Of Casual Grunts, Brutal Commanders, and Outrealms

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Summary

Awaking with only fragmented memories and a fading smell, Robin must join the Shepherds in their quest to defend the kingdom of Ylisse from all who would threaten it. Both from outside and within. Meanwhile, three young women set out on their own quest, to change fate itself. All the while, Old Gods choose champions.
A Dream

Chapter 1: A Dream
The first thing Robin remembered was a sorcerer launching a ball of dark energy at him. Dodging to the left, Robin fired a wolf shaped bolt, growling when it intercepted another sphere. The blast from the colliding energy was enough to send both the madman and himself flying.

Dust obscured their vision.

Taking advantage of the cloud, another man charged past Robin. His sword burned as he ran. He ambushed the sorcerer with strikes fast enough to leave blurs in their wake. But the sorcerer was faster, blocking every blow until he tripped the swordsman. Smirking, the madman blasted the swordsman across the room. He crashed into a pillar which cracked against steel skin.

The sorcerer teleported in front of Chrom, who struggled to get his bearings. The madman began to cackle as a sphere of dark energy crackled in his palm.

"Chrom!" Robin sent a howling wolf frothing into the sphere, cutting off the mage's power. The explosion staggered the madman, bloody eyes spinning to glare at Robin in disdain.

"Why do you continue to resist you naïve fools!" The madmen bellowed. "You only prolong the inevitable!"
The sorcerer's ashen face and glowing, bleeding eyes gave him the look of a risen corpse. Robin shuddered at the sense of an unnatural malice leaking from the monster's skin.

"Come on Robin, we can win this if we work together!" Chrom called, "You're one of us. No fate, destiny, or god can change that!" He finished his challenge flourishing his sword, light from the burning blade glinting off his metal skin.

"You're right, Chrom," Robin nodded to the man next to him, "Let's finish this!" Robin ended his challenge by summoning another wolf, Mercurius belted to his side.

"Come then fools... and meet your death!" The madman bellowed at the two warriors before they charged into the fray once more.
The memory darkened for a moment. When clarity returned, the sorcerer was dissolving into a rancid mist. Defiant to the end, the monster garbled one last cry of rage before launching a pitch-black sphere at Chrom.

Robin felt his body move of its own accord, shoving Chrom out of the way and taking the blast himself. Blackness greeted him, every sensation voided, and for a moment he thought he was dead. Yet, sight slowly returned. Chrom's worried face swam into view.
Chrom sighed, relieved. "Thank Naga, you're ok. Now we can get back and Cordelia won't burn me alive."

Robin had a quip ready when an excruciating pain pierced his head. Somewhere deep inside his mind a voice swam into control and roared. It was a command, an instruction. And a fairly simple one at that.

"Robin? Are you ok? What's-!" Chrom's voice choked in his throat when Robin's hand shot forward and buried a jagged blade of lightning into the prince's ruined armor.

Robin stared at his hand in horror, mind grinding to a halt. Chrom gurgled past the blood staining his chin. Robin looked up at him, the dark presence was dissipating in his head. He had just – he had –
"This… isn't your fault, Robin, promise me… promise me you'll keep everyone safe …" Chrom's voice filled his head. Chrom's eyes gazed back at him, intent that he understand. Chrom's blue hair and shining skin and Chrom's blood was everywhere, "Please … go."

Chrom's last words wheezed past his lips. His body slumped to the embrace of the earth while the madman cackled manically in Robin's head, overwhelming and painful.

The memory faded again, replaced by voices. Voices that were so … so familiar.

"Chrom, we can't just leave him here…"
"...And what do you suppose we do?" Robin vaguely recognized the voice of a young man, his tone calm and deep.

"I don't know, something... I mean, we can't just leave him facedown in the dirt, right?" The next voice was different, and younger. Most likely a girl.

By this point, Robin could feel his eyes begin to open and sensation return to his limbs. He rolled over with a groan and beheld his rescuers.

The first thing Robin noticed was the man's shock of deep blue hair. His eyes were the same, compassion and steel shining in cerulean pools, the eyes of a leader. There was a girl hovering near him too. Two golden blond pigtails framed the side of her head, adorned with an auric headband and a bonnet. Her eyes were light blue, sparked with curiosity as she gazed at his groggy form.

The two ceased talking after hearing his groan and, seeing the man wake up, went to greet him.

"Hey there stranger!" Greeted the girl, voice subdued. "What you doin' there, huh?"

"There are better places to sleep than on the ground. You know that, right? " Asked the man as he reached down to help Robin to his feet.

"Yes there are, but thank you, Chrom." The name came unbidden to Robin's lips, an easy reflex.

"Ah, then you know who I am?" Chrom asked Robin, nonplussed by Robin's knowledge.

"Well, no, not really... I'm sorry, but can you tell me where I am? I can't seem to remember." Robin scratched his head as he glanced around.

"Ha, you claim to know who my lord is yet not know where you are? Someone pay this actor; he plays quite the fool." This quip came from a man that Robin had not yet seen. When he turned to look, he quailed.

Easily a foot taller than him, the man had wavy brown hair and a stoic face, the look of a consummate professional. Adding to his stern demeanor was heavy riding army, which encased everything short of his legs and face. He cut an imposing figure.

Now that Robin had his wits about him, he noticed they were all dressed for war. Chrom wore a lightly armored suit of chainmail underneath a blue shirt and pants, the metal clinking as he moved. A cloth and elaborate shoulder guard covered his right shoulder and a white cape was slung over his back. Chrom watched Robin look around, his palm on the hilt of an ornate longsword sheathed at his belt.

The blonde girl wore a more modest set. It was mostly cloth with thick leather crossing her torso and a large metal-banded skirt about her legs. Robin found it peculiar, the idea of wearing such bright yellow to a fight.

"I assure you, Sir, that I truly mean that I have no idea where I am. I have no idea how I got here nor any memory before this moment. The only thing I know is my name, Robin." Robin answered the knight's question and introduced himself.

"Oh! I heard of that before, it's called amnesia!" The girl exclaimed. Robin filed away the information in case he needed to name his condition later.
"It's called a load of wyvern dung, Lady Lissa, and I'd prefer if you didn't stand so close to this… Robin," the knight replied, giving Robin an icy glare.

Robin's hands shot up. "Believe me, Sir Knight, if I knew who I was and what I was doing before you found me I would tell you everything! But… I honestly cannot remember."

"Enough, Frederick!" Chrom barked at the knight, "What if he is who he says? We can't just leave him here. What sort of Shepherds would we be if we abandoned those in need?"

"Just the same, milord. I simply must recommend the appropriate level of caution." Frederick turned to Robin, "I have every want to trust you stranger, but times have been dangerous of late and at least one of us must be cautious." He nodded towards an armored horse bearing a lance. The deadly blade gleamed in the sun.

"Enough," Chrom commanded with a weary sigh. "We'll take him to Southtown and sort him out there. Will that satisfy you, Frederick the Wary?"

"Very well, milord," the great knight turned to mount his mighty steed and spurred it forward. The other three followed on foot.

"Am I to be your prisoner, locked away upon arrival to this Southtown?" Robin asked Chrom cautiously.

Chrom grinned at him before replying. "Don't worry, if we find you're no enemy of Ylisse, you'll be free to go."

Ylisse.

The word echoed in his head like bells. Where had he heard that before? It sounded so familiar, but he really couldn't think of it.

Robin walked behind Lissa, and for the first time his eyes were drawn to a staff slung on her back, a jewel nestled in its head.

"Excuse me, Lissa was it?"

The girl nodded, a friendly smile crossing her face. "That's me! Did you need something, feel ill?"

Robin shook his head, "No, I was just curious about your staff."

Lissa blinked before stopping and pulling the staff from her back, grunting when it caught on lose strap. After a moment of yanking at it, Lissa pulled it free and plonked the staff into the earth.

"This is a healing staff. I'm learning to be a healer, and I can't do much yet, but I try my best!"

Robin gaped, "That's… does it?"

Lissa giggled, a sound akin to chimes in the wind. "Yes. The staffs are made by the priests and clerics of Naga, each one carrying the blessing of the Goddess. Mind, the gem can only work so
many times and they're hard to produce. Can't tell you how many times I was scolded for using one on minor injuries."

Robin nodded, his fractured memory dredging up an image of howling wolves born of a book, "Are there other things that can channel magic?"

Lissa almost spoke before Chrom's laugh reached them. "If anything proves you have amnesia, it's forgetting about tomes."

Robin frowned again, suddenly aware of a square weight in his cloak. "Tomes?"

Chrom nodded, "They're a type of book that's been enchanted to channel magic for battle. Some conjure fire, some lightning, and some wind. There's a subset that use thaumaturgy when magic is channeled into them, but they're rare."

Robin filed that away too. He was glad that his scarce memories still told him what magic was, but it seemed he had much still to learn, "Um, one last question, about the tomes."

Chrom motioned for him to speak.

"Well… can the conjured elements take different shapes?"

Chrom and Lissa shared curious glances, a silent 'don't look at me' shared between them. Lissa lost the staring contest and answered, "Well… You'd be better served asking a veteran mage. They know more about combat magic than we do."

Frederick finally joined the conversation. "If he should be found innocent, may I remind. Now, if everyone would be so kind as to move along?"

Chrom and Lissa started forward, the conversation quickly forgotten amongst the rolling green hills. Robin kept his mind on the tomes as he followed, curiosity eating away at him.

*There's nothing I can do,* he finally decided with a sigh. *If I'm right, then I can use magic, and that weight in my coat is a tome. But… can I make those wolves?*

Robin cleared his mind, jogging to catch up to the others. They were still a ways from their destination. He had plenty of time to think.

Time passed like an unwinding clock as they walked. They continued for a few leagues, stopping for a rest just before Southtown's walls.

"Whelp, we're nearly there. How are you holding up, my delicate little sister?" Chrom teased Lissa who pouted at him.

"I am NOT delicate!" she yelled for the fifth time that day.

Robin had used their walk to observe them. Chrom and Lissa were siblings, Frederick acted as a guardian of sorts. Used to their banter by this point, Robin chuckled at Lissa's comical expression. Then he saw Frederick's chin pointed sharply upward and his smile faded. The tainted stench of burning wood flooded his senses and he turned toward Southtown, modest homes just visible over the ridge.

Lissa, who had since gone to the top of the hill, gasped and shouted, "Chrom, the town's being attacked!"

Chrom and Frederick quickly joined her on the ridge, Robin scrambled to keep up with them. What
he saw below was a nightmare. The town roiled in flame and screams filled the air as people ran for their lives or were callously cut down.

"Chrom, we have to help them!" Lissa shouted at her brother.

Chrom nodded, hand falling to his blade. "Damn bandits," he muttered, looking to Frederick

"Milord, what about him?" The knight asked, pointing to Robin.

"Unless he's on fire too, it can wait!" Chrom rushed to the town with his sister close behind, drawing his sword as he went. Robin watched them disappear into the smoke, adrenaline tainting his mind with nausea.

"Aptly put, milord" Frederick muttered before spurring his horse after the siblings. Robin was left alone with his thoughts.

_Hm. If I wanted to, I could run into the forest and disappear into obscurity._

His body turned to face the trees, but he didn't move.

_But, if I do, then both the townspeople and my saviors are likely to die. And, if by some chance, they survive, I'll be hunted down. Well, when I put it that way, looks like pragmatism and my conscious agree._

His heart hammered at the decision, but Robin drew the iron sword at his waist and charged into the town.

At first, Robin only saw corpses. Villagers were the majority, but he saw bandits too, holes punched through them or innards splashed on the ground.

:Frederick and Chrom: Robin thought as he moved through the carnage. He froze when a whistle pierced his ears.

Instinct took over and Robin rolled to his left, dodging the two axe heads that buried themselves where he'd been standing. With a twirl, he swung for the closest attacker. Unprepared for this show of resistance, the first bandit was decapitated with a wet tear. Robin channeled his magic on instinct and fired a bolt of lightning at the other bandit. His arm vanished and he collapsed, blood burbling onto the stained road.

Robin stared at the carnage. _I... really do not like how easy that was. I may not know much, but that was instinct. Was I a soldier before this? Do soldiers train in magic and arms? Or, are bandits just weak and I have the same bloodlust as an average man?_

Robin shook the questions from his mind. He needed to find Chrom and the others before they got killed. Something told him that there were many more bandits where the two he'd slain came from.

He ran through the town, following sounds of conflict while killing any bandit he came across. More than a few villagers owed him their lives, but he'd yet to see Chrom or the others. Hearing metal crash into metal, he turned into the town square.

There were Chrom and Frederick, but he couldn't find Lissa. Then again, Robin couldn't worry about her with almost a dozen bandits trying to trap Chrom and Frederick. Thankfully, the bandits were so focused on Frederick riding around them that Robin went unnoticed.

Pulling out his tome, Robin concentrated and tried to shape the lightning like one of his memories. It
didn't work as planned. He was trying to conjure a pack of wolves to rush the bandits and rip them asunder before exploding, but all he got were a trio of lightning orbs exploding among the bandits and scattering the men.

*Ok then. I'm guessing I need a good deal more practice before I can do something like that. Besides, that practically killed the tome. Sword time.*

Robin drew his blade and charged toward Chrom. Another bandit tried to stop him, but Robin parried the blade and smoothly impaled him. Casting the dying man aside, Robin finally saw Chrom in action.

Chrom in a fight was hard to describe. His strikes had a great deal of force behind them, but they flowed into each other smoothly. He also seemed to forgo defense when he pressed his attack, but his actions were decisive. In one instance, he smoothly opened a bandit from shoulder to hip before cracking another into the ground with a punch. Then, he smacked a blow aside before parrying another strike.

Savage beauty, that was the only way it could be described.

Snapping back to reality, Robin ran to join Chrom, stabbing one of the bandits bearing down on him. Only three remained after the electric blasts. This remainder was cleaned out in short order.

Chrom regarded Robin, surprised to see him there. "You didn't run?"

Robin almost laughed, "Weren't you the one spouting my innocence?"

Chrom shook his head. "I never doubted you. I just didn't expect you to know how to fight."

Robin glanced around, looking for any other bandits. "Neither did I. Frankly, I'm winging it, but I'll help however I can."

Chrom glanced behind Robin and sighed, "It's appreciated, friend, but Frederick has this well in hand."

Robin turned to see and agreed, a hint of trepidation entering his mind.

Frederick was charging in and out of the remaining bandits, aiming to split them into ever smaller groups. Any that tried to attack him met their ends on his lance, his slices quick and efficient. Every bandit that tried to flee was quickly run down, sickening cracks rending the air.

Soon, only one trembling bandit in a fur coat was left. Robin couldn't hear any words, even in the nearly empty plaza, but the bandit was obviously begging for his life. Frederick wasn't half that merciful.

A moment later, the bandit had a hole where his heart was and Frederick spurred his horse to join Chrom and Robin.

The two made for quite a contrast. Chrom was powerful and dexterous, but he was, dare Robin say it, a little flamboyant in his attacks. Frederick, on the other hand, was all efficiency, not a single movement wasted as he delivered death to those threatening his charges.

Speaking of charges, Robin finally found Lissa. She was curled behind Frederick, eyes squeezed shut while her hands gripped Frederick hard.
Poor girl. I doubt she's ever been in a battle, let alone one with so many casualties. I suppose I should feel lucky I'm not in the same state.

Chrom asked, "Is that all of them?"

"No, milord, the leader remains." Frederick pointed across the bridge to a large figure.

From their vantage, Robin could see the leather wrapped around the man's frame and the great axe he hefted over his shoulder. His movements were smooth too, like a veteran at ease with his work.

"Chrom, listen, that man is skilled, more so than the others. Underestimating him will get us killed," Robin cautioned. Chrom and Frederick turned to him in surprise.

"How do you know this, Robin?" Chrom asked.

Robin scrunched up his face, trying to think up an explanation for what he could see. "I don't know. I can kind of... see the battlefield. I can see strengths, weaknesses, weapons. I must have studied this somewhere..."

Frederick almost spoke, but a meek voice interrupted, "So... you can do tactics?"

Robin glanced at Lissa, who was shaking. A warm smile bloomed on his face, "I guess so!"

Her eyes regained some of their former light, "Cool! So, you can use swords, magic, and tactics! You're like a... horse that can balance on a ball and juggle!"

Chrom chuckled at Robin's dumbstruck face, "An apt comparison, Lissa. Happily, none of us have any injuries. We'll take care of the leader before sorting out the town, ok?"

Lissa nodded. Frederick placed himself between Robin and Chrom and Robin almost rolled his eyes.

"Ok, advance slowly and keep an eye out for surprises."

Frederick snorted, "I always do."

Robin shook his head and they advanced. Frederick went a bit ahead, his heavy armor providing better protection. The man across the bridge shuffled and an axe flew toward them. Robin shifted so the axe only sliced his cheek as it went by, burning a shallow cut.

Their leader laughed. "Come on little sheepies, it's time to pay for slaughtering my boys!" He crowed before charging at Chrom. But, the swing was slow, Chrom already knowing how to react.

Blocking the incoming axe strike with the flat of his blade, he pushed the man away. Robin fired three bolts of thunder from his withered tome, but the bandit was not kind enough to stand still.

"Ha! Is that all you got little sheep? No wonder your kingdom's in such dire straits!" He laughed before charging at the two again, unaware of the charging knight who had circled behind him.

"Pick a god and pray." Frederick suggested as he brought his lance to bear. His bland voice betrayed his focused gaze, not once looking away as he skewered the surprised bandit.

"Damn you... Ylisseans... You'll... pay for... this..." the bandit managed to spit before his soul left him.

Chrom stared at the corpse for a moment before turning to Robin, "I thought you said he was skilled?"
Robin shrugged, "I said thinking he was like the others would get you killed. I never said he was anywhere near your level."

Chrom snorted, "A clever tongue. But we have a town to put back together. Will you stay with us, even if it means dealing with Frederick?"

Robin thought for a moment before sighing, "At this point, you, Frederick, and Lissa are the only people I know. I'll stick around."

Chrom nodded before he led them into town, the villagers returning to rebuild their lives.

They pieced the town back together quickly, the damage minimal compared to what they feared. A feast was offered to the heroes, which was politely declined despite Lissa's complaints. As the sun began to descend, they left Southtown. Barely twenty minutes later, Chrom made an interesting proposal to Robin.

"Would you like to be a Shepherd, Robin? We could certainly use your help defending people like the villagers today."

Robin barely had to think about it. He'd been doing his thinking while helping the townspeople after all, and decided that, while Frederick was overbearing, he wouldn't leave newfound friends. He wouldn't leave the only stable ground, the only foundation he had for memory.

"I would be honored to join, Chrom."

Regardless of what storms came, the Shepherds and their recruit would see it through, even as their greatest challenge grew in the distance.
Hello everyone and welcome to the next chapter! I have an acronym to describe it, one of my own design! STSARW! (Shepherds to Saviors: A Rewrite)

Severa: What is that horrid thing, 7? Did you just throw a word to the Powers That Be and have them come up with that?

7: No, I didn't give it to the Powers That Be. I just thought it would be more convenient to write the name of the story as an acronym here in the Author's notes.

Owain: A fine idea my friend, now it just needs its own theme music and it shall be perfect for our tales!

Severa: *Opens mouth to quip at Owain*

7: Up, up, up! No sarcasm until chapter 5!

Severa: But…

7: No buts, you promised no snarkiness! I even have it in writing along with Owain promising to speak normally until then.

Severa: *grumble* Fine, at least I don't need to hear that geek's fantasy-induced madness this week

Owain: Hey, I'll have you know all my actions are the signs of divine genius…!

7: *Knocks out Owain with a statue before giving Severa a new plushy*

Severa: Ahhh! It's cute! *Snuggle*

7: There, that should keep them tame for a while. Now, onto the story!

Hints of A Future Yet Born (Glimpses)

With Robin on board, the travelers entered the eastern forest, their next destination Ylisstol, the capital of Ylisse. Robin didn't think it was all that clever a name, but who was he to judge? Unfortunately, the attack on Southtown delayed them so that the sun began to set bare hours into the journey.

"Geez," Lissa complained, "I still think we should have stayed in Southtown for tonight. Especially since we have to camp in these creepy woods."

Lissa sighed again and immediately began to splutter and choke as a bug flew into her mouth. "Ugh, I thinkp I sthwallowed a fly!"

Chrom smirked. "Now, now, Lissa I thought you said that you'd be getting used to this. Or were you just spewing hot air?"

Frederick, not wanting to sit through the impending banter, spurred his horse further down the path. Lissa, for her part, just wanted to argue.
"No, I am getting used to this! I just thought we could reach Ylisstol faster if we rested, maybe even got horses from the village."

Chrom hadn't expected something well-reasoned, but he fired back all the same. "Well, we rarely have the luxury of such things. Besides, all it proves is that you're too delicate to rough it."

Lissa took umbrage and began to rant at Chrom. Robin chose to ignore them. Instead, alone to his thoughts, he took in his surroundings.

*I seem to have a theme with what I can remember. I know how to fight, how to use magic, and I'm adept at tactics of all things. And now, it seems I know what to look for when trying to make camp.**

His search was cut short when Frederick, ever dutiful, returned to announce he'd found a campsite.

Conversation ceased as they followed the knight and began clearing the area. The silence was short lived though, soon Lissa was groaning about rocks and Frederick decided to make an announcement, as if he couldn't just speak normally to his three companions.

"I fear we're short on rations. We have enough water to make the capital, but foraging and hunting will be required this night."

Chrom sighed, that was just great. "Well, the only one of us with a horse is you Frederick. Lissa and I will go forage."

Lissa groaned once more. "Come on, can't we just let Frederick do his job?"

Chrom smirked at her. "Why? Do you want to be the spoiled girl resting while good people work?"

Lissa erupted once more, Robin chuckling at the sight. *If their band is half this entertaining, I'll never be bored.*

Then his mind went back to its thoughts, his actions automatic.

*I wonder, though. I'm obviously trained in battle, but, who trained me? Do I have comrades, friends looking for me? Do I have a family waiting for me?*

The imaginings hollowed his mood, but any imaginings did nothing for his memory. Trying to imagine friends and family did nothing but make him focus on his lack of memory. A crunch brought him back from the prison of his musings.

He was alone now, his companions off in the forest. A dry twig had been the source of the sound, but its color drew his eye. It was darker than the surrounding wood, chestnut hued if his fractured memory was right, and he picked it up.

What's this doing here? I asked Chrom if anything interesting grew around here beside oaks, but this isn't oak.

He pulled it in for a closer look when a sharp, spicy scent invaded his nose. A barrage of images bombarded his mind. They flew too fast for him to make out but for the briefest glimpse. A house, a ravine, a river at night, heart-pounding contortions he didn't dare try to name, and a ridge. As the images flashed, brief sounds, snippets of conversation, and names, accompanied them.

'...And you are?'

'That's too kind of you.'
'Thanks for being here.'

'Hey, stop that!'

'Well aren't you a charmer?'

'Go get daddy!'

'I love you.'

The images and sounds were gone as soon as they arrived, but one thing stuck with him.

Red. A beautiful, blazing scarlet. It was all he could conjure up, regardless of how he tried. But, when he finally regained control of both his mind and body, he found the bark's pieces lodged in his palm.

Damn it! Whatever that was, it gave my memory a boost, but everything it showed me is already starting to fade. Everything, except that color.

He shook his head and set about his task once more, Chrom and Lissa's voices slowly growing as they returned. Shortly after, Frederick joined them with his catch. Robin and Lissa stared as he pulled down the bear's carcass.

"A bear, Frederick?!" Lissa screeched, "Couldn't you have caught something normal?"

Frederick dragged the bear away from the indignant girl, a friendly smile on his face. "This was the closest game I could find. Thus, I brought it here."

Lissa huffed and sat next to Chrom.

Chrom waved Robin over. "Hey, mind helping me start this? Maybe blast it with some of your lightning?"

Robin sighed. "Sure, if you want all that wood to go flying everywhere."

Chrom rolled his eyes. "You showed plenty of control just a few hours ago. Why not now?"

Robin shrugged. "That was aim, nothing more. The smallest orb I can make is the size of my head, and even then, I don't have all that many pages left in my tome."

Chrom nodded. "Good point," he turned to Lissa, "do you have any of those small branches on you?"

Lissa held up a stick as if presenting it to a king. Robin laughed at her ham acting while Chrom snatched the stick and set to work with his kindling. A few minutes later, they had a fire.

"I've finished dressing the game."

Just in time, too. Venison was skewered and roasted, while Robin practically drooled as he waited for his portion. Another realization he'd had after being assaulted by the bark?

He was starving.

Minutes felt like hours as he watched the meat slowly brown, the aroma driving him mad.

"Ugh, this stuff smells. It's like old, moldy boots."
Heresy! Burn the she-witch!

Chrom's chuckles pierced Robin's maniacal haze. "Ah, come on, Lissa. Meat is meat and you must eat!"

Lissa groaned, that rhyme was just bad. Frederick was sipping at his flask, but even Chrom could see the knight smirking.

Chrom laughed, "Ah, you're no fun, Lissa. The only time you're ever laughing is when it's at someone. You need to learn to laugh at yourself."

Lissa huffed again, "Oh please. I can laugh at myself just fine, it's Maribelle that needs to learn that lesson."

Chrom shook his head. "A tad on the nose, but true. Anyway, food's done. I'll just…"

He paused at the sight before him. Where once there were a good nine skewers of meat, only five remained. Confused, he looked to see Frederick and Lissa both ogling their new companion.

Chrom turned to his left and blinked. Robin not only had the four skewers in his hands, he was almost done with them!

Lissa sighed as Robin slurped up the last morsel. "Well, I guess that's what hunger looks like. I don't think Stahl could have eaten that fast."

Frederick snorted, "A bold claim, milady."

Lissa adopted a contemplative face before giggling. "True, true. The day someone out eats Stahl is the day I start singing opera."

Robin, his hunger-crazed mind settled, stretched. "Well, I don't know who you're talking about, but I'm tired. Hope you don't mind, but I'm going to sleep."

He heard mumbles of acknowledgment as he hauled himself away. He stretched out on the ground and listened to Lissa mocking Frederick for not eating his own portion. Robin tried to listen to them, to keep his thoughts clear, but his mind wandered.

Chrom's certainly strange. I feel like a leader is supposed to be in command at all times and command absolute obedience. Or, that's what I remember it being called. But, he's so casual with those around him, no matter what it's about. I mean, Lissa's understandable; they're siblings, but he and Frederick trade barbs more often than I expected. Then, there's me. He treats me like a friend when I don't know anything outside of some fragments, all having to do with battle. Perhaps... he's just a different kind of leader?

Robin's mind stored his thoughts for later. He was tired, his bones weighed him down while fog rolled through his brain.

His eyes finally closed.

Then, his mind bloomed scarlet.

"Huh!" Chrom gasped, jolting awake. He sat up and looked at his companions, sleeping peacefully. After a moment of silence, he got up to look around, inadvertently waking his sister.

"Uh… What's up, Chrom?" Lissa asked, still groggy.
"I don't know, Lissa. I felt something… strange."

"Did one of those millipede's crawl on you again?"

"No, not that, something … sinister" Chrom answered hurriedly, hand on Falchion.

"I'm going to patrol the immediate area, stay here," he said. Lissa already had her staff in hand though.

"No, I'll come with you!"

Chrom, seeing her famous bullheadedness surface once more, nodded before pacing into the forest, Lissa close behind.

Their trek through the forest was devoid of all conversation. Initially, they tried to keep their camp in sight, but Chrom felt pulled to go deeper. Lissa, stubborn to the end, followed along. It wasn't until they'd long since left the camp that Chrom froze.

"Wait," Chrom commanded, stopping his sister with his off hand, "something's wrong here." He gripped Falchion's hilt hard.

"Yeah… now that you mention it…" Lissa began to look around until she registered the utter silence, "Hey… Chrom… where did all the cicadas go?"

Chrom tensed, pushing Lissa behind him.

The ground quaked violently. The siblings stumbled, barely keeping their feet. The earth before them cracked and soared skyward.

"Lissa, run!" Chrom screamed at his sister. Despite his words, they both stared at the rising wall in shock.

"I said run!" Chrom screamed again, this time pushing Lissa away from the wall. Back to her senses, Lissa ran the way they had come as fast as her legs could carry her. Chrom joined her not a moment later, liquid fire bellowing from the sundered earth and raining meteors of flame.

"This way!" Chrom roared at his sister, jumping into a large ravine out of the fire's path. Lissa stumbled as she turned, jumping into the ravine with a screech right as a large ball of flame crashed into the ground.

Out of harm's way, Chrom gave Lissa a once over for injuries. She'd rolled her ankle from her fall, but was otherwise fine. She whined when he prodded her ankle, but gasped as she looked behind him. Lissa pointed at whatever it was, voice panicked.

"Chrom, what is that?!"

Chrom whirled around, staring at several runes swirling in the open air. The runes froze before forming a large circle. A moment later, a line cut across its diameter, opening into a large, crystalline eye.

"Lissa, stay back," Chrom warned as he drew Falchion. Sluggishly, two figures were birthed from the glowing eye before falling to the forest floor with sickening thuds.

Inexplicably, the things rose from the ground and looked at the siblings with glowing red eyes. Chrom tensed as the figures, holding rusted axes, came closer to them.
Monstrous. That was the only word Chrom could use to describe these creatures. Their skin was ash gray and peeling, glowing red lights glaring from sunken sockets, noxious fog leaking from their mouths.

They were corpses. Old corpses.

One roared at Chrom and charged him with surprising speed. Chrom, caught off guard, was able to meet the creature. It could barely use an axe, just raising the weapon to swing, leaving it wide open to a slash from Falchion.

Chrom thought he'd killed it, but saw no blood. He looked back at the creature, which proceeded to turn its head around with a sickening crack. It swung at Chrom, but he leapt over it, if barely.

Landing on the other side of the creature, Chrom rammed his shoulder into the creature's body, knocking it to the ground. He finished it with a thrust through its skull. It let out a hideous groan, dissolving into a noxious purple smoke that quickly dissipated as Chrom looked for Lissa.

He heard Lissa scream, turning and sprinting in the direction of the noise. Bare moments later, he saw the other creature looming over Lissa, its axe ready to strike.

Chrom cursed, urging his legs to move faster, to save his sister. In his haste, he didn't notice three figures exit the closing eye. The first to make it out almost floated in the air, landing directly in front of Lissa. The monster swung down but its axe clanged off the man's sword.

Chrom stopped short, surprised to see his sister rescued. The other figures dashed into the forest unnoticed.

"Help!" The stranger shouted. Chrom regained enough of his wits to charge, roaring in anger. The noise caught the creatures' attention, taking the force off the other's blade. They took advantage and swung at the creatures' belly in perfect sync with Chrom's own strike, making it dissolve.

Now that the danger had passed, Chrom turned to look at the other swordsman, who'd already sheathed their blade. "I must thank you, friend, for saving my sister's life"

Chrom kept Falchion bare though. Frankly, he was in no mood for another surprise this day.

The stranger didn't reply giving Chrom a chance to look at them properly. His hair was short, dark blue like Chroms. He wore a butterfly mask to conceal the top half of his face. Chrom hesitated at the noble Ylissean clothing he wore, albeit gold where Chrom's was adorned with silver.

Finally, the stranger spoke. "I have only done what I must, Sir, you owe me no thanks." His deep voice sounded false to Chrom, like they were trying to keep their voice at a lower octave then it actually was.

"Well, in any case, you have our thanks, stranger. If you hadn't arrived…"

Lissa chose then to pipe up. "I'd be nothing more than a bloody smear on that rock!"

She giggled, a grateful smile plastered on her face, though the swordsman was unmoved.

"I came for one reason, to warn you, these things are but the vanguard." The swordsman turned away from them and began to move toward the forest. Chrom tried to stop him, but froze at the sound of a horse thundering through the forest. Chrom turned to face Frederick and Robin, both alarmed but still half asleep.
"Milord, milady, are you alright?" Frederick asked. His face didn't show it, but he was in an absolute panic.

"We're fine, Frederick, thanks to this… Where did he go?" Chrom answered, turning to introduce the swordsman who'd disappeared.

"I tried to stop him, Chrom, but he'd only give me his name." Lissa informed Chrom. "He called himself Marth, after the old Hero-King."

Lissa cradled her head, sighing. "He's kind of dreamy too"

Chrom was having none of this. "And you're sort of dreaming!"

Robin clapped for their attention. "While I enjoy seeing you two bicker, we've a much greater problem at hand."

He waved to the field before them. A large pack of the creatures that had attacked Chrom and Lissa were approaching them.

"You're right. Everyone, ready yourselves!" Chrom barked, Robin studied the battlefield for any advantage.

"Chrom, what is that?" He asked, pointing to a large tower of stone and wood that rose out of the forest.

"That's one of the abandoned forts in this region; they're dilapidated, but useable."

"Good. Let's get everyone over there. Unless, you fancy taking all of them at once." Robin grinned.

Chrom shook his head and led them to the fort. Well, calling it a fort was a tad generous.

The stone walls were crumbling and most of the wood had rotted, but the gate was thin enough to block. It also didn't offer any footholds should the creatures prove to be smart.

Robin sighed when he saw its disrepair. *It'll have to do. Not much else around.*

He waved Chrom over, "I'm guessing that Frederick won't take orders from me, not that I blame him, so here's what I'm asking you to do."

Chrom nodded and left to inform Frederick of his role. Robin and Chrom would hold the fort entrance while Lissa would heal them if needed. Frederick would use his mobility to break up groups and kill stragglers. It wasn't perfect, but having all of four people, and one that couldn't fight at that, wasn't ideal.

Robin took a deep breath, "Ok, is everyone ready? I don't know about you, but I'd like to see new sights."

Lissa laughed, the sound hollow. "Everything you see is new. How's that fair?"

Robin shook his head, wanting to reassure her, when a noise that wasn't the growling dead met them.

It was a loud, feminine voice to the left of their position.

"Captain Chrom!"

Chrom obviously recognized the voice, running to the top of the wall. He searched around for a
moment before pointing towards the forest. "Sully! Frederick, Lissa, it's Sully!"

Robin, curious to see this 'Sully' scrambled to join Chrom.

Sully was a masculine name, so Robin could be forgiven for being rather shocked at what he saw.

Sully was, first and foremost, a woman. She also happened to be riding a lightly armored horse, wearing red and white armor similar to Fredericks, if much lighter. She galloped toward them brandishing a steel lance.

As she drew closer, Robin drew in a sharp breath. Sully had red hair, cropped short and messy, and he could almost imagine she had similar eyes. He forced himself to exhale after a moment. Her hair was closer to burgundy, not the bright scarlet that shone in his memories.

She wouldn't know him.

Sully finally spotted Chrom waving her down. She started towards them when yet another voice joined them, this one clearly masculine.

"Hold, milady, let sweet Virion handle these awful creatures in your delicate stead!"

The voice was weird, Robin noted, furrowing his brow in thought.

Who talks like that? They sound… like… something?

He truly cursed his amnesia at this point. It was keeping him from creating witty comparisons.

A figure was drawing closer to Sully, and them, but all Robin could see was the bow slung over their shoulder. Once they were closer, Sully turned and started yelling at the figure, the archer, Robin corrected.

A moment later, Sully rode toward them while the archer picked himself off the ground and jogged after her.

Odd, that was the only possible way to describe the archer. He had straight, teal, hair and a deep blue shirt on. A small shield and plate sleeve covered his right arm and Robin grimaced at what he could only describe as a bib around the man's neck. Outside of that, his dark pants and boots were almost plain. But, what really made the ensemble of blue strange was the silver bow slung across his back.

The man finally pulled aside Sully while she was trying to talk to Chrom.

"Captain Chrom! I came as soon as I saw the fire and picked up this floozy," the cavalier pointed at the man, who introduced himself as Virion the 'Archest' of Archers. "Along the way. I'm glad I found him cause it seems you need some help."

By then the horde of creatures were beginning to enter range and Robin could make out their rusted iron weaponry. They were moving with purpose now that they sensed prey.

"That's ok, Sully," Chrom called back, "Robin here is going to direct you, and before you ask, he's our new tactician."

The growls of the horde were even louder now, forming a steady vibration in the air.

Robin waved Chrom down to the gate, calling to Sully while he was at it, "The one on the horse is Sully and the other's Virion, right?"
"That's me, boss man! Where do ya need me?"

Robin pointed to the fields. "Join Frederick and charge any groups you see! Try and break off stragglers before eliminating them. If you see any loners, be wary!"

Sully saluted with her lance before riding off. Virion stepped forward, "And what would you have me do?"

Robin glanced around the walls of the fort, trying to find a good spot. "Take that wall on the right of the gate! Fire at will on anything you see, but leave any that make the gate to us!"

Virion bowed and jogged into the fort, clambering to his position with ease. Robin joined Chrom back on the ground and took his position, the eyes of the enemy clearly visible.

*Here goes nothing.*

"Now!"

*Ch3. End*

I think I'll stop here for today since this chapter's getting a bit long for my taste (and I need to study).

Severa: It's so cuuuute! *Rolls on the floor in a happy daze*

7… I really need to make sure you get some lovin' in this story, huh?

Severa: *Continues to snuggle plushy*

7: Who'd have thought she liked them that much?

7: Well, since Owain is still unconscious I'll just wrap this up

Please review, follow, and favorite everyone and if you have any questions send me a PM, I'll try to get back to you as fast as I can!
Of Meetings (Signs of Remembrance)

As the first creature bore down on him, Robin noticed something. As he'd been riding with Frederick, numerous portals had opened above the forest, vomiting dozens of the creatures onto the burning earth.

So why weren't more attacking?

Robin could give it no further thought, blocking the axe of his attacker. He pushed the axe away, slashing it's chest. The creature tried to swing again, but pulled too far back. A swift thrust made it dissolve.

Chrom was working on his set of opponents, seven of the creatures boxing him into a tight ring. This proved a poor choice against him.

The first one leapt at Chrom. Chrom dodged and twisted, cutting the creature open from belly to shoulder. Two more charged him, but their rigid movements did nothing against Falchion. As they dissolved, the remaining creatures jumped Chrom, trying to tackle him. Chrom took a casual step back, letting them tangle their limbs and bodies. Chrom grinned and beheaded them.

Robin was hardly slacking off while Chrom finished. He parried an incoming sword before rolling under an axe. Robin came up from his roll and cut open a monster's throat. He twisted and fired a precious blast of thunder, vaporizing one. Three more charged him, but Robin ducked and weaved around their strikes before making some space.

I need something to wipe them out. I'm pretty good with a sword from what I've experienced, but I'm not Chrom.

He jumped back as an axe buried itself into the ground, another small fragment coming to mind.

Well, no point not trying. I've still got enough pages anyway.

He dodged again before raising his sword, the tome in his coat glowing.

He yelped as twin bolts coalesced on his blade, swinging the blade in surprise and unleashing the bolts. The bolts flew away from the blade, fusing into a single arc and cutting the creatures in twain. Robin panted, feeling energy leave his limbs.

Ok, note for later. Channeling magic through a weapon not only uses pages, but personal energy as well. It's powerful, but better to use only when there's no choice.

With the fight for the fort done, Robin joined Virion atop the wall to see how the others were faring.

In a word: wonderfully. Sully had charged a large pack, scattering them. Two archers in the pack trained their sights on her, but Virion lived up to his boasts. He swiftly nocked and fired four arrows, planting two arrows in the skull of each archer. Robin let out a low whistle, the sound making Virion smirk.

"See? I am truly the Archest of Archers! Who else could fire so far, fast, and accurately as myself?"

Robin nodded absently, watching Sully fight the pack she'd charged. Virion huffed and turned back
to firing at anything Frederick hadn't killed yet. Lissa joined them, having checked Chrom already.

She found Sully. "Ah, always fun to see her go at it."

Robin nodded mutely, eyes shining in awe at what he was witnessing.

Sully had charged back into the pack, sweeping her lance in a wide arc as she passed them. The lance took the head off one of them before burying itself in another's chest. The horse's momentum brought the creature with Sully until she turned around, flinging its evaporating corpse from the blade.

The remaining creatures charged at her, bringing their rusted weapons to bear. As the first approached and jumped into the air, the others circled around to flank her. It was most complex tactics Robin had yet seen from these things.

Sully only laughed from what Robin could see. She swung her lance and smacked the first attacker out of the air with the butt. The force pushed the lance blade around to Sully's side, skewering one of her flankers. Letting go of the lance, Sully drew the iron sword at her side and slashed while ducking under the last attacker's swipe. She sat up and cantered forward, not even bothering to watch as the attacker fell to the ground, split from navel to crown. Her mount crushed the skull of the creature stunned on the floor.

Robin and Virion stared in amazement at this terrifying display, Lissa laughing at their faces. "Sully's one of the best knights we have! That was too easy for her!"

Robin slowly shook his head, swearing to never make Sully mad. Virion was more vocal.

"Oh, such terrible fury in such a beautiful form! It reminds me much of a dear friend of mine. The bards will sing of our romance!"

Lissa looked like she wanted to gag. "Yeah, not happening. Sully's engaged already."

Virion visibly wilted. "Ah, then my love is to remain unrequited. Woe is me that I fail to find love after so long."

Robin ignored them. He'd waved down Sully and Frederick and now they needed to regroup. He needed to cajole Lissa and Virion to move, but everyone was gathered in front of the fort a few minutes later.

Chrom looked around. "Well, the coast is clear for now. See anything while you two were riding out there?"

Sully shook her head, but Frederick pointed beyond a low hill.

"Milord, only one of those creatures remain. It lies beyond the hill, waiting."

Chrom nodded. "Is it anything special?"

Frederick nodded. "The creature is in no way similar to the others we've fought. It appears much stronger and smarter. When I attempted to approach, it threw an axe at me. Had I not dodged, Lady Lissa would be reattaching my arm."

Lissa blanched at the thought but Chrom pushed forward. "If it's the last, then we must be swift. Once it's gone we can make for Ylisstol."
He turned to Robin. "Any ideas, friend?"

Robin thought for a moment. Caution was their greatest ally for now, may as well use it. "That one is probably the leader of this entire horde, it would be best if we approached carefully."

Chrom nodded before turning and giving out orders, "Alright, this is how we'll do it. Everyone, approach the creature cautiously and keep an eye out for any surprises."

Before they got moving, Sully cantered up to Robin. "First time I actually got to greet ya. Name's Sully and I'm a knight. You?"

Robin reached up to grip her outstretched hand. "Robin, pleasure to meet you, Sully."

She grabbed his arm and shook hard enough to jar his arm. "I'll hear your story later, but welcome to the Shepherds. Maybe you'll be decent sparring unlike that bozo over there."

Chrom let the jab roll over him. Now wasn't the time for petty insults. "Get in position, Sully! The sooner we do this the better!"

Sully chuckled but joined Frederick up front. Robin rolled his shoulder, trying to get some feeling in it, when Lissa passed him a flask.

"Vulnerary," she explained when he just stared at it. "Sully doesn't know her own strength at times. Just swig that and you'll be right as rain."

Robin still looked confused.

Lissa sighed. "Right, amnesia. Ok, short version, vulneraries are water and ground medicinal plants enhanced with a bit of healing magic. They're a lot easier to produce than staffs so they're sold just about everywhere."

Robin nodded and took a swig. The liquid was bitter, but he felt the pain in his shoulder ease before disappearing.

Lissa smirked at his awed face. "Seeing you relearn things is going to be all kinds of fun."

Chrom's annoyed yell got them into formation. Frederick and Sully would advance first, followed by Robin and Chrom. Lissa and Virion would stay in the back for support.

They advanced slowly, careful of any surprises. Eventually, they crested the hill and Robin got his first look at the enemy.

The creature was tall, easily a foot higher than the lesser versions. It's face was an ugly mask with long, ragged hair flowing out of its head. It had a massive axe over its shoulder with a smaller one belted to its tattered pants. Outside of the pants, the creature was bare of any armor.

It saw them and pulled the axe from its shoulder. Everyone held their weapons at the ready when it did something no one expected.

It threw the axe.

It flew at speeds one would expect of an arrow, its blade biting deeply into Sully's shoulder. Her armor saved the arm, but Lissa had to rip Sully off the horse and staunch the bleeding before she started using her staff.

The rest scattered, Frederick keeping back to protect Lissa and Sully. Chrom rushed at the creature,
stabbing at its side. It dodged and lodged a fist into Chrom's gut, making Chrom hunch over and nearly vomit. Robin charged in, distracting it with some stabs while Chrom limped away.

Virion circled the duel slowly, arrow trained on the creature. It was moving too much for a clear shot, but he just needed patience.

Chrom had recovered enough to join Robin. They kept swinging and slicing at any perceived vulnerabilities, but the creature would twist itself into grotesque shapes to dodge and counter. After taking a fist to his cheek, Robin gazed through his bleary vision to see Chrom flying at him.

The creature had grabbed Chrom and thrown him at Robin's dazed form, sending them both to the ground. It charged, sensing the chance to kill them, then it stopped dead in its tracks.

Virion had come through once more. An arrow was sticking clean through the creature's head, temple to temple. But, as Robin's vision fully returned, another cause of death was made apparent.

Frederick had impaled the creature, a rare look of rage on his face.

Thankfully, there were no more creatures. When they gathered around the wounded Sully, the stranger that had jumped from the portal joined them along with another two.

The first was hidden almost completely by a large coat that bared an uncanny resemblance to Robin's own. Their face was hidden in shadow, only steel greaves visible on their legs, and Robin couldn't make out their gender or if they had any weapons.

The other was most definitely female. She rode atop a large lightly armored horse with wings of all things and wore a set of light armor with a blue and white dress. She also had a lance held tightly in her grip, the silver head more intricate than any he'd seen before. Her face was hidden behind a steel visor, but she had a grin on her lips and her dark blue hair was easy to see.

Frederick placed himself between them and Sully. "I see. You were the ones that removed the rest of those creatures?"

The masked swordsman nodded. "Yes, I and my companions took care of the others."

Chrom came from around Frederick. "You are Marth, correct? My name is Chrom."

Marth remained silent.

Chrom shook his head. "A name after the old Hero-King. You fight incredibly well too. Where did you learn your way with the sword?"

Marth sighed. "We're not here to talk about me. You have seen the prelude to a terrible calamity this night, and we have warned you."

Marth turned to leave, the others turning to follow, when Robin stopped them. "Wait! At least let us know the names of your companions. If only so we may thank you properly."

Silence met them, but Marth's companions turned to face them.

"You may call me Catria." The girl said.

"You may call me Katarina." The other said.

Now that he heard their voice, Robin could tell the one under the cloak was a girl. But, the voice sent his mind reeling, the same images from earlier flashing by.
But the voice was different.

'Daddy, play with me!

'Up, up!'  

'I don't like onions!'

'Come on, Lucy's here!'  

'I love you, Dad.'  

'Don't leave!'

He came back to reality with a snap, staring into Chrom's concerned eyes. "Hey, are you ok? You've been staring at the forest ever since they left."

Robin blinked, trying to right himself. "I'm… fine. Must have been that hit I took."

Chrom was still concerned. "Take a swig of vulnerary. If that doesn't help, go see Lissa."

Robin nodded and took another swig of his vulnerary. The memories faded a bit and his pounding head settled down, but he was still reeling.

*I know her. The one that introduced herself as Katarina. But… does she know me?*

He couldn't give it any further thought. Frederick was worried about the capital from what he could hear and they needed to move.

Thankfully, Sully's injury was much less severe than expected. A quick chant from Lissa and a green glow suffused the wound, leaving unblemished skin.

Lissa prodded the shoulder, nodding when Sully hissed. "Yeah, that'll be a few days rest. The wound's healed, but everything's going to be tender till you let your body get at it."

Sully groaned. "Can I ride at least?"

Lissa glanced to Frederick, sighing at his steely gaze. "You'll have to. I'll get your arm in a sling so it won't jostle as much, but you'll have to bare the pain."

Sully nodded and let Lissa do her work. Moments later, they were thundering down the road.

Robin had to marvel at the horses they rode. Each was carrying three people, their armor, weapons, and supplies, and the horses weren't so much as breathing hard.

*That's damned impressive if I do say so myself. I'll have to ask either Frederick or Sully how they're so strong.*

He shivered at the thought of trying to talk to Frederick alone. Sully was a better idea for now.

The run was silent beyond that. But, the horses were able to reach the grand gates of Ylissetol within five hours, just as the sun was cresting above the horizon.

Robin marveled at the sheer size of the walls and the city they contained. People of all kinds were walking everywhere, laughing, shouting, and all around living.
To Robin's empty memory, it was the most beautiful thing to ever cross his eyes.

"Thank the gods," Frederick sighed as they entered the walls. "It appears the capital was saved from the great quake."

Sully groaned. "I'm glad to be back too. But, Captain, can I head for the barracks? I need some rest."

Chrom waved her down a street. "Go ahead. Say hi to Kellam and the others for us."

Lissa jumped in. "Get Maribelle to look at it if I'm not there in an hour!"

Sully snorted before cantering down the street.

"Hold, milady! I, sweet Virion, shall accompany you!" Virion shouted after Sully, following after her.

Everyone blinked as Virion ran after Sully, Chrom eventually sighing. "Let's... just go. Emm's going to need an update."

They continued down the street before running into a large crowd, people jostling amongst themselves.

Curious, Frederick got the attention of an elderly man. "Excuse me, sir. Is there something going on?"

The man pointed towards the crowd, excitement clear. "The Exalt has come down to visit us today!"

Frederick nodded, thanking the man before returning. "It appears the Exalt shall be coming through shortly."

Chrom and Lissa shared grins before taking up spots where they could see, Robin joining them

"The Exalt is the leader of the Halidom, correct?"

Robin's question made sense. He'd had the basics of the Halidom explained to him on the trek, but it was better to confirm.

"That is correct, Robin. She's a symbol of peace for our people in these times of strife. She keeps heads cool when others would call for war. It certainly doesn't help that Plegia continues to poke our borders, but she thinks of her people first and foremost." Chrom answered as the procession came into view.

The first thing Robin noticed were the Pegasus knights creating a box around the Exalt, most likely their personal guard. Each member rode upon either a white or black winged horse adorned with cloth or armor. The white riders wore armor across their chests, shoulders, and thighs. The black riders wore leather and chainmail. They all carried heavy silver lances.

"What are the horses called again?" Robin whispered to Lissa.

She laughed. "Pegasus. Or pegasi, if you're being plural."

Robin nodded and glanced at the center of the box.

That was when Robin saw the Exalt herself. She was tall and sure, striding in her pure white robes like a second skin. The robes were covered by a large scarf that held the numerals of 1-12 on it. Its meaning was lost on Robin, but the green contrasted well with the white. Her face was what stuck
The woman before him was beauty personified. A glossy mane of scarlet hair fell around her and pooled on the floor, accentuating her armor clad form in all the right ways. Her boots drew his eye to her long legs, the leather clad limbs stretching for what seemed like forever. She pushed her hair out
of her face and Robin was drawn to her eyes.

Garnets, blazing red gems. That was the only way he could describe the red orbs glaring at him from her sharp face. But, her face was soft too, the sharp and soft in perfect harmony.

She picked herself up, her hair falling past her waist. She continued to glare at him before speaking.

"…And you are?"

Her melodious voice made Robin's eyes widen. He'd heard that voice, he knew that voice. And now, a bit more memory returned.

It wasn't clear, but this woman, this knight, was perfection.

And her name came to him as easy as breathing, the scent she wore warming his heart.

She didn't know this though. To her, a strange man was staring at her like an animal. "Hmph, don't answer me then. If you'll excuse me."

She brushed past him, but froze when his voice carried across the silent air.

"Cinnamon…Cordelia."

Ch. End

7: Well I rather liked how this chapter turned out with a few continuing divergences here and there as I create this story

Severa: Is that really how Mom and Dad met?

7: In this story yes they met in the castle for the first time.

Severa: But they told me they met later than that! *Glares*

7: Don't worry Sev you'll see why that is in the next part so don't worry

Owain: Sorry I just got back from that food-truck you sent me too

7: Yay lunch!

Severa: I guess I'm doing the outro this time *ahem*

Thank you all for reading and don't forget to leave a favorite, follow, or review see you next chapter!
Meetings (Strange Feelings)

Cordelia froze.

How… how did he know her name? She hadn't introduced herself, had she?

She felt her foul mood give way to confusion, questions banishing her embarrassment and anger. She turned slowly, her eyes locking with his.

They were intense, but kind. Confusion swam in his eyes as clearly as it did in hers. Yet, his warmth was very, very real.

She spoke with a gulp. "How… do you know my name?"

His eyes continued to shine. He seemed to be in his own world, but he began to speak haltingly.

"I…"

She leaned forward a bit, a desperate curiosity pulling at her.

It was not to be. Another voice rang down the hall, making Cordelia jump and hurry from the hallway.

Robin watched her go, mind still trying to process what he'd seen.

Lissa bounced up to him, "Hey, Robin? Who were you talking too?"

Robin shook his head, "Just… someone I thought was familiar."

Lissa frowned. "Ok… what did they look like?"

Robin hummed, trying to find the words. "They were… perfect."

Lissa went wide-eyed. "Uh, can you be a bit more specific? You sound like a puppy with a crush."

He rolled his eyes. "Tall, light armor, red and white dress, long boots, sharp features, red eyes, and long scarlet hair. That help?"

Lissa stared at him before busting into hysterics. Robin adopted a consternated face as she howled with laughter, eye twitching when three servants walked by with nary a glance.

This must be common. I know she's a princess, but she certainly doesn't act like it.

Lissa's guffaws slowed once she started losing air. Robin turned as if to walk away.

"Wait, Robin, snrk, don't go! We, heha, have to meet, haha, with Emm!"

Lissa chased after him and started to drag him down the hall once more. When she finally had her mirth under control, Lissa answered his urgent question.

"Based on what you told me, you seem to know the one and only Cordelia. She's a member of the Pegasus Knights, but she only joined recently. I've heard that she's the best recruit they've seen in a century and, let's be honest, she's very pretty. I'd kill for a tenth of her looks."
Robin frowned. "Don't sell yourself short, Lissa. But, how is she familiar? Knowing someone like her is bound to stick in one's mind."

He held up a hand to stop her retort. "Yes, I have amnesia, I know."

Lissa pouted. "Well, we can think on it later. For now, we need to see Emm!"

Robin chuckled and followed her, mind turning back to Cordelia.

*She left in quite a hurry. I wonder if she's ok?*

-Cordelia-

She'd raced to the nearest training ground, wailing away at an unfortunate dummy.

Today had not been a good day. First, her breakfast had been cold. Then, she'd been chewed out by her sergeant for making a tiny mistake. Then, when she'd heard the Shepherds had returned, she'd tried to catch Prince Chrom's eye, again, and failed. Then, her seniors decided to mock and tease her about it, again. Then, her Pegasus decided to have a hissy fit, and *then* she'd been run over while trying to relax!

But, what most irked her was the lack of answers. That man she'd run into *knew* her, somehow. She was aware of her popularity, but the ones that knew of her fondness for cinnamon could be counted on one hand!

*And I don't even use that much. The fragrance should accentuate, not walk in before you do.*

She shook her head of the so called 'advice' from that damn book. She wasn't even sure why she kept reading it.

A crack broke her reverie. It seemed that, by trying to sort out her thoughts, she'd snapped her practice lance in two.

She sighed and went to grab another lance, ignoring the other knights walking by. Her mind turned back to the man she ran into as she started again.

*Now that I think about it, he was with Lady Lissa. Maybe he's a recruit for the Shepherds? Or an ambassador?*

She shook her head at that idea. She'd have been informed if an ambassador was coming, so that likely made him a recruit.

*If he is, I'll have to find some time to meet him. I'll have my answers, whether he likes it or not.*

With her mind focused and determined once more, she attacked the dummy with renewed ferocity, silencing her thoughts for the moment.

-Throne Room, Robin-

Chrom and Frederick were the first to arrive at the throne room, leaving Lissa to play guide for Robin. Chrom and Frederick waited by the grand oak doors baring entrance to the throne room and entered as soon as they were wide enough.

Chrom's eyes locked on Emmeryn, who was speaking with a woman in golden armor

"Emm! We've returned from patrol."
The Exalt turned from her conversation to see Chrom and Frederick approaching.

"Well met, Prince Chrom, Sir Frederick." Emmeryn greeted them serenely.

The room they were in was large, easily able to fit two hundred people within its walls. Decorated in gold, white, and green, the room radiated serenity and peace to match its ruler. In comparison, the simple gilded chair towards the back of the room was almost too humble.

"It's good to see you again, Emm." Chrom smiled at his sister, relieved to see her unharmed. "Before you ask, Lissa will be here shortly. She's showing our recruit around the castle."

"Oh, another one, Chrom? What's the story behind this one, then?" The Exalt asked, mirth in her voice.

Chrom scratched at his head. "Well…"

Frederick interrupted him, "If I may speak, milady?"

Emmeryn smiled, "Of course, Sir Frederick, what troubles you?"

Frederick straightened. "Our 'recruit' has a suspicious backstory. Or, should I say, lack thereof. I cannot shake the feeling that he could be a spy, if not an assassin."

Frederick’s words earned him a glare from Chrom.

"Really? Tell me, Chrom, does the man he speak of hold your trust to the point you would risk your life on his loyalty?" Emmeryn turned to Chrom, steel replacing her mirth.

Chrom nodded, "Robin has my full trust. He fought to save Ylissean lives. In my mind, that makes him worthy of both trust and admiration."

Frederick conceded the point, for now. He was still suspicious, but Chrom had the Exalt convinced.

"Then, the matter is settled, now onto business…" Emmeryn began before the doors creaked open. Lissa skipped inside, dragging a man behind him.

"Hey, Emm!" Lissa shouted, running to embrace Emmeryn. Hugging Lissa back, Emmeryn got her first look at the Shepherds recruit.

He was tall and… that was all she could really see. His simple set of dark pants and boots with a V-neck shirt hid most of his body, but a very impressive cloak kept her from making any further observations. It was a sleek, sturdy material, the dark color shining under the room's gold light. The edges were sewn with golden thread, weaving cryptic symbols into the trim.

But, the dark material drew her eyes to his head. To Emmeryn, that was how she'd know him, by his hair and eyes. His hair was a verdant purple, shining like a field of lavender in the wind. His eyes shined like opals, a white iris with swirls of frozen, iridescent color.

He was… unique. But, the eyes, though respectful and awed, made her feel slightly uncomfortable.

She realized why a moment later. Her brand, the proof of her exalted blood, burned when she looked him in the eye.

Focusing on his nose, Emmeryn smiled. "You must be Chrom's recruit. Would you be so kind as to share your name?"
Robin bowed deeply. "My name is Robin, Your Excellency. I owe your siblings my life."

Emmeryn giggled. "Please, raise your head. You saved Ylissean lives and helped both of my siblings. If thanks should be doled out, I would rather extend it to you."

Robin blushed. "That's very kind of you, Your Excellency."

Emmeryn rolled her eyes. "Enough with the titles. They're a necessity in court, but among friends, please, call me Emmeryn."

Chrom guffawed at Robin's pink face. "Well, well. I didn't think Emm would take such a shine to you. Maybe her days unwed are finally numbered."

Emmeryn stepped up to Chrom and yanked on his ear, whispering something to Chrom that made him backpedal. "Alright, alright! Geez, no need to bring that up."

Lissa giggled. "Yeah, you deserved that one bro. You and I both know she's not interested in marriage."

Robin found himself out of the family's little circle, Frederick to his right and the woman from earlier on his left. Not really wanting to talk to Frederick, he turned to the woman.

"Excuse me, I don't believe we've been acquainted."

The woman glanced at him, her red eyes stoic. "My name is Phila, I'm the commander of the Pegasus Knights."

Robin gulped. "Um, well, uh, it's a pleasure to meet you. May I… ask if they're like this often?"

Phila shook her head. "More so then I think they should be. Their duties are of the utmost import, but they always find time to indulge in these frivolous activities."

Robin heard Frederick snort. "I do not wish to offend, Commander, but I fear they may well explode if they didn't. Lady Lissa in particular has a hard time staying still let alone courtly."

Robin saw a faint smirk on Phila's lips. "True. I fear for the Halidom when Her Grace gets truly bored."

Robin felt his original picture of the Exalt begin to crumble. Originally, he thought she'd be this almost ethereal being that radiated serenity and peace. Instead, she just seemed normal.

Well, as normal as one can be when you're ruler of a country. Heaven knows why any normal person would want the position.

He sighed. He hadn't slept in almost a day and exhaustion was starting to weigh on him. Thankfully, Emmeryn noticed.

She coughed. "Well then, Chrom, Frederick, if you would come with me and Phila. We've had reports of strange creatures appearing across Ylisse and I have little doubt you encountered them."

Chrom nodded. "That's right, we did. Come on, Frederick, we need that wonderful memory of yours that forgets no slight."

Frederick sighed but walked to Chrom's side.

Emmeryn turned to Lissa. "Lissa, dear, can you show Sir Robin to the barracks? He'll need to find a
Lissa nodded before dragging Robin out of the room, the remaining occupants leaving to discuss events and give a name to the new menace.

"...And all of them are lots of fun!" Lissa exclaimed, Robin nodding tiredly. She'd been describing some of the other Shepherds to him.

Well, I was right. If Lissa's not just exaggerating to prank me, which she very much would, this band will keep me entertained if nothing else.

Robin nearly ran into Lissa when she stopped. After apologizing, Robin got his first look at his new home.

It was a modest two story building built of wood and stone. There was a storage shed off to the right and stables on the left. A pair of wooden doors led into the building, which Lissa pushed open with all the excitement of a chipmunk.

The first thing Robin noticed were stacks of weaponry and armor. Ranging from wooden lances and thick leather armor to healing staves and massive plate suits, the Shepherds certainly didn't want for supplies. At least, that's what he thought.

"Don't be fooled by all the stuff."

Lissa pointed to a rack of intricate staffs. "The regular military uses most of the bottom floor for storage since we aren't here often. All of our stuff is upstairs."

Robin slumped, his dreams of a well-supplied group dying a pitiful death.

Lissa giggled at his dejected face. "Ah, don't be like that. Come on, the others should be just over there."

When they turned the corner Robin was nearly run over by a pink and yellow blur.

"Lissa, my treasure, are you alright!?"

Lissa laughed at the woman, tall and poised with her hair coiffed into tight ringlets and clothed in fine vestments. "Hey, Maribelle! I'm doing fine, what about you?"

"Hey yourself!" The woman scolded, "I've sprouted fourteen grey hairs fretting over you!"

Their banter continued as Robin regained his bearings. Others were watching the scene so he took his time to study them.

The first was a large man with a thick leather sleeve on his arm and a ring of steel covering his shoulders. He wore no armor on his torso, his skin bared to the elements, showing off impressive muscles. Fortunately, he wore dark pants with thick leather greaves.

He carried a huge steel axe over his shoulder, the blade drawing Robin's attention to his swept blonde hair and scarred face.

The next person he noticed was seated in the middle of the room. The man was wearing incredibly thick plate with orange accents. He had dark hair styled in the shape of a bowl and a blank expression. Actually, he was so bland and uninteresting, Robin would have missed him entirely if it wasn't for the steel lance beside him.
The last person to join them was a young woman. She wore the plate armor Robin had seen on
guards earlier, albeit dark pink. Wait, hadn't Cordelia been in armor like this? Did this mean she was
a Pegasus knight?

Shaking his head, Robin blinked at her grey hair. She was still young, her soft face and fresh eyes
said as much, but she had an aura of anxiety that could be felt across the room.

Robin noticed that the room had gone silent. Feeling a pair of eyes boring into his back, he turned to
face Maribelle, who had finished scolding Lissa.

She cleared her throat and Robin slowly came back to reality, focusing on her brown eyes.

"And who are you, sir?" She asked. "I've never seen you here before and I know all the Shepherds
by sight, or in some cases …" Her gaze went slyly to the man without a shirt, "by smell."

"I was just getting to that, Maribelle, sheesh." Lissa sighed, irritated at her friend's fussing. "Ahem,
anyway, this is Robin, the newest member of the Shepherds and our tactician."

Robin bowed. "It's a pleasure to meet you all. I hope to be of service henceforth."

Lissa giggled at his formality, while the blonde man started laughing.

"No offense, stranger, but you'll find no better service than Ol' Teach's trusty axe!" He turned to
Lissa. "Hey, where's Chrom, pipsqueak? I bet he had a hard time without Teach, eh?"

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, so it's 'Teach' now, huh, Vaike? What next, Skeletor?"

"Hey, never doubt the Vaike! I could have helped you way more than this stranger!"

Lissa jumped at the opening. "No one's stranger than you, Vaike!"

She laughed at her own joke. "Anyway, as I said, Robin is our new tactician. He's also handy with a
sword and knows how to use tomes. So, don't think because he's coming up with the plans that he
can't fight, ok?"

Vaike laughed after Lissa finished. "Ok, yeah, but can he do this?"

Vaike belched loudly, making Robin jump.

Robin smiled unsurely. "I'm… sure you have much to teach me in the belching arts, Teach"

Maribelle looked ready to explode at Vaike, but the Pegasus Knight beat her to the first word.

Her question went to Lissa. "Pardon me, but when might we see the Captain?"

Lissa smiled at her. "Aw, it's sweet of you to worry about him, Sumia, but he's meeting with Emm
and Phila. It'll be awhile."

Maribelle looked at Sumia with false pity. "Poor Sumia couldn't keep her eyes off the horizon during
training today. She would have earned fewer bruises blindfolded."

She huffed. "But, I've had quite enough of the buffoonery shown so far today. If you'll excuse me."

Turning her nose up at the room, but noticeably not Lissa, Maribelle left. Robin watched her go,
surprised at her disdain.
Sumia smiled at him. "Don't worry about her, Robin. Maribelle warms to people slowly."

Lissa smirked. "Or burns too quickly!"

Lissa started to laugh but the others just shifted awkwardly.

Robin was trying to find a way to cool the tension when the door opened. Chrom's boots thudded on the wooden floors.

Sumia sprang forward when she saw him. "Captain! I was so... I mean, we were so..."

