She had the lithe body of a shrine dancer, but was clad in a simple green blouse and dress. Her eyes, the bright azure pools of light that they were, were turned down to a small leather pouch clasped tight in one hand, while the other was pawing through it frantically. The pouch appeared to be almost empty, and a small pile of coins was sitting on the counter next to an overly large bag of fresh produce.

"I'm sorry sir, but I appear to be a little short," her voice was like good wine, smooth and clear.

"Well you better grow up quick!" came the shopkeeper's sharp retort. Allen, taking this all in, walked slowly up to the counter.

"Allow me," he said, brushing past the woman, and pulling a 500 gil note out of his breast pocket, he shoveled the pile of coins back into the very shocked woman's pouch.

"Here, let me help you with that," Allen smiled as he picked up the bag of produce. He almost dropped it. Man, that woman could pack! She followed Allen away from the stall silently, obviously forgetting how to speak. Finally, Allen stopped and turned to face her.

"Where am I taking these groceries anyway?" He grinned at the look on her face.

"Why did you do that?" she asked, eyeing Allen strangely.

"I thought that you might need a little help, and I'm not one to leave someone in trouble,"

"Well, at least let me pay you back. My house is down by the theatre," She started walking off at a brisk pace, and Allen was hard pressed to keep up holding the large bag. She stopped and turned around.

"By the way, my name's Cecile," Allen broke into a jog to catch up with Cecile's brisk pace.

"You don't have to pay me," Allen said, a little out of breath, "I was just helping out,"

"Then at least allow me to offer you a meal," Cecile said, turning to look at Allen.

"Now that you mention it, I am a little peckish, and I'm no chef. My name's Allen. Allen . . ." He cast about for inspiration. His eyes fell on a puddle.

"Allen Clearwater,"

"Well, Allen, I hope you like food, because I haven't figured out how to condense my recipes," Allen laughed, and the two walked away among the rain.

Allen smiled as the memory faded away.

"I've kept to that story for over twenty years. The days I spent away from Burmecia were at the farm, but I was fixing it up from years of neglect, not harvesting. I finished only days before we were to receive Master Gizamaluke's blessing. But secretly he re-christened me the day before, under the name Clearwater. So, legally my name is now Allen Clearwater. But I still am known by

my other name in the capitol." All through his story, Cecile and David sat quietly watching Allen. Now they sat there and stared at him, like he was some kind of animal.

"There's one more thing I want to show you," Allen said, finally sitting down and sighing. "David, under my bed there's a loose board. You'll feel a box there. Please bring it to me," David nodded wordlessly, and quietly walked out of the room. A few minutes later, he walked back into the room, his hands empty, and an extremely puzzled look on his face. He held out his hands, as if he was holding a box. Allen reached out and touched the air between David's hands, and a box appeared. Cecile stifled a gasp. Allen tried not to smile at his family's obvious surprise.

"It's covered with wraith skin. Only the owner can make it visible," He opened it slowly, and withdrew three items. The first was an ornately decorated flute. This Allen put aside. The other two items were strange looking coils of bronze. They had little hooks along the outside edges, but the inside was incredibly smooth. Allen pushed up his sleeves and slid the metal bands up onto his forearm.

"Follow me," he said. Allen stood up, followed closely by Darren, who had been silent the whole time. David and Cecile followed silently after. Allen walked around the house and up the stair leading to the shrine, not bothering to expend the energy to jump up. The party entered into the shrine and Allen, not bothering to wash his feet, walked into the main sanctuary. Slowly, Darren, David, and Cecile entered after Allen, having finished washing. Allen waved his hands, and the stone block rose out of the floor. This time both David and Cecile tried not to gasp. Allen jumped down the hole, and called back

"It's safe. Darren, can you help Cecile down?" David jumped down after Allen, while Darren stepped up behind Cecile.

"Forgive me, madam," He said, and scooped her up, and jumped down the hole. By the time he had hit bottom, the stone block had closed back over the hole. Darren put Cecile down, and supported her while she regained her balance. When she had, Darren noticed that it wasn't completely dark. There was a dim glow that appeared to come from the walls themselves. Darren and Cecile heard the quiet click of nails on stone from ahead. Continuing on, they came to a large, circular room. Many torches in sconces on the walls lit the room, the last of which Allen was lighting. Standing in a glass case at the end of the room was a complete set of Dragon Knight armor. It appeared to be black, but upon closer inspection it was a deep violet. Allen was at a cupboard next to the armor case, fiddling with the metal bands on his forearms. He pulled down his sleeves, covering any sign of the bangles. Reaching up his sleeve as if to scratch an itch, Allen flung his hand outward. Darren ducked, as just above his head, four tiny daggers skittered across the stone doorframe. Darren bent to retrieve the daggers from the floor behind him. Allen pushed up his sleeves again and removed the coils, now laden with many daggers on the hooks. He placed them on a shelf in the cupboard, and withdrew the most beautiful weapon that Darren had ever seen. It was a polearm, but not one like Darren's which was a trident. It was almost a full seven feet long, the main pole covered with ornate carvings. At the top, there were, on either side, slender blades, almost a foot long each that made the whole thing look like an elongated axe. The butt end widened to a flat end, and in the center of the butt, there was a large sapphire. Allen gripped the weapon with the firm but loose grip of an experienced fighter. He swung it in several different attack arcs, and practiced different styles of defense before resting the weapon over his shoulder. Cecile, who had been watching the whole thing from over Darren's shoulder, slowly walked forwards. She was almost to Allen when she suddenly fell to her knees, and started shaking. Allen placed his weapon back onto the shelf and knelt at his mate's side. They stay there for an interminable amount of time. Eventually, Cecile sat up, and said;

"Why didn't you tell me?" The tone of her voice wasn't angry, but sad, and it wrenched at Darren's heart.

"I was going to some day," Allen began, still kneeling, but now looking at the polished stone floor.

"I thought that if you knew . . . that you'd love me for being famous, not for being the man that I am," There was an awkward silence, in which David moved over to the cabinet and pretended to examine the armor. But even as his eyes took in its graceful lines, his mind was wrapping around the thoughts given to him. Father? A Dragon Knight? David couldn't believe it, yet the evidence was standing before him.

Cecile, who had been kneeling on the floor next to Allen suddenly stood up. She tore out of the room, and Darren could just see the glistening droplets rolling down her face. He was about to follow, when Allen stood up as well.

"Let her go Darren," Allen's eyes had lost their glitter and were now a dull, tired green, as if he had seen far too much.

"She has a lot to think about."

