

# Worth

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**Pairings:** Balthier/Vaan

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**Spoilers:** FF XII

**Warnings:** slash, mild angst, sexual situations

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**Summary:** They don't see his worth, it's clear, so he leaves. Someone comes to regret such haste.

**Notes:** I've seen one too many stories where Vaan is used as the whipping boy for everyone in the party. I find myself annoyed by that.

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## Muthru Bazaar, Rabanastre

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Vaan always had the sense that he was less than an asset in their eyes. They had just returned from their unplanned visit to *Leviathan* and *Shiva*. The set of rooms they had temporarily taken over was decorated in dusty webs and slanting slices of light, perfumed with sweat and exotic spices. The ‘adults’ were arguing again. In this instance he rather thought that adults meant anyone but himself and Penelo, but Penelo was content to just listen and watch. Every time he went to open his mouth she would nudge him. Every time he would become more angry, more resentful. Since when had Penelo gone more from being friend to scolding mother? Why did everything have to be so deadly serious, except when it was time for her to tease him once again?

He thought back over their journey so far and winced. Basch always seemed to have a haunted expression when looking at him, cut with something else. He thought it might be pity, though he could not understand why. Did Basch only see him as the embodiment of guilt? Did Basch look at him and see Reks? Perhaps that was why the man’s gaze always seemed to slide away from his. Every mistake he made while learning was met with a swift look, but the man never offered to help, and never even made it seem possible to ask. Maybe he was being too sensitive, but something about Basch just made him want to stay away and not be a bother.

Ashe was forever telling him not to interrupt, to be quiet, as though he were a child of five begging for attention. When not doing that she had a tendency to treat him as a servant who just happened to be there. He wondered why the future queen of Dalmasca was so unkind to the people who lived there. Was this normal of royalty, this unthinking iciness? Were they taught only to treat other highborn people as real and thinking beings? He knew damn well he was a street rat, a commoner, a thief. Did that make him any less of a person? Or was she unable to deal with the fact that he had also seen the specter of Prince Rasler?

Balthier was so many things in his eyes. His first reaction had been awe—a real sky pirate! And though he held hope that the man would teach him, he would not ask, put off by Balthier’s ways. The man had an air of strained tolerance for him, amused condescension. Still, that did not stop his eyes studying the man, and slowly becoming just as interested in simply that as wanting to learn how to fly. He told himself it was just a crush, an understandable one. Who wouldn’t feel like that around a person they wished to become like, right?

Vaan was just a street rat, barely having stepped foot outside Rabanastre until getting caught up in this unholy mess. Why *would* Balthier ever think of him otherwise? After all, he had never really made any attempts to reach his dream, just talked about it. He did not think he was supposed to be so introspective at the tender age of seventeen.

He looked up at the sound of the door opening and caught the tail end of what Ashe was saying, something about supplies. Even Penelo had risen, so he followed, absently patting his hidden stash of gil, his share of the takings so far. Though, he admitted, not fairly. They were constantly pushing ahead of him, pulling him back or out of the way. How was he ever

supposed to get used to bigger game than rats if he never got the chance with the way they stifled him. Why was he with them again?

The 'adults' were arguing again, this time about when to set out. Ashe was playing at being tireless and fearless. It made Vaan wonder about the difference in the definition of reality between royals and commoners. He thought about opening his mouth, but decided against it. The male 'adults' forced her to see reason, or at least temporarily submit. Thus they went shopping, and in doing so, seemed to forget he existed.

He wondered again: was this his fault? Was he invisible because he made himself so, or because they refused to see him unless it was convenient? Vaan wandered around, eyeing piles of fruits, pausing long enough to purchase some for himself to eat right then to assuage the empty feeling inside him. When he returned to their temporary lodgings he loitered outside, propped against a wall still warm from the dying rays of the fierce desert sun, and admired the sunset.

And then it happened, confirmation of his fears. He could hear two voices growing louder for all their softness; they must have come to stand near the window.

“—keeps looking at me with those doe eyes,” Balthier was saying.

“If you do not like it, make it known,” Fran replied.

“And he can barely fight.”

Vaan's heart sank even as heat flushed his face.

“Perhaps if you were not all so keen to drag him down.”

“Oh, please,” Balthier said rather scornfully. “He's nothing more than a common thief.”

“And you are an uncommon one?” she shot back.

Vaan heard a snort, then some soft sounds.

“You know what I mean. Don't pretend otherwise. He wasn't even there to help with getting supplies.”

“I'm surprised you even noticed,” Fran said in that peculiar dry way of hers. “You all scorn his attention, then become angered when the puppy isn't obediently following. I will not further this discussion with you.”