She proceeded to trip on thin air.

Robin stared at the impossible feat as Chrom bent to help her up, the others hiding their mirth.

"Sumia, are you ok?"

She nodded as she got up, dusting herself off. "I-I'm fine, Captain."

He glanced at her legs. "Was it those boots again? Didn't you have them refitted last week?"

Sumia sighed. "Yes. I... I just don't know."

Robin stood off to the side with Lissa, watching as Vaike went to greet Chrom. "So, what's their relationship?"

Lissa gave him a flat stare. "Who, Sumia and Chrom or Vaike and Chrom?"

Robin felt nervous to ask. "Um, Sumia and Chrom."

Lissa had the single scariest grin on her face. She stood on her toes and whispered into Robin's ear. "If all goes according to plan, she'll be my sister in law by year's end!"

Robin stared at Lissa. "Are... are you sure?"

Lissa rolled her eyes. "Oh, don't give me that look. Just watch, you'll see."

Robin shrugged, may as well. He jumped when something prodded his shoulder.

"What, who's there?"

Lissa looked around before groaning. "Oh, that's just Kellam. Turn to your right and glance to the left."

Robin did as instructed and spotted the man in plate. "Oh, I'm so sorry! I had no idea you were there."

The man laughed. "Nah, it's alright. People tell me I'm easy to miss."

He held out his hand. "Name's Kellam. Glad to have you with us, Robin."

Robin shook the hand offered. "Glad to be here. Actually, I think I've heard your name before."

Chrom's voice drifted over to them. "That you have, Robin. Kellam is Sully's husband-to-be."

Robin blinked. "Oh, you are? I'm sure there's a story to that."
Kellam smiled. "Indeed there is."

Chrom coughed. "You can tell him later, Kellam. Tonight, we celebrate a successful mission and the addition of a new member!"

Cheers met his declaration and they filed out of the barracks, Robin hung toward the back.

*I don't know what to think of all this. They've accepted me with nary a question and treated me like an old friend. It feels warm and light and friendly.*

He chuckled and his mind turned to Cordelia once more.

*Lissa said she's a Pegasus Knight recruit. Maybe, once I settle in, I can speak with her.*

Robin scratched at his chin.

*But, why was that girl, Katarina, able to trigger my memory? And with such different words to similar images?*

Chrom called back to him. "Oi, Robin! Either catch up or miss out on some damn good eating!"

Robin blinked before hustling to catch up, his questions buried for a time.

Unbeknownst to him, Cordelia had been thinking about him all day. Through training, chores, eating, and patrol he hounded her. Even now, as she lay in her cot, his intense gaze lingered.

Cordelia sighed into the quiet air.

*I won't have free time for another month at least. I want answers, but unless they decide to lighten patrols, I'm stuck.*

She sighed again.

*Guess I'll just have to be patient. If he's going to be a Shepherd, I'll see him around before long. Then, I'll sit him down and get my answers.*

She nodded, but swiftly devolved into planning out the meeting to the minute and didn't get a wink of sleep for hours. It made the next morning miserable, even more so than usual.

Still, it was a start for both of them.

That's all they could really ask for.

**And another chapter done!**

If anyone has questions, feel free to leave a review and I'll do my best to answer without spoiling anything for you!

As always please favorite, follow, and review!

Severa: So, that's how they started out huh?

7: Yep, you could say it was fate with these two right?

Severa: Well, I hope it gets more interesting from here on out! All this talking is boring!
7: It's called introduction and character development my girl. Now, let's call it a night since now I have to go on a recruitment drive again.

Severa: Fine, let's go. *both leave stage*
Months flew by as Robin settled in to his new life. The first thing he did after arriving was meet the remaining Shepherds and go on a shopping trip for the essentials. After that, he was inundated with reports, inventory, requests, budgets, and maps.

Apparently, in Ylisse, 'tactician' actually meant 'paper jockey'. He'd even found some forms that Emmeryn needed to fill out, not him!

Frankly, he didn't know what to think of the Exalt. In public, she matched her royal persona to a T, but when she wasn't, she gave Lissa a run for her money! Though, Chrom kept pushing the idea that Emmeryn was flirting with him. He just thought the woman enjoyed getting a rise out of him.

Despite that, he enjoyed the other parts of his job. He got to travel the country whenever the Shepherds went on patrol, he had unlimited access to the royal library, which he used to catch up on many basic things he didn't want to ask about, and he had a place to sleep.

But, perhaps most important of all, he made friends.

"Hey, Robin! Dinner's up!"

Speaking of friends.

"Coming, Stahl! Make sure Miriel actually gets to the food this time, I don't need her raiding the rations at midnight just so she can keep studying."

A man's laugh pierced Robin's tent. "Yeah, says the pot to the kettle."

Robin sighed. "Very funny. I'll be right out, just get Miriel already."

Laughter filtered through the canvas, fading with sound of footfalls.

That was Stahl, one of the other Shepherds he'd met after arriving. He was a man of average height with greenish hair in a near permanent cowlick, despite the many attempts to tame it. His face always had a grin on it, his easygoing voice a welcome respite from the others.

He wasn't soft though, far from it. He made for an intimidating sight in his emerald and white armor and his skill with a blade on horseback was a match for Sully's skill with a lance. Actually, the two of them were rather odd in the sense that they had the same armor, but had different colors and were skilled in the weapon the other was not. It was almost like they planned it.

He shook his head of that conspiracy.

I do still need to thank him for his help last month. Birthday celebrations are still foreign to me, but at least we were able to make that potion. We'd have probably gotten scolded by Frederick otherwise.

It was an important affair, as Robin found out. Chrom had officially turned twenty-one and, by Ylissean custom, had to start entertaining women looking to court him. Chrom, not wanting to face the lions alone, had brought all the Shepherds to the party, even the ignorant to all social customs Robin.
That had been quite the learning experience.

"Robin, do you mind? I'm trying to test a hypothesis and you're erstwhile feet could very well ruin my work."

Robin jolted from his memories to see he was about to walk over some kind of contraption. "Oh, sorry, Miriel. Wait… wasn't Stahl supposed to come get you?"

Miriel pointed to her left where Stahl was standing. He waved. "Hey there."

Robin sighed. "I'm guessing she refused to budge and when you tried to move her she threatened to smite you with fire."

Stahl chuckled. "On the nose, my good man. Well, minus the fire part. She actually wanted to use her thing there."

He nodded to the odd amalgamation of wood and metal lying on the ground, a large rock sitting between the two planks in a net.

Robin sighed, again. He did that a lot lately. "And what, pray tell, is this newest endeavor?"

Miriel huffed. "It is a scale model of a design I found in my mother's journal. I'm simply testing it."

She adjusted it a couple times before pulling a piece of twine near the base. A moment later, the net shot up and the rock flew through the air. Where it proceeded to knock in one of the tents. Judging by the indignant squats coming from the collapsed canvas, it was Vaike's tent.

"Hm, it worked. Right on target too."

Robin stared at her. "…What did Vaike do this time?"

She shrugged. "Nothing. His support pole was the closest target so I chose it for the first test. I'd thought he'd already gone to eat and planned to have everything returned to normal before he arrived."

She adjusted her spectacles. "Obviously, that is not the case."

Robin just sighed again. "Well, go apologize! Then you both are to get something to eat."

He received nods and he walked away, stomach gurgling. It hadn't appreciated the delay, but that needed to be cleared up.

*Scratch my original idea. Tactician doesn't mean paper jockey, it means cat herder.*

Well, that was more Miriel, but his point stood.

One wouldn't expect Miriel to be as much trouble as she was really. She was always dressed in a white blouse and billowing olive pants that ran into sturdy boots, a black and gold mage's gown covering her arms, shoulders, and torso. As if to make her seem even less irresponsible, she had a wide-brimmed mage's hat with a pair of glass spectacles settled on her sharp face while her orange-red hair was kept straight and tidy, only two ornaments adorning it.

But, that was just a mask. Efficient she may be, but the woman was a perfectionist of the highest order. Her reports were beyond meticulous and filled with enough jargon and overly long words that Robin kept a dictionary on hand just to be safe. She was also an inventor and self-described 'discoverer of truths', using a journal left by her late mother as a guide in her experiments. Many of
them did nothing to satisfy anyone but her, a few though, like her newest contraption, gave Robin all kinds of ideas.

After nearly walking into a tree, Robin finally walked to the mess tent. Thankfully, Stahl hadn't beaten him there or there'd be nothing left. Grabbing his fair share, Robin took his usual seat between Chrom and Virion at the round table they all shared. At least, some of the time. They only pulled it out of the strategy tent when they were within two days of Ylisstol.

As he ate, he observed his friends.

*We've only been together for a few months, but it's certainly been eventful. Let's see…*

His mind went back to his adventures with the ones around him.

Chrom had been his closest friend for the longest. He'd found that Chrom was an even more trustful and helping soul then he'd originally thought, patrolling the camp by himself and stopping to help at every village. It had consternated Robin at first since he wanted to keep his savior safe, but Chrom's infuriating logic and general demeanor eventually made Robin swear to be Chrom's voice of reason and friend.

Lissa, was both beyond charming and absolutely infuriating. She'd gotten a kick out of pranking him because he had a 'rubbery' face, but after she'd ruined a rare text he'd been reading, Robin had refused to speak with her. It had been a bitter pill for the princess to swallow, but she'd finally apologized, and they'd reached a truce that let them mutually tease and enjoy being around each other.

Really, there was just so much to tell. From him and Sully getting in a silly competition about weight loss, to Kellam's long standing reputation as a 'ghost', to novel discussions with Sumia, and practicing strategy with Virion.

But, perhaps his biggest challenge had been connecting with Frederick. He'd only really interacted with him when Chrom was around and even then he was generally met with nothing but stoic professionalism. It wasn't until after he and Vaike had been chased from a lake by Sully's horse that he'd talked to Frederick without any of the antagonism.

*The topic was rather inane. Frederick had approached him to see if he could train him to... eat.*

*Robin stared at the stoic knight. "You, want me, not Stahl, me, to teach you how to eat gamey meat?"*

*Frederick nodded slowly. "Quite... I respect Stahl and would rather not lose it on something so small."*

*Robin snorted. "Glad your opinion of me is as high as ever. Tell me, why should I teach you? You've been suspicious of me for months and you do nothing to hide it."*

*Frederick's face remained flat. "Milord has requested that I give you a chance. This seems the easiest way to do so."

*Robin sighed. "Of course. You don't want to try and bridge the gap; you're only doing this under orders. Quite bold of you to ask when you've done nothing to make me sympathetic."*

*Fredeick's eyes narrowed. "That's hardly-"*

*Robin stopped him. 'I'm quite aware that you are only concerned for Chrom and Lissa's wellbeing.*
But, if my risk just last week where I threw myself before the archer has not convinced you, then nothing will."

He brushed past Frederick when a hand stopped him. "Wait."

Robin glanced back to see what could be construed as embarrassment. "What?"

Frederick sighed. "I... was not ordered to give you a chance."

Robin started smirking. "Don't tell me you were too proud."

The grip tightened. "I was. I admit that I was suspicious of you for quite some time, but you've already proven yourself. I fear I'm not... tactful, and feared that I would only make the situation worse."

Robin sighed. "If you'd told me that from the start, we wouldn't be here. Alright, I'll help."

From there, he'd been able to get Frederick to stomach everything short of bear meat. It also explained why Lissa was calling him a hypocrite the night after they left Southtown.

"Hey, Robin, you're spacing out again."

Robin jolted and found Sully leaning over with a smirk. "Come on, you need to stop doing that."

Robin chuckled. "Hey, can't blame me for reminiscing when it's as far back as my memory goes."

Sully laughed. "True enough! Just thought I'd warn ya before Vaike stole your fruit."

Robin glanced down and delivered retribution upon the offending hand. "Thanks, Sully."

She just laughed and turned back to her conversation with Sumia.

Now that he was out of his personal reverie, Robin smiled while everyone talked. He took most of his lessons on how to interact in a social situation from them, so everything he saw was important and interesting.

For example, Chrom and Sumia kept making moon eyes whenever the other wasn't looking. Lissa had told him that they'd been interested for years and were doing all the things dating pairs did without even realizing it. There was good money on them finally getting their heads out of the sand by next year.

And right then, he thanked the dictionary and joke book he'd found in the library. He wouldn't have all these fun phrases if he hadn't found them.

Actually, there was only one official couple among the Shepherds, Sully and Kellam. They'd gotten engaged just two months before Robin arrived, the conclusion of a three year romance that started when Kellam saved Sully's life.

The story was that Kellam had spent months cultivating a garden in secret, going in and out of an artisan's shop when he wasn't in the garden. No one really knew what he was doing except Stahl, until the day Kellam rolled up to the barracks with a cart filled to the brim with Sully's favorite flower.

She'd been understandably embarrassed, but she cried, actually cried, when Kellam had produced a band he'd made himself after learning from the artisan.

Lissa even said the display had scared Chrom. Now he had a bar to live up to.
Besides that though, the others had their own share of quirks that made them interesting to observe.

Miriel and Stahl were a study of opposites, one astute and stern most of the time while the other was friendly and open. Or, as Vaike put it, a bookworm and a doormat.

Speaking of Vaike, Robin would not call him the sharpest tool in the shed. He seemed to lack basic knowledge of certain things and was prone to put his foot in his mouth. But, he did just about anything he could for his friends when the going got rough and Robin couldn't think of a jollier friend.

At least, most of the time. When the situation doesn't call for it, he's quick to show his belly.

Virion's voice caught Robin's attention. The foppish man had joined the Shepherds along with Robin, even if it took some begging on Virion's part.

He'd started flirting with every female in the vicinity soon after joining, but he surprised everyone with some hidden depths. First, he had a wide range of knowledge from dirty tactics to dancing. Second, he was a surprisingly good listener. And lastly, when he said he would do something, he did it.

Well, not always immediately. It took some coercion on the men's part to get him running while the ladies didn't have such need. Frankly, they'd extorted his services for almost a month before Chrom laid into them.

Robin had never seen Chrom so furious. None of the lady Shepherds could look him in the eye for almost two weeks.

He sighed. At least they'd learned their lesson.

"Hey, Robin, why ya spacin off like that?"


Vaike laughed. "Well, don't think too hard! We still need to hear your announcement!"

Robin almost slapped himself, how could he forget?"

"Sorry," he cleared his throat. "Anyway, can I have everyone's attention?"

He waited until everyone was looking at him. It took a minute, but a quick glare from Frederick got everyone on track.

"Ok, so, I just wanted to announce that we've officially reached an agreement with three suppliers. First, the smiths in Western Ylisse have agreed to supply us with steel and silver, but the specialty items have to be ordered individually. Second, the enchanter to the southeast will supply us with tomes and reagents. Third and final, the temples around Mount Prism will supply us with staves and potions."

He pulled the parchments out of his robes to pass around the table. "Be aware that you'll still need to keep all weapons maintained. We'll only be able to resupply while in Ylisstol."

Chrom nodded after looking over the agreements. "I'm impressed. Emmeryn's been negotiating with them for some time to make what forces we have of the highest quality."

Robin shrugged. "Oh, it wasn't easy. The temples were especially stubborn about it."
Miriel held up a hand. "Wait, is this for all the Ylissean forces?"

Robin shook his head. "The steel, yes. The silver's only for elite units. Basic and advanced tomes are also supplied along with simple healing staves and the more powerful Mend versions."

Miriel nodded. "Well, I assume this will take some time before everything is supplied correctly."

Robin nodded. "Yep. We will not have access to the supplies until after the regular forces, the wonders of being a militia, but it should only be four months."

Frederick grunted. "Not bad, but it could be better. I'll need to speak with Commander Phila about this when we return."

Robin nodded. "I leave it in your capable hands. Now then, if everyone's done, let's get to packing up. We'll reach the capital by noon tomorrow if we're quick."

He stopped Chrom. "Oh, and I need to ask you something before you go."

Chrom was confused. Robin didn't need to speak with him privately all that often, let alone right after eating. They waited until everyone else was gone from the tent and made sure that none had stuck around before Robin spoke.

"Well, Chrom, this is a bit of a personal request."

Chrom sighed. "You don't have to make a big song and dance about stuff like this."

Robin snorted. "Oh, please. Anyway, I would like some time off tomorrow for some personal shopping."

Chrom stared at him for a long moment before realization entered his eyes. "Ah, you want to try your luck for an instrument, right?"

Robin smiled. He'd wanted to get his hands on an instrument ever since he'd gone to the Royal Orchestra concert with the Shepherds. The music was so sooting to his ears and it made him feel at peace. But, despite all that, he'd remembered songs that had no name when the music met his ears, and he wanted to recreate them.

Chrom shook his head. "If that's the case, then you have my permission. I was going to announce a week's break when we got back anyway."

He smirked. "Besides, we're due back as the same time as one of our patrols. I heard our friend Cordelia was on this one too."

Robin felt heat rise in his cheeks. "I'll have you know that she's important to my memories, nothing more. I just haven't had the time to speak with her since our schedules are so different."

Chrom kept smirking. "Sure, sure. Anyway, her group should be off too. I'll have Lissa or Sumia set up a meeting for you two and we'll see where it goes."

He swept out of the tent, cackling at Robin's protests.

He slowed down as he approached his tent, thoughts going back to the parchment in his hands.

*It's a start, but we don't have the numbers to fight Plegia. Emmeryn's doing everything she can to keep the peace, but Plegia's been looking for any chance to start a war. A war we're not ready for, mentally, physically, or emotionally.*
He sighed and turned his thoughts to a more pleasant subject.

Lissa's going to love hearing about Robin and Cordelia. She's been dying to set up a meeting between them for months. Sumia's been excited about it too. If what she's told me is correct, Cordelia seems to have a mutual interest in Robin, but she can't tell if it's anything more than normal curiosity.

He sighed. Frankly, he hoped it was more than just curiosity. Robin was a handsome fellow and very easy to get along with. Heck, he was even a lover of music, reading, hiking, and all sorts of other things that Chrom knew Cordelia liked.

It was just the matter of her idolizing crush she had on one Chrom, who hadn't done much discourage it, much to his regret. It wasn't even his fault, really, he'd been young and dense when he'd first met her.

Not that it was a peaceful first meeting, which likely didn't help.

-Southeastern Ylisse-Eight years ago-

She was running as fast as she could from the pack of men following her. She'd wandered too far into the forest and gotten lost, stumbling onto a bandit pack. Crimson hair ripped behind her as she ran as hard and fast as possible, silently cursing her weak legs. She could hear them close behind her.

"Just come along nicely, pretty one! We won't harm you… much! Hahahaha!"

One of the bandits leapt in front of her, the others quickly surrounding her.

Mute from fear, she could only cry as they moved in.

A young man's voice rang out. "Get away from her!"

A much younger Chrom stepped out of the trees, Falchion glinting in the dappled light.

"Who in blue blazes are you?" One of the bandits shouted as he charged Chrom. Chrom simply ducked to the side and cut the bandit open.

As he collapsed with a gurgle, Chrom faced the others. "Anyone else?"

They fled.

Sheathing Falchion, Chrom turned to the young Cordelia and held out his hand "My name's Chrom, you?"

"…Cordelia," The young girl answered, admiration shining in her eyes.

Chrom sighed as the memory came to an end. He'd let the incident fade from his mind and hadn't even known that the Cordelia he met two years later was the same one he'd saved. It wasn't until Sumia explained that Cordelia had been saved that he'd remembered.

But, he was dense then. He hadn't noticed many of Cordelia's attempts to catch his eye until two years ago… When Lissa had started screaming at him.

His ears started ringing at the memory.

After that, he had noticed the little touches that Cordelia used to try and catch his eye, but he didn't
feel anything. He liked her for her work ethic and friendly demeanor, but he'd had his eyes on Sumia for much longer. It was cruel, perhaps, to fall for her best friend, but it was crueler to have not turned her down when he had the chance.

He sighed again.

*I hope they can help each other. Even if Lissa's ideas of a romance fall through, I hope they can be friends and help her find someone else. I don't want her pining after me when there's such a bright future for her.*

As he lay to sleep, a thought made him chuckle.

*Good luck, Robin. Hide it all you like, but you're infatuated with her. Even a simple meeting will earn you more ire from the young men of the capital than anything else.*

The next morning was uneventful and they made Ylisstol before noon, their feet spurred by the idea of a break. They dispersed at the gates, Chrom and Frederick going to report to Emmeryn while Lissa and Sumia went to find Phila, a plan in mind.

They found the Commander instructing a group of new recruits, her orders crisp and clear. Feeling it rude to interrupt, they took a seat nearby and waited for the lesson to end. They weren't expecting it to take another hour.

"Alright, that's enough for now! See to your mounts!"

Phila's command was met with a chorus of understanding and the recruits filed out of the practice field. She sighed when familiar voices called out a greeting.

"Oh, Lady Lissa, Sumia, you've returned."

Lissa smiled. "Yep, arrived an hour ago. Hey, we wanted to ask a favor."

Phila blinked. "A favor? This wouldn't have to do with that crepe fiasco last month would it?"

Sumia shook her head. "N-no! Not that! We were wondering if we could borrow Cordelia."

Phila narrowed her eyes. "And why, exactly, should I let you borrow my best recruit? She just got back today."

Lissa and Sumia shared a conspiratorial glance. "Let's just say were going to try and make her stop sighing."

Phila blinked before a doubtful frown settled on her face. "Girls, are you trying to set her up on a blind date?"

Lissa and Sumia almost panicked. "N-no, no! We're trying to get her to meet with a friend of ours that she's wanted to meet! We just thought now was a good time!"

Phila gave them a hard stare. "Really?"

They nodded in unison.

Phila stared for a little longer before sighing, a tired smile replacing her frown. "Very well. I wasn't going to have her do anything today or tomorrow, so I guess it works."

Lissa cheered while Sumia bowed. "Thanks, Phila! Can you tell us where to find her? Oh, we'll need
permission for our friend to come over too."

Phila sighed, amused. "She's in the barracks right now. She'll probably go to the training field in an hour, knowing her, and your friend has my permission to come over as long as they aren't in the barracks without either of you."

They cheered and thanked Phila again before racing into the city. Phila smirked as they went. "Oh, Sumia. If you were half that enthusiastic, you'd never trip again."

A thud greeted her ears a moment later. So much for that idea.

-Robin-

He'd been walking amongst the market stalls almost since they'd gotten back. Sure, he'd dropped off the non-essentials, but he didn't like the delay. But, everything was well now, his eyes casting about for his goal.

Unfortunately, he'd had little luck. It seemed that instruments were actually pretty hard to find for his price range. The cheapest he'd found was worth three months' pay.

"Hey, you, in the coat! What you lookin for?"

He turned his head to see a merchant woman waving him down. Her clothes were nothing special, but she had dark, almost blood-red hair and mischievous eyes of similar color.

Robin paused as he saw her wares. It looked like she had just about everything, from books to weaponry and back again.

"Hey, tell me what you're looking for! Anna's Fabulous Shop has everything your heart desires!"

Robin sighed, may as well try. "I'm looking for an instrument. Something of good quality, not what you can whittle out of a branch."

The merchant frowned. "Hm, let me check my stores. Oh, I'm Anna, just so you know."

She vanished into the depths of her stall, Robin shaking his head. Of course the owner would name their stall after themselves.

A few minutes later, the merchant returned with a long black leather case. "Well, this is the only one I got. Please take a look."

Robin took the case and examined it. It was in very good condition, the leather recently oiled and clean. He popped the clasps on the side and opened the case slowly, smiling at what he saw.

It was what Chrom called a trumpet. The brass metal gleamed in the afternoon sun, no rust to be found on any of its keys or joints. The tops of the keys had a milky white stone pressed flat into it, and when he tested the keys they slid in and out smoothly.

Perfect.

"How much?"

Anna tapped her chin. "Considering it's my last one… Two thousand."

Robin almost choked. "What?!"
Anna shrugged. "It's a pretty rare piece. Far as I know, only nobles can get their hands on them."

Robin stared her down. "Can I know the price of production?"

Anna smirked. "Nope! Trade secret."

Robin glanced down at the beautiful metal. "Can I convince you to lower it to Fifteen hundred?"

She laughed. "Oh, a haggler? Hmm, nope, won't go any lower than Two thousand."

He leaned forward. "Are you sure about that? I'd be willing to part with Sixteen hundred."

She stood her ground. "Since you're cute, I'll lower it to Nineteen fifty."

"Sixteen fifty."

"Nineteen hundred."

"Seventeen hundred."

Eighteen fifty and I will go no lower."

Robin sighed, just in his range. "Very well, eighteen fifty it is."

He pulled out a sack of coins and tossed it to her. She took her time counting, but it was all there. "Pleasure doing business with you!"

Robin rolled his eyes before grabbing the case and setting off for his room. He couldn't keep a slight skip out of his step, but the price was well worth the opportunity. Now he could just relax and familiarize himself with the instrument, all with a good weeks' worth of pay still in his pocket.

Those plans died a sad death soon after he'd stored the case.

"Hey, Robin, you busy?"

That was Lissa, a Lissa with the sing-song 'I'm up to no good' voice.

"We have something exciting we want to share!"

That was Sumia, a Sumia with the 'My favorite book characters got together' matchmaker voice.

Oh dear.

"Actually, I'll have you two know that I am-"

Lissa grabbed his arm. "Good, glad your free. Come on!"

Sumia grabbed his other arm and they began to gleefully drag him to some destination or another. He'd certainly grown stronger in the last few months, he had battle and Frederick to thank for that, but there was no escaping their death grips.

After being unceremoniously dragged through the city, Robin found himself staring at the entrance to the Pegasus Knight compound.

"So," he began, "tell me why I'm somewhere that I shouldn't be."

Lissa and Sumia just gave him a pair of sweet smiles that opened a pit in his stomach.
Lissa patted his shoulder. "Don't worry, Rob. We're here to pick up a guest is all."

The pit grew. "Guest?"

Sumia giggled. "Oh, you'll see. Wait here, I'll go get her!"

Silence descended on them as they waited, Robin thinking and Lissa almost jumping out of her dress in excitement. A few minutes later, the gates swung open and Robin's stomach fell into his feet.

Apparently, the guest was Cordelia. And by the looks of it, she was just as surprised as him.

"Oh, so this is the one you wanted me to meet."

Cordelia had kept tabs on the man after running into him at the castle. He'd been announced as the new tactician of the Shepherds the day after their run in and she hadn't physically seen him since. Well, that was a lie; she'd seen him a few times over the last few months. But, those were just glimpses, now she could actually speak to him and hopefully get her answers.

Robin coughed nervously before introducing himself, "It's good to meet you, milady. I am Robin of the Shepherds."

Cordelia smiled. "I've heard of you, Sir Robin. Your actions in the field have given you quite the reputation."

Robin blushed. "I assure you, those are exaggerations. My comrades are willing to follow my orders and I do the best I can."

Cordelia blinked. "Oh? So the stories of you leading the Shepherds against an army of bandits and a great swarm of those Risen without a single major injury are false?"

Lissa jumped in. "Oh, I assure you, they are quite true."

Robin glared at her, but Lissa continued unabated. "Now then, do you have anything to do right now, Cordelia? We're getting dinner over at The Melting Pot, my treat."

Cordelia jumped, she hadn't noticed the sprightly princess. "L-lady Lissa! Please, forgive my dreadful manners, I should have addressed you first."

Lissa smirked before shock flashed across her face. "Ah, horse plop! I need to talk with Chrom about our staves supply. Sorry guys, I have to go."

She untied a bag at her waist and tossed it to Robin. "Money for dinner. Bye!"

She took off down the road, soon disappearing around a corner.

Sumia glanced between the dumbfounded Robin and Cordelia before sighing. "I'll have to take a rain check too. Remember, Cordelia, I was supposed to give Phila a full report when we got back."
Cordelia nodded slowly. That was true, but this seemed a tad convenient. It didn't really matter, she'd finally have Robin alone to interrogate, but it smacked of something very different.

Sumia smiled before disappearing into the compound once again.

Now alone, awkward silence stretched for an eternity as they tried to think of the next move.

Cordelia eventually shrugged. "Well, I won't say no to a meal. Shall we?"

Robin snapped out of his thoughts and nodded. "I hope you don't mind guiding me. I haven't been to this part of the city much."

She smiled. "No problem, I know the quickest way to The Melting Pot. We'd best hurry though, it gets very busy at sunset."

Robin nodded, silently cursing himself for ignoring the setting sun. They walked into the streets in silence, only speaking when Cordelia gave directions. Eventually, Robin got tired of the silence and stuck up a conversation.

"So, I don't mean to pry, but why join the Pegasus Knights? Was there any real reason for it?"

Cordelia shook her head. "You must not be from around here if you don't know that. It's every little girl's dream to joining the Knights. The tales of their bravery and devotion to the realm are legendary and we strive to be just like them. That's why I joined."

He was startled by the passion in her voice. "I… didn't mean to offend."

She gasped. "Oh, no, sorry, I'm not offended! I just get a bit fired up talking about it."

Robin smiled. "Don't worry about it. As you said, I'm not from around here, but I'd love to learn."

Cordelia felt a smile cross her face. "Well… how about I teach you. I'm always glad to share the stories."

Robin nodded and the atmosphere relaxed. Cordelia began to teach him the various legends and stories of the Pegasus Knights as they walked, finishing her latest tale as they arrived.

"… and that's the tale of Mary the Clumsy. One of our more humorous tales, but inspiring in its own way."

Robin was too busy chuckling to answer, but calmed down when he saw the sign on the building. "Oh, looks like we're here."

Cordelia glanced up. "Oh, indeed we are. Looks like we showed up right on time too."

The restaurant wasn't too busy, but it was certainly lively. A waiter sat them at a table near the window and they started chatting about work.

"Wait, you do the entire inventory yourself?"

Cordelia sipped from her mug. "Yes. I do it to clear my head most of the time, but I just like keeping things tidy."

Robin chuckled. "I try and do that with my charts and maps, but it always ends up a mess. Miriel's far better at it, but she's not terribly efficient with how meticulous she is."
He sipped from his mug. "But, that can't be the only thing you do to relax. Anything else you enjoy doing? Hobbies?"

She smiled. "I'll tell you if you share first."

He laughed. "Oh, trying to pry it out of me first? Very well. I enjoy reading most of all, but there's something cathartic in training. Outside of that, I play chess and talk with my comrades. Your turn."

Cordelia twirled a finger in her hair. "Well, I train a lot to relieve stress too. I can't say I read a lot, but I always enjoy a good book. I've never played chess, but I love swimming and flying on my Pegasus."

Robin snorted. "I've had little chance to swim, but I like the idea of it. Flight… well, controlled flight sounds great."

Cordelia smiled. "Oh? That sounds like a story if I've ever heard it. Care to share?"

Robin nodded before launching into his tale. From there they began to trade stories about the various silly situations they'd found themselves in, laughing hard whenever a particularly absurd tale came to the front.

"And then, Vaike starts screaming 'GHOOOOOOOOOST' right after Kellam put the cups down, scaring the daylights out of everybody! Lissa refused to leave her tent afterwards!"

He laughed hard, tears in his eyes. Cordelia wasn't far behind, almost choking on her laughter. It was a good thing they'd ordered before the tales began, but they'd attracted more than a few annoyed looks.

"Alright, that's pretty good" Cordelia began, leaning her head on her hand. "I don't have anything that can beat that."

Robin grinned sheepishly. "It's nothing, really. We just travel a lot and people get bored."

Cordelia grinned as their food finally arrived. "Well, I can't say that patrol keeps people any more focused. I've seen some of the veterans play cards or dice whenever there's a lull."

Robin nodded and they started to eat. After a few minutes of comfortable silence, a soft tune drifted across the restaurant. Apparently, there was a band.

"I feel like I know that tune," Robin commented as he listened, "I just can't put my finger on it."

Cordelia was tapping out the beat with her hand. "It's a local favorite. You'll hear it just about everywhere."

Robin turned back to her. "You like music?"

She smiled. "Of course. I play harp and the lyre in my spare time, though I'm not that good."

Robin had an idea. "I really like music too. In fact, I was going to go look for someone to help me learn how to play."

Cordelia stared. "Wait, you mean me? Surely there's someone better."

He shrugged. "I don't have time for formal lessons. I'd prefer to learn in a more casual setting, preferably with a friend."
She smirked. "Oh? I'm a friend already?"

He stuck a bite in his mouth. "Why not? We seem to get along well enough."

She chuckled again. "You're certainly interesting, that much is for sure. But, how about we finish up? I don't know about you, but I'd rather lose the audience."

Robin sighed. Less than ten minutes after they'd entered, some groups had come in. Each was a set of very poorly disguised Shepherds and he could swear that Phila and Frederick were there too.

And that wasn't counting the many envious glares he'd been receiving from the bachelors in the audience.

"Sounds good to me."

They polished off their meals before paying and walking out into the night streets. Once sure that the others were still stuck in the restaurant, they took off running and disappeared into the maze of streets.

Judging by the scream of frustration that could only be Lissa that broke the peaceful air a few minutes later, they succeeded.

Stopping for a quick breath, Robin turned to see Cordelia leaned against a wall. She was panting pretty hard and looked far more tired then she should for such a short run.

"Cordelia? Are you ok?"

Her head shot up, face red with either exertion or embarrassment. "I… guess… you foun out."

He tilted his head. "Found out what?"

She took another gulp of air. "I…I'm a very poor runner. I … don't have much… stamina."

A light went off over Robin's head. "Ah, that's the other reason you enlisted as a Pegasus Knight isn't it."

She nodded her head, beyond embarrassed.

He laughed. "Well, since I know such a big secret, I'll tell you one of my own. Sound fair?"

She nodded slowly, curiosity burning in her chest. He walked toward her slowly, leaning in close to her ear when he was close enough.

He couldn't tell his closeness made her ears flame, instead assuming she was still tired.

"No one really knows this outside of my close friends. I have amnesia. Not one memory remains from before Chrom found me lying face first in the dirt near Souhtown."

His whisper made her eyes widen. How could that be? How could someone without memory know her?

His voice tickled her ear again. "Something about you, though, tugs at my mind. That cinnamon oil you wear makes my memory go mad, and I want to know why."

He leaned back, serious eyes meeting her shocked ones. "I assume you want to say something too?"
She gulped. "I… have wanted to know how you recognized me when I didn't know your face. I wanted to know how you knew about the oil. Only Sumia knows about it."

His smile seemed vicious in the low light. "Well, I guess we both have questions that the other can't answer."

They stood there, staring at each other, for what felt like forever. Eventually, Robin sighed.

"No… no this isn't how I want us to be."

He walked forward and kneeled, keeping his eyes even with her. "I want us to be like when we were eating. Obviously, we can't answer the questions we hold as is, but that doesn't mean we can't be friends. I'd… really like to be friends."

Cordelia stared at him, his intense gaze making her knees go weak. Well, weaker than they already were.

"That… sounds great."

His face instantly relaxed, like a great weight left his shoulders. "Thank you. I… didn't mean to get so pushy."

She finally stood up. "No, no, I understand. If I were in your situation, I'd want to know too."

He stood up too. "So… can we, maybe, meet again?"

She smiled. "Of course. I'm actually stationed here for some time so, if you're free, you can find me over by the training fields most of the time."

They stood there awkwardly for a moment before Robin coughed. "Well then, it's getting late. While I'm quite sure you can handle yourself, may I escort you back to the compound?"

Cordelia shrugged. "You've already paid, albeit with Lady Lissa's money, so why not? I do enjoy the company of gentleman after all."

Robin felt a wry smile cross his lips. "Well then, milady, shall we?"

He held out his arm and she took it with a laugh. "Why, yes we shall."

The walk back was comfortable, neither speaking. They said their goodbyes at the gate and Robin soon found himself back in his room, thoughts filled with his new friend.

She's even better than I thought she was. She's smart, witty in her retorts, elegant in her movements, and kind in her actions. I still do not know why her name came to me that day, or why it is that the smell of cinnamon warms me so, but I know this. Not fighting against Lissa and Sumia was a great decision.

The thought brought a silly grin to his face before his mind was claimed by sleep.

Meanwhile, in the Pegasus Knight compound, Cordelia was by her cot, her new friend on her mind.

Today was certainly eventful. First I find out I'm to remain here for a time, then I end up going to dinner with the man I've been trying to meet.

She winced as she combed out a small tangle in her hair.
He's certainly entertaining. He was even considerate enough to let me ramble until we got to dinner. Funny too.

She giggled, remembering his recollection of the 'Camp Ghost'.

But, he's so intelligent too. He was able to guess at most of the riddles I tried while we were swapping tales. And he's so... intense.

Her mind called forth his eyes, the opals shining under the moon's light, threatening to overwhelm her. She shook her head free of the image, face flushed.

Ok, calm down Cordelia. I was surprised to find out he had amnesia, frustrated too, but maybe meeting with him will help us both get the answers we seek. Besides, even if we don't, it's always nice to make a new friend when I've been so short of them the last while.

She sighed. Now wasn't the time to be dwelling on that, she was tired and needed her rest.

But, as she lay to sleep and her mind was filled with verdant purple and opals, she smiled.

We'll meet again tomorrow. Perhaps... my stay will be even better than I thought.

They met nearly every day for the next month. Their first few meetings were simple chats, learning a bit more about each other, but they soon began to spar. And, on the days when neither wanted to spar, Cordelia began to teach Robin how to play his trumpet. She wasn't the most familiar with the instrument, but Robin was a quick study and began to play with passable skill about a week in.

Cordelia couldn't keep these meetings from the other knights though. Soon enough, they began to tease her about her meetings with Robin, calling them rendezvous. Cordelia was understandably steamed and the teasing ceased when she beat one of her seniors into the dirt during a sparring match.

Robin, on the other hand, had a far more annoying set of distractions. First were the other Shepherds that liked to tease him about the meetings and demand details whenever he returned from one. The other was the large number of self-proclaimed 'suitors' that tried to either intimidate him or outright challenge him for the right to Cordelia's attention.

It only took a few bolts to clear them away most times. Otherwise, he beat them into the dirt in a duel.

But, in spite of these distractions, neither wanted the meetings to end. They meetings were so soothing, especially when they played, that Robin and Cordelia were many times more efficient after the meetings then they had been.

Phila had even joked that giving them more than one meeting per day would put her out of the job.

Sadly, all good things must come to an end.

Chrom stood before the Shepherds, a map of the continent behind him. "We have new orders. The Shepherds are to march for the country of Regna Ferox and enlist their help. Doing so will make Plegia back off, or if it doesn't, give us an invaluable ally."

He motioned for Frederick to speak.

"The Feroxi are the most skilled and vicious warriors on the continent. Having their aid is beyond invaluable."
He looked each Shepherd on the eye. "The mission is both delicate and critical. As such, it is volunteer on-"

He was interrupted by every Shepherd taking one step forward.

Frederick almost let a tear slide down his face. "Very well. Check your gear and prepare for the worst like always. We leave at dawn. Dismissed!"

The shepherds saluted before filing out one by one. Robin thought that Sumia looked kind of shaky, but had to catch her when they left Frederick's sight.

Chrom's voice broke the tension. "Sumia, are you ok?"

She shook her head. "I... I'm alright, Captain. Just need to get my legs under me."

Chrom didn't believe her. "No, you're not."

He turned to Robin. "I'll take her to her room. You go ahead and prepare."

Robin nodded and left the barracks. Sumia had such a low opinion of herself, but all it seemed to take was a kind word from Chrom and she was back to normal.

He was almost envious of it.

Robin sighed. He needed to talk with Cordelia.

He almost smirked at the thought. He'd gotten close enough to her that she was the first he wanted to talk to, even before Chrom.

He was almost surprised to see her sitting in the training field, but, she seemed to have news for him too.

He held up a hand. "Let me guess... you're being sent out again."

She smiled. "On the nose. Guess we've been meeting long enough for you to tell."

He scratched at his head. "Well, can you guess what I have to say?"

She stared at him before sighing. "A mission?"

He nodded. "Yeah. Can't really tell though, classified and all that."

She shook her head. "Right."

Silence descended on them, neither sure what to say.

Finally, Cordelia spoke. "I... guess we can't practice tomorrow."

"Yeah."

Silence again.

Robin sighed. "Hey, we'll be fine. How's this? When we get back, we'll play a whole set and go to The Melting Pot again, my treat."

She smiled, melancholy in her eyes. "That... It's a date."
Robin blinked, pink dusting his cheeks. "…What?"

Her face burned. "I said that's a great idea."

Robin was pretty sure that wasn't what she said, but let it slide at her desperate face.

Robin cleared his throat. "Well… I wish you luck on the patrol. I'll see you in a couple weeks."

Cordelia nodded before biting her lip. Right as Robin turned to leave; he gasped as Cordelia ran into him and hugged him tightly.

"Be safe."

Robin tried to keep his ears from burning and patted her arm. "I always am."

She wouldn't let him go, so he wriggled himself around and let her head rest against his collarbone. They stood there, one afraid to lose the friend she'd found and the other unsure of what he should do.

Sensing his uncertainty, she whispered. "It's only polite to hug me back. I don't mind."

He steeled himself and wrapped his arms around her shoulders, keeping his touch light and unintrusive. Their embrace was awkward and their faces burned in embarrassment, but it cemented what they felt.

This was their friend. Regardless of what happened, they would do everything they could to see their friend again.

So they swore.

CH 6 End

*SQUEEEEEEEEEAAAAAAAAAL!*

7: Holy shit Lucina was that you

Lucina: *Deadpan* No

7: Ok… *Backs away slowly* So? what'd you think Sev?

Severa: I thought it was ok

7: Yeah I think you thought it was more than just OK considering the dreamy look in your eye

Severa: *Flustered* W-w-what's that supposed ta-

Lucina: Anyway shall we wrap this up I need to be somewhere *hint hint*

Severa: Oh, right! *Glares at me*

7: *Mutters* For the longest time I thought you liked Owain, guess I was wrong

Anyway I hope you guys liked this chapter as it was a good deal more character presentation then action as well as some character development for some of the Shepherds.
I especially liked that final scene as well as a reason for Cordelia's crush on Chrom even if it is a bit generic all things considered.

Anyway if you have any questions send me a PM or review and I'll try to answer when I can, otherwise please Read, Favorite, and Review!

Squad 7 DISMISSED!
-Western Ferox, Five Days before Shepherd Deployment-

A young woman sighed for what felt like the thousandth time that day. She observed the cold, ice covered ground in silence.

She'd come to Regna Ferox about three weeks ago with a plan to become Khan Basilio's champion. The idea had been conceived from the minds of her friends before they'd arrived. The reasoning was simple; becoming champion let them control events and would divert the disaster that was to come.

Well, control was a stretch. She had arrived with only two others in tow.

Sighing again, she looked at her own attire, unchanged from when she'd met Chrom, and moved back into the room she shared with her companions. Most of the others hadn't been there when they arrived. She could only assume they were wandering the world, searching.

The woman frowned a bit at that thought. Many of the others seemed desperate to avoid the Shepherds of this time, and while she could understand their trepidation, not wanting to meet at all was a bit extreme.

Clearing her head of such thoughts, she turned when she heard voices approaching the room.

"...and I'm telling you that charging in without help is just going to get you killed!" That was Severa, the woman's oldest and best friend. They were born just a year apart from one another and were nearly inseparable.

"That's not heroic at all! If you can't break the enemy's line with a great swoop, special moves and one liners, there's no point!" Answered another voice.

The woman chuckled. That was Cynthia, her polar opposite, bright and outgoing compared to her own solemn aura. They made a great team, balancing each other like that, but that's what sisters were for.

"Sis! We're back!"

The door creaked open and two figures entered the room, both loaded down with bags.

The first was clad in light armor, steel clanking on her torso and arms. Underneath, she wore a white and blue dress with long blue gloves and equally long boots. Her most eye-catching feature was her midnight hair, tied in two small pigtails on either side of her head. The brand proving her lineage was hidden from sight, but the woman knew that it slept upon Cynthia's breast.

It was fitting, she supposed. Cynthia had been their beating heart ever since everything went wrong.

The second figure wore a unique set of armor made up of steel greaves over her boots. She wore chainmail underneath a dark shirt. Her top garment was purple and scarlet, a sort of leather jacket-dress.

She sighed. That was the only way to describe what Severa was wearing since it was stuck between the two.

Besides that, it had light pauldrons on both shoulders and had dark pants with a line of gold on them.
But, the entire ensemble paled before the large coat she wore over everything, the gold embroidery shining.

She smiled again. Despite everything they'd been through, the coat was in fabulous condition. It was Severa's last gift from her parents, placed on her shoulders bare weeks before they'd died. It was their way of telling her she'd surpass them, an acknowledgment of the girl's tactical genius.

The genius that had saved them so many times.

But, even with all that, she thought that Severa's best features were her long amethyst hair, tied into two pigtails, and her heterochromatic eyes. Her right eye shimmered like an opal, multiple colors frozen in the iris, while her left eye was a blazing garnet that flickered like fire.

She blinked a moment later, surprised to see them staring expectantly at her. "What is it?"

Cynthia glared at Severa. "Tell her she's wrong, sis! Heroes swoop in to save the day!"

Severa rolled her eyes. "Oh, please. Lucy, tell her doing that is just going to get her killed."

Lucy, full name Lucina, rolled her eyes at them. "Not this again."

They just stared at her, waiting.

Lucina sighed. "Geez, ok."

She looked at Cynthia. "Cynthia, you can't just charge off into enemy lines by yourself. You're a valuable asset in battle and it would be a disaster to lose you to a trap."

Her eyes softened. "Besides, you're my sister. I'd be devastated to lose you."

Cynthia glanced away, pouting. Lucina spoke again before Severa could start celebrating.

"But, it is admirable to think of others before yourself and it is something we should all aspire to. Heroes give people hope, and sometimes, that means going against common sense."

This time Severa looked away, eyes bitter.

Lucina smiled and pulled them into a hug. "You both have valid points, I know that, but it's by working together we've gotten so far. So, let's leave these petty arguments behind for now, ok?"

She felt them nod against her shoulders. "Good. Now, I assume the shopping went well?"

Severa nodded to the bags on the table. "We were lucky. They still had some extra veggies and beef to go with all those potatoes."

Cynthia perked up. "Oh, and I got the last of the spices they had too! Had to wrestle a few people to do it, but all's well that ends well."

Lucina smiled wryly. She could picture Cynthia diving into the crowd with a roar and the kerfuffle that followed. "Well, depending on what you bought, I may be able to make my famous russet soup tonight."

Severa and Cynthia almost cheered. Lucina knew how to make soup better than just about anyone, even if she couldn't make anything besides that and pies. All those hours in the kitchen with her family weren't just for show.
Severa blinked. "Wait a minute! Cynthia, didn't you say something about having news?"

Cynthia paused her fantasies of hearty soup to think. "Hmm. Did I?"

Severa glared at her. "I'm pretty sure you did. You were running around like a headless chicken trying to find me, screaming about how we had to leave."

Cynthia's face scrunched in thought. "Um, oh what was it, something about…"

Her eyes flew open. "That's right! I found out where the tournament is being held!"

Severa and Lucina groaned. That sort of news was beyond important in so many ways.

"Well, spit it out numbskull!" Severa punctuated her demand by putting Cynthia in a headlock. Lucina almost smiled. Seeing them wrestle like this brought back old memories.

Lucina coughed. "Anyway, let's hear what she has to say, Sev."

Severa pouted but let Cynthia go. Cynthia, after blowing a petty raspberry, grew serious.

"The Champion Selection Tournament, or ‘The Harrowing’ according to locals, will be held at the West-Khan's palace in three days. From what I was able to scrounge up, anyone is allowed to enter as long as they register by noon the day before the tournament."

Lucina nodded. "Good, that's our ticket in. Anything else?"

Cynthia played with her hair, bored. "Well, everyone says the current champion can't be beat. Outside of that the only concrete information I could find was an announcement in the square explaining how everything works."

Severa sighed. "Well, I don't know about you, Catria, but how are we going to go with Marth over there?"

She nodded to Lucina's mask on the table.

Cynthia grinned. "Well, I may not be able to hide my face under a hood like you Katarina but I bought this."

She held up a mask outlined in white feathers. "They use these for the festival that's happening because of the tournament."

Severa snorted. "Would you look at that? Using your brain actually made something easier for everyone."

Cynthia growled and started arguing with Severa again.

Lucina let them go at it, mind pulled away from their antics.

They certainly act like sisters. At least, they act more like sisters than Cynthy and I do. I may be older than her, but we haven't been this open with each other in almost ten years.

Lucina gulped, mouth suddenly dry.

If… if I follow what I believe, and by some miracle it works… then they will be sisters.

Lucina took a steadying breath before interrupting them. "Alright, that's enough. The Khan's Palace
is two days from here, less if we all fly on Selene. I'll get the soup boiling and then we'll turn in, agreed?"

The girls agreed and a moment later Lucima had a pot boiling over their fire place.

"I still don't see why we didn't just go to an inn that serves food."

Lucina sighed. "Sev, we had to scrounge for enough gold just to stay here, let alone get food. Something like that is too expensive."

Severa groaned. "I know. It's just… we've been through a lot. I think we deserve some luxury after coming to a time where there's plenty."

Cynthia shrugged. "I'm not opposed to being pampered, but we still have work to do."

Severa sighed, her hand pressing into her forehead. "I know… I know."

Lucina put a hand on her shoulder. "Still thinking of what happened?"

Severa sighed. "How could I not? Daddy was right in front of me. Young, vibrant, alive. I…"

She started sniffling and Lucina pulled her into a hug, Cynthia embraced her from the other side.

"Hey," Lucina whispered, "I understand. Having father in front of us with Aunty Lissa and Uncle Freddy… It was almost too much."

Cynthia stroked Severa's hair. "You have no idea how hard it was for me to not choke up. If mother had been there, I wouldn't have been able to stop myself."

Severa shook her head. "Ok, ok, I'm… I'm better. Thanks, guys."

Cynthia punched her shoulder. "Come on, what are friends for?"

Severa didn't miss a beat. "Annoying the hell out of me and running off into danger without back-up."

That made them all laugh, the atmosphere much more relaxed. Lucina went back to preparing their meal and before long they'd eaten and were getting ready to sleep.

Cynthia was the first to fall to her dreams, leaving Severa and Lucina alone at the table. They didn't speak, each preferring their thoughts. They avoided looking at one another.

Oh, why did Cynthia convince us to get nightgowns? And for that matter, how did she convince us to get negligee at that?

Lucina sighed as the thought went through her mind. Sure, the fabric was positively divine compared to their normal clothes, but they were sheer up to the waist and it made she and Sev look away from one another.

"So," Severa started, "what are we going to do tomorrow?"

Lucina sighed. "Pack up and leave, most likely. If we want to make it in time for the tournament and get somewhere to sleep, we'll have to leave early."

Severa nodded. "Thought as much. Do you… do you think after we do this we can go search for the others?"
Lucina sighed. "Our main objective is to do all we can to stop the events leading to doomsday. Everything else is secondary."

Severa's eyes grew bitter again, her nod stiff.

"Sev, I know you miss Morgan. I do too. If we find any leads, I will investigate them personally, but she's a strong girl. Have some faith in your sister."

Severa frowned. "I always have faith in my sister. You of all people should know that."

Lucina held up her hands. "Sorry, I know it's a sore subject. I guess I shouldn't be so flippant about it."

Severa huffed. "No, you shouldn't."

Lucina smiled, standing and walking to Severa's side. "Do you remember when I'd come visit? How we'd play in the stream and climb trees?"

Severa averted her eyes. "How could I forget? You always insisted on gigging for frogs and eating apples straight from the tree. We drove my parents mad."

Lucina stood behind Severa, fingers trailing up the other girl's arms and settling on her shoulders. "Want a massage? I want to do something to apologize."

Severa shivered at her touch, not really sure where this was going. "Um, uh, sure, if you, uh, want."

Lucina smiled and began to knead Severa's shoulders, feeling for the tense spots and slowly rubbing them away. Severa seemed pleased with her work if the brief mewls she was letting out meant anything.

Lucina took a deep breath. "Hey, Sev?"

"Hm?"

Lucina's hands stopped on top of Severa's shoulders. "I've... wanted to speak with you alone for a while. I have something I want to say."

Lucina's arms wrapped around Severa's shoulders, holding the nervous girl in place. "Um, w-what do you want to say?"

Lucina took a deep breath before leaning close to Severa's ear. "Sev... I-"

"What are you guys doing?"

Lucina launched herself away from Severa's side. "C-Cynthia?! What are you doing up?!"

Cynthia rubbed the crust from her eyes, blinking when she saw Lucina's glowing face and Severa hiding her face in her arms. "Uh, did I interrupt something?"

Severa jumped out of her chair. "No, now got to sleep!"

Severa jumped into her bed and hid herself under the sheets, leaving a mortified Lucina to stare at her sister.
Cynthia coughed into her fist. "So… am I going to get an explanation?"

Lucina sighed before slinking to her bed and hiding herself under the sheets.

Cynthia scratched at her head before flopping back into bed. "Guess not." She mumbled.

The girls did eventually go to sleep, but there was little in the way of conversation the next day. They took to the air on Cynthia's Pegasus, named Selene, and flew towards the Khan's Palace just after waking and gathering their things.

They couldn't fly forever though and they set down in a clearing amidst trees as the sun began to set. Again, there was little conversation until Cynthia finally got fed up and dragged Lucina away for an explanation.

"Ok sis," she started as soon as Severa was out of sight, "what happened last night?"

Lucina fidgeted. "I was… just giving her a massage. You know how stressed she gets."

Cynthia's face fell flat. "Lucy, you know you bite your lip when you lie, right?"

Lucina bit her lip. "No I don't."

Cynthia reached up and freed the lip. "Yes, you do. Come on, Lucy, I'm your sister! You can tell me anything and I won't blink!"

Cynthia's face scrunched. "Unless you tell me you've decided to live au natural, then I can't help you."

Lucina glared.

Cynthia backtracked. "I'm kidding, I'm kidding! Geez, can't take a joke today?"

Lucina tilted her head. "That was a joke?"

Cynthia stared at her before sighing. "You know what? Never mind. Now, tell me what happened!"

Lucina started glancing around for an escape route, but Cynthia would have none of it. "Don't even try, sis. Even if you run back to camp, I'll just drag you into the sky."

Lucina glanced around some more before heaving a resigned sigh. "Fine, if you're so insistent. But, don't breathe a word of what I'm about to say to Sev, got it?"

Cynthia smiled. "Course, now tell me!"

Lucina rolled her eyes. "Well… I was giving her a massage. I had brought up Morgan… and I wanted to apologize for being insensitive."

Cynthia winced. Morgan was supposed to come right behind them, the last to enter the portal to the past. When she hadn't shown up, Severa hadn't been the same, retreating into an acerbic and sarcastic shell.

Lucina pushed on. "As I was working on her shoulders, I decided to tell her something that I'd been thinking on for some time. Something that my heart was ready to tell."

Cynthia connected the dots instantly. "You tried to confess?! Oh, geez, no wonder you didn't want to talk about it, I'm so sorry!"
Lucina sighed, a tired smile on her face. "It's fine. I think I was trying to push this too fast. Don't worry, I'll tell her when I feel it's the right time. I just…"

Cynthia pulled her older sister into a hug. "You're afraid she'll think you're a freak and stop being friends with you, right?"

Lucina nodded into Cynthia's shoulder, tiny sniffles shaking her body.

Cynthia held her tighter. "It'll be fine, Lucina. Severa's not some idiot. She's been your friend since you guys were tiny. Believe me; you had a more serious chance of losing her friendship when you decided to hide Mr. Fin from her when I was five."

Lucina choked on a laugh. Severa had been beyond furious with her after the old plushy had been found, not speaking to her for almost a month. It had taken a heavy apology and a lot of crying to get her back.

Lucina finally got a hold on her emotions. "You… you're right, Cynthia. You always seem to know what to say when I get like this."

Cynthia smiled. "Hey, remember what we promised after Mom and Dad died? We would work together to lift the other when they were down, to be like the sun and moon. I want to see my sister be happy, no matter what it takes."

Lucina finally hugged her back. "I do too. You little pony harasser."

Cynthia laughed. "That was one time!"

"Hey, what are two talking about? Food's done, but if you don't want any..." another voice interrupted them.

They jumped and turned to see a curious Severa standing a few feet away. They shrugged helplessly at each other before Lucina answered. "Cynthia wanted to ask me about the possibility of getting Selene checked when we reach the castle-town. She thinks she's ill."

Severa clicked her tongue. "Ah, small wonder she's been so ornery. Well, they should have something for her if we can afford it, but we won't get anywhere without eating. Come on."

She turned and left. Cynthia and Lucina sighed in relief before trading smiles and following her.

Tourney Day

Thankfully, they were able to reach the town early on the morning of the tournament. Selene was indeed falling ill so Cynthia set out to find medicine. She stored her armor and put on a white shawl and winter dress with her mask before leaving. She led Selene to the nearest vet under the pseudonym she'd used with the Shepherds: Catria.

That left Severa and Lucina, going by 'Katarina' and 'Marth' respectively, to search for the registration tables.

Katarina glanced around under her hood. "When Catria said there was a festival, she wasn't kidding."

In fact, it seemed closer to a grand celebration than a festival. There were stalls, games, food, and drink aplenty. The excess actually made the time travelers slightly nauseous.
Marth nodded. "Indeed. Were we not here on business, I'd enjoy looking around."

Katarina shrugged. "I guess. Hold on, I'm going to ask for the tables. It'll take too long if we just wander everywhere."

She wandered over to one of the stands and conversed with the owner for a moment before returning.

"Ok, they're in front of the palace. If we walk straight from here and turn left we'll see an inn with a blue snake on it. Once we see that, we'll be there."

Marth nodded and they set off. Eventually, they made it to the tables.

There were only a few people waiting to sign up, so Marth was only in line for a few minutes before being waved forward.

The registrar cast a skeptical eye over her lithe form. "You sure you want to sign up? You look like a stiff wind could blow you over."

Katarina almost snorted. Marth's outfit hid it well, but she was all muscle and grace. All sexy muscle and curves…

*Stop that, you oaf! Focus on the mission, you can entertain sick fantasies when you're alone!*"'

"I'm sure, sir." Marth answered. "I wield the sword when I fight, if that's helpful."

The registrar shrugged. "Alright kid, your choice. Now, sign here please. This basically says that you're doing this of your own free will, accept any potential injuries, and will not fight dishonestly or after the fight is called."

Marth nodded and signed.

"Alright then. Your waiting area is over there, with the big D on it. Competitors are allowed to bring only two comrades with them. These comrades can help them prepare, but that's it."

Marth nodded and walked off to the waiting area, Katarina a step behind.

Marth turned to Katarina. "Why don't you find Catria? I can prepare on my own."

Katarina stepped towards Marth, face wreathed in shadow. "You sure?"

Marth nodded. "Yes, go ahead. I'll see you at the tourney field."

Katarina nodded before sweeping back toward town. Marth watched her go before turning around and walking further in. She almost smirked as she walked.

*None of them think much of me. They take one glance and dismiss me as a fool for thinking I can fight them. Well, we'll see who the fool is. A warrior fighting an apocalypse for eight years against a militia that rarely sees real battle.*

She gripped her blade tighter and continued.

*Proving Grounds- Two Hours Later*

Catria and Katarina were milling about the edge of the grounds. Getting Selene the medicine she needed took longer than either had expected, but they arrived just before the matches began.
"Did you get a look at the roster? They should have put it up by now."

Catria shook her head. "An airhead I may be, but I'm not so bad as to miss the roster. Marth fights in the sixth round."

Katarina groaned. "Ah, that'll take forever! Want food?"

Catria cheered and they wandered over to one of the stalls, vaguely hearing an announcer get the tournament started. They ignored the voice at first, more concerned with getting their hands on a pot pie, but hurried back when the fifth fight ended.

"And now, we move on to our next fight of the day!" The announcer howled to the rowdy crowd.

He gestured to the right side of the field. "On my right, we have the runner-up of the last Harrowing! He hails from right here in town and is always looking for a fight, let's hear it for BROOOOOOGGAAAAANNNN!"

The crowd roared once more, a big beefy man with a simple axe roaring right back at them.

He's... kinda plain. Like, if he didn't have that fur coat over his shoulders, I'd lose him in a crowd without even trying. Katarina shook the thought away, focusing on the other fighter.

The announcer did too. "On my left, we have a recent entry. Hailing from parts unknown and with an air of mystery sure to make the ladies swoon, I give you, MAAAAAAATTTTHH!"

There wasn't near the level of cheering this time, but more than a few women were making doe eyes at Marth.

Catria chuckled when she saw them. *Oh, if only they knew.*

The announcer recited the rules 'just to be sure' before banging the gong at his side. "Begin!"

Bogan charged, aiming to split Marth in two with a single blow. He froze when his target disappeared from view.

"Hey, come out and fight like a man!" Bogan roared, his voice like raw gravel.

The crowd started whispering, wondering if Marth had fled the field.

Katarina and Catria smirked. "You remembered to put our bets on Marth, right Kat?"

Katarina groaned. "Don't call me that, and yes, I did."

Bogan was still searching for his opponent when a cut appeared on his arm.

"What the-"

He couldn't continue as more and more cuts bloomed over his body. Every one of them a simple flesh wound, but the sheer number soon put Bogan on the ground.

Stunned silence met the result, Marth reappearing with her blood coated sword after Bogan hit the ground.

She placed the blade under his chin. "I believe that's my win."

The announcer shook himself out of his stupor. "T-the winner, in a stunning upset, is the late arrival,
There was little cheering, the crowd still stunned. Only Katarina and Catria made any attempt to show their support. Marth walked over to them, a slight smile on her face. "So, how'd I do?"

Catria giggled. "You were super cool! No one could see you!"

Katarina cackled. "And we made money! Those fools at the betting table put you at six hundred to one!"

Marth's eyes narrowed behind her mask. "How much did you use?"

Katarina had to keep herself from dancing. "A thousand."

Marth groaned. "You're lucky we need to become the Khan's champion. That's almost all the money we had left."

Katarina shrugged. "Hey, we have another six rounds before you fight for the title. Besides, we're not going to be here forever, so we may as well get some funds."

Marth chuckled. "Always an angle. Good thinking, Kat."

Katarina groaned. "Not you too. Let's... just go collect our winnings. You won't fight again till this afternoon anyway."

They exited the field and went to find the betting tables, happily ignoring the angry mutterings of those that had bet on Bogan.

That was how it would continue for the next few days. Marth was too fast for any of her opponents to see let alone fight, so the fights became less of a spectacle and more of a certainty. The odd-makers got wise to this after the third fight so Katarina couldn't make any further money on anything but the title fight.

They did have a few incidents after the first fight. A number of angry losers had tried to gang up on them and attack, but Katarina summoned fire to her side and they scurried away. Another problem was when the odds-makers sent some goons to try and intimidate them.

Catria took care of them with the generous application of her lance butt.

Finally, Bogan decided to try and take revenge on Marth for the humiliating defeat. He'd brought some of his own goons to corner Marth, but it ended the same way.

Now, they were waiting to be called out to the field for the title fight.

Katarina took Marth aside. "Hey, you ok? I know it's Inigo's dad, but you can't afford to hesitate."

Marth shook her head. "I'll be fine. Remember, he's not over his phobia yet. Knowing how sharp he is, he'll figure out I'm a girl and hesitate. That'll be my ticket."

Katarina nodded. "Good. But remember, he's as honor bound as they come. He may hesitate, but he's still the best swordsman the continent's ever known. Don't let your guard down."

Marth smiled. "I never do."

Catria's voice interrupted them. "Hey, they're about to call you out! Get over here!"
Marth nodded and walked to the edge of the field, counting butterflies in her head to calm down.

The Khan was the announcer this time. "Well, if it isn't a wonderful day for a fight! Who's ready for a real brawl of a battle!"

The crowd roared at their leader's words.

The Khan laughed. "That's what I like to hear! Now, so everyone knows, the famous Swan Troupe is in town today. They'll be performing after the tournament is over!"

The crowd roared ever louder, but Marth could see a pink haired woman shaking her head next to the Khan.

Oh, that's Inigo's mother. I forgot she was part of the troupe.

She shook her head. It looked like the idea of the tournament was just to celebrate, like she'd heard. No one expected anyone to show up with a chance to actually beat the champion.

Well, not until we showed up.

"Alright, let's get started! Our champion requires no introduction, but I'll yell his name to embarrass him! Give it up for Lon'qu!"

The crowd roared once again, laughter mixed in with their cheers.

Marth glanced at her opponent, barely keeping a smirk off her face.

Normally, he'd be quite intimidating. His short and wild hair mixed with his perpetually frowning visage and narrow eyes made him look like a demon. He wore a blue tunic with black and gold lacquer shoulder guards. His sleeves were lined with fur. He wore fur lines leather gauntlets and a pair of beige pants which ran into fur lined boots.

Actually, fur was a theme with his clothes, adding to his wild appearance.

Yet, his eyes were extremely focused, at odds with his wild appearance. In fact, despite many of his features trying to draw the eye, Marth was drawn to the red sheathe belted at his side. Its shape was curved, a unique shape compared to the traditional straight sword Marth used.

But, all of this intimidation was ruined by the slight blush on the man's face.

The Khan laughed. "Now that I've had my fun, let's introduce his opponent! They've blazed through the tournament with nary a scratch while fending off Feroxi hospitality, no small feat, and now they're looking to dethrone Lon'qu! Give it up for Marth!"

This time there was a lot more applause. Marth's mysterious demeanor and skill had garnered many fans, most of the female variety.

The Khan laughed again. "Well, I want to see this as much as the next guy, so let's get a move on! Fighters, to the center!"

Marth and Lon'qu walked to the center of the field.

"You both know the rules! When I hit this gong, have at it!"

The Khan paused. "Oh, and Lon'qu! If you win again, you and Olivia get the week off!"
Lon’qu perked up along with the pink haired woman.
Marth frowned.

*Great. Now he has motivation.*

A moment later the gong rang.

Lon’qu drew his blade, a single edge tapering off at the tip. Marth drew hers in turn, the simple steel less recognizable than her personal blade.