Cecile ran down the stair, tears streaming un-hindered down her face. She ran into the house, and fell into one of the armchairs near the fire. She sat there, sobbing quietly, for a long time. Slowly, she composed herself and walked into the kitchen. Retrieving some vegetables, she took a knife and started preparing a salad for the next morning. She chopped the cabbage into small, bite size pieces probably smaller than was necessary, and dumped them into a large, glass bowl. She had just started into the tomatoes, when Allen walked in.

"Listen, Cecile," Allen began, "I know you're upset, who wouldn't be. I know that I should have told you sooner, but," Allen looked down and saw a crushed tomato held in Cecile's clenched fist. Allen reached past her and grabbed a bucket full of vegetable scraps.

"I'll be in the barn with Mikey," Allen turned and started walking away.

"GRRRRRAAAHHHHHH!!!" Cecile brought her arm back and threw the tomato pulp at the back of Allen's head. It hit with so much force, that Allen almost fell over onto his face. He wiped the pulp off the back of his head, and dropped it into the bucket. He walked across the yard towards the barn. After lighting the lanterns, Allen closed the door, and placed the bucket in Mikey's stall. The bird squeaked quietly, and started munching on the vegetables.

"You're lucky Mikey," Allen said, stroking the bird's neck, "You don't have to worry about women," Mikey raised his head, and cocked it to one side, as if thinking. He squeaked again and continued eating. Allen walked over to the pile of straw in the corner, and sat down. He leaned back against the bale behind him, and lost himself in thought. He gazed down at his hands, and started fiddling with the ring on his left hand. It was gold, and there were three stones mounted on the band: a garnet, a lapis lazuli, and a topaz. He drifted into sleep remembering that day long ago . . .

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"How do I look?" Allen twisted around, trying to get a good look at his back in the mirror. He was wearing a suit he'd bought just for this occasion. It was a white silk tunic, with a crest depicting two dragons intertwined embroidered on his left breast, and matching white pants. He had a cherry red half cloak, lined with black streaked through with silver, making it look like the clear night sky draped over his right shoulder.

"You look fine," Darren said, clapping Allen on the shoulder. "Although I don't know why you're not wearing your armor. Isn't it like a custom or something?" Darren was wearing his forest green armor, and also had a half cape, a robin's egg blue one, lined with golden silk.

"It probably is," Allen said, adjusting the half cape, "but I just don't feel right wearing armor on such a nice day," Allen went to the window and looked up into the bright blue sky. "I'm glad we decided to hold the ceremony up on this mountain. It's so beautiful," Darren joined Allen at the window, and looked out, admiring the scenery. Allen turned to his friend,

"I would appreciate it if you didn't say anything to Cecile about my rank," Darren looked strangely at Allen,

"Why? I thought she'd love it if she knew your rank!"

"Just humor me," Allen said, turning back to the mirror. He adjusted the cape again, and started pacing. Darren sat down on the windowsill looking totally relaxed.

"How can you be so nervous?" Allen stopped pacing long enough to say,

"How can you can you not be nervous?" Allen resumed his pacing. "When are we supposed to be there anyway?"

"Soon. Now, sit down, have something to eat. And STOP PACING! You're driving me crazy!" Allen obediently sat down and grabbed an apple from the bowl on the table. He sat there, shining it restlessly on his shirt, until Darren reached over and plucked the apple from his grip.

"Stop that, if you shine it any more, you'll shine the skin right off it!" Allen grabbed the apple back, and took a big bite out of it. The entire flavor was lost, due to his already stressed nerves, so the apple tasted like cardboard left in the rain too long. He sat there, staring into space, and was surprised to find that he'd already finished the apple, and was about to take a bite of the core. Allen got back up and walked over to the trash bin beside the door. The core dropped into the bin with a quiet thunk and Allen went back to the bed. He sat down, and started fiddling with his tail

"Ouch!" He looked down to find that he'd tied his tail into a knot. Kira, his sister stuck her head in the door.

"They're ready to start," she said.

"Just a second!" Allen said, frantically trying to un-tie his tail. It felt like he was trying for hours, but it could only have been about a minute. Finally, he got it untied. It looked a little twisted, as if he'd just got out of bed, but it'd have to do. He walked out the door along the hall, and out the door. Upping his speed to a light jog, Allen took off along the lawn of the resort, and saw on an upper plateau the people gathered to witness the joining. He hit the stairs running, and took them three at a time. He jogged down the isle, and skidded to a stop just before the altar.

"Here!" Allen panted, out of breath from his run. He looked up to see the aquatic serpentine form of Master Gizamaluke towering over the assembled people.

"We may begin as soon as Allen catches his breath," the giant lizard grinned. Allen looked over his shoulder and saw Darren just coming over the edge of the stairs, carrying his lance, and panting heavily. He walked down the isle to Allen's side.

"You could've waited, they can't start without you,"

"Stop whining Darren, you need the exercise. Now go, you're the honor guard," Darren nodded, walked back up the isle, and into a small building overlooking the mountainous landscape. Gizamaluke sank a little deeper into the pool, so as to be at eye level.

"Turn around," he whispered to Allen. Allen turned slowly, and saw Cecile stepping out of the cabin. She was beautiful, dressed entirely in white. Her dress was made of the same white silk that Allen's clothes were. She wore a thin, white veil over her face, and a tiara of lavender flowers. Her honey-streaked hair fell loose across her shoulders and down her back. She walked slowly down the isle, holding a bouquet of wildflowers tightly. Darren walked slightly behind and to the right of Cecile; his javelin lay over one shoulder in an escort position. He stopped at the front row of seats, and stood at attention, his javelin stuck blade first into the ground. Cecile stepped up onto the altar, and both she and Allen knelt before the serpentine priest. They rose together, and Allen lifted Cecile's veil. He looked into her blue eyes, was lost in those deep azure pools. Allen just barely noticed that master Gizamaluke had started the ceremony.

"We are gathered here today to witness the joining of these two people. Bring forth the symbols!" At his last words, Kira came forward carrying a silk lined box. She set the box on the altar, and took a place beside Darren.

"You may begin the oaths," Cecile bowed her head, and started reciting from memory the oaths of the joining:

"Dost thou pledge thy love for me?

To love no other personity?

As I profess my love for thee

Forever and eternity?

At this, Allen responded

"I will, if the gods permit me,"

Cecile continued

"Dost thou pledge thy faith to me?

To love my person faithfully?

As I profess my faith to thee?

Forever and eternity.

"I do, if the gods permit me,"

"And dost thou wish for unity?

To spend your life along with me?

To live in peace and prosperity?

Forever and eternity,"

"I do, if the gods permit me,"

And together they replied

"Forever and eternity,"

Allen reached for the rings sitting on a pedestal between him and Cecile. He put one on, and reached for Cecile's outstretched hand.

