

Epilogue

Just over a week since Iri hitched her wagon to Rainer and his crew, and she finds herself sitting in a horse-drawn, covered carriage, Kotori sleeping with her little head across her sister's lap. She stares through the back, fixated on the night sky. Though the stars twinkle, one can't help but wonder if they'd do so more brightly if not for the trail of fire, circling the world.

Opposite Iri and her sister sit Jill and Dodger, the latter stretched across the wagon floor and the former with her feet crossed over his back and her head resting against her hand. "Jill, dear..." Dodger strains. "Perhaps we could bury the hatchet. I know we said some things. But I'm confident that we can work through it."

"Oi. Last I checked, rugs can't talk. Mouthy snoop," Jill grumbles.

Dodger turns to Iri, folding his hands as if to pray to a kind, forgiving goddess. "Miss Iri, if you wouldn't mind using that uncanny charm of yours to talk some sense into my colleague?"

Iri looks down on Dodger through the corner of her eye. It's not really her problem. Surely this fool could get himself out of the situation he'd gotten himself into. But before she says anything, the wagon hits a bump, causing Kotori to stir. The girl sits up with a yawn, her eyes still shut. But Iri gently lays her back down. "Back to sleep, Kotori. It's still very late." The path becomes far smoother from there on. And Iri need only look back through the rear of the wagon to see why.

All around them is a clearing of some form. Nothing created by man chopping down trees. No, this is something far different. Trees - broken in half, or ripped from the earth - rest across the forest floor or at unnatural angles. The land, itself, is scorched black, with nary a blade of grass to be found. As the cart turns, it becomes all the more evident what the cause of this had been. They soon pass a massive hole in the ground, made by something nearly the size of a small building burrowing its way out. An uneasy vibe takes hold over Iri as the nature of this scenery settles in.

The wagon comes to a stop, just meters away from the smoldering pit. “We’re setting up camp for the night,” Rainer says, hopping down from the front seat and stroking one of the horses’ manes.

Iri finds herself staring down into the bottomless abyss, traces of smoke rising from its depths. “Are we certain this is safe?” she asks.

“It’s either here or Templar town,” Jill says, jumping from the wagon with Dodger behind her, a boot print down his face.

Rainer steps away from the horses and over to the pit, sharing Iri’s view. “No Templars are going to come around here, now. It’s too new. They’re afraid somethin’ll crawl out of it.”

“Again,” Iri says, cutting Rainer a sharp glance. Rainer takes out his cigarette, flicking it down the pit and giving Iri the most uncaring of looks ever conceived by man. “It was a rogue. This one attacked over a week ago. If more were coming, they’d have done it by now and...” Rainer pauses, looking around and shoving his hands into his pockets.

It isn’t difficult to see where this is going. “And there wouldn’t be any forest left. So what’s the plan for now?”

Rainer grabs a blanket from one of the supply bags and tosses it to her, nodding at Kotori, who sleeps soundly across one of the wagon seats. “The plan’s to set up camp. Then we’ll review the strategy for tomorrow. You can start the fire,” he says, walking off to help his crew pitch the tents.

Iri climbs back into the wagon, laying the blanket over her sister and kissing the girl on the forehead before leaving her to sleep. “*Oyasumi*, Kotori.”

One freshly-built campsite later, Iri holds her hand to the bundle of wood in the fire pit. Sure enough, the embers of her gentle touch take and dance into a cozy flame. Rainer holds up a box of cigarettes. “Oi. I could use a light, over here,” he says, drawing a glare his way. “What?”

Iri sighs. “*Ara ara...*” Her finger to the end of Rainer’s cigarette, she lights it without looking. “I wasn’t aware you brought me along to be a glorified matchstick, Rainer-san.”

Rainer pulls out a paper roll and opens it across a wooden crate between himself and the campfire. They're schematics – a layout of... a prison yard? "So. The prisoner we're after is going to be here," he says, pointing out a structure at the farthest back corner of the facility. "It's the most secure area in the place. Walls lined with tempered luminite and chains made of adamantine. Just to get there, ya gotta go through the entire rest of the fortress."

"Heeeh? Is that all?" Iri asks.

Jill laughs. "Way to make it sound easy."

"If all this goes off without a hitch, it will be, my boorish friend," Dodger says, inviting a punch to the shoulder from the one-eyed thief.

Iri leans further over the layout, brushing her hair back, away from her face. "Still... it's a bit strange. What about this one Djinn warrants all the special attention?"

Jill and Dodger cease their bickering and fall silent. Then Rainer bows his head, taking out his cigarette. "A maximum-security prison for a maximum-security threat. They have every right to be paranoid. After all..." He then shoots Iri a much more serious expression than his usual apathetic stare. "This prisoner killed the Grand Cleric of Eleos."