They stood in silence, studying each other, then Lon’qu tensed.

*He's figured out my disguise. The phobia should kick in now, but I'll need to take the initiative.*

Marth charged forward, sword poised to stab at his chest. He jumped out of range and weaved among the flurry of stabs with ease.

Marth clicked her tongue and jumped back, avoiding a hard slash that would have opened her shirt.

They started circling each other, diving in at every opening, imagined or real. Lon’qu could feel himself hesitating unconsciously, trying to compensate for it was throwing off his rhythm.

Their blades clashed whenever they couldn't dodge, Lon'qu's aggression against Marth's prudence.

Marth was calm though. Lon'qu was starting to rush his attacks to compensate for his hesitation, and his blows were slowly becoming less accurate.

But they also became less predictable.

Marth hissed as his blade cleaved through her armor and opened a cut on her back. How did he get behind her?

*Damn it, he's getting faster too. I need to end this, now.*

She rolled away from another strike and sprang forward. Lon'qu leaned away from her attack, but she hooked her arm around his neck and pulled him to the ground.

He tried to flip himself back to his feet, but Marth pinned his sword under her body and placed her blade at his throat.

They remained there, panting, until the Khan's voice reached their ears.

"And that clinches the match! We have a new champion, Marth!"

Marth sighed in relief, getting off of Lon'qu and letting him stand. "A great match. You're truly a peerless swordsman."

Lon'qu blushed. "Hmph, you're not so bad yourself. You're lucky I haven't had to train getting out of a pin in so long."

Marth tilted her head. "Why's that?"

He gestured to his sword. "My usual plan is that I slip my arm out and roll over you before impaling you. But, you seemed aware of this possibility, so I'll let this loss slide, much as it burns to say that."
Marth bowed before turning to face her friends. There was still the formal ceremony to go through, though she wondered if the crowd could hear her racing heart.

He could have ended me less than a minute in. If it hadn't been for his phobia, this plan would have been for naught.

She shook the ifs from her mind. It was time to get inducted as the Khan's champion and relax.

Katarina frowned at Marth's form as she walked toward the winner's platform.

I need to talk to her tonight. That couldn't have been an easy battle.

The ceremony was short and to the point. After that, the dancing troupe moved into position and the celebration swung into full force.

-Night—

Lucina, sweet Naga is was good to say her own name again, watched the festivities from her room.

They'd each been given private quarters to relax in. The Feroxi told Lucina they'd leave for the Grand Colosseum in three days, the ancient building which would host the bi-annual Khan Selection tourney.

If all proceeds as it should... then I will meet father in combat.

The thought filled her with dread and joy in equal measure. Joy because she could finally fight her father without him holding back, just like she always wanted. Dread because she feared getting carried away, what if one of them was hurt?

No... no, it's a silly fear. Father was always skilled, even before I was born. Fighting him now will save both him and Uncle Kellam in the long run. Hopefully... hopefully we can save Aunty Emm too.

Lucina knew it would be hard. Time always favored its original course, and it would cause ripple effects to make it move.

No, I can't think like that. We will save them, no matter what.

A knock on her door broke her musings. She coughed and spoke in a deeper voice. "Who is it?"

"Well, if you're going to try and hide behind a voice from your best friend, I'll just take my leave."

Lucina sighed. "Sev, come on. There's no way I could have been able to tell."

A chuckle ghosted through the door. "I know, I just like messing with you. Now open up."

Lucina smirked and walked over, letting Severa into her room.

Severa looked around. "Well, I wasn't expecting fine silks and velvet, but there's a lot of fur in here."

Lucina chuckled. "Well, the Feroxi are practical if nothing else. Most of the fur is for insulation, and to keep the stone from freezing."

Severa shrugged. "Meh, not that important. Anyway, how are you feeling? I know it was pretty hard to keep your head in that fight."
Lucina sighed, taking a seat before the hearth. "Well… I don't know how to feel. I'm happy that I was able to fight one of my heroes on even ground, but…"

Severa sighed, sitting behind Lucina. "You're concerned that this is for nothing, right?"

Lucina nodded.

Severa shook her head. "Well, you can't worry about that. Come on, we went through time, how awesome is that? If we're cool enough to break a law of nature, we're cool enough to see this through."

Lucina chuckled. "Am I that obvious?"

Severa chuckled too. "More than you know. I don't need to have known you my whole life to tell."

Lucina leaned into her. "Thanks, Sev. Thanks for always being there."

Severa hugged her. "Why wouldn't I be? Without me, you'd just go be a martyr somewhere else."

Severa sighed. "I'd hate that."

Lucina gulped, aware of the opportunity before her. With what was to come… she couldn't let this pass.

"Hey… Sev?"

"Mm?"

Lucina took a deep breath. "Could… I ask for one of your famous shoulder rubs?"

Severa blinked. "Uh, sure. Just let me get your pauldrons off."

Lucina nodded and let Severa unhook her pauldrons and set them down, a slight pressure dug into her shoulders moments later.

Lucina let Severa work her magic, letting the loosening muscles relax her anxiety. Eventually, she found her voice again.

"Sev, do you remember when Aunty took care of us? After our parents left?"

Severa sighed, digging a bit harder on a stubborn knot. "How could I forget? She took care of all of us after she came back from the war, even when Uncle had to stay."

Lucina took another deep breath. "Well… I have a confession."

Severa's hands stopped. "A confession?"

Lucina nodded. "Yes. When… when we were with Aunty, I had a talk with her."

Severa felt anxiety settle in her stomach. "About what?"

Lucina kept her back to Severa. "About love."

Severa gulped. "And… you're telling me this why?"

Lucina smiled, though Severa couldn't see it. "Well… I think it'd be better if I showed you."
Severa leaned back. "Show me? Lucy, what are y-"

Severa didn't finish. Lucina spun around and wrapped her arms around Severa, sealing the other girl's lips under her own.

Severa didn't move, mind futilely trying to process what was going one. Her eyes just stared at Lucina's eye lids, who was trying to enjoy the sensation for as long as she could.

Eventually, Lucina pulled away. Severa was still frozen.

Lucina's heart ached at Severa's look of shock. "I… I'm sorry, Severa."

She hurriedly pushed Severa out of the room, locking the door and flopping facefirst onto her bed. She sobbed into the sheets.

_I've done it. I've gone and ruined our friendship for my own selfish wants. Oh, Naga, please let her forgive me. Please don't let her hate me._

Lucina sobbed again, her branded eye burning.

_I'll break if she hates me._

Severa, for her part, was still frozen in the hallway. Her mismatched eyes were cloudy, mind somewhere else.

_Ylisstol, Nine Years Ago-_  

Severa was sitting next to her Aunty as they stared at the sunrise together.

"So, Sev," her Aunty began, "what did you want to talk about?"

Severa fidgeted in her seat. "Um, Aunty, when did you realize you liked Uncle?"

_Her Aunty chuckled. "Oh, love is it? Well, I met your Uncle during the early parts of the Plegian War. I was on the run from the Grimleal when the Shepherds found me. The others went to fight the villains, but your Uncle stopped to tend to me, to make sure I was ok."_

_She chuckled. "I knew right then he was a kind man."_

Severa stared at her. "Then… how did you knew you liked him?"

_Her Aunty pulled her into a hug. "That's not something I can really tell. Every person feels something different when they fall in love." She pulled away. "Now, why don't you tell me? What do you feel when you're near this person?"

Severa glanced away, blushing. "Uh, well…"

_Her Aunty smirked. "We're both girls here, there's no reason to be nervous."

Severa sighed. "Well… I feel safe, secure. I feel happy, like everything that's happening is going to be ok as long as they're there. I just… feel so happy."

_Silence stretched between them before Severa was pulled back in. "Ah, that sounds a lot more like love than what I thought. Here I thought you had some kind of puppy love, but this sounds a lot more serious."_
Severa buried her head into her Aunty's silky green hair. "I… I just don't know if I can tell this person."

*Her Aunty tightened her grip. "Why?"

*Severa started crying. "It's… It's Lucina. I love Lucina."

Severa wiped at her eyes as the memory came to an end. Aunty had been beyond understanding, telling her it didn't matter that she loved her best friend, that she loved another girl, all that mattered was that she loved.

Severa almost choked out a laugh, her voice a whisper. "To think… Lucy talked to her too. What else have I been blind to?"

Severa's back hurt. These emotions were making her back hurt and she needed to rest.

Tears streamed down her face, relief and fear mixing in the tracks.

*I'm so relieved… she loves me too. But… my stupid brain may have just ruined it before I even had the chance to tell her.*

Severa finally went back to her room, barely remembering to lock the door before falling into bed.

*Morgy… I need you. You always know what to say when I get like this. I need your help.*

Her back continued to ache, even as she fell into a fitful sleep.

The ugly purple brand between her shoulder blades pulsed with every sob.
Cold Shoulder (A Duet)

Robin shivered hard as the Shepherds made their way through the snowy terrain. They'd been marching all day, but that wasn't the worst of it.

No, they had arrived in an area that had a light smattering of snow on the ground, but now they were in a full on blizzard.

*Why didn't I pack for this better? Sure, Chrom said it would get cold, but I didn't think I'd be close to losing fingers!*

Most of the others were shivering right alongside him. Well, except Chrom and Frederick, but he just chalked it up to them being freaks of nature.

Speaking of shivering, Kellam had to be hauled onto Sully's steed. While he was used to wearing his plate on long trips, the cold was making the joints freeze up. He'd be fine after a good oiling, but they wouldn't be able to do that for some time.

*Oh, Chrom just gave Sumia his cape. And now Lissa's complaining about the cold, again.*

He sighed, breath misting. With how they were now, the cohesive unit of two days ago seemed like a dream.

*They were only three days into their march when the first sign of trouble arrived.*

Sully had gone ahead of their company to scout out the terrain but had returned far sooner than planned.

"Risen?"

Robin was confused. What in Naga's name did that mean?

Chrom scratched at his head. "Oh, right. Risen are the name the war council gave to those creatures we fought. They thought it was appropriate since they look like corpses."

Robin narrowed his eyes. "Why wasn't I told this? I've been puzzling over the reports with 'Risen' in them for days!"

Chrom blushed, Frederick answering instead. "That responsibility fell on Lord Chrom. As it appears he forgot to tell you, I will deliver you a custard later as recompense."

Robin snorted. "It better be the greatest custard ever devised. Anyway, back to business, Sully?"

Sully shook off her amused smile. "Right. Ok, so the Risen are blockin the main bridge that separates Ylisse into its North and South halves. It also happens to be the fastest route to the Ferox border."

Robin sighed. "Ok, so, do we have numbers, positions, that sort of thing?"

"Well, the area on the south side is almost totally flat. That's also where most of the Risen are. On the other side are some old forts that look over the mountain pass we need to take. That's where the leader is if I had to guess."

Frederick nodded. "Very good, Sully. Call the others together."
Sully cantered off to gather the Shepherds to gather while Robin and Chrom cobbled together a plan.

"Ok, so we leave the South side to Frederick, Stahl, and Sully. With them will be Miriel and Kellam as insurance. In the meantime, you, me, Sumia, Vaike, and Lissa will hunt down the Risen to the north."

Chrom sighed. "We'll need to be careful. Sumia's pretty good with a lance, but she has little training in fighting on such uneven ground."

Robin pinched his nose. If she couldn't fight on the mountains to peak efficiency, then she could do something else.

"We'll have her guard the supplies. She can take notes from the others while we're in battle. I'll put Virion with her for extra insurance."

Chrom almost growled.

"Oh, would you be quiet? He's very well aware that flirting with her is a death sentence, you don't need to worry."

Chrom blushed while Frederick hid an amused grin.

By then, the others had joined them.

Chrom stepped forward, ignoring the chuckles at his pink cheeks. "Alright everyone, here's what's going on."

After everyone's positions were outlined, they continued the trek. Sumia was a tad disappointed at being assigned guard duty, but Robin could tell she was relieved too.

That would need to change. The girl had steel in her, Chrom could attest as much, but she needed to find her role and soon.

But, that wasn't what he needed to think on. They'd arrived at the river crossing and Robin could tell that the Risen had sensed them.

"Alright, cavalry, I want two pincers. Frederick, you're on the left."

Frederick saluted and sped off to the left.

"Sully, Stahl, I want you on the right."

Hooves rumbled to the right,

"Kellam, Miriel, push up the middle. Press them into the bridge and crush them."

Steel and cloth marched to the center.

Robin nodded at what he saw. "Alright, engage!"

He shot a bolt into the sky, the cavalry charging at the familiar signal. They were far faster than the stumbling creatures and made quick work of any they ran across.

Robin almost chuckled. Frederick was efficiency personified and Sully was power on a horse, but Stahl was his own beast.
As he watched, Stahl charged two of the Risen. His horse split them away from each other, Stahl's sword finding the neck of one. It dissolved immediately, but the other took a swing at his leg. Stahl leaned sideways and made his saddle slide on his horse, the attack missing by a hair.

The horse spun around at its master's command, Stahl practically hanging out of his seat. They charged the Risen again, this time kicking it to the floor as they passed. A quick stab as it stumbled to its feet made the Risen dissolve.

Miriel and Kellam were no slouches either. At first, Miriel would simply burn any that got close. But, as a large group charged them, she only had time to cremate two of them.

Then, Kellam went to work.

The first Risen brought its weapon down on Kellam's shoulder, only for the rusted steel to shatter. Kellam then reached forward and crushed its skull in his grip. The other's got wise to this and tried to circle him, but Miriel met them with a snap of her fingers and a pyre.

Soon, only two remained.

They charged Kellam again, aiming for his head this time. He finally braced himself and when they were close enough, thrust.

His lance blurred forward, its tip burying itself in the closest Risen. Its hideous groan was silenced as he continued the motion, turning himself on a pivot until the shaft collided with the other Risen.

Then, he crushed them under his sheer bulk.

It was an interesting strategy, but Kellam wasn't known as a mighty glacier for no reason. He'd trained himself to flip right back onto his feet after the maneuver and he was stomping away a moment later.

With the southern half well in hand, Robin and Chrom guided their group over the bridge to confront their opponents.

Robin was excited to fight them. After finally befriending Miriel, he'd been able to ask her about shaping one's magic into specific shapes.

Her answer had involved a lot of jargon, but the gist of it was that it took many years of practice to reach the point of what he saw in his dream. In fact, many preferred not to pursue it because of the time required to master it.

Robin was not so weak-willed, but now wasn’t the time to try.

Thankfully, there were fewer enemies in the north half of the battle, but the rough terrain made fighting them difficult.

It didn't help that all of them, all of them, went after Lissa on sight. It was like they knew she was their healer and went after her accordingly.

Admittedly, that made fighting them easier. With Lissa as a focal point, the Risen came to them.

All except the leader, designated a chieftain by Chrom.

The thing was still intimidating in broad daylight, but something curious was going on around it.

Whips of rancid smoke were drifting from its ashen flesh, but it was entering the earth rather than
drifting into the air like the rest of its aura.

A moment later, Robin had to hold in his revulsion as another Risen, well… rose from the earth.

Vaike actually spoke first. "Hot damn, the big guy's… spawning them! Like a frog with tadpoles!"

Lissa would have laughed had she not been holding down her lunch. "That's… actually a good analogy. Look at Vaike, being clever for once."

Vaike puffed up a bit. "Never doubt the Vaike!"

The Cheiftain's gaze snapped to them and Robin sighed. "And, there goes the cleverness. Charge!"

They did so, Vaike taking on the newly summoned Risen while Robin and Chrom took care of the chief.

Robin was far more worried about the chief than Vaike. Reckless the man may be, but he was fast and had reflexes to spare.

A moment later, after dodging a swing from the chief, Vaike jumped into the fray.

As he later found out, Vaike had started swinging his axe, only for the Risen to duck away. Then, Vaike used the force from his swing to spin around the Risen's attack and bring his axe around into another swing.

It was a testament to Vaike's sheer strength that when the axe met its target, the Risen was split in two.

From there, the chief was rather easy to take down. The first one had surprised them, but now they were prepared for its greater power and it soon dissolving like the others.

But, they'd made an odd discovery after it had disappeared. A shattered glass box lay on the ground where the chief once was, a putrid smell leaking out of it.

Miriel, once they'd regrouped, had wanted to study it. They couldn't of course, but Chrom ordered her to hold onto the remains and examine them when they returned.

But, now they found themselves in the freezing wilderness. That temperate climate was a fond memory that Robin missed dearly.

When I finally get a house, I'm not living anywhere that gets this cold.

As if reading his thoughts, Chrom laughed. "Oh, don't worry, Robin. Ylisse never gets quite this cold, and most people spend the winter inside anyway."

Robin shook his head, his teeth chattering too hard to answer. Lissa was of a similar persuasion, her attempt to ask Frederick to shield her from the wind coming out as a jumble of gibberish.

But, it was with much groans of relief that the great Longfort came into view. It was a truly grand construct that apparently ran the length of Ylisse-Ferox border and the Plegia-Ferox border. It was also constructed several hundred years ago and had never been breached.

Fun.

It was still another hour of walking before they would arrive, but Chrom had called for him.
Robin found Chrom speaking to Frederick, the two hammering out a plan.

"Ok, so diplomacy is paramount here. The Feroxi are rightly suspicious of outsiders and it will take a great deal of subtlety to get on without angering them.

Chrom sighed. "Frederick, you know diplomacy is not my strong suit. I will try to convince them, but I can't shake this bad feeling I have.

Robin snorted. *A bad feeling you and I share, my friend. Throwing rocks at them would be more subtle than your attempts at persuasion.*

Chrom frowned at him. "You're doubtlessly clever thoughts aside, we need to get to the one in command. Make sure everyone stands back, too many could provoke them."

Robin shook his head. "I just wish Sumia would get back to us. I didn't think the Pegasus was all that injured, but I'm no expert."

Chrom nodded. "True, but we must press on."

Frederick signaled for everyone to move and they started forward again. After another round of snow slithered into their boots they finally left the treeline.

*It's much more imposing up close. The main gate's massive, but there look to be side entrances, probably for returning patrols if I had to guess.*

Robin shook his thoughts free. He had to focus on the here and now, not space out like he was prone to do.

Chrom split from the others, walking to an open spot about halfway between the Shepherds and the gate.

"Halt, who goes there?"

A figure in heavy plate appeared at the top of the gate. Robin didn't have a clear look at them, but the voice placed them as a woman.

"I am Prince Chrom Falke de Ylisse. I come on a mission from Her Grace, Emmeryn Adler de Ylisse."

He took a step forward.

"Not one step further my brave lad, I have javelins at the ready!"

Chrom flinched back. "Wait, we have done nothing to you!"

The woman scoffed. "You think you can fool me! You and your 'mission' have cost me good men! Now be gone lest I lose my patience!"

Frederick would have none of it. "Now see here, milady! You have no right to-"

His horse moved forward.

"Fire!"

Frederick's eyes widened as the other armored figures around the woman reared their arms back. He tried to spur his horse forward, but he was too far.
As the javelins sailed through the air, Chrom put his armored shoulder forward. Just as the steel closed in, Chrom was swept off his feet by a blur of white, one of the blades digging a bloody furrow in his skin.

When he finally had his wits about him, his breath caught in his throat.

"Sumia."

He was in the air, white wings around him and Sumia in front of him. There was no wind up here, or at least, he didn't feel any. All he could do was look at the back of his savior.

"Hang on, Captain." He voice was almost angelic. "This will get bumpy."

He didn't respond so she turned to him, slight mirth in her eyes and a laugh in her voice.

"You'll be fine."

Then and there he realized what he was seeing. It was not an angel in the form of Sumia. It was actually Sumia, armor and all, with him on a Pegasus, the same one that had kicked at him earlier that day.

He was glad Sumia had turned around. It would have been mortifying to have her witness how red his face was.

Her head jerked downwards. "Captain, we need to move!"

Chrom snapped back to reality. They had javelins trained on them and it looked like some archers were about to join them.

"Right. Shepherds, to battle!"

He drew Falchion and he heard a faint roar in reply. "Sumia, set us down next to Robin."

She nodded and angled them down towards Robin's position, alighting next to him a moment later.

Chrom jumped from his position. "Alright Robin, tell us what you have."

Robin rolled his eyes. "I just told the Shepherds to take down the Feroxi non-lethally. May I remind you of the talk Frederick had with you last month? Where he said I can't do everything?"

Chrom chuckled. "Oh, right, sorry."

Sumia spoke up. "Um, where should I be, Robin?"

Robin glanced at her. "I want you to take Chrom and join up with the others over on the right. After that, act as a ferry and scout until we take out the archers. Then, join up with Chrom and watch his back."

Sumia raised her lance in a salute. Chrom had one more question. "How do you plan on Miriel and Virion not killing any of them?"

Robin shook his head. "I told Miriel to tone down the power while Virion is to aim for areas that disable but don't cripple. It'll be tough, but we can do it."

"And how do we get in?"
Robin smirked. "You leave that to our friends Kellam and Stahl."

-Kellam & Stahl—

"So, we both agree that Robin's insane?"

"Yes."

"We both agree that we should pour freezing water on him should we survive this?"

"Yes."

Stahl nodded. "Ok, glad we're on the same page. Shall we?"

Kellam nodded and Stahl spurred his horse onward. They'd mostly defeated the Feroxi on their side, only an archer that Virion was trading fire with remaining, and now they had to complete Robin's insane idea.

Stahl spurred his horse, trying to squeeze all the speed he could out of the loyal beast.

*Sorry boy, I'll get you something real good to eat after this.*

They were closing in on the small side gate, within less than fifty yards when Stahl yanked hard on the reins. The horse bucked and skid to a stop, whinnying at the sudden loss of weight.

Stahl just watched as Kellam, sweet, lovable Kellam, took flight with all the grace of a turkey. His massive bulk flew through the air, activity stopping as time seemed to slow down.

The idea was for Kellam to be launched over the doors and into the citadel. From there, he could get the door open and let the other Shepherds in. But, it seemed they'd underestimated how much speed it required to do so.

With growing horror, Stahl watched as Kellam's form arced toward the door proper. It seemed almost peaceful, the way Kellam fell, but his landing was far from it.

With a great crash, Kellam met the gate in a battle of steel versus steel. Human ingenuity versus sheer metal and stone.

Miraculously, Kellam won.

The gate groaned as the steel moorings ripped themselves from the stone, a Kellam sized dent in the gate. With a great boom, the gate fell inwards.

Stahl couldn't stop himself from gaping. It had worked! They'd have to face Sully's wrath later, but it worked!

Kellam appeared at the top of the stairs. "What are you waiting for down there? Let's go!"

Stahl shook the stupor from his mind and charged inside. This would be quite the tale to tell.

-Robin—

"It worked! Sweet Naga, it worked!"

He was positively giddy at the sight and sound of the gate falling. This tactic could get them in to all kinds of places now!
Well, only as a last resort. He'd much prefer using large rocks than his friends.

He shocked a knight unconscious when they charged him. "Do not interrupt my good mood!"

Actually, now that the tactic proved useful, how was he going to explain this to Sully?

He shivered. "Ok, note to self, avoid Sully for a few days."

"And why, exactly, should I be avoided?"

Robin jumped. "Oh, hey, Sully, what's up?"

She glared at him. "What did you do?"

He started sliding away. "Oh, nothing. Just, thinking… about…"

He took off running. He could hear Sully call after him, promises of training-read: punishment-carrying over the freezing wind.

Frankly, he preferred the Feroxi. They were just trying to kill him.

Speaking of, a javelin sailed by his face. It missed, but another gash opened along his cheek.

Kellam's grand entrance had distracted the Feroxi enough that the Shepherds had been able to sweep in and render many of them unconscious. That didn't include the commander and her guards.

"Come then, cowards!" The commander screamed, yanking a strange javelin from her back. "Come and face the Khan's chosen!"

Robin sighed. Looks like she wouldn't give up without a fight. "Alright, everyone, surround them!"

It was a sound strategy. There were only a few defenders left and a lot more Shepherds compared to them, so it should have been simple.

It… wasn't.

Oh, sure, the other guards went down without much issue, but not the commander. She decided that their weapons were useless against her armor and that anyone that tried to get close got a new scar for their trouble.

*Stop grousing Robin. You have thunder at your beck and call, but you can't use it.*

He heard someone grunt. It looked like the commander tricked Vaike into attacking and now he had a hole in his shoulder.

*Great, first Stahl gets hit on the leg and now Vaike. We need to end this, now.*

An idea popped into his head.

"Sumia, Chrom! Hit her knees!"

He'd made sure to yell that as loud as possible. It was no secret that the commander's armor was weak around the knees, it needed to be, but he wanted the commander to watch the skies.

She bit, just like he wanted, and turned her attention to the duo circling above.

*Ok, now let's see how sharp she is*
Sumia swept past him, the commander taking a swing at the wing of her Pegasus. Robin took the chance and charged in, tip of his blade trained on the back of the commander's knees.

He got within range and struck.

"Nice try, bastard!"

A heavy gauntlet met his temple and Robin saw double. He dropped like a rock, heaving from the monumental headache, when a boot crashed into his back.

"You fight well, I'll give you that, but none can match me! None!"

Robin wheezed, vision darkening. "You… sure about that?"

His hand clapped around the greave in his back.

"Thunder."

He felt the electricity stream into the armor, electrifying the commander viciously. He didn't have enough strength to render her unconscious, but he heard Chrom's yell and a dull thud as blackness claimed him.

-Chrom—

"Damn it!"

Robin was out cold and so was the commander. The clever bastard had used him and Sumia as a decoy, likely expecting the commander to notice him so he could shock her.

*And now you have a concussion and we're short three fighters. Lissa's staff is amazing, but it can't work miracles.*

He sighed. "Lissa, when can we expect them to wake up?"

Lissa gave the two unconscious figures one more look. "Well… based on how much power Robin used, the commander will wake up first. That hit Robin took will likely put him out for a couple hours, but there's no damage to his brain from what my handy little staff can tell.

Chrom sighed again, this time in relief. "Good. Everyone, bind the soldiers and bring them here. We'll get our answers when the commander wakes up."

He looked at Robin. "Well, maybe the blow knocked some memories loose."

A sigh caught his attention. "That's… a tad morbid, Captain."

"Oh, Sumia. I must thank you for your assistance. Honestly, I'd probably be skewered like a roast hog right now if you hadn't swooped in."

Sumia blushed. "O-oh. You're too kind, Captain."

Chrom groaned. "Sumia, we've had this talk before. Just call me Chrom, everyone else does."

Sumia clutched at a non-existent necklace. "I-I'm sorry, Ca- Chrom."

He caught that stumble but smiled all the same. "We're friends, Sumia. It comes with all the benefits and pitfalls as your friendships with the others."
Sumia blushed. "You… you're too kind, Chrom. Um, thanks for believing in me until I could find my role."

Chrom smiled. "Hey, I always knew you had it in you. Now, it's finally in the open where everyone can see it."

He turned to her Pegasus. "Actually, what should I call my other savior?"

Sumia winced. "Oh, sorry, this is Selene. I named her after my mother's first horse."

Chrom laughed. "Hey, no need to apologize. Let's just do our best from here on, ok?"

She pumped her fist. "Right!"

Meanwhile, off to the side, the other Shepherds were groaning in mutual pain.

"Whyyyyyy!" Lissa ground out, chewing on a handkerchief. "They're so obvious and cute it's poisonous!"

Frederick sighed. "I pray this plan of yours comes to fruition soon, Lady Lissa. This is becoming painful to watch."

Vaike laughed. "I hope so! If I can tell, then a blind and deaf man can tell!"

The opening was too good and he was soon buried in friendly teasing. It didn't last long though.

"Ugh, what…"

The commander was waking up. Everyone surrounded her and Chrom put himself in front.

"I see that you're awake."

She groaned again before jolting awake. To everyone's surprise, she bowed.

"Prince Chrom, a thousand apologies to both you and your men! I honestly took you for brigands, but that is no excuse for harming those that did not wish harm in turn!"

Chrom took a step back. "Uh, ok. Could you… tell us why you decided we were brigands?"

She kept her head bowed. "I was instructed by the Khan to regard all armed passerby with suspicion until proven otherwise. But, it seems I have grown overzealous after several bandit attacks."

Chrom sighed. "I will accept the apology you give to me, but you will have to apologize personally to the men you wounded, along with my good friend who you concussed."

The woman nodded. "Very well. Now, I believe you said that you wished to speak with the Khan?"

Frederick stepped forward. "Indeed that is our mission. Would you happen to know where to find them?"

She nodded. "Of course, I am their right hand. My name is Raimi, and I will personally escort you to the Khan."

Chrom nodded. "Very well, but let us unbind your men. After that, we'll follow you."

Lissa spoke up. "Uh, what about Robin?"
Chrom gestured to the riders. "We'll put him with you and one of our riders. That way, we can move and you can keep an eye on him. Sound good?"

Lissa nodded and they freed the Feroxi soldiers before following after Raimi. Thankfully, there were some wagons waiting for them and their own supply wagon was allowed to join them before they left.

-Khan's Palace-

It was a relatively short ride all things considered. The road was free of frost and snow and the town they entered was very lively despite the cold.

But, the palace they entered was something to behold. It was almost completely square, three walls surrounding the palace proper, and decorated with numerous lions and banners showing two dog heads facing away from each other.

It was the first thing Robin saw after coming back to the land of the living. He was in a wagon with Lissa, Vaike, and Kellam, the soft-spoken knight explaining what had happened since he'd been out.

Now though, it was just him, Chrom, Frederick, and Raimi. She'd apologized to him for the blow, but he'd waved it off as part of the job.

That, and Lissa is absolutely amazing. She said she was just a beginner when we first met, but I'm starting to think that was a lie born of a rare humility.

His thoughts were cut short when a pair of large doors creaked open, Raimi leading them into the large room beyond the doors.

"Sirs, if you would wait here. I will fetch the Khan."

Raimi left the hall, mumbling something about ale casks as she went.

That left them to discuss the Khan.

"So, Frederick, what do you know about the Khan?"

Frederick hummed. "All I know is that they are a powerful warrior. It shames me to admit it, but I overestimated diplomacy's value here. As such, the Khan is not only a leader to their people, but also their greatest defense."

Robin chuckled. "When you put it like that, I can see him now. Broad, hairy chest, biceps the size of barrels, and an axe to shame Vaike… what are you two panicking about?"

Chrom and Frederick were shaking their heads wildly, gesturing for Robin to stop talking. When he'd asked his question though, another voice answered.

"Oh, am I now? Please, continue your fantasies, I'd love to see what else you think."

The voice was distinctly female, a dangerous form of mirth filling it as Robin turned.

She was tall and tanned, heavy armor sitting heavily on her torso. She bared it without effort though, the great shield running the length of her left arm clicking as she moved. In fact, she held a large steel bastard sword in her right to go with all her metal.

But, even in the face of steel encasing her body from legs to arms, her blonde hair and grey eyes projected the aura of a lion.
Robin gulped. "I'm sorry… are… you…?"

She laughed. "Why, yes, I am the East-Khan, Flavia. Now, your silly imaginings aside, I heard that a group of warriors had business with me?"

Chrom stepped forward. "I apologize for my friend's insinuations. Now then, Raimi told us you'd been suffering bandit raids, can you explain why you decided stopping travelers would do anything?"

Flavia grunted. "Hmph, Plegian soldiers. They've been disguising themselves as Ylissean travelers and attacking us when we weren't expecting it. How do I know this, you may ask. Well, one of the bastards got sloppy and we found documents proving their mission to cause an incident."

Chrom cursed. "Damn those Plegian dastards!"

He quailed at Frederick's withering glare. "I…apologize, milady. That was… inappropriate."

Flavia laughed. "Hey, damn them and damn delicate speaking! In Ferox, we much prefer plain speech, from the commoners to the Khans!"

Chrom's face turned sour. "Then you should have a word with your damn border guards. I have three injured thanks to them."

Flavia smirked. "The fact you don't have more is a testament to your prowess."

Frederick coughed. "I hate to interrupt, but our true mission is to ask for Feroxi support against Plegia. They continue to prod at Ylisse's borders and an ally of Ferox's caliber would be most welcome."

Flavia sighed. "I'm afraid I cannot do so."

She held up a hand. "Much as I'd wish too, I currently lack the authority to commit any forces."

Robin finally spoke. "But, are you not the Khan, the leader of Regna Ferox?"

Flavia glared at him, the look making him sweat. "As I said, I am the East-Khan, one of two. Currently, the West-Khan holds absolute authority over our combined armies."

Chrom's head drooped. "Then, is our mission for not?"

*Emm's going to be upset.*

Flavia smirked. "Not if you give up so easily! You're family name means falcon, a swift and noble bird! There is a way for you to gain that which you seek."

Chrom's head shot back up. "How?"

Flavia's smirk grew. "You see, the Khans hold a selection tournament every two years to see who will hold absolute power. You have arrived just a few days before the tournament is set to begin and I need fighters."

Robin raised the obvious question. "And outsiders are allowed in this? Surely if it's that important you'd prefer more personal and trusted fighters."

Flavia shrugged. "Ha, if we did that, the country would be rife with blood feuds and dead Khans. No, it was decided that outsiders would do the fighting many years ago."
Chrom nodded. "Very well, we'll be your champions in exchange for your support. Tell us what we need to know."

Flavia shrugged. "Are you sure? I hear the West-Khan has a new champion with another two companions joining them. It'll be a tough fight."

Chrom snorted. "They will be defeated by Ylissian necessity and steel. There is no other outcome."

Flavia laughed again. "Oh, I like you, Prince Chrom. Very well then, you shall be my champions. But, only three can go into that arena, and one of them has to be you."

She turned to leave. "Deliberate among yourselves later though, for now, we party! Raimi, break out the kegs!"

She ran from the room, leaving the others dumbfounded.

"She's… quite the character."

Frederick sighed. "Aye, but her strength is obvious. I suppose all good leaders have their quirks, eh?"

Chrom smirked. "You can say that again."

They began discussing what they'd need to do as they walked, minds occupied by the coming days.

-Night, Castle Flavia—

Night had settled on the castle with a crash. Flavia had prepared a grand feast for the weary Shepherds, now her champions, and they'd been almost forced to party along with her. Thankfully, Robin had been able to slip away when Flavia got drunk enough to start leading a chorus.

Now, he was sitting in his assigned room. He'd been behind on his readings and was glad for the respite he'd been afforded.

Hmm, so they used the narrow passage to funnel the wyverns into a killing field. This could be useful should war break out for us.

He closed the book with a sigh. The Jugdral Crusades were an interesting thing to read about, but the volume in his hands was one of the few detailing the strategies used.

Now if I could get my hands on the 'War of the Invisible Kingdom: A Tactician's Eyewitness' my collection would be complete!

Turning his thoughts away from the beyond rare book, his mind turned to Cordelia.

I hope she's doing well. Before we separated, she was telling me how the veterans were being incredibly mean spirited towards her. I don't know why that is, but I hope they're professional enough not to do it on patrol.

He sighed again. He hadn't had the chance to play while they'd been marching, so why not now? It'd help him relax.

He reached under his bed and pulled out his case. Thankfully, the cold hadn't done anything to his prized possession and he was tuned and ready to go soon after.

Hmm, what should I play…? Oh, I know!
He pulled in a breath and began.

*I hope this reaches her, if only to make her day a bit brighter.*

-Cordelia-

It had been another bad day.

She sighed into the cool air, trying to puzzle out why this was happening to her.

_Hmph, maybe it's karma. Here I am, getting sohappy with my friend that the universe decides to go and make me miserable._

She sighed again. She'd readily admit to missing Sumia and her thoughts were still with the Shepherds, but she found her mind less and less focused on Chrom.

I wondered how Robin's doing? _He promised to keep practicing while he was away, but has he been able to keep it? Is he safe and sound this night?_

She didn't know why, but the thought of him in danger hurt her. Not in the form of panic induced hysteria like if Sumia or Chrom were hurt, but in a deeper more sickly way.

If she had to describe it, it was like getting a gash in your arm versus seeing your home burned down. One was quickly resolved if taken care of quick enough while the other was slower and more personal.

Why... _why do I feel like this? We only truly met a few weeks ago, but he's already my closest friend. I've told him things I've never told anyone, not even my parents!_

She groaned. There was no earthly way she was getting any sleep tonight.

_Well, if he promised to keep up the practice, then so will I. No one's come to their cots yet, so I have the barracks to myself for now anyway._

Resolved, she reached under her cot and pulled out a worn lyre. The wood was well cared for though, and the strings hummed as she tuned her old friend.

_Hmm, what to play though? Oh, I know. Let's play the one we were working on._

She felt compelled to walk to the window and at an unknown signal, began to strum.

_Maybe it'll reach him, and make his day a bit brighter._

Unknown to both, the wind carried the notes far into the night. They twisted and whirled amongst the black silk of the night sky, dancing with snowflakes, stars, and birds alike.

It wasn't until hours later, when the players had long retired, that the notes finally met.

They embraced and danced amongst each other, old friends laughing at their reunion. Wind, dust, and leaves bore witness to the invisible ball, dispersing only when the last notes fell into each other's arms and a new day was borne unto the sleeping earth.

-Castle Flavia, Balcony—

Severa had to hold back her tears as her father retreated back into his room.
Naga, it's that same tune. The one they always played to wake me and Morgy up. Why did I come here? What convinced me to force Selene to take me here?

She would never admit it, but it was because she needed the strength the sight of her father, young and alive, brought. It was the only way she could stay in Lucina's presence.

Geez, I'm such a sap. I need to leave or Cynthia's going to blow a gasket.

She steadied her breathing and disappeared into the halls, her parent's tune humming past her lips the rest of the night.
The Shepherds were here. After two days of travel through the snow, they'd finally arrived.

"Man, the Khan's descriptions did not do this place justice."

Robin chuckled at Lissa. She was right; the verbal descriptions just couldn't match the great stone building before them.

From where they were, the building was five stories with great archways acting as windows. Banners and flags alike flew across its grand façade and the Shepherds could see people buzzing about every level.

Lissa's voice reached his ears again. "So, Robin, you said you wanted a better understanding of how the church worked, right?"

Robin shook his head. "Yes, I would. But, first, can you tell me why it's Naga that's worshipped? I've found a number of books that talk about so called 'High Gods'."

Lissa scratched at her chin. "Well, as a fan of fairytales and myth alike, I'll do my best. You may want to ask a more dedicated priest or cleric when we get back, they'll be able to give you better detail."

Robin shrugged. "We have another three hours until we arrive at that building. The fact we can see it from here should tell you we'll have a lot of time on our hands just getting around."

Lissa giggled. "All too true. Ok, here we go."

She took a deep breath and launched into her lesson.

"Ok, so the first being to enter the world was known as Ybris, the God of Order. He gave shape to the swirling mass of chaos he found and formed many things. The first of his creations were Light and Dark, governed by Horakhty and Armityle, his children. But, with their creation came duality, forming the being known as The Scales to balance them."

She took a breath.

"But, Horakhty and Armityle were competitive in the extreme, each racing to craft their own masterpieces to please their father who was ever at war with the chaos."

She held up her right hand. "Horakhty created many of the things you and I associate with light: Fire, lightning, warmth, wind, stars, the sun, and so on."

She held up her left hand. "Armilyte created many of the things we associate with darkness: Ice, cold, the earth, metal, dust, and so on."

She shook her head. "But, nothing they created could please Ybris. Even as their new creations birthed new gods and goddesses, Ybris knew that they were missing something."

She clapped her hands together. "That's when The Scales finally took action. It took the creations of the two competing children and mixed them together. This is the origin of the High Gods, the products of mixing light and dark."

Her hands pulled apart. "Ybris was pleased by this and allowed the new gods and goddesses to have
dominion over the earth. From there they formed the world as we know it, not truly taking notice of what was occurring until new beings, born of Tiamat and Titan—the High Goddess of Water and High God of Earth—appeared.

She smiled. "The first of their children were the dragons. They were closest to the High Gods as they were the firstborn of the earth and worshipped the gods accordingly. After them came the skin changers, beings that could shift between beast and man. They were not as close to the High Gods and developed their own beliefs, creating new icons to represent the old powers."

She took a deep breath. "Then, finally, came humans. They knew little of the High Gods and wondered at the might of the Old Dragons, choosing to worship them instead."

She sighed. "The Gods were unmoved by this, but not the dragons. Many of them had died in wars amongst themselves and the truly old had begun to grow mad. They saw the humans as a way to possibly restore their power or as the cause of their decline. Wars and peace alike broke out among the dragons and humans, leading to generations of bloodshed."

Robin stopped her. "Wait, what of the skin changers?"

She sighed again. "Many of them were driven to a remote island. Some of their tribes had learned to take on the forms of dragons and this offended the originals. What happened after their exile, I do not know."

She pointed to her staff. "But, one thing wished to halt the bloodshed. The ideal of peace had its own goddess take shape, Naga. She gathered those amongst the dragons and humans that wished for peace and granted them twelve holy weapons."

Robin smirked. "The Jugdral Crusades."

She nodded. "Yep, on the nose. Anyway, after the warlike dragons were defeated, all but one of the High Gods retreated into a realm all their own. The only one to remain upon the Earth was Titan, who supposedly toils below the Earth and causes earthquakes and volcanoes when angered. From there, the victorious crusaders created the Church of Naga and it has remained nearly unchanged ever since."

Robin sat back, absorbing the information. "So, where did the High Gods go?"

Lissa shrugged. "No one knows. There's only a vague hint that they sleep in an 'Astral Realm' in one of the oldest texts. Supposedly, there's a way to meet with them, but it's an old wives' tale."

A yawn interrupted them. "Ugh, are we there yet?"

Lissa glanced to her left. "No, Vaike, we're not. Here, let me check your wound."

As she busied herself with the injured man, Robin thought on her lesson.

Hmm, I wonder if those wolves I keep seeing in my dreams have something to do with the legends? One of my books lists several of the High Gods and Fenrir in particular caught my eye. He's God of Lightning and Thunder and prefers to take the shape of a wolf…

The wagon they were in jolted, nearly making him tumble out.

"Sorry back there!" The driver called. "Blasted idiot decided to cross right in front of us. We'll be inside the Colosseum in a few minutes."
Robin grunted. "Ok, thanks. Lissa, Vaike, Stahl, we need to get out soon."

They gathered at the edge of the wagon and hopped out after it stopped. They were in a large corral, several other wagons along with the Shepherd's supply caravan already gathered.

"Ok, listen up!" That was Flavia. "Anyone that's not participating today is going to be seated in an area called A5. It's pretty close to the arena floor so you'll get to see the fight up close. Prince Chrom, grab your champions and come with me."

Everyone began to disperse.

"Oh, before I forget! There's food and drink being sold throughout the colosseum. Believe me, you'll see the stalls. Try and get something before the match starts."

Lissa took off running, eager to try new things.

Robin was too worried about the fight to notice, but Lissa had gone into the wrong tunnel.

"Robin, come on. We need to discuss our plan with Sumia before the fight."

Robin sighed. "I'm coming, just let me get my sword."

-Lissa-

Lissa was lost, irrevocably lost.

The moment Flavia had said food and drink, she'd taken off to find the nearest stall and now she couldn't remember where the Shepherds were supposed to sit. Thus, she found herself standing by one of the archway windows, trying to figure out where she was amongst the throngs of people.

_Ugh, I just had to listen to my stomach. I haven't even found a stall that's serving anything I like. Chrom's gonna chew me out good for this_.

She sighed again. Was it too much to find a good rib of roast pork? She'd take chicken at this point.

A brief hint of something passed her nose as the wind blew. It was coming from the right, so she followed her nose and began weaving through the crowd again. Sure, she drew more than a few odd looks with her clothes, but she was able to follow the heavenly scent without much trouble.

Eventually, she found the stall where the scent was coming from.

_Mmm, chicken._

The stall was a humble affair, just two people serving the roasted chicken. They had three roasters going in the back, but it looked like they were almost out of stock.

"Ma, we're darn near out! Got 'bout two left I reckon."

The woman at the front sighed. "Alright, Donny, go ahead and sell the last pair. I'll go find the neighbors."

"Um, excuse me? Can I have a bird?"

The stall people stared at the girl before them. They'd never seen anyone in clothing like hers before.

Lissa frowned. "Is everything ok? I heard you still have two left."
The boy shook out of his stupor. "Oh, sorry ma'am. We have two good birds, plucked just this morn."

Lissa smiled. "Wonderful! How much?"

The woman smiled. "For a whole bird? That'll be one silver coin."

Lissa frowned as she reached into her coin purse. "Hold on a second…"

After a moment of searching, she sighed. "Shoot, I don't have any."

The woman shrugged. "Well, what do you have? I may not be able to get you a whole bird, but Donny here can carve some."

Lissa pulled out a coin. "I have this. Will that work?"

Donny, or Donnel as was his actual name, didn't see the coin but his mother turned pale at the sight. When he finally got a look, he was stunned.

"What in tarnation? That's a gold coin! You wouldn't get less'n a hundred fowl with that one coin!"

Lissa shrugged slowly. "Really? I… didn't know it was worth that much. So, can I have a bird?"

The woman nodded rapidly. "A bird? You can have them both!"

Lissa pumped her fist. "Sweet, here you go."

She handed over the coin to the trembling woman and was soon two roasted chickens richer.

"Thanks for the food! Now, I just need to find out where everyone's sitting."

The woman, smelling an opportunity, jumped at the chance. "Donny can show ya around. He's been here the last few contests so he knows his way around."

Donnel frowned. "But, Ma… I still have to pull the iron. Specially since them idgets are likely to show up if I leave."

His mother waved him off. "Ah, don't worry bout that Donny. I can see the neighbors heading for us right now. Now, be a dear and guide this young lady where she's going."

Donnel could tell he wouldn't win this fight, but the neighbors were in sight now, so he may as well.

"Alrighty then, do you have a reckoning where your friends might be?"

Lissa shrugged. "All I heard was something about an A. I still have no clue where that is."

Donnel shrugged. "Ah, then we need to head right. Follow me, Miss, uh…"

Lissa smiled. "My name's Lissa, pleasure to meet you."

Donnel blushed at her curtsy. "Ma name's Donny, er, Donnel. Sorry, my ma calls me Donny so much I start thinkin' it my real name."

Lissa giggled. "Oh, if only you knew how many I have. Now then, lead the way Donny!"

Donnel's mother watched them go with a smile. The girl had slipped her arm around his and was skipping along with birds in hand. They seemed to hit it off just fine too.
Good, if all goes well and she's not just visitin', we may have a future for you yet my boy.

Oh, if only she knew.

-Donnel-

How'd he find himself here again?

To his right was the girl he'd been escorting barely twenty minutes ago. That wasn't the strange part. No, the strange part was the absolute mountain of a man to his left that was glaring at him with enough force to shame Porkers back home.

It had started after they'd left his ma and the stall behind. He'd asked the girl, Lissa, what her friends looked like. She'd then gone on a long and very detailed account of what they looked like all in one breath.

Not even Ol' Sal could say so much and he was famous for it!

Then she'd started asking him all kinds of questions. Most was stuff rich folks didn't know, but she seemed to love asking them anyway. Some were common sense one's that made him wonder if she'd been under a rock for a while.

Once, he'd found their old cow lying under a rock. It had been a particularly cold day.

Then the man on his left had come thundering down the hall, calling for Lissa. Donnel had been stunned at the man's resplendent armor, which probably cost more than their entire farm, but Lissa didn't seem fazed.

In fact, she started dragging Donnel toward the big man. In her words, she wanted to thank him for being a guide and a gentleman, whatever that was, and sit next to her during the match. The other man, Freddy she called him, had argued that they couldn't let an unknown person sit next to her.

Lissa had then, amazingly, pulled rank and told him she didn't care. If Freddy wanted to keep an eye on Donnel, he'd have to sit next to him.

An' now I'm here. I hope Ma's able to get everything packed up. I ain't leaving anytime soon.

"Hey, why the long face, champ?"

The voice came from behind him. "Uh, wha?"

The voice laughed again. "Ah, look at ya. So flustered sitting there between Frederick and Lissa. Don't worry kid, you'll be fine. Half of us are idiots anyway so you'll fit right in!"

This was followed by a dull smack. "Don't assign your stupidity to others, Sir Vaike. I, for one, am of far superior upbringing than most everyone here."

Another smack followed that boast. "Shut up, fruitcake. Ignore them, just enjoy the match kid. Besides, Lissa only likes people that she thinks are nice, so you've done something right."

Donnel just smiled awkwardly when a piece of chicken was placed under his nose. "Want some?"

He blinked at the chicken but took it all the same. "Uh, thanks."

Lissa smiled. "No problem! Food's better when you share with friends!"
Donnel felt a smile rise on his face. "The old spinner in my town says the same thing."

She giggled. "Ah, my brother says it too. Great minds think alike, I guess."

They fell silent, the others chatting around them, when Donnel finally asked what had been on his mind. "Um, pardon me for askin', but uh, where are you from?"

Lissa kept chomping away.

_Maybe she didn't hear me?_

He tapped her shoulder. "Uh, excuse me?"

She swallowed and looked at him. "Yeah?"

"Um, can I… ask where you're from?"

Lissa scrunched up her face. "Well… I'm from Ylisse."

Donnel's face fell. "Oh, then you're from down south."

Frederick coughed next to him, making Donnel jump. He'd forgotten the man was there.

"Milady, I think it's time you told him. It does him no good to be ignorant of who you are and it's better to be honest."

Lissa sighed. "Fine, I'll tell him. See, Donnel, I'm actually-"

Frederick stopped her. "May as well do the full introduction, it'll be good practice."

Lissa groaned. "Really, do I have to?"

His glare said it all. Donnel felt his heart climb into his throat as Lissa groaned.

"Fine, fine, just let me get my words in order."

She took a deep breath before taking Donnel's hand in her own. "I apologize for my lack of decorum earlier. Allow me to properly introduce myself."

She smiled, but there was nervousness in her eyes. "My name is Lissa Spatz de Ylisse, 1st princess of the Halidom and second in line for the throne. Thank you for escorting me today; I've had a lot of fun."

Donnel's mind went blank, shock echoing through his very being. In a sign that he was likely not taking this well, his first thought was:

_I am severely underdressed._

Lissa's face was tense, nervous energy palpable as she waited for his response. She'd known him barely half-an-hour but she wanted to know more, more about farm work and the simple life.

She wanted to know about life without the burden of being royalty.

Donnel though, did what was expected. He kneeled. "I-I'm humbled by your kindness your ladiness. I-I appreciate the chance to meet ya."

Lissa frowned, that wasn't what she wanted.
Frederick however, nodded. "Well done, Lady Lissa. And to you as well, Donnel I believe? For a commoner, you know decorum."

Lissa glared at Frederick, but Donnel spoke. "Uh, my ma, she, uh, drilled it into me. Said I needed to have propriety an' some o' ter words."

Frederick nodded. "Well, at least you know. I'll still keep my eye on you, but I mean no offense. I'm simply sworn to my duty."

He turned back to the arena floor. His eye was still on Donnel, but it was no longer cold, just alert.

Lissa turned away and started sulking, half-heartedly chewing on a drumstick.

Donnel didn't understand what was happening. Hadn't he just done the 'proper' thing?

A hand patted his shoulder. "Hey, Donnel right? Name's Kellam, but that's not important. See Lissa there? She does not like being treated like a princess. For whatever reason, she's taken a shine to you, and I suggest you win back the shine fast."

It was just a whisper, but it shocked him all the same. Lady Lissa didn't like being treated as a princess? Feeling more than a little confused, Donnel spoke. "Uh, why?"

The voice whispered again. "It may seem like the high life for the common folk, myself included, but there's a lot more pain up there than most realize. She's kind and open to everyone, but she spent her early years alone with few friends. Considering how quickly she's warmed up to you, it's best to try and make her laugh."

Donnel sighed. "And how do I, a two-bit hick, do that?"

The voice chuckled. "Hold a moment. Hey, Vaike, let me borrow you for a second."

A moment later, they had a plan.

The voice, Kellam Donnel remembered, whispered again. "Ok, Donnel, you need to pull her eyes over here. Do that and we'll handle the rest."

Donnel fidgeted "Are ya sure? What makes you think I can make her look, by ta time they introduce the fighters?"

Kellam, who Donnel could see now, smiled. "Don't worry about it. We were planning on doing this to Chrom at some point anyway."

The arena was buzzing now, the match about to get underway. The West-Khan's champions would be introduced first.

Donnel had to get Lissa to look at them before that happened.

"Um, excuse me, Lady Lissa?"

She ignored him and the first champion, named Marth, was announced.

"Lady Lissa, um, can I ask you something?"

The second champion, Catria, was introduced.

This isn't workin'. I'll try one more time, but then I'll need to get'er attention quick.
The third champion, Katarina, was announced.

"Lady Lissa, please, this is important."

She sighed and turned to him. "What?"

Donnel smiled awkwardly as the announcer spoke once more.

"And, representing the East-Khan Flavia, we have the fighter Chrom!"

Donnel turned her to face the other Shepherds, whom had formed a line in their seats.

Lissa stared at them. "What the-"

At that point, Robin and Sumia were introduced and the Shepherds launched their plan.

"Oh, Ylisse the bea-u-tiful, radiant as the sun!"

They began to belt out the Ylissean War Song.

Lissa stared at the scene, openly gaping. She wasn't alone; the entire section had gone completely silent as they tried to process what was happening.

Then, to really kick the spectacle into gear, the Shepherds began a synchronized Cordan Dance Line, named after the Ylissean province it originated in, with Frederick leading the line.

Donnel was staring right alongside everyone when he heard strange sounds coming from his right. He turned to see Lissa's face scrunched up in a desperate attempt to hold back her laughter.

She fared admirably, but failed ten seconds in.

Her laughter could be heard throughout the arena, the crowd joined in moments later. Flavia herself, seated in the Khan's formal position, cheered them on.

It was quite a way to begin the match, but Donnel was glad. Lissa was holding onto him for support, and it seemed like life had returned to her once more.

-Robin-

"I knew they were planning something, I just knew it."

Chrom sighed at Robin's claim. "Well, I bet it's Stahl, Kellam, or Sully who came up with it."

Sumia giggled, eyeing Donnel all the while. "Ah, let them have their fun. I'm more interested in the little friend Lissa found."

Chrom grunted. "As am I, but Frederick looks ok with him, so for now we let it be. Anyway, shall we get back to business?"

They nodded and turned to face their opponents.

Who were all desperately trying to remain stoic but couldn't contain their mirth.

Robin sighed. "Well, they better hope they don't start soon or this'll be a quick fight."

Unfortunately for them, Marth and his compatriots recovered quickly.
Robin whistled through his teeth. "Ok, remember the plan. Sumia, you take Catria, we can't keep up with her otherwise. Chrom, you've seen Marth in action and are our best swordsman, take them down. I'll handle Katarina."

They nodded, the plan memorized. Robin would have to thank Flavia later, without her they wouldn't be armed with new weapons, albeit Chrom still chose to wield Falchion.

Actually, where did Chrom and Sumia disappear to earlier? I know we arrived somewhat early, but did they have time to get practice in?

In fact, they did.

-Hours Earlier-

Chrom sighed as he searched for Sumia. After Flavia had explained the rules to them, fighters must be equal on either side, Sumia had disappeared.

"Where did you go?" He muttered under his breath.

After another few minutes of searching, he heard the grunts of someone at work and the solid smacks that could only come from a training dummy.

Following the noise, he finally spotted her. She'd already worked up quite a sweat, but she was so concentrated on her task he escaped her notice.

So, he took the time to observe her.

She was always beautiful, that had never been in doubt. But, seeing her so determined made her seem even more so in his eyes. She was kind, caring, and willing to treat everyone equally, even him. And now, she'd been his savior. Actually, now that he thought about it, he could swear the background was turning pink and sparkly. Wait, there was a violin in his ear and were those rose buds!

He shook his head of the fantasy. They needed to talk, that was what he came for. He could figure out his strange hallucinations later.

"Sumia!"

She stumbled mid-swing, tipping herself forward and landing with a hard thud. Chrom dashed forward and helped her up, face contrite. "Sorry, I shouldn't have done that while you were swinging."

Sumia dusted herself off. "I-It's alright, Chrom. Um, did you need something?"

Chrom nodded. "Yes, I just wanted to make sure you felt ready. You'll be going against another Pegasus Knight, and we don't know how skilled they may be. I'm... worried."

Sumia slowly smiled. "Oh, thanks. But, um, don't worry! I'm ready to do my best, just like always!"

Chrom relaxed. "Good, good. Well, you can whack away at that dummy for another ten minutes, but I want you to rest after that. A tired Sumia's no good."

She smirked. "And a tired Chrom's a bad Chrom. Why don't you take a nap? I won't tell anyone and you'll feel better."

Chrom blushed. "I have no idea what you're talking about."
Her smirk grew. "Well, I saw you trip on a pebble earlier today. No one else saw it, but I could tell them, unless of course ... you took a nap."

Chrom frowned. "This is blackmail. How do you know I wouldn't rather endure the embarrassment?"

Sumia giggled. "Because Lissa would never let you hear the end of it. Besides, you're stubborn and you know it. If I didn't use blackmail, you'd never take care of yourself."

Chrom held his frown before laughing. "Well, you got me. Alright, I'll go take a short break over there on that bench. After that, we'll head to the arena and meet up with Robin, ok?"

Sumia nodded, instinctively embracing him before going back to her practice. Chrom just smiled and walked over to the bench, both unaware of the observers desperately trying to hold in their glee.

-Robin-

They were at the center of the arena now, each of them squaring up against their opponent.

Robin had a question. "Tell me, Katarina I believe? Why do you keep your hood up? Surely it impairs your vision."

Katarina did not answer.

Robin scoffed. "Very well, then. But, do not be surprised if I win on account of it."

She still didn't speak.

Robin sighed as the Master of Ceremonies called over the din. "Alright, after that marvelous display, we are about to begin! Now, a quick reminder, killing is not allowed nor can blows be crippling. Should a fighter suffer such a blow, the Khan the attacker represents will lose."

The crowd roared and laughed in equal measure, even the Shepherds. Sure, they'd embarrassed themselves, but they'd accomplished their goal and embarrassed Chrom while cheering Lissa up.

The MC took over again. "Alright, now that everyone's all caught up, let's start!"

A gong rang through the arena and Robin drew his sword.

Chrom and Sumia drew their weapons as well, thinking it was strange how slow their opponents were removing theirs.

Catria, the Pegasus Knight, held a great lance with a half-moon curving toward the black shaft with a red chord wound around it. A strange set of what looked like ribs with a green gem rested under the moon, connecting it to the shaft. A triangle shaped blade sprang from the back of the moon and ended in a wicked point.

Katarina wielded a blade with a red grip and golden pommel, all leading into a golden cross-guard with a circle worked into it. The blade was made of four black spine-like sections, the fifth formed the tip of the blade. All four small blades had a white line of metal running down their center.

However, Marth's sword needed no description when it finally saw light.

It was Falchion.

Chrom tensed. "Where in the nine hells did you get that?!"
In response, Marth took up a fighting stance.

Chrom growled. "Not talking, huh? Fine, I'll force the answer out of you!"

He dashed forwards and leapt into the air. He swung himself forward and brought his Falchion down onto the other Falchion at the end of his spin. Marth was strong enough to take the brunt of the hit before lashing out with a kick.

Chrom dodged and they exchanged blows, Chrom's eyes wide when they finally locked blades.

"Tell me," he grunted, "who taught you to fight like that?!"

Marth leapt away, jumping into the air in a perfect rendition of Chrom's opening strike. He screamed as he came down, the first time any of them had spoken.

"My Father!"

Chrom leapt away from the strike, face contemplative. Marth held out his sword in challenge.

Robin snarled at Chrom. "This isn't the time for questions! Fight damn it, or Ylisse will not have what it needs!"

Chrom shook himself free of his thoughts and charged Marth once more. Sumia and Catria had since taken to the air, so it was just Robin and Katarina now.

They circled each other, each reading for an opening. Robin had his blade bared while a new tome, one Miriel called Archthunder, glowed in his other hand. Katarina stood in a similar stance, but with her blade in front and her own tome next to her leg, the cover a blazing red.

Katarina lost her patience and charged. Her thrusts were lightning fast, but they were only testing Robin's range and defenses. He countered with some thrusts of his own, slashing hard when she sidestepped his last attempt.

She rolled away from him and closed the gap once more, metal crashing into metal as they exchanged blows.

_We're evenly matched in swordplay. Let's see how she handles magic._

Robin muttered the incantation under his breath and sent three bolts of lightning screaming at her. She dodged two of them and then, in direct defiance of everything Robin knew, smacked the last one away with her blade.

Robin pulled up short, openly gaping at the feat.

_How in Naga's name was she not shocked?! What is that blade made of? It should have conducted the energy!_

He could feel Katarina smirk. "What's the matter? Something mess up your understanding of the world?"

Robin growled and charged in again. They continued to exchange blows, fire and lighting starting to flow between them. They locked blades before pushing apart, Katarina's tome shining violently.

"Ragnarok!"

The familiar magic script flooded from the book and coalesced into a great circle around Robin. He
jumped back as hard as he could, barely escaping the center of the circle as it was flooded by a pillar of white hot fire.

After it died down, Robin stared at Katarina.

Apparently, the force and heat from the spell had been enough to blow the hood off her head.

*She... she could be my sister! Her hair's the same!*

But, her features were too sharp. Sure, he could see something that he thought was family resemblance in her lips, cheeks and nose, but her eyes were mismatched. One was much like his own while the other was a beautiful red.

*I've seen that color before... but where?*

Robin saw no more as she pulled the hood back over her head.

Robin grit his teeth and charged again. But, when she charged him too, he stopped on a coin and sidestepped her charge. He heard her curse before he lashed out with his leg and tripped her. When she finally rolled to a stop, she found steel at her throat.

"I believe that's my win."

He could hear her growl, but she held her hands up.

Victory sealed, Robin reached to pull her up when she did something he wasn't expecting.

She pulled him into a hug.

"I... I know you don't know me, but let me have this, please."

Robin glanced over Katarina's shoulder, tense from the fight and not sure what to do. It appeared that Marth had been defeated at least, but Sumia and Catria were still in the air.

Katarina didn't look like she'd be letting go anytime soon, so Robin resigned himself to being stuck for the remainder of the match.

*Good luck, Sumia. You can do it, we all know it.*

-*Sumia-

*Damn, I haven't seen lance work like this since Cordelia!*

Sumia swooped down again, barely missing the other Pegasus as it dropped out of range. They circled each other and struck whenever they saw an opening, real or perceived.

*I can't keep this up. I'm the better flyer, but she's better with a lance. Actually... let's leverage that as best we can.*

She pulled Selene into a steep climb, baiting the other rider to chase her.

*Gotcha.*

Catria bit and started climbing too, her eagerness apparent. Sumia climbed and climbed 'till she was near the ceiling. Then, she turned Selene around and dove.
Catria jerked in surprise and nearly lost her spear when Sumia passed her. She lost a gauntlet, but it was a small price to pay.

Sumia glanced behind her as she dove, smirking as Catria followed. 

_Alright, let's see if you can fly and fight at the same time._

Sumia pulled up as they skimmed the ground, Catria using the lack of wind resistance to catch up. Once side by side, they began exchanging slashes and thrusts, rolling and weaving through the air in an aerial ballet for the ages.

Sumia huffed when Catria's lance scratched her shoulder guard. "Alright, fine then! Let's do this!"

She angled her lance and, when Catria's Pegasus raised its wing, thrust into the wing.

The Pegasus shrieked in pain and immediately lost flight. Catria, desperate, scored a similar blow on Selene's wing. They both crashed to the ground with a hard thud.

The crowd held its collective breath as the two combatants finally came to their feet. The Shepherds though, had to hold in snickers at what they knew was coming.

Sumia and Catria stood apart from each other, held up their weapons, charged…

And tripped over thin air.

The audience waited, stunned at the sheer absurdity of what happened. There was no physical way to trip on air was there?

Sumia picked herself up, blushing at the stunned silence. The only noise in the entire arena was the hysterics of the Shepherds, everyone but Frederick and Donnel having a blast at her expense.

Catria started to pull herself up when she found steel at her throat.

"And, that's our win."

It was Robin, and the battle was finished. Sumia sighed in relief and walked over to join them when Catria popped forward and hugged her.

"Um, sorry for this, it's just how I congratulate people."

Sumia didn't respond, simply smiling and patting the other girl's back.

_Robin_

"So, we've won and the ceremony's over. What now, Great Khan?"

They were standing in the arena, the area long since vacated. It was just Robin and Chrom now, as Flavia practically preened in front of them.

"Ah, give me a second boys, I need to soak this in. It feels like _ages_ since I've held full power."

Robin didn't like how she purred the word 'ages' but put it out of his mind. "Now then, we've delivered the tournament to you as agreed. Are you still willing to back us?"

Flavia huffed. "Oh, you're no fun. But, yes, Regna Ferox will throw all of its might behind Ylisse."
Chrom shook her hand. "Thank you, Flavia. This debt shall never be forgotten. But, we must make haste back to Ylisstol. Emmeryn must be made aware of this success as soon as possible."

Flavia smirked. "Ah, come now, there's no need to leave so soon. It's late and my celebratory feast is dying for its guests of honor."

Chrom backed up a step. "No, we really should…"

"Boy, you may as well let her have fun. It's safer for everyone that way."

Flavia didn't even bother glancing at the new arrival. "Then I'll see you both in a few hours! Golden Ale, here I come!"

She raced from the room, leaving Chrom and Robin to stare at two new men.

Robin spoke first. "And who, sir, are you?"

The man that answered was a true bear of a man. Tall, broad, and tanned brown with a black eyepatch over his bald head, he was much closer to Robin's original imagining of a Khan than Flavia was. Actually, he must have had some wealth if his golden armor, blue pants, and fur lined vest were any indication.

"I am the West-Khan you so rudely removed from power!"

Chrom took a step forward as Robin cursed his impropriety. "And? We won the match fair and square, you have no grounds to complain."

The Khan stared at Chrom before bursting into laughter. "Ah, don't get your knickers in a twist boy, I'm not mad. If anything, I'm relieved to lose the mantle."