The click of heels was quickly heard, as well as a ragged sigh. Vaan was considering moving away, to return later, when another voice spoke.

“What was that all about?” It was Penelo.

“Vaan.”

“Oh.”

Vaan could almost imagine how her posture would change. Her arms would go behind her back and she would bounce slightly on the balls of her feet.

“Yeah, sorry,” she said. “I keep trying, but. . . Vaan doesn’t seem to understand subtleties, you know?”

Vaan’s jaw dropped.

“He doesn’t seem to understand how important all of this is,” she continued. “I mean, these aren’t rats in the waterway. He doesn’t seem to be able to settle in.”

‘Maybe because you all seem so desperate to stop me,’ he thought, his mind turning to Fran. It was nigh well impossible to tell most of the time what she was thinking, but at least it seemed she was not against him. Still, that was just one person.

“—is he?” came Ashe’s irritated voice.

“Vaan?”

“Of course. This is so irresponsible of him,” Ashe complained, then sighed heavily.

He tuned out again, this time pushing away from the wall and walking silently through the rapidly darkening bazaar. He had some hard thinking to do.

When morning came he was sitting on the sill of the opened window, facing outward. He mentally cringed for a second at the sound of multiple steps behind him, but outwardly remained relaxed. He had practice, after all, in how to pretend.

“Where have you been?” Ashe demanded.

“Out.”

“Well don’t blame any of us that you’re too tired to be of any use.”

Vaan shifted so he could look inside without strain. He smiled faintly. “Ah, but I’m never allowed to be of any real use. You make sure of that.” Part of him was delighted to see her face contort with shock, the same expression flitting across those of everyone else except Fran. “Hey, just wanted to say good luck. I hope you all find the things you’re looking for.” He pushed off and started walking, ignoring the yelling behind him. Moments later he was lost to their sight.

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## Sun-Dappled Path, Salikawood

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He was extremely pleased with his bounty and set about quickly dressing his game, stacking the separate parts into the appropriate containers. He would eat well tonight, to be sure. He had also gathered quite a lot in the way of loot that day, his collection growing ever larger, to the point where he would need to get started on his idea, before he would no longer be able to carry it all without help. Gems and magicite, among other things, did not take up much room, but they did get increasingly heavy.

Wyrdhare was good eating, assuming you could bring one of the tricky bastards down, and he had plenty of fruit to go with it. With a pleased sigh he finished packing up and cast Float so he could tow his burden, then set off back to the hut he had claimed to the north. Maybe a few more days here and he would consider moving on to the Phon Coast. Fish might be a nice change of pace. He had gone only a short distance, clearing out aggressive creatures come to menace him, when the sound of footsteps caused him to stop and glance over his shoulder briefly. He blinked, then returned to slaying the malboro attempting to gas him. When the danger was gone he turned around, somewhat curious.

“Vaan!?”

Yes, that was Penelo’s voice all right. He supposed he wasn’t hallucinating after having breathed in something awful. That must mean the others really were there as well. He considered saying something, but a familiar sound teased off to one side, and he smoothly moved to meet it, slaying yet another encroaching malboro. He took a long look around for others before facing the group again.

“Was there something you wanted?”

Penelo stepped back, confusion writ on her face. “Vaan?”

“Yes? Are you lost? If there’s nothing you wanted I’ll be on my way.” Part of him felt relief. Seeing them again brought forward no particular sense of pain. Part of him was simply curious.

“You . . . took down those . . . malboros by yourself?” Ashe said wonderingly.

Vaan shrugged. His eyes were drawn to Fran; she had something he would interpret as a smile on her face, and it warmed him inside. “Of course.”

Penelo looked torn between confusion and relief. He supposed she was happy that he was doing well, but was she confused due to where he was, or because she had no idea how to interact with him now? Ashe had a very peculiar expression indeed. Vaan was mildly amused that she was wearing that awful outfit he had first seen her in. He himself had, shockingly, gained a set of outfits, each suited for a particular clime. Once again he wondered just what definition of reality a royal held.

Basch was still giving him that look, though even he seemed confused, and Balthier. . . . Balthier's gaze was piercing, his expression like that of a man who had just realized something. It made him smirk a little inside. Seeing that they were all rather caught up in their thoughts he tried again.

"Yeah, hello? Was there something you wanted?" he prompted, then heard another of those sounds and rolled his eyes. A quick movement had his gun to hand and a bullet shot right through a malboro's excuse for brains. Still nothing. "Okay," he said briskly. "I'll just be on my way, then. It was good seeing you again, Fran."