"May the three gems of these rings symbolize the three oaths that we have taken today," As he said these words, he slipped the ring over Cecile's middle finger. Gizamaluke rose up to his full height, towering over the gathered.

"With the exchanging of the rings, the joining is made final. If anyone opposes this union, speak now," he paused, allowing for anyone to speak. "That there are no objections, I pronounce this pair joined and protected under the jurisdiction of the Gods! They shall be together for all eternity, in this life and the next," The crowd erupted in cheers. Scooping Cecile up in his arms, Allen planted a kiss on her cheek. He carried her down the isle, and put her down.

"You're walking down those stairs," he said in a mockingly serious voice. She playfully shoved him, kilted up her dress, and started picking her way carefully down the stairs to the reception.

<< END OF CHAPTER 1 >>

Mikey was bent over Allen's prone form, licking the tomato residue off the back of his head. The chocobo jumped back slightly as Allen ran his hand through his hair. Mikey bent over and looked Allen square in the eye.

"KWEH?" Allen opened one eye, and closed it again. A second later, both eyes shot open, and he jumped to his feet. He looked around, surprised to find himself in the barn.

"What? Barn? How'd I . . . oh," he sat back down, remembering the previous night's events.

(What will Cecile do now?) He thought to himself. (What'll I do now?)

"Should I risk going inside?" Allen asked the scarlet bird. Mikey looked strangely at Allen, as if trying to understand him. He then trotted over to his now empty vegetable bucket.

"No, I haven't got anything for you," Allen said, getting up and walking to the door. "I'll be back later," He pushed open the doors and slid them closed quietly behind him. He walked slowly to the house, not noticing the light rain falling on his face. He lost himself, thinking about what he'd say. He was mildly surprised when he found himself standing just outside the kitchen door. He put his back onto the doorframe, and slid slowly down. His head thunked against the door, as he looked up at the roof. He tried to work up the courage to open the door, but the previous night's scene was still fresh in his mind. He finally decided to get changed before confronting his family, and was about to rise, when the door opened behind him. He fell flat on his back, looking straight up at Geffory. He quickly got to his feet and cleared his throat in an embarrassed way,

"Hem. Good morning," Geffory tried to smile, but it came out strange.

"Good morning Father," He stepped aside and let Allen pass. Allen quietly sat down at the table, and helped himself to the salad sitting in a bowl. Cecile had her back turned, frying potato fritters. Kendra was munching on a lettuce leaf when she turned to talk to Allen.

"Pa, whoz dat man dat stayed last night?"

"Don't talk with your mouth full," Cecile said over her shoulder. Allen lowered his fork, which was bearing a heaping load of salad, and turned to speak to Kendra.

"Darren's an old friend of mine that's come for a visit,"

"Whys he gots a freedent?" Kendra asked a bewildered Allen. Geffory leaned over and whispered to Allen,

"Trident," Allen leaned back and sighed before he started explaining

"Kendra, do you know why you aren't allowed into the fields?"

"Cuz there is big monsteses dat would eat me all up,"

"Right. Now Darren had to come a long way, and there are lots of monsters between here and the city. He has a trident to protect himself,"

"Kay," Kendra seemed satisfied with the answer and went cheerily back to her food. Allen lifted his fork again, and quickly finished off his salad. Still not having the nerve to talk to Cecile, he looked over to Geffory.

"Where's David?"

"He's outside with Darren. I think Darren's teaching him how to use a trident," Allen stood up and, with a look towards Cecile to see if she was looking, walked out of the room. He was shortly outside, and headed up to the shrine. Going down into the secret room, Allen retrieved his weapon Dualstrike as well as his armored hat. It was almost the same as Darren's except for the color. It had four sides, the front two elongating to a point above his muzzle. It had triangular holes cut out of the front so that one could see when it was pulled down to protect the face. The whole thing was made of leather, but underneath lay a layer of steel. Allen laid his ears flat and placed the hat onto his head, lifted up so that he could see beneath the brim. He left the secret room, closing the floor behind him. He stood at the edge of the precipice; Dualstrike placed lightly over one shoulder, scanning the farm lay out before him. He saw Darren and David on the far side of the fields. They were both wielding long sticks, and taking swipes at each other, Darren occasionally stopping to say something to David. Allen took a long step forward, placing his foot in mid air. His face was pulled tight with the effort of keeping the magic in check. He pulled his other foot off the cliff and stood there, as if it was normal to be standing on deceptively thin air. He slowly descended to the ground, letting the magic slide away and falling to one knee. It had been a long time since he had done

anything even remotely as strenuous as casting such a spell.

“Should’ve started out small,” he whispered to himself. He stood up and started towards where he’d seen Darren and David. He walked deliberately slow, still recovering from performing such a magical feat. After he had passed the house however, his strength had returned slightly. Shifting Dualstrike to the other shoulder, he picked up his pace to a light run. The vegetable plants slid past, transmogrifying into a green blur. In short order, Allen reached the place where he had seen David and Darren sparring. He could hear the clatter of sticks over the rustling of plants in the wind and the falling rain. He slowed to a walk, and pushed aside the last row of plants.

David swung at Darren’s head, reeling when Darren dodged. Darren coolly brought his stick up and tapped David on the rear.

“Never leave yourself open. Try again,” They set at each other again, David holding his own despite his inexperience. When their sticks met a final time, Darren’s shattered, and they both fell to the ground, stunned. Allen laughed at the looks on their faces.

“Stand back David,” Allen said, waving Dualstrike. “Let me show you how it’s done,” Darren stood up and dropped the stub that was all that was left of his stick. He reached behind his back and unhooked the trident strapped there. The two circled each other, each sizing up the other. Darren struck first, bringing his weapon around in a slow, sweeping arc to Allen’s left flank. He blocked it easily, and swung his own blade around into the opening Darren had left. Darren skipped to one side and jabbed straight forwards, his trident glinting in the sun. Allen caught the weapon with the pole of Dualstrike and twisted, throwing Darren off balance. While he was recovering, Allen jumped and swung Dualstrike under his feet, slicing some of Darren’s hair off with a snick. He landed behind Darren and shouldered his weapon. Darren turned, laughing.

“You’re just as good as you were twenty years ago! How do you do it?”

“Actually, I was aiming to knock you hat off. I liked this better though,” David looked at the two with awe, the look on his face clearly saying ‘My dad could do that! And he didn’t even tell me?!?’ Allen clipped Dualstrike in its place on his shoulder strap and walked over to David.

“Practice every day and eat all your vegetables and one day you’ll be able to do that to,” he said with a wink. “Now, let’s see how well Darren’s teaching sunk in,” He picked up two sticks and tossed one to David.