Robin calmed himself. "Then, why are you here?"

The man laughed again. "Well, first things first, my name is Basilio. Pleasure to meet you both."

They shook hands, Basilio nearly crushing them in his grip. "Anyway, I'm here to provide a personal contribution to the cause. Lon'qu, step up."

Another man stepped forward, his physique painfully thin next to Basilio. "This is my right hand man and former champion: Lon'qu."

Robin blinked. "Oh, former champion? So, how did Marth and his compatriots become the participants?"

Lon'qu grunted. "Beat me in selection tournament, that's the long and short."

Basilio laughed. "Well, I certainly don't know how! Lon'qu's the best swordsman in Ferox, bar none, and I feel he has the makings of a Khan in him. But, as of today he's under your command. Think of it as West Ferox's personal contribution."

Chrom turned to Lon'qu. "Are you sure?"


Chrom shrugged too. "Alright, welcome aboard."

They shook hands and Basilio laughed again.
"Now, let's get ourselves to the feast hall! We don't want Flavia drinking all the ale!"

They walked out of the room, a smirk rising on Robin's face. *Or Stahl eating all the food.*

-Lissa-

"Hey, Donny, come with me!"

She grabbed her friend's arm and started pulling him towards a big crowd.

"Ah, Your L-Lissa, don't scare me like that!"

She laughed. "Ah, come on, Donny! We've had a lot of fun today, why not stay for the feast?"

Donnel scratched his cheek. "Uh, I hate to, uh, disappoint, but…"

Lissa pouted. "You have to go home?"

He nodded, scratching at his head again. "Yeah, hate ta say so, but my ma needs me back home. We leave on the morn."

Lissa dropped her pout and sighed. "Well, why don't you tell me where your village is? I'd love to visit if I can find the time."

Donnel blushed. "Garsh, yer too kind. Well, I live bout a two hours east of here, so you can just follow the road."

Lissa blinked. "Oh, we must've passed it on the way here."

She shrugged and pulled Donnel into a hug. "Don't forget about me, 'kay? We're still friends, even if we don't see each other for a while?"

Donnel could feel his face flush and his hands remained frozen. "I don' mean no offense, but you're a mighty hard gal to forget."

Lissa giggled. "Ah, you're sweet. Oh, and you can hug me back, just keep it above the shoulders so Freddy doesn't have a conniption."

"A what now?"

Lissa rolled her eyes. "Just hug me you big dink."

Donnel did so slowly, very careful of where he was putting his hands.

"See, not so hard is it," she whispered. "Now then, I have a party to get to and you have to get to your ma. I hope we'll see each other soon."

Donnel pulled away. "Uh, yeah, that'd be, uh, swell. Um, goodnight!"

Donnel fled the colosseum, never looking back or honestly considering he'd ever see Lissa again.

Lissa watched him go with a smile. He was super cute and so prone to embarrassment, it was so utterly charming.

*We'll need an ambassador to Ferox, right? Maybe I can convince Emm to let me do it.*

She shook her head, one thing at a time. For now, party!
Robin had fled the festivities soon after the kegs had opened. The feast may have been grand, but he knew what happened when Vaike imbibed enough and it looked like Flavia and Basilio would be joining those theatrics. Now, he was in his room and thinking on the day’s match.

*I doubt this will be the last we hear of Marth and his compatriots. I don't know why, but it feels like they have a great role to play in all this.*

He sighed into the night air, mind turning to Katarina.

*She felt so familiar, and when I saw her face…*

He cradled his head. Her face had made his mind scream, another jumble of indecipherable images called to mind. Then, that embrace… it was far too familiar for them to be strangers, she had to know him!

*I need to find them. Cordelia, forgive me, but you do not hold the answers to my past.*

He sighed as his mind’s eye was filled with the image of his friend.

*I hope she's ok. I can't play tonight, I'm too tired, but I can at least pray for her and hope that we'll have some fun tales to swap when next we meet. Although, she did say that she'd been dying to go to that new place in the main square…*

His mind started planning out their next meeting not noticing his stack of books had grown.


-Cordelia-

*They're getting worse.*

She sighed again and slinked into her bed. She had to keep her hair combed lest it get tangled, but it had been quite the trial today.

*I don't know what I've done to deserve this. First it was just the usual taunts, but now I'm getting work shunted toward me. Curse my inability to say no, and curse them for exploiting it!*

She punched her thin pillow.

*Positive thoughts, Cordelia, positive thoughts. Ok, so, we're done in less than two weeks. After that, we have a week of down time. The Shepherds should be back by then too, but that's just conjecture.*

She glanced down at her old lyre, but sighed. Not tonight.

*Hm, I did… say our next meeting was a… d-date. Naga, I'm stuttering in my head. Anyway, um… he said he wanted to go and visit some of the provinces, see more of Ylisse. Maybe… I could convince Phila for some time off and be his guide?*

But, that would entail them traveling together.

*Alone.*

*Ah, bad, bad, bad thoughts! You're only making this worse, I just want to help my friend!*
She knew, though, that underneath that denial she wouldn't do the same for another friend. She probably wouldn't have done it for Sumia.

I… I need to see him again. Being away is only making me more confused. Maybe, if not a trip, then a dinner at his favorite place? Yeah, that sounds okay.

With a new plan and eased mind, she finally went to sleep.

Her dreams were full of warm lavender and laughter, chasing away her demons, if only for the night.
The Shepherds left the coliseum the next morning, the only noise coming from the rumble of the wagons.

The day was bright and clear, cheery to all but the Shepherds. The wagons made all possible speed back to Ylisse, their passengers fuming.

Robin sighed as they passed through the Longfort. They'd made a six hour journey in fewer than three.

All because Plegia got impatient and decided to start something.

He sighed again as the morning’s events played out in his mind.

They’d all woken up early, habit guiding them through their usual rituals despite pounding hangovers. Many were still half-asleep when they finally gathered by the wagons.

The only one missing was Chrom, but Frederick, ever the taskmaster, had the Shepherds storing their supplies before Chrom arrived.

When he did, it was in a storm of rage and anxiety.

"Shepherds! We make for Ylisstol immediately, everyone to the wagons!"

His voice brokered no argument and they scrambled into the wagons with all the haste their muddled brains could muster. Only Robin had the wherewithal to catch Chrom's arm.

"Hey, what's wrong? We aren't supposed to leave for another hour."

Chrom simply grunted and handed Robin a piece of parchment. "Read that while we ride."

He stormed away from Robin, leaping into the wagon and screaming for the Shepherds to hurry.

Robin jumped into his wagon and started reading, a pit opening in his gut after the first sentence.

Emergency Dispatch.

Prince Chrom, you are hereby ordered to return to Ylisstol with all possible haste. A national incident has occurred on the border of Ylisse and Plegia and all forces are being recalled. Details of the incident will be given upon arrival.

Godspeed,

Knight Commander Phila.

Shaking his mind free, he glanced to the others with him. All of them were solemn, but Lon'qu in particular had tried to stuff himself into the corner of the wagon.

Robin sighed. Basilio had, while drunk, spilled to everyone at the feast that Lon'qu wasn't comfortable around women. The man in question had simply scowled, but the Shepherds happily began teasing their new addition.

That is why I don't drink much. If I lose that much control after drinking, I'll either shame myself into
exile or get myself killed.

Squashing the thought and sighing again, he turned his mind to Cordelia.

The dispatch said that all units are being recalled, but who knows when it'll reach them? When I asked Phila about what they could do in this kind of situation, she said there was no way for messages to reach them in the air. It still boggles the mind that most of Ylisse's forces are based on Pegasus Knights yet messages travel by land.

It meant that Cordelia and her comrades would have to reach an outpost before they received the message.

He prayed it would happen soon.

Ylisstol Castle

Their journey took another five hours; the sun was low in the sky when they thundered through the castle gates.

Chrom leapt from the wagon he'd been in, Lissa, Sumia, Frederick, and Robin chased after him.

"Everyone, go to the barracks and prepare! I'll be back with news!" Robin called over his shoulder before sprinting after Chrom.

He wouldn't catch him though. Chrom was on the warpath and even the veteran guards shook in their boots as he passed. He didn't even wait for the throne room doors to open before exploding inside.

"Emm, is it true?! Are we at war?!"

Emmeryn stood from her throne, steely gaze silencing Chrom. "At this moment, we are not. Now please, be patient. I will explain everything when Lissa has joined us."

"Explain what, Emm? I haven't had a lick of information all day! Why did we leave Ferox so soon, what's the problem?!"

Lissa had arrived by then, Frederick, Sumia, and Robin bringing up the rear.

Emmeryn's eyes lingered on Sumia. "Milady, is there a reason you have come? This involves Lissa and Chrom personally. Sir Frederick and Sir Robin are in company to fulfill their duties."

Sumia flushed. "Uh, I was thinking, uh, that I could be… a messenger! That way Frederick and Robin can continue discussing with you while I inform the Shepherds."

Emmeryn smiled. She had plenty of messengers and the poor girl was so obvious. "Very well then, but you must inform them the moment I finish. Any delay could be disastrous."

Sumia nodded and tried to get beside Chrom as subtly as possible.

Emmeryn suppressed a smile, she needed to begin.

"The incident that caused us to recall our forces occurred two days ago. Bandits raided the villages bordering the Plegian Trade Pass in the province of Themis. "The Duke's daughter — Lady Maribelle— took it upon herself to drive out the attackers."

Chrom sucked in a breath. "Is she ok?"
Emmeryn silenced him with a look. "Do not interrupt me; all will be clear in a moment."

Her eyes turned to Lissa. "When Lady Maribelle arrived at the village, all she found were burnt homes. One of her guard spotted the bandits shortly thereafter and she pursued them."

She sighed. "However, that is where our information ends. Plegia has claimed the Lady Maribelle invaded their territory in pursuit of the bandits, but what little we've been able to gain since then tells us they captured her."

Lissa was pale as death. "B-but surely she's ok? Right, Emm?"

Emmeryn sighed. "We... can't be sure, Lissa."

Phila, ignored and silent till then, spoke. "Trying to get any scouts close enough to find out could provoke them into hostility. Lady Maribelle's life would be forfeit."

Chrom growled. "Then we will march and take her back! She's an old friend of all of us, surely we can do that!"

Emmeryn glared. "This is why you are not Exalt, Chrom. You do not see this situation for what it is!"

Chrom recoiled and Emmeryn's face softened. "Your heart is in the right place, but this is an attempt to provoke us. Should we rush in blindly, Gangrel and his court can claim we are launching another purge. I will not see all I have worked for destroyed by an instant of irrationality."

Chrom grimaced and looked away, eyes haunted.

Robin glanced between the two curiously. They're talking about the so called 'Grand Crusade' from fifteen years ago. It was instigated by the former Exalt—Draken—after his wife died after Lissa was born. There's long been rumors that she was killed by a jealous noblewoman, but others contend it was Plegian agents.

He shook his head; there'd be time to entertain conspiracies later.

Emmeryn sighed. "I'm sorry, Chrom, that was cruel of me. In any case, there's a more practical side to why we can't rush in blindly. Phila, if you would?"

Phila stepped forward. "Despite Sir Robin's success in supplying what forces we have, we are still very weak. Plegia outnumbers our own forces by a significant margin, even with our most conservative estimates. In addition, we lost many of our most experienced warriors in the Purge so many years ago."

Frederick frowned, finally speaking. "I assume that has to do with the policy to keep a smaller and more mobile force? Our knights may be of higher quality, but we have little to counter Plegia's wyverns."

Emmeryn nodded. "Exactly. We may have the advantage in quality of troops, but our numbers are small enough that Plegia can simply drown us in bodies."

Chrom sighed, finally calm. "Then what can we do?"

Emmeryn took a deep breath. "As we have so few options, I will offer parley with King Gangrel."

Everyone save Robin began protesting the idea. Robin kept his eyes on the Exalt.
Hmph, stubborn as a bull. Lissa and Chrom aren't the only hard heads in the family.

He turned to Sumia. "The Exalt has debriefed us. Please, go tell the Shepherds. I feel we'll be leaving before long."

Sumia nodded slowly and left the throne room. She threw one last worried glance at Chrom before she disappeared.

Robin shook his head and turned back to the argument. Emmeryn was doing her best to calm everyone down.

Well, looks like I have to play peacekeeper. I hope Lissa doesn't slip me something at dinner after this. I know she's worried, but sense and worry rarely collude.

Robin took a deep breath. "Alright, that's enough!"

The argument stalled, everyone turned to face Robin.

He steeled his eyes. "The Exalt has spoken. If we must meet this King Gangrel to secure peace, then we shall do so with a smile. We are a kingdom of peace and we shall not go to war unless we must."

Emmeryn smiled at him. "Thank you, Robin. As he says, my order is absolute, but that doesn't mean I'll be going alone. I would like the Shepherds to join me and my personal guard at the meeting point."

Mollified, if still unhappy, Chrom and Lissa left to prepare. Frederick followed them, but Robin was stopped before he could.

"Robin, please stay here. I have some matters that I need to discuss with you."

He paused and turned to see they were alone. Not even the usual guards stood in the corner.

Efficiency on par with assassins. Phila trains her recruits well.

Emmeryn walked up to him. "Please, walk with me."

She turned toward a small side door and Robin followed. They entered a small hallway with a beautiful garden to their right and Emmeryn slowed until they were side by side.

Silence stretched between them as they strolled, Emmeryn contemplating and Robin starting to feel nervous.

Did I do something? Was there an accident that involves me in some way?

Emmeryn finally sighed. "I'm sorry for pulling you away, Robin. I wanted to ask you a few things before you went to prepare."

He gulped. "Ask away. I will answer anything I can."

She smiled. "Well, first I'd like to thank you. My siblings are quite stubborn when they get their mind set and your intervention kept things from turning ugly."

Then she sighed. "But, I wish to confer to you something I've discovered. Something that may help us both."

Robin raised brow. "Oh? How?"
Emmeryn gestured for him to follow. "I'll tell you in a moment, come with me."

They turned into the garden, eventually reaching an alcove with a bench. Emmeryn sat first, patting the seat beside her. "Come, sit. Don't worry, I won't bite."

Robin sat slowly. "Ok… why are we here?"

She laughed. "Well, I think I may have discovered something regarding your past. In addition, I have an offer for you."

He gasped. "What did you find?"

She tapped at the bench, eyes pensive. "Well, I heard that you'd been asking about markings and such. So, I had some of the scholars look into the marks you were asking about. I looked in my spare time too and we found something interesting."

Robin felt like his heart was in his throat. "Please, what did you find?"

Emmeryn met his eyes. "Show me the mark and I will tell you."

He was growing frustrated with her stalling but pulled off his right glove all the same.

Emmeryn stared at the back of his hand. "As I thought. You, Robin, are a member of the old Plegian nobility. Your family is Grimleal."

Robin didn't like the sound of that. "Grimleal? What are they?"

Emmeryn grew confused. "I… guess you haven't gotten to that yet. Well, the Grimleal are an age old cult that worships the fell dragon Grima. Unlike us, who worship Naga and wish for peace, the Grimleal seek to bring their god to the physical realm and destroy the world."

Robin narrowed his eyes. "Why do that? It would kill them as well."

She sighed. "They believe that Grima's followers will rule the new world after the unworthy have been cleansed. It says in their texts that doing so will lead to an earthly paradise. As you might imagine, that sounds really good to a poor soul down on their luck."

Emmeryn's eyes hardened. "But, much of what they do is horrid. Human sacrifice, genocide, kidnapping, incest, all of that and more. The Grimleal were once a much more peaceful sect, their oldest texts show as much, but the defeat of Grima by the first Exalt and the Purge fifteen years ago has turned them into what they are now."

She looked away. "I… doubt this is what you wanted to hear. I'm sorry all I've discovered is a link between you and them."

Robin was silent for a long time before he sighed. "Blood does not make the man, only action. To judge a man by his blood is to suffer the height of arrogance."

Emmeryn blinked. "You truly believe that?"

He smiled. "Well, amnesia and love of reading aside, your brother said that to me. It was his answer when I asked him why he'd welcome people like Kellam and Vaike into his personal force."

She smiled again. "That does sound like him. I'm glad you've taken the news so well."

He nodded. "And I thank you for delivering it. Now, what was the offer you had for me?"
Her smile shifted. It was sly and she looked like she was going to enjoy this next part.

"Well, I've been under increasing pressure from the nobility to do something I'd rather not. I have people coming for visits and dinner and all kinds of functions, it's quite burdensome."

Robin did not like where this was going.

"But, if you agree to my offer, all of that goes away! And, the benefit to you is that you have complete run of the castle, the library, and you'll never go hungry or grow lonely."

He really didn't like where this was going. "Um, Your G-, Emmeryn. Can you just tell me what you want?"

Her smile was almost evil. "Simple, marry me."

His face must have been hilarious. She collapsed into a fit of giggles, nearly crying as her mirth begged to escape.

Robin slowly schooled his face into an unimpressed mask. "Very funny, Emmeryn. How long have you been waiting to pull that one?"

She finally got her mirth under control, her body still shaking. "Oh, hehehe, you have no idea."

Her eyes were alive right then, just like she was when in private. Frankly, Robin much preferred this Emmeryn to the one that presented herself to the public.

She took a deep breath. "Sorry, that was too good an opportunity. Besides, I have it in good faith you have your heart elsewhere. Anyway, my actual offer is to install you as a court advisor."

His brows shot up. "A court advisor? Aren't all the positions filled?"

Emmeryn nodded. "They are, but the Hierophant is getting to be too old. He'll have to retire soon and I don't know anyone else I'd be willing to trust."

Robin shook his head. "But, why me? Surely there are others more qualified."

She giggled. "Maybe, but I don't trust them. Besides, you've already done something I and my current advisors could not. That's proof enough in my eyes."

His eyes narrowed. "The suppliers. You sneaky woman, you set that up as a test!"

She smiled coyly. "Caught me. But, you did marvelously. You also have my siblings' complete trust and have been invaluable in dealing with the Risen. It's only right that I reward you."

He still had one question. "Then, why tell me this privately?"

Her eyes became sad. "Not all of our people have been so accepting of you, Robin. You have earned the trust of the royal family, Phila, and Frederick though you came from nowhere."

The sadness was gone quickly, replaced with familiar mirth. "That and you've caught the eye and attentions of the most sought after bachelorette in the realm. And before you ask, do you really think Lissa wouldn't tell me everything?"

Robin blushed. "Uh, it's not what you think. We're just…friends."

Her face went flat. "That's the single most unconvincing lie I've heard since Chrom told me he and
Sumia were just friends. I have five hundred gold riding on them."

He laughed. "Everyone's in that pool it seems! I put forty on it happening by fall, you?"

She smirked. "All on next spring. I know my brother better than anyone; it'll take that long for him to finally be brave."

They laughed again, glad for the levity after their meeting. Robin knew that Emmeryn needed these moments, it was what kept her sane.

Did he know for sure? No, but if he'd been in her shoes, he'd need them.

She finally sighed. "The night grows late. I told Phila to send a messenger for the parley, but we must move in the morning. Goodnight, Robin."

He bowed. "Goodnight, Emmeryn. I pray this will go well."

She stepped up to him and planted an affectionate kiss on his cheek. "You and me both, my friend. I'd love to keep teasing you like this."

He blushed and didn't reply.

"Well, this time for true, goodnight."

He turned on his heel and left, missing Emmeryn grimace.

Why? Grimleal have come before me in the past, but something about him makes my brand burn. First, it was just looking at his eyes, but physical contact is even worse. It feels like a burning dagger has stabbed me.

She shivered a bit. She'd been attracted to him, as were most of the maidens in the castle, but that pain had kept any thought of pursuing him at bay.

If a teasing peck is enough to give me a migraine what would a kiss do? Or, worse, what would the marriage bed have been like?

Something told her it would be deadly.

Her eyes narrowed and she turned to the heavens.

What is he? Everything he's done shows a good man that anyone would want to be friends with, but something's just... off.

She shook her head, now wasn't the time to think on it. She had plans to flesh out and a very impatient commander waiting for her with stacks of parchment.

Joy.

—Robin—

He was finally outside of the castle, his mind thinking on what Emmeryn had told him.

Hmph, if what she says is true, there'd be a revolt if I was appointed. An advisor to the Exalt who just so happens to be of Grimleal descent? I'm not so foolish as to think some jealous aspirant wouldn't spread the word and send the jackals after my head.
It would offer him nothing but trouble. Maybe after some time had passed and his name was more well established, then he'd think about it.

*I need more information on the Grimleal though. They sound like a powerful faction in Plegia and as the saying goes, 'Knowing is half the battle.'*

He sighed and kept walking. As he walked, he noticed the faint sound of wings beating in the air. Looking around, he smiled ruefully at where he was.

*Why am I not surprised? When the mind is troubled, the feet carry it where it will be soothed.*

But, that meant the wings he could only mean one thing.

As the Pegasus settled to the earth, Robin smiled.

"Cordelia."

The woman leapt from her seat and rushed up to him, just restraining herself from jumping into his arms. "Robin!"

He smiled. "Hey, I don't get a hug?"

She smiled back. "You actually know how to hug? I'm shocked."

He rolled his eyes. "Yes, make fun of the amnesiac, it's never been done."

She laughed. "Ah, but you know more. Not quite able to play that card so easily."

Robin took a step forward, his arms crossed and eyes locked on Cordelia's own. "Touché."

Cordelia stepped forward, the distance shortening to a bare foot. "Now, how'd the mission go?"

They were right in front of each other, Cordelia having to tilt her head back a bit to look at him. Robin reached around her shoulders and pulled her close, but not as close as she secretly wished.

"It went well. We did it without any hiccups and were going to start back this morning."

She wrapped her arms around his back. "I see. Then, you got the dispatch too?"

He nodded, enjoying the hint of cinnamon she wore, even in uniform. "Yes. I… have little doubt you'll find out all the details soon, but I'd like your input."

Her eyes widened and she pulled away. "Oh, what can I help with that the great tactician can't solve?"

He sighed. "Don't call me that. If you do, I'll start calling you Corny Cordy again."

She smacked his shoulder. "You promised to never make fun of my reading preferences!"

He rubbed the shoulder. "First, ow. Second, I reserve the right to give you silly nicknames when we're alone."

She huffed. "Fine, have it your way. And here I was, thinking of treating you to your favorite place for dinner."

He didn't laugh or backpedal like she expected. If anything, he grew solemn.
"I… can't take you up on that. It has to do with what I'm going to tell you."

She nodded slowly. "Ok, but… can we sit down? I've been riding most of the day."

He nodded and they took a seat on a worn bench on the field's edge. Silence stretched between them, the usual feeling of comfort replaced by anxiety.

Since she was waiting for him, Robin began. "So, what happened to get us here was a raid. Bandits attacked villages bordering the Plegian Trade Pass in Themis. Lady Maribelle, the Duke's daughter, pursued them to the Plegian border."

He sighed. "That's where things get complicated. See, Plegia has taken Maribelle hostage, accusing her of invading them. But, from what the Exalt and her sources have found, it looks like the Plegians took Maribelle and dragged her over the border."

Cordelia shook her head. "That's a direct act of war. Kidnapping the heiress of a duchy like Themis is bound to make the others demand blood."

Robin sighed. "That's the problem. The Exalt's sources aren't completely sure that's the case and if we go to war over something that's actually a mistake, it could lead to another purge."

Cordelia looked sick. "That's… you make a good point."

He put a hand on her shoulder. "That's why I'd like your input. It's always a good idea to see what others are thinking, if only because they may be too scared to share something."

She smiled at him. "I thank you for having such a high opinion of me. But, I've no head for strategy. I can fight, I can organize, and I can cook, and so on. But, the one thing I could never grasp was strategy."

Robin laughed. "Look at that, she admits it! You're always so competitive when we spar, I never thought you'd admit to being bad at anything!"

She punched his arm. "I'm being serious!"

He rubbed his arm. "Again, ow. But, you should have asked about it. I'm quite good at chess and Virion's great sparring when it comes to strategy."

Cordelia looked away. "I… didn't want to impose."

He clapped her shoulder, Cordelia tensing from the impact. "Hey, no need to feel bad. I'll gladly teach you."

She shook her head. "That sounds great, but I don't think we have the time. It's been wonderful talking with you again, but I need to leave."

She stood but he caught her arm. "Wait, I need to tell you one more thing."

She glanced back at him and sat.

"Ok, so, the Exalt has decided to parley with the Plegian King. We'll set out for the pass tomorrow, but I want you to come with us."

She jumped from her seat. "What?! You want me to join the Exalt's guard?!"

Robin held up his hands. "Only for this mission. If things go south, we need the best. The Shepherds
are already going, but I'd feel beyond relieved to have you there."

Cordelia held her tongue, hands clenched at her sides. She wanted to go with him, she really did, but there was no way. She had a duty to uphold and... and if that meant refusing his offer, then so be it.

"I can't. I... I have to stay with my unit. We go back on patrol tomorrow, I can't just leave them!"

Robin stood. "You've told me how they treat you! Why would you go with them when you have friends that want you, need you?!!"

She sucked in a breath. "I have a duty to my Flight Sisters! I may not be on the best of terms with them, but I know my place is beside them!"

Robin growled. "You have a duty to yourself as well! Quit being so stubborn about this, duty isn't everything!"

Her eyes were fire. "Of course you'd say that! I'd expect nothing less from an empty minded dreamer that's gotten by on nothing but luck!"

That stung. "Fine have it your way! Go with your unit and be miserable!"

He turned and stormed away, not bothering to look back. Cordelia did the same, mounting her Pegasus and taking off to her barracks. It wasn't until she was in her room that what she'd said fully sunk in.

She pounded the wall and sunk to the floor.

Naga damn it. I just went and blew up my friendship because I was embarrassed. He hates me now, I just know it, but I couldn't just abandon my unit!

She gripped at her arms, digging small furrows in the leather belts.

Why did I lose my head? I could have just explained to him that I needed to stay, that those were my orders. But, then he started to... insult my duty! My duty is my pride, everyone knows that!

Except him, it seemed. She'd answered her own question, but now she had to figure out how to make amends. If the situation was as serious as he said then...

I... I need some time. Maybe, the patrol will help me out a bit.

It was funny, in retrospect. Just two days ago she was dying to see him.

Now, she didn't want to be in the same city.

—Robin—

"Damn and blast it!"

Robin kicked over a stool, not caring that it sent a pile of books tumbling.

"Stubborn, bull headed, zeal clouded woman!"

He sat heavily on his thin bed, head in his hands as he seethed.

She couldn't see that I was trying to get her away from the fighting. I know that Emmeryn will always believe peace is possible, but bloodshed is inevitable. Damn it, I wish they'd give me access
to the information network.

He snarled and glanced around.

*I need something to get her off my mind. I'll think about this again when I'm calm and Phila's not so busy.*

He’d already read most of the books in his rooms so he set out to find one that he hadn't read. But, before he could really dig, he needed to remove his guests.

"Lissa, you either leave to prepare with everyone else, or so help me I will make you do all my paperwork!"

A commotion sounded behind the door as his 'guests' left. Finally alone, he began searching for a new book.

*We'll be going against the Grimleal at some point. I wonder if I have anything on their practices?*

After a few minutes of searching, he came across a book that he didn't remember buying.

It was bound in black with silver thread spelling out its title of *Blood Magic: A History of Forbidden Thaumaturgy*.

*Well, that's convenient. I don't remember buying this particular volume. Anyway, it'll do. Grimleal are supposed to use blood magic after all.*

He sighed and brought the book to a low table that could generously be called a desk. He took a deep breath and popped open the first page.

As he read, the descriptions became incredibly grisly and the illustrations demonstrating some of the rituals became increasingly extreme. One part, though, caught his attention.

*Hm, dragons were the originators of blood magic? According to this, they used their blood in long lost rituals to contact or summon the ancient gods, or High Gods as the Church knows them. The rituals were lost when the dragons more or less disappeared, but it says a book called Comaoinneach na Gods, whatever that means, holds the ability to contact them.*

It contradicted the idea of the Astral Realm that Lissa had told him about, but then again, the book may have been out of date.

*Oh well, it was informative if sickening. I'll make this mandatory reading for the others when we get back.*

He shut the book and blew out the candle he'd set up when the room had grown dark. So much had happened today, but the moon had only just reached its zenith.

*Tomorrow will determine everything. I can only hope Emmeryn has a miracle hidden away somewhere.*

—*Afternoon, Plegian Trade Pass*—

Their journey had been silent. They'd left in the wee hours of the morning, Royal Guard and Shepherds intermixed around their lieges. Robin had to leave his book behind, but he'd wandered into a confrontation between a young man in mage robes and Chrom.
The mage had been told he was too young to come and was supposed to keep an eye on the barracks.

Except, now he was following them.

-Earlier that day-

They had stopped for a short break. Robin had volunteered to walk the perimeter until they were ready to go and kept his senses trained on every detail.

A rustle in the brush caught his attention. It was subtle enough that most would have missed it completely, but Robin hadn't been listening for nothing.

He had his sword pointed at the brush and his tome glowing a moment later. "Show yourself!"

The brush didn't move.

"Either surrender or I set the brush ablaze!"

The brush rustled hard. "Wait, wait! It's me, Ricken! The guy from this morning!"

Robin lowered his weapon as the young man came out. "Why are you here? I thought Chrom ordered you to stay behind."

Ricken sighed. "I know, but I can help dammit! I may be small but I'm sixteen, Lissa's only a year older than me!"

Robin stared at him. "I know, but I can help dammit! I may be small but I'm sixteen, Lissa's only a year older than me!"

Ricken laughed. "Yes and she's the only healer the Shepherds have on hand. What can you do?"

Ricken pulled out a light green tome. "I'm a wind mage! Well, I can use thunder and fire too, but wind's my specialty."

Robin nodded slowly. "I heard that wind magic's effective against flying units like pegasi and wyverns. Why is that?"

Ricken blinked. "You don't know?"

Robin sighed. "No, I don't. I've only heard it in passing from Miriel."

Ricken nodded, his excitement clear. "Well, when you send wind at them it messes up how their wings catch the air. Since their wings are useless they plummet to the ground. More powerful spells can rip their wings to shreds and even pierce heavy armor!"

Robin cupped his chin. "Small wonder you wanted to come. We may be up against wyverns and wind will be invaluable."

He crossed his arms. "But why are you the first person I've seen use it? Are wind tomes hard to make?"

Ricken shrugged. "Yeah, kinda. Lightning and fire are easier to enchant since they're controllable. Wind goes wherever it so pleases. Makes it a lot harder to enchant."

Robin grinned, an idea coming to mind. "Ok, Ricken, I need you to listen."

Ricken gave him his full concentration. "Ok, what? Don't tell me to go back, I'll just find somewhere else to hide."
Robin smirked. "That's actually what I want you to do. See, we're going to rescue Lady Maribelle and I need someone up on the cliffs. Chrom doesn't know you're here and neither do the Plegians, so you'll be our secret weapon."

Ricken started smiling. "I'll do my best!"

Robin held up a finger. "But, you need to move on my signal. When you see a lightning bolt fly into the sky, grab Maribelle and run for us. Once you're both behind our force, you'll need to provide support."

Robin turned around. "Now, head back into the brush. I'll take the heat from Chrom after this, you just do what you can."

Ricken nodded and clambered back in but returned a moment later. "Uh, do you have a snack or something? I haven't eaten since breakfast."

Robin rolled his eyes and passed him a strip of jerky.

Ricken nodded his thanks before going back into the brush and Robin moved on.

Now, he was still following them and Robin was impressed by his stealth. No one had noticed him, not even Frederick, by the time they arrived at the pass.

Robin glanced around at the peaks, noting the shadows above them.

Soldiers, they have to be. Looks like Plegia will have their war one way or another.

His eyes widened. If that was the case, they'd just delivered the entire royal family into their clutches.

He marched over to Virion. "Virion," he whispered. "Head to the right of the column, we have an ambush forming around us."

Virion's eyes widened. "Are you qui-"

Robin silenced him with a hand. "Yes, I'm quite sure. Do it."

Virion nodded and walked to the right, his training as a noble helping his composure.

As they walked ever forward, Robin moved all the Shepherds into positions he felt were most advantageous. He couldn't command the Royal Guard directly, but a word with Phila had them preparing when the King of Plegia came into view.

"Well, well, weeeell. We are in the presence of radiance herself! I fear I must shield my eyes!"

The king's voice was manic, Robin noted. It fit well with his gaunt face and pale skin. Oh, he tried to hide it under a luxurious white shirt and black vest with a voluminous yellow cloak and matching collar. But his dark pants lead into boots with a crooked turn in them, almost like a jester.

Actually, the entire outfit made him look something like a high-end jester. Only the gold necklace and the spiky gold crown around his mahogany hair made him out as the king.

Emmeryn stepped forward, her voice serenity incarnate. "King Gangrel, I have come to parley with you. We seek the truth of this incident."

The king sneered. "Yes, your messenger said as much."
Another voice spoke. "Do not trouble yourself, my liege. I'll tell them the truth."

A woman stepped forward, entering the Shepherd's sight.

Sultry and sensuous. Those words described her black corset and short skirt perfectly. She wore a black crown and collar of feathers surrounding her bleached white hair. Black pauldrons and shields adorned her hips, signs of an experienced fighter. But, all that was lost in the whisper of her voice, the way her clothing drew the eye to her plump breasts, long stocking-clad legs and beautiful face.

Robin did his best to ignore it, instead recognizing the purple marks on her figure.

_Grimleal. I can't see the entirety of the marks but they look like some of the ones in that book._

She smiled, likely noting all the gazes locked on her breasts. "You see, one of our patrols was marching along the border like agreed when they stumbled upon a lost woman. However, when they tried to escort her she attacked them. One of our soldiers is dead thanks to her."

"You lying little skank, I did no such thing!"


That was Maribelle alright. Bound and held by a Plegian soldier, but Maribelle none the less.

He almost smirked. Her positioning put Ricken right behind them, but they needed to wait.

Gangrel shook his head. "Such a mouth on that girl, so disrespectful. Now then, what can I get for her?"

He pretended to think while Emmeryn spoke. "King Gangrel, surely there's no need for hostages? We can discuss this, like we have for the past decade! Surely you don't wish a war?"

Gangrel's face morphed into a vicious snarl. "I want what every Plegian wants! Every last Ylissean dead! But, I will be willing to release… what was her name again? Mary Contrary or some such high society name?"

He laughed at his own joke.

Emmeryn sighed. "Your terms, King Gangrel. The sooner we hear them the sooner we can settle this."

He laughed again. "My, my, so impatient! Remember, I can have her head this moment and make it home for dinner! Now then, what I want is… the Fire Emblem."

Emmeryn gasped. "What could you possibly want with Ylisse's greatest treasure?! Its purpose is greater than either of us!"

Gangrel sighed. "Ah, but I've always desired the Emblem. But, my birthday and the holidays go by every year and yet nothing from Ylisse. It makes me quite sad."

Robin had to praise the man's acting, he looked genuinely sad.

Emmeryn had steel in her eyes. "No, King Gangrel, I cannot give you the Fire Emblem. Its purpose and value are greater than any mortal."

She refused to look behind her, no doubt reluctant to see her siblings' horrified faces.
Gangrel snarled, face contorting in rage. "You don't have a choice. Men, kill them all and bring me the Emblem. But, do not kill the Exalt or her siblings, I want to do so myself!"

He turned with a flourish and disappeared behind the cliff. Some of the hidden soldiers charged Emmeryn but a blue blur shot forward and cut them open.

"Stand back! All who try will meet the same fate!"

It seemed to work as the soldiers stopped at the sight of Falchion's silver blade. But, they soon continued their charge.

Robin launched his signal and joined the fray. Phila grabbed Emmeryn and escaped the immediate area, but Virion had to put an arrow into one particularly daring Plegian.

Robin's lightning and swordplay took down its fair share of Plegians, but Lon'qu and Chrom were demons. Chrom had anger fueling his strikes and he cut down every Plegian to stand before him, leaping clean over a diving wyvern and beheading its rider.

Lon'qu was speed itself. He went from one opponent to the next in the blink of an eye, his strikes fast and precise but strong enough to lop off arms. His most impressive feat was outracing three Plegians and making mincemeat of their torsos.

Robin glanced up after he tackled another Plegian to the floor and cut open his throat. The blood splattered on his face, but he was more concerned with the whooshing sounds just above him.

A moment later, two Plegians flew over the edge and crumpled on the rocks next to him. He winced at the sickening cracks, but sprinted up the cliff to find the source.

He smiled when he got there. "Ricken, you devilish boy!"

Ricken held his glowing tome in hand, wind screeching from his palms whenever a Plegian grew close. Maribelle rode behind him, astride a horse that screamed thoroughbred.

She was unharmed, thankfully, but had an elaborate staff in hand that Robin recognized as a Mend.

She's a healer? A good one, too? Where did she find such a thing, or the horse for that matter?

Robin shook his head of questions and ran past Ricken, racing the other Shepherds to the top of the cliff. A white blur shot past him, a tinge of blue in it.

Chrom and Sumia. Damn, if they kill the captain we'll be short an information source!

He raced up the slope but found his path blocked by three Plegians with axes.

They charged him, but he ducked away from the first swing. The second and third blows were more coordinated, but he leapt away from them. They charged him again, but one of them anticipated his swing and Robin put his sword through the man's chest.

As blood splashed Robin's arm, the others attacked again.

Let's try what Miriel was helping me with.

Robin pointed his palm at them, hand still on his sword. Runes bloomed over his hand before lightning spat from his palm and slammed into the Plegians. It didn't kill them, but a few strokes from his blade remedied that.
Ok, so I can cast magic without having to grab the tome.

He pulled out the book but sighed at the dwindling pages.

Problem is it drains three pages for one spell. Along with that, it's not as powerful. Looks like I'll need to work on this more, but maybe adding Ricken to the practice will help.

Shouts drew him back to the battle. He was almost at the top of the cliffs now, but when he crested the slope, he growled.

Most of the Shepherds were there, but a single heavily armored wyvern rider was giving them hell. He'd already injured Stahl, Frederick, and Kellam while dodging around the others. As he watched, Virion sent an arrow towards him and it bounced off the wyvern's armor.

Spotting Sully, Robin had an idea. "Hey, Sully! Want revenge for that catapult trick?"

Sully grunted as she deflected a strike from the rider. "Love to, but not now!"

Robin ran up to her, driving the wyvern away with lightning. "Yes, now! Get me on the horse, I'll be doing it!"

She stared at him. "Are you insane? It'll kill you if I'm off by even an inch!"

Robin shrugged. "You have a better idea? Vaike just got raked by wyvern talons and Miriel's fire is doing jack all. By the time Ricken gets here, we'll be paste."

Sully groaned. "Fine, get up! This either works or we die!"

Robin smirked and pulled himself behind the horse. "More inspiring words have never been said! Charge!"

Sully spurred her horse forward, both riders roaring their challenge. It was enough to draw the Plegian's attention and he charged toward them. Seeing the charge, Robin took a deep breath.

"Now!"

Sully pulled hard on the reins, making her horse skid and buck. Robin used the buck to fly from the horse, doing his best to stay feet first.

The rider kept charging, deciding that Robin wasn't a threat. Sully wasn't vulnerable by any stretch of the imagination, but she realized what was happening for Robin.

"Shit, he's short!"

Robin crested and began to fall, legs extended. It wasn't until he finally saw the ground that he realized the same thing.

This is gonna hurt.

He fell like a rock. His original target had been the rider: kicking him off when he landed then electrocuting the wyvern. But now, he dove feet first into the wyvern's neck.

He felt one of his legs crack, blinding pain rushing to his brain. He kept just enough of his mind to smirk as his fall forced the wyvern's head into the ground. It flipped over and sent its rider flying. Unfortunately, this led to Robin being crushed under the dead weight of a wyvern with a snapped neck.
He heard metal rip flesh and someone's voice before his consciousness fled.

It wasn't until what felt like an eternity later that he finally opened his eyes.

*Medical tent, must be in camp. I've been here enough times to know what it looks like. Damn Chrom and his version of sparring.*

He glanced to his left. It looked like Vaike and Stahl were with him, but Kellam and Frederick were absent.

*Must not have been that badly injured. Actually, where's Lissa? There's blonde on my right, but it's too light to be hers.*

"You're awake. Tell me, what was that stunt? Are you so eager to die that you hatch such insanity regularly?"

Robin sighed, that explained the hair. "Hello, Maribelle, glad to see you alive too."

She huffed. "Alive is relative. You had a compound fracture in your leg and had your ribcage crack when that wyvern landed on you. If I didn't have my staff with me, you'd still be in a sling."

He rolled his eyes. "Thanks you for your help, but I need to see Chrom. I assume we're at war?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Yes, we are. And I will likely be known as the fool that got it started. I should have known those gutter rats wouldn't listen to reason."

Robin narrowed his eyes in turn. "You tried to parley with them? When they've been poking at our borders? Milady, you have no right to call me insane if you act so rashly."

She growled. "I've endured this lecture already, you needn't remind me."

Robin sighed. "Then I have no more to say on the matter. But, I will commend your work. My leg feels good as new."

She tried to hide it but Robin could see a trace of pink on her cheeks. "Hmph, it's my job! I will treat you, even if you are deplorable."

Her face became contrite, nearly giving Vaike a heart attack if the gasp Robin heard was any indication.

"I… must apologize for my curttness. Ricken has told me of how your silence ensured his rescue of me, and for that, you have my thanks. I fear that I'm distrustful of men approaching my dear Lissa and it makes me…curt."

Robin shook his head. "And here I thought you hated me on principle of being a commoner. Then again, you wouldn't be friends with Lissa if you did."

Maribelle sighed. "No, I suppose not. Now, if you'll excuse me, I must inform Lord Chrom that you've awoken."

She stood and left the tent, leaving Robin with Vaike and Stahl.

"So," Robin began. "What're you two in for?"

Stahl laughed. " Took an axe to my shoulder. It's not too bad, but Lissa's keeping me in the medical wagon until we return."
Vaike pointed to his back, a proud smirk on his face. "I got raked by a wyvern! Got me some cool scars!"

He had three dark lines running the length of his back, another, thinner line across his shoulder.

Vaike laughed. "Though, gotta say, never seen little Miss Prissy actually apologize to anyone. Maybe she's got something soft in her after all!"

He grimaced. "Doubt I'll live to see it myself though."

Stahl smirked. "Same. Maribelle acting contrite is rarer than diamonds, so savor it while you can, Robin."

"I'll do that," Robin laughed. "So, tell me, where are we?"

"We are half way to Ylisstol. Good to see you up, Robin."

Chrom pushed aside the tent's flap, Phila and Emmeryn behind him.

Robin saw Stahl and Vaike bow out of the corner of his eye. "Chrom, Phila, Your Grace. Are we at war?"

Emmeryn sighed. "Much to my regret, yes. We'll need to send out what forces we have to the forts and prepare the capital for battle. I'll make a formal call to arms when we return, but Gangrel's impatience has given us an advantage, small though it is."

Chrom nodded. "My blade started this bloodshed. But, Gangrel attacked us first and we are now in the right to defend ourselves. I may have doomed people to die, but they will not do so unwillingly. It's… small comfort."

Phila shook her head. "As I've said, Prince Chrom, had you not done it I would have. War was inevitable the moment he sent his soldiers forward."

She turned to Robin. "Sir Robin, Lady Emmeryn has granted permission for you to access our intelligence sources and full inventory. Your tactical acumen is well known, if unconventional, and that may be just what we need."

Emmeryn nodded. "Yes, but that is for when we return. For now, we will begin packing and resume our journey. Chrom, come with me. Phila, make sure this tent and all of its supplies are stored before we leave."

Phila bowed and Emmeryn swept out of the tent. Chrom spoke one last time before he left. "Don't worry about the others, Robin. Everyone's fine and we were able to recover your weapons. They'll be waiting in the usual place when we get back."

Robin nodded and Chrom was gone. Phila walked to his bedside and sat down.

"I already know what you're going to ask. But first, what did you do to make Cordelia so upset?"

Robin broke out in a cold sweat. "I… don't know what you're talking about."

Phila glared at him. "Don't get cute. Her captain told me that she took off the moment they were dismissed. Then, less then half-an-hour later, she comes back with rage in her eyes and locked herself in the barracks. Then, in the morning she was sulking."

Her glare could have killed a man at a hundred yards. "What. Did. You. Do?"
Robin sighed. "Phila, I'll be honest in a moment, but you act like Chrom when Cordelia's involved. In the 'get away from my sister you dirty pig' kind of way."

Phila folded her hands in her lap. "I certainly have no idea of what you speak. I'm concerned for all my juniors, not just her."

Robin almost chuckled but her glare stopped him. "Ok, look, I wanted to keep her close. I was asking her to join us in the mission rather than go off on another patrol."

Phila's silence told him to keep going. "Then, she told me how it was her duty to stay with her unit. I kind of threw back that her unit hadn't been very kind to her. And I told her duty wasn't everything... it didn't go well."

Phila sighed. "Congratulations, Sir Robin, you've officially made me angry."

Robin raised his hands. "Hey, hey, let me finish!"

Phila's face gave him his answer. One chance.

"Ok, I know it was stupid, but I was annoyed and I just spat it out. I know she takes great pride in what she does, she wouldn't have stuck it out if she hadn't."

He sighed. "But, I lit a fire in her and she called me an 'empty headed dreamer who doesn't know duty' or something to that effect."

Phila's anger drained away. "Did... did she really say that?"

Robin nodded. Everyone he knew was aware that Robin had amnesia and it was a sore point for him. To be called empty headed and a dreamer that didn't understand allegiance was a grave insult.

He'd worked hard for his knowledge and fulfilled the duty thrust upon him admirably. Calling him such a thing was the same as saying he didn't exist.

Phila sighed. "I see... then you're both at fault. You said what you said out of concern and frustration, but her words are arguably the greater slight. Looks like you have some issues to work through."

Robin sighed. "Yeah. Actually, if we didn't have a peanut gallery, I'd feel better about sharing."

Phila leveled a glare at Vaike and Stahl, the two swiftly fleeing the tent.

"Alright, please continue."

"Alright, please continue."

He sighed, pink rising in his cheeks. "Phila, would you explain to this poor amnesiac why I seem so happy around her? Why it hurt so much for her to get angry at me? Why I feel just a little hollow when we don't see each other?"

Phila blinked, surprised. "Really? The first two, I'd say you just had a crush on her. But, the third..."

She slowly began to smirk. "Naga in heaven, you're in love. Not just puppy love either, you're head over heels in love."

Robin's blush deepened. "But what does it mean? Amnesiac that literally woke up with nothing a few months ago, remember?"

Phila looked contrite. "Right, sorry. Well... as I said, you're in love. It means different things to
different people, but yours seems to be in the 'I want to spend my life with this woman' camp. It's pretty rare all things told."

Her gaze was curious. "Actually, can you tell me when this hit you?"

Robin scratched his cheek. "I'd say… three days before I left for Ferox. I started coming up with excuses to keep her nearby."

Phila nodded. "Ok, well, that's something the two of you need to have a long conversation about. But, I'd save doing that until this little fight is resolved."

She stood. "That's all the advice I can give. I need to get this tent organized and you need to head to the medical wagon. Shall we?"

Robin nodded and stood, but couldn't help himself. "Where is she?"

Phila sighed, regret coloring her tone. "She was sent to the border fort in western Superius. It's closer to Plegia than all but one fort."

Robin's hand went limp as Phila continued.

"She'll be there when the Plegians storm the border. I… don't know if she'll make it.

Her eyes didn't meet Robin's as he slowly sunk into the cot.

"I'm sorry."
Memories (Outsiders)

Northern Ylisse, Two days after the tournament.

The girls had settled down for the night. After two days of using abandoned roads and animal paths, it was good to rest. Yet, even far into the wilderness, they still heard the rumble of wagons as the Shepherds charged out of Ferox.

Their party was faring little better than the Shepherds. Severa and Lucina hadn't spoken to each other in more than a week, awkwardness and depression evident in their every move. Cynthia was beyond infuriated with them, every attempt to get them talking ending in failure.

Now, she was alone with her sister. Severa had gone to 'check the perimeter', but Cynthia knew it was just her trying to avoid Lucina. It was silent between them, the fire crackling merrily in defiance of what Cynthia felt.

_Stupid fire and its stupid good mood. Why can't it read the room?_

Cynthia sighed, blaming a fire wasn't going to do anything.

_Arright Cynthia, put your game face on. Lucy and Sev like each other, clear as day, but they won't tell you what happened. So, let's go for the obvious 'when did it start' question._

She stood and walked over to Lucina, waiting until her elder sister pulled her eyes from the stars.

It took a few minutes, but Lucina brought her gaze to Cynthia. "Do you need something, Cynthy?"

Cynthia shook her head at the warm voice. Lucina tried her best, but she wasn't mother. "I need to ask you something, Lucina."

She took a seat next to Lucina. "When did you start liking Sev? I won't take no for an answer either."

Lucina turned away, but couldn't hide her blush. "And what would telling you do? I'm pretty sure she hates me right now."

Cynthia rolled her eyes. "Because I convinced you to act on what your heart was saying. I'm just as responsible for this mess as either of you, but I've never heard the full story."

Lucina kept her eyes turned to the forest. "I still don't see how this will help."

Cynthia sighed. "Oh for- look, Lucy, I want to fix this as much as you do, but I can't do squat until I know more. You two may not speak right now, but I'll be the messenger if I have to!"

Lucina still did not look. She didn't have to.

Cynthia's gaze was a powerful thing and it pressed against the back of Lucina's head like a physical force.

_Her and her stubbornness. Then again, I guess it runs in the family._

Lucina finally sighed. "Alright, I give up. I'll tell you how it started, but that's all."

Cynthia giggled. "That's all I've been asking for! Now, tell me, tell me!"
Lucina pushed her sister's face away from her own. "Calm down. You may be a princess, but you sure don't act like it."

Cynthia's gaze became haughty. "Well of course, how else am I supposed to balance your dour air? Anyway, talk, now!"

Lucina almost smiled. "Alright, Alright. Well, believe it or not, it started before you were born."

Cynthia blinked. "Really?"

Lucina did smile this time. "Yes, it started when we first met. I'd say… sixteen years ago."

_Ylisstol-16 Years Prior_

_It was a sunny day, nary a cloud in the sky. Lucina was playing with Daddy today since Mommy was feeling icky._

_But, someone had come and taken Daddy's attention away from her._

_Lucina hid behind her Daddy's leg, pouting at the other person, he was talking to._

"Chrom, how's Sumia doing? Last I heard it was just a stomach bug."

_Daddy laughed. "She's doing better, don't worry. Should be right as rain as long as that poultice Lissa gave her keeps working."_

_Lissa? Oh, he meant Aunt Lissy!_

_The other person spoke again. "Well, I actually have someone I'd like you to meet."_

_She finally saw the other person's face. It was a 'guy' like Daddy but Daddy didn't have purple on his head. So… he was a purple guy!_

_He smiled at her. "Oh, is that little Lucina? My, she's grown since I last saw her."_

_Daddy laughed. "She's a big girl now, that's for sure. Come on Lucy, don't you recognize Uncle Rob?"_

_She looked at Daddy then the purple guy. That was Uncle Rob?_

_Purple guy laughed. "I'd be surprised if she did. Now then, where did my little angel go off to?"_

_He made a show of looking around before pulling his cool coat back. "Ah, there she is!"_

_Lucina couldn't see what he was so excited about, but Daddy cooed. "Ah, is that Severa? She's walking really well."_

_Purple guy nodded. "She's quite the talker too. Cordelia's been having fun teaching her."_

_He bent down. "Come on Severa, say hi."_

_There was silence for a moment before a little voice said, "Hello."_

_Lucina felt Daddy's hand push on her back. "Come on, Lucy, say hello to our guests."_

_She tried to keep her grip on Daddy's leg, but she slowly let go. She kept her face to the ground when she took a step forward._
“…ello.”

She didn’t look up, even when Daddy told her to. She was so nervous…

A little hand entered her view, the voice she heard speaking again. "I'm Severa… what you name?"

Lucina glanced up. "Lucina."

The little girl before her smiled. "You Lucy now. Me Severa."

She heard her daddy laugh. "Grammar still a work in progress?"

The purple guy laughed too. "Oh, it will be for a while. I doubt Lucina's that much better."

Her daddy laughed and she smacked his leg. No one made fun of her, nobody!

Daddy just kept laughing. "Well, why don't we let the girls get to know each other? I'll have Nowi keep an eye on them."

Purple guy laughed. "Well, if anyone can tire them out it's her. Severa, why don't you try and play with Lucina. Maybe you two can be friends."

Severa smiled, practically hopping out of her little red dress. "Me like friends!"

She reached over and grabbed Lucina's hand, making the tot-sized princess squeak. But, before anything else happened, another voice joined them.

"Are those my little nieces? Meeting for the first time?! Robin, how could you not tell me you'd be visiting?"

Severa's mismatched eyes lit up. "Aunty!"

She ran over to the woman, dragging Lucina all the way.

"And that's how we met. I admit I was too young to realize how interesting Severa's appearance was, but that didn't mean we weren't fast friends."

Cynthia was chuckling. "Sorry, I just can't picture Sev talking like a caveman."

Lucina sent her a wry smile. "Oh, and you think you didn't? Your first full sentence was 'Peggy go bye bye!' when you saw a Pegasus take off for the first time."

Cynthia blushed. "Ok, ok, sheesh. But, was it Aunty that helped you guys be friends?"

Lucina nodded. "Severa's always had something special with her. You could almost say that Aunty was her second mother with how many times she looked after Sev."

Cynthia frowned. "But, didn't Aunt Cordy and Uncle Rob take care of her the most?"

Lucina smiled. "They did. Aunty only actually took care of her a couple dozen times over the years, but she was her first babysitter. As for how it truly formed, well, you'll have to ask Sev."

She sighed. "But, I've told you where it started. I… don't feel comfortable discussing the rest, but Severa was my first friend and I cherish the memory of our first meeting more than almost anything."

She stood, exhaustion calling her to rest, but Cynthia hugged her from behind.
"Thanks for telling me, Lucy. I know it's been hard the last while, but you guys have been through worse. I remember more than a few arguments before we came here and one incident with a plushy that really got you guys angry."

She turned Lucina around, smile radiant. "You'll both be fine. It may take some time, but you just need to trust in each other. Just like you always have."

She moved closer to Lucina's ear, voice a whisper. "Besides, I don't think you're giving this enough thought. I know you're dense, your inability to get jokes proves it, but just trust me and Sev. If you do, you may be surprised."

Lucina sighed and whacked her sister over the head. "You need to work on your pep-talks."

She pulled Cynthia into a hard embrace. "But, thank you. That means more than you'll ever know."

Cynthia could forgive the sting on her skull for now. There'd be retribution later, of course, but for now she just held her sister close.

"If you want to cry, go ahead."

And Lucina did. She hadn't cried in nearly ten years, but this was the tipping point.

She cried for the dead and missing. She cried out her desperation and anxiety of shouldering Falchion's burden. She cried for the friendship she thought was dead. She cried for every tragedy and frustration to befall her.

Cynthia hadn't been expecting her to cry so much, but held Lucina against her shoulder until the tears ran dry. Once Lucina was only hiccupping, Cynthia spoke again. "Better?"

Lucina nodded against her. "Yeah… yeah that feels much better. Thanks again, Cynthia."

Cynthia smirked. "Good, then it's time for the 'Little Ram' and 'Pega-Pony Princess' to get back into action!"

Lucina blushed hard. "You swore to never say that nickname ever again!"

Cynthia laughed and started skipping around the campsite. Lucina gave chase, giggling whenever Cynthia tripped over something and blushing whenever she did too.

She may have been the more serious of the two, but she was still Sumia's daughter.

They ran about until they finally fell to the ground, exhausted.

"Well," Cynthia panted. "That was fun."

Lucina tried to laugh. "Well, fun's relative. But, we need to go to sleep. I don't know about you, but I'd prefer to make Ylisstol by tomorrow."

Cynthia had a nostalgic smile on her face. "Yeah… it'll be nice to see the city in its heyday, before everything went south."

Lucina hummed. "Do… do you think Marley's has opened yet?"

Cynthia shrugged. "Don't know. What, you thinking of taking Sev as an apology?"

Lucina sat up. "No, not as an apology. More of a… peace offering, until we can sort ourselves out."
Cynthia nodded. "Well, it was her favorite place to go when she was in town. Here's hoping its open!"

Lucina sighed. "You and me both, Cynthy. Let's get to bed. Sev will be back soon and we need to be rested for tomorrow."

Cynthia gave a tired cheer and they crawled to their sleep rolls, neither noticing the girl listening from behind a tree.

Severa sighed. She'd circled faster than she thought she would and now she'd heard all this.

At least she still wants us to be friends. Whether it goes beyond that… I don't know, we'll see. I mean, I love her, I know that, and she loves me, she knows that, but is it… real? Or, is this the 'you're my best friend and a sister' love?

Severa refused to acknowledge the kiss that started this introspection. That was goading on Cynthia's part, not natural. If it happened again in a natural setting…

She shook her head with a sigh. There was no point thinking about it right now.

Seeing Lucina and Cynthia were asleep, she walked back to the camp. They were both breathing deep and even, fast asleep.

Severa smiled. Only you two can have a heartfelt conversation, run around, and fall dead asleep. All within ten minutes too.

She shook her head and patted Cynthia's shoulder. "Sweet dreams, Cynthia."

Cynthia mumbled something that sounded like 'custard soldiers'.

Severa rolled her eyes, chuckling at the sleep talk. She took a deep breath before going to Lucina's side.

"Goodnight, Lucy. Sweet dreams."

Lucina had a frown on her face though, small whimpers escaping her lips.

A nightmare. Ok, Sev, what's the one thing Mom always did when you or Morgan were having one?

She blushed as the memory came to her. Whenever Severa or Morgan had a nightmare, Mom would always come in and kiss their foreheads or their cheek.

Come on, Sev, you can do this! This isn't romantic in the slightest; you just want to help your friend!

Confident in her thoughts, she leaned down and gulped. She was right there, Lucy's quivering lips not two inches away.

Maybe she could do it a little more to the left…

No, bad Severa, bad! You're trying to help your friend, not molest her!

Severa pulled her eyes from Lucina's lips and planted a slow peck on Lucina's cheek. It seemed to work. Her face relaxed and her breathing grew slower and deeper.

Severa nodded. Mission successful! I hate having to pull on an old memory, but what works, works!
Satisfied, she skipped over to her own roll and swiftly fell asleep. She never noticed Lucina open her eyes and whisper.

"Thanks, Severa."

They woke early the next day, Cynthia none the wiser to what happened and Severa unaware of what Lucina had witnessed. But, it was a more relaxed atmosphere as they made their way to Ylisstol, their steps far lighter and more assured.

In fact, they made the great city's gates the very next day.

They knew that going in their masks was asking to be captured so they were free of their disguises when they arrived. The only difference was they had their armor stored in packs over their backs and wore civilian clothing. It made them look all the world like ordinary travelers.

They were able to enter with little trouble, the guards friendly and helpful. In Ylisstol, they marveled at the life around them.

"It's so… alive." Lucina breathed after they found a spot to rest. "Never in my wildest dreams did I think to see Ylisstol like this again."

Cynthia was almost bouncing out of her dress. "It's so cool! So many shops and stalls and people, it's wonderful!"

Severa smirked. "It is a sight for sore eyes. But, we need to find somewhere to stay. Remember what happens soon?"

Lucina sighed. "Yes, I remember. It's ok to have some fun every once in a while, Sev, you don't need to have a tactical mindset about everything."

Severa snorted. "Considering it's me being in that mindset that's saved us countless times, I'll take my chances. I'm already the local grump as is."

Cynthia sighed. "Oh, Severa, always the serious one. Ok, we'll go find somewhere. But! Once we do, we go get food!"

Lucina and Severa nodded before setting off to find an inn. Thankfully, a reward of two hundred gold had been given to them for winning the selection tournament so they had their pick of lodging.

Eventually, they decided on an inn in the main square called the Golden Eagle. It was one of the most renowned inns in the city and they decided that a bit of luxury was in order after they'd made such good time.

Sure, it was twenty-five gold for the three of them, but it paid for meals and a room for three days.

When they were deciding on where to eat, Cynthia gasped. "Ah, shoot! Selene still needs cleaning and I sure as heck don't trust these stable hands! Go on without me, I'll eat here!"

Cynthia turned and ran from their rented room, leaving an amused Severa and nervous Lucina behind.

"So," Severa began. "What do you think? Should we just have a look around till we find something? I don't know about you, but I remember jack about what Ylisstol has."

Lucina nodded. "That sounds good. Shall we?"
They locked their room and left the inn, wandering into the busy streets. Even as dusk began to set on the city, the streets remained alive with torches slowly being lit. They passed a few places that would have been nice, but Severa could tell Lucina was guiding her somewhere very familiar.

She smiled when their destination came into view. "Marley's Grill… It's… open."

Lucina could tell Severa was trying to hold in her emotions. It wasn't all that surprising, really, since Severa had many of her best memories came from this place. She'd had birthdays here, attended Shepherd reunions, and came here with her family whenever they visited.

She smiled. "Hey, Sev? I think that's a good place to go. Shall we?"

Severa sighed but followed Lucina inside. It looked just like she remembered except shinier and missing the royal citation. She even spotted the booth she'd shared with her family whenever they visited.

Lucina waved down a passing server. "Excuse me. We'd like a table for two, preferably somewhere quiet."

The server nodded. "Hold on. Logan, table for two! Put 'em towards the back!"

A young man's voice answered. "Got it!"

He was young when he came up, younger than either of them. But, Severa mentally groaned when she saw interest spark in his eye.

*Hate to say it, friend. You have set your eyes on something that you literally cannot have.*

He guided them to a seat in the back, constantly trying to strike up a conversation, before handing them some menus with a flourish and leaving.

Severa flipped through the pamphlet, smiling in nostalgia. "Heh, they have my favorite as the special today. Sweet."

Lucina giggled. "Well, consider it yours. I'm paying today anyway."

Lucina flipped through the menu. "I must commend them for this idea though. If I remember correctly, most of the other restaurants in Ylisstol started using these after Marley's."

Severa rolled her eyes. "Meh, people are copycats. And, Lucy, it's our collective funds you're using. Technically, I'm paying too."

Lucina sighed. "Here I was trying to be nice. Oh well."

Logan returned and gave them some drinks on the house. Severa rolled her eyes as Lucina ordered, the other girl completely missing the boy's saccharine compliments.

*Hah, trying to win favor with us. If he tries to charge us a lower price, he'll get in big trouble. Then again, considering the angry looks he's been getting from the other customers, he may be in deep already.*

Logan left and Lucina turned back to her. "So, Sev…"

Severa held up her hand. "Let's wait for the kid to get back. I need to have a quick word with him."

Lucina tilted her head. "Why?"
"Because," Severa began, burying her head in her hands. "The guy's trying to win our favor. Remember, there's no such thing as 'drinks on the house'. Probably thinks he can convince one of us to go out with him by being generous. He's been trying to act all suave too."

Severa sighed. "I'd just prefer to nip that particular problem in the bud."

Lucina nodded slowly. "Ok… I don't see it, but I'll let you do your thing."

"What would you do without me?" Severa groused. "I'm pretty sure I've saved you from more than a few amorous suitors that got too bold."

Lucina giggled. "Those are some fond memories. If I recall correctly, you dunked one of them in the punch bowl. Then, when their parents complained to yours, you told them that he was getting handsy with me while my father was in earshot."

Severa smirked. "Oh yeah. Man, those pricks turned pale when he popped up."

They laughed, settling into a comfortable conversation about their fond memories. They didn't want to bring up their mission, not now, but the mood still fell when Logan returned with their food.

"Terribly sorry for the wait, ladies. One Superius Tuna with Feldian rye bread and a light sauce for the lady in blue."

He handed the plate to Lucina.

"For the lady in purple, one Themis Sirloin with a side of corn and sweet peas. And, to finish it off, some yeast rolls."

He presented the plate to Severa, who took it before speaking. "Logan, can I speak to you for a minute?"

He blinked, shock and a hint of excitement in his eyes. Severa stood and pulled him away, speaking in low tones so Lucina couldn't hear them.

Lucina kept her eyes on them though, even as the steaming and delicious fish before her called like a siren's song. Eventually, she saw Logan's shoulders slump and they returned.

He bowed to her. "I'm… terribly sorry for acting inappropriately. I shouldn't just dole out good service since I was… attracted to both of you."

Lucina waved him off. "As long as you've learned your lesson. Service is a noble profession, but difficult as well. Those you serve will always demand and expect your best and you must provide it at all times."

Logan bowed again and left. By the looks of it, he was going to apologize to several other customers as well.

Lucina turned to a smiling Severa. "What did you say to him?"

Severa stuck out her tongue. "That is for me and him to know, no one else. Besides, I can't stand seeing an Inigo wannabe."

Lucina shook her head, amused. "You need to show that sweet side more. It'd make it so much easier for you to make friends."

Severa huffed. "Nah, I reserve my sweet side for when I'm helping those I care for. In this case, that's
you."

Lucina smiled. "You… still care for me? Even after I…?"

Severa smiled too. "Come on Lucy, that's not gonna ruin our friendship. Let's just… see where it goes. For now, we're friends, ok?"

Lucina reached across the table. "Ok… I understand. Friends it is then."

It hurt to say that, it really did. But, neither wanted to try and rush something so complicated in the midst of such important circumstances. There just wasn't time to work through what needed to be worked through.

For now, they'd stay friends. But, when their mission was over, maybe then…

They silently agreed to give it no further thought; Severa gripped Lucina's hand in reassurance before they turned to their meals.

They finished a short while later. Cynthia hadn't arrived so they paid and left, deciding to walk off the meal before returning to the inn. They wandered for what felt like hours, their feet carrying them to the road and then to the castle gates.

Lucina stared at the gates, melancholy in her eyes. "It looks so majestic. Nothing like how I remember it."

Severa sighed. Even after Lucina was born, there had been damage to the castle. To see it pristine must be quite the shock.