He hadn't managed two steps when he heard, "Wait!" Vaan restrained the impulse to pinch the bridge of his nose and turned around.

"Would you like to come with us?" Ashe offered.

He couldn't help himself; he let out an amused snort. "Uh, no."

"Why? We would like you to join us." Ashe looked like she could not comprehend. Who would dare refuse her?

Vaan had another long look around before aiming a rather patient, knowing look at them. "Right, you want me to join you, now that you finally see? Or do you still see your guilt in me?" His gaze flitted between Ashe and Basch for a moment. "I know you may not understand, but I don't need your approval or your validation." A smile tugged at his lips, at once sunny and wry. "It's really quite simple. You all made it so clear then. But now, now that I've done it on my own, I'm suddenly worth something in your eyes? No. Be on your way and forget your pleas. I have no use for them."

"But, Vaan," Penelo cried, "we're fighting for our home!"

He snorted again. "Your home," he corrected gently. "My home is wherever my feet take me. There is nothing much in Rabanastre to arrest my heart, and I never did pay much attention to material things. Beauty doesn't keep me fed. Rabanastre is just a city I visit on occasion, nothing more."

"What happened to your dreams of being a sky pirate?" Balthier asked.

The man had a certain look in his eyes, something that Vaan could not quite interpret, so he laughed. "I'm already free, and I've already answered my own questions. The sky is just a different sort of freedom."

They stood there, silent, so he shrugged again, and recast Float on his burden. After a quick nod to Fran he turned and walked away, feeling somehow lighter as he did so. Vaan rather felt that going with them would equate to having to prove something, and the only person he owed that to was himself. Though, given their appearance in the Salikawood, he thought they might be headed for the Phon Coast. Fish would have to wait a while.

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## Starfall Field, Giza Plains

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He was busy collecting goods for a client when unnatural sounds encroached, causing him to look up, then start; ships filled the sky. Vaan wondered, fleetingly, if this was it, that mythical final battle over the fate of Rabanastre. A short time later he was seated on top of a dark crystal, the best vantage point he could get under the circumstances.

After a time he fancied he could see the *Strahl* weaving through the confusion, headed toward that huge, oddly shaped ship. Enthralled, even at that distance, he continued to watch, seeing all manner of strange lights, ships being shot out of the sky, and then . . . the strange ship began to slide diagonally, almost listing. It threatened the safety of the city, and yet, it was saved, the ship drifting, almost sluggishly, off to the west, to come to a crashing rest in the ever present Dalmascan sands.

Again he fancied spotting the *Strahl* and wondered if everyone was all right. Then he shrugged, caring deeply, but not tempted to travel to the city. Instead he climbed down and floated his burden, and headed toward Ozmone and Jahara.

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## Sandscale Bank, Nam-Yensa Sandsea

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His things were spread out around him like a truncated halo as he eyed both his notebook and the goods, checking to see if he had gathered enough to fill his latest clients' orders. Vaan grinned, pleased, and set the notebook aside in favor of canvas to wrap each set of goods in. Just as he had everything packed away and settled he heard a sound well known to him, a characteristic shifting of sand.

He looked up to see Balthier and arched a brow.

“Hello, Vaan.”

He nodded. “Balthier.”

“You looked busy.”

He wondered what exactly this was leading up to. “Yes, I was making sure I had enough to fill some orders.” There was a long silence, a question unasked, but he was not going to fill the gap.

“What is it that you do?” Balthier finally asked.

Vaan cocked his head to the side. “Aside from accepting hunt bills, I also take orders for specific loot, for craftsmen.”

Balthier shifted. It seemed to be an uncomfortable movement. “Is that what you were doing in the Salikawood?”

“No,” he replied with a shake of his head. “Not exactly. I had been traveling, building up a stock, so I could later pitch my idea. It’s worked out well.”

There was another long silence before Balthier said, “Yet, if you had a vehicle of some sort. . . .”

Vaan smiled easily. “Then I would be tied down to it. It’s enough that I take care of my weapons.” He paused, then said, “Hey, I need to get going. Maybe I’ll see you around some time.”

“I could give you a lift,” Balthier offered.

He aborted his turn halfway, considering, and glancing upward to see the barest hint that the Strahl was floating overhead. “Did you ever find that something more valuable?”

Footsteps sounded, drawing nearer. “Yes, but it slipped through my fingers, long before I realized its worth.”

He hummed softly. “Maybe you’ll find it again someday. Thanks for the offer, but I don’t have far to go. Doesn’t make sense to hitch a ride.”

A hand placed itself on his shoulder. “Not even from an old friend?”