Six hours and many broken sticks later, the three were all sweating and panting heavily. David had shown an amazing natural ability with the trident. Darren had surrendered his trident to David after the first three hours, and the youth had spent the rest of the time learning new techniques. Darren on the other hand, had been exercising and using sticks to fend off ‘invisible enemies’. A rustling sound made the two adults grab for their weapons. Geffory poked his head through the tall plants, eyes sliding towards the weapons in the adult’s hands.

“Ma says that if you want food, come and get it now,” he said this without taking his eyes from Allen’s Dualstrike. Darren’s stomach gave a hearty growl at the news. The three others looked at his gut and burst out laughing.

“I - I think that’s a hint,” David coughed around a laugh. Darren grinned sheepishly

“I do believe that it’s time to feed the beast,” Allen inhaled sharply

“I’ll be right back!” he took off running towards the barn. Even before he opened the door, he could hear Mikey squeaking discontentedly. Allen opened the door to find the chocobo jumping at the jar of gyshal pickles.

“Sorry buddy, I forgot about you,” Allen went to a bin in the corner of the barn and withdrew several carrots and a beet.

“KWEEEEHHH!” The chocobo squealed with delight and almost knocked Allen over in his hunger.

“Take it easy buddy, you know what eating fast does to you, and we still have a bit’ve harvesting to do.” Mikey made a noise that might have been acknowledgement, but sounded like a mouse being trodden on. The scarlet bird kept on munching on one of the carrots in Allen’s arms even as he walked across the room and placed the produce onto a ledge beside the bird’s stall. Mikey went onto his stall, reluctantly following the food. Allen brought two more beets and a potato to the wall (Mikey snorted at the potato) and left the bird to his own devices, leaving the door open so Mikey could get some air.

Allen started back out towards where he had left the boys, remembered lunch, and changed his course to lead him towards the house. He again began worrying about Cecile’s mood.

(I knew I was stupid leaving that unsaid. I should’ve - I should’ve told her sooner. I really should’ve told her right after the ceremony. I hope, no, she’ll never forgive me for this) he didn’t think it directly, but he wouldn’t hold it against her to leave him.

The house loomed up much quicker that Allen would’ve believed possible. The prospect of spending maybe sixty minutes in his mate’s presence seemed below spending six months in a human prison. He took a deep breath, gathering courage for what he needed to do, and stepped through the kitchen door. The boys, Darren, and Kendra were seated around the table, each with a clear view of the door. Cecile, however, sat with her back to the door. David waved as his father walked through the door. Allen may have imagined it, but the slow swish of Cecile’s tail appeared to have taken on a slightly agitated mood. There was a bowl of salad on the table (possibly the leftovers from breakfast minus the lettuce) as well as some dried meat, and a pitcher of water. Allen hesitated for only a second, and then placed a hand on Cecile’s shoulder. She didn’t jump or turn around.

“Err, may I interrupt your meal that I may speak to you in private m’lady?” Darren and David both raised their eyebrows and exchanged a look. Cecile stood silently, dabbing at the corners of her mouth with a napkin, and walked slowly out of the room. Allen followed quietly behind.

* * * * *

Cecile stood in the center of the family room, both her arms and her face crossed to some degree. Allen leaned against the wall just around the corner, taking a silent deep breath and smoothing his hair back before turning the corner and closing the door behind himself.

“Cecile, I - I” he exhaled, trying to get the words to form. He tried again “I know what I did was wrong, trying to hide the truth from you was the worst mistake of my life. I - the only reason I lied to you was to - I only did it because - because I was afraid that you’d love me only because I was famous,” the last came out in a rush. Even though he’d already given his reasons the night before, it was still hard to say. He took her hand in his, and looked into her eyes. They were like chips of ice floating above the abyss.

“Can you find it in your heart to love me again? I promise never to lie to you again my love. We shall start over again, living and loving truthfully this time.” The chips of ice lingered for a second, then melted away, replaced by the loving gaze that he knew so well. Cecile placed her other hand on top of Allen’s, and placed it over her heart.

“I cannot forgive what you have done, nor will I ever forget it. But for the time being, I will put this behind me.” She leaned forward and delicately licked Allen’s cheek. He hesitated for less than a second, then enveloped his mate in a loving embrace and returned the affectionate lick. They stayed like that for a while, before Cecile pulled back.

“Now, shall we get back to lunch?” Allen’s ears pricked up slightly. He put a finger to his lips and held up a hand to silently tell her to stay put.

“Just a second dear, there’s something upstairs that I would like to show you,” he spoke slightly louder than was necessary, and Cecile gave him a strange look, but stayed silent. Allen leaned closer to her for a second and whispered into her ear, “Act like I’ve gone upstairs,” before he went to the

stairs in the corner of the room. Instead of mounting them however, Allen silently shuffled across the wall to the door. Cecile pretended to examine a loose thread on a pillow, covertly following Allen's motion. He grasped the doorknob, and turned it slowly, then threw the door open wide. There was a gasp and both David and Geffory tumbled into the room. From the look of it, one had been watching through the keyhole, and the other at the crack between the floor and the door. Both boys looked up and grinned nervously, half expecting some sort of punishment. Both parents only laughed however, and were quickly joined by their children. They all returned to the table and sat, still laughing intermittently. Allen looked at his youngest son.

"So, who put you up to it?" Both David and Geffory pointed towards Darren.

"You little finks!" He said, mock angrily. This set them all off again, Kendra looking confused, but laughing along with the others. When they finally stopped and had continued eating, she asked

"Pa? Wazza finks?" Allen almost started laughing all over again.

"I'll tell you some other time dear," Cecile commented lightly. They finished the meal in near silence and were about to go about their afternoon chores when Geffory looked at his mother and said

"Mother, why were you acting so sad this morning?"

"It was something your father said to me last night. It's nothing to worry about." She rubbed her eye as a small glistening tear slipped out. She coughed and started gathering up the dishes.

"Don't you men have something to do? Or do you intend to sit about all day?" Allen rose quickly and spoke, sensing his mate's wish to be alone.

"I suppose we should finish harvesting. David, I'll meet you at the far side of the field with Mikey." Darren stood up with David

"How can I help?"

"I couldn't ask you to help us Darren, it's just a few vegetables

"Nonsense, I can't let you two do all the work while I sit around! Lead the way David!" after an acknowledging look from his father, David led Darren out of the back door. Allen turned, wishing to comfort Cecile, but though she appeared to be wiping plates, her shoulders were trembling slightly. Allen decided that it would be best to give his mate her space. He went the long way through the house and out the front door towards the barn. Inside, Mikey lay in the same place Allen had the previous night, snoring slightly. The vegetables on the half-wall had all vanished into the gullet of the bird, except for the potato, which was buried under a messy pile of straw. Allen shook his head, smiling slightly.

