

Rosalie let out a sigh, looking out at the sea of papers covering her desk. Newspapers from all across the world, Crusader applications, books in not one, not two, but THREE languages, among different tidbits the Commander of the Crusaders of the Convergence had to take care of. She had no idea how long she had sat here for, with her door closed, alone, the shades shut, nor how much longer she would be there in the same condition. She made it perfectly clear to the Crusaders that if her door is closed, she is not to be bothered.

When Rosalie returned, she kicked the decorative stone she used as a doorstep far into her office, allowing the door to swing shut with a slam. She then took a seat, and remained there for as long as she could remember.

She hasn't read a single word—just various blurs of what appeared to be text, blotches of color where pictures must have been. She shuffled the piles around, organized them in a way that she hoped would provoke her to do something, anything, but she found herself staring into the miasma, lost in her thoughts.

The commander hasn't been able to focus since she returned from the short vacation she allowed herself after the New Year. She thought about how amazing it was that a simple few days could wreak such havoc on someone's psyche and lead them to question everything they had ever believed to be true. Could one's entire life be a lie? Could their memories be rendered a simple deceit? Or is reality a matter of choice?

Her mind was prone to wandering, but not into these dark places. Prior to this moment, she destroyed some precious relics of her childhood, setting them ablaze in a trashcan, wishing the fumes would tell her a truth, any truth. But the truths she sought were the ones that could destroy everything, and maybe, just maybe, she was better off not knowing them.

Invested isn't a word she would use to describe her work ethic, but sufficient—she actually got everything she needed to get done, as it came to her. The girl meticulously worked, trying desperately to stay on top of everything. Memories of screaming matches and demon deals and rapid succession and rebuilding the universe and mass divinity and petitions kept her awake late into the night as she worked towards perfecting her methods.

She would be the commander the crusaders needed—at least, of course, until someone came to take her place as her time here expired. She knew she only had a couple of months left, but the tension between members of her group rose every day. If nothing else, she would be remembered as the one who tried; the one who made an effort to connect with her team. And in order to that, she needed to sift through lots of papers, make some executive decisions, and get her work done.

But the work piled up from her absence, and continued to pile up outside her door, she presumed, the longer she kept herself locked in here.

She closed her eyes, seeking solace in the dark.

But instead, piercing blue eyes looked back at her, in the center of a weathered face she once loved. A sardonic kind of smile twisted below these, yet still was radiating fatherly warmth. Flashes of her life of a bounty hunter rushed forward, everything at once, but just as quick dissolved into a grim conclusion: the heavy blanket of death wrought by necromancy and the silent echo of her mentor's shattered spine.

She never recovered his body.

Rosalie swallowed, willing the image to change, and it shifted, slightly, to that of a twenty-six year old blonde girl kneeling beside a grave, with his eyes, looking back at her, her mouth fixated in a pensive frown. And the look was one that was familiar to her, a look she adopted during all that time she spent bounty hunting.

And Rosalie froze. The girl was the right age, in the right place.

Is she the one she's been looking for?

They rose at the same time, as if from two sides of a distorted mirror. The girl reached out, a question on her lips. The same question Rosalie had churning in her brain. The one question that will never be answered, unless the dead lived again, and a past neither of them were alive for could be reviewed.

So Rosalie ran, and would keep running.

A shudder rippled through her as she pushed away from her desk. She paced to and fro in front of the door, trying to think about anything else, something to ground her in reality, a place of certainty. Name? Rosalie Vierra. Age? Twenty-six. Residence? The council. Her favorite place? Her forge. She had a collection of hammers gifted to her by her parents that came by mail a few weeks ago, each with a specific purpose. She was giddy, ready to start working on Owain's shimmersteel. Gorgeous sword, devastating fate. It was almost done. She would return to it soon.

This was one of many fits she has had since her return.

She sat down with images of fire and molten steel swirling through her mind, her fingers itching to unscrew the cap to the wine bottle she kept hidden in the bottom of a drawer that she kept locked. The initial detox period was over, but the constant urge knotted in her stomach.

Rosalie forced her attention away from the sweet, easy relief and flipped through more applications. She managed to sort a few of them and tried to commit names to memory, to no avail, for her mind soon wandered to that trip once again.

The girl, the girl! It always went back to the girl.

All she wanted was a simple visit to the shrine honoring her mentor's memory. She hated her hometown, but went there every-so-often anyway to do him this service. To update him on

her life. To apologize for the failed contract. To promise to find his daughter one day. She knew that she lived for him now, and made so many promises she'd die to keep.

And Rosalie Vierra always keeps her word.

That day was the first time she had seen anyone else there. Many of these visits had her with her knees in the dirt, her fingers tearing at weeds. But the shrine was clear and clean, with a girl in place of the weeds. A girl who felt so familiar, but why? They never met before. But she looked and felt so close, like from a time so long ago that it fell from her memory.

Rosalie stared at the pile of personal correspondence on her desk. There were so many she was ignoring, but two stuck out at her. One was a note enclosed with the hammers. The other was a letter from her mother. She refused to open the latter, afraid of its contents. She knew it was silly to ignore it, but everything was different now. There were so many things she thought she knew for certain.

Like her family.

What even was family? Her parents? Currently, there was doubt that she even knew who they were. But would it even matter? They parted ways so long ago. She didn't remember the last time she saw them. She could barely remember what their faces looked like, or how it felt to be in their arms. Letters and money have been their only exchange for so many years. Any connection she felt to them was dulled. The only connection she felt with people was severed those few years ago, at that place stinking of death, where Hoth drew his last breath.

And she ran, trying and failing to leave it all behind.

Shaking, Rosalie got up again, and tried to pace to calm her nerves. She went over to the window and opened the blinds. It was dark. She came in here when it was light. How many days ago? How long was she stuck with her thoughts?

Too long, she decided. It was time to stop thinking.

She walked back to her desk and opened a small drawer containing important keys and similar small, valuable objects. She grappled for the key to the drawer containing the answer to all her problems. She longed for its warmth, for the numbness. The lock clicked open and she hungrily lunged for the bottle, unscrewing its metal cap from the top. It fell on the floor with a quiet tap.

She put the bottle to her lips just as a tiny ball of fur barreled into her office, talking a mile a minute about this and that and how he hasn't seen his "Roselee" since breakfast yesterday and how painfully boring it was out there without her to play with, coupled with the embarrassed apologies of the Lupus whose care the boy was in. And then the conglomerate of voices and clinking sounds of supertime from down the hall in the cafeteria fluttered through the open

space, grabbing her attention, and her thoughts fell to the wayside. And everything felt numb. And everything felt certain.

“Roselee, what’s that?” The boy, Sinder, asked, with his head cocked to the side, curious.

“Oh, this?” She asked, the bottle still in her hands. “Nothing I need now.”

She made eye contact with her general, an understanding passing between them. It’s been a long time since she was able to communicate with someone in such a manner. It was familiar, but different, and she liked that.

And Astral smiled in such a way that confirmed that he knew her much better than she would ever know herself.

“Sinder here wanted you to join us for dinner. Would you--?”

“Roselee, please! I want to show you these flowers I found—“

“Of course,” She said, gesturing around her office. “I’ve been locked up here with this mess for way too long.”