Vaan deftly moved away and turned to face Balthier, shaking his head slowly. “But I was never your friend, remember? I was your annoyance.” He was unamused to realize that not all wounds had healed, but smiled nonetheless. “Hey, I need to go. Maybe next time we run into each other, we can have a drink, okay?” With that he turned fully and resolutely walked away.

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## West Ward, Nalbina

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The noise was a welcome one; it always was. He had delivered the merchandise and the sweet sound of gil clinking against the metal around his fingers rose to his ears. Vaan tossed a grin at the Bangaa as he slipped the coins away safely. “Good doing business. Let me know, okay?”

“Aye,” was the gruff response.

Vaan waved and headed toward the combination inn/bar, it having never, for some odd reason, been named. Still, someone during the reconstruction of the fortress to the ‘glory’ of Dalmasca had decided to cut it into the imposing walls, and he did stop in whenever he arrived, to check the board and to get a meal he need not cook for himself, and a bed for the night.

Worth

The board was lacking, sadly, any bills, so he dropped into a chair at a nearby empty table and signaled the barkeep, who nodded and sent a girl his way.

“Whatcha up for, handsome?” Her eyes sparkled as she gave him a long look.

Vaan glanced at the menu board. “The special is fine.”

She nodded, seemingly a bit disappointed, and wandered off. A short time later he was happily eating, and water with it like the finest wine to sate his thirst. He had only just pushed away the plate when someone took a seat across from him, causing him to look up.

“Hello, Vaan.” A strange echo of the last time.

After a moment he smiled. “So who’s buying?”

Balthier’s arm smoothly moved in signal, and when the girl arrived again he said, “Two Madhu, if you please.” A handful of coins were tossed on the table in payment.

“Balthier.” He felt amused in a way. Never once had he thought that this man would ever come seeking him. Perhaps he was actually . . . serious? Or, maybe, Balthier was simply seeking something long enough to cleanse it from his mind, like an itch that needed scratching. Could he live with that, should it happen?

“I trust you’re doing well?” Balthier inquired casually.

“Well enough to suit,” he replied, then nodded his thanks to the girl as she returned with their drinks. “What of you and Fran?”

“Things are the same as ever.”

He hadn’t expected things to be so awkward, and yet he had. The silence between them was maddening, and perhaps it was childish of him to want Balthier to be the one to crack. Balthier, the elder by several years. Eventually he said, “Things cannot be so much the same. You seem to be at a loss for words. Or maybe you’re just tired?”

Balthier did indeed look tired, and pained, but a faint smile flitted across his face. “Maybe I am.”

After a sip of wine Vaan said, “Been to Rozarria yet?”

And that carried them through the next few hours, with Balthier regaining some of his customary cockiness, regaling Vaan with tales of the places he had seen, the treasures he had liberated.

“Whatever is in Nalbina for you to stop here?” he asked during a lull. “Just a resupply point?”

“You.”

Vaan sat back, head tilted slightly to the side. “Been keeping track of my travels?”

“Perhaps.”

He nodded. “What is it you really want?”

“You,” Balthier repeated.

“Ah.” But was it a one-time thing? “It’s getting late, so I’m gonna head to my room. You’re welcome to join me,” he said evenly as he stood. He quit the table without looking back; he would find out soon enough if Balthier followed.

In his room he was not alone, but that did not stop him from stripping down without embarrassment, as it might once have; clothes landed in an untidy pile. The room the barkeep always let to him had a bathing room, which he entered, happy to see that the tub was filled already and that the heating system had been turned on to keep the water at least lukewarm. He slipped in and sighed, so pleased to be able to wash the sweat and dirt away.

“Need a hand to wash your back?” Balthier was poised in the doorway, cuffs rolled up in contrast to his usual polished appearance.

“Sure, since you’re offering.” Vaan smiled slightly and soaped the rough cloth off to the side, then lifted it up.

Balthier approached and knelt by the tub. An only slightly shaking hand took the cloth, then began a slow, circular motion against the skin of Vaan’s back. Soon that cloth was tracing patterns down his neck, over his shoulders, across his chest, and even down his arms. Balthier seemed determined to wash all of him, and Vaan was not above enjoying every second of it.

When it stopped moving Vaan took it for himself, briskly cleaning all beneath the water, then tossed the cloth aside so he could take care of his hair. Several minutes later he was standing, plug pulled and water sheeting off him. A quick pull of a chain and water was cascading down to rinse away any residue, and then he stepped out, snatching up a waiting towel to dry himself with.

It went into a basket, and Vaan returned to the bedroom. Balthier was there, still clothed. Vaan walked up to him and tilted his head back, his tongue absently flickering out to moisten his lips, and when the man said nothing shifted to the side and got into bed. Then he asked, “What is it you want?”