"Mikey, Mikey, Mikey. I've told you a thousand times, potatoes are good for you. A big beautiful bird like you needs the starch," the chocobo sneezed in his 'sleep'.

"C'mon, I know you're faking it," the bird rolled over and smacked his tongue loudly inside his beak. Allen thought for a second before saying "If you don't get up now, you're not getting a pickle," Mikey squeaked and jumped up, moving almost hurriedly towards Allen. The Burmecian laughed as he led the chocobo to the cart. Once hitched, Mikey seemed almost eager to go. Allen hopped onto the cart, and clucked his tongue, causing Mikey to move. The bird went to the spot he's found the cart yesterday, and pulled to a stop next to David and Darren, who were discussing something in hushed tones. They stopped abruptly when Allen jumped off the cart. He un-hitched Mikey and turned to his son and his comrade.

"You know what to do David. Go ahead, I'll help Darren," David nodded and continued the previous day's work. Darren looked thoroughly out of his element, standing next to a row of corn stalks.

"Now, since it's reaching the third month of Marpenoth, everything has to be harvested. If

something looks even remotely edible, it goes on the cart, the exception however . . .”

* * * * *

That night, once again the whole family sat in the living room, this time joined by Darren. Kendra was clutching and whispering secretively to a stuffed chocobo, Geffory was sitting on a cushion near a kerosene lantern, studying his history half-heartedly (his head was nodding and his eyes were glazed), Cecile was reading a book by some JRR Tolkien (sounds boring was Geffory’s comment) and seemed oblivious to everything except the words before her. Allen, David and Darren had pulled three chairs together and were talking about the happenings in the city. Darren was talking the most, having been to the city most recently.

“ - and Sassh and Dan just had another child, named him Grey at the ceremony,”

“I always thought they’d make a cute couple. That’s how many now?” Allen inquired “I lost count after Della,”

“I think Grey makes it five. Della was the third,”

“And how’s Koss? Still single?”

“And looking! You’d think he’d give up after his 50th birthday!” The three all laughed, David only to humor the others. As the laughter subsided, Allen inquired of Darren

“So Darren, I appreciate the social call, but surely that isn’t the sole reason for this visit?” Darren shifted uncomfortably in the padded wooden chair.

“No, I was sent by the king.” At this, every head in the room swiveled to face Darren, except for Kendra, who giggled at something the chocobo ‘said’. Cecile put down her book, marking the page with a copper tab next to the line. She pulled a chair over to where the men were sitting.

“I think I should be a part of this,” she said quietly “Please continue,” Darren shifted again, and Geffory dropped every pretense of studying, and was watching the group.

“Go study with the lantern in the kitchen Geff, the light’s better,” Allen said

“But Pa!”

“No buts. I’m not letting you ruin your eyes. Now scoot!”

“But pa! Kendra gets to stay!”

“No she doesn’t, she’s going to bed. Now scoot, before I have to make you!” Geffory reluctantly gathered up his books, going as slow as he could without attracting trouble. Finally he left, throwing many dirty looks over his shoulder.

“David, please plug the keyhole and put a blanket under the door,” Allen picked up Kendra, who was starting to doze and took her to the bedroom she shared with her parents. Allen returned to find David poking chunks of bark from the wood pile through the keyhole, and what sounded like carefully concealed footsteps walking away. Allen and David returned to their chairs at about the same time and sat down facing Darren. He took a deep breath and began.

“The king sent me here to find you. He didn’t give me many details, but I know that whatever he’s pulling you into, I’m going down with you. He suggested that you bring your family into the city. The way he said it, it sounded like it would take at least until Alturiak,” Allen whistled

“Two months, that must be some assignment. But why me? I’m listed as on indefinite leave,”

“The king said that he wanted someone he could trust. I guess he found out about our friendship, because he sent for me personally to deliver the message. Oh!” Darren reached into his pocket, his ears turning slightly red. He handed Allen a slightly bent envelope with the name Allen Wolfsbane in flowing script. Allen slid a nail under a red wax seal bearing the royal seal. He slid a piece of parchment out and read aloud:

To Sir Allen Wolfsbane:

King Robin 'Puck' Goodfellow requests that you appear in audience with him on the twenty first of Marpenoth regarding an assignment that overrules your current activity status. Please bring your family to the address at the end of this letter, as you may not be able to care for them during the winter. Thank you for your co-operation.

The letter bore no signature, only an address printed below the text.

35 Nevenor Crsc.

Cecile grabbed the letter from Allen, who protested only slightly.

"Hey!"

"Shut up and let me read," Cecile read the letter over several times, her eyes widening with each pass. She put the letter back on the table. Allen looked again at the address.

"The address sounds familiar, but I can't remember why," he scratched behind his ear thoughtfully. "I know where in town the street is, but I can't remember - where - I've - seen - it!" Allen smacked his head with his hand in time with the last words. Darren grabbed Allen's arm

"Stop that. Giving yourself a concussion won't help. Besides, it doesn't matter, you said you know where the street is, so we can just walk down there and find the number,"

"I guess you're right," Allen said. David meanwhile had been intently studying the letter. He spoke quietly

"That's two days from now," The three jumped slightly, they had quite forgotten that David was there, he was so quiet.

"Pardon?"

"Today's the eighteenth of Marpenoth, that makes the audience two days from now,"

"Two days!" Allen said loudly "But it takes a day to get to the city in the first place!" Darren's ears turned red again and he shrank down in his chair. He mumbled

"My fault, didn't give you the letter right away,"

"It's all right Sir Isthma," David patted Darren on the shoulder. "We can be ready by late tomorrow morning if we start packing tonight,"

"Call me Darren," he said almost automatically. "Can you be ready?" he asked Cecile.

"Yes, easily. But what are we to do with the stores we have here?" Allen thought for a second, then responded

"I was going to take the excess into the capitol anyway. We could probably sell the stores, since we'll be staying the winter there. I'm more concerned with what we'll tell the children,"

"Kendra will be excited to see the city and won't care about reasons. Geff though," Cecile rubbed her forehead. "This is starting to be too much to handle. First you turn out to be a famous Dragon Knight, then this summons, and now spending the whole winter in the city - I'm starting to get a headache," Allen put an arm around his mate.

"I'll tell Geff tomorrow morning. You go ahead to bed, it's getting late. I'll send Geff to his room. Darren, where are you sleeping?" Darren gestured to a pile of blankets in the corner.