She pulled Lucina down the road. "Don't worry, Lucy. We'll be very familiar with these halls in a couple days."

Lucina sighed. "I already am, remember? But, you're right. Let's get back and see how Cynthia's doing."

They turned back to their inn and made it back by sundown. Cynthia was waiting for them, brush in hand, when they entered their room.

"Hey guys!" Cynthia greeted them. "Hey, I found something weird out back."

Lucina frowned. "Weird? How so?"

Cynthia pointed to one of their windows. "Look there! It's in the alley below us."

Lucina and Severa shared glances before walking over to the window and glancing outside.

"Hey, doesn't that look like the Gate we came through?"

The Gate was nothing more than a simple archway with two grey slabs closing it off. It was so nondescript and ordinary that it practically blended into the wall behind it.

Lucina nodded. "It does… Maybe it's one of those Outrealm Gates we heard about."

Severa sighed. "If it is, then we can't do anything. Remember, we need a key to get in and even then no one to go through one has ever come back. I think we should just leave it."

Lucina nodded and Cynthia sighed. "Aw, and here I thought this would be something interesting."
Lucina shrugged. "Can't have everything. Anyway, it's getting late. We should turn in for tonight and start scouting more thoroughly in the morning."

There were nods all around and they prepared silently. It wasn't until Severa was asleep that Cynthia snuck over to Lucina's side of the room.

"Hey, Lucy, how'd it go?"

Lucina rolled over, eyes annoyed. "If you mean lunch then it went fine. We're friends, that's it for now. I'll tell you more in the morning."

Cynthia sighed. "And here I went to the trouble of whispering. Fine, have it your way."

Cynthia snuck off to her bed and went to sleep with a pout. Lucina sighed and did the same, minus the pout.

But, when the morning came, it wasn't the sun that woke them.

"Hey, stop pushing!"

"Sully, get your horse to stop fidgeting!"

"Kellam, you're squeezing me into the wall!"

"Get the damn door open!"

Cynthia shot out of bed and raced to the window, opening it with a bang. "What's all the racket out there?!"

She looked down to see the embarrassed faces of the Shepherds.

A man with greenish hair called up to her. "Uh, sorry for the commotion! Our business will be done shortly, don't mind us!"

Cynthia squeaked and fled back into the room. "Lucy, Sev, we have a problem!"

Lucina, ever the morning person, popped out of bed. "What problem?"

Cynthia was busy shaking Severa awake so she just pointed at the window.

Curious, Lucina walked over and glanced outside. Yep, those were the Shepherds alright, but what were they doing here?

"Stop shaking me dunce, I'm up!"

The yell was punctuated by a smack and thud as poor Cynthia took a pillow to the head. Severa huffed before seeing a pale Lucina by the window.

"Hey, Lucy, what's up?"

Lucina pointed out the window. "The... The Shepherds are... going through the Gate."

Severa's eyes widened. "What?!"

She sprinted to the window and threw the pane open. She poked her entire torso out and gaped. The gate was not only open, but most of the Shepherds had already gone through! The last one to enter
was the one and only Robin.

Severa suddenly felt very foolish when Robin's head perked up and he turned to look as the gate began to close.

His eyes widened when he saw her. "Katarina?!"

The door slammed shut right after he said it, a blue light shining between the cracks before everything went silent.

Severa pulled herself back into the room and slumped to the ground. "That's... not good."

Lucina sighed. "Yes, and for three reasons. First, where did they get the key to enter? Second, why go in when no one has ever come back?"

She turned to Severa, eyes hard. "Third, if they do come back, what will they do now that Robin's seen you?"

Severa kept her head in her arms. "I... I don't know. I don't know if he's met Mom yet, so that's one reason to stay away, but we need to be in Ylisstol for what's about to happen."

Lucina sighed, eyes softening. "I know, Sev. Maybe he'll forget about seeing you, but we should probably move inns just to be sure."

Cynthia spoke up. "But... shouldn't we keep an eye on the Gate? I mean, how will we know to hide if we don't see them come back?"

Lucina nodded. "A fair point, but I'll do it. They've seen you both, so you'll have to hide, but they haven't seen me."

Severa stood. "And how, exactly, will you find us and tell us?"

Lucina smirked. "You leave that to me."

She turned back to the window and the inert gateway, thoughts racing.

*But the questions remain. Where did they get an Outrealm key? And why, when war is coming, did they go through it?*

She shook her head. They could question why the Shepherds would leave in the wake of a war's outbreak later. For now, they had to find another inn for Severa and Cynthia before the Ylissean military stormed the Golden Eagle.

What she'd find two days later would throw everything she knew upside down. But, answers would not come to her for a long time.

*The Night Before-Shepherds*

They arrived in Ylisstol to immediate murmurs from the crowds. They'd been able to make the rest of the march without incident, but everyone had been glancing over their shoulders the entire time.

The first words out of Chrom's mouth when they entered the palace were orders to double the guard and recall all patrols. They needed to concentrate their military might if they were to have any chance against the Plegian forces.

Robin predicted it would take Gangrel four days to gather his forces and storm the border. It was
poor news to Phila and Emmeryn, but they knew he'd only ever tell them the truth, and now, with his access to the nerve center of the kingdom, he was dismayed.

*Phila said Cordelia went to one of the westernmost forts. The call to retreat won't reach her in time. We... we can't save her unit or any of the others out there.*

He slammed his fist into the wall, making Emmeryn glance at him. "Sir Robin, I know you're dismayed, but the call has been put out and the reports I've received match your observations to the letter. Please, be patient. Once Chrom has returned from organizing the guards we can begin."

They were standing in the throne room by a small door, different than the one she'd previously led him down. She'd asked Robin to join her and Chrom on a visit to a place called 'The Royal Archives', but the prince was late.

Robin sighed and almost asked to leave when the throne room doors creaked open. It was Chrom and he did not look all that happy.

"Why do you need us to go down there, Emm? Surely there's a better way to spend our time?"

Emmeryn gestured for them to follow. "Because, our forces must be stronger than mere mortals to best what comes for us. However, the Shepherds are the only ones I trust with this burden."

She opened the door and led them down a complicated series of hallways that made Robin's head spin. They stopped before a nondescript door. Emmeryn muttered something in an indecipherable tongue and the door glowed with unknowable runes. Slowly, the glow faded and the door creaked open.

Emmeryn pulled out a red tome. "Follow me. The descent is as long as it is dark."

The tome glowed and a ball of fire sprang to life in her palm, lighting the darkness landing they stepped on to. Robin glanced over the side and saw a long drop with stairs ringing it, petering into the darkness only a short ways down.

He followed Emmeryn and Chrom, slowly growing cold as their descent wound them ever deeper. Eventually, when he could see his own breath, they reached the bottom.

Chrom patted his shoulder. "The climb's far worse, trust me. For now, feel honored at what you're about to see."

Emmeryn waved her hand and the ball of fire flew around the room, lighting a ring of torches. The light made Robin wince, but he gaped when his vision settled.

Before him stood a grand door of smooth granite, every inch of the stone inscribed with runes and magic circles. The magic radiating from it was palpable in the air. As if to drive home the fact that no one should enter, great chains bound the door, inscriptions etched into the rusted iron.

Emmeryn stepped up to the door, voice echoing like a bell. "Open before those of Exalted Blood and grant us entry. Power beyond what we hope to match seeketh the sacred shield. Open and grant us the power to defend ourselves. So sayeth Exalt Emmeryn Adler the Fifth de Ylisse."

The door glowed and the chains fell away with a crash, stone grinding against stone as the door parted.

Robin stared at the doors, but Chrom answered the unasked question. "Yes, Emmeryn is the fifth of her name. Ylisse has existed for a thousand years and Emmeryn was a popular name for royal girls a
few decades ago."

Robin shook his head and followed Emmeryn through the door, Chrom right behind them.

He stopped dead in his tracks when he crossed the threshold, jaw slamming into the floor. "Naga's
tits."

Chrom stifled a laugh. "I take it Vaike taught you that one. But, I agree. It is quite a sight."

Before them lay a cavernous room filled to the brim with all kinds of things. Ranging from paintings
and sculptures to piles of gold and jewelry, the room practically glittered.

Emmeryn ignored the splendor and walked further in, waving for them to follow. "As you can see,
Robin, we do not call this an 'Archive' for no good reason. What surrounds you is a collection of
Ylisse's greatest treasures, gathered here since the founding of the Halidom."

She sighed. "But, do not be fooled by the splendor. We are here for two items only, no more."

She led them through the treasures, answering any question Robin was willing to ask. She finally
stopped before a low pedestal with a dark key sitting on the cushion. "Ah, here we are."

Robin blinked. "And what, dare I ask, is that?"

Emmeryn took the key from the cushion and presented it to Chrom. "This, dear Robin, is called an
Outrealm Key. It's one of only five in the entire world."

Robin was confused. "Outrealm? What's that?"

Chrom shook his head, storing the key in his pocket. "Supposedly, they're other worlds, separate
from our own. There are many tales of them, ranging from places of infinite gold to places where one
can train for but a day yet receive the results of a year. But, I always thought they were fantasies."

Emmeryn shook her head. "Not quite. The key goes to a door located behind the Golden Eagle Inn
and I want you and the Shepherds to use it. Go and train, become the best possible warriors you can
in the two days I'm giving you."

Robin finally got his head around the idea. "Ah, so you know the place of training exists and you
want us to use it. An astute idea, milady, but why not send all our forces to do so?"

Emmeryn smiled. "Because there are foolhardy members among our troops. Some would go hunting
for gold to make them rich whilst others could get curious and invite horrors unto our world. It's best
if only a few with integrity go."

Robin nodded. "Very well, when do we leave?"

Emmeryn spun about and continued further in. "Tomorrow morning, as early as you can. For now,
we need to retrieve one last thing."

She walked ever further into the room, the golden glitter giving way to rusted weapons and rotten
staffs.

Robin glanced around. "What are these?"

Chrom sighed. "Old weapons and staffs. The jewels in the staffs still hold power, but the weapons
are little more than antiques."
Emmeryn stopped in front of them, reaching down and picking up a nondescript shield. "Here we are, now then, let's go."

She turned and started walking again, passing the shield to Chrom as they followed. Silence stretched for an eternity before they left the room and Emmeryn sealed it once more. "Well then, our work for today is done. Chrom, Robin, please retire for tonight. I will do so myself after I meet with Phila."

She bowed to them and started climbing the stairs. Not wanting to be left in the dark, they followed. It took a while, but Robin eventually found himself back in his room.

So, we're going to an 'Outrealm' tomorrow. All while we have war preparations to do. Emmeryn, I have no idea what you're thinking but I hope this works.

-Morning, Golden Eagle Inn—

Well, this is fun.

The Shepherds were currently shuffling in an alley behind the inn. It was less than spacious with three horses and a pegasus, but Chrom was studying the strange door before them.

"So," Robin drawled. "What we got here doctor?"

Chrom rolled his eyes. "I'm trying to find a keyhole, my good man."

Lon'qu's voice sounded over them. "Away woman!"

The Shepherds were really starting to complain now. Kellam was crushing Vaike into the wall and Sully's horse was getting testy with Miriel.

"What's all the racket out there?!"

Great, they woke someone up. Thankfully, Stahl answered them. "Uh, sorry for the commotion! Our business will be done shortly, don't mind us!"

Robin heard a squeak before what sounded like a window slammed close. Robin sighed when Chrom laughed. "Found it!"

He set the key in the hole and turned it, a hollow click echoing through the air. "Shepherds, let's go!"

Chrom pushed the door open and walked into the dim room beyond. The others followed along shortly, Robin funneling them through the door. When everyone else was inside, he crossed the threshold.

But, something tugged at his mind and he turned to the alley as the door began to close.

He choked at the sight that greeted him. A woman was poking her head out of the inn's window, staring at him to reflect his own shock.

"Katarina!"

No one else had those mismatched eyes, but the door slammed shut at his shout and a blue flash whisked him and the others away.

He'd return stronger than ever, but Katarina's face and Cordelia's fate would haunt him throughout the trials.
No manner of training or happenstance would be able to banish them from his mind.
Plots (Results)

-Ylisstol, Main Plaza-

Two days after the Shepherds disappeared into the gate, Lucina was still stuck in the inn. She’d been able to move Severa and Cynthia to another inn across town, but, now she’d been staring at a door for hours on end.

It's not like she was well and truly bored but it wasn't the most exciting work.

She sighed. It looked like nothing else was going to happen for now. May as well go check on her friends.

As she went through the inn's dining room, she turned her head towards a loud voice.

"Don't you think it strange that the Exalt herself is by the fountain?"

"Fool, she's showing us solidarity! She's amongst us when she could be holed up in that palace like a rat!"

Lucina frowned as she passed them.

The Exalt? Aunt Emmeryn's outside?

That could mean many things, but the Shepherds going through the gate two days ago, almost to the minute, was too convenient.

They must be coming back soon. Hmm, if I remember correctly, Emmeryn would play with the children whenever she decided to walk through town. Maybe I can speak to her.

She smiled wryly. Getting to talk with an aunt she'd only ever heard of sounded wonderful. Besides, everyone knew Marth as a male. She wouldn't know Lucina was family unless she looked closely at Lucina's eyes.

Well, I never got anywhere without taking a risk. I just wish Cynthia was here, she'd love to do this.

Lucina steadied herself and walked out of the inn. Even though she was expecting it, the sight made her breath catch in her throat.

Emmeryn was right there, sitting on the lip of the fountain with a crowd of children. Lucina could see her personal guard circling the square loosely, but they looked confident.

Good, they don't suspect any attempts on her life. That'll let me talk to her.

She smiled and started walking towards the fountain, making very sure to be as non-threatening as possible. She was stopped, of course, but the woman just looked her over. "Do you require something of the Exalt?"

Lucina recognized her as Phila, from her mother's stories. "I seek advice is all. If times are as troubled as I hear, then a word from the Exalt is beyond comforting."

Lucina frowned. "But… is it ok for her to be out in the plaza?"

Phila kept eyeing her. "It is, for now. Her Grace insisted on keeping her appointment with the
children."

Then she shook her head. "I will speak to her. If she's willing, you may speak."

Lucina bowed and Phila turned and walked away. It was a few minutes before Emmeryn finished, but Phila waved her over after leaning close to the Exalt.

Lucina bowed when she stood before Emmeryn. "Your Grace, it's an honor to speak with you."

Emmeryn smiled. "Phila told me you seek advice. Tell me, and I will help as much as I can."

Lucina nodded. "Thank you, Your Grace. I have an aunt that is seriously ill, but refuses to admit it. She goes about her duties without a care to her ailing body and I fear she will die if she does not stop. Is there anything I can do to help her?"

Lucina mentally applauded the story she thought up. Not bad for coming off the top of her head.

Emmeryn nodded. "Hmm, a difficult situation indeed. Tell me, why does your aunt continue to work herself? Does she not have others that can support her? And if she does, why is she stubborn?"

Lucina shook her head. "She is unmarried. My father and other aunt are more than willing to help her, but she's been generous all her life. She likely feels that stopping for her own sake is selfish."

Emmeryn tapped her chin. "Hmm, that sounds similar to how my siblings have described me. I may not be ill, but I admit to being a generous soul. But, if she's like that, then all I can think to do is jump in front of her and give her nothing to do but rest."

Then Emmeryn winked. "That way, you show she's appreciated while making her recover. A tear laden appeal or two wouldn't hurt either."

Lucina nodded. "Thank you, Your Grace. I think I know what I need to do."

She turned to leave but Emmeryn stopped her. "Please, wait. I wish to ask you something as well. Phila, if you could watch from over there. I wish this to be private."

Phila went to protest, but Emmeryn showed her a tome hidden in her robes. Phila left without a word.

Lucina felt anxiety rise in her as Emmeryn patted the spot next to her. "Please, sit. Don't worry, no one can hear us, Phila's already made sure of that."

Lucina sat slowly, her anxiety increasing at Emmeryn's amused gaze. Silence stretched for a time before Emmeryn spoke. "So, how are Chrom and Sumia as rulers?"

Lucina practically jumped out of her skin. "What?! How did you...?"

Emmeryn gave her a flat stare. "Please, blue hair, Sumia's facial features, Falchion and the Exalt's Brand in your eye."

She held up the fringe of her scarf. "If you think a member of the Sages can't pick out the obvious, you're mad."

Lucina blushed. "Oh, well... how do you think I know anything about something that hasn't happened?"

Emmeryn's stare became amused. "I read quite a bit, my dear. I know most all the rituals and legends
associated with Naga, including the one where she compels The Scales to send people back through time."

She took Lucina's hand. "Now please, tell me your name. I wish to hear what my niece is called."

Lucina felt tears in her eyes. "…Lucina. My name's Lucina. It's… wonderful to finally meet you, Aunt Emmeryn."

Emmeryn smiled. "Lucina… a beautiful name for a beautiful girl. But, I guess by your melancholy that I do not live to actually meet you."

Lucina shook her head. "No… you don't live to meet me or my sister. We've only heard stories about you."

Emmeryn chuckled. "Two? Oh my, Chrom and Sumia were luckier than I thought. Tell me, what's my other niece's name?"

Lucina smiled. "…Cynthia."

Emmeryn shook her head. "Another beautiful name… can you tell me more? I will gladly hear all you have to say."

And so they talked. For almost an hour, Lucina told Emmeryn her story. She omitted some parts out of necessity, but Emmeryn did not pry. She only smiled at her niece, beyond happy to see something wonderful come from her mistakes.

Eventually, they had to part.

"I fear Phila grows impatient. Your father and mother will be returning to us shortly, but it's clear you'd rather they not know."

Lucina nodded. "As… much as I wish I could leap into their arms, I cannot interfere with their relationship. Just talking to you like I have could change things in ways I cannot predict and cannot change."

Emmeryn stood. "Very well then. But, you need not worry about your father and mother falling for each other. They already have, it's just a matter of when they pluck up and say it."

She winked. "I'll make sure they do it by next year though. I have money riding on it."

Lucina sighed. "I knew Aunt Lissy got it from somewhere."

Emmeryn giggled. "Lissy? Is that what you call Lissa?"

Lucina nodded, a blush springing to life

Emmeryn smirked. "And me? Did I get a cute nickname?"

Lucina blushed. "…Emmy."

Emmeryn smiled. "That sounds right. Well, Phila's staring daggers into my back, we should wrap this up."

Lucina smiled. "Sorry for taking so much of your time. But, it was wonderful to meet you."

Emmeryn smiled and pulled Lucina into a hug.
"You carry a great burden, my lovely girl. It is obvious in your eyes and posture. My advice, my true advice, is to realize that you are loved. Your mother, your father, your sister, your friends, they all love you. I love you. Never forget that we will love you for who you are unto eternity."

She smiled into Lucina's ear. "Messiah or not."

Lucina couldn't stop the tears. She buried her head into her aunt's robes and cried all over again. They doubtlessly drew a few looks, but Emmeryn had done something like this many times before. It only made those that saw respect the Exalt even more.

Lucina pulled away when her tears were dry. "Thanks… I needed that."

Emmeryn smiled. "To cry is to be human. That and our capacity for forgiveness is what makes us more than common beasts. Not intellect or language."

Then Emmeryn winked. "Good luck, and I hope to meet you again. Both of you."

Lucina smiled in return and bowed. She turned and strode from the plaza; her heart lighter than it had been in years.

Emmeryn watched her go, smile fixed to her face. "Phila, I feel like we'll be seeing more of her. In fact, I'd like you to think of her as my friend from here on."

Phila's brow shot up. "Oh? Whatever you talked about must have left quite the impression."

Emmeryn giggled. "You could say that."

Phila sighed. "I'll just chalk that up as one of your quirks. But, to the matter at hand. Lord Chrom should be leaving the gate shortly."

Emmeryn nodded. "Very good. In fact, I think I hear the opening of a door."

They walked back to the fountain and waited. Soon enough, they heard the familiar chatter of the Shepherds drift from the alley.

Emmeryn sighed, relieved that they were safe. She closed her eyes to savor the moment but gasped upon opening them.

Those were the Shepherds, that was without doubt. But where once a militia of many disparate parts entered, paragons exited.

Everyone, from Chrom to Miriel, was outfitted in armor of astounding quality. The knights wore heavy plate that ranged from blue to gold and back again, Kellam in particular resembled a sheer mountain of metal.

The magic users wore robes of blue, black, white, and pink. Even Lissa, Emmeryn's darling sister, was dressed in robes that greatly resembled her own. Even Sumia could use magic now, if the icy blue tome she carried was any indication.

"A Dark Flier." Phila muttered. "Who'd have thought that girl could join such rarified air?"

The others were no less grand. Vaike had taken the armor of a berserker, bones decorating his shoulders while metal plates hung around his waist. Lon'qu, the one she knew least about, was covered in leather and scale chainmail underneath a blue coat, lacquer sitting on his shoulders.

Finally, there was Chrom and Robin. Her brother wore resplendent silver plate from his torso down,
that same basic shield she'd given him hanging on his arm. Robin looked similar, but he wore gold and epaulettes adorned his shoulders. Even his coat had new stitching in it.

*What… happened? I knew they were going to train, but this is a bit extreme!*

She schooled her face into a smile. "Chrom, Lissa, everyone. I see that your training reaped quite the reward."

Chrom scratched his cheek. "Physically and magically, oh yes. Though, I wouldn't say we're all that smarter for it."

Robin nodded. "Aye, I tried to see if I improved in strategy by applying the same rules. Well, let's just say I ended up wasting a day."

Emmeryn nodded slowly. "Ok… If I may ask, where did the armor come from?"

Lissa bounced forward. "There was this really cool smith on the other side! He even had a couple of his friends enchant the armor and make the robes. They were so cool!"

Emmeryn's brow rose, spotting an odd spear over Chrom's shoulder. "And where, pray tell, did the weaponry come from? I'm pretty sure what I told you only gave access to the training."

Robin raised his hand. "Well, whoever was handling things in there decided to screw with us. We went in one time and found ourselves in some sort of mausoleum. Had to fight our way through, but we found a lot of useful items."

He drew the blade at his side. "For example, this. Mercurius, one of the Three Regalia that had long been lost to the world."

Emmeryn gasped. "One of the Hero King's Regalia. It looks brand new, like it had never left the King's side."

Chrom nodded. "And the spear I carry is Gradivus, another of the Three."

Emmeryn shook her head. "What else did you find there? It sounds like a place where every lost legend goes to rest."

Lissa chuckled nervously. "Well… you're not wrong."

She held up a light blue book, a small rainbow circling it. "We… kinda found the Book of Naga too."

Emmeryn nearly fainted. The ancient Archaean weaponry and an artifact blessed by Naga herself?!!

She shook her head. "You know what… I don't want to know. I'm just glad you're all back safely."

Chrom chuckled. "Yeah, that's probably for the best. Anyway, how have things been here? I know it's only been two days for you, but for us it's been a month and a half."

Phila stepped forward. "It's best if we discuss this back at the palace. Prince Chrom, Sir Robin, if you would come with us. Sir Frederick, please take the others back to the barracks and await your orders."

Frederick nodded and ordered everyone to follow him. They did with a surprising amount of discipline. Frederick was quite the taskmaster after all.
Emmeryn gestured for everyone else to follow her. She almost smirked when she turned away, recalling her chat with her niece.

_You'll make a fine ruler should it come to that, Chrom. I pray it won't, I want to meet my cute little nieces, but I feel confident all the same in your leadership._

_Castle Courtyard- That night_

Chrom paused in his pacing, mind wrestling with unpleasant information.

_The Plegians have already started mobilizing. They haven't crossed the border yet, but they'll have thousands of troops ready to drown our outlying regions before long. The Dukes are useless too, with only Themis, Felds, and Superius answering the call to mobilize. Grevis and Clarissa have turtled and Draconis refuses to march until they're threatened._

He heaved a sigh, cursing the current Duke of Draconis.

_Grevis and Clarissa are understandable, they're right next to Plegia, but Draconis is far to the east and holds Mount Prism. Duke Carlen is mad to think Plegia will simply ignore them._

He snorted as another thought occurred to him.

_It is funny, that he wants nothing to do with this. If I recall correctly, he was one of the most ardent supporters of war with Plegia. Looks like the war hawk is little more than a clucking chicken._

He sighed again, footsteps approaching him. "Good evening, Robin. What brings you out here?"

Robin joined him. "Just seeing how you were doing. We were discussing what to do with the Duke, but I decided to leave after they stripped him of his title."

Chrom almost laughed. "I would pay to see that vainglorious dastard's face when he hears the news. I just wish such celebration didn't rest on our tenuous ability to hold all of five forts."

Robin sighed. "Agreed. I was able to convince Phila to transfer Cordelia's unit to one of the forts, but that was after pointing out the other forts stretch us too thin. Trying to get her back to the capital is a fool's errand unless we can raise the forces we need."

A familiar voice joined them. "You won't and the news only gets worse tonight."

Chrom glanced to his right. "Ah, so you were the one hiding in the brush, Marth the Seer."

Marth stepped from the shadows, his masked visage frowning. "I would prefer you not call me that."

Chrom shrugged. "Well, stop showing up and warning me about future calamities. Actually, stop telling me about calamities that come true. Can't you spare a good fortune for once?"

Marth cracked a smile. "Were that I could, good sir. But, I bear grave tidings once more."

Robin cracked his knuckles. "Tell me, 'Marth', where did you come by all this information? It's been very accurate so far, and such accuracy comes at quite the cost."

Marth frowned, hesitation clear in his frame. "What if… I told you that I've seen the future occur with my own eyes? That the Exalt dies, tonight, and Prince Chrom is brutally injured in the process?"

Robin snorted. "I'd call you mad."
Marth nodded. "As any reasonable person would. But, I will prove myself."

Chrom crossed his arms, eyes shifting to the tree behind Marth. "And how do you plan to prove that?"

Marth drew his Falchion, taking a breath as he did. "I'm about to save your life… from him."

He looked to his right, leaping into the air as a hooded man with a blade rushed from the brush. He brought his Falchion down and through the assassin's spine, killing him instantly.

Marth stood back up. "I trust… this will suffice as proof?"

Chrom shared a glance with Robin before nodding. "Indeed. But, what about the one in the tree?"

Marth's face morphed into one of shock as another assassin burst from the tree. Their sword was aimed squarely for Marth's collar, but he was able to backpedal away from the attack. Unfortunately, he stumbled on the slain assassin's sword and his attacker sliced through his mask.

Chrom burst toward the assassin and split him in two with a single strike from his Falchion. Sighing, he turned back to Marth.

"Wait," he started, "you're a woman?!"

Robin cackled. "Yes, Lissa owes me money!"

Marth just smiled, not really wanting to get into this. "And quite the actress too! Honestly I'm amazed you took this long to figure it out."

A grand boom sounded from the castle. Chrom and Robin turned and, trusting Marth's words, dashed inside. Marth ran right behind them.

**Castle Corridors**

They ran through the halls, Robin and Chrom nearly out pacing Marth. They were lucky some of the Shepherds were in the castle, but some of them were missing, likely still in the barracks.

While Robin started organizing both Shepherds and guards into a ramshackle defense, Chrom burst into Emmeryn's room.

"Sister, are you alright?!"

Emmeryn stood from where she'd been kneeling, likely in the midst of her evening prayer. "Chrom, please, grab Lissa and flee from here! My life is nothing before yours; please get out while you can!"

Oddly, he smiled. "Emm, don't worry. We're ready for this; just have some faith, ok?"

Emmeryn could see confidence in his eyes. "But, Chrom, that was only training! These are assassins, nothing you've faced before!"

Marth stepped forward. "Milady, I will gladly vouch for Prince Chrom's skill. He slew an assassin sent after him before I could even blink."

Emmeryn still looked hesitant, even as she gazed at Marth in surprise, but sighed. "Very well. But please, don't take any unnecessary risks! You and Lissa are my treasures; I would be devastated to lose you!"
Chrom smiled, putting a comforting hand on her shoulder. "You're our treasure too, Emm. We won't let you down. Marth, see to it she stays safe! I'm trusting you on this!"

Marth instinctively saluted and Chrom sprinted from the room. Alone, Marth sighed.

"Marth? Is that the name you chose for yourself, Lucina?"

Lucina nodded. "It is. I… had hoped to draw on the Hero King's strength."

Emmeryn nodded. "I see. That must be what you didn't tell me earlier today. Very well, I won't pry, but would you like some tea?"

Lucina stared at her, mouth agape. "Um…what?"

Emmeryn pointed to her door. "Hear that sound? Those heavy footfalls?"

Lucina nodded after taking a moment to listen. "Indeed. What are they?"

Emmeryn smiled. "That would be the wonderful Sir Kellam putting himself before the door. I don't believe anything will enter this night."

-Robin-

"Virion, either put an arrow in the bastard behind that pillar or find a new job!"

A javelin flew through the air and pinned the assassin to the floor.

"Thank you! And remember to talk to a smith about getting those arrows replicated!"

Robin heard something that sounded like a melodramatic yes so he moved on. "Sully, roll with Frederick down the east side, don't let anyone through!"

Hooves and steel rang like thunder and lightning, lances, swords, and axes took limbs and lives.

"Lissa, show that damn mage over there who's boss! Vaike, charge the pillars. We have a guy hiding there!"

Holy light burned forward and a bloodlust fueled body flew into the pillars, cutting the man in two.

Robin was in his element now, directing the Shepherds to their optimum efficiency. Any who got past Robin's efficient directions were skewered or crushed by Kellam.

Ok, so far so good. Now, if I could figure out how they got here and killed most of the guards, I'll be golden.

That had been an unfortunate discovery. When Robin had been trying to gather the castle forces together, he'd found most of the guards killed. He'd managed to scrounge up about six, but they'd been slain in the first wave.

The Shepherds, while much better, could only monitor so much of the castle. They were missing three of their mages and Lon'qu, Stahl was nowhere to be found.

Looks like I'll need to join soon too… Wait, who's that? He's not trying to fight, he just looks scared.

Curious, Robin ran over to the pillar the other man was hiding behind. Robin managed to approach him unnoticed.
The man had a shock of orange hair. He wore a black bandana and beige clothing with a heavy black cloak. He was armed, the steel sword in his hand said as much, but only small leather armor padded his chest and legs.

*The man started speaking, still ignorant of Robin. "Man, I did not sign up for this. I'm a thief-not a murderer. The Exalt's a sweet lady and while I'll rob her blind, I don't want to kill her!"*

His monologue finished, the man sighed. "But, if I try to leave, they kill me. What to do, what to do?"

Robin tapped his shoulder, Mercurius at his throat a moment later. "Well, you could surrender. Or, if you really want to live, why not join our side. Believe me, we pay well and the Exalt's more than willing to forgive."

The thief raised his hands slowly, sword clattering on the ground as he looked Robin up and down. "Hey man, no need to be so aggressive. It's bad business to betray clients."

Then he shrugged, "But, my contract says to steal, not kill. I'll join up if you sweeten the deal."

Robin sighed. "Gold? How cliché. Alright, let me see…"

He reached into his coat pocket, but cursed when some wrapped candies fell to the floor. The man was on them like vultures to a carcass, scrabbling them off the floor and scarfing them down. A moment later, he burped.

"You got any more of those?"

Robin just blinked. "Uh, what?"

The man smirked. "Hey, I said 'sweeten' the deal didn't I? Don't get me wrong, I'll still take the gold… Unless… you have more of those candies?"

Robin sighed. "I'll ask Lissa later, she bought them. For now, can you guide me to the leader of these blackhearts?"

The man nodded. "Sure, he's creepy anyway. Oh, name's Gaius, so you know."

Robin nodded too. "Robin. Now, if you would?"

Gaius waved for him to follow and Robin ran after him. He needed to vaporize a few of the assassins as he went, thank Naga he'd found Mjolnir among the tomes, but the situation was well in hand with the arrival of Catria and a giant killer rabbit.

*Wait a minute?! Giant killer rabbit?!*

Robin shook his head. They could worry about that later, the assassins leader to priority.

Robin and Gaius burst into the castle's courtyard, Robin gaping in awe at the purple portal swirling in the open air.

Wisps of energy flew around the portal – all soaring from one, hooded man in the center of the yard. Gaius pointed to him. "That's the boss. Creepy fellow that one; uses dark magic. Be careful, yeah?"
Robin nodded and drew Mercurius. But the mage noticed him and started laughing.

"Do my eyes deceive me? Truly, fate piles gifts at my feet. Garn! Report back and tell the others the vessel has been found!"

A diminutive creature flew from behind the mage and disappeared into the portal. It closed a moment later, the miasma flowing into the mage.

"Now then, they need the vessel alive, but it doesn't need to be any greater than that!"

He roared and dark orbs, eerily similar to the magic from Robin's first memories, streaked across the ground.

Robin rolled away and sidestepped the magic, wincing as the orbs exploded around him. He charged forward, a twitch from the mage the only hint he was surprised.

Robin swung and thrust as precisely as he could. He didn't have anything resembling Chrom's strength, but he made up for it in sheer accuracy.

The mage growled as Mercurius's blade sliced open a shallow cut in his dark skin. "You have some fight in you! Well then, take this!"

His hand gripped thin air and three spike of purple sprung forth, slamming into the earth where Robin had once been. Robin responded with a blast of thunder.

The energy threw the mage clean across the courtyard, slamming him into the wall. He staggered away, rage burning in red eyes, before roaring again.

This time a wave of dark energy shot forward, plants withering in its path. Robin had no way to dodge it, the wall was too high to jump over and too low to roll under, so he called forth Mjolnir's might.

Robin's spell roared forth. "Fenris!"

A pack of wolves sprang from Robin's hands, crackling howls rending the air as the forces met. Robin was blinded by the following explosion but another dark sphere met his chest and he rolled across the ground.

Whatever the spell was, it knocked the wind out of him. He could just barely see a black cloaked figure slumped against the wall to his right. Gaius must've been blown away by the hit.

He tried to stand but found a boot on his chest. The mage was standing on him, blood running from numerous cuts on his dark skin. His arm hung limp, but a smile was painted on a face that Robin recognized all too well.

The sorcerer from his dreams laughed. "Quite a fight. But, this is where it ends."

He raised his hand and sent another sphere into Robin's chest. Pain rang through his being, the runes in his armor reducing the damage enough to just barely keep him conscious.

"Hmph, impressive armor. Well, just need to boost the power a bit."

The sorcerer raised his hand again, but a voice caught his attention.

"Get away from my daddy, you gods damned freak!"
Robin knew that voice, he just knew he did. His vision was darkening, but he saw another Mercurius sink into the Mage's chest, his face locked into a grimace of pain and shock. A moment later, a familiar set of mismatched eyes hovered over him.

"Daddy, stay awake! Please, don't leave me, not again!"

Oh, it was Katarina. That's how he knew that face. The face that was currently tearing up in his almost black vision.

Robin found the strength to reach out his hand and stroke her cheek. Then, with the last of his conscious strength, he spoke.

"I'm… alright. But, I know you… somehow. You're name, it's… not Katarina, but… I can't place it."

Katarina nodded. "And you can't know. I wish you could, but you can't. Please, just stay alive. That's all I want, damn it. That's all I've wanted since I first saw you!"

Robin felt a tired smile stretch across his face. "I'm alive… I can tell you that much… About to be… unconscious… though."

His vision disappeared and he knew no more.

-Castle Infirmary-

Robin woke to a sharp pain in his gut and a splitting headache. He laid back down and took a deep breath, letting the headache subside.

Ok, I'm in the infirmary. Now, who else is here?

He looked right and left to find a few Shepherds joined him. Vaike had bandages on his head and arms, Kellam had a nasty looking gash on his forehead and it looked like Maribelle was nursing a broken leg.

Oof. Well, they should be able to heal it right up tomorrow. She'll just need a couple day's rest after it's mended.

"Oh, good to see you up, Rob. How's the gut?"

Robin glanced over to see a smiling Lissa. "Like I'm being gored by a deer. How's Emmeryn?"

Lissa smiled. "She's fine… wish I could say the same about the guards, but Emm and Chrom are talking to that Gaius guy now."

Robin sighed. "And… what about the bunny?"

Lissa stared at him like he was insane before blinking in recognition. "Oh, you mean Panne? Yeah, she's with us now."

Robin frowned. "Panne?"

Lissa giggled. "She's a skin changer! She calls herself a taguel and she's not that friendly, but she's a real-life skin changer!"

Robin nodded. "Well, that explains it. I'll have to meet with her and Gaius later."

Lissa nodded. "Yep, but not until you're better mister! Now, go ahead and rest up tonight. Your
entrails took quite a pounding, but I'll be able to shove an elixir down your throat in the morning."

She turned to walk away, but Robin called to her. "Marth's a girl by the way! You owe my three gold!"

She flashed him an obscene gesture that made Maribelle cry out from the other side of the room.

Robin just chuckled and laid back, contemplating his last moments of consciousness.

*It's strange. The closer I get to Cordelia, the clearer a picture I get of Katarina. Now I know that's not her real name. It seems the key to all this is Cordelia, but I just don't know if I can save her. I want to, I really do.*

He sighed.

*I want to apologize to her for dismissing something so important to her. I may have been worried, but I handled it poorly. I... I just want us to play again, to go out and eat again. We were discussing literature for Naga's sake!*

His mind wandered again, nose filling with the sharp scent of her cinnamon laced hair.

*I... I want to hold her again, like before we left and this turned into a mess. I admit it, but I don't even know what it is I'm admitting! Books don't help and the Shepherds are less than useless. What do I do?*

He pounded his head against the pillow, careful not to agitate his wounds.

*And then there's Katarina calling me 'daddy'. I'm pretty sure she's far too old to be my daughter, but with my lack of memory, who knows? I could be a very young looking man in his late thirties!*

Robin sighed. There were simply too many questions and not enough answers. All he could do now was rest and pray that he could find a way to bring Cordelia back, by any means necessary.

Within days, he would regret that thought.
Devastation (Comfort)

-Northwestern Ylisse-Fort Firald

It was a quiet evening. Fires crackled in their braziers and the wind rustled the trees as Pegasus Knights patrolled the walls of the fort.

One knight in particular sighed.

**Why are we here? I still don't understand why we were given orders to move from the border.**

In truth, she did understand. Firald was one of two vital forts that watched over the northwestern region of Ylisse with its sister, Fort Daud. They needed all the forces they could to hold the forts rather than have them ground to dust when Plegia rolled down the mountains.

It was just too convenient. After all, her unit had been the first to arrive at Fort Firald. By almost two days, in fact.

**Only Phila could give such orders, but this feels like something – or someone – else.**

Cordelia sighed to the cool air, idly checking a rack of javelins. Her mind conjured the idea that Robin could have been behind the order but she dismissed it just as quickly. Robin was the tactician for the Shepherds alone; he'd have to be granted access to the War Room to do anything.

**I wouldn't put it past him to try and convince Phila though. He may have used his tactical acumen to convince her, but Phila's smarter than that.**

Cordelia sighed again and moved along the wall. Better to turn her thoughts elsewhere for now.

**It's funny. I have a fight with him then go straight off to war. Then, the moment that dispatch comes in, all the harassment stops.**

She almost snorted. It looked like war and the possibility of her saving their skins made the Pegasus Knights best friends. In fact, she'd had more than a few of her former tormentors try and ask how she was doing.

Oh, she was polite about it, like always. But, that didn't stop her from attacking the training dummies in the fort with renewed zeal.

"Cordelia!"

She nearly jumped out her skin. She spun on her heel and snapped an instinctive salute, "Ma'am!"

Her captain-Isara- shook her head. "At ease."

Cordelia put down her salute but stood at the ready. Isara sighed. "When I said at ease, I meant you can relax, Cordelia. This isn't me giving orders; I just want to talk with you."

Cordelia relaxed slowly, not sure what this was about. "Talk to me? What about?"

Isara sighed again. "You're not in trouble, if that's what you're asking. I just... wanted to explain a tradition we have. Something you haven't learned yet."

Cordelia's eyes widened. "Something I haven't learned? I thought I'd learned all the traditions and
Isara smiled, melancholy coloring her eyes. "Well… not quite. You remember when we had about fifty recruits in your class?"

Cordelia hummed. "I… believe so."

Isara gestured to the grounds below. "How many have you seen since?"

Cordelia's eyes narrowed. "I'd say six or seven. Why?"

Isara's eyes twinkled a bit. "Well, there's a reason for that. A reason I'm sure you're familiar with."

Cordelia stared at her captain for a moment, but couldn't see what she meant. "I'm not sure the reason is familiar to me. I've been nothing but dutiful and I will carry out that duty to the letter, so I swore."

Isara's eyes saddened. "I see. We're lucky to have someone so driven among us, but I guess I'll just tell you."

Isara took a deep breath. "The reason you don't see most of the recruits is because they left, dropped out. The tradition I mentioned earlier is basically a mental exam, where we put the recruits through a hazing process to see if they can withstand the pressure."

Cordelia's eyes widened, but Isara continued. "The idea is that our patrols are long and generally miserable. To add to that, we don't have good food or enough space for everyone for long periods of time. As you might imagine, tempers tend to flare."

She pinched her nose. "However, the idea and rule is that only a few veterans act as the hazers while the other knights help form a support system until the recruits either drop out or make it through the first few patrols. After that, the hazing is supposed to stop."

Cordelia growled. "Well, that's news to me. I've been through at least six patrols counting this one."

Isara pinched her nose harder. "That's the reason I'm here. I can't speak for the others, but they went well beyond the simple hazing. First, everyone was part of it, even the sergeants. Second, they continued the hazing into training itself, which is forbidden. Third, they shunted tasks off to you, also forbidden. Fourth and final, they've been doing everything they can to spread false rumors."

Cordelia's eyes widened further with every listed crime. Sure, she knew about it, but she thought the officers just didn't care. "…Why tell me this now? We're at war; this could have been addressed at a much better time!"

Isara grimaced. "And that fault lies with me and me alone. I was willfully blind to what was happening and I refuse to excuse that negligence."

She bowed. "You have my sincerest apologies. I know it's likely too little too late, but I hope we can start afresh."

Cordelia stared at Isara before sighing. "As much as I'd like to tell you no, I'm not that kind of person. I'll try at least, but I'll need to hear apologies from everyone before I start forgiving them."

Isara smiled. "At least you're willing. That right there, in my eyes, makes you the future of these knights. You'll go far Cordelia, especially if you can forgive such trespass born of simple jealousy."

Cordelia saluted again and Isara left. She didn't show it, but Isara's words had lifted a massive weight.
from her shoulders.

And placed an even heavier one in its place.

*It's relieving beyond words to hear they don't hate me. Jealousy had crossed my mind, but I hadn't thought it would be the reason behind all of it. But, now Captain Isara's told me I just may be the future of the knights! She was even willing to apologize to me in person...*

She nodded, turning back to face the forest below.

*I can't let her down! I will do everything I possibly can to reach those expectations, no matter what I must do; I will be the model knight!*

Cordelia smiled, but turned around at a horn's bellow. Dinner time by the looks of it.

She took one more look at the forest before turning and leaving, waving to her replacement as she went, and just missing a man in a fur coat stumbling out of the brush.

-Dining Hall-

She entered the hall to the chatter of the knights. She didn't know many of them, but she didn't care. All she wanted was to get something to eat and get back to work.

Taking her place in line, she noticed her unit sitting at the end of one of the tables. They all had their eyes trained on her, but Cordelia did her best to ignore them.

If they wanted to apologize, they needed to come to her.

She grabbed her food and sat at a lonely table near the back. Normally, she'd eat with the others out of obligation, but not today.

It didn't take long before she heard chairs scrape around her table and her unit sat down. Silence stretched for a few strained moments before Captain Isara coughed.

"Girls, we've talked about this. Now, say what you need to say and let's move past this, ok?"

Silence stretched for a little longer before the others started apologizing. As Cordelia had thought, the big motivator for the abuse was sheer jealousy. Most of them were jealous of most of what she had, her looks and skill being the most envied, but they admitted to one thing universally.

They wanted to break her down, throw her in the mud and revel in it. Every time she brushed it off or answered politely only made them seethe more and it had taken Captain Isara a verbal and physical thrashing to kill their green eyes.

Cordelia simply stared at them. "I… don't know what to say."

One of them sighed. "Well, I'd be surprised if you forgave us. I know I wouldn't."

Another chimed in. "Personally, I'd just send us all to twenty lashes. If that didn't teach us, we don't deserve to be here."

There were nods all around, but Cordelia sighed. "No, I don't think that's necessary. I've struggled with jealousy when I was younger, so I know how it feels."

One of them chuckled. "Oh, let me guess, Sumia?"
Cordelia stared in surprise at the speaker until they started shifting uncomfortably. She answered slowly, "Yes, it was. As I said, I know how it feels, but that time in my life is over. If she can forgive me for being jealous, then I can forgive you."

She was met with smiles, many of them bowed to her. She heard a few sniffles too, but they only made her smile wider.

Finally, they could do this right. She'd be able to prove to Robin that her duty could reap great things. And she could apologize to him as well. He was just worried after all, but hopefully this could assuage his concerns.

The dream was alive for all of five minutes before an emergency horn blared through the hall.

The doors to the hall slammed open, a wounded knight stumbling inside. "Plegians! They're at the gates!"

The hall exploded into action, soldiers and knights running about trying to find weapons and armor alike. Cordelia, still armored from her rounds, dashed for the stables.

She cursed as she burst into the castle grounds. Plegians were everywhere and their wyverns had control of the skies. The Ylissean soldiers were putting up a hell of a fight, but they'd been caught napping.

She cursed again when she saw the stable, punching a Plegian soldier away in the process. The stables were aflame, the screeches of horses clear among the screams and yells of battle. She ran for the stables, grabbing a discarded javelin from the ground and pinning a Plegian to the wall in one smooth motion.

She slammed the door in, grabbing an emergency axe next to the door. "Theresa! I'm here girl, just hold on!"

A neigh greeted her from further in, but she smashed the locks on every stall she ran by, the horses and pegasi thundering out and away from the fire. She found Theresa in one of the last stalls, bucking wildly as fire danced in her hay.

"Hold on!" She shouted, smashing the lock. Theresa shot out and Cordelia barely grabbed her saddle before Theresa took to the air and smashed through the weak ceiling.

Cordelia pulled herself up into the saddle, breathing a sigh of relief when she saw a lance and some javelins still in the bindings. She looked down and felt her heart sink.

The fort was lost; there was no way around it. Torches stretched far into the forest and the sky was black with wyvern wings. As she watched, soldiers and knights alike were struck down, the Plegians only interested in Ylissean blood.

"Cordelia!"

That was Captain Isara! Cordelia shot toward the sound of her voice, relief flooding her when she found her unit and captain alive.

"Cordelia, flee! Tell the Exalt; warn them that the forces are far greater than we feared!"

Cordelia's relief was swiftly replaced with denial. "No, Captain! My place is here with you! It's my duty to defend this fort and stand by your side!"
Isara growled, impaling a Plegian that tried to ambush her. "Don't make me give you an order! The fort is lost and you're the only one able to fly. Flee, and live to fight again!"

Cordelia didn't move. She couldn't. They'd just made up and promised to start over again, she couldn't abandon them!

Isara snarled. "Cordelia de Grevis I order you to warn the Exalt, now!"

Cordelia felt her need to stay and duty to follow orders reach a roiling pitch. What convinced her, though, was a brief flash of purple rising from a fire ball to the south.

She started crying. "Yes… yes ma'am. I… I understand."

Isara smiled. "Good. Ok girls, cover her retreat! Don't let one of those damn wyverns give chase!"

Her unit gave a collective cheer and they thundered up the walls. Cordelia took to the sky and kept her eyes glued to the horizon. She knew that wyverns had started giving chase, but screeches of pain told her that her unit kept their promise.

Against her better judgment, she glanced back. Just in time to see Captain Isara blasted off the wall by a Plegian mage.

Her heart screamed in agony. Isara had been the one that was always kind to her, even during the hazing. She may not have done all she could or should have done, but she still cared.

And now, she's gone. All because of me. If I had stayed, maybe we could have strategized; maybe we could have gotten the pegasi together and run for it. Damn it, I should have stayed!

In a repressed part of her mind, she knew that doing so would have done nothing. They would have all died either way and her true reason for leaving would have died too.

It did little to comfort the wounds on her heart, even the kind face of a friend unable to do anything.

Everything was drowned in sorrow and self-loathing as she fled into the night, her wails of pain lost to the wind.

-Robin, Breakneck Pass-

They weren't kidding when they called it Breakneck Pass.

There were sheer cliffs to the left and a deep ravine to their right, making even the most sure footed of the Shepherds feel somewhat nervous as they walked.

Robin though, wondered on how they got here. After the assassination attempt, Chrom, Phila, Lissa, and Frederick had banded together to convince Emmeryn to go to the Exalt's summer palace. It was the first Robin had heard of it, but he couldn't argue with the idea.

But, it wasn't the thought of relocating the royal family that bothered him. Nay, he applauded it. Rather, he didn't understand why the jittery old man in green priest robes and spectacles was accompanying them.

He knew the man was known as the Hierarch, Chrom told him as much, but he was very shifty eyed. Like he was waiting for something to arrive and didn't want others to know.

He sidled up to Chrom. "Hey, Chrom? Can you tell me more about the Hierarch?"
Chrom glanced at Robin, but shrugged. "Sure. Well, his name's Jason Felds, the old Duke of Felds. He's been Emmeryn's political advisor since she took the throne and he's helped her though a lot of things, particularly after our father … well …"

Robin hummed. "Do we know where he was a couple days ago? Call me paranoid."

Chrom eyed him. "Ok, paranoid, he was talking with Emmeryn the day of the attack if that's what you're asking. But, he was in his room when we checked."

Robin narrowed his eyes as they broke from the trees. "When did you have time to check?"

Chrom glanced at him. "We checked after the attack and the guards that survived told us he was in his room after his meeting with Emm ended."

Now Robin was frowning. "How many guards told you this?"

Chrom was starting to frown too. "Now that I think about it… just…one."

He whispered the last word and Robin turned to the Shepherds, lungs roaring.

"It's a trap! Get the Exalt out of here!"

His warning was nearly too late. War cries screamed from the mountains as wyverns descended like hellish messengers, footmen jumping from the bushes further up the road. But, the Plegians stopped short and a wyvern that was larger than the others flapped forward.

The rider was a fit man with a scraggly head of hair and similar beard, his visage sneering at them from his perch. "Hail, Ylisseans! We know your wench of a leader is with you. Hand her over to us and you'll walk away alive!"

Chrom growled, but the Hierarch rushed forward. It was rather impressive for a man that needed a cane to walk, but the Shepherds only caught snippets of the conversation.

"Orders…protection…"

"I have… man… traitorous bacon!"

Whatever was said next was lost to the wind. All the Shepherds knew was that an axe was raised; blood painted the earth, and a body fell into the ravine.

*And so ends the life of Jason Felds, I hardly knew him. But, this raises concerns of traitors in the palace. We'll need to do a thorough house cleaning when we get back.*

His musings ceased as the Shepherds charged. Robin hung back, if only because he had a hunch these weren't all the Plegians.

Besides, the Shepherds had the fight well in hand. They kept Ricken and Virion in the back while the others spread out and started laying in to the Plegians. In fact, it looked like the Plegians were panicking.

They weren't expecting to run into a physically superior force. There are still mistakes, Lissa took a hit just now, but we have the speed to make up for it. At least for now.

He jumped from his thoughts and the ground when a screech reached him. A wyvern slammed into the earth and an axe met Robin's armor. It lived up to its name and the blow scratched away while Robin felt a quick push rather than searing pain.
Grinning at the flummoxed rider, Robin drove his blade into the wyvern's neck and blasted the rider into the ravine with a dose of thunder.

*I need to thank Miriel for giving me that book on wyvern anatomy. Mercurius is beyond good at cutting things, but the less I have to tangle with these things the better.*

Another screech sounded and Robin found three wyverns diving at him.

*Me and my big mouth.*

He pulled Mercurius to his side, ready for the fight to come, when a spear of ice skewered one of the wyverns. A dark blur shot back toward the main fight and Robin smiled.

*Thank you, Sumia. You get first pick of the library when we get to the palace.*

He leapt forward as the rider's landed, dodging under an axe and a wyvern's maw. Landing next to one, he clambered up its side and jammed Mercurius through the rider's neck before stabbing the lizard. As it flopped to the earth, a blast of fire singed his side, pain lancing from the site. The other wyvern's smoking grin told him everything.

"You'll pay for that with your hide!"

Robin jumped off the cooling corpse and charged again, lightning gathering in his palm. The rider was smart enough to take to the air, but Robin had a counter for that.

"Himmeljagd"

The lightning in his hand coalesced into a snarling wolf, the construct shot into the air. The rider was good though, twisting and whirling away from the electric hound. Soon enough, Robin's real plan came to fruition.

"Thoron!"

The beam of lightning ripped through the air and pierced rider and mount alike, their bodies falling to the ground where the wolf vaporized them.

*Ok, a tad overkill. Only use when you have a really tricky opponent.*

Robin sighed. It looked like the Shepherds had stalled in their attack, the wyverns taking to the mountain ridges. Most of the foot soldiers were taken care of...

...make that all of them. Vaike had just crushed the last one's skull with that giant anchor he called an axe.

But, that still left them with a swarm of wyverns and the Plegian captain. Sure, Virion and Ricken could clean them out given time; Robin just had a sinking feeling they didn't have that time. Not if they wanted to get Emmeryn to safety.

He saw another wyvern fall from the sky, followed by two more.

*What I wouldn't give to have one more Pegasus Knight. Sumia's lance work is spot on, but her ability to use ice along with Virion and Ricken's specialties make this much easier.*

He blanched as the sound of wings echoed down the valley. He was right, there were more Plegians.

And he alone had to keep them from stabbing the Shepherds in the back.
Damn it! Why didn't I keep Miriel with me? Or Stahl at the very least? I don't have enough firepower to take down a whole platoon!

Robin sighed and turned toward the ravine, waiting for the inevitable wave of black to scream around the mountain and descend. Except, there was no wave of black. All he saw was a single white figure with a streak of red behind it, the sound of wings growing closer the longer he watched.

Those sure as hell aren't Plegian reinforcements. But, I feel like I know them...

The figure grew a little clearer and Robin finally made out some details. A Pegasus, grimy and worn from long travel. Red, unkempt hair and what looked like battered armor to match.

...Damn it, why was she here?

A voice called to his right. "By the gods, is that Cordelia?"

Robin growled. "Nice of you to join us Phila. And yes, I believe it is. If you can name me one other person with hair like that, I'll eat my coat."

Phila glared at him. "I'll have you know my unit and myself have been fighting off Plegians that appeared from the trees. But, only one other person has hair like that, and you're staring at her daughter."

Robin grunted. "I happen to like how my coat tastes. Wave her down, we need to finish this."

Phila shook her head. "She's been riding for days by the looks of it. Anything I try isn't going to pierce that haze. You have lightning magic, use it."

She turned and dashed back into the forest, leaving Robin snarling.

"Fine then, but if I end up with a lance in my gut, at least I'll be able to talk to Cordelia about taking breaks."

He didn't quite fancy that idea, but desperate times. Sighing, he glanced back to the battle to see a number of the Shepherds nursing injuries. The remaining Plegians had gotten clever and started dropping boulders on their heads.

Damn it. Alright, here goes nothing!

Gathering magic once more, Robin pulled Mjolnir from his coat. The tome glowed gold and he slowly pulled a bolt of lightning from the pages. Once free, he reared back and sent the spear flying, the electricity crackling through the air. It had barely gone ten feet past the ravine before it exploded in a shower of sparks.

The brief flash blinded Robin, but his vision returned to see a lance closing in on his arm and a woman's horrified face gazing at him.

He sighed.

Lissa, I'll need that staff of yours again.

Then his arm erupted in fire.

-Cordelia-

She could barely see.
Her tears had long dried on the wind, but her vision was nearly dark from the dust that caked her. She'd ridden for what felt like an eternity, but the arrival and disappearance of light told her she'd been going for three days.

She'd turned away from Ylisstol after the first day. A contingent of Plegians had broken from the army marching below the clouds she hid in, many of them fliers. To break so early from an assault told her someone important, likely the Exalt, had left the capital.

That meant she had to head for Breakneck Pass, quickly.

She cursed as she flew. All the knights knew about the Summer Palace, but she never thought she'd have to fly there, especially so high up where dust was her worst enemy. Then again, she thought she'd been ready for the fighting.

Her gut rolled as the images of slaughter rolled by her eyes again. She'd vomited once before, but that had only drawn Plegians. She'd kept it down since.

Now though, Theresa was tired and so was she. It took all her strength to even keep her eyes open, let alone hold her lance as they pulled around another mountain.

A burst of light and the crackle of electricity sent Cordelia's adrenaline surging once more. She could just barely make out a dark figure with what she believed was a tome.

*Plegian Mage!*

Her mind snarled at the thought. One of his ilk had killed Captain Isara and now…

…Now it was time for payback.

She pulled on Theresa's reins and dived at the dark figure, lance steady in her grip. His own spell had blinded him.

She smirked and aimed at the man's arm, wanting to remove the damn tome before she killed him. Yet, something felt off, deep in the back of her mind.

It was feeble before her rage, but it convinced her that removing some of the dust in her eyes would make targeting easier. She had enough time to clear her vision, color blooming back to life, when she finally saw her target.

Purple hair, iridescent pools for eyes, a snazzy set of armor underneath a familiar cloak.

It was Robin.

Her mind ground to a halt, face morphing in horror as she realized she couldn't stop. Her lance trembled in her hand, but her years of training betrayed every plea to stop.

Red bloomed in the air, her momentum pushing Robin to the ground with her lance sticking clean through his arm. His scream of pain made her mind start up again, her voice thick with worry.

"Robin! Gods, I'm so sorry, I thought you were a Plegian mage, oh gods there's blood everywhere, I, I ,I"

She started panting fast. A rational part of her said she was having a panic attack, but the rest of her was far more worried about her groaning friend.

A sharp pain bloomed on her cheek. "Calm down, Cordelia! A healer is on their way. Now, report!
What are you doing here, what happened to Fort Firald?"

The cool voice of command helped pull her from the raging seas of panic. "C-commander Phila?"

Phila's gaze was soft and stern in equal measure. "He'll be alright. Now please, report."

Cordelia sucked in a lungful of air before launching into a tirade. She spilled everything her guts held; from the arrival at Fort Firald to the final moment when Captain Isara fell to her death.

It took all she had not to break then and there.

Phila sighed. "You did the right thing. Captain Isara rightly prized your youth and potential and thanks to you we know of the army behind us. A healer should be her-"

"I will heal Sir Robin."

Cordelia looked up to see the Exalt herself walking toward them. She wasn't sure if all that dust had damaged her vision, but it looked like the Exalt was glowing.

Phila frowned. "Are you sure, Your Grace? Lady Lissa or Lady Maribelle would serve just fine."

A groan broke the air. "I… appreciate that you care, Phila, but please don't talk like I'm not here."

Cordelia almost squeaked. "Oh gods, Robin! Are you ok, is the wound deep?"

Robin chuckled. "Well, let me think. There's a lance pinning my arm to the ground and I'm pretty sure your Pegasus broke my ribs."

His mirth vanished when she began to sob. "Hey, Cordelia, I was just trying to lighten the mood. It's not your fault, heck I was expecting it. You did what any of us would have done."

Cordelia sobbed again. "But… but I injured you! I charged in without thinking and hurt you! I… I never wanted to hurt my best friend!"

She started to turn away, but stopped when a warm hand cupped her cheek. "Hey, it's ok. I'll be just fine. Just seeing you alive is beyond anything I could have wished. We'll talk later, ok? For now, I believe our Exalt wishes me unconscious so she may work."

A swift bop on the head with a staff accomplished that mission, ending the pain he felt.

"Indeed. Lady Cordelia, would you join the Shepherds? They're having trouble with the Plegians on the cliffs."

Cordelia nodded slowly before mounting Theresa and taking to the air. Phila and Emmeryn watched her go, myriad emotions lingering in their eyes.

"To see such slaughter so soon… it will haunt her all her days."

Emmeryn sighed, placing a hand next to the lance. "Indeed it will. I can only pray she moves past it, but Phila, can you help me with this? I'd rather not put him back together with a lance in his arm."

Phila nodded and, on Emmeryn's signal, yanked the lance from the earth. Robin screamed, but Emmeryn's quick chant sent healing magic straight into the wound.

A few minutes later, he was breathing evenly and his wounds had been healed.
"Well, Sir Robin, I hope you can help our young friend with her troubles." Emmeryn whispered in his ear. "She'll need you most of all."

Phila frowned at Emmeryn, curious at the last message. "And why do you say that, Your Grace?"

Emmeryn merely chuckled. "Oh, Phila. I've attended enough balls to see what Cordelia feels."

She glanced at Robin's sleeping form. "She loves him. Her mind will likely not see it through the trauma, but her heart has been set on him for a long time."

Phila smirked. "Ah, so that's why Sumia and Lady Lissa introduced him a few months ago. I didn't think love could spring forth so quickly."

Emmeryn laughed. "Oh, I've seen lifelong romances spring from a single meeting. But, let's not ring the chapel bells just yet. We still have much to do."

-Robin-

When his vision finally returned, it was to the sight of concerned red eyes and white robes.

"Hey, Chrom! Robin's awake!"

That voice could only be Lissa and the white robes disappearing from his vision confirmed it. Blue hair and eyes swiftly replaced them. "So, to stop any attempts to jump up, we won with only moderate casualties. Mostly flesh wounds, but those rocks made it… well, rocky."

Robin laughed; he was just relieved his lungs weren't on fire. "Pun aside, that's good news."

He turned his head to the red eyes. "Hello, Cordelia. May I ask why you're staring at me so intently?"

Her gaze didn't waver. "To make sure you're ok."

Robin's ears were doubtlessly smoking, but Chrom coughed. "Cordelia, why don't you go rest? You've been flying for days."

Cordelia wanted to protest, desperately, but Robin agreed. "He's right. Cordelia, please rest. I know you want to do all you can, but everyone needs to sleep, even you."

He sat up slowly, but popped to his feet when nothing hurt. He gave Cordelia a look that she took as a 'we'll talk later' before he followed Chrom.

She watched him go before she started shaking. His touch and presence had done so much to stabilize her, but now that he was gone…

…There was no way to stop it. Her body demanded rest and even her legendary stubbornness wasn't enough.

She collapsed and surrendered to the nightmares.

-Robin-

Robin had been tasked with trying to convince Emmeryn to not return to the capital and get captured along the way.

Considering she was getting ready to leave, he'd failed spectacularly.
"Think for a moment, Emmeryn! You don't need to be some thrice damned martyr to help our people, you just need to live!"

Chrom's plea was met with a cool smile. "Chrom, I've already explained this twice. With Fort Firalda and other forts overrun, Plegia has a direct path to Ylisstol. If I'm not there, the people will panic and even more blood will be spilled without need."

Lissa was equally desperate to keep Emmeryn with them. "But Sis, what can you do?! The Plegians know where we are, you'll just get captured by those… pigs!"

Emmeryn's eyes sharpened. "Gangrel is mad, but even he has never stooped to such levels. He has a long standing law that anyone found raping a prisoner is to be executed. Considering how bloodthirsty his executioners are, it's strictly enforced."

Lissa shrunk away, fear stark on her face. "I…I know that…"

Emmeryn smiled again. "Worry not, Lissa. Even should I be captured, Gangrel wants me pristine. I will be unharmed as my darling siblings ride to the rescue."

Lissa started crying, but nodded her assent. Chrom though, was unconvinced. "And how do we know the Mad King won't simply kill you? Listen to reason where he will not!"

Emmeryn turned to him. "Chrom, he may wish to kill me, but he wants the Fire Emblem before all else. Only I know where it is hidden and he will keep me alive until he both knows where it is and can set up a suitable spectacle."

Chrom spat to the side. He wasn't able to deny that, cold as it made him feel.

"Chrom, you know that I cannot stay with you and I cannot leave the people. But, I know that you are capable and I will look forward to you bringing Feroxi aid."

Chrom nodded, struggling to hide his tears.

"Lissa, you are so brave. You went and learned magic just so you could do all you can. Please, help Chrom, help our people. Be the light that you've always been and darkness shall never win."

Lissa began bawling, charging into her sister's robes for one last hug.

Emmeryn wasn't done. She went to every single Shepherd and implored them to do all they could to end the war and bring peace back to the Halidom.

She even went into a small tent that had been set up for the wounded, emerging a few minutes later with a sparkle in her eyes. Then, she spoke to Robin.

"Sir Robin, please guide these people. I still don't know what's so special about you or what that mark on your hand truly means, but I know this. You are a good man, and you will go far alongside them."

Her next words were a whisper. "And please, take care of Cordelia."

Robin smiled. "I heard you the first time, Your Grace. I swear."

Emmeryn smiled one more time before walking toward Phila and mounting her Pegasus.

"Wait, Emm!" Chrom called. "Where is the Fire Emblem? If I can, I'll take it out of the country."
Emmeryn smiled. "Oh, Chrom. You already have it."

And she was gone.

As she rose into the air, she chuckled at the look on her brother's face.

_He will be a good leader, I know it. I don't know what would have caused my dear nieces to come back in time and save me, but I hope Chrom, Lissa, and their friends can help in their quest._

She smirked as she cupped a necklace she kept hidden under her coat.

The blue gem a perfect match for the one hiding in Chrom's shield.

**Shepherd Camp-Night**

They'd run and rode with all their strength, but it still took until nightfall to reach the Longfort. The Feroxi guards, led by Raimi, insisted that the Shepherds remain and rest, but Chrom ignored them and ordered everyone forward.

Still, they couldn't deny their need to rest and it soon became apparent they needed to stop.

The mounts were the first to be cared for, the brave horses and pegasi completely exhausted. After that, meals and water were consumed in silence and everyone fell into the sweet embrace of sleep.

Except for two.

Robin wandered about the silent camp, slowly growing desperate. After he'd spoken to Emmeryn, Cordelia had more or less vanished. He knew that she'd passed out, Sumia told him as much, but he hadn't seen her since.

He'd tried the wagons to make sure she wasn't still sleeping, but she was nowhere to be found.