Balthier looked horribly frustrated for a split second, then shook his head sharply and began to undress. A bare minute later he was slipping into the bed as well, bending over Vaan to initiate a kiss. The next thing Vaan knew the sky had fallen, the earth had revolted, and the air

had switched places with water. In some way, in some distant, detached part of his mind, it did not surprise him that Balthier was such a passionate lover.

His breathing was ragged for some time, even after the bliss-glow faded, and he quietly accepted to be drawn up against Balthier and held, sinking without thought into the depths of sleep.

When he awoke he was almost afraid to pay attention to his surroundings. Had Balthier slipped away, back to his life? Perhaps leaving a note behind? His brow crinkled as he considered the idea of opening his eyes.

“Good morning, sleeping beauty.”

They opened. Sitting on the single chair available was Balthier. “Good morning,” he returned, shifting to sit up. Sun-gilded hands rose up to thread through his hair, then Vaan flipped the sheet aside and stood. It was not usually a problem, this need to relieve himself while someone else was still in whatever room he had taken. Usually his lovers slipped away in the middle of the night, knowing that sex was all they would likely get from him. He decided it was irrelevant and headed for the bathing room to take care of things. His bladder empty he returned and began to hunt out fresh clothing from one of his packs, dressing quickly and quietly, then took a seat on the bed, aiming a curious look at Balthier. Admittedly, he was a bit ignorant of etiquette in this situation, and he still had no idea exactly what the man wanted.

“I wasn’t about to leave while you yet slept.”

Vaan nodded. Time had never erased the crush he had felt. No, it had deepened into something else. However, the first rule had become don’t tie yourself down unless it ties back. “That was thoughtful of you. Thanks. Are you . . . headed out, then?” No one needed to know just how fast his heart was beating.

“I . . . yes.” Balthier seemed to be at a loss for words again.

Vaan stood again and started gathering his things, preparing to head out as well. “Hey, next time we run into each other, I’ll buy, okay?” He paused, deliberately, to see what Balthier might say.

The delicacy of the moment was shattered when Balthier got to his feet, nodded, and left.

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## Quayside Court, Balfonheim Port

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He was not surprised to hear and feel someone take a seat across the table from him, nor that when he looked up it was Balthier. He flashed an easy smile.

“Hello, Vaan.”

“Madhu?” he asked, raising a hand in signal. Balthier nodded, thus Vaan ordered. Once again, after an awkward period of time, conversation flowed. By the time the sun was sinking to rest and the sky was aflame he was feeling only the slightest hints of tipsiness, having nursed his wine carefully. “So, what brings a sky pirate to a home of sky pirates?”

“You.”

Vaan bit his lip. “What is it you really want?”

“You,” Balthier repeated.

Vaan chuckled softly. “For?”

Balthier leaned forward, toying with part of the tablecloth. “I’ve found my something valuable several times, but it keeps slipping away from me.”

“Why?”

“Because I—damn it all.” Balthier looked away for a moment. “I am such a wretched creature,” he muttered.

“Your eloquence astounds me,” he said teasingly. His heart was beating madly again, this time with hope.

Balthier’s head turned back, a fire in his gaze which softened quickly. “One would think a man such as myself would see the worth of a diamond in the rough, and not treat such a treasure so callously. Yet I did. I cannot hope that you will return my feelings, not after the way I treated you, and yet I do.”

Vaan smiled somewhat tentatively at that and swallowed, the sound of it overly loud to his ears. “And how would you treat this treasure now? When you say feelings, I must assume you mean something more than lust.”

“Yes.” Balthier released the tablecloth and snaked his hand over to take one of Vaan’s.

“Somehow you stole my heart. Oh, I have tried and tried again to dismiss this. When last we met I thought, this is it, I will be free once more.”

“But you’re not?” he asked softly.

“I will not be so melodramatic as to claim my life is not worth living without you, yet it almost feels that way. I have been a very stubborn man, thinking only of my freedom, my own selfish needs and wants, and yet I find now that freedom means so much less with you not in it. I seek your forgiveness, and hopefully, your heart.”

Worth

Vaan looked down at the fingers entwined with his own, admiring them, feeling rather amazed that Balthier had actually said it. “Got room on that airship of yours to give me a ride?”

Balthier’s fingers tightened, almost painfully. “Always,” he whispered.

Vaan smiled, his gaze darting back up. “Help me gather my things?”

It took another six months for Balthier to work up the courage to say, “I love you.” But that was all right, for Balthier treated him like a diamond—precious, yet not fragile.

— **The End** —