"There's a very comfortable spot of carpet by the hearth. I'll be fine." Darren stood up and walked to the corner. David and Cecile went upstairs, both showing slight signs of weariness. Allen unplugged the keyhole and gave Darren the blanket under the door. He found Geffory sitting upright in the kitchen, but his eyes were closed and the lamp was dark. Allen gently shook him and said

"Come on kid, time for bed." Geffory nodded sleepily and started to the room he shared with David. Darren had draped his shirt over a chair, and was settling down near the hearth. He seemed to be speaking prayers to the gods, but stopped long enough to say goodnight to the pair. Allen returned with a "Goodnight, and may the gods give you pleasant dreams," before mounting the stairs. Geffory turned into one room and closed the door behind himself. Allen walked to the end of the hall and into his room, closing the door. He un-dressed and slipped into bed next to Cecile. Feeling his body next to hers, Cecile rolled over and snuggled closer to Allen. He licked her on the cheek and wrapped an arm over her head.

This is living, Allen thought to himself. Laying in a warm bed in one's own house next to his beautiful mate who is loved and loves you dearly. Cecile, clearly asleep rolled slightly away, and Allen drifted off to dreamless sleep.

* * * * *

AAARRRRRGGGGHHHHH!" Cecile screamed as another contraction wracked her body. She lay on the bed, half naked, and completely in pain. Allen stood by her side in the small room in her parents house. She held his hand and clenched it harder with each passing contraction. He winced with the last one. His mother-in-law (for lack of a better term) was at the foot of the bed, watching and waiting for the moment when she was needed. The couple had moved in to the city for the last month of Cecile's labour, wanting to be near help if it was required. Madam Ifray (as Allen called her, she insisted on Danna) inhaled sharply.

"It's coming! I can see the head!" Allen leaned closer to his mate, feeling a little out of place.

"Did you hear that? It's almost over," Cecile screeched again, nearly crushing Allen's hand.

"Get - this - kid - OUTTA ME!" she yelled, pushing with each word. With an almost audible pop, the baby fell neatly into Danna's waiting arms. Cecile sighed audibly and virtually melted into the sheets. Danna rubbed the child down with a towel, only slightly affected by the newborn's yells. She wrapped him in a blanket and passed him into Cecile's waiting arms.

"Congratulations! You're parents of a healthy baby boy," Cecile sighed contentedly, and looked at Allen, silently asking if he wanted to hold his son. Allen hesitated, almost afraid to touch the newborn, but held his hands out and accepted his newborn son. The child was covered with a light fuzz of brown, which was in itself rare. The eyes that would make him even more unique were shut tight against the dim light, as if desperate to get another week of sleep before entering the world. Allen smiled at the now silent newborn. He turned to say something to his mate, only to find that she had fallen asleep where she lay. He turned instead to Danna. The older woman had drawn a blanket up over Cecile's nakedness, and was standing next to Allen. He spoke to her in a quiet voice, so as not to wake the exhausted Cecile.

"Congratulations, you're a grandmother," She blushed a bit and motioned that she wished to hold the child. Allen surrendered his son to Danna willingly. He had been up all night and yet, yet he was still too happy to be tired. As he tickled his son under the chin, the boy yawned widely and snuggled deeper into his blanket. Allen spoke in a loving voice,

"Welcome into the world, my little David,"

* * * * *

Allen awoke to sunlight falling onto his face. He yawned and looked at the clock. It read 7:00. He groaned and rolled to the edge of the bed. His foot hit the floor, and he stood up. He pulled his pants on and went to Cecile's side of the bed. He shook her gently,

"Time to get up," She groaned and rolled away. He shook a little harder and Cecile sneezed once.

"Wha - a - a - at time's it?" she yawned, stretching a little as she sat up.

"Just after seven. We have to get ready to leave," Allen stifled a yawn and continued getting

dressed. As he finished, Cecile was just getting started. Allen went out the door and down the stairs. Darren's blankets were neatly folded against the wall, and the fire was blazing merrily. With the winter drawing ever nearer, the nights and mornings had become cold.

Allen found Darren and David in the kitchen, chatting quietly over steaming bowls of oatmeal. Darren raised a hand in salutation.

"Good morning, I hope you don't mind, but David and I went ahead and made ourselves breakfast,"

"No, no problem at all. I trust you had a good sleep Darren?"

"Most comfortable floor I've ever slept on. Although I look forwards to by house tonight," Allen went to the stove and found a pot of slowly simmering oatmeal. He ladled himself a bowl of it and sprinkled a bit of dark sugar on the top. He then joined the others at the table, and conversation was just beginning again, when Cecile and Kendra entered. By this time, the three had finished their breakfast and were ready to do their part in making sure the family was ready to leave on time. Darren and Allen got the large cart ready and began carrying the years produce stores up and packing them into the back. David roused Geffory and helped pack things from inside the house. He loaded this luggage after the produce. By this time, it was nine, and the only thing left to do was to wait for Cecile to get Geffory and Kendra ready. With nothing to do, David had gone up to the shrine to think. He found Allen opening the secret floorstone. His father motioned for him to follow. David jumped down the hole, landing a little hard. He staggered a bit, and then went towards the room at the end of the dark hall. Allen was packing all the objects inside the cabinet into a large case. He touched each thing lovingly, then placed it carefully inside the case. David walked the length of the room and looked over his father's shoulder into the cabinet. It was full of strange looking knick-knacks, from little vials of multi-colored liquids, to a large dirk that was almost two feet long.

As amazing as the cabinet's contents were, David's eyes were always drawn to the suit of armor in the glass case. He turned so as to better regard the glass. The armor looked almost black in the dim light of the secret room. Perhaps it was a trick of his eyes, or perhaps it was the wavering torchlight, but to David, it appeared as if the armor was shifting slightly in it's container. The youth unconsciously brushed the glass with his fingers. He wanted to touch the armor, to run his hands over it's smooth chestplate, yes, even to try the suit on for size. Allen stood behind David, almost feeling the youth's desire. He put a hand on David's shoulder, causing him to twitch slightly. David placed his head against the glass and sighed.

"I'd let you try it on, but we have to go soon. As it is however, you could help me carry it up to the cart" flipped the catch on the case and as David pulled his head upright, the glass door swung open. David stared at the open case, not making any motion to take the suit.