Iri does an immediate double-take, her eyes as wide as they can go and her mouth hanging open. "*N-nani?*" she says.

Come morning, a tall figure in a tattered, grey cloak approaches the gates of Paragon. The Templars outside cross spears, denying his entrance. "Hold, friend," one of them says. "City's closed, given recent events. I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to come another time."

"Is that so," the stranger asks, pulling back the hood of his cloak, revealing the face of a hero. There Baldrik stands tall and proud in the face of the much younger knights. "Such a shame. I'd hoped to catch up with an old friend."

The knights stumble back. “W-w-wait a minute. Y-you’re... We’ll get that for you right away, sir.”

Baldrik pats the boy on the back as he turns around and calls for the men operating the doors to open up. “Excellent!”

Minutes later, Baldrik finds himself drifting through the busy streets of Lowtown with his hood back up, taking in the atmosphere. Several people run up and down the streets, carrying food and supplies. There appear to be dedicated group efforts in place to repair several storefronts and residential buildings from some form of damage. The streets are shattered in places, and the cobblestone rent asunder in others – the result of something heavy, and something else very, very fast. Curious.

He follows this trail of destruction, leading him to the Lowtown park. All around are patches of scorched earth, as well as burnt or broken trees and an entire area where their leaves have been completely stripped from their branches... in the middle of Spring. Baldrik chuckles. *It looks like this was a good fight. A shame I didn’t get to see it.* From there, he departs before anyone takes notice.

Baldrik decides to go on a little tour before the stop he’s most here for. He makes a point of visiting a Lowtown forge, aiding the blacksmith in crafting a fine dagger for a client. Then he stops by his favorite restaurant in all of Midtown, ordering a box of his favorite pastries on his way out and nearly finishing them by the time he’s climbed to the top of the stairs, leading into Uptown. But then there’s Castle Verity, where Baldrik stops by the Wall of Champions. His eyes wander over to the symbol by his name – the sword and shield. “The mark of a Great Knight...”

While he’s lost in his own head, a young Templar wanders by. Without a second thought, the old hero reaches over and grabs the boy by the shoulder. “Would you do me a favor, friend? There is someone I wish to see.”

Later, comes a loud knock on the door to Knight Commander Ramos’s office. The senior knight sits at his desk, reading through paperwork with his reading glasses upon him. At the sudden, sharp

sound, he glares up from his work. "I thought I said I didn't wish to be... disturbed," he says, trailing off as he takes in the sight of the man standing in his doorway. "Gods above. Baldrik?"

"Knight Commander Ramos. The promotion suits you." The two knights shake hands, pulling one another into a hug before Ramos sits back at his desk and gestures for Baldrik to take a seat, himself.

"So, what brings you back from the dead, all of a sudden?"

"Dead? Is that what they're saying about me, these days?"

"Well, when you left and we never heard about some old war dog stopping travelers on the streets to regale them with his latest tales, we all just assumed..."

Baldrik belts out a laugh, slamming his fist on the desk. "Well, it so happens I'm very much alive! Sorry to disappoint you. And how have you been, old friend? Keeping busy, I see. The trees in the park. You, I take it?"

Ramos glances down at his paperwork and shakes his head. "Yes, well, this latest generation of knights is... spirited. Much like you, in your youth. Now that I'm getting all of this paperwork, I'm starting to see why our superiors had a problem with you, you know." Ramos waves his hand over the piles upon piles of finished paperwork to the side of his workspace. "They show promise. Hardheaded, though. Also rather like you."

Baldrik chuckles as he leans forward in his seat. "Ha! You almost sound like our old instructor."

"Longwinded and dull?" A response that gets another hearty laugh out of his dear old friend. But then he straightens out, sitting back. "So? What does bring you here? You're not looking to reenlist, are you? I'll be honest, Baldrik, I'm not certain I can deal with any more noise, around here."

Baldrik stands and wanders over to the weapon display on the back wall. "Ah, getting weary in your old age, eh, Ramos? No, though I've made a decision about that. I intend to do a bit of wandering. Help those I can."

“You’re going to become a knight errant? Hm. Truthfully, that sounds like a perfect fit for you. No higher-ups to bicker with, just you, your ax, and whatever you decide to help with. But why come here for that? If you came because you heard about the Akuma attack, you’re a bit late.”

Baldrik looks over the war table. “No,” he says, surveying the map and pulling the knife out of the block. “I came to fulfill a promise.” He then jams the tip of the knife into the point on the map where Aimsbrusch would be. “At this location is a town. Fairly out of the way. Until recently, it was the victim of constant bandit raids. I have a feeling that pattern will be returning. But there are no Templars there, and few of the people are fighters. They could use all of the help they can get.”