_Hm… Maybe she's not necessarily in camp. Theresa's still there, so she hasn't flown off, but where could she be?_

He decided after another lap through the camp to follow his other senses, as his eyes had found nothing. She was distressed and likely still felt the need to get away from others.

*If I wanted to be alone and cry, where would I go?*

He started to widen his circle, but soft sobs stopped him barely a quarter way through his third lap. Picking his way through the light snow, he found her curled up next to an iced over stream.

He sat next to her. "…Hey."

She didn't answer, head buried in her knees.

He sighed. "I…I heard about what happened."

His hand went to her knee, the gesture lost on her. "I'm sorry. For whatever it's worth, I'm sorry."

Another sob shook her pale body. Even her hair, normally so vibrant, was muted.

Robin sighed. "I'm… not sure what I can do here. I've never had to comfort anyone and I don't know what to say, or do, to not sound like an ass."
His hand squeezed her knee. "But, I'll gladly keep you company, if nothing else. I've said it already, but I'm so glad you're alive. I didn't want the last thing I said to you to be so spiteful."

He bowed his head. "I'm sorry for that too. I shouldn't have disparaged your sense of duty, especially when I know it's so important to-"

A sick laugh interrupted him. "Duty? All my duty has done is get my unit killed. Then, my failure to reach the Exalt sooner sent her to certain capture!"

She laughed again, the sound shrill and hysterical as her head turned to face Robin. "I've failed everyone! I failed Captain Isara, I failed my comrades, I failed the Exalt, I failed Prince Chrom, I failed Lady Lissa, I failed Sumia, and I failed you!"

Robin slapped her. He didn't want to, but she needed to snap out of it. "You haven't failed anyone! You warned the Exalt, as you were ordered. Emmeryn is as stubborn as her siblings and made up her mind the moment she heard the news."

He gripped her shoulders. "You haven't failed Chrom or Lissa either! Or Sumia! If anyone's failed them, it's me!"

He panted, staring into her surprised eyes. "If anyone's failed, it's the dukes that did nothing! If anyone's failed with what we had, it was me! You are innocent in all this Cordelia, not one drop of guilt lies with you."

She stared at him, not really comprehending his words.

Robin smiled at her. "I guess you're in your own little world, huh? Well, if that's the case…"

He unfastened his breast plate and opened his arms. "…Then I'm right here if you need a shoulder to cry on."

Cordelia stared at him for a long time, eyes slowly growing dull. At first, Robin was afraid she'd just curl up again, but she inched forward and leaned into him.

That was how he found himself rocking back and forth, whispering reassurances in her ear as she sobbed. He cradled her like he'd seen parents do with their children when they were scared, but this felt more… intimate.

He sighed when he felt the shaking cease and her breathing even out.

*Finally asleep. Cordelia… I can't say I know what you're going through, but I'll do all in my power to help you. I swear it.*

He picked her up slowly, careful to keep his hands only where they needed to go. He walked to camp at a snail's pace, not once jostling her as the moon shone on her peaceful visage.

He almost smiled. If he had any talent for painting, he'd want to capture that image forever. But, when he entered the camp, his eyes noticed something else.

*I never thought about it, but Cordelia's face has a lot in common with Katarina's. I mean, she had some of my features so I thought she could be related to me, but why Cordelia's?*

He shook his head. He could indulge his conspiracies later, right now, he needed to find Cordelia's tent.
It took him another few minutes, but he soon found the one Cordelia had been assigned. In retrospect, it was pretty easy since so many of the Shepherds put identifying marks on their own. Cordelia's was the only one that didn't have any.

He pulled the tarp aside and walked in, taking in the simple cot and stool that waited in the silence. He walked over to the cot and laid Cordelia down, careful of her armor. He wanted to take her out of the doubtlessly uncomfortable metal and leather, but he'd pushed his luck far enough tonight.

He didn't expect her to try and crawl back into his arms.

He grunted at the unexpected weight and nearly fell to the floor. Glancing at her face, he found her still asleep, but muttering something.

"…Don't go."

It was just a whisper, a whimper, but it steeled his nerve. He'd deal with the consequences when they arose, but his friend needed him. Damn social conventions, he was going to help, even if he had to stretch his amnesia as an excuse.

His mind set, he began to unfasten his own armor. He was delicate with it, even though he only had one hand. After he was in his normal clothes, he took a deep breath and began to help Cordelia out of her armor.

Well, help was a generous word. Rather, he was getting her out of the armor and leaving her in her dress and boots. The breastplate, all too appropriate a term, was a tad awkward to take off, but it met the ground like the rest.

Realizing how the armor strewn about could be taken, he organized them into two distinct piles, again, not an easy feat with one arm, before he was satisfied.

*Now's the moment of truth. Come on, Robin, you're just trying to help. If she wants to kick your ass while sparring, so be it.*

He took a deep breath before putting his arms around her again. She unconsciously shifted back into a tight curl, ear pressed to his chest. He sighed and laid them both onto the cot, his ears likely on fire.

*I hope this isn't a regular thing. But, if it is, I need to see if she'll be comfortable with Sumia. That'll be better for both of us.*

He sighed again before his own exhaustion and her steady breathing lulled him into a doze. Before he'd even contemplated how Lissa would take this, he was asleep.

He didn't know it, but Cordelia had pressed her head to his chest for one reason, one she'd be unable to point out for a long time.

His heartbeat was her lullaby, her favorite music.

And all it took to drive the nightmares away, if only for a time.
"Two weeks."

Flavia stared at the Shepherds assembled before her, eyes hard. "That's the fastest I can gather a force large enough to drive the Plegians from Ylisse. An actual army would take a month if not more."

Chrom snarled. "Not good enough! You're Khan now, and you cannot deliver in our time of need?! What was the point of us fighting for you?"

Flavia snarled right back. "I'll have you know that Ferox is large, boy. It stretches from the West Sea to the East Sea without a single break! Our forces are scattered out of sheer necessity and it will take time to gather them, regardless of how fast we wish it to happen!"

Robin stopped Chrom from charging Flavia. "Chrom, that's enough. The capital is well fortified and supplied. Since we pulled back most of the men on the border to the capital along with the fortifications, they can hold out for a solid month."

Flavia nodded to Robin. "That's more than enough time. As I said, it'll take two weeks to gather the forces, but we can make Ylissitol in three days at the slowest. We'll save your sister, Prince Chrom; you just need to be patient."

Chrom growled and left, the Shepherds parting from his path. Only Sumia followed him.

Flavia sighed. "He's a real hothead, eh?"

Robin nodded. "He is, but it's because he cares. But, what will we do for two weeks?"

Flavia shrugged. "I dunno, something. Maybe explain to me why you have that key around your neck."

Robin jolted, feeling the Outrealm key bounce against his chest. "How did you…?"

Flavia laughed. "Please, you think I don't recognize an Outrealm key? They may be rare, but all Khans know of them and what they look like. You know, just to be safe."

Robin heaved a long sigh. "And why, may I ask, is it so important?"

Flavia smirked, pointing towards the north. "Because, Ferox has its own gate."

Silence greeted her statement. Most of the Shepherds were understandably surprised, but the newest members were simply confused.

"Uh, mind filling the ignorant in on the situation?"

Robin shook his head. "Sorry, Gaius, I'll explain in a few minutes. Now then, is there anything else we could do besides investigate the gate?"

Flavia tapped her chin. "Well, I have reports that some low-lives have set up shop near one of my villages. They're about two hours east of the colosseum."

Lissa squeaked at the news, but Robin shrugged. "Well, it'll distract a few of us. Ok, does anyone want to stay behind and take care of those bandits? Gaius, Panne, Cordelia, you guys are going to the gate so you can't volunteer."
He waited a moment before two stepped forward. He frowned. "Lissa, Maribelle, are you sure?"

Lissa nodded. "I am. I… need to do something. Going into the gate would only drive me nuts anyway."

Maribelle huffed. "I refuse to leave my darling Lissa alone. Besides, I believe Lord Chrom will join us in this endeavor. He'll need to blow off steam and an extra staff will do wonders."

She narrowed her eyes at Robin. "I'll have you know that just because Sumia used her time in the gate to learn how to heal, she still must master the nuances. And besides, I'm better suited to get us there in a timely fashion."

Robin rolled his eyes. "You were meant to hear that comment. Anyway, no one else? …Alright then, I'll get Chrom and Sumia. Lissa, Cordelia, come with me, everyone else head for the wagons."

He swore that there were some choice words muttered by Maribelle, but he ignored them. Lissa was on his left and Cordelia on his right when they entered the halls, but Robin stopped short and turned to them.

"Cordelia, I need to apologize for this morning. I didn't think you'd be quite so…embarrassed."

Cordelia blushed hard, looking away from him. "Um… I…"

He stopped her. "You were right to react as you did. Anyone would try and break an intruder's arm, regardless of why they were there. But, it was why I was there that I'm discussing this in the presence of the gossip queen."

He gestured to a grinning Lissa.

"You see Cordelia; I need to know what you last remember of last night. I'll be able to explain better if you tell me."

Her face was still afire, but she nodded. "Ok…um, the last thing I remember was finding a creek and just… sitting there."

Robin sighed. "I see. So, you don't remember me finding you or the talk we had?"

Cordelia shook her head. "We…talked?"

Robin turned to Lissa. "This is why you're here Lissa."

Lissa's face became serious. "Ok, go ahead Robin."

He nodded and turned back to Cordelia. "I hate to say this to you, but I found you curled up by the creek last night, almost motionless. You didn't respond to me when I tried to talk to you at first, but then you launched into hysterics when…"

Cordelia's eyes became dull. "…When you mentioned duty."

Lissa's eyes were trained on Cordelia's face so Robin kept going. "Yes. I had to strike you, but after that you stopped speaking. Then I offered my ear if you needed it. But, you instead climbed into my lap and I rocked you to sleep."

Lissa's eyes widened. "Wait, really?"

Robin nodded slowly, shushing Lissa with a look. "Yes, but that's not all. When you finally went to
sleep, I brought you to your tent. But, you would not let go of my arm. As such, I had to work myself out of my armor and, much to my embarrassment, you out of your armor. Then, I had to join you in the cot. From there, we rested."

He bowed. "That's what happened. I understand if you're mad, but I just wanted to help. I hope you can forgive me."

Cordelia didn't answer, her eyes still dull.

Lissa clicked her tongue. "Dammit, she's retreated. Robin, I think I know why she wouldn't let you go, but you can't be her safety blanket. It'll take one bad day for her to do something she'll regret and you're not exactly readily available."

Robin sighed. "That's what I was thinking. We'll have to see if Sumia will bunk with her for a while, for Cordelia's safety if nothing else."

Lissa nodded and reached out for Cordelia's hand. "It's only a stop gap, but we at least know she's comfortable around you. I'd recommend heavy therapy, but we don't have the time. Is there anything that she wants to do? That could give her a goal to focus on."

Robin hummed. "She said something about failing people. Maybe the training will help her, if nothing else."

Lissa shook her head, hand grabbing Cordelia's own firmly. "That's only a start. Trauma and guilt are tricky to deal with separately, let alone when they're working in tandem. It'll just take time."

Robin nodded and Lissa guided Cordelia back down the hall. Robin stood still before following.

She only spoke to me and Sumia. I have a feeling we'll be the only ones she stays beside for a long time, but I'll tell the others to try their best. Maybe bringing a sense of normality to her life would help, but I don't know anywhere that I could take her to eat... and we're all going training.

He paused, face thoughtful.

Wait a minute...

He turned and ran down the hall, somehow ignoring the scene of Sumia kicking Chrom's ass in a spar. Eventually, he found Flavia speaking to Basilio.

"Flavia! Do you have a harp here?"

Flavia turned to him, brow raised. "A harp? I certainly don't have one."

Basilio laughed at Robin's disappointed face. "Ah, don't worry about this uncultured warrior woman! My performance troupe has one and they won't mind lending it to you."

This comment earned him a swift punch to the gut, but Basilio laughed it off. "You'll find them down by the main courtyard. Just talk to Olivia, she'll get the harp for you."

Robin almost sprinted away, but stopped himself. "Um, what's she look like?"

Basilio shook his head. "Pink hair, can't miss it."

Robin nodded and ran out of the room, the Khan's argument swiftly fading. He wound through the Khan's palace before spotting a flash of pink. Skidding to a halt, he found himself staring at a young woman in a shift with black silk and gold decorating her arms and legs.
Pink hair, check. That must be Olivia.

She noticed him staring at her, her arms stopping in the middle of a pose. "Um… i-is there something I can… do for you?"

Robin jolted. "Oh, I'm terribly sorry! Um, are you Olivia by any chance?"

She nodded, fidgeting nervously. "C-could you stop s-staring so much?"

He wasn't sure he was staring, but he turned his gaze away. "Um, Khan Basilio said you could help me. I'm looking for a harp."

Olivia's face brightened, even though her eyes remained on the ground. "Oh, is that it? Well, we won't be doing any tours for a few months, so I don't see why not. Wait here, I'll go get it."

Robin frowned as she fled the courtyard. If he remembered correctly, harps were quite large. It was why Cordelia only ever brought a lyre to their play sessions unless they got to meet in the castle.

Maybe she's stronger than she looks? I mean, she looks like the dancers I've seen in some of my books so it's not out of the question.

He sat down to wait, but he soon heard grunting come down the hall.

"And why, exactly, am I carrying this?"

"Because, I'm balancing it. You're the muscle, I'm the guide."

"Like hell you are!"

Robin blinked as the voices revealed themselves to be a smiling Olivia and frustrated Lon'qu.

Lon'qu sighed when he saw Robin. "I should have guessed. No one else in this place can so much as whistle, let alone use this thing."

Robin chuckled, glancing between the two as Lon'qu set the harp down. "So, I see you know each other."

Lon'qu grunted, Olivia squeaked and hid behind him. "I've been her guard for a while. Before you say anything, I'm used to her and she's used to me."

Robin grinned. "I wasn't going to say anything. But, thank you for getting me the harp. This'll help immensely."

Lon'qu frowned. "With what, exactly? I've been around you long enough to know you play a trumpet, not strings."

Robin's grin turned sad. "It's… for Cordelia."

Lon'qu nodded. "Say no more. I wish her the best in the training to come."

He bowed and walked away, dragging a confused Olivia with him. Robin smiled and grabbed the harp with a grunt, walking slowly towards the Shepherd's gathering point. It took him a while, but he got there eventually.

"Yo, Rob meister! What's that harp for?"
Robin grunted. "Less talk, more help Vaike! I need this in the wagon before we set off."

Vaike jumped down from his perch and grabbed the other end of the harp. After some work and much yelling, they got it to fit.

"There," Robin sighed, dusting his hands. "That'll be good. Now, where is everyone? We're supposed to leave in an hour."

Vaike shrugged. "Last I checked they were watching Sumia beat some sense into Chrom. Something about the 'spar of the decade' or something like that."

Robin blinked slowly before burying his head in his hands.

"Um Robin? What's going on."

This wasn't Vaike, this voice was music to his ears. "Cordelia! Where have you been?"

She tilted her head. "With Lissa. She said she needed to do a physical to make sure I was completely ok."

Robin clicked his tongue. "Well, that would do it. Actually, I have a present for you. Come here."

She walked over to his side and glanced into the wagon, gasping at the harp. "Robin, where did you get this?!"

Robin chuckled. "Well, you can thank Khan Basilio and Olivia. They let me borrow the harp for a few months and I thought you'd enjoy playing together."

Her face became unreadable and Vaike, reading the atmosphere, slinked away.

"Who's Olivia?"

Robin blinked. "Basilio's troupe leader. She's the one that let me borrow the harp. …Why do you ask?"

Cordelia was a bit closer to him now. "Oh…just making sure. Now, can I play? I already have a song in mind!"

Robin frowned. "Um, it'd take more time to get set up than we have. I'd be fine with it after we get to our destination though. Is that ok?"

Cordelia's face was unreadable again. "I…I guess."

She turned and walked away, pausing to stand next to Theresa.

_The hell did I do wrong? She was despondent last I saw her and now she's pouting like a child!_

He shook his head. He needed to get everyone together so they could leave. It wasn't fair to drag Cordelia along like this, but they needed soldiers and she had more reason than most to improve.

_Won't stop me from helping as much as I can when we get there. Just need to ease into it._

He nodded and got back to work, ignorant of the looks Cordelia was sending him.

She sighed, gripping her hands to stop the tremors. Lissa had been adamant that she was physically fine, but asked her if she was comfortable bunking with Sumia for a while.
She was, but that wasn't the problem. The problem was that nothing could calm down her racing heart when the memories and nightmares came, save for Robin.

That was its own can of worms.

She'd never actually admit it, but she'd wanted to get closer to Robin. It just wasn't the way she wanted. Maybe some moonlit walks, a trip like she'd originally thought up, even getting to the point they could rib each other mercilessly would have been great.

But now he was her sanctuary. Even now, as she thought about it, his absence from her side made her tremble. She'd gone from wanting them to mutually enjoy each other's company to being dependent on him.

She didn't like it.

While certain people that shall remain unnamed had insinuated that her want to get closer had different roots, she believed differently. She wanted a relationship between two equal partners, not to have one be dependent on the other let alone be the dependee herself.

She didn't want to be so weak.

On the bright side, if there was one, it would give her a deeper insight of Robin's character. Really, it was all she had to latch on to if she wanted to keep the nightmares and demons at bay.

She smiled. It was really nice of him to get a harp, if only because she had something to escape in besides training.

"Hey, Cordelia?"

She jumped, turning to Robin. "Uh, yes?"

He smiled at her. "I'm pretty sure I've said it already, but I'm glad you're here. When all's said and done, want to go get lunch or dinner? My treat."

She smiled right back, pulling him into a hug.

Her shaking stopped, his heartbeat the one good thing in the world.

The only thing she had.

-Lissa-

It was just her, Maribelle, and Chrom. How Robin had convinced Frederick to not come with them would forever remain a mystery, but Lissa was glad to be free of him.

He was amazing at his job but he was just so…stifling.

Besides, she could take care of herself now! She hadn't spent all that time training in the Outrealm for nothing. Sure, Vaike was best with an axe and everyone knew Cordelia was invincible with a lance, even though she hadn't been through the gate yet, but Lissa was really good with them too!

She sighed. Then again, she outdid everyone when it came to healing. She'd even bested Maribelle in the ability to heal, something she'd previously thought impossible.

*It really is all thanks to Robin. I was just content with where I was before we found him, but seeing how hard he worked… well, it lit a fire.*
She chuckled, thinking about some of her pranks. His face was just so flexible, it made the funniest expressions.

"Lissa, concentrate. We'll be arriving soon."

Chrom's voice snapped her from her reverie. "I got ya, bro! Those bruises Sumia give you healing alright?"

Chrom's ears burned. "The only thing bruised is my pride, Lissa. I'm perfectly fine."

Lissa giggled. "Yeah, after I worked my magic. Why did you even challenge her? We both know you weren't exactly in the right state of mind."

Chrom snorted. "Were I able to keep focusing on the future like you, I'd have been fine. I envy that about you, Lissa."

Lissa grew quiet and Maribelle sighed. "Milord, if I may speak?"

Chrom stared at her. "Uh, ok, go ahead."

Maribelle fixed him with a stern stare. "My dear Lissa is not exactly in good straights either. Were it not for her duties and undying confidence in both you and Sir Robin, she'd likely be comatose."

She turned her gaze to Lissa. "I know you didn't want to share that, but I feel he needs to be aware of your feelings."

Lissa just looked away. She didn't look at Chrom or Maribelle for the rest of the trip, just rubbing the Book of Naga's cover.

It was still strange to think about that fight in the mausoleum. They'd been attacked by… corpses. Corpses that put any Risen to total shame. Many of them had almost died, but Robin's idea to push individuals into corners and crush them ended up working.

Then the damn things rose up and bowed to them before herding them into a massive room full of glittering weapons. Next, as if to screw with them further, the weapons started floating around them and settling before certain Shepherds.

The book had settled before her. The question was why.

_I heard legends of this thing. It's said to only be used by the purest of hearts, the chosen of Naga herself. But, when it floated in front of me, I thought and still think it chose wrong. Emm's so much more worthy than I am. So…why did it choose a little girl pretending to be a princess?_

She sighed, glancing at her palm. The faint white pentagram with a small dot in the center of the star had appeared right after she'd grabbed the book, just appearing on her skin. Robin and Miriel had been kind enough to try and find the mark, but the closest they'd come to it was the old 'eye of truth' symbol.

She shook her head. It was a mystery that would likely take a visit to Mt. Prism to solve, but they didn't have time.

They were in a forested area now, the light sifting through the leaves in beautiful rays. Brush surrounded them and the light chill gave it the feel of a peaceful day.

Then the brush rustled.
Maribelle had her tome, the legendary Excalibur, open and glowing immediately. Chrom had Falchion pointing at the bush and Lissa thrust her palm toward it a moment later.

Silence stretched for a moment before Chrom spoke. "Come out, we know you're there."

Slowly, a pot covered head poked out of the brush. It was a young man in a simple shirt and pants with worn boots. He gripped a simple lance.

Lissa's eyes widened at the sight of him. He had a cross shaped scar and curly purple hair that she'd recognize anywhere.

But, before she could speak, a burly man with an animal skull for a helmet and a fur coat jumped from the brush. "Come along sheepie! Less you want to be gutted!"

The man paused and took one glance behind the young man to see three frustrated Shepherds. He gulped and ran back into the brush.

Chrom sighed. "Well, I think we've found the bandits Flavia told us about."

He turned to the peasant. "Tell me, what's your name? Are you from the village near here?"

The peasant nodded, shaking a bit. "Y-yes your lordship! I-if it pleases Your Graciousness."

Chrom sighed. "Hold up on the titles, friend. Just tell me what's going on."

The peasant gulped. "I'm Donny, er, Donnel that is. I live in the village just down the road."

Chrom's eyes widened, that name was familiar. "What happened to send you running?"

Donnel proceeded to launch into an odd tirade of profanity and apologies for the profanities. He wasn't the most articulate person Chrom had ever met, but he got the gist of what was happening.

"So, bandits attacked the village and started dragging off villagers. You were able to escape, if barely, but now you want us to help you. Am I correct so far?"

Donnel nodded. "Yes'm. Please Your Lordlyship, help my ma, she's all I got left!"

Chrom smirked. "We were going to get rid of the bandits anyway. We'll help, just lead the way."

Donnel almost jumped into the trees. "Thank you, thank you so much!"

He started racing down the road, stopping every once in a while to wave them forward. While he was doing that, Chrom started talking with Lissa.

"Why did you hide behind Maribelle? I admit he looks familiar, but you're acting shy. …I never thought that word would ever come out of my mouth."

Lissa stuck her tongue at him. "Please, I'm not acting shy. I just…"

Chrom scrunched his face in thought before it hit him. "Ah, that's your friend from the tournament, isn't it?"

Maribelle was more than a little interested. "What? You know that… peasant boy?"

Lissa pouted. "I'll have you know he's a perfect gentleman. I got lost in the colosseum and he helped me find the others."
Maribelle wasn't done. "Did he demand anything from you?! Any favors of a degenerate nature?!

Lissa held up her hands. "Hey, Maribelle, that's not-

"He did, didn't he! I'll flay that bastard alive!"

Lissa gasped. "Maribelle! Calm down, you're doing the overprotective thing again. Besides, we're here to help his village, not make ourselves look like murderers."

Maribelle wanted to continue her protests but a stern look from Chrom quieted her.

He sighed. "Now then, let's hurry up. I don't want those bandits to get away."

He turned and jogged after a waving Donnel, Maribelle spurred her horse on with a huff.

It wasn't a long journey to the village, but it was empty. Tracks in the light snow leading north brought them to a set of ruins that practically screamed bandit camp.

Chrom sighed at the number of bandits. "I'd say there's about fifteen. If this was a normal camp I'd just say lay waste to it, but we have hostages."

Donnel gulped. "My ma an' the others should be in the center. I reckon it be quite the sight though."

Maribelle huffed. "Quite. Prince Chrom, I'll deal with the ones outside the ruins."

Chrom nodded. "Very well, I'll leave it to you. Donnel, can you fight?"

Donnel paled. "What? N-no, Your Lordship, I ain't never stuck a pig before!"

Lissa, still keeping out of Donnel's sight, frowned. Wasn't he serving roast chicken with his mother at the colosseum?

Chrom shrugged. "Believe it or not, fighting isn't much different from farm work. You're swinging sticks with metal on them at living things after all."

Donnel paled further. "B-but…"

Chrom smiled. "Don't worry about it. You'll have backup while I take care of the bandits inside. Just keep an eye out for any stragglers."

Donnel still looked uneasy, but nodded.

Chrom shook his head, wondering if Donnel would actually be able to help. "Alright then. Maribelle, when you're ready."

Maribelle flipped open her tome and pointed toward the bandits. Magic script flared to life and raced to the ground.

And a tornado burst from the earth.

The great green funnel of wind started pulling the air around it into the vortex, trees groaning under the sudden pressure. The bandits were not so lucky, the wind ripping them from the earth and hurling them high into the air. A few unlucky bandits met the wall of magic wind and were torn to bloody shreds.

Maribelle smirked when she saw Donnel's awed face. "That should take care of that. I'll start circling
and take care of any runners."

She patted a red tome on her hip before riding off. Chrom shook his head, sighing at the showboating.

"Nice, Maribelle. Anyway, let's go."

He drew Falchion and almost charged, but Donnel beat him to it. The young man ran right past Chrom and impaled a surprised bandit.

Chrom and Lissa, no longer hiding behind her brother, blinked.

Donnel charged further into the ruins, making Chrom and Lissa hurry in after him. Chrom cut open a pair of bandits that tried to attack him, but the tornado combined with Donnel's attack had them all confused.

Except three of the bandits were now trying to catch Donnel. Lissa gasped as one of their axes closed in on the young man's arm.

"No, Donny!"

Her hand extended and pure light burst from her palm. The beam split into three and burned through the bandits, the axe looking to end Donnel's arm vaporized.

She panted. That had taken more energy than she thought it would.

"...Lissa?"

Her eyes widened when she saw his eyes on her. "Oh, uh, hi...Donny."

Donnel blinked. "You look...perty."

Lissa felt a blush spring to life. "Oh, uh, that's very kind. Um, I can't say this is how I envisioned us meeting."

Donnel blushed too. "Oh, uh, sorry. My ma always tells me I got a big mouth, pardon me Your Beutifulness."

Lissa smiled. "Stop complimenting me, Donny, you'll make me blush."

They were still standing there, mutually fidgeting, when Chrom called to them. "While I am enjoying the scene immensely could you please help? I have five of them blocking the door and I hear hostages!"

His voice jolted them back to action. As Chrom had said, five of the bandits were blocking the way and each held a trembling villager in their grasp.

Chrom growled. Every time he so much as shifted towards them, they'd dig the blades a little further into the villagers' necks. "Lissa, how are you with precision beams?"

Lissa gulped. "Uh..."

Chrom turned to her. "Now's not the time for 'uh'! Can you or can you not?"

Lissa glanced at her tome, to Chrom, and finally to Donnel. His eyes were glued to the villagers, gaze desperate and sick at the sight.
She steeled her resolve. "I…I can do it. Just give me a second."

Chrom nodded and yelled at the bandits. "Let the villagers go! Harm them and your lives are forfeit!"

A cocky voice yelled back. "Hah! And that little piglet convinced you to do this, then? Well, why don't you just give him to us and leave? We'll take good care of him and these little piggies while you keep your lives!"

Chrom sighed. "And who are you? Do you speak for these men that will die if you do not surrender?"

Lissa placed her tome behind her back, concentrating on pooling the power in her fingertips. The bandit leader kept bragging about his ability to get rich off the villagers, but Chrom continued to shred his claims. It was making the man very, very angry.

"Ah, shut up! You blue bloods know nothing about us wild men! Now hand over the boy or the cow gets it!"

His axe went to a plain woman's throat and Donnel's eyes went wide, "Ma!"

Lissa's eyes snapped to the woman. It was the same kind woman that had sold her the birds and lent her Donny!

The woman spat at her captor. "Don't you touch the boy! You took my husband when he defended this village and I won't see you take him too!"

Lissa growled, overcome with the need to deliver justice to the pile of crap holding the innocents. The power shrunk into pinpricks on her fingers, just light ready to deliver retribution.

A melodic voice echoed through her head and her movements became automatic.

Well, well. It appears my youngest worshipper has chosen someone for me to see. Hm… yes, I like your spirit, girl. Passionate and just, but above all bright. You will make a fine arbiter when the day comes.

The voice chuckled and Lissa raised her hand.

Now, destroy the filth that stand before the innocent. In the name of your patron, Horakhty.

Beams of light, thin as an arrow's shaft, shot from her fingers and burned through the bandits' skulls. Every one of them dropped like stones.

Lissa went down with them.

"Lissa!"

-Several Hours Later-

When she woke, there was nothing to see but a wooden roof and an orange glow to the side. Groggy, she glanced to her left and found a familiar face.

"Oh… hi Donny."

Her voice was barely a whisper, but Donnel heard it anyway.

She didn't expect him to hug her, let alone start crying. "Thank Naga, you're ok. My ma's safe cause
of you, my whole village. Thank you… thank you so much.”

Lissa didn't know what to say so she just reached up and rubbed his back. Chrom and Donnel's mother watched the exchange from the doorway.

"So," Chrom began. "Do you really want him to stay? As I said, he led the charge against the bandits and he has more potential than I dare guess."

Donnel's mother sighed. "I really don't... but it's his decision. Honestly, all I want is for him to be safe."

Chrom nodded. "I understand. I've only ever wanted Lissa to be safe too, but she's her own woman."

He sighed. "Though she'd never walk around in anything short of three reams of silk and hey if Maribelle had anything to say about it."

Donnel's mother chuckled. "Well, I think he's already made up his mind. Go ahead and ask, I won't stop you or him."

Chrom nodded and walked toward the teary eyed young man, a curious thought in mind.

*Can we make the gate before Robin heads in?*

-Robin-

"Virion, please explain to me why there's a woman here with a wyvern."

The Shepherds were standing in front of the Outrealm gate, staring at the sight of a black wyvern and woman with dark pink hair.

Virion posed as usual. "This, my friends, is who I've been writing to the last few weeks!"

Stahl blinked. "You've been writing?"

Kellam agreed. "First I've heard of it."

There were several more grunts of agreement.

Virion deflated, but the woman stepped forward. "Excuse me, but this'll go faster if I speak."

She curtsied. "My name's Cherche. I'm a former servant of Duke Virion of Rosanne, but I've decided to stay in his service if not officially."

Frederick narrowed his eyes and turned to Virion. "Well, that explains where your extensive knowledge of court and other such things came from. Tell us, why would a Duke from across the Long Sea come here?"

Virion sighed. "That, is a story for another time. I'll tell you that I was forced to flee my home, but anything beyond that is unimportant."

Robin coughed. "Well, that aside, are you asking to join us, Lady Cherche?"

She nodded. "Yes, that is why I'm here. Lord Virion asked me to join you in the fight against Plegia and I will gladly do so."

Robin nodded. "Good, then you're with Vaike. He's the blonde over there with the axe, but forgive
his mouth. He tends to put his foot in it."

Cherche giggled. "Not to worry. As long as Minerva likes him, we'll get along swimmingly."

The wyvern snorted at the name 'Minerva'.

_Ah, guess that's where that came from. But, hopefully this leads to that one strategy I read about during the Scouring where a wyvern and a berserker can wreak all manner of havoc._

He sighed. "Well, are there any other surprises I should be made aware of?"

Silence met his words.

"Good. Now then, we're heading into the gate. Please keep all your items on you and take a count when we come out the other side!"

The veterans chuckled while the new arrivals looked on in confusion.

A few minutes later, they were through the door, just barely missing a messenger from Basilio.

Emmeryn would die in a month's time. She'd been captured and Ylisstol had fallen to Plegia in but a single day.
-Northwestern Ylisse-Two Days after Fall of Ylisstol-

It was a somber camp they set that night.

Lucina, Cynthia, and Severa had fled Ylisstol soon after the assassins had been dealt with, each giddy. They'd done it, Emmeryn was alive and the future averted. Then, when they'd stopped along the road, they'd been forced into the forest as the Plegian army rumbled by.

Smoke rose from the direction of Ylisstolbare hours later.

It was only the next day that they'd found out what happened. Ylisstol had fallen, the sheer number of Plegians overrunning normally solid defenses, and the Exalt captured. Now their celebration had turned into a desperate rescue mission.

But, they could only go so far in a day. The mountains of Plegia sat on the horizon, but it would be another day at least before they arrived. Then, they had to scour a country of plains and desert for one woman.

Cynthia sighed, poking the fire with a stick. The air had a melancholy tune flowing through it, the product of Severa's fingers dancing on a lyre. She'd bought it on a whim in the last town they visited before Plegia rolled through and now it did all it could to distract her.

Lucina wasn't there. She'd gone on a 'patrol' and wouldn't be back until she got her head on straight.

Cynthia snorted, envy coloring her mind.

She got to talk to Aunt Emm. I've never so much as seen her, but Lucy spoke to her and even got to hug her. Why don't I get anything like that? All I ever seem to do is act peppy and help other people with dumb problems.

She sighed again, watching a dead leaf catch in the flame. This really wasn't like her, but how could she not be a little bitter? Lucina was Falchion's chosen, was the last to see their parents, led them through hell for years, and even got them to the past.

What had she done? Played games, cried over little things, had to have been saved more than she'd ever saved, and was little more than a courier for the two actually doing things.

Some hero.

She didn't move as the music came to an end. Not even when someone sat next to her.

"Cynthia? You ok?"

Oh, it was Severa. "Just… thinking about things."

Severa sighed. "You're too peppy to think on things, there's not enough brain,"

The playful insult only made Cynthia curl into a ball, a palpable aura of depression surrounding her. Severa coughed, not really sure how to deal with a sad Cynthia.

…That sounded wrong, even in her head.
She sighed.

*Just treat her like Morgan. She may not be as optimistic, but they're kindred spirits.*

She felt a twinge at the reminder of her bubbly sister, but put an arm around Cynthia's shoulders.

"Hey, come on, don't be upset. I'm sorry for being mean, it was uncalled for. What's actually wrong? I won't be mean about it, I promise."

Cynthia kept herself curled up, still as stone.

Severa frowned. "I can't help you if you don't tell me anything. Come on, Cynthia, you've always been honest with me. Just let me help."

Cynthia mumbled something.

"Care to repeat that?"

Cynthia mumbled again, this time a tad louder. "…help…supposed…hero."

Severa sighed. "You're down since you think you're being a burden not a hero. How close is that?"

Cynthia pulling her knees to her chest said it all.

"Cynthia, you're not a burden! Lucy and I wouldn't be here if not for you! You've saved our hides on more than one occasion, as begrudging as I am to admit it. You've cheered us up when we get lost in our cynicism and you've done more than that to keep us going too!"

Severa pried Cynthia's head from her knees. "You're important. You're the reason Lucy and I didn't decide to just drop on the ground when the Plegians went by. Remember?"

Cynthia did. Right after the last Plegian had gone by, Lucina and Severa had just remained on the ground. They were almost inconsolable the moment the smoke rose into the air and they'd spoke about just going away when the news hit.

Cynthia had bopped them both on the head, proclaiming they still had time and motivation to be heroes. It had lit a fire in them, just enough to keep going.

All thanks to Cynthia.

She started tearing up and Severa smiled. "See? You're the heart of this team, Cynthia. Without you, Lucy and I would have given up or deemed the plans impossible. You've been the light, the inspiration, just like any great hero."

She pulled Cynthia into a hug. "And you're our dork. The one we love and respect. Don't ever forget that, ok?"

Cynthia nodded into Severa's shoulder, feeling so much better. "Thanks… Severa. I…I needed to hear that."

Severa smirked. "Ah, Lucy would say the same and you know it. Big sisters know their little sisters better than they do after all."

Cynthia smiled, glad for an opening. "And little sisters know their big sisters just as well. Now, tell me, when did you start liking Lucy?"
Severa jolted away, a blush burning to life. "Hey, this isn't about me!"

Cynthia smirked. "Well, try and take my mind off things! Come on, I want to hear the story!"

Severa turned away. "There's nothing to tell, you're mistaken."

Cynthia's smirk grew. "Oh, really? And the way you've looked at her since forever ago? The way you two were in such good moods after going on a little date? Sev, I may be an airhead, but-"

Severa sighed. "Yeah, yeah, 'but you're not dumb', I got it."

She turned away, but could feel Cynthia's eyes boring into her back. It was really making her uncomfortable, but she was determined not to give in.

Cynthia's voice brushed her ear. "Hey, Sev. I want ot tell you something."

Severa turned to see Cynthia grinning at her, hand to her mouth. "What?"

Cynthia shrugged, letting the frustration roll over her. "Just wanted to let you know that I'm going to share those dirty dreams you've been having with Lucy."

Severa tackled her to the ground, hands on her throat. "You wouldn't dare you little pest! Tell her and I'll kill you!"

Cynthia struggled under the hold. "But… I-I was just gonna… share the ones… about the mud wrestling!"

Severa stopped, realizing she'd been duped. "…Damn it."

She pulled herself off Cynthia and sulked back to the fire. Cynthia sat beside her and silence stretched for an eternity.

"…Alright, fine. I'll tell you where it began, how's that? If… if this works out, I'll tell you the whole story."

Cynthia nodded and settled in, eager to hear Severa's story.

Severa almost smiled but kept her eyes on the fire. "I'd say it began… ten years ago."

Southeastern Ylisse-Severa's Family Estate

Lucy had come to visit!

Severa was in her room, doing her best to make herself all pretty and nice looking with mommy's help. Mommy had laughed when she'd asked for her help, saying she was a 'big girl' and didn't need her help anymore.

She didn't care. She wanted mommy to make her just as pretty as mommy was.

The finishing touch was her hair, like always. She wanted her hair long, both to be pretty like mommy and because she really liked the purple she and daddy shared.

Now if she could finally beat him at chess her day would be complete!

"Severa, don't fidget so much. The royals won't be here for another hour."
She stopped moving and mommy's hands went back to brushing her hair, but she had a question.

"Mommy? I forget, why are they called 'royals'? Aren't you and daddy, like, Duchess and Duke or something?"

Her mommy smiled. "Because, dear, we're in charge of a duchy while they're in charge of a monarchy. Duchies are led by Dukes and Duchesses while Monarchies are led by Kings and Queens. And, since they rule the kingdom our duchy's a part of, they're called royals.

She didn't understand all that well, but she got the gist of it. "Ok, thanks mommy!"

Her mommy nodded and finished brushing her hair. "Good. Now then, do you want it in twin tails like always or would you like something else?"

She thought on it before grinning. "Wavy! Like daddy when he got lost in the woods!"

Her mother chuckled but set to work on making the wanted waves. It was pretty easy since her hair was naturally wavy like her daddy's, but she liked twin tails a lot.

"Done." Her mommy said a few minutes later. "Now, go downstairs and wait with daddy. Oh, and can you get Morgan for me?"

She nodded and ran from the room. Morgan was just down the hall and Severa sent her into the room before she thundered down the stairs. She almost slid into the living room and found daddy looking at a chess board.

"Oh, Severa, would you like to play a game or two while we wait?" Daddy asked when he noticed her.

She nodded, today would be the day! She'd been reading up on strategies and had been badgering anyone else that visited to have a match with her.

In her opinion, she was quite good.

She took a seat and they started the game, soon getting lost in the moves and mind games until a victor emerged.

"Checkmate."

Severa smiled in glee as her daddy tipped over his King. She'd done it! She'd actually beat daddy at chess!

"Sev, to the point please."

"Geez, I'm getting there. You'll see why the build up's important in a second."

Her daddy chuckled. "Well done, my little princess. Now, we can move on to the more complex games."

A knock on the door stopped Severa's excited yell. She gasped and ran for the door, flinging it open in excitement.

"Lucy!"

Except it wasn't her best friend. Rather than that long blue hair she secretly loved with a gold circlet, she was staring at a boy about her age in a suit with an average face and a snooty disposition.
He looked down at her dress. "What's a servant girl doing here?"

His voice was damned grating, that's what she thought. "And who are you, buster?"

Daddy joined her. "Severa, who's at the do-"

He saw the boy and looked behind him, sighing at what he saw. "Marquis Roger, what can I do for you today?"

A deeper, but no less grating voice answered. "Duke Robin, I apologize for the interruption. My son and I were going to discuss the recent proposal of new fortifications along the Plegian border with the King. But, we found out that he would be visiting you today and I decided to kill two birds with one stone."

Daddy sighed. "I see. Well, come on in, take a seat. Chrom should be here with his family in about ten or so minutes."

The Marquis and his son entered her home, daddy hiding a grimace.

"Wait, what was the kid's name?"

"Stop interrupting!"

The Marquis made his way toward one of the armchairs, but daddy stopped him. "Forgive me, Marquis, but that is my wife's chair. She's quite...fond of it."

The Marquis raised a brow, but went to another chair. They sat down, leaving her with the snooty boy.

He stared down his nose at her. "This is a discussion for men, servants have no place here."

She grit her teeth, but held her tongue.

"You didn't snap at him?"

"Shut up!"

She wanted to see his face when he found out just who she was. Instead, she turned on her heel and went onto the porch to wait. Thankfully, her mood shot through the roof when a white and blue carriage clattered down the road.

It flew to the sky when a girl with blue hair and a gold circlet jumped out.

"Lucy!"

This time she ran forward and was met with equal enthusiasm. They embraced in the middle of the yard, celebrating their reunion after two weeks separation. Eventually she pulled back and paused, hesitation nearly imperceptible.

Lucy was really pretty, her hair styled in a long braid and her dress immaculate. She was even... filling out.

She slapped herself mentally. She would not let a little thing like puberty stop her! (1)

"I'm so glad to see you, Lucy!"
Lucina laughed in turn. "I'm glad to see you too Sev! Sorry to say, but Cynthia couldn't make it. She got sick and mommy had to stay with her."

She frowned. "Well that's too bad. Morgy was really looking forward to seeing her."

A man's laugh caught their attention. "Well, I hope she'll forgive Cynthia. But, Severa, can you lead us inside? I'd hate to keep your parents waiting."

Her frown must have said something because Chrom frowned. He looked around before he saw another carriage. "Oh, you have other guests?"

He hummed before he sighed at the crest on the carriage. "Great, Marquis Roger. Severa, did he bring a boy with him?"

She nodded, both her and Lucy curious. Chrom's shoulders slumped. "I see. Well, lead on. I need to save your father."

She didn't know what that meant but nodded and marched them up to the house, Lucy's hand in hers.

When they entered the house, mommy and Morgan were sitting in the usual spot. Morgan was trying her best to get out of mommy's hold, but she couldn't move. Mommy looked irritated too.

The boy appeared again, kneeling before Lucina. "Ah, Lady Lucina. It's a pleasure to see you again."

He reached out and took Lucina's free hand, planting a quick peck on it. Lucina smiled demurely, but she could feel a shudder run down Lucina's arm.

Chrom cleared his throat. "Excuse me, but may we come in?"

The boy gracefully stepped aside, still kneeling. The sheer... what did daddy call it? Brown-nosing? Yeah, that! The sheer brownnosing made her feel ill.

"Ah, Lord Chrom! Forgive my sudden arrival, but I wished to discuss my proposal." The Marquis exclaimed, standing and bowing toward Chrom.

Chrom sighed. "I intended this to be a simple visit with friends, but I suppose it's better to see this settled. Lucina, why don't you go out back and play?"

Lucina nodded and grabbed her hand, Morgan escaping her grasp and running after them.

"Raulf, why don't you go with them? Even if the games do not interest you, you can still keep them out of trouble."

The boy, Raulf she guessed, bowed and followed after them, still sneering whenever she looked at him.

Thankfully, he didn't want to take part in their games. At least, until she and Lucy started having competitions.

Then he just had to stick his nose in.

"I will gladly champion Lady Lucina in these contests. She need not waste her time on such silliness."
She smelled a golden opportunity, so she gave Lucina a look. "Fine. But, I get to choose the contest."

He smirked. "Agreed. No matter what you choose, I can best any mere servant."

She really was not sure why he still thought she was a servant. Oh well, better to kick his butt.

They started with a race, where she outran him. Then, they sparred with sticks, where she beat him blue, then they tried stories where she begrudgingly lost. Then, they tried climbing, where she also lost by a hair.

She could tell he thought her a brute for the first two, so she chose one more.

"Chess."

He blinked. "Chess? Does a servant even know what chess is?"

She was really getting annoyed with him, and so were Lucy and Morgan.

"Yes, I know chess. Now, are you going to agree or forever be tied with a 'mere' servant?"

Annoyed, but still loving to rub it in.

He huffed and followed her inside, Lucy and Morgan silently giggling at what they knew was going to happen.

They found the chess board and set up, their respective parents eventually coming in to watch. The match started slowly, but she eventually drew him in and started her offense. She almost overextended in her zeal to defeat him, but a concerned look from Lucy calmed her down.

When it was said and done, she'd beaten him completely. That didn't mean he took the defeat well.

"How?! How did a simple servant girl defeat me at a game of nobility?! Your tactics had no honor in them, only dirty shots and cowardice!"

She rolled her eyes. "No one said the tactics had to be honorable. All you have to do is win."

He growled and turned to his father. "Father, this girl has insulted my honor! I demand she be fired for this transgression!"

His father was… sweating. "Um, Raulf, I don’t know where the notion of her being a servant came from, but…"

The Marquis gulped so a too happy Robin answered. "This is my daughter, Severa. She also happens to be heiress to the duchy, and thus of a higher rank than you."

Raulf's face grew paler in direct proportion to how large her smirk was. "W-wait, the h-heiress? Then, that means you're..."

Lucina stepped up. "My best friend. I'm greatly displeased with your behavior Sir Raulf. In fact, how could you not recognize her? She's been to many a ball I know you attended."

She sighed. Lucy knew the answer to that question, and so did she. After all, when the future Exalt is in the room, the girl in her favorite but worn gown tends to be ignored.

It didn't mean a warm feeling didn't spread in her chest as Lucina glared at the sweating twat.
Chrom spoke up. "Actually, Marquis Roger, in light of this… incident, your son shall not be invited to any formal event involving my daughter until the insult is paid."

His eyes narrowed. "And do stop telling him to try and win her favor. She does not have to entertain anything like that for another eight years."

Daddy spoke next. "Also, while we understand your concerns, we cannot lace new fortifications on Plegia's border. We simply do not have the men to build them and even if we did there are other things to worry about."

Mommy hugged her from behind. "I believe that concludes your business here, Marquis Roger. If you would please follow me, I will see you off."

The Marquis was as pale as his son. She didn't know what her parents and Lucy's dad had done, but they were gone from the house and yard shortly thereafter.

Their parents started talking again while Morgan started attacking the food. Lucina pulled her aside and frowned. "Are you ok, Sev? I know he was a big jerk to you."

She smiled. "Don't worry, Lucy. I got him real good in the contests so all's well."

Lucy didn't look convinced, but dropped it. "Alright, Sev, if you're sure."

She nodded, but had one more question. "By the way, what was that thing your dad mentioned? The one about 'entertaining' something in eight years?"

Lucy shrugged. "I don't know. All he and mommy told me was that I had to find someone I really liked."

She tilted her head. "Oh, and do you really like someone?"

Lucy smiled. "Of course! I really like you Sev; I don't believe there'll be anyone I like more!"

The way Lucy gripped her hand when she said that made her face bloom. She wasn't sure why, but the idea that Lucy liked her more than anyone else made her feel beyond relieved.

And very, very happy.

Severa finished her tale with a wistful gaze, her eyes lingering on the stars above.

Cynthia wasn't entirely happy though. "That doesn't sound like you started 'liking' her. If anything, that just sounds like she won your eternal loyalty."

Severa sighed. "I said I'd tell you the beginning and you got it. Now, can we get back to being friends? I want to get on the trail at a decent hour."

Cynthia rolled her eyes but hugged Severa tightly. "Thanks for sharing, Sev. I know it's been hard for you after we left, but I wouldn't ask for anyone else to be here with me and Lucy."

Severa hugged her back. "Same to you, but, now that I shared, you have to share how Gerome caught your eye."

Cynthia jumped back. "Hey! You promised never to say that out loud, we had a pinky promise!"

Severa chuckled. "Don't worry, no one's here. Besides, we're friends and friends can make fun of each other all we wish."
They continued their laughter and teasing, neither noticing Lucina watching them from the trees.

To think, that was when it started. I never did see Raulf again, but to think a little brat barely eleven years old was enough to make us grow so close.

She shook her head. Her sister and friend had fallen asleep, their bodies splayed awkwardly on the ground. Chuckling, she walked into the camp and put them in their bed rolls.

"Goodnight, Cynthia." She whispered, kissing her forehead like mother always did. Cynthia smiled unconsciously, muttering 'mom' under her breath.

Lucina's smile became melancholy. It wasn't too far off from the truth after all. She was the oldest member of their old party with Severa being right behind her and it wasn't uncommon for her to be the mother figure to the youngest members.

Especially Inigo and Kjelle since their mothers had such a hard time conceiving them. They were five when it all went wrong.

She walked over to Severa's bed roll, not really sure what to do.

Come on, Lucina, be brave! You're sure of your feelings, but doing nothing won't accomplish anything!

Decided, she leaned down and pressed her lips to Severa's forehead. She held them there for a little longer than absolutely necessary, but pulled away with a smile. "Goodnight, Severa."

She turned and slipped into her roll, missing the reply.

"Goodnight, Lucina."

Castle Flavia—Two Days after entering Gate

Their return coincided with the announcement that Chrom had been locked in the dungeon.

Oh he wasn't there for any serious reason. No, he was there for trying to run off to Plegia by his lonesome on a tired horse before Basilio suplexed him into submission.

Robin didn't know what a suplex was, but based on what Lissa told him, it was quite painful.

Now that the Shepherds had returned though, Chrom was released and allowed to discuss their next move with the Khans.

"Ok, it's been all of three days since you lot arrived. As such, we only have three of my armies ready to go. They're not small and they are skilled, but they'll need to be careful in any engagement."

Flavia's logic was sound. Their forces, Shepherds included, barely numbered over five-hundred, not nearly enough to challenge the main Plegian force in open combat. But, if they were just going after Emmeryn…

Robin sighed. It would be risky, beyond risky in fact, but it could be done.

He just wasn't sure he should voice that opinion.

"I understand your concerns, Flavia, but I will not let that Mad King have his way! He's been left alone far too long and I will cut out the blight that is his rule. Even if I have to do it myself."
Chrom's voice made Robin wince. He didn't like this Chrom, the one that had such cold rage in his voice. It was so different from his friend that the idea of possession had passed through his mind more than once.

Gaius tapped his shoulder. "Hey, Bubbles, is the boss always like this?"

Robin shook his head. "No, he's not. But, it looks like we'll be going to war soon, regardless of any arguments we field against it."

He turned to Gaius. "Actually, all the new gear treating you well? I know it has a lot more pockets than your old clothes."

Gaius, in gear resembling the assassin's that had attacked Chrom minus the large arm blades, shrugged. "Well, my idea for climbing claws hasn't been tested yet, but there'll be opportunities."

Robin nodded. "Good. I'll go check on everyone else, Sumia or Lissa will have to take care of Chrom."

Gaius stepped aside and Robin started checking in with the others. The veterans, if they could be called that, were ready after a quick chat but Robin spent more time conversing with the new arrivals.

First, Panne.

She stared at him curiously as he walked up. "Yes?"

Robin almost laughed. "We started with you not trusting any of us. Glad to see you're not immediately glaring at me."

Her gaze turned into a glare. "You've not tried to kill me, yet. And do to the training you've given me I can defend myself against most anything. At this point, I can trust in my skills to protect me and can thus give you the benefit of the doubt."

Robin sighed. "Just glad you don't call me 'man-spawn' anymore. Anyway, I wanted to check to see if everything was how it should be. That beaststone we found still working its magic?"

Panne's gaze softened. "Yes. It… calms me, keeps my head clear even in the midst of battle. I would also like to thank you as well. Your… insistence that I learn how to use man weapons has greatly helped in learning how to avoid them."

Robin chuckled. "Well, that wasn't the point when I asked, but I'm glad you got something out of it. Oh, and do tell Virion that, while the gestures toward you are appreciated, he needs to do that while you two are alone."

He bowed and left the blushing taguel behind, almost smirking at her low growl.

Next, Cherche.

She was conversing with Vaike as usual, the usually rough man laughing right along with her.

Robin almost didn't want to interrupt, but he needed to check. "Excuse me, Cherche?"

She stopped her conversation with Vaike and turned to Robin. "Yes, Sir Robin?"

Robin gestured to Minerva and the axe Cherche was carrying. "How're the new weapons and armor treating you? If the screaming match behind me is any indication, I'll need you to keep it short."
Cherche smiled. "They're treating us just fine. I personally never thought I'd ever hold Helswath, but I'll still use my own axe until its power is needed."

She gestured to silver axe strapped to Minerva's side, just above the wyvern's own plate. Robin hadn't, and still couldn't, see what made the bound up axe so special but he shrugged. "Ok, just wanted to check in. Vaike, take care of her, we both know Minerva needs to be pampered."

They laughed at the friendly jab, even as Minerva puffed smoke. Robin waved to the two friends before going to speak with the next person on his list.

One Donnel.

The young man was outfitted in standard soldier armor, minus the helmet, but his spear was still shaky in his hand. "Hey, Donnel right?"

He jumped. "Y-yesir!"

Robin frowned. "Hey, no need to get so wound up. My name's Robin, the tactician of the Shepherds. I just wanted to check in with you and see how the new gear was treating you."

Donnel gulped. "U-uh, very well, yessir! Lady L-lissa's been teachin me how this here lance gets used."

Robin raised a brow. "Hmm… you may want to ask Frederick for more advanced lessons. Lissa's pretty good with a lance, but Frederick is far and away the better of the two."

Donnel saluted. "Yessir!"

Robin sighed and dismissed the poor guy. It must have been hard for someone with his upbringing to get thrust into all this. But, Lissa was doing her best to get him acclimated, so he decided to leave it with her.

Now for his favorite person, Cordelia.

_The timing of all this trouble could have been much better. Now I have to give her the birthday gift I ordered on the march._

He sighed, but put on an exasperated face as he walked to her. "Hey, Cordelia! How's the new gear doing?"

She almost jumped but smiled when she saw him. "Good. I didn't think I'd be wearing Falcon Knight Armor anytime soon, let alone hold a legendary lance, but it's been good. All that's left is to put it through its paces."

Robin chuckled. "Well, let's try not to have that happen. The lance, understood, but putting armor through trial means you're in harm's way. I'd hate to see that, especially after we've only been back together for a short time."

Cordelia smiled again, a faint blush springing to life. "Yes, I'd rather that not happen. But, it was kind of you to come check on me. I can assure you though, I'm fine."

Robin frowned. "You sure? We're about to go on the march again and I want you to get anything off your chest that you need to."

Cordelia's face became exasperated. "Robin, I'm fine. The harp's been a big help and so have you,
but I need some space ok? I'm not made of glass."

Robin snorted. "I know that. Anyone that can lift Kellam in full armor not name Vaike or Sully is automatically tough."

She chuckled. "Yes, well, that made me tear my groin may I remind. I couldn't walk for two days."

He grimaced, that hadn't been fun. "Yeah… my fault for getting the kegs mixed up. Sorry about that."

She rolled her eyes. "It's fine, I learned my lesson." She looked over Robin's shoulder. "Sumia has calmed Lord Chrom down by the looks of it. Knowing her, she used everything in her arsenal to get him back."

Robin sighed. "Well, then that means we're back to business. See you at supper?"

Cordelia pulled him into an embrace. "Sounds good, I'll see you then."

They held their embrace for a bit longer than necessary, but separated and went about their business. The other Shepherds, minus Chrom and Sumia, watched them with varying levels of amusement.

Donnel was confused. "Uh, I missing somtin?"

Lissa, who'd snuck up behind him, sighed. "Ah, they're just so obvious. We have a pot going on whether they'll start dating soon. Personally, I bet five-hundred on the end of the war."

She smirked at him. "Want in?"

He chuckled awkwardly. "Uh, yeah… I ain't got money."

Lissa shrugged. "I'll put the bet in your name. Just tell me when and what amount."

Donnel scratched at his head. Well, tried to, what with the pot sitting over his hair getting in the way. …He was fond of it, if you need to ask.

"Well, the village folk always made bets on marriage, not dates. Heck, I don't know what this 'date' thing is. So… I'll bet twenty on them marrying by this time next year."

Lissa's brow rose. "Marriage huh? Alright, Donny my man, twenty it is. Hey, Stahl! We got new blood!"

An excited cheer rose from the room and Donnel knew dread.

Not the dread of war, that would come soon, but the dread of being amongst friendly fools. Naga help him. Naga help them all.
Dragons and Blood

Much to the Shepherds' chagrin, Naga was not in a helping mood.

The march to the border of Plegia was easy, insofar as moving across frozen ground could be, but now they had an issue.

To put it simply, the mountain paths were in ruins. Only a few remained traversable, but it would take the Feroxi forces days to find new paths to cross.

Robin sighed, tuning out the argument Chrom was having with Flavia. Chrom was questioning how the Plegian raiders that had been attacking Ferox could cross the ruined roads while Flavia answered his every shout with one of her own.

Robin didn't see what the issue was. The Shepherds were perfectly capable of going through the remaining passes and scouting, they didn't need to be inside the Feroxi forces all the time.

"Yo, Rob, what you thinkin bout?"

Robin glanced from the ground to a grinning Vaike. "Waiting for those two to hash out their differences. You?"

Vaike puffed out his chest. "Just lookin' for my partner. You seen her recently?"

Robin's brow rose. "Oh, looking for Lady Cherche? Tell me, why the interest the last few weeks? Don't tell me the wyvern lover captured your interest."

Vaike grimaced. "Ya know, sayin' weeks when it's been a few days at most… Outrealms are weird."

Robin shrugged. "You're telling me. Anyway, she's on a scouting run right now. Should be back soon, but I suggest getting something ready for her. Say…"

Vaike turned on his heel. "Say no more! I'm coming for you boars!"

He took off running and Robin couldn't stop a smile. It was so charming to see the usual blockhead Vaike not only being considerate but also knowing someone well enough to realize their wyvern comes first.

"And there goes lover boy. Tell me, Robin, why aren't you so considerate with me?"

Lissa plopped next to him, flashing her pearly whites. Robin rolled his eyes. "Please, you don't need me doting on you. If anything, you're the one doing the doting. Speaking of, how's Donnel doing?"

Lissa huffed. "He's doing fine, I'll have you know. And I don't dote on him, I just try to make sure he's getting used to this!"

Robin merely chuckled. Lissa may say otherwise, but Donnel fell into being a fighter with almost frightening ease. In fact, he’d settled into the camp life far faster than Lissa or Maribelle could ever claim, and was teaching them how to live off the land.

Lissa growled, guessing the source of his mirth. "Stop that! He's the only guy even close to my age here not named Ricken, of course I want to spend time with him."

Robin smirked. "Oh, is that so? I guess Ricken must live with the disappointment of not being the
princesses' favorite plaything."

Lissa punched his shoulder. "Please, stop. I get enough of this from Sully, I don't need it from you too."

She sighed. "Besides, it's pretty hard to even talk with him. Maribelle seems to have it in her mind that he's a scumbag that's trying to get in my shift."

Robin almost choked on his spit. "Really?!"

Lissa nodded, her face twisting in frustration. "Yeah, and I don't know why. Donnel's far too nice to even realize what a shift is let alone try to get in one. He's not Gaius, but every time I tell her that she just gets all red and angry."

Robin… didn't know what to say to that.

Lissa smirked. "Just be glad Chrom's still arguing. If he heard this little conversation of ours, he'd throw a fit."

Robin finally unwound his tongue. "Yes… that would be quite bad. Um, if you'll excuse me, I need to check up on Vaike. Never know where he's run off to."

Lissa rolled her eyes but bid him farewell. Robin noted Lissa grabbing a stick off the ground and advancing on Chrom, but he didn't stick around for the inevitable. Instead, he made his way to the corral the Shepherds set up for their mounts.

He could hear the whoosh of wings passing by overhead and the light was briefly blocked. The shadow passed and Robin watched a heavily armored wyvern land with a thud.

"Cherche! Minerva! I brought boar!"

Robin jumped away from the shouts behind him and barely avoided an enthusiastic Vaike. He was carrying a big hog over his shoulder and there was a roar of joy when Minerva spotted the fresh meat.

A flash of dark pink revealed a smiling Cherche, her cheer at odds with the heavy plate and white crest attached to her chin. Robin, curious about what was about to happen, walked forward unnoticed.

Vaike spoke first. "Don't worry, Cherche! I made sure to get this one out of the woods with permission!"

Cherche stroked Minerva, chuckling at the excited lizard. "Good, you listened. As I said earlier, the gesture's appreciated, but we don't want to get in trouble for poaching."

Vaike laughed. "Yeah, with Chrom bein' all hissy that'd be a sight. I don't see why he's worried personally, he's got the Shepherds!"

His chest puffed out. "And he's got the best pair a fighters right here! Plegians are nothin'!"

Cherche smiled. "Well, I thank you for the compliment. Vaike, I wish you a good day. Minerva is getting understandably upset with us."

Vaike blinked before finally noticing the smoky maw inching ever closer to the boar on his shoulder. He yelped and laid the boar on the ground before speaking again. "Yeah, uh, I'll see you later."
He turned around and sulked off, Cherche sighed when he was out of sight. "I don't know what to do, Minerva. He's so… obvious in his affections, but he's so charming that I can't just turn him down."

Minerva growled and grunted, obviously enjoying her meal. Cherche flushed in response. "I do not feel a fluttering when we speak. In fact, I'm insulted that you would think I search him out for minor reasons."

Minerva chuffed and Cherche groaned. "You're not helping. I understand you like him, everyone does, but to insinuate that I may feel something romantic for him is going too far."

Robin decided to leave. This was a private discussion and it was rude for him to stick around.

But, he was stopped soon after leaving the corral, a familiar shade of red walking toward him. "Hello, Cordelia, do you need something?"

Cordelia shook her head. "No, not really. I just… wanted to check in. Any new plans, are we moving soon?"

Robin sighed. "No, sadly. Chrom and Flavia are having another shouting match, so I sent the troops ahead to start repairing the roads. The Shepherds are likely to go before the Feroxi, but we'll need everyone in the air we can get. I don't fancy trying to navigate the desert on the other side."

Cordelia nodded. "Understood. So, while we're waiting, do you mind helping me?"

Robin's brow shot into his hair. "What could you need my help with? Knowing you, it must be frustrating to overcome your perfectionism."

Her cheeks tinted red. "You say it like a compliment."

Robin laughed. "Because it is! You were already so determined when we first met, but you've really stepped it up after entering the gate."

His gaze became softer, more concerned. "You… haven't been burying yourself in it, have you?"

Cordelia sighed. "No, I haven't. Ask anyone in the Shepherds and they'll tell you the same."

Her gaze became hard. "And why do you always ask? I meet with Lissa twice a week for…therapy," she ground the word, "and I've been staying with Sumia. Everything's been on your orders and I know you get reports, so why are you so set on stifling me?"

Robin pinched his nose. How should he answer this?

Cordelia was silent, waiting for his answer. She had appreciated the idea for about a week, but she wasn't that helpless.

And if she still woke up screaming from nightmares every other hour, well, a sleeping draught kept Sumia quiet.

Robin finally gave in. "It's because you're my friend. What you went through was horrifying and I want to do all I can to help. But… I will always be concerned, even after you and the others claim you're fine."

He sighed. "If you want the meetings to end, I'll tell Lissa. I'll pull the others away from you so you can have some time to yourself. Much as it hurts me to say it… I'll even give you your own tent."
Cordelia smiled as his offer took shape, but frowned when his gaze hardened. "What's the catch?"

Robin kept his eyes on hers. "You come to me, anytime something happens. I care enough to listen to your feelings, but I know you're stubborn too. Please, just let me be there and don't use this as an excuse to isolate yourself."

He put a hand on her shoulder, "Ok?"

Cordelia's face was pensive, but she took his hand off her shoulder. "...Very well. I'll come to you if anything... unfortunate occurs."

Robin frowned, not sure what her gesture meant. Cordelia took his silence as a dismissal and excused herself, brushing past him as she went.

He narrowed his eyes, but groaned when he heard Frederick calling for him. Looks like he needed to help them wrestle Chrom into submission.

Again.

-Cordelia-

Damn it all.

Cordelia sighed for the millionth time, Theresa snorting in exasperation. "I know girl, I know. Here I am, trying to be the model knight, when all I can do is rely on people. What can I do to prove I can do things on my own?"

Theresa shook her head, pawing at the earth.

"What, you think that's not the problem? Tell me then, oh wise one, what should I do?"

Theresa craned her neck towards the camp, huffing when Cordelia just stared.

"What, you want me to go to my tent? Are you willing to give up your brushing if it makes me go?"

Theresa whinnied and Cordelia shrugged. "Ok... I guess I'll go then. But, don't be surprised if I'm back shortly."

She turned and left her mount, weaving her way through the familiar twists and turns of the camp. She returned any greetings she was given, but tried to avoid the more amorous soldiers until she was safely before her own tent.

Pulling the flap aside, she blinked at the state of her personal space.

Well, the only difference was a wicker basket covered by a cloth in the center of the room, but it was a big difference.

Who could have left this here? Maybe Sumia delivered some lunch?

Shrugging, she grabbed the basket and placed it on the floor. A little card fell out, but she didn't notice it, instead removing the cloth to reveal a wonderful spread.

Oh, all my favorites. Sumia, you're a wonderful friend, but you need to stop spoiling me.

She shrugged, may as well partake in the bounty before getting back to work. It had been a few hours since she'd spoken to Robin, so who knew when they'd get to eat again? Grabbing a loaf of
cheese crusted bread, she bit into the heavenly morsel before finally noticing the card on the ground.

*Oh, what's this?*

She reached down and grabbed the letter, pausing when she heard the tent's flap brush the ground.