"Don't worry, it won't bite," Allen said, laughing under his breath. David reached into the glass case and wrapped his hand around the breastplate. It was incredibly light and there seemed to be a fine scale-like texture etched into the metal. He found that he could carry the whole suit at once. He was walking back out to the exit when Allen called after him, "Come back when you've got that packed, there's something else I want to show you." David nodded in a preoccupied way. Allen suppressed another laugh at David's head, which seemed to be floating among the clouds. David packed the suit of armor with special care with the clothing, and returned to the now not-so-secret room. Allen had packed the contents of the cupboard that he wanted into the case, the rest was safe where it was. He stood next to the empty glass case, beckoning David to come stand on the other side. Once David was standing opposite the case, Allen reached inside and pushed the wood back of the case hard. There was a click, and the back slid to one side. Allen withdrew a trident. He closed the case's back again, and hefted the trident.

"I kept this here in case I needed it. Since I won't be back for a while, I want you to have it." He held out the weapon to David. The shocked youth accepted the trident and stared at it. It wasn't as nice as Darren's, and it was balanced slightly off center, but it was beautiful because it was his!

Allen smiled, and went to the cabinet. He pulled out a leather harness and showed David how it was worn over one shoulder and clipped to a belt. He then helped the youth practice hooking and releasing the trident quickly. They left the room together, both feeling a little better than they were when they went into the room. Darren met them at the entrance to the shrine.

“We’re ready to go.”

* * * * *

The cart was packed carefully, and a canvas roof had been affixed to several bows anchored to the bed of the cart. Kendra was sitting in the back with her stuffed chocobo, Geffory was sitting just behind the seat, carving something out of a piece of wood he’d been drying. Cecile sat next on the seat at the front of the cart, next to David, who’d been charged with the task of driving. Allen and Darren had the joint task of walking along around the cart, and fending off the creatures that might come too close. David had pleaded to be allowed to join them, visions of single-handedly saving the family from some wild Fang, or maybe even a small dragon (called Ironite by the Burmecians). In the end however, David accepted the task of driving and had carefully laid his new trident near Allen’s armor. The small convoy prepared to leave. David clucked Mikey forwards and they were off. The house receded behind the cart until they reached the edge of the plateau. Mikey slowed down a bit as they reached the beginning of the seldom used road that lead to the city.

It wasn’t by any means a difficult route to travel, if the road traveled straight, it would take less than three hours to reach the city. It did not run straight however, but twisted back upon itself several times, to decrease the grade. By the third hour, Geffory had put aside the carving, and was practicing history lessons. That in itself was amazing, as he hated studying, but as time went by, he finished not only the day’s lessons, but almost half of the week’s! Kendra had fallen back asleep, curled into a ball on top of the pillow she’d been sitting on, still clutching the chocobo tightly.

As they drew closer to the city, the rain increased from a gentle patter to a loud roar on the canvas roof. Despite the overhanging canvas, both David and Cecile were soon soaked. By the fourth hour of the afternoon, Geffory had also fallen asleep, and was sucking his tongue slightly. Cecile had abandoned every attempt at keeping her book dry enough to read, and had put it under the seat to keep it out of the rain. David’s eyes had glazed over, and he only moved when he had to steer around some obstacle, or to shift on the uncomfortable wood seat. Both Allen and Darren were soaked through, Allen even more so, as he didn’t have even armor to keep the rain at bay. But they didn’t seem to mind, and were talking amiably, occasionally switching sides of the cart. After what seemed like an eternity to Cecile and David, the ground leveled out and, in the distance, the glint of light reflecting off glass could be seen taunting them through the pounding rains. David perked up a little at the sight, and urged Mikey forward a little faster. The chocobo burbled angrily under his breath, clearly uncomfortable with the incessant rain. The two older men fell silent, their moods falling slightly after the long walk in the rain.

As they drew even closer to the city, farmhouses began to appear near the road, which itself was growing ever better maintained. Twice they had passed other farmers carting their harvests to sell at the city. Less than half a mile away from the gates, which were barely visible through the rain, Darren stopped the cart.

“You’re changing into your armor,” he said to Allen. It wasn’t a question “You don’t think a civilian carrying something like that,” he pointed at Dualstrike “will be allowed through the gates without question?” Allen nodded. He carefully took the armor from the back of the cart, careful to not wake Kendra. He lifted his pant legs up, put on the oiled leather leg guards, and tightened them until they almost bit into his skin. Next came the arm guards and bracers. Lastly came the torso armor and hat. David and Cecile saw for the first time some of the famous knight in their well known and loved Allen. Both he and Darren holstered their weapons and started off towards the city. David twitched the reins and Mikey started forwards, grumbling to himself again.

“It’s okay Mikey, we’re almost there,” the chocobo coughed incredulously, but went with a bit more

spring in his step. The half-mile was crossed much quicker than the ones before it, and soon they were close to the gates. Cecile reached over the back of the seat and shook Geffory awake.

“Wake up, we’re almost there,” Geffory sat up almost instantly, and paid for it by almost passing out again as the blood left his head. He didn’t seem to mind, indeed he hardly noticed in his excitement. Being only a young boy, he didn’t remember the city. He’d been there only once, and then only because Cecile had come to the city to give birth to Kendra. David only dimly remembered the city, mostly the view from his grandmother’s roof.

They approached the gates, and stopped about ten meters away. A city guard walked out to meet them. He saluted Darren and Allen, who had moved up to stand beside the seat of the cart.

“Good to see you back Sir Darren, but who’re your friends?”

“My name is Allen Clearwater. This is my family,” the guard looked slightly puzzled.

“My name’s Darrien Calahan. Forgive me, but I haven’t heard of you Sir Allen. I must ask, what is your intent in the city? It’s standard protocol nowadays,” Allen nodded.

“I understand Darrien. I’m bringing my family into the city to sell excess crops and to weather the winter out in relative comfort.” The guard backed off and waved them towards the gate.

“Carry on. I hope you get a good deal for those crops, all the local farms have sold off their crops already,”

“Thanks for the news. I hope you have few people coming through these gates today, it feels like a particularly nasty bout of rain’s on the way,” Darrien waved and went back to the gatehouse and storeroom built into the wall. Allen heard him yelling, “Hey Eddie! You ever heard of a Sir Allen Clearwater?”

* * * * *

Allen lead the way through the streets. Since they had arrived several hours earlier than he thought, the first stop was the nearest Harvest Supply. Allen brought the clerk out to inspect the harvest before asking for a price.

“I can’s give you more than 500 000 gil for the whole lot. I wish I could do more, but you’re getting in late,” He flipped through a small leather booklet he was carrying, and handed over a five 100 000 gil notes. Allen stashed these in a pocket of his change purse and helped the clerk carry the produce inside. After the clerk closed the door behind him, Allen took the lead again. They reached a street corner and Allen went back to the cart and pulled the letter out under the protection of the canvas. The address was 35 Nevenor Crescent. The feeling of recognition tugged at the back of his mind, but that’s where he kept it. He looked at the signs on the corner, then walked off to the left.