Ramos stands and walks over to the map, inspecting the area. “You know this is outside of my jurisdiction, Baldrik.”

“Of that, I am aware. But, nothing is beyond the reach of the Justices. And you have their ear, do you not? Speak to them for me... please.”

Ramos sighs. “I’ll do what I can, Baldrik. But I can’t make any promises.”

“That is all I ask,” Baldrik says, folding his arms. “Well... that and perhaps a treat of ale. It’s been a rather long trip.”

“Of course,” Ramos laughs. “Come on. There’ve been a few new taverns added to Uptown since you left. And, honestly... I could use a drink, about now.”

“Right behind you.”

Ike opens his eyes, very much against every urge in his body. But it’s sitting up that lets him know waking was a terrible mistake. Every cell in every muscle screams at him. But he powers through it, albeit not without a few strained groans. He turns himself, sitting on the edge of his bed in the hospice. There stands Amelie, arms crossed. “Uh... morning,” Ike says, trying to wave but locking up the instant he begins to raise his arm.

“That’ll happen when you drink down an entire luminite potion then get into a slugfest with an Akuma,” Amelie says, taking Ike by the arm and raising it abruptly, sending a pulse like a bolt of lightning straight through his entire body.

Ike winces through the worst of the pain. He hunches over and sighs. “You’re not planning to let me off the hook for that any time soon, are you?”

At that moment, Amelie, rather than help Ike unravel the bandages around his arm, looks him dead in the eye and yanks the two ends, tightening them to the point he feels his arm may well burst open... again. After deciding he’s had enough, she continues unraveling the wraps. His arms are completely healed. The boon of luminite potions, no doubt. That and powerful healing magic. “Just try to remember that being free to go isn’t an invitation to throw yourself into more trouble, okay?”

“I’ll be careful,” Ike says, harboring the enthusiasm of an eight-year-old, told by a parent to go and do his chores.

Amelie lightly smacks Ike over the back of the head, making his whole skull hum. “What am I gonna do with you?” As she finishes undoing one arm, she goes for the other one, this time more sensitive in her touch. “Still... I’m glad you finally got to live out your dream and be a hero.” But a sense of reservation in her voice belies the kindness of her words and smile on her face. In truth, she knows better than to ask if that experience was enough. “Must’ve been a pretty good feeling.”

Ike raises both his arms as Amelie finishes up with them and helps him undo the bandages around his torso. “Well, I think the only things I felt at the time were fear and pain, so...”

Amelie laughs. “Yeah, I guess that makes sense.” As she undoes the last of the bandages, she gives him a hard pat on the back, once again nearly getting him to leap out of his own skin. “There! Violent muscle aches, aside, you’re good to go! Must be nice, finally getting out of here. Bet you were getting stir crazy.”

“Eh. The nurse kept me entertained,”

Amelie puffs out her chest and places her hands on her hips. “No thanks necessary, citizen!” she says. But she stows the act and offers a hand, helping Ike get to his feet. “Besides. I might’ve had a little help. Your idiot, Huck was here, right?”

“Yeah, but I’m not sure if he was here to see me or the other sisters.”

Amelie sighs. “That definitely sounds like him, all right... But, hey, Faye stopped by before she left. Sweet girl. Hope she made it home, all right. With everything that’s been happening, lately...”

It’s difficult to say Amelie’s wrong. The Akuma attack, the assassination of the Grand Cleric, the city lockdown, it was madness. Ike’s mind trails back to her visit. The luminite potion had just worn off and he could barely move. He’d been trying to rest, but to no avail. Then came the knock on his door and there she was, joined by Amelie and Huck.

“Hi, Ike,” she’d said. “Truth be told, today’s my last day in town. I’ve had so much fun over the past few days and you three were a big part of the reason why. I wanted to see you all again before I left.” How could Ike have possibly said no?

Between the four of them, they’d all spent most of the day just talking about the festival and their favorite parts of it. Amelie went on an entire lecture about the food – how the bread and the pastries were a gift from Nemesis, herself. Pieces of heaven, broken off such that mere mortals could have a taste. For the entire speech, Faye had listened with the enthusiasm of a small child, tuned into their favorite bedtime story. Huck had been simpler, of course. For him the best part was seeing so many sisters actually outside of the chapels. What came next was an... interesting debate between himself and Amelie that Faye had to break up without Ike’s help.