"Cordelia? You in here?"

Sumia pushed the flap aside and almost laughed. Cordelia was bent over with a letter in hand, her cheeks puffed from the bite she'd taken from the loaf of bread.

Cordelia swallowed hard, trying to keep a blush from her face. "D-do you need something, Sumia?"

"Oh, nothing important." Sumia answered. "Just wanted to see if you'd found the surprise."

Cordelia's face relaxed. "Oh, so this is from you. Look, I appreciate the sentiment, but I don't n-"

"That's not from me."

Cordelia blinked at the rebuke. "Really?"

Sumia rolled her eyes. "Look, just read the letter, it'll make sense."

Cordelia narrowed her eyes, but opened the letter.

*Cordelia,*

*I know this may seem rather late, but I'd like to welcome you to the Shepherds! The basket and the food inside is the product of much work from all our current members, so we hope you enjoy. Before you ask, this is a custom of the Shepherds—we greet new members with a meal. But, due to the march, we're only able to give you this small meal. We wish you all the best and hope to have you with us for a long time.*

Cordelia felt a wry smile bloom on her face. The letter had the signature of every Shepherd on it, even Chrom's.

"Geez, I told him to stop making you guys stifle me."

Sumia giggled. "Nope, it's true! Every Shepherd to join has gotten an honorary meal, but with circumstances being what they are, we had to settle for this."

Cordelia put the letter down, missing a small piece of parchment hiding behind it. "Well, I can't eat all of this on my own. Care to help?"

Sumia smiled and they dug in. True to the letter's word, there wasn't much, but it was a wonderful midday meal nonetheless after nothing but salted meat and hard bread for a week. They were even able to catch up a bit more, but the conversation stalled when they reached the bottom of the basket.

Sumia reached into the basket and pulled out a small box. It wasn't anything special, but it was weird to find the rough wood hiding under the food.

She frowned at Cordelia. "Was there anything else in the letter? Like, an extra note or something?"

Cordelia frowned too and grabbed the letter, finally noticing the small scrap behind it. "Yes, there is.
The handwriting was eerily familiar, but she nearly sighed when she realized who it was.

*Cordelia,*

*You’ve likely already read the big letter. I hope you enjoy the food and can relax a bit from your duties. Now, the reason for this is I have a surprise waiting for you in the bottom of the basket. It's a box I carved myself while we were in the Outrealms. I think you’ll like what you find inside.

Also, in case we're on the march when you get this, happy birthday!*

*Your friend,*

*Robin*

Cordelia snorted, of course he knew. "Let me guess, you told him my birthday was coming up?"

Sumia blushed. "Well, uh, he wanted to know. I always found it odd that you never told him, so…"

Cordelia shook her head. "It never came up. Besides, I didn't want to bring up his amnesia."

Sumia's eyes narrowed. "You know… he told me you two had a fight. He wouldn't tell me what happened, but whatever you said must have made him super mad. In fact, he's only been that mad when someone called him a kiss up."

Cordelia's eyes grew shamed. "I… I admit I insulted him. In my defense, however weak it may be, he was insulting the pride I hold in my duty. Unfortunately… my mouth moved faster than my brain."

Sumia nodded. "Well, then I think he's a keeper. I won't deny that he's at fault for getting that fight started, if what you say is true, but he's made up for it in every way possible."

Cordelia blushed. "That's not… we're just friends, Sumia."

Sumia rolled her eyes. "Please, stop spouting that drivel. Tell me, my old friend, when's the last time you tried to catch Chrom's attention?"

Cordelia's mouth opened, ready to put the scrutiny to bed when she froze. She couldn't remember the last time she'd done so, at least recently.

She tried anyway. "I tried shortly after I arrived in Ylisstol. He called a meeting with the Pegasus Knights and I tried to talk to him."

Sumia's gaze was smug. "Yeah, that was before we came back from Ferox the first time. I was there too, remember?"

Cordelia almost cursed. All she could do was snatch the box from Sumia's hands and point to the tent flap. When Sumia frowned, Cordelia huffed. "It's my surprise, don't ruin it. Besides, don't you need to check on Selene soon?"

Sumia yelped and fled from the tent, screaming about a brush the entire way. Cordelia just shook her head and gave the box in her hands a once over. It was rough like she thought, the obvious sign of a novice carver, but there was something charming about the ruggedness.
Maybe because it's from Robin?

She shook her head of the thought, preferring to just stare at the small latch and hinges. Again, the work was that of an amateur, but she didn't want to ruin the oddly perfect little cube.

Eventually, curiosity won out and she opened the gift.

She gasped when the present came into view.

They were a pair of hair clips, each one shaped to resemble a Pegasus wing. They were made of an odd blue-white stone that shone in the low light, with silver outlined each feather. To finish, gold capped the wing tips and the clips themselves were sturdy steel.

They were…beautiful.

Where did he find the time? These are masterfully done, better than I've seen in many stores, but they must have taken a long time to make. Even then, what's the stone? I can't place it, but it's so soothing…

She shook her head, the clips she wore making their weight known as she pulled the gift out of the box.

But… I can't just replace my current ones. Mother gave these to me when I was accepted into the knights.

She gulped and slowly pulled her current clips from her hair, looking between the two pieces in her hands. Eventually, she closed one of her hands with a sigh.

I'm sorry, Robin, but I can't just wear your gift. You're a true friend, but my family is greater to me than anything…even you.

Something in her railed against that thought, her heart pounding painfully. But she forced the sick feeling away and placed the gift back in the box and put her normal clips back on.

A horn sounded and she pushed the matter from her mind. It was time for action, not introspection.

Even if her choice broke her friend's heart.

-Robin-

It had not been a good day.

He'd had to wrestle Chrom for half an hour, insults that only they could use flying, before the original idea of the Shepherds going ahead was finally put in motion. Along with that, he'd had to organize the scattered Shepherds together and rush the packing of the camp.

Then, just to rub salt in the wound, Cordelia was actively avoiding him, his gift nowhere in sight.

He bit his tongue, not wanting his mind to wander as they trudged through the sand. That was the other thing that made the day horrid, the sand that stretched for miles. Sure, the mountains had greenery for a few miles, but it soon gave way to sand as far as the eye could see. In fact, they were currently heading for what Cherche thought was an oasis.

Having a wyvern that could navigate the mess of air currents was a godsend.

He glanced at the sky and frowned as red flashed away from the main body.
A grunt drew his eyes to the earth. Poor Kellam was being hauled in the only wagon they had, his massive plate suit making the wood creak. The heat was nearly unbearable for him, but he needed to be ready always now that they were in Plegian territory.

"Hey, Robin, what's up?"

He looked to see Stahl's concerned gaze. "Oh, just wondering why there's no Plegians. I know the border was in disrepair, but we should have seen the Plegian Guard by now."

Stahl hummed, eyes scanning the horizon. "Agreed. They're notorious for how ferocious they are against invaders. You don't think they could be waiting for us, do you?"

Robin nodded. "Yes, that's what I think. Where though, I can only guess. Most likely, they'll be waiting for us by the oasis and in the towns that surround the lake."

Stahl nodded. "Makes sense. Well, anything else on your mind? I can tell that's not all you're thinking about."

Robin chuckled. "You know me too well. But… this is kind of private."

Stahl's lips pulled back in a grin. "Let me guess… It has to do with the lovely Lady Cordelia."

Robin glared, his eyes leaking poison. "Damn you and your empathy."

Stahl blinked, leaning back from the venomous gaze. "Hey, what's the problem? I haven't seen you this upset since Miriel blew up the mess tent."

Robin softened his gaze. "It's… it's nothing, just thinking on how she's been doing. You already know I told everyone to give her some space, but I'm always worried. That and… I don't think she liked my present."

Stahl clicked his tongue. "Ah, we get to the heart of the matter. I don't see why she wouldn't like it, not after you went to so much trouble to get ahold of it."

Robin's voice grew melancholy. "I didn't just buy it, Stahl. I got it custom made from moonstone. The stuff's rare, but it's always been a stone of protection and I don't want her getting hurt."

Stahl's face morphed to a frown. "Ok, if you're sure. Just… be careful, I guess. I mean, if you don't know how to approach her that is."

Robin shook his head. "No…no this is something we need to figure out for ourselves. Thanks for offering Stahl, but I'll figure out what I need to say."

Stahl kept frowning. "Ok, if you're sure. Just… be careful, I guess. I mean, I don't think you two ever played while we were in the Outrealms this last time, so why not start there?"

Robin sighed. "Thanks, Stahl, but I'll do what I think is best."

He turned to leave but looked back one more time. "And don't worry, I always take advice to heart."

He looked forward and left the concerned paladin behind. He could see a cloud of sand rising on the horizon, but a quick glance to Cherche's position showed no emergency.

"Hm, must be Frederick. I hope he's spotted that oasis, lest we run out of water these next few days."
The cloud soon resolved itself into Frederick's familiar silhouette, his face dusty from the sand. The frown he wore was deeper than usual, making Robin groan as Chrom stepped forward.

"What's the news? Are we near the oasis?"

Frederick nodded. "Indeed, we are but a few hours away. But…"

Robin frowned at Frederick before blinking. Why was there another man riding behind Frederick? What was that cloak doing between them? It looked crumpled up and rather bulky.

Chrom noticed it too. "And who are you, sir? Frederick must think you're important if you still have your guts."

The man shrugged. "Name Gregor, mercenary. Gregor running when big man in armor comes along. Asked if he could help Gregor get friend to safety."

Frederick sighed. "In other words, while I was scouting, I ran into Gregor here. He was fleeing from Grimleal, or at least the cloaks they wore indicated as much, with a bundle in his arms."

Chrom nodded. "And you did the chivalrous thing. Considering you're letting him here, I assume you've done the usual interrogation?"

Gregor groaned. "Big knight very thorough, Gregor assures. Grimleal originally pay Gregor, but Gregor kill them after finding out job."

Robin's brow shot up. "You killed your employers? Isn't that bad business for a mercenary?"

Gregor shrugged. "Eh, most time. But, Gregor only take good job, not kidnapping."

Chrom's eyes narrowed. "Kidnapping? Then that would make the bundle sitting between you and Frederick the target."

Gregor nodded. "Aye, on nose noble man. Gregor never steal life from someone that not deserve it, no matter the coin."

Robin nodded, he could respect that. "Hey, Chrom. Don't you think we need some more help?"

Chrom was thoughtful. "Hm... Ok, Gregor, how's this? We'll pay you twenty gold as a trial run. Should you prove as good as Frederick says, we'll take you on as a full member."

Gregor laughed. "And what be pay for joining? Twenty gold good for any number of jobs, but what Gregor get for staying?"

Robin smirked, his mind thinking of their finances. "Oh, just one hundred gold a month."
Gregor's jaw met the ground. "That…Gregor accept."

Robin smirked while Gregor and Chrom shook hands, his eyes moving to the bundle of cloth that was starting to squirm on Frederick's horse.

"Ah, I see our other guest is waking up."

Frederick twisted in his saddle and pulled the cloth away, a vibrant green greeting the world. "Milady, please wake up. We've arrived."

A great yawn stretched through the air, small arms clad in pink and purple cloth stretching from the bundle. The green shook itself free of its confines to reveal itself as a mane of green hair that faded to yellow.

Finally, a face revealed itself, purple eyes shining from a youthful face and a slim circlet shining in the hot sun. "Oh, are these your friends?"

Frederick nodded. "Yes, they are. I'd like you to meet Lord Chrom and Sir Robin."

There were cries from the other Shepherds demanding they be introduced as well, but Frederick ignored them. "Milord, Robin, this is Nowi. She was the victim Gregor was originally charged to kidnap, but he helped her escape. She's incredibly important to the Grimleal, to the point I think they'll be after us before long."

Robin sighed. "Frederick, inform us of that earlier next time. Anyway, Nowi, are you ok? Do you know where your home is or where your family is?"

Nowi's cheerful visage fell away. "No… I was kidnapped soon after I hatched and I have no idea where I'm from or if my family still lives."

Chrom spotted the oddity first. "Wait, hatched?"

Nowi nodded, smiling at their confused faces. "Yep, hatched. Hold on, I'll show you why, it's pretty cool!"

She turned and hopped from Frederick's saddle, producing a simple green stone that shone when she clenched it. A great pink flower bloomed from the earth and swallowed the girl before bursting with a flash. When vision returned to the poor Shepherds, they beheld a great yellow-green dragon with short arms and legs contrasting its great webbed wings.

The dragon wore a smirk and Nowi's voice filtered through the air. "I'm a dragon! Cool huh?"

Chrom's jaw snapped back into place. "A manakete? Here I thought they'd long since died out."

A snort followed that statement. "And the taguel are supposed to be dead as well, yet here I am."

Panne stepped forward, gazing at the dragon curiously. "How odd it is to see another skin changer. But, I suppose you're the genuine article rather than the dragon tribe."

Nowi's head tilted. "Oh, another friend that can change shape. Hm… don't tell me… a bunny!"

There were chuckles from the peanut gallery, but a swift glare form Panne silenced them. "Yes, I am a taguel that wears the shape of a hare. Tell me, Nowi, how old are you? That will tell me whether you are genuine or not."

Nowi did a little loop. "Oh, I don't know the exact number, but I'm a thousand something. Gets to be
kinda boring counting every year when I can have fun and explore."

Panne nodded. "Then we stand before one of the firstborn, or at least a true blooded descendent. It's an honor to meet you, Nowi."

The dragon flashed and Nowi was back in her human form. "Same! You guys look like a lot of fun too, can I come along?"

While Chrom contemplated, Robin had a question. "Excuse me, Nowi? Why are you dressed like that, aren't you afraid of burning up out here?"

Nowi looked at her clothes. She was rather exposed with strips of scale pattered cloth running from her neck down her sides and very short pants. Most of her torso was bared by the top, except the important parts after all.

She shrugged. "I'm a dragon, so it's not that bad to me. Besides, my boots are real long and the cloak I wear keeps the sun off just fine."

Robin shrugged. "Alright, if you're sure."

Chrom pointed at the cloak. "Isn't that yours, Frederick? The cloak, I mean."

Frederick wanted to answer, but Nowi beat him to the punch. "He gave it to me! He saw that I was, as you say, exposed and gave it to me. That earned him a peck on the cheek!"

Laughter abound through the peanut gallery as Frederick stared ahead stoically.

Gregor, forgotten by the others, laughed. "Ha! Gregor save you from life and death situation and all Gregor gets is kick to groin!"

Nowi smirked at him. "Oh? Would you like a peck on the cheek?"

Gregor immediately grimaced. "Gregor is thinking no. No want to be known as child molester."

Nowi pouted. "I'm not a child!"

Frederick had a sardonic quip at the ready. "You sure act as one, milady. I'm quite sure you and the others will get along just fine."

Nowi adopted a devious smirk. "Oh? Then, if I wasn't a child, I wouldn't be treated like one?"

Robin spoke this time. "That's how it normally goes. Why?"

Nowi's smirk became evil and eerily like Lissa's expression when she'd set up a prank. The stone in Nowi's hand blazed to life again, the light blinding everyone. When sight returned, even more jaws fell to the floor.

Nowi had, for lack of a better term, grown up. Where once she was barely able to reach Robin's collarbone, she now looked him in the eye. Her face had sharpened and become more mature, her originally long ears growing even longer and sharpening to points. Her body had, well, filled out well, not to the point of good old Sumia, but she put the court ladies to shame. Finally, her hair had grown to nearly brush the ground.

Nowi smirked at the jaws on the ground. "So, am I still a child?"

Her voice was more mature too, but it had a hint of childish mischief that seemed to define her.
Robin and Chrom just shook their heads, deciding to drop the sight before them. After all, despite the visual spectacle, there had been the sound of marching growing closer for several minutes.

Frederick spoke. "Uh, ahem, milady. Would you be so kind as to close your cloak? I fear your current attire is… unsuited for you as you are."

Nowi frowned and glanced down, squeaking when she saw her chest straining the fabric she wore. The cloak swiftly hid the sight and she turned back to Frederick. "Thanks."

Frederick nodded. "It is no issue. Any gentleman would avert their eyes from the sight."

Nowi smirked and pulled herself back into the saddle, shooing Gregor from his seat. She settled into the saddle and wrapped her arms around Frederick's waist. "Well, I need to thank you then. But first, what are we going to do about those guys running at us?"

Every Shepherd snapped their gaze to the horizon, groaning at the wave of warriors in dark purple cloaks stampeding towards them. Robin fired off commands immediately, a ramshackle defensive line swiftly put in place. Luck would have it that they were on flat terrain, but Sumia couldn't use her ice in the intense heat while wind magic would only stir up irritants for both parties.

That left fire, lightning, and holy light-something four of them happened to specialize in.

Robin gathered his fellow spell casters, Miriel, Lissa, and Cordelia. He was thankful Cordelia was leaving whatever was causing the distance between them behind, but that didn't mean he was happy about it. "Ok, we need to remove as many of them as possible. That means Bolganones for you, Cordelia."

She nodded, tapping the burning red tome belted to her waist.

He turned to Miriel. "Miriel, we need Valflame on every heavy concentration you can find. They don't seem to have heavy units since the sand makes it hard for them to move, but target wisely. I don't want you catching one of us in the blasts."

Miriel pushed up her spectacles. "Your lack of faith disturbs me, Robin. Have I not proven my skill with this tome?"

Robin rolled his eyes. "I don't doubt your skill, I doubt your single-minded determination. Anyway, stay in the middle like planned. I'll take the left while Cordelia takes the right. Is that clear?"

They nodded and left, leaving Robin with Lissa. "Lissa, are you ok? You haven't used the Book of Naga since you came back with Donny."

Lissa looked away. "I'm fine. I just… want to do something else, is all."

Robin frowned. "Lissa, I hate to say this, but we need that magic. You and I both know every Shepherd here is worth damn near a legion, but we can't tire ourselves out here. Think of Emmeryn, think of the people, think of your friends."

He took her hand in his. "Please, do what you can."

Lissa was silent. She'd told no one of the voice that had spoken when she'd killed those bandits and saved Donnel's mom. It was… just too crazy to hear something call her an arbiter of Horakhty, the creator of light. She'd likely be locked in a room for the rest of her life if she said anything.

"Lissa," Robin tried. "Come on, talk to me. Can you, or can you not? We don't have much time."
Lissa pulled her hand away. "I... I'll do it. Where do you need me?"

Robin pointed to the middle of the line. "You and Miriel are going to work together. Whatever her blasts don't kill, you erase. I'll be handling the left with Cordelia on the right. If it looks like we're about to be overwhelmed, help the side in most dire straits."

Lissa nodded. "Got ya. Ok, talk later, bye!"

She took off running, leaving Robin steaming. She was hiding something, he knew it, but it likely wouldn't come out until Emmeryn was back on Ylissean soil.

Hs sighed and took his position, smirking as the enemy finally got close enough to make out details.

Their dark purple clothes had several purple lines racing through the cloth, some eerily like the purple marks on Robin's own clothes. That meant one thing: Grimleal.

_Hm, let's see if these fanatics have a leader. Take him out and they should scatter._

"Kill the interlopers! Offer their life force to the Great One! But do not harm the scion of Naga, she is to remain alive until properly prepared!"

The insane screams from the back of the Grimleal fighters marked the leader. Robin couldn't see them, but he had to focus on the screaming lunatics that were almost on top of them.

He narrowed his eyes and let loose the first spell. "Mjolnir!"

The tome in his hand shone gold and lightning rained from the sky, tearing a hole in the earth. Any Grimleal caught in the center burned to ash while the debris from the strike downed those around it. Pillars of fire erupted from the right and a great blast sent Grimleal bodies and limbs flying.

Just when the fighters thought they had a respite, beams of rainbow light burned forth and skewered them. Some even had the lights converge and explode within them, making a gory mess of the surrounding sand.

The sheer shock of the assault threw them into confusion, blades of legend soon joining the slaughter as the Shepherds sallied forth. Gregor, able to overcome his shock just a bit faster than the Grimleal, charged in and slew three Grimleal in three strikes, blood flowing from their sundered torsos.

He laughed. "Gregor not slow down, even when faced with youngsters!"

A blast of fire interrupted his cheer. A green dragon flew by followed by a bellowing knight. Gregor just watched them go. "Ah, they get along well. Gregor know they make great friends."

-Cordelia-

She was so glad to be in the fight. Finally, after waiting for weeks, she could exact vengeance on the Plegian pigs that had taken her captain and unit from her. She reveled in every blast of liquid fire and the hot blood that ran whenever her lance met flesh, a fiendish snarl twisting her features. Even when they tried to flee, she turned her fire and javelins on them, even when they begged for their lives.

They'd given her flight sisters no quarter and they'd find none with her either.

But, in her bloodlust, she failed to notice just how far she was pushing forward until she found herself surrounded. Each of them had axes and angry eyes, more than willing to avenge their losses on the red-haired woman. She hopped down from her perch on Theresa.
"Theresa, go."

Her Pegasus whinnied, but a look from Cordelia sent the winged horse into the air. She glanced around until the Plegians decided to do something, likely thinking she was a vulnerable damsel off the Pegasus.

But she was no mere damsel. The first learned that lesson when his attempt to take her head ended with a lance in his neck. The others charged in unison, but Cordelia whirled and leapt about them like she was possessed. She'd leap over one of them and drag the blade of Gungnir through their spine before grabbing the next one's head and flash fry their brain with a quick spell.

Eventually, all that was left was a hunchback man with a white cap gazing at her in something akin to rapture.

"Yes...you are the one foretold of in the scriptures! The only human worthy to hold the heart of our master!"

He cackled and lightning gathered around him. "That fool Validar may have been killed, but Garn told us everything. I may not be able to bring the vessel, but I can bring the master's consort this day."

Cordelia barely heard him, but even then, the words did not pierce the red haze surrounding her like a bloody cloak. Blood, boiled and vaporized by the fire she'd used, curled behind her like putrid wings.

The mage cackled again and lightning shot forth, eager fingers of light reaching for the angel of blood. Cordelia growled and met the bolts with gouts of flame, sprinting forward to take the man's head. But, her rage was so complete, so encompassing, that her strikes were sloppy and unrefined enough for the mage to dodge with ease.

He took his time as she swung, waiting for the proper moment. All it would take was one opening, no matter the strength of the woman facing him, for the battle to be decided.

Eventually, Cordelia grew frustrated enough to launch Gungnir at him, not caring that the move was easily seen and evaded. She just wanted him dead, the desire pulsing in her veins right up to the moment lightning invaded her skin.

Pain replaced rage and she screamed. Screamed for all her lungs were worth as every nerve in her body fired at once and her skin began to burn. It stopped after what seemed like an eternity, Cordelia fell to the sandy earth with her lungs on fire. The grit of the sand was like needles in her fresh wounds, her mind somehow still lucid amongst the pain.

"Hmm, a bit charred, but nothing our magic can't fix. We'll have to take care of that temper of yours, but you're perfect. Now then, I think you'll be fine without that arm of yours."

The mage's voice cackled with glee as a bright spear of lightning built over his head. Cordelia was just barely able to make out the glowing shaft, her reason finally defeating her rage.

A fool am I, for thinking that simple rage could ease the ache. And a fool further still for deciding to hide it from everyone, even Robin. Now... now my foolishness shall be met appropriately.

Her eyes closed, ready for the bolt to descend. But it was only silence that met her ears, as the pain finally overwhelmed her mind and she passed out.

-Night-
It wasn't until well after the sun had set that Cordelia finally came to. Her mind returned to a body wrapped in bandages and in enough pain to make her groan. No one answered the groan and, when sight returned, she could see why.

There was only one other person with her, the lump in the cot on her left said as much. Her vision was still bleary, but she could make out what looked like gold settle on the floor next to her comrade-in-injuries.

She blinked again and her vision finally settled.

What she saw nearly made her scream.

Robin was in the cot, that purple mop of hair unmistakable. He didn't have a blanket on, displaying the stained bandages tied around his torso. The darkest splotch originated under his arm, the site of a fresh wound that had likely taken time to heal.

Normally, the sight would only make her worried, except she knew, just knew, where the wound had come from.

He'd leapt in front of her, saving her arm and life at the same time. The energy had pierced through the weakest part of his armor and straight through the crook of his arm. Overcome with dread, she forced her stiff body to roll from the cot and she barely kept a scream in when the ground rushed to meet her.

Grimacing and whimpering, she used her one good arm to drag herself to his cot and pull herself up. She panted when she finally saw him, his face peaceful and serene. She almost thought he was in a deep sleep when she noticed something.

His face was very pale… not only that, it didn't look like he was breathing!

Panic consumed her and she pressed her head to his chest, searching for the sweet lullaby she knew and loved.

There was none.

Denial swiftly joined panic. "Robin… no, Robin, no!"

She grabbed at his shoulders and shook him, tears spilling from her eyes when his head lolled to the side. She tried slapping him, pinching him, anything and everything she could to try and make him wake up.

Robin did not stir.

Realization crept into her mind like a disease, her hands falling limply at her sides. She'd killed him. In the rush to exact petty vengeance on Plegians, she'd gotten her best friend killed.

Her hands flew to her head and she screamed, screamed for what felt like an eternity until her lungs could do no more. And even then, no one came to investigate, even as her mind cried for the comfort of someone, anyone, they did not come.

She was alone.

Her psyche could take no more. She'd failed everyone, before she'd even started trying, and her mind shattered.
Her dead eyes shot to a small table next to the cot holding the body of her friend. A pair of scissors glinted in the low light, a roll of bandages sitting next to them.

"Cut out the rot."

The voice that invaded her mind was so familiar. It was his voice, but with a slight rasp she could not place.

Her eyes focused on the scissors, even as the cadaver next to her sat up.

"Cut out the rot of your failure."

It was no suggestion. An order, to clean her honor and mind with but a small price. She reached for the cold steel.

Red eyes entered her vision, six of the baleful red orbs staring from both the eye sockets and the forehead.

"Do it, my bride. Cut out the rot of your blood and be the one who stands at my side."

She smiled, that sounded wonderful…

So she pressed down on the blades and cut, and cut…

And cut.
Emmeryn

Chapter Summary

P.S Have Surinukeru Kokoro from Nagi no Asukara ready. Play at “…Very well then”

Robin woke on a familiar expanse of canvas.

*Ah... I'm in the med tent again. Heh, they may as well reserve a cot for me.*

He hissed when his arm jostled, his eyes focusing on the expanse of gauze wrapped around his shoulder. That's right, he'd taken a bolt of lightning for Cordelia after she'd gone down.

*Cordelia!*

Pain lanced through his arm again and he groaned. Apparently, that got someone's attention.

"Robin! Maribelle, hold her down!"

That was Lissa's voice. Now that his senses were coming back, he could hear a lot of voices shouting at each other and what sounded like a thrashing body.

Lissa's face appeared, her eyes tired and panicked. "Thank Naga you're up! I know it'll hurt to move, but you need to come with me."

Robin didn't have much choice as she looped her arm under his uninjured shoulder and hauled him out of the cot. His shoulder screamed in protest, but he bit his lip hard and limped along toward the shouting voices.

When he got there, his words failed him. Maribelle, Vaike, and Sully were holding down a thrashing and screaming Cordelia, a river of blood running from her arm. Bloody shears lay abandoned on the ground, the source of her wound obvious.

Lissa shook her head. "She's been screaming for a while. We brought you and her here after the fight, we're at the oasis by the way, but she woke up in a trance. I was working on you with Maribelle, so we didn't notice, but she grabbed the shears and…"

Robin could guess. "Has she been screaming and struggling ever since?"

Lissa nodded. "She has. It's just noise now, but when she started she was screaming about 'honor' and 'cutting out the failure'. Frankly, she's worse off than I thought if this could send her so far down."

Robin nodded and walked to the side of the cot that Lissa had abandoned. He knew he couldn't touch her, not as she was, but he could try to calm her. "Cordelia, it's me. Please, calm down, I'm right here, I'm ok."

He highly doubted she heard him, but it looked like his voice soothed her. She slowed her thrashing
so the others could pin her limbs completely. Robin was free to touch her now and he put his uninjured arm on her shoulder. "Cordelia, it's ok. Come on, Cordy, you're fine, we're fine, there's no need to be afraid now."

He saw green healing magic shine over his shoulder and the blood flowing down her arm stopped. Her face was still scrunched and her voice was a whimper, but she'd gone limp. Robin moved his hand off her shoulder and grabbed her hand, her fingers wrapping around his and gripping like a vice.

Finally, her face became peaceful and the others stepped away. Maribelle huffed. "Vaike, Sully, thank you for your assistance. You can return to your preparations."

Vaike and Sully nodded, each giving Cordelia well wishes before leaving. Robin kept his grip on Cordelia's hand, ignoring the insidious itching that invaded his shoulder as Lissa put her staff back to work.

Lissa sighed. "Thank Naga that's over. She's been screaming for hours, not even Sumia could get her to calm down. We had to gag her for a time since the Plegian Guard came looking for us before Chrom and the others drove them out."

Robin nodded slowly, sighing when the magic faded from his skin. "I'll stay with her… she needs me to be here until she wakes and can tell us what happened."

Lissa nodded. "Oh, we found this on her. I think you'll like it."

She reached into her robes and produced Robin's gift, the stone shining in the low light. Robin took the clips with a melancholy gaze. "She kept them? I thought she didn't like them since I didn't seem them on her or hear her mention it."

Lissa shook her head. "Sumia told me about that. See, her original clips were from her mother. They were a gift for making it into the Pegasus Knights."

Robin frowned. "Were?"

Lissa pointed to the bedside table, a wooden bowl with what looked like black twigs was sitting on it. "The lightning scorched the clips, no saving them. We had to cut them out of her hair since the metal had melted into it."

Robin nodded slowly, his hand closing over the clips. "Alright… I'll be fine here, Lissa, you go help the others."

Lissa looked to protest, but the look Robin sent her made a groan come out instead. "Fine, but I'll be coming back in twenty minutes. I still need to do more work on that wound of yours before you're anywhere near combat ready."

She left without another word, leaving Robin to stare at both the clips and hand he held. He sighed, reaching over and placing the clips next to Cordelia's hair, just looking at them.

*I was right, these look beautiful against your hair. You'd be an angel incarnate if you wore these, but I can't force this on you. You think you've failed me, even though it was my choice, and I know you'll blame yourself for getting your mother's gift destroyed.*

He closed his hand again, brushing his knuckles against Cordelia's cheek. "Please, Cordy, wake up. I still have so much to talk to you about, so much to apologize for. We need everyone for what's coming, we need you. …I need you, damn it. You're my closest friend, closer than anyone, and it
would destroy me to lose you like this. Please… come back to me."

She didn't stir.

Robin sighed and clutched her hand to his forehead, holding it there in a vague prayer. A moment later, he lowered it and followed his body's instructions.

He leaned forward and placed a light peck on her forehead.

That seemed to do the trick, Cordelia's hand gripped his tightly and her eyes scrunched. Robin retreated just before her eyes blearily opened. The red orbs turned to him, a haze dulling their shine. "…R…Robin?"

Robin smiled and stroked her cheek with his knuckles. "Hey…"

He wasn't expecting her to nearly leap from the cot and hug him, tears running from her eyes, but she did. "You're alive! You're-you're ok! I… I… I'm so sorry!"

She buried her head into his, thankfully uninjured, shoulder and sobbed. "I-I thought you were dead! And then, you rose out of the bed and started talking to me and I saw the shears and, and-"

Robin put a finger to her mouth. "It's fine, Cordy. I'm fine, you're fine, we're all fine. There's nothing to be afraid of, you didn't fail anyone, everything is just fine."

Cordelia's sobs slowed as she calmed down, though she didn't lessen her grip. "Everything's… fine?"

Robin nodded. "Yes, it is. Well, most everything. We couldn't save your hair clips."

He pointed to the bowl at the bedside and Cordelia slowly turned to stare at the ruined pieces, she picked them up tenderly. "These… they were my mother's gift. I… I destroyed them."

Robin shook his head and took the bowl from her. "No, you didn't. The madman you fought was the one to destroy them, not you. You need to understand that Cordelia, not everything that goes wrong is your fault."

Cordelia obviously didn't believe him. "It was my fault! I charged into battle out of some… asinine desire for vengeance, something so petty I'd be booted from the Knights! I let my head get away from me and now something dear to me is ruined and I damn near lost something even more precious! This is my fault, there's no other way around it!"

Robin was at his wit's end. Ever since she'd joined them at the pass, all she'd done was criticize herself and punish every minor mistake. He didn't want her to destroy herself over this guilt, especially when she had such a bright future before her.

"Cordelia, listen to me."

She turned to him, blinking when she saw the stone hair clips in his hands. "Where'd you find those?"

He sighed. "Lissa gave them to me. She said they'd found them on you, after the battle, and I wanted to… give them properly this time."

Cordelia slapped them away, the clips tinkling on the ground. "Don't… just, get them away from me. I don't deserve them. I don't deserve anything."
Robin would have slapped her, but he just picked up the clips. "Cordelia… talk to me damn it! Where does this… guilt come from? It's eating you alive and you won't tell me. It… It breaks my heart that you don't trust me enough to help you. And don't give me the 'I don't need help' excuse, do so and you'll be little more than a narcissist."

Cordelia glared at him, but her eyes slowly lost their fire. "You… you wouldn't understand. Sometimes, I wish I had your amnesia, it'd save me so much grief."

This time Robin did slap her. "You don't know what it's like to remember nothing. All but the most basic of things were lost to me and even now I still wonder what may have been. You know you have a family, you know you have friends and a home to return to. You know who you are. I have none of that, so hearing you say that sounds only selfish and childish."

Cordelia nursed her red cheek. "Ignorance can be bliss, especially when you're held to the standards of gods."

Robin sighed. "That's never made you depressed like this, if anything you didn't even notice people were giving you standards. What's the real issue?"

Cordelia didn't look at him. "I… It happened when I was at Fort Firald. My captain had just explained a tradition of the knights to me and I was steamed to just be learning about it. But, when I forgave her, she… called me the future of the Knights."

Robin pinched his nose. "So, that's the heart of the matter. She inadvertently placed a burden on you by giving you a compliment, but you took it as an expectation you had to meet. That's why you've worked yourself to the bone and let every failure, no matter your involvement, affect you personally."

He leaned forward, staring her in the eye. "That the gist of it?"

Cordelia nodded, eyes wide in surprise. Did he really know her that well?

Robin sighed. "Do you really think that's what she wants you to do? She already saw you as the future, but you're trying to be the future now. That's not possible, Cordelia, and you'll only destroy yourself if you keep going like this."

Cordelia wanted to snap at him, but her reason destroyed the irrational anger at last. That anger had done nothing but cause her more heartache and she wasn't about to let it win again. "I… I know, but… I don't know why I'm doing this anymore. I guess… I guess I just wanted to be punished. Ever since I fled the fort, I've felt like nothing more than a coward. I wanted someone, or something, to clean that stain away."

Robin nodded. "Your honor would allow no less. Cordelia… this is why I said duty isn't everything. I understand that it's a large part of who you are, but you can't obsess over it like you've been doing. All that leads to is sadness and pain, not just for you, but for those who care for you."

He reached out, presenting the clips once more. "Please, take these. Don't think of them as something you are not worthy to hold. Think of them as a promise."

Cordelia took them slowly, a childish wonder in her eyes. "A… promise?"

Robin nodded. "Yes, a promise that we'll be honest with each other. That we'll be there for each other through thick and thin. That we'll do everything we can to support each other. Sound good?"

Cordelia smiled, but didn't answer right away. Instead, she placed the slightly dusty clips in her hair
and fixed the mess a bit. "...How do I look?"

Robin smiled, cupping her still red cheek on reflex. "Beautiful."

Cordelia leaned into the touch, their bodies slowly inching closer until their foreheads met. They both closed their eyes, enjoying the moment.

"The answer is yes." Cordelia whispered. "I promise that I will support you, and that I will gladly have you support me. I'm sorry for everything that's happened, my stubborn refusal to see your gestures for what they were only made this worse."

"It's alright." Robin whispered back. "I have you back now, that's all that matters."

Their lips were separated by bare inches, each willing to take that next step but wanting to let the other take the lead. The hesitation cost them.

A crash rang through the air, making them jump away from each other. A pile of green metal and a familiar cowlick greeted them, followed shortly by a familiar voice.

"Stahl, you idiot! They were there, the bet was won! And you had to go and crane your neck, ruining everything!"

Stahl scrambled to his feet and beat a hasty retreat, Lissa hot on his heels. Maribelle walked in right after they left, her manner far too dignified for someone caught eavesdropping. "Alright, that's enough for today. Robin, go back to your cot, Lissa will doubtlessly join us shortly. Cordelia, I'm banning you from all sharp objects until further notice. You may have worked out some issues, but I'm not taking chances."

Robin stood reluctantly, but retreated from Maribelle's glare. Cordelia instinctively reached for him, but pulled back her arm as Maribelle walked up to her. After a quick onceover, Maribelle sent a burst of magic into Cordelia's body. "That should fix most everything. You'll have to deal with a new scar on your arm, but you're physically fit for duty."

Cordelia nodded. "Very well then. I assume you wish for me to stay, but cannot order it?"

"Well of course." Maribelle huffed. "Were it up to me, you'd be back in Ferox with three therapists, but circumstances. You're free to go, just report to Lord Chrom and Sir Frederick before returning to your tent."

Cordelia nodded and finally got out of the cot, pins and needles spreading up her legs as she stood. She looked around, confused. "Um, where's my armor, if I may ask?"

Maribelle pointed in a vague direction. "Supply wagon, same with Gungnir. Oh, and we've removed all sharp objects minus weapons from your things."

Cordelia nodded before wandering into the camp, the sandy earth shifting under her feet. No one spoke to her, doubtlessly worried, but she felt... almost at peace. She chuckled under her breath, wondering at why she'd been so stubborn when just getting the problem into the air made her feel so much better.

Her hand stroked her new clips. They were lovely, just like she thought they were, and now she had something physical to grasp and hold onto should the nightmares return. He'd given them as his promise after all and she never broke a promise.

Ever.
Robin sighed as Lissa finally declared him able to leave. His shoulder was sore, but the pain did little to him, even as he retrieved his armor and weapons. As he'd found out, they were camped next to the oasis that Cherche had spotted, the Plegian Guard stationed there making up little more than a token garrison.

He'd grimaced at that news. It meant that much of the Plegian forces had retreated to their big cities, particularly the capital.

Even in the face of this news, there was reason to be optimistic. A message from Flavia showed that the Feroxi forces were making better time than expected and the Shepherds had used the time to recuperate and start formulating a more specific plan.

That's how he found himself standing in an abandoned home with Chrom, Frederick, and Nowi. …Nowi was there because she was latched onto Frederick's back and refused to be pried off.

Anyway, they were staring at a map of Plegia with another map detailing the capital and its surrounding areas placed beside it. As Robin thought, it would be suicidal to try and charge the capital, Xaldornos, head on. The city had multiple levels built into it, the base supposed bones of Grima himself, and trying to fight would require scaling to those levels against who knew how many archers.

Skill only did so much in the face of black rain.

Chrom slammed the table. "Is there nothing we can do? Emmeryn is in that city, I know she is!"

Frederick shifted, Nowi's older form keeping her grip steady. "Milord, there's no way we can find Her Grace before the time of execution. Such high-value prisoners would be held somewhere only the king would know and even our best infiltrator wouldn't be able to do a thorough search in the time we have."

Robin nodded. "That's right, which is why we have to snatch her off the cliff."

Every eye flew to him, disbelief clear. "You want us to what?!"

Robin stared at Chrom. "There's no other way. We can't find her before it happens and she'll be under heavy guard until the moment she's forced out onto the cliff. At that point, it's her and the executioner. Kill the executioner and we can swoop in, grab her, and get the hell out of the city."

A booming laugh met them. "Well, that's a bold plan boy! I'd claim it myself, but how would this lot get out of the city?"

Basilio strode into the room, pausing when he spotted Nowi latched onto Frederick. "So… who's the pretty one hanging onto our favorite knight?"

"Oaf, can you focus for one thrice damned minute?" Flavia scolded as she walked in, barely sparing a glance to Nowi. "I have little doubt there's a story there, but we need an entry and exit strategy ASAP."

Basilio grunted. "Leave the exit to me. I can have Olivia and her troupe keep a route clear with some wagons, the Plegians won't suspect them of anything. That way, we get the hell out with as little trouble as possible."
Robin snorted. "We'll have Plegians on us like demons at all times, those wagons better bedamn fast."

Flavia laughed. "Ah, no need to overthink things. My forces can launch an 'assault' on the wallswhile you lot sneak in. I'll come with, I want to be the one to save the little lady from her executioner."

Robin hummed. "That's… not a bad idea. Tell me, do you think you can put a throwing axe into theexecutioner from the ground? If you can, that can be the signal for your forces to attack. While that'shappening, the Shepherds can storm the execution grounds and grab Emmeryn."

Flavia smirked. "Don't doubt me, Mr. Tactician, I've planted an axe from much further. The questionis, who's going to get the little lady?"

Chrom snapped his fingers. "Sumia, she's our best flier. She's got more experience flying with peopleso she'll know what to do."

Frederick shook his head. "A solitary Pegasus Knight, no matter the skill, is still vulnerable. All itwould take is a single lucky arrow."

Nowi spoke for the first time. "I can help!"

Flavia and Basilio gave her incredulous looks, leaving Robin to explain. "Khan Flavia, Basilio, meetNowi, a new addition. She's a manakete."

Basilio and Flavia continued to stare before they burst into laughter, making jokes at the ever-stoicFrederick's expense. One of the more colorful ones had to do with how the knight needed to slay thedragon, not something else.

Chrom got them back on track before turning to Nowi. "How can you help? Have you ever had totransport someone as a dragon?"

Nowi smiled. "Oh no, my claws will crush them alive. I was thinking as an escort and living shield. I don't like to boast much, but I'm good against arrows."

Chrom shared a glance with Robin before nodding. "That sounds good. Alright, looks like we havea plan. Robin, would you do the honors?"

Robin nodded and started making marks on the map. "Ok, here's what we'll do. The Shepherds willremain in front of the Feroxi forces, acting as a scouting force while we march. Once the Shepherdsreach Xaldoros, we'll await the Feroxi forces. Then, when the Feroxi are half a day away, theShepherds and Flavia will infiltrate the walls and make our way to the execution grounds."

He checked to make sure everyone was still with him before pointing to the map of the capital."Once we're there, we'll wait for the execution to begin. Emmeryn will be here, on this crag, withonly a single executioner. Flavia will kill the executioner while the Shepherds storm the grounds.After that, we'll clear the area around Emmeryn at which point Nowi and Sumia will fly up andretrieve her. Finally, we'll flee the city using the escape route that Basilio and the Feroxi create."

He looked around one more time. "If you find any other Ylissean prisoners, free them. It will do uswonders to find anyone, but special priority will go to Phila. Even then, if she's not found, we mustleave her. The Exalt's priority here, not her."

It was cold, he knew, but they couldn't scour the city for Phila. It'd be a miracle to escape withEmmeryn as was, let alone allowing enough time to find Phila.
Chrom sighed. "Much as it pains me, he's right. Spread the plan to the others, we march in three hours."

Frederick nodded and marched from the building, Nowi's feet dragging on the ground as she continued to hold on. Flavia and Basilio shared a chuckle at the knight's expense before leaving as well. Robin turned to leave, the maps in hand, when Chrom stopped him. "Robin, wait."

Robin turned to him and sighed at the sight. "What is it, Chrom? If you're going to ask about what happened with the Grimlea—"

Chrom grunted. "Not that. I want you to answer one question, that's it."

Robin stared, oddly calm in the face of Chrom's gaze. "Alright, go on."

Chrom walked up to him. "Robin… I want you to be honest with me. If… if I offered my blessing… would you marry Emmeryn?"

Robin recoiled, eyes stinging with surprise. "W-what?"

Chrom smirked. "I thought not. My actual question is… do you love her?"

Robin's gaze turned defensive. "Who do you mean by 'her'?"

Chrom's eyes narrowed. "You know who I mean. Do you love Cordelia? To the point that even the offer of becoming royalty makes you ill?"

Robin's eyes remained hard. "Of course. Without question, I love her more than my own life. But, I refuse to go any faster than she wishes and so for now, we remain friends. I truly think that Emmeryn is a great person and a wonderful friend, but I do not feel that way for her."

Chrom stared at his friend for a long time before laughing. "That's what I thought. Sorry for the out of nowhere question, I just wanted to make sure. You know… Cordelia had a crush on me for the longest time, but I never noticed. It took Lissa shouting at me for hours to get it through my skull."

His eyes grew hazed with nostalgia, Robin not sure how to take this. "But, I still only thought of her as a friend. I was worried that she'd waste her life pining after me, but then you came."

He grinned at Robin. "After you told me about how you seemed to know her, I thought there was a chance for her happiness. Heh, you can imagine my delight when I found out you were meeting regularly."

Robin was getting frustrated. "Get to the point."

Chrom rolled his eyes, grin still in place. "I'm getting there. Anyway, after that, I was concerned that you two had fought, but seeing how tender you were with her and how happy she was around you, I wanted to make sure that you loved her. I care for everyone in this company, you two included, and I didn't want this to come to an end before everything was resolved."

Robin finally understood. "So… you wanted to see that we were happy, is that it?"

Chrom clapped him on the shoulder. "Of course, that's what I want for everyone. You two have been through a lot, especially since I basically conscripted you into the Shepherds. Hopefully, there's something magical on the other side of all this."

Robin smirked. "Are you still talking about me, or you and Sumia?"
Chrom smacked him. "Let's think on this further when Emmeryn is safe and the war over. You still have much courting to do before anything happens."

Robin snorted. "And you could propose this moment and no one would bat an eyelash."

Chrom smacked him again and they laughed, walking back to the Shepherds and getting ready for the most important operation of their lives.

-Xaldornos, Day of Execution-

It was almost insulting how poorly the trap was disguised.

Robin waved Gaius and Panne over, pointing to the soldiers hidden in the crowd. "Take them out immediately, they have arrows."

Gaius spotted his target. "Man, they're not subtle, are they?"

Robin shook his head. "No, they're not. But if they'll let us in, let's not turn down the hospitality."

Panne snorted. "They're little more than cubs. I'll clear them out the moment the signal's given."

Robin nodded. "Good, just don't hit civilians. Emmeryn wouldn't forgive us otherwise."

Panne and Gaius dispersed, taking up their spots. Robin looked to the right and spotted Virion and Flavia. He'd had to repair the Khan's shattered pride after assigning Virion as a possible second signal, telling her repeatedly he trusted her skill but wanted to be sure.

That had taken longer than he thought it would, but now they were ready.

As he sat waiting for Gangrel to show his mad visage, his mind turned to a story that Chrom had shared with him about Emmeryn. It made Gangrel's zeal seem almost appropriate.

-Ylisstol, 15 years ago-

The coronation passed without incident. Emmeryn, the nine-year-old daughter of a zealot, was now Exalt.

She sat in her new room now, her siblings joining her, and her gaze turned outside the window. A large crowd was gathered outside the outer gates, the sturdy oak shifting against the pressure of the angry mob. She could see knights barring the gate and the mob dispersed after another failed attempt to break through.

Sighing, Emmeryn looked down at her younger sister, an innocent toddler with not a care. The young child was asleep now that they were alone, not a single crease on her peaceful face. Her younger brother though, was aware of everything.

"Are we going to die Emm?" He asked blankly, emotion absent.

Shocked from her daze, Emmeryn looked at her brother in equal parts amazement and horror. He was such a bright child, the question did not fit his voice

"No, we won't die little hero." Emmeryn answered softly, his face scrunching at the nickname. "Everyone's hurting, not just us."

She stood slowly, careful of Lissa, and gave Chrom a warm hug.
"But, the hurt will go away, we will heal." She began slowly. "It will take time, as everything does, but it will happen." She gave him a soft kiss on the forehead, bringing a teary smile to his face.

"And, before anything, you and Lissa are my life. I will go and build a world for you both, one that you can know and love with all the life I know it holds."

Her hug and whispered reassurance allowed him to sleep, feeling at peace for the first time in days. She would live up to them through the following years. When the people attacked her in both word and deed, she smiled and healed them. When parley with the former Plegian king looked to end in bloodshed, she made cooler heads prevail and peace be given. When assassins amongst her own people tried to kill her siblings, she stopped and forgave them without once spilling blood.

She was the picture of serenity and peace, even during the nights when the pressure sought to break her.

She, above all others, held the title Exalt to its highest peak.

Robin's recollection came to an end when he heard Gangrel's voice, the Mad King listing Emmeryn's supposed crimes with incomparable venom.

Robin ignored him and kept his eyes on the Exalt, licking his lips as the executioner pushed her forward. As they expected, she looked immaculate, now it was just her and the executioner.

Gangrel called for the executioner to do his work at the same moment Robin called to Flavia. "Now!"

Flavia reared back and threw her axe, the blade whirring through the air until it met the head of the executioner with a wet crunch. A javelin sized arrow impaled the man a moment later and the executioner fell to the earth.

The civilians in the crowd dispersed with frightening efficiency, making Robin wonder how often something like this happened. A moment later, the first axe of many met his blade. Panne and Gaius pounced on their designated targets, the hidden archers bleeding into the sand moments after the battle started.

Unfortunately, the Shepherds had to work their way around a wall to reach the execution ground. The lightly armored members could cross the sand with little difficulty, but the horses and heavily armored members were left with no choice but to form a rearguard.

Robin lopped off a man's arm and fired a wolf shaped bolt into another before he heard fighting further down the wall.

No one should be there yet. Did some prisoners escape?

He shook his head and took off for the for the sounds of fighting, soon being passed by Cherche with Vaike and Chrom flying with her. He cursed, begging his feet to move faster, when he felt himself yanked into the air and deposited in a saddle. The scent of cinnamon eased his pulse. "Warn me next time!"

Cordelia almost laughed, striking a Plegian away. "Then learn how to run! Come on, let's leave our potential allies to Lord Chrom, we need to get to the square."

Robin nodded and, when they'd escaped the sand, jumped from his perch. Lightning gathered in his hands and he blasted the closest Plegians away, a blast of purple miasma and another axe slaying the ones trying to attack from behind.
He glanced over to see a new pair fighting the Plegians. One was a beautiful woman with blond hair. To Robin's confusion, she wore priest robes. The second woman was sensuous, with pale skin and dark hair. She wore sheer silk under a voluminous robe.

He turned his eyes away just soon enough to avoid becoming a quiver. Arrows from behind him slew the archers and he saluted both Virion and Gaius for their help. Now, they just had a pair of makeshift bastions and the Plegians there blocking them.

Robin noticed Miriel and Gregor working their way to him, the mercenary slicing through two Plegians before they could move. "Miriel, blow that bastion to shrapnel!"

Miriel heard him and a blast turned one of the bastions to a smoking ruin.

Next, Robin saw Ricken. "Ricken, blow that other bastion away, scatter them!"

A tunnel of roaring wind birthed in the sand, the force and ripping dust scouring the bastion and Plegians.

Robin nodded, glad to see everything going well. "Alright, get rid of the leader and the plaza is ours! Vaike, smash him aside! If he can't do that, I want you to crush him Kellam! Failing that, rain every bit of hell you have on him!"

Vaike screamed his reply, charging the heavily armored General with all his bloodlust fueled speed. The General, an older man, seemed to laugh before sending a spear at Vaike. Vaike rolled away from the attack, but failed to notice a chain on the spear. The General yanked the spear back and its blade carved a deep furrow through Vaike's back and shoulder, sending him to the ground.

"Vaike!" Robin roared. "Lissa, get on him! Kellam, take that guy out!"

Lissa finished lobotomizing another mage before rushing to Vaike's side, cries of panic soon rising from her as blood continued to flow. Kellam stomped his way to the front and glared at the general. "Your weapon's cursed."

The General laughed. "Of course! In this world, you take every advantage you can get. I will not move from this spot. Your Witch Queen dies today!"

Kellam frowned. "Yeah… not happening."

The twin mountains of metal charged at each other, their steps shaking the earth. Kellam lowered his shoulder and crashed into the other man, using his superior strength to force him back. The General used the proximity to jab his cursed spear at Kellam, the purple miasma surrounding it growing with every strike.

Kellam finally got his leverage and threw the general to the ground, his own lance sinking into the General's vulnerable arm. Kellam panted and yanked his axe out and kicked the General's helmet off.

"Any last words?"

The General spat at him, smirking when his blurry vision focused in on a tuft of red coming towards them. "I may die, but I'll take two with me!"

Kellam grunted as the spear found a hole in his armor, the cursed blade sinking into Kellam's side. And, right before Kellam split the general's head with his axe, the cursed spear flew and Kellam heard his worst nightmare.
Sully screaming.

He spun on his heels and tried to run, stumbling when his knees became weak. Robin, seeing that both had been hit, screamed for Maribelle and the priest to help them. Staffs came out and healing magic flowed, but neither stopped bleeding.

Robin spat a foul curse. "Sumia, Nowi, get the Exalt and let's get out of here!"

Wings interrupted him, a trio of Pegasus Knights appearing right as Nowi and Sumia took to the air. One of them had a head of light blue hair that Robin would recognize anywhere. "Phila, you beautiful bitch!"

Phila apparently heard him and flashed a rude salute before racing for Emmeryn. Robin, slowly, felt his guard fall. They'd done it, all that was left was to get out of here.

"Ugh, you do not play fair."

Gangrel's voice rose over the din, making Robin turn his eyes to the Mad King. The king smirked. "But, my own tactician doesn't play fair either."

A purple mist oozed from Gangrel's perch, the miasma invading the bodies of every dead archer on the field. Too late, Robin realized the trap as the archers rose from the dead.

"Everyone, get down!"

Sumia and Nowi barely escaped, the other knights and Phila too far up to do anything. The Shepherds and Emmeryn could only watch in horror as the knights were riddled with arrows, their souls fleeing before they'd even hit the ground.

Gangrel laughed long and loud. "Ah, priceless! Exuent, three Pegasus Knight, stage left! We'll be asking the Exalt to exit stage right in a moment!"

"Gangrel!" Robin heard Chrom roar. "You'll pay for this, I swear it!"

Gangrel sniffed. "Sure, sure. Archers! If any of them so much as moves, make Her Grace the world's largest quiver!"

Robin gulped, mind casting about for ideas as Gangrel made his demands. The Fire Emblem for Emmeryn. Chrom looked to honestly consider it before Robin growled at him. "You cannot listen, Chrom! He will kill Emmeryn either way and we don't have the Emblem!"

Chrom grimaced. "But we could save her while he's distracted! Gah, what do we do? My duty says no, but my heart bleeds to give it to him!"

Robin could see the internal war driving his friend mad, but he could do nothing. Gangrel, growing impatient, delivered his ultimatum. "Give me the Emblem, now! If it's not in my hands by the time I count to three, the Exalt dies! One… Two…Th-"

Chrom roared back. "Enough, Gangrel! We… we'll give you the Emblem, just let Emmeryn go."

Emmeryn's voice echoed for the first time. "Chrom! You cannot give that which our people have protected for centuries in exchange for one life!"

Chrom looked to her, voice and eyes sad. "I know of the great enemy you've seen in the prophecies, Emm. The Emblem may help then, but your people need you now! We need you now!"
"...Very well, Chrom." Emmeryn answered, oddly serene. "King Gangrel... is there no chance you'll hear me out?"

"No! And if I don't have the Fire Emblem now, you'll die with a thwack and a thud, Witch!" the King answered.

Emmeryn seemed to come to a conclusion. "I understand. ...Plegians, hear me out! War has done nothing but give us pain and sadness, and I have worked all my life to try and rebuild what was lost. Even now, I still believe that peace is possible between not just our peoples, but all people. And on this day, I will show you... I will show you how a single, selfless act... can change the world."

She was met with silence, her gaze found only dumbstruck faces.

*No reaction... was I wrong then? Will this do nothing, even though I give up the chance to meet my nieces?*

She smiled as Lucina's face passed in front of her. "So be it. If it means I give them peace.

She hardened her face and walked to the edge of the cliff, her arms spread wide when she could see the entire city.

"No... Emmeryn!" Chrom shouted, bolting towards her with all the speed he could muster. The archers immediately fired, making Chrom swerve and dodge under the hail.

Seeing him run, Emmeryn felt the blue jewel she'd kept hidden glow against her breast. Then... she fell.

*Chrom... Lissa... I pass on a great burden to you. But, I know you'll be able to live up to the challenge and bring the peace that I could not.*

Lissa ripped Forseti out of Ricken's hands, Robin doing the same with Maribelle's Excalibur. Somewhere in their minds, they knew this wouldn't work, but they summoned the twisters all the same. Their desperation drowned their reason, screaming that the force of the wind would slow her down so she could live.

Instead, they missed.

As the twin tornados sprung to life, tearing the ground asunder and destroying the archers, Emmeryn fell onwards towards the ground, barely slowing as Naga greeted her. There was a brief flash of light and the tornados fell away, revealing a crumpled pile of robes.

Chrom stared at the pile, watchin a blue gem roll from the body and bounce against his feet. He picked the jewel up robotically, mind frozen even as Lissa wailed and screamed her pain to the world.

Robin was no better, barely noticing as the Shepherds bid a hasty retreat. Somehow, Emmeryn's body was retrieved and placed into one of the escape wagons before they fled the Plegian forces into a place called the Midmire.

Morale fell further when the news came. The wounds on their companions would not heal, no matter what magic was used. The curse was too strong and it would take more than what they had to cure them.

As if the fates weren't done with them, a Plegian force surrounded them. Robin didn't really remember what happened at first, his only clear recollection occurring after its leader mentioned
Chrom dashed forward and slew the first Plegian there, eyes cold with rage. He ran into the mud and killed every Plegian he found, using Falchion or Gradivus to kill them as brutally as possible. Robin remembered seeing the other Shepherds stare after him in equal parts fear and satisfaction, though that satisfaction came to an end when the Plegians failed to resist.

Then, sickness took hold and many turned away.

Only Sumia was willing to fly through the carnage, she found Chrom disarming the Plegian leader. She grew close enough to hear the man beg for the life of his troops before Chrom cast aside his weapons and started punching him.

He punched after the man's face was a pulp. He punched after the man stopped moving. He punched even when the skull gave way.

He kept punching until he was punched in turn, sending him into the mud.

He leapt to his feet, snarling until he saw Sumia with her arm outstretched and hair plastered to her head. It was too much of a downpour to tell, but she looked like she was crying.

The sight made Chrom's rage calm, his mind finally realizing what he'd just done. In his quest to avenge the death of his sister, he'd done the one thing he'd swore would never happen.

He'd slaughtered the unwilling.

He'd become his father.

He stared at his hand, horror shining in his eyes. Even the arrival of the others didn't register until he saw fear, honest fear, in Lissa's face. His stomach rolled and he vomited.

Everything in his gut was a poison, the anger and grief fleeing his body in squelches and heaves. He continued until he had nothing left to give and even then, needed Sumia to pull him up and guide him to the wagons that would take them away.

-Ferox, Castle Flavia Infirmary- Three days later-

Cherche sat beside Vaike, watching the rise and fall of his chest. She'd been on another side of the battlefield when Vaike had been injured, helping the dark mage Tharja with some Plegians. It wasn't until after the fall of Emmeryn she'd heard the news.

It had taken the intervention of Tharja and the war monk Libra to break the curse and save his life.

Across from her were two cots holding Sully and Kellam. They'd bled along with Vaike almost the entire way, nearly dying before the wounds had been closed. Their only visitors were Frederick and Nowi, making sure they were ok.

Frederick sighed. "Nowi, let's go. They'll be fine for now, we just have to wait."

Nowi nodded slowly. "I… I know we should. But… can we just keep an eye on them tonight?"

Frederick sighed, but nodded. Sully had saved Nowi early in the battle by noticing and killing a Plegian with a wyrmslayer. If she hadn't, Nowi would have taken serious injuries from the rare weapon.

Nowi settled into her seat and leaned into Frederick, smiling at Cherche when their eyes met. "How's
he doing?"

Cherche smiled back. "He's stable. It'll just take time for his blood to come back."

Nowi nodded and resumed her vigil, Frederick still as stone.

Cherche almost laughed. Nowi had liked to run around the camp as a child, but she always stayed in her older form whenever Frederick was around. She wasn't sure how perceptive Sir Frederick was, but it was obvious the manakete fancied him.

She sighed and turned her gaze back to Vaike, stroking his cheek tenderly. She wasn't sure why, but Vaike made her feel safe. Maybe it was his constant attempts to please her, or the way he always at least tried to follow through on his words, but he'd charmed her silly. She didn't know if he was just a fool or someone desperate to impress, but she liked him.

Minerva would say more than liked, but that was some ways into the future.

Cherche chuckled as sleep slowly claimed her, her head coming to rest on Vaike's heart. The steady beat lulled her to sleep, even as Frederick and Nowi gazed at her in amusement.

"To think, that Vaike would win a heart like hers." Frederick muttered, turning to Nowi when there was no response. He smiled when he saw the manakete asleep as well, her breath soft and deep.

He almost laughed.

Well, I'm not going anywhere anytime soon

Castle Flavia-Third Floor

Robin sat in the frigid hallway, wondering at how it all went wrong. He didn't care about the icy wind, even as it dug needles into his flesh. All he wanted was to be left alone.

A single lantern lit the hallway, its light coming closer and closer until the wind changed and Robin smelled her. Cordelia sat next to him in silence, neither speaking as the wind whistled through the hall.

They didn't need to say anything. Cordelia was willing to be there for Robin as he sorted himself out and Robin took strength from her presence. Eventually, he turned to her and pulled her into an embrace. She returned it and chuckled when she felt him fall asleep, even as his grip refused to let up. She rolled her eyes and worked his cloak around until it covered them both.

Eventually, his warmth lulled her to sleep as well, her ear seeking his heartbeat before she stilled. As the moonlight swept over them, Cordelia's clips shone to their true brilliance, forming a halo over her head and suffusing her in the warm glow. The light caught the gold in Robin's cloak and wings of light bloomed behind her, an angel to save the man from the darkness he held.

-Chrom-

He stared at the blue jewel, wondering why Emmeryn would hold something like it so close to her. He'd found a similar stone in the shield he held, but he could only guess at its significance.

He sighed and placed the jewel on a table next to his shield, almost leaving before noticing the gem shine in the low light.

"What?"
His voice seemed to do something, the jewel shining brighter until he had to look away. Finally, when the glow vanished, Chrom looked back and stared.

"It… it can't be."

Emmeryn smiled back at him, arms and legs crossed over her naked form with her eyes shining merrily. "Hello, Chrom. Can you help me find my clothes, I feel terribly exposed?"
Chrom stared at Emmeryn in stunned disbelief.

Here before him sat his sister, her eyes shining with mirth even as not but a thick blanket kept her decent. His sister that he had watched fall to her doom and whose body was being prepared for burial that very moment.

His mind simply couldn't understand.

Emmeryn tilted her head. "Well, I guess I should explain. Take a seat, this'll take a few minutes."

Chrom nodded slowly before sitting in the other chair, just staring at Emmeryn.

She made a show of covering herself. "Chrom, it's quite rude to stare."

He continued to stare, Emmeryn eventually shook her head. "I'm sorry, I sought to lighten the mood. As for why I'm here before you, when I should by all rights be dead… it's complicated."

Chrom rested his head on his hands. "I have all night. I'm still trying to decide if this is real or a cruel nightmare."

Emmeryn blinked at his blasé tone. "Well, I can tell you this is no dream. I'm here, touching, tasting, smelling, all sensations are here with me. I feel the cold in the room and the warmth of this blanket, but… I'm not here as you may think."

Chrom nodded. "So… what are you?"

Emmeryn reached over and grabbed the blue jewel that Chrom had placed on the table, a white light flashing with each word she spoke. "I am a construct, a vessel through which my body can experience the world. I can hold things, but do no magic, feel heat, but not burn. Even should I be cut, I will not bleed, for this form is not permanent. Instead, I reside in this gem, the final gift our mother gave me before Lissa was born."

Chrom reached out and held the gem, his mind still playing catch up. "But… how could mother's gift save you from death? What is this gem? Hell, what made it call you out when I placed it next to that shield?!"

Emmeryn grabbed his hand softly, voice firm. "This gem was a gift from Naga herself. Should the holder face death, the gem will look through their life and determine whether their soul is worth saving. It looked into mine and… found value, I suppose. Through it, I may now see what the future will hold, but I cannot continue to rule."

Chrom shook his head. "That much, I can agree with. You've been announced dead, to reverse it after three days is ill advised. Even if you only truly exist in that gem, then I am glad. But, the question remains, why come out now?"

Emmeryn smiled and took the gem back, tapping the shield on the table. "The gem only creates a construct when it comes close to a pure font of Naga's power. So, I did not appear until you placed me next to this shield."

Chrom stared at the shield, not sure why it would do such a thing. "But, it's just a shield. A far sturdier and lighter shield than I expected, but it's no font of holy power."
Emmeryn's smile did not falter. "That doesn't surprise me. The enchantment was made by some of the most powerful sages to ever live. But, that enchantment is weak enough that I can now dispel it."

Her hand reached over and tapped the shield, the worn wood, rusted moorings, and chipped paint curling and shedding to the floor. Chrom, after watching the excess fade for a moment, caught sight of gold and the blue gem he'd found hidden in the shield slowly changed to white.

Emmeryn giggled at his stunned face as the transformation came to an end. "Shocking, isn't it? You offered the Emblem to Gangrel, thinking you could buy time with something you didn't have, when the very same treasure sat on your arm the entire time."

Chrom stared again, his mind trying desperately to wrap his head around all the new information. Eventually, he gave up and sighed. "This… I need some time to take all this in. I'll go get your robes at least, but dear Naga, don't wander away from this room. I fear we'll have the others calling for an exorcism and Lissa may have a heart attack."

Emmeryn giggled. "Don't worry, I won't leave. If it makes you feel better, I'll stay in the corner while I wait."