<<END OF CHAPTER 2>>

The small convoy turned onto Nevenor Crescent. The tug at the back of Allen’s mind had increased to an almost painful pulsing. Something about this street was familiar, and almost painfully so. Allen counted the numbers until they reached number 35. It was an extremely large three story house, almost a mansion in comparison to the small house on the plateau. Allen waved Cecile and David forward. Darren stayed back by the cart as the others went up the walk to the door. Allen reached out for the bell pull when suddenly, it clicked. He smiled as he pulled the chain. Somewhere in the depths of the house a clear deep bell could be heard. The door swung open, pulled by a young looking Burmecian wearing a plain white shirt and blue pants. He saluted the young servant and spoke.

“My name is Allen Clearwater. Is the lady home?” the servant nodded.

“You are expected Sir, please bring your family in. Your things will be brought to your rooms in short order,” Allen motioned for Darren to bring Kendra and Geffory forwards. They all stepped inside and took the towels offered them by the servant. After drying off slightly, the servant

recovered the towels and walked a short distance away.

“Follow me please. The lady will see you shortly,” they were led to a fairly large sitting room. It was furnished with several comfortable chairs and a day bed, which was occupied almost instantly by Geffory. One wall was taken up with a huge hearth with a fire burning merrily. Apart from the fire, the room was lit by several gas lights on the walls, and a kerosene lamp sitting on a table in the center of the conversation area. The room was carpeted with soft, green pile. Along the walls, spaced between the lights were different pieces of artwork, most of them landscapes of different locations around Gaia. Darren and Allen alike had left their weapons and armor in the entry out of consideration. The family was spaced evenly around the room, most looking at the art, some just looking in general at the posh room. Allen was examining an interesting painting of Qu’s marsh from an airship, when he heard a quiet footstep on the marble outside the room. As the painting was near the door, Allen had to take a step back to see the person standing in the double doorway.

She was enrobed in a dress made entirely of white satin and fell to the floor. Her hair was a moonlight white, almost hinting at bluish highlights, and was almost as long as her dress. Her one visible eye shifted prismaticly between green and blue. The other eye was hidden behind her bangs, which were brushed to one side. Allen and Darren both knelt and bowed their heads. Allen being closer spoke first.

“M’lady Freya,” A hand fell on his shoulder, inviting him to rise.

“There’s no need for that Allen. You know how I ask that formalities be left at the door here,” Allen rose, smiling, and wrapped his arms gently around Freya. She returned the embrace one-handedly. Allen stood back and brushed the sheaf of hair covering her right eye aside. Unlike it’s partner, the eye was a milky white, clearly unusable. He let the hair slide back, and helped his adoptive mother to a seat near the hearth. He noticed that she walked with a slight limp, and leaned on a carefully engraved walking stick. She sat down gracefully, and motioned the others to do the same with the other chairs. Kendra seemed to take an almost instant liking to the older woman, and so sat near the hem of her dress. Allen sat in a chair beside her and turned it slightly to one side so that he could talk without turning. The others quickly enough found seats and arranged them in a rough circle around Freya. Allen opened the dialogue, feeling the most comfortable as he had spent several years in her care.

“I must say Lady Crescent, although you looked great in that coat of yours, this makes you look stunning!”

“Please, you lived here for long enough, call me Freya,” she smiled at the child at her feet. Kendra tugged on the hem of Freya’s dress.

“Granny Fweya? Whereza baffroom?”

“Out that door and it’s the third door on the left,” Kendra thanked Freya and took off at a run. Freya smiled grandmotherly.

“Such a wonderful child. As to your statement Allen, Fratley finally talked me into wearing a dress after the accident,” Allen looked instantly worried.

“What accident? Why didn’t you send word?” Freya waved his worry away.

“I didn’t want to worry you over nothing. It was almost seven years ago now,” she patted her leg

“Couldn’t wear those leathers again if my life depended on it. Without Fratley . . . I found that only through training would the pain ease. Of course the one time I decided to not wear armor was the one time I chose a sub-standard weapon,” she shuddered. Cecile had become comforted enough by Freya’s manner to speak

“You don’t have to tell us if you find it too painful,” Freya once again brushed away the concern.

“No, no. It feels good to tell someone again. It’s been so long since I’ve had family around. Alas

Allen, you were the closest thing that I had to a child. Somehow Fratley and I, we never, the fruits of our love were never realized,” she finished finally. For a few seconds she just sat there, eyes focused on some distant point. Finally she sniffed, and wiped a tear from her eye.

“Right, I was telling you about the accident. It is still vivid in my memory . . .

* * * * *

Freya stood back, double-checking her handiwork. The bland target that she’d retrieved from storage was suitably camouflaged. She’d bought a cheap Fang skin from one of the seedy vendors. After a little persuasion and a sprained finger on the vendor’s part, she’d been elevated from gullible housewife, to honored patron. Her change in status brought around a hefty discount.

The skin lay draped over the faded orange cube of a target. From above and at a distance it resembled a Fang. Only once someone came closer would they see the large slit along its stomach. Freya found that she performed much better against an actual foe than against a straw-stuffed orange cube.

She wore no armor, no metal plated hat - she’d even left her coat at home. She was clothed only in the tan shirt and pants combo that she usually wore under her armor and coat. The only times she’d ever worn a dress were the dance lessons when she’d been small, and her own mating ceremony. Whenever else she was required to dress elaborately, she wore the dress armor awarded to her upon her appointment as a Dragon Knight of the Crowned Nation of Burmecia. Now, on the training field could be hardly considered formal.

Before she began any strenuous training, Freya had run around the field twice to stretch her muscles. She’d then sparred with invisible foes. Lastly, she stood a few meters away from the ‘Fang’. She crouched, feeling the muscles in her legs pull taut. She sat like that, relishing the feeling, before releasing the energy stored within her powerful legs. She shot upward fast enough to cause the air to whistle across her spear, and to cause the raindrops to feel like pebbles falling. She reached the apex of jump at enough of a height to see onto the roofs of the nearby houses. She lined up the fang along the left edge of the spear’s blade (it was slightly windy) and allowed gravity to pull her ever more rapidly towards her target. The ground rushed up to greet her and her spear found its target. Something felt wrong however, the cube gave more than it had the other times she’d used it. Instead of landing and letting her legs take the most of the shock, she felt a tearing pain in her left leg, and she collapsed. She tried to sit up, but the hand she used to lift herself up gave out. She had a brief glimpse of shards of metal scattered amid pools of water stained with blood - her blood she realized later - before her head fell again. There was a piercing pain in her right eye and she heard herself screaming. The darkness of the mud she lay in closed in, and she passed into blessed darkness away from the pain.