

fracture

fracture, n. the breaking of a hard object or material; a break, breach, or split.

Eustace does as he is told.

There is a path laid out before him, one he follows without hesitation. The Society beckons, and he moves. They set the stones at his feet, guide him with a hand on his back. They warn him of the twists ahead, of the splits and forks that will come, pressing him one way or the other. He listens and asks no questions - the thought of raising a question never crosses his mind. There is nothing to ask about. There is nothing to explore. There is only his path, his actions, and the transceiver buzzing at his side.

Eustace does as he is told, and he does it well.

His is a role of observation, knowledge seeking, and reporting. There is action, of course, but that is not his goal - only a means to an end. The world around him is for analyzing and changing for the benefit of the ones on the other end of the line. Eustace travels the skies, and he sees, he learns, and he reports. Trouble is brewing: do not engage, the Society says, and he does not engage. Rumors milling of new weapons: investigate, and report, and he reports. It is the way the world works.

The transceiver buzzes at his side, and, like clockwork, like the endless flow of time, like the ever-winding path before him, he moves on.

Eustace is not the only field agent of the Society, but he knows he is the best. The most trusted. The most obedient. He sees it when their paths cross: their lack of respect for rules, their flaunting of procedure, their reliance on skyfarers when they should be able to manage themselves. They're loose with secrets where he is tightlipped, quick to action when patience is needed. He ignores Beatrix's whining, Zeta's scolding, Vaseraga's silence. He retreats to observe them, to watch the Society set their paths, just like his, and for them to disregard it. They leap into the unknown, making their own way, creating forks in the road at will. They choose whatever they want, whenever they want.

Choice is not something he understands. Eustace always does as he is told; there is no room for choice. The hand at his back pushes him whichever way it wants, the transceiver tugging him the right direction. He is not like the other field agents. He has never disobeyed. He has never wanted to disobey.

He has never wanted a choice.

He tells himself that, over and over, as a buzz that isn't the transceiver forms in his mind. A buzz that makes walls sprout along his path, clear as glass, hard as steel. A buzz that makes him pause and watch the others even more closely as he tries to sort it out. A buzz that makes him let slip one piece of knowledge to calm their excitement, to guide them on the paths he will not take. Cannot take. He knows he shouldn't, but the words rush out as he's focused on the buzzing, the strangeness in his chest. Grains of sand he cannot catch, slipping down the hourglass.

The transceiver sounds. It feels heavier than it had before. The words are muffled, tangled. He has to force them through his mind, tear his eyes away from Beatrix and Zeta's arguing, from Vaseraga hovering nearby. The hand that takes him away feels less like a push and more like a pull, nails digging into his wrist, yanking, insisting. He does what he is told. He does it well. He'll do it, always.

For the very first time, he looks over his shoulder as he leaves, and he begins to wonder.

He's assigned to watch *her*. Lyria. The girl with the power to sense Primals, the girl with the blue hair and a quick smile. He follows her out of the barren, snowy land because he is told to do so. He follows her across the skies because he is told to do so. He has a mission, and he has to stick to it.

But the Grancypher crew is... different. Wild, in its own way: there is no one pulling their wrist, nothing forcing their path, nothing guarding it. Their choices are their own, sometimes clashing, sometimes harmonious, always adventurous and new. They're brash and loud to the point of being irritating. He finds himself flattening his ears in common areas, slouching to the side, polishing his gun. He turns away conversations, walks away from invitations and questions. It's not what he's here for. He's supposed to be observing.

Yet he feels the buzz that comes not from the transceiver, feels it settle in his chest, feels it bloom into curiosity. He does his job, but as he watches, he wonders, and wonders, and wonders.

He learns from the crew as he learns about them. He learns how to steer the majestic craft, how wind and beast and machine work together to sail the skies. He helps prepare meals - and learns when extra hands are a hindrance, not a help. He joins them in battle, discovering new ways to time attacks for maximum damage and counter blows with exact precision.

He finds himself sharing his own knowledge, his own tricks. He spends the mornings practicing on the deck, Eugen and Rackam at the helm observing his aim and complimenting his technique. In the afternoons, he answers questions, questing with the crew, gathering materials and insight, Lyria on his one side and the Captain on the other. He spends his evenings watching Cagliostro work, observing her arts and wondering how he can apply them himself.

He spends his nights tethered to the transceiver, unable to bring himself to answer. It weighs at him heavier and heavier with each conversation he has, with each battle he survives. The buzzing at his side wars with the buzzing in his chest, a constant hum that follows him, haunts him, every moment.

Eustace does as he is told. But he doesn't want to. Not anymore.

The transceiver can't be avoided forever, though, the buzzing too insistent, too demanding to be left alone. The buzzing at his side has been going on for too long without break - so long that Lyria and the Captain have noticed, even with the dogs they've taken him to visit as a distraction. He excuses himself, his hands shaking, arms straining under the device's weight as he raises it to his ear.

The mission has changed. Lyria is too much of a threat to be left alive. The Society has decided: he needs to kill her.

He sees the path stretch out before him, sees the Society set it at his feet. A long, straight road, white, stained with the blood he's supposed to spill. The hands snag on his wrists, grappling up his arms, nails tearing their way to his throat. The voice on the other side of the transceiver gets louder, angrier, echoing in the space between his ears. Do as he is told. Do it well.

But there is another noise, beyond the Society, beyond the device. The buzzing in his chest, growing louder and louder. A buzz that draws his eyes away from the path at his feet, towards the branches, the endless possibilities beyond. It's a force, but it doesn't claw at him, doesn't trap him: it only grows louder, more insistent, more urgent. It makes him think of the crew, of the Captain's smile and Lyria's laugh. It makes him stare down the splitting road. It makes him wonder.

Eustace has never made a choice of his own before. But he has to start somewhere.

"No." His voice wavers, hitches in a way he's never heard before. On the other end of the line, the Society is silent, but Eustace's world buzzes louder than ever before. A second time, more firmly, more strongly, loud enough for him to hear it over the throbbing inside him. "No."

It is not the right answer. The Society yells in his ear, their invisible hands tightening, but the words will not, cannot, penetrate. The buzzing fills him from the tips of his ears to the bottoms of his feet. It drowns out the sounds of the device, the thing that has called him for so long, that has made him travel so far.

Eustace draws it away from his ear, tilting his head, eyes focusing on the small black device, the worn metal case, the dull screws. It seems small in his hand, smaller than he remembers it being. The longer he looks, the lighter it gets, a weight lifting, folding, compressing under the pressure of the buzzing. He's made a choice. His choice. There is no going back now - and he doesn't want to.

He draws on every battle he's fought alongside the crew, every tip and pointer he learned on the deck of the Grancypher, every quick movement he's taught others. He summons strength, his strength, from deep within the buzzing, from within himself. He clenches his hand into a fist. The device creaks, groans, shatters into pieces. They tumble, slow, down. Sand falling in an hourglass.

Silence.

It tingles in his chest, the remains of the transceiver falling from his fingers as he reaches to lay a hand over his heart. The buzzing no longer sounds, no longer echoes, no longer insists. The path before him has no hand to push him along, no beckoning fingers tearing at his flesh, no walls guarding the exits. He stares down the path, stares down at the transceiver, and finds the silence... comforting. Strange. New.

He looks ahead of him, back towards where the Captain and Lyria wait, back where the crew rests and trains and prepares. He takes one step, and another, and another - each easier than the last.

He has to start somewhere.