Chrom shook his head and swept out of the room, leaving Emmeryn to hum an old tune. She was glad, about how things had turned out, but she could not mourn quite yet. Her life may have been spared, but Phila, her oldest friend, had not been so lucky.

She sighed and blinked, a curious sight greeting her eyes.

Is it just me… or did the room get darker?

A quick glance around confirmed the idea. The three candles that had been providing light to the room had darkened considerably, but the flames were too large to give off so little light. She narrowed her eyes before her mind screamed in pain. Her vision scrambled and her soul strained in the gem that was her home. Eventually, dark boots enter her blurred vision.

A dark chuckle reached her ears. "I see… so, Naga keeps one of her favorite pets alive through something I had no way of knowing about. Clever, if only just."

Emmeryn saw another pair of boots enter her vision, these decidedly smaller. "My lord, can we not take her as is? I've always wanted this particular soul…"

The dark chuckle sounded again. "No, not yet. Let her steep in the fear that her presence changes nothing. My resurrection and yours will be soon enough, my queen, all we need is patience."

The two voices laughed before the boots disappeared and Emmeryn's mind returned. She panted into the stillness, the breaths doing nothing to help the pain she'd felt in their presence.

What… was that? I knew those voices, even as corrupt as they were, but why were they here? What resurrection were they talking about?

Her mind tried in vain to conjure the faces that went with those voices, the strain from the brief encounter making her ache.

"Emm!"

Chrom rushed into the room, her robes in hand. His hands found her shoulders and she felt her soul
relax. "What happened? Are you alright?!"

Emmeryn slowly took her hands from her head. "I'm... I'm alright. I guess coming out of the crystal the first time was more of a strain than I thought it would be."

Chrom didn't look convinced, but he let the subject drop. "Alright then... Anyway, I brought your robes. Just so you know, it's nearly dawn and I'd prefer Robin and Lissa know about this before we do anything further."

Emmeryn paused as she reached for the robes. "Robin? I thought for sure you'd have Frederick here too."

Chrom shook his head. "You saw what happened to Kellam and Sully. Frederick trained them himself, so he's more or less become their sentry. Robin will shake out of his guilt if he sees you and we can get back on track."

Emmeryn nodded, but stared at him when he presented her with her halo, the symbol of her position. "Chrom, enough. I cannot lead further and there is no point in giving that to me. Let it be buried with my body and let me start over again, as both your sister and your advisor."

Chrom pulled back his offering. "I thought you'd say that. You always did hate this thing."

Emmeryn chuckled and gestured for Chrom to leave. "You know me so well. Anyway, if you'd let a lady have her privacy?"

Chrom nodded, but looked back one more time before he left. "Thank you, Emm."

Emmeryn just smiled at him and he left. She chuckled as the blanket fell around her and she began her usual routine.

>You thank me, Chrom? If anything, I should thank you. Your daughter's the one that let me believe this could ever be possible.

She paused in her musings. *Hm... I wonder how she and Cynthia are doing?*

---

_Ylissean Forest, Same time-

What were they going to do now?

They'd arrived in Xaldornos just in time to see Emmeryn make her final plea and die. Were it not for Severa, Lucina and Cynthia would have just dropped to the sand and let death take them. Even now, as they tried to spar, their grief was clear in every movement.

Severa sighed, rubbing the cover of her tome. It was the last piece she had of her once loving family, the very essence of her mother's magic bound into the never ending pages. Even after going through the bare scraps of writing her father had left with Laurent, she'd never learned how the magic was bound. Let alone how it never ran out of pages, regardless of how often she used the tome.

Quite the gift, though naming it Ragnorok had always made her chuckle darkly. Maybe they knew it would be their last gift and named it as such?

She shook her head of those thoughts, her eyes looking down to Mercurius.

If Ragnorok was her gift, Mercurius was her inheritance. Mother may have tried to get her interested in using a lance, but Severa always preferred swords. They bonded over magic at least, but it was
Mercurius she was presented with after Dad's death. Morgan got Gungnir instead.

She sighed, letting those thoughts go. Lucina and Cynthia needed to snap out of this before anything else could be done. She couldn't even allow herself thoughts of Morgan.

Honestly, if Dad hadn't drilled the ability to keep calm in the face of adversity into her head, they'd likely be dead by now. It's what allowed her to be annoyed when Cynthia tackled Lucina to the ground and disarmed her.

Severa walked up to them and pulled Cynthia off of her sister. "Alright, that's enough. Team meeting, now."

Cynthia nodded and reached to help up her sister, but Lucina slapped the hand away. Severa's eyes narrowed at Lucina as she picked herself up. "What's your problem?"

Lucina glared at her. "My problem? What's your problem? You haven't cared about any of this, not even a blink when Emmeryn fell off the cliff!"

Severa groaned, this wasn't the time. "Lucy, let's not do this-"

Lucina growled. "No, you want to know why I'm upset? Fine, you're why I'm upset. What happened is why I'm upset. Everything I've done since I was a child amounting to nothing is why I'm upset! Get it?!"

Severa snarled back. "I'm, making you upset?! If I hadn't kept my head, you'd be a dried up husk in the desert! And why are you being so freakin' angst ridden about what happened, you're not a thrice damned messiah!"

"I watched my aunt die, because we were late! Because you insisted that we take the long way around!" Lucina screamed in Severa's face.

Cynthia broke her silence. "I'm sorry, your aunt? She's my aunt too, and I didn't get the special privilege of speaking to her! You don't have the right to be all high and mighty about this!"

Lucina rounded on her sister, but Cynthia was nowhere close to done. "And why do you always take everything personally, why are you the special one! You saw Dad before he died, you saw Mom before she died, and now you met auntie?! Why the hell do you go off and do all these things and never tell me?!!"

Cynthia started to sob, despair rolling in her gut. "You saw Dad the night he left, but you didn't wake me when your gut told you something was going to happen! You saw Mom off in the wee hours of the morning, but you left me in my room! You didn't even have one of the servants get me! All you've ever been is selfish, even when you suffer, I'm sick of it!"

She spun on her heel and ran into the forest, leaving Lucina and Severa's anger to drown under a pall of shock. Lucina didn't look like she'd be moving anytime soon, so Severa took off after the wayward princess.

It took some searching, but she found Cynthia sobbing in a tiny clearing. It was really weird to see the chipper girl lose her cool, but Severa could sympathize. They both knew Lucina had a martyr and messiah complex and it got annoying to deal with, but they'd persevered. At least... they had until Lucina went and took all the blame again.

Severa sighed and walked over to Cynthia, plopping next to her with a sigh. "Don't be so hard on yourself. I'd have exploded at her if you hadn't."
Cynthia choked another sob. "I'm mad at everything, Sev. I just want to be alone."

Sev wrapped an arm around the younger girl. "So do I, but we don't exactly have a choice. Look, Lucina's thinking everything's gone downhill and so are you. But, we have changed things, right? Uncle Kellam can still fight, your dad's not hurt, everyone's safe in Ferox right now. This whole war could be over in three months, not three years. That's something, right?

Cynthia's sobs slowed, but her words were not what Severa expected. "Stop trying to be the grown-up, Sevra. You're just as broken over this, don't try and hide it from me. Besides, I don't need you to comfort me, I'm not Morgan."

Severa jumped to her feet like she'd been branded. "Well, if you're going to be prissy about it, fine! Come find me when you get your damn head on straight... and I expect an apology at that!"

She turned with a huff and stomped further into the forest, not once looking back. She didn't know where she was going; all she knew was that she needed to get the hell away from the two self-pitying sad sacks that had the gall to masquerade as her friends.

_Seriously, they're so caught up in their moping they don't see the good in it. Yes, I'm sad we couldn't save Emmeryn, but her death meant something this time! Every Plegian patrol we slipped by looked like they didn't want to be there at all, and I heard more than a few whispers that Gangrel's support is crumbling._

She finally slumped against a tree and stared into the leaves. "Damn it, where are you, Morgan? I need your optimism."

Only a breeze rustling the leaves answered her.

_Her heart sped in anger and her back pulsed with pain. "What, you won't answer me?! Ok, I admit I was jealous when we were younger, but can you blame me? I didn't know you had a breathing problem; you were just a brat that took all of Mom and Dad's attention from me! But we're sisters damn it, we got past that. So come on... just tell me where you are..."

Silence was her answer._

Severa felt her pulse slow and she sighed. "Look at me, bargaining with someone that can't hear me. I don't know where she is, no one does. I can just hear Mom and Dad telling me that I should keep a better eye on her though, even if she's old enough as is."

The leaves rustled again, but there was no breeze. Instead, the noise came from the undergrowth further in the woods. Severa frowned and stood up, eyes scanning the brush. Eventually, her eyes spotted a dark spot a long way off from where she stood, but it was growing by the second.

_The hell?!_

Severa dove to the side and avoided a big, black, neighing object. It wasn't until she was sure the thing wouldn't charge her again that Severa finally got a good look at the creature.

_Her throat ran dry. "T-Theresa!"

The Pegasus neighed in greeting, her snout nuzzling Severa's shoulder. Severa had just enough control to pat the Pegasus's head, but her mind was spinning._

_This has to be Theresa, I'd never forget those eyes! But, why is she black? She was still white when she came back to us and there were only grey feathers when she was with-"
She caught up with her thoughts and her breath froze. "Theresa… is Morgan with you? Is she ok, can you take me to her?!"

Theresa snorted, her head gesturing where she came from. At that moment, a young woman's voice rang through the air. "Theresa, where'd you go? Come on girl, we can't just have you run off like that, we need to find sis!"

Severa ignored the tears that burst from her eyes, her mind racing to memorize every last detail around her. The way the light fell through the trees, how Theresa's mane shifted, how she moved, and the way the leaves parted to reveal a head of scarlet red.

The figure's eyes landed on Theresa first. "There you are! You need to stop running off so much, I can-"

The girl's eyes found Severa and they widened, her voice fell to a whisper. "…Sis?"

Severa's brain raced to memorize the new image, words failing her. The other girl was shorter than her, only coming to her nose even in her riding boots. A black and white riding dress covered her, dirt and grime smudging the once pristine cloth, but the steel of her armor shone in the light. Above the metal that encased her torso and arms was a youthful face with tears starting to make tracks in the dirt. Mismatched eyes made a mirror of Severa's own, an opal on the left and a garnet on the right, before a mat of tangled scarlet hair hid them from view. The last thing Severa saw were a pair of light blue hair clips, the silver stained and the gold caps long since gone.

Words finally came to Severa's mouth. "…Morgan, i-it's you."

Morgan's only answer was to start sobbing, hands covering her eyes. Severa almost ran to her, but Morgan took a shaky step forward. Then another, and another, until she was right in front of Severa.

Severa reached out shakily. "Morg?"

Morgan choked another sob before she wrapped Severa in a crushing hug, wailing into Severa's shoulder. "Sev, I missed you so, so much! Don't leave me again!"

Severa rubbed her sister's head, wrapping her other arm around the smaller girl. "I'm the one who should be saying that. Next time, you come with me when I say so, no heroics."

Morgan nodded into her sister's shoulder, still sobbing. Theresa, wanting in on the hug, draped one of her wings over the sisters. Severa was glad for the privacy the wing provided, a brief thanks going to Theresa before she buried her face in her sister's messy mane.

For once, as her tears wet the scarlet tresses, she knew no pain. Her mind was at ease and her back was silent.

All she felt was raw, honest, relief.

Lucina and Cynthia, their issues worked out after a long argument and even longer apology, hid in the brush. They were desperate to greet their wayward friend and humble themselves before Severa, but they would not interrupt this moment.

Severa had her family back. To ruin this was to court damnation.

-Castle Flavia-
Lissa stared silently into the lightening sky, eyes glassy. She’d worked so hard, stretching every minute of her training to the limit, and it hadn't done squat. She wasn't able to heal her friends until their new members had broken the curse, hadn't been able to help Cordelia cope with her grief, and now…

She'd failed her sister, at the time when she needed her most.

She didn't really care that the sun was about to rise, or that they'd come to an agreement about taking down Gangrel next month. She just wanted to be away from everyone and stew in her failure. Emmeryn would be buried with full honors the moment the war was over, but there was still the problem of restoring order to Ylisse in the wake of everything.

Lissa sighed for the millionth time, kicking her feet against the ledge she was sitting on. The top of the castle was nice and quiet, if cold, but she welcomed the pricks dancing on her skin. It made her feel alive and awake as she gazed at the frozen world of snow.

Boots thudded against the stonework, but Lissa ignored the noise. It wasn't until the wonderful scent of roast chicken found her nose that she looked back. "Oh, hi Donny. How'd you find me?"

Donnel shrugged and plopped next to her, placing a wrapped pair of drumsticks on the stone between them. "Well, the roof's a right place to be alone. I sat myself down here too, 'member?"

Lissa nodded. "Oh, right… You came up after you came with us because… oh."

Donnel sighed, breath misting in front of them. "Yeah, my pop. He taught me how to hunt, ya know, and a lot of other things. The goatkeep may have taught me how to read, but pa knew everthin' else. It's… still raw."

Lissa nodded and grabbed her drumstick, tearing a bite out of it before speaking. "I know if anyone feels like that, it's me. You lost him when those dastards attacked your village and I just lost Emm."

Donnel nodded and took a bite out of his piece. "Yeah… Sorry, didn't want to make ya all glum. Just… wantin' to lend an ear I guess."

Lissa almost smiled, his goal warming her heart. "That's kind of you, Donny. But… I just want to be alone right now."

Donnel shook his head. "That's the last thing a perty girl like you needs. My ma always said, 'people need people to mourn, bein' alone only makes it worse.'"

Lissa felt her cheeks flame up and she was glad for the cold. "She's… very wise. Really, Donny, I appreciate it, but I just want to sort this out myself."

Donnel sighed and tore through the rest of his snack before standing. "Well, ya ain't got a choice. Your brother asked me ta get you, said it was important."

Lissa rolled her eyes, a grimace painting her face. "Well, if that's what you were told, fine. Just let me finish this off."

Donnel shrugged and had to keep a smirk off his face. Lissa took note of the mirth, but resigned herself to tear through the chicken as quick as she could. Not very ladylike, but she didn't care right now.

Donnel grabbed the bone from her when she was done. "Hey, want to hear sometin' cool?"
Lissa's curious eyes were his answer. "Ok, in ma village, it's a tradition use bones when one a the villagers dies. We go to a cliff, take a thigh bone a whatever we have the most of, and snap it. Then, we toss the bones over the cliff."

Lissa wondered at that. "Why?"

Donnel shrugged. "The bones 're suppose to represent the life, strong and steady, till death breaks it and frees the soul inside it. Then, castin' 'em over the cliff shows that they've left the world and we gotta move on. It's our way of showing them they'll be missed."

Lissa felt a faint stirring in her mind at that, a voice she hadn't heard in a while. "A surprisingly fitting tribute. Humble, but to the point. Take note, little arbiter, you may be doing this and more one day."

Lissa shook her head and the voice was gone. That was… odd. "Do you… want to do that here?"

Donnel nodded, snapping the thigh bones like twigs. "This here's for my pa and your sister. Want to do the next part?"

Lissa gulped and took the bones reverently, a part of her mind feeling a little silly at holding the broken pieces so carefully. But she took the pieces to the edge and paused. "Um, do I say something?"

Donnel chuckled. "You don't have to if you don't want to. Ma says silence can say more t'an anything."

Lissa chuckled too, her heart a little lighter. "Well, I think I need to say something. …Ok, here I go."

She stepped to the ledge and held out the bones. "Emm, I'm sorry I couldn't help you. I'm sorry that I couldn't help my friends. I'm sorry I couldn't live up to what I've always wanted to be."

Only the winter wind answered her. "But… I'm going to keep trying. That's what you always told me, and I'll live by it from now on. I may not be able to help everyone, but I'll follow your example 'till the day I die. Thank you, for all the years you've given me. Now, I hope you can rest and be at peace."

She was surprised at the strength in her voice, but her heart ached with relief as the words spilled out. She smiled and looked back to Donnel. "Hey, Donny, what was your pa's name?"

Donnel smiled at her, eyes alight with something she couldn't describe. "My pa's name was Owain. My grandma and grandpa were kinda funny."

Lissa smiled. "Owain, huh? Well, Mr. Owain, I'm glad you helped bring Donny along. He may not be the cleverest, or the most articulate, but I wouldn't trade his friendship for anything. I hope you can rest in peace too, and know that Donny's a great guy."

She closed her eyes and let the bones drop, feeling at peace with the winter sun that finally crested the horizon.

Donnel was struck by her poise and beauty, silently committing the sun around her to memory. Lissa chuckled and started towards the stairs, waving for Donnel to follow her. "Come on, Donny, we have to meet Chrom!"

Donnel snapped back to reality and ran after her, glad to see the sun finally rising for her.
Robin grunted as he helped Kellam with a training lance. On the orders of the Shepherd’s newest healer, a beautiful priest named Libra, Kellam was slowly working himself back into fighting shape with liberal applications of healing magic and physical therapy. Robin had volunteered to help in the process, both to help his friend and ease his guilt.

Kellam’s voice caught his ear. "Still thinking about what happened with Libra?"

Robin snorted, feeling his ears burn. "Of course I am, everyone is. I called him a woman to his face, how would I not be embarrassed?"

Kellam chuckled, but the grimace on his face belied the mirth. "Yes, well, you aren't the only one. He's just so… ethereal, I guess."

Robin laughed. "Did you hear what Virion said about him? He said that if he had even a tenth of Libra’s beauty, every maiden’s heart would be his!"

Kellam coughed a laugh, his lance shaking. "That sounds just like him. And, how many more times are we doing this today?"

Robin did the math with a hum. "About twenty more, we're almost done."

Kellam nodded. "Good, good. It’s a lot better, but it still smarts."

Robin’s mood fell at the reminder of the injury. "How's… how's Sully doing?"

Kellam sighed as they stopped the exercise. "She's not taking it all that well. The dastard's spear may have missed anything vital, but the curse… It'll be a miracle if we can ever make a family."

Robin sighed, melancholy making him nauseous. "I'm sorry. I know you two were hoping to have children some day."

Kellam sighed in turn, massaging his temples. "Yeah, and I doubt her family's going to be happy about it. She's an only child and her family wants an heir, continue the good name and all that. They weren't too happy when she accepted my proposal either, her father still refuses to speak with me."

Robin shook his head, silently cursing the sheer misfortune. "Well, she loves you and you alone. I think you two'll be fine, you just need to have faith."

Kellam chuckled under his breath. "At this point, that's all we have. Remind me to thank Frederick later, he's likely telling Sully the same thing right now."

Robin nodded, but a familiar voice interrupted their heart-to-heart. "Sir Robin, Lord Chrom requires your presence. I'll take over Sir Kellam's care for now."

Robin turned to find the one and only Libra walking towards them, accompanied by their other new member. "Libra, Tharja. Is it important?"

Libra nodded his head at the greeting and the dour woman behind him muttered what sounded like a greeting. "He said it was urgent."

Robin puffed his hair out of his face and stood up. "Alright, I leave my friend to you. Try not to lose him this time, ok?"
Libra huffed while Tharja chuckled darkly. Robin ignored them and strode into the guts of the castle, his thoughts only turning to his new arrivals when he was well away from them.

Libra was, as his conversation with Kellam showed, a priest of such beauty he was often mistaken for a woman. His patience was saintly too, if his handling of the misunderstanding was anything to go by.

Tharja was a dark mage and formerly part of Gangrel's forces. She'd defected when the realization that her life and that of those around her meant nothing to the king and Libra had trusted her enough to offer his help when she'd been injured trying to flee.

She was a little creepy, all things told, but she'd broken the curse on their injured comrades for what amounted to an act of generosity and it seemed Libra had her undying loyalty. Combine that with Libra's devotion to Ylisse and she was assured to stay with them.

Still didn't make her any less unnerving, even if she was starting to lighten up a bit.

Robin shook his mind free just in time to avoid Frederick. By the looks of it, Sully's lesson was over and Nowi had taken advantage by jumping onto her customary spot on his back.

Robin waved to the manakete, glad she was in her adult form today. "Good day, Nowi. Bothering Frederick like always, are we?"

Nowi giggled from Frederick's back, the other man holding her with ease. "Nah, I'm just hanging out with him. Sully's supposed to rest up, but I asked Frederick to do something fun that wasn't training."

Robin's eyes widened. "And what could that be? I've only ever seen him enjoy training and starting fires."

Frederick sniffed, annoyance cracking his stoic mask. "I'll have you know I can do more than just that for enjoyment. Lady Nowi observed Lady Olivia practicing a routine and wished to learn from her. However, Lady Olivia is not the best teacher, so I've been asked to teach her the basics."

Robin popped his lips. "Ah, that explains it then. Well, don't let me stop you, have fun."

Frederick nodded and marched away, Nowi giggling on his back the whole way. Robin sincerely hoped she'd stop doing that at some point, if only because it was strange for a young woman to be carried everywhere, dragonhood be damned.

A breath exploded from his mouth and he hurried along, almost running over Vaike and Cherche in his haste. He exchanged a quick apology and well-wishes before taking off again, this time feeling his lips twist in a smirk.

Cherche had taken Vaike's injury personally and had appointed herself his caretaker. Vaike had complained about not needing help for all of five seconds before he realized his crush was going to be interacting with him day in and day out for his entire recovery.

It truly was entertaining to see how charmed they were with each other. Though it made Virion and Minerva more than a little exasperated, much to everyone else's amusement.

Finally, after far too long a delay, Robin arrived at Chrom's room. The prince was always here, after what had happened, so Robin never bothered asking where to find him.

He opened the door with a sigh. "Alright, Chrom, what-"
His eyes caught sight of an apparition and he retreated from the room, slamming the door behind him. He counted to ten before slowly opening the door again, just enough to peek inside. Yep, that was Emmeryn's ghost, she'd come to haunt him.

The spirit was smiling at the door, but he refused to enter. He'd read stories of events such as these, where the dead would appear before the living, and such encounters rarely ended well.

"Hey, Robin, what are you doing?"

The voice made him jump from the door, adrenaline making him burst into a cold sweat. "Begone spirit!"

His eyes found a smiling Lissa, her face scrunched in an attempt to keep her mirth in. Miraculously, she succeeded. "Well, I'm no spirit and don't intend on being one anytime soon. Now, why are you peeking into my brother's room? He and Sumia finally pluck up and tango?"

Robin's ears subconsciously flamed. "No, that, what are you even asking?! Look, just, don't go in there, he's not here!"

Lissa frowned. "Really? Then he wouldn't mind us checking, now would he?"

Robin grabbed her reaching hand. "No, I already looked! He… must be getting something to eat, yes!"

Lissa rolled her eyes. "Please, we both know he's taken his food in his room ever since we came back. Now let me go!"

Robin tried to stop her other hand, but the door flew open to reveal a very annoyed Chrom. "What the devil are you two doing?! Get in here, before anyone else comes!"

Lissa smirked at Robin before following him inside. A moment later, a piercing shriek rent the air and there was the sound of two voices panicking. Robin took a deep breath and forced himself into the room, his back to anyone there until he'd shut the door.

His entire being felt drowned in sweat, but he dredged up his courage and turned to face the phantom. Who was, surprisingly, carrying Lissa to the bed.

Chrom must have seen his face. "This… is complicated. Believe it or not, that's Emmeryn, though not exactly in the flesh."

Emmeryn, honest to heaven Emmeryn, finished making Lissa comfortable and walked in front of Robin. She looked him up and down before smiling warmly. "You don't believe I'm real, do you?"

Robin shook his head, mute in the face of a miracle.

Emmeryn's smile turned to a smirk. "Well, how about this?"

Emmeryn stepped close to him, a little too close for his liking, and he felt a warm pair of lips press against his cheeks.

His mind froze, she was real!

Emmeryn pulled back from him, smiling like a cat at both Robin and her brother. "Believe now?"

Robin did the only thing he could, even as Chrom gave him a surprised stare.
He followed Lissa's lead and screeched for all he was worth before he blacked out.
For the next few hours, Robin and Lissa took turns waking up, screaming, and fainting.

Chrom and Emmeryn slowly gave up trying to calm the two, instead spending their time discussing what Chrom would need to do after the war was over. This swiftly devolved into a tense standoff when Chrom revealed his solution to the conflict.

Kill Gangrel.

Emmeryn, ever the pacifist, objected to such an extreme and final measure. They could simply imprison him and be done with it, there was no need for killing.

Chrom's answer in the face of that was simple. "Emm, I know you wouldn't harm someone even if they did you harm, but think for a minute. Gangrel has gone completely mad, he cannot be reasoned with. For your sake, I will try, but imprisoning him isn't an option. He will escape to wreak more havoc on us and if I must end him to save others, I will."

Emmeryn's hands tightened in her lap. "Chrom... that's all I can ask. Please, just try for peace, if only for your peace of mind. My heart aches at the thought of what's likely to happen, but I will not stop you."

Chrom blinked. "My peace of mind? Emm, I've been calling for Gangrel's head on a pike for years now, why would I need peace of mind?"

Emmeryn sighed again, smoothing an imaginary fold in her robes. "Chrom, you never did learn how Gangrel came to power, did you?"

Chrom shook his head. "No specifics. All I know was that he was the king's nephew and he ascended after the immediate royal family was killed during the Purge."

Emmeryn nodded. "All except the king himself, yes. Remember, I parleyed with King Gerrick myself, but to see him... he was so haggard and angry with the world after we signed the peace treaty. You could see it in his eyes that he had no reason to live. Two years after we signed the accord, he was dead of drink."

Her eyes glazed over, the light in the gem that held her dimming. "It was such a violent time when that happened. With no immediate heir, every noble house in Plegia staked a claim on the throne. Gangrel's mother knew that he had the greatest and most legitimate claim, so she pushed him into the fray. Before it began, he was a performer, reveling in the joy he brought to the audience with the plays he sponsored and participated in."

Chrom's eyes narrowed, a faint memory trying to claw its way out. "How do you know this?"

Emmeryn smiled at him. "Why, Gangrel visited Ylissol often in those two years. Plegia has never been much of a place for the arts so he spent his time in the city developing his work. I caught wind
of his talents and invited him and the troupe he'd joined to perform in the palace. As I recall, you and Lissa were greatly entertained by his comedy acts."

Chrom's memory finally clawed itself free, an image of a much younger, sane, Gangrel dancing like a fool before a clapping Lissa.

Emmeryn continued unabated. "In fact, you both were quite taken with him. When he left, Lissa wailed that she didn't want him to leave, at one point clinging to his leg. He took it all in good humor, promising to return later, and that was the last I saw of him for years."

Chrom's head was in his hands now. "So... what happened to him?"

Emmeryn shrugged. "He was forced into the power struggle. The paranoia and betrayal, along with the pressure of his position, eventually broke him. Where once he was a gentle actor and comedian, his sufferings twisted him into who you know today."

The room fell silent, Chrom's thoughts churning along. Emmeryn, seeing this, dropped one more truth. "Believe it or not, I had met Gangrel even earlier than that. You weren't born yet, but King Gerrick had come to Ylisstol for an official visit long before the Purge started. It was then I met Gangrel and the original crown prince, Prince Forsith. While our fathers met, we played and pranced about the gardens for hours, our mothers chatting. We were but babes, but I still remember that joy in Gangrel's eyes, and I knew it was him when he came to the palace. I was... distraught, when I met him for the first time as King of Plegia."

Chrom finally heaved a sigh. "Now it all makes sense. You were so patient with him not only because you didn't want a war, but because you wanted to help an old friend."

Emmeryn smiled. "Exactly. It may seem selfish, but I believed, right until the moment I fell, that he could be saved. I still do, to some extent, and that's why I ask for you to try. But, if he still refuses... then at least give him peace."

Chrom sighed again. "Emm, you could have saved me so much grief if you'd told me this long ago. I have little doubt there are reasons, but I don't want them. I have a lot to think about now, but I'd prefer our sister and friend finally calm down before that happens."

Emmeryn chuckled. "Very well, then let us speak of another important topic. You and Lissa have been gone for quite some time, and we didn't have time to remove Duke Carlen. By the time this is over, you will likely be staring down a very angry Duchy with Carlen having much of the temples behind him. That, and Felds stands headless with Carlen having more than a little sway over them."

Chrom snorted. "Carlen has no right to be angry. He refused the call to arms when Plegia invaded, any aggression from him will invite the nobility's wrath. Besides, Superius and its nobles have long desired Draconis's lands. He's not foolish enough to risk a confrontation with the deck so stacked."

Emmeryn's eyes twinkled. "There's a spark of wisdom. I never thought I'd see the day."

Chrom snorted, but another groan stopped his snappy comeback. "For Naga's sake, Robin, don't scream this time."

The tactician sat up with another groan, his eyes glued shut. "Forgive me if I gape at the impossible. But, knowing that I will faint again if I open my eyes, please explain what's going on."

Emmeryn giggled. "My, so well-spoken for one that just woke up. Very well, should I do it, or do you want to Chrom?"
Chrom rolled his eyes. "I'll do it. Ok Robin, here's the situation-

Another groan interrupted him and Lissa rose from her spot. Her eyes were covered by her hands. "Chrom, is the ghost gone?"

Robin could hear Chrom's teeth grind. "Lissa, sit there and listen. Don't uncover your eyes until I'm done. The same goes for you, Robin."

Chrom saw their heads nod so he gave them the best explanation he could, Emmeryn happily correcting him when he flubbed a detail. By the end of it, Robin and Lissa had uncovered their eyes and were staring at Emmeryn. Or, more specifically, the gem on the table.

Lissa found her voice first. "So… you're in there?"

Emmeryn nodded, the white light flashing. "Indeed. I am no longer a part of this world as you know it, so by all rights, I am dead. It's only through the grace of Naga and our mother that I have the privilege to remain with you."

Robin's face scrunched while Lissa processed that. "So, by sheer luck, you have a gem on you that can house your soul and project a physical body that allows you to interact with the world, a gem that only activates when next to something like the Fire Emblem that you gave to your brother mere days before you were captured."

He crossed his arms. "Forgive the skepticism, but that seems far too contrived."

Emmeryn shrugged. "I didn't know the power of this gem until the day I found myself residing in it. I just… intrinsically knew what had happened. As for why I had it, I've kept it around my neck for decades, just out of view. Then, for the Fire Emblem, I knew that I could trust Chrom with the greatest treasure of Ylisse. To be where I am now can only be divine intervention."

Robin growled. "I really would enjoy a more thorough answer, Your Grace. We went to a lot of trouble and I don't even want to think what the other's reactions will be."

Lissa answered for Emmeryn. "They won't find out, Rob. Call it a hunch, but I don't think Emm's going to be showing herself as is."

Emmeryn smiled at Lissa. "How astute of you. Indeed, I will not remain in this form at all times and I cannot keep this form when the Emblem is far away. Instead, I will make a necessary change in appearance and be introduced to the others as an aide when this conflict is over. Until then, I will only speak or appear when I'm alone with Chrom and either of you."

Robin sighed, his head starting to pound with a migraine. "You know what? I'll leave this to you. I've had enough mysticism and miracles for one day and I do not wish to try and hammer this out. Inform me when you have some semblance of a plan, but I will take my leave."

He stood at last, sweeping past the royal siblings before pausing at the door. "Oh, and Emmeryn… I'm glad to see you again."

Emmeryn smiled at his back. "You as well, Sir Robin."

She saw him nod before the door opened and he disappeared. Emmeryn kept her eyes on the door for a moment before she heard Lissa start sniffling. "Oh, Lissa… don't cry."

Lissa choked on a sob. "I… I can't not cry, Emm! I-I said goodbye to you, just hours ago!"
Her head fell to her hands. "It's... i-it's just not fair!"

Emmeryn frowned, sharing a concerned look with Chrom. "How is it not fair? I understand that anyone would cry if something like this happened, but..."

Lissa shook her head, scarcely noticing the hand Emmeryn placed on her. "It's just... Donny helped me say goodbye, and... it's just not fair that I get my sister back when he lost his dad."

Emmeryn pulled her sister close, giving Chrom a confused stare the entire time. Chrom held up his hands. "Hey, don't look at me. Donnel, as is his actual name, is a recruit. He was the one following Lissa and Stahl back in Xaldornos."

Emmeryn's mouth formed an 'o' before she started rubbing Lissa's back. "I see... that is unfair. But, I can do nothing about it, Lissa. It was Naga herself that allowed me to live, such as I am, and I cannot speak for her. But, he sounds like a dear friend if you're so saddened by this. Your empathy is to be admired."

Lissa sniffled, burying her head into Emmeryn's shoulder. A small part of her mind wondered at how life-like the construct was, but she noticed no blood pumping where their skin met.

It truly dawned on her that her sister would never truly hold her again and her tears redoubled, the siblings helpless to comfort her.

-Vaike-

He was more than a little irked right now.

Here he was, stuck to a bed with no one in sight. He could practically feel his carefully sculpted muscles deteriorating as he lay there. But, he was under strict orders from three people he mostly respected and one person he very much respected to stay put.

That, and he'd been threatened with Minerva's flame if he disobeyed. Good motivator.

He sighed for the umpteenth time that day, shuffling into a more comfortable position. Nothing happened for a while, just sunlight streaming into the room, when he heard a familiar, grating voice.

"You're still here? Hmph, if I'd known a wyvern could keep you still, I'd have gotten one earlier." Maribelle drawled as she strutted towards him. Vaike wasn't sure why, but she always acted extra snooty around two people, him and Gaius.

Gaius, he had no clue, but Maribelle clearly disliked him for his 'buffoonery' or whatever namby pamby word she used. Vaike'd silently admitted that he enjoyed getting a rise out of her, but she needed to pull the pole from her ass.

She'd reached him by the time he'd finished the thought. "What's this? No crude reply to that little jape? You really are cowed, I must ask for Minerva to stand guard from here on."

Vaike snorted. "Yeah, and I should ask Lissa to go gigging with me. She could always use more frogs."

Maribelle's glare said it all. She must have been annoyed by something else though, because she was silent while she gave him a check-up. Normally, they exchanged these barbs until she was finished, but she not only finished silently, she took a seat.

Vaike stared at her, not sure what was going on. "Uh... something I should know about?"
Maribelle stared at him, her eyes judging as she looked at him from head to toe. Vaike had the urge to cover himself, if only to screw with her, when she spoke. "I don't see it."

Vaike's face must have answered for him. "I don't see what about you has her so charmed. You're loud, brutish, rude, smell... and you aren't the sharpest blade, to put it kindly. All you can do is swing an axe and boast."

Vaike's face scrunched into a snarl. "Hey, who you callin' smelly?!"

Maribelle huffed. "My point exactly. What she sees in you, I'll never know, especially when someone of such good standing can be so easily charmed."

She stood and turned on her heel, ignoring Vaike's indignant shout until she was at the door. "You'll be released tomorrow. Don't do anything to screw it up."

The door slammed shut and Vaike was left to stew in silence. Maribelle was known to have a sharp tongue, but that was low, especially since Vaike couldn't get a word in while she pointed out his every flaw.

Besides, he bathed a lot more often now!

And even then, who was she talking about? Someone, a woman at that, saw something in him? Only two people had ever actually seen something in him besides raw strength and stupidity.

Exalt Emmeryn and his rival, Chrom.

Oh sure, he had friends among the others, good friends at that, but no one had ever really believed he could be something besides the Exalt and Chrom.

So, who else did?

His musings were silenced when the door opened again, familiar dark pink hair entering the room. He felt a smile rise to his face as Cherche walked up to him, eyes catching what he believed was... eyeliner?

He stared at her when she reached him, making her tilt her head. "Vaike, are you ok?"

Vaike pointed at his eye. "What's with the eyeliner, Cher? You got a party to go to or something?"

Cherche clammed up, a cold sweat breaking on her forehead. "Y-you noticed that?"

Vaike shrugged. "Course. We been workin' together long enough for me to notice little details like that. So... if it's not a party, ya got a date or something?"

Cherche's face flamed before she forced the blood down. "Y-you noticed that?"

Vaike shrugged. "Course. We been workin' together long enough for me to notice little details like that. So... if it's not a party, ya got a date or something?"

Cherche's face flamed before she forced the blood down. "No... I just haven't had to work with makeup recently, so I thought to get a bit of practice. It's all I can do, what with my partner bedridden and my training done."

Her voice was steady for someone casting for an excuse. Vaike may have been an idiot when it came to books, but he had more street knowledge than any five Shepherds put together, maybe even more. He could tell when someone was trying to avoid the question. "Ah, come on, we're partners! You can tell me. I won't mind hearing a few saucy tales if you're up to it."

Cherche sighed, her face back to its normal shade. "Vaike, come off it, I don't have a date and I don't have any 'saucy' tales to tell. Really, I just wanted to see how you were doing."
Vaike shrugged, laughing off the surge of envy that had sickened his breast. "Well, Mary-contrary came by earlier and said I'd be out tomorrow. Thanks for sticking by me the last while, you really know your stuff."

Cherche bowed her head. "Oh, think nothing of it. I was training to be a cleric before I found Minerva, so I at least know some rehabilitation."

Vaike's face must have twisted just right because she started to giggle. Vaike eventually started to laugh along with her and they settled into simple chatter. Somewhere in Vaike's mind, where his oft-neglected intelligence slept, a spark went off.

He wouldn't mind this… especially if it was for a long time.

Maybe… even a lifetime.

-Chrom-

It was noon before they finally had everything put together. Emmeryn would remain inside of her gem until Gangrel was brought down and peace restored. After that, she would manipulate her appearance and arrive before the palace as a prospective assistant to Chrom. After enough work to keep others from being suspicious, Chrom would take her on and give her a room in the palace. From there, she'd advise him and help him rule.

Simple, but the stress of the day had driven Chrom to find Frederick and duel him. It was a sloppy affair, Chrom's usual poise abandoned in the name of venting frustration. Frederick, appropriate as always, did not comment on his liege's anger and instead beat the younger man into the dirt.

Chrom would have to find some way to pay the knight back, maybe telling Nowi his patrol routes, but now he was on his back in some courtyard staring at the cold sky as he caught his breath.

"Chrom?"

He turned his head, smiling when he saw Sumia shuffling towards him. "Sumia, how are you?"

Sumia shuffled up to him, bare of her armor. "Good, if a bit cold. What are you doing, I thought you'd still be in your room?"

Chrom turned his head back to the sky, still panting. "Oh, you know, just working off some stress."

Sumia frowned, hands linking behind her back. "Stress? I thought you were better after our talk."

Chrom coughed a laugh, mind quaking at the memory. "Talk? You whipped my ass around the grounds until I stopped feeling sorry for myself! Everyone was cheering you on!"

Sumia blushed, a silly smile blossoming over her lips. "Oh, you were just mad. You could beat me one on one easy, especially if you were serious. I guess… I just thought you needed something to take your mind off things."

Chrom laughed again, cheeks warm. "Well, you certainly made me think about other things. Namely how sore my legs were afterwards."

Sumia giggled too, her legs folding under her as she sat. They remained silent for a time, each enjoying the quiet day, until Sumia started toying with her boots.

Chrom glanced at her. "Boots?"
She shrugged, tongue poking from her mouth as she messed with the leather. "Yeah. I've gotten these things refitted almost five times now, and they never seem to fit quite right."

Chrom glanced away, face forming an unsure frown. "Well… who fits your boots again?"

Sumia stopped her work, pink rising in her cheeks. "Uh… the Pegasus Knights supplier. Cordelia swears by him, but…"

Chrom nodded, scratching his cheek nervously as an idea came to mind. "I… can have the royal family's cobbler give it a shot. She's worked with me and Lissa for years and they always fit perfectly."

Sumia's mind ground to a halt. "Wait… the royal cobbler? D-don't they only work with royalty?"

Chrom kept his eyes turned away. "I've known her forever, she'll do me a favor."

Sumia didn't respond and Chrom feared that he'd drive her off. Well, he did until Sumia pulled him into a tight hug and buried her head in his shoulder. "Thank you, thank you so much!"

Chrom did his best to catch the young woman, but they ended up sprawled on the ground, Sumia crying in glee. Chrom just patted her back and waited for her to get off, a goofy smile on his face.

_Hm, _he thought. _This is nice, just holding her. I kind of missed this ever since we came back. Looks like we'll have to make those boots fit, come hell or high water._

He had the odd thought of giving her some lovely shoes pop in his head, but he shook it away when he noticed Sumia jump away from him, face aflame.

He laughed, today was a good day.

_-Donnel-_  

How'd he end up here?

Just that morning he'd been helping Lissa come to terms with the death of her sister, but it had been selfish of him to mention his father. She probably just saw him as playing off her sympathies now.

Anyway, after that, he'd gone to find Sir Frederick for his daily training. Had his lance ready and everything when he found the Great Knight helping Nowi stumble through what might have been dancing.

Frederick had spotted him and called an apology, telling him to go find Stahl, when Nowi had a brilliant idea. "Hey, Freddy, why doesn't he join us?"

Frederick stared at her. "And why, milady, would he do that? Also, please refrain from using that ingenuous nickname."

Nowi flicked his nose. "No big words while practicing. Anyway, Lissa's a friend of his and she tends to drag him places. Who's to say he won't need to know how?"

Frederick had opened his mouth to rebut that statement before he paused. "Actually… that's true. Good idea, milady, we'll begin posthaste. Donnel, come here!"

Donnel had still been trying to figure when the two of them had gotten chummy, so he didn't realize he'd been bamboozled until he was going through the basic steps of a waltz with Frederick.
And now, he was staring at a smirking Nowi as they practiced decorum. It was actually easier to look at her now, since she was in her adult form and her clothes covered more skin, but he still kept his eyes on either her nose or her fingerless evening gloves.

If he looked anywhere else, he could feel Frederick's gaze harden.

Said knight stared at them both. "Now, remember what I showed you, Donnel. When you ask a lady for a dance, you must bow, extend your hand, and ask 'May I ask the favor of this dance'. After that, it's up to the lady."

Donnel gulped, feeling his palms sweat. "A-aight."

He stepped forward, bowed a bit lower than necessary, and extended his hand. "M-may I the favor of ti's dance?"

Nowi smiled at him while Frederick sighed. "No, Donnel, you need to be more confident. It's likely the first few times you ask, the lady will not accept, but you must be confident enough to keep trying. Now, again, and do not stutter."

Donnel sighed, wondering why this was necessary. "Uh, Sir Frederick, are you sur-"

Frederick's voice was as thunder, shattering the air as he yelled. "Do not underestimate the need for decorum in your position, young man! You have formed a close friendship with the crown-princess of the Kingdom of Ylisstol, and your every move will be analyzed to its smallest parts! Your actions speak on behalf of the princess and to stumble is to hurt her. Now, again!"

Donnel recoiled at the force of Frederick's statement, even Nowi blinked at her battle partner.

Frederick noted the shocked looks and cleared his throat. "Forgive me, I tend to get zealous. Lady Lissa has been a dear friend of mine and my charge for many years. She's called me stifling on more than one occasion."

Donnel shook his head at the revelation, but Nowi brought him back. "Well, if we need him to practice for Lissa's sake, why doesn't he just go ask her? She's walking this way right now."

Donnel felt fear flow through his veins, ice making his heart beat painfully. He turned slowly and, sure enough, there was Lissa walking towards them. Frederick seemed to share his apprehension.

"While the idea is sound, I don't think it wise to spring this on her."

Nowi groaned. "Fine, let me go talk to her. I'll make sure she understands and then everything can keep going, ok?"

She didn't wait for an answer and sprinted up to the princess. Donnel and Frederick couldn't hear what was said, but seeing Nowi, who normally ran about as a child, stand much taller than Lissa was amusing. The amusement died when Lissa started shaking her head and strode away from Nowi, the manakete calling for her in vain.

Donnel wasn't sure what spurred him, but he took off after the wayward princess. Frederick watched the young man go with a new spark of respect, smiling when Nowi joined him. "He'll go far. He has a knight's spirit in a layman's mind."

Nowi smiled at him. "I think he'll do just fine. Now then, shall we leave that issue to Donny and get back to our lesson?"

Nowi's smile was sweet, but she was squealing inside. Young romance and getting alone time with her favorite person/crush? What more could she ask for?
-Lissa-

*Why won't he just leave me alone?*

Lissa groaned and sped up, turning corners at random while the thud of boots grew closer. Today had been… weird, to put it lightly, and she needed some alone time to sort everything out.

But dear Donnel, bless him, had seen her brush off Nowi's invite and grown worried. Now she was trying to evade him in the corridors of Flavia's palace. It was creating a big scene. She was sure said Khan had betrayed her position at one point too.

Another turn revealed a dead end and her shoes scraped against the stone trying to stop. Sadly, she was going too fast and her forehead burst into pain as it met the wall. She saw double for a moment, and felt a goose egg forming on her skull while she kneeled over, mewling in pain.

Donnel's hands grabbed her shoulders, muffled voice asking if she was ok. She tried to speak, put her bump pulsed and she cringed. He started muttering about getting her to the infirmary, or that's what she made out, but everything was clearing up and the pain lessened.

She shook her head. "I'm fine, Donny, just ran into the wall before I could stop myself. Give me a minute."

Donnel's hands tightened on her shoulders, his voice trembling. "Ah ya sure, I mean, Ms. Maribelle or Mr. Libra can give ya once over if ya want."

Lissa rolled her eyes, relieved when no pain came from the action. "I'm. Fine. Just go back to your lesson with Frederick, I want to take a walk. Alone."

Donnel's eyes wavered. "I don' know 'bout that. First, ya hurt, second, your shoes aren't in the best a shape."

Lissa puffed her cheeks, seeing her tattered slippers just barely hanging on to her feet. "Geez, I knew I shouldn't have run around in these things, especially on stone."

Donnel shrugged. "Well, ya have been goin' with that same pair since I joined up. Got any boots or something like that?"

Lissa sighed. "Yes, back in my room. They're not really suited with my robes being so light, but the slippers were enchanted to act just like them. Now I gotta get new ones."

Donnel's arms snaked under hers. "Welp, looks like I gotta take you back. Hop on my back, I'll get your shoes."

Lissa squeaked as she was lifted onto his back, her hands scrambling to grab hold of something. She finally found purchase on his shoulders and she gave him an indignant smack. He just chuckled and grabbed the ruined slippers, starting off when he was sure everything was in order. "Aight, where we headin'?"

Lissa finally surrendered to the inevitable and started directing him, hiding her face in his neck as they got closer. He was… warm, comforting… she was… sleepy.

By the time Donnel found himself before her room, he was blushing up a storm and stepping gingerly.

He didn't want to wake his Sleeping Beauty.
Robin

What did he do now?

After the miracle in the morning, he'd outright buried himself in reports, maps, inventory, and all manner of other things to try and distract from thoughts of divine intervention and the inherent cruelty of deities.

It wasn't until the sun began to fall that he finally left his room, stomach threatening mutiny if he didn't eat. While that was swiftly solved by a visit to the kitchen, he'd finished every scrap of work that he'd left for himself for both the last three months and the next six months.

In other words, he was bored and needed something to do before the thoughts he was trying to bury came up again.

So, he fell on an old habit, reading through a new treatise on integrating wyverns and pegasi into the same camp without making them rampage. It was his way of sorting out his thoughts while finding new ways to keep the Shepherds in something resembling order.

Eventually though, even that couldn't keep the thoughts at bay. Desperate, he turned to an old friend that he'd been forced to neglect for the last few months.

Thankfully, his oil hadn't settled and his trumpet was still in great shape. One quick oiling later and he was wandering the halls, trying to find Cordelia for a bit of music practice.

It wasn't because he wanted her company, or that she made his mind ease just by being there. She just knew how to carry a tune unlike the rest of the barbarians that surrounded him. He chuckled at that silly image before slowing at the sound of plucked chords.

He knew that song, it was at the edge of his mind, but he knew it. He followed the notes in a daze, his feet guiding him through twists, turns, and other Shepherds. They didn't follow him at least, but he was sure they'd given him some strange looks. After another pair of minutes, where the sound stopped at times, he stood alone before a simple oak door.

He finally recognized the sound as that of a harp, the only one he knew of in Cordelia's possession. That's when it hit him, this was Cordelia's room and she was playing. He felt rather silly for believing that an angel had come to visit them, but that was likely this morning's events influencing his mind. But, it was convenient that she was already playing. He could ask to join without any issue now.

He raised his fist to knock when soft lyrics drifted through the door and his mind was sent scrambling into the past.

He stood in a room he didn't recognize, a fire crackling merrily in the hearth. There were two chairs facing the fire with a small table between them, a stack of books and parchment perched on top. He was sitting in one of the chairs, looking at a tall harp. Candles added more light to the room.

But, his eyes drifted to the beautiful woman sitting next to the harp, dressed in a simple gown of purple and black that made her scarlet hair shine. Her fingers plucked at the chords and her voice drifted through the air with the song, a serene smile on her lips.

A creak drew his attention to a door he hadn't noticed, the frame flanked by a vase of flowers and a painting. He couldn't make out what the painting was, but little voices entered the room.
"Mommy, keep singing! Morgy's almost asleep!"

A little girl with purple hair matching Robin's stumbled into the room, her orchid nightgown swaying as she dragged an even younger girl with scarlet hair into the room. The small child's nightgown was a melon color, but her lolling head made Robin chuckle.

"Oh, I guess it is nearly bedtime. Come here, girls, let me sing you the lullaby. Robin, dear, why don't you hold them?"

Cordelia's voice sounded far away now, but Robin felt his body move on its own. He stood from his chair and settled onto a carpet he hadn't noticed, the two little girls crawling into his lap and taking an arm each.

Cordelia laughed, the sound even further away as the scene began to fade. "Now then, where was I…"

The memory ended and Robin found himself leaning against the wall, gulping air as his heart pounded and sweat soaked his body. When he finally found the strength to do so, he turned his eyes up to meet scared red orbs. "Robin, are you ok?"

Robin didn't answer, entranced by her eyes.

Cordelia frowned, her heart speeding at his look. "Come on, Robin, speak up. I don't want to take you to the infirmary."

Robin snapped out of his daze. "Oh, sorry, I'm not sure what came over me. I was just looking for you…"

Cordelia's eyes followed his to the case laying on the ground, a smile brightening her face. "Oh, you wanted to practice? You know… we never did get to play that full set you promised."

Robin blinked. "That's it? No inquiries into my health or concern over my wellbeing? Have I insulted you recently, if I did, I apologize."

Cordelia rolled her eyes, voice bursting with mirth. "I have plenty of emergency medical experience, may I remind you. Who else patched our comrades up when Lissa and Maribelle were nowhere nearby?"

Robin snorted. "Touché, Ms. Falcon Knight. Speaking of, I've never seen you like this before, what's the occasion?"

Cordelia blinked before her face grew pink. She was wearing a simple dress that fell to her ankles with a lavender ribbon tied around her stomach. Her arms and feet were strangely bare. "Oh, this is just my casual dress. I don't wear it all that often, but I didn't have to do anything today."

Robin guffawed. "The perfectionist relaxes? Ha, I'll need to make sure Vaike isn't teaching Miriel how inventory works."

Cordelia gave him a petulant smack before turning back to her room. "Are you going to join me, or continue to jest?"

Robin chuckled some more before pulling himself up and grabbing his case. The room itself wasn't much to look at, a near copy of Robin's own minus his personal library, but Robin kept his eyes on Cordelia the entire time.
She positioned herself before the harp and plucked a chord. "So, what should we start with?"

Robin hummed as he tuned. "I don't know… what sounds good to you?"

Her foot tapped against the fur rug, Robin oddly drawn to her bare skin. "How about something relaxing? We've all been on pins and needles for a long time."

Robin forced his eyes away, though this time they settled on her toned arms. "Sure, that sounds great."

She looked at him curiously, but he'd already looked away. Something in her felt pleased, but she buried it and readied herself. "Cavatina then?"

Robin nodded and they lost themselves in the music, an eternity passing with the passage of the sun.

It wasn't until the moon rose to take its place that they finally finished. Cordelia stretched in her seat, a deep part of her mind purring when she caught Robin staring.

The rest of her just wanted blood back in her legs.

Robin followed with a hard groan. "I didn't realize how long we'd been at it."

Cordelia laughed. "You're telling me. It's a good thing I had those snacks on hand, or we'd be out of luck."

Robin smirked, but busied himself cleaning up. Throughout their impromptu concert, he'd been building up his gumption to ask what the song he'd heard was. If the name rang familiar, it'd at least give him something to work with.

"Say, Cordelia, um… were you singing earlier?"

Cordelia froze, hand on the stand of the harp. She remained silent and still enough that Robin was regretting asking when she found her voice. "W-w-what?"

Robin kept his next words slow, afraid she was going to jump him. "Were you singing earlier? I thought I recognized your voice before I blacked out by your door."

He didn't expect Cordelia's head to fall into her hands. She wilted off the stool and started rolling around, babbling about how embarrassed she was. He was sure that this was a far more embarrassing display, but he had the sense to turn away and spare her further humiliation.

When she calmed down, she was glad to see that Robin had turned his back to her shameful display. She gingerly got back to her feet, dusted off her dress, and cleared her throat. "Forgive me…. That was childish."

Robin shook his head. "Think nothing of it, I just wanted to know."

Cordelia sighed. "Yes… I was singing earlier. I stopped when I heard you slump against the wall, but I'm not that good."

Robin whipped around, ears burning at the blasphemy. "Not that good?! You were fantastic! I'd wager Olivia doesn't have so lovely a voice!"

Cordelia squeaked and hid her face, the amount of blood rushing to her head making her feel faint. Robin's arms steadied her and he continued. "Sorry, didn't mean to embarrass you. Um, can you tell me the name of that song? And, where you learned it?"
Cordelia slowly revealed her face, but crimson still dusted her cheeks. "Um, it's a lullaby, but I don't know the name. My mother sang it to me until I was too old for it, but she taught it to me. Why?"

Robin sighed, not sure if he should share. But his reason won out, especially when the image of Cordelia before the hearth came back to him. "Well... when I heard the lyrics, my head hurt and a memory came to me. It's just... the memory made no sense."

Cordelia's eyes widened. "You remembered something?! Did it have anything to do with me? Did I look like a child or something?"

Robin felt sweat gather on his brow, his mind realized that telling her the memory seemed to have them married and with kids was probably not the best idea. It was still something else to wrap his head around, let alone dealing with that set of consequences.

"Well... no, sadly. I only saw a house of some sort, and a room with a bed. Maybe my mother sang that song to me when I was young and that's what caused it? I just don't know."

Cordelia didn't believe him, but his face was begging her to drop it. "That's... unfortunate. I wish I could help some more, but as I said, I don't know the name. Hmm... I think we should call it a night though. You need to think this through and we have to get back to work tomorrow."

Robin's shoulders slumped in relief. "Yeah, that sounds like a good idea. Um, see you tomorrow?"

Cordelia smiled. "Of course, I'll need a sparring partner."

Robin's exasperated face made her chuckle and she walked him to the door, reveling in the smooth feel of his cloak. "I've been meaning to ask, but how do you keep your cloak so smooth? It should be ragged and grubby by now with how often we move."

Robin's face lit up. "Oh, there's a whole process to it! I don't keep all that oil in my tent to keep a light going. I'll tell you more tomorrow, good night."

Cordelia frowned as her half-baked plan failed. "Wait!"

Robin paused, halfway out the door. "Yes?"

She hadn't thought that would work. "Uh... how about we meet for breakfast instead? We can get started earlier if we do that."

Robin shrugged, eyes concerned. "Um, ok. I'll see you then."

He turned back around and strode down the hall, disappearing around the corner. Cordelia stood still as stone until she finally sighed and closed her door. She shuffled across the floor and flopped into the furs covering her bed, groaning at her own stupidity.

"Am I in your memories? Naga, how self-centered to ask him when he got a hold of a memory for the first time in what must be months. And the way I asked him? Could I be any more of a lovesick fool?"

Just admitting that was a step forward if you asked her. After waking up in the hallway with him after they'd returned, she'd been arguing with herself about what the fluttering in her chest was. It wasn't until they'd been playing a slow tune just hours before that the realization hit her.

She loved Robin. It wasn't the idolized crush she once held for Chrom, now dashed on the stones, this was a love that made her heart ache to be apart from him. The problem was her own uncertainty.
at the idea of opening herself to him, telling him how she felt, and whether she could deal with rejection.

He was a kind man and if he didn't feel the same way then he'd let her down gently, but she'd already lost so much. If she lost him too, especially if the confession distanced them…

She groaned, trying to squash the sick feeling that raced through her breast. She'd have to be careful, and all too subtle, but she could find out. All it would take was some light bribery and more time with Robin than she already spent.

She smiled and nodded, blowing a stray hair out of her face. She had her plan and a month to make it work. If it hadn't happened by then…

Well, she'd think about it if it got to that. For now, she had pleasant dreams calling to her, the lullaby she'd sung playing through her head.

-Draconis, Temple of Naga-

"Then we are agreed?"

A round table filled with priests and nobles alike was silent, shadows crossing their faces.

"Very well," the first speaker continued. "For the crimes of unlawful removal, harboring of enemy nationals, and for breaking the tenants of Naga's church, the current Exalted family will be removed and Duke Carlen shall take the throne. We will make the announcement in two weeks, and should they not step down peacefully, our forces in both Draconis and Felds will suppress Themis and Ylisstol."

The small meeting broke and the members exited quietly. Only one remained at the table and they glanced to a dark alcove. "You should have listened, Archbishop. Plegia's very existence is an affront to the Goddess, the people agree. Stew on that as we wipe those heathens from the earth."

The figure disappeared and the faint light shone on a chained figure in the alcove, his body bruised and bloody from the captor's 'mercies' and days of starvation. Even then, tears ran down his eyes and an old voice spoke into the silence.

"Your madness will see the ruin of both the church and Draconis! The armies of Ferox will march to put you down and Lord Chrom is not so merciful as to forgive treason!"

He hacked up a wad of phlegm and blood. "Damn you, damn you and all your conspirators! The name Meredith shall mean traitor from this day forth!"

The voice chuckled, the figure reappearing. "Oh, dear sir, I quite wish it to. After all, no one turns me down."

Pearly white teeth shown in the dark. "Not even a prince."
The first week of the Shepherd's wait passed without incident.

Emmeryn had taken to residing within her crystalline home for most of the day, only coming out to converse with Chrom and Robin or teach Lissa the finer points of using a staff. Chrom, when he wasn't speaking with his spectral sister, sparred incessantly.

The only time he stopped was when either food was served or Sumia made him stop. It had happened enough times, over just one week, that more than one Shepherd had joked Sumia would be the real power behind the throne.

If Chrom ever got his head out of the sand, of course.

Besides that, the only event of import was Khan Basilio formally introducing one Olivia Rince as another member of the Shepherds- with Chrom's approval- and Vaike demanding entrance to Frederick's dancing lessons.

The first was easy to dismiss, Olivia was very familiar with the area around Gangrel's personal palace after traveling there several times with her troupe, but the second raised a few brows. Maribelle in particular scoffed at the notion of Vaike dancing, but wonders never ceased with the gruff man.

He stopped stepping on poor Nowi's toes after two lessons. It took the manakete five to stop stepping on Frederick's.

This uneasy peace came to a swift end when a harried cavalier flying Chrom and Lissa's personal colors thundered to a stop before the Longfort. Raimi, who was on duty once more, called down to the shivering horseman. "Halt! Who are you? Why do you fly the colors of Prince Chrom and Lady Lissa, but not that of Ylisse?"

The horseman's voice was strained when it reached Raimi's ears. "I come baring a message of grave importance! The Exalted family is betrayed!"

Raimi's eyes widened, but the sound of hooves turned her eyes to the forest. Her breath caught when saw a growing block of bodies, their forms clad in silver and gold. "Guards, allow this man passage! Everyone else, to your posts!"

The great gates groaned open while the inner portcullis raised just enough to allow the cavalier through. He spurred his steed forward and ducked through the iron gate before the weights slammed the gate closed. It was just in time too, as the group hunting him entered the clearing just as it closed.

Raimi surveyed them from her perch. They all wore silver and gold plate, as she'd thought, but they all had plumes of either red or white springing from their helmets. One in particular, at the head of the party, had a large plume dyed blue.

This obvious leader cantered forward, a woman's voice carrying over the cold wind. "You have allowed a fugitive asylum! In the name of Duke Carlan, I demand you release him to us!"

Raimi scoffed. "You have no right to demand anything of the Feroxi, girl. Besides, he flew the personal colors of the Ylissean rulers, and claimed they had been betrayed. And don't dare claim we're being tricked, Lord Chrom's dealt with far greater threats than a single assassin, let alone false
Raimi smirked, easily seeing the frustration in the blue-plumed rider's frame. "Though, why not tell me why you claimed his guilt in the name of this 'Duke Carlan' rather than Ylisse at large?"

The knight's horse stomped, mirroring its rider's agitation. "Because, the High Priests and High Clerics have determined that the current Exalted family is unworthy of the authority once given to them. They have determined that Duke Carlen is most worthy to hold the title of exalt, not the bull-headed prince."

Raimi gaped, stunned by this audacity. "W-what? Why would they choose to declare such a thing so soon after the Exalt's death? Do you truly wish Plegia to drive you into oblivion?"

The knight scoffed this time. "They wish the family of the Purger dead, not each Ylissean life. So long as they're cast out, the kingdom is saved."

Raimi clicked her teeth, wondering at the girl's foolishness. Surely she didn't believe Gangrel would leave them be just because the Shepherd's leader and his sister were gone? But, the knight's posture held all the certainty of snow in winter.

She believed every word.

Raimi sighed, a headache forming between her eyes. "Look, girl, I cannot simply let you in. The Supreme Khan is allied to Prince Chrom, and she is loath to betray someone she holds in high opinion. Turn back, and tell your lord he is not welcome here."

The rasp of steel met that proclamation, the knight and her fellows baring their weapons. "You will allow us to pass, savage! None may stop justice from being meted out!"

Raimi rolled her eyes. "Justice means little when the javelins rain. Men, give them a warning!"

Her knights raised their javelins while the archers nocked their bows. Some of the riders had the good sense to turn tail and race for the trees, but the others stood by their blue-plumed leader. Raimi raised her hand, held it dramatically to see if the remainder would grow a brain, and dropped it.

Steel flew from the wall and buried itself into the snow around the riders, a few finding marks in the riders themselves. True to Raimi's orders, the hits were only flesh wounds, but one errant javelin took the helmet clean off the blue rider.

Raimi's eyes widened when the rider recovered from the hit, her face staring unaghast. "Sir Frederick?"

The rider's face turned to stone, orders to retreat flying from her mouth before they fled down the road. Raimi stared after them for a time before taking a long breath.

_The hair was longer and tied in a braid, but damn if that wasn't Sir Frederick in a woman's frame. Why try and threaten us? For that matter, why was it Carlan's troops rather than Duchess Miranda's?_

Raimi didn't like the answer that came to mind. This gate bordered Superius, and Duchess Miranda was the only one to send any regular envoys until Prince Chrom himself came. In fact, not one of the riders was wearing Superius's colors, emerald and black.

_This does not bode well. I must report to Khan Flavia immediately._
She turned from the forest and barked for a horse, setting off for Flavia's palace with all the haste she could muster.

-Robin-

Robin's day had started swimmingly. He'd made it to breakfast before almost everyone, minus Frederick of course, and was able to grab enough for both him and Cordelia before they went out and sparred. He'd defeated her a couple times, a vast improvement from when they'd started, when a gasping man that he didn't recognize ran into the training grounds.

"Prince Chrom," he cried, "you've been betrayed!"

Frederick and Kellam made a wall in front of Chrom, who was sparring with Sumia and Ricken. Kellam grabbed hold of one of the man's arm. "Hold, friend. Calm down and tell us what's going on."

Frederick grabbed the other arm. "You may as well start with why you're wearing milord Chrom's and Lady Lissa's colors. Your name would be appropriate as well."

The man took some deep breaths, but he was still panicked. "My name is Harrison, I was one of the survivors from the Plegian assault on Ylisstol. I'd been helping repair the damage in the city when an army flying Duke Carlen's colors and heraldry marched on the city. Without a word of explanation, they occupied the palace and demanded we swear allegiance to the Duke. My fellows and I refused such treachery, but I was the only one to escape. From there, I fled north."

Chrom walked up to the man, Robin jogging to join him. The other Shepherds formed a ring around Harrison, each wearing a worried mask. "Tell me, were Carlen's men the only ones?"

Harrison shook his head, eyes haunted. "Nay, they weren't. I was pursued by forces flying the colors of Felds and Clarissa as well. At one point, I even saw knights from Themis clash with the Clarissian riders pursuing me."

Sumia's hands flew to her mouth, making Robin frown. Sumia was from Clarissa, her family a member of the nobility. Chrom kept his eyes glued on Harrison, even as his hand steadied Sumia. "You speak of rebellion, bare weeks before we go to end the Mad King. You also speak of a conspiracy from Felds itself, even though they sent troops to Ylisstol to help defend Emmeryn."

Harrison coughed, the exhaustion from his journey obvious. "I wish it weren't so, milord. All I know is that someone's been planning this for some time. They were too efficient for this to be impulse."

Chrom's expression was stormy, but he mustered enough of his mind to speak. "I have nothing but your word, but you've obviously come far. Frederick, take him to see the healers. Kellam, find Gaius for me."

Frederick sighed, but guided Harrison away. Kellam left shortly afterward, leaving behind a quiet courtyard.

Robin spoke first. "Chrom… can you think of anything that would have caused this? I thought Duke Carlen was stripped of his title."

Chrom's knuckles popped from his grip. "I don't know. We didn't have time with the assassination attempt and rescue that followed, but there was no indication Felds, let alone Clarissa, were meeting with Draconis. I know I have done nothing to slight Feld's regent or Duchess Diane, but this…"

Sumia sobbed, making Chrom turn to her. "Sumia, please calm down. I know your family has
nothing to do with this, they'd never do anything to harm you or me."

Robin frowned, his eyes going to Cordelia. "How sure are you? Are you not from one of the duchies?"

Cordelia glared at him. "I'm from Grevis, and we pride ourselves on loyalty. My parents served with distinction until they retired, and they remain at home near Grevis's capital."

Robin put a hand on her shoulder. "Forgive me, that was insensitive. I may