But when asked about her own favorite part, Faye was less certain. She took some time to think about it before coming to an answer. “This part,” she’d said. “The end. When the festival’s over.” Ike, Amelie and Huck had all given her rather stunned looks, at first. But then she raised her head with that same angelic smile. “When everyone’s back together and they can all talk about how proud they are to

have been a part of it or how much they enjoyed themselves. This is the best part.” In truth, those words had brought Amelie to tears, prompting her to ensnare Faye in a hug whilst bawling uncontrollably, much to the girl’s confusion.

The memory brings a smile to Ike’s face, albeit one with a bittersweet tinge as, soon after that, Faye transitioned to saying her goodbyes. The sun had begun to set and Faye observed quietly as Ike, Amelie, and Huck got back into one of their spats. Though with Ike unable to move, he was helpless to do much about it. Faye giggled at them as they carried on. “I should probably be on my way, now,” she finally said, bringing their entire exchange to a freeze. “I’m glad I met you all.” Before she could leave, though, Amelie tackled her with another hug and Huck even strolled over to ruffle her hair a bit.

“We’re gonna miss you!” Amelie cried.

“Don’t be a stranger, kid,” Huck added. “You’re welcome back, any time.”

When the two of them let her go, she nodded, before making her way to Ike. He’d been able to move enough, at the time, that he could shake her hand, though it brought a chuckle out of him. “You know, it’s turning into a pattern that I just look pitiful whenever you’re around, huh?”

But at that observation Faye shook her head with that comforting smile of hers. “Not pitiful. Just determined,” she said, taking his hand to shake. “Good luck, Ike.”

At those words, Ike smiled. “Thanks.”

And after that, she was gone. It was a good memory of a good day. One soon interrupted by the outside world. “Ike,” Amelie says, dragging him back into reality.

“Huh?”

She shoves his armor into his hands. “You can dress yourself. Oh, and Ike... if I see you in here again...” she then cuts him a fierce glare. “You’re staying.”

Ike gulps and gives her a nervous laugh. “Uh... y-yes ma’am.”

“Good. Now, I’m heading back to the chapel. You better get back to the castle. Take it easy.”

“Roger that.”

With Amelie gone, Ike throws his armor back on, then looks to himself in the room’s mirror. He may be healed up, but his armor’s seen better days. It’s covered in scrapes, punctures, burn marks. Considering how little action he ever saw on his normal duty, that Akuma had really done a number on him. But something about that makes him smile. Every nick in the armor was proof of his getting closer. With that in mind, he takes a deep breath before running off. Though he instantly regrets that decision and slows to a brisk walk as his muscles go back to yelling at him.

On his way to Castle Verity, however, he spots out a familiar face. Knight Commander Ramos walks the streets, accompanied by a towering, cloaked stranger. “K-knight Commander!” he says, snapping to attention.

“Ike,” Ramos says, raising a hand to have the boy relax. “I see you’re finally out of hospice care. How are you feeling?”

Ike rolls his shoulders and stretches his arm. “Better, sir. I mean... my joints and muscles are mad at me and my bones and I could be on better terms, but... I’m ready to return to work, sir! I... was actually on my way to check the duty roster.”

Ramos chuckles and folds his hands behind his back. “Is that right? Well, don’t bother. You aren’t on it. I didn’t figure you’d be out this soon. Though, from what you’ve said, I’m not really sure you should be.”

“I-I’m fine, sir! I want to work. I’ve been sitting around for a week. I can’t stand just lying there, doing nothing.”

Ramos stares at his subordinate, equal parts exasperated... and proud. “Ike, you really never change. Fine. But I’m not giving you anything highly active. Your body needs to fully recover. Guard Duty at the prison gate.”

Ike salutes. “Yes sir!”

“And no complai-... what?”

“Guard and Patrol duty are important Templar services. I shouldn’t be complaining about doing something that can save lives. Right?”

Ramos stands there in a daze. “I... well said,” he stammers out before collecting himself and giving the boy a grin. “Though I’m sure it could have something to do with your last patrol duty being so... exciting.”

Ike rubs the back of his head. “Well... sitting around in hospice care for a week gave me a lot of time to do some thinking.”

“Ah,” the stranger says, planting a hand on Ramos’s shoulder. “Is this the one?”

Ramos nods, fixing on Ike with that proud gaze. “The very same.”

Ike’s attention drifts over to the stranger. “O-oh! I’m sorry, sir, was I interrupting something?”

Ramos shakes his head as his guest places his hands on his hips. “Not at all. I was just on my way out for a drink with a friend of mine.”

The stranger draws back his cloak and the effect is instant. Ike’s eyes grow wide and fill with the same glimmer as his younger self. His heart suddenly takes it upon itself to participate in a marathon. And his jaw drops like a brick. Every ounce of ache in his body evaporates, completely. “Y-you’re-!”

“Aye,” the stranger says, putting on a confident grin. “Baldrik the Unstoppable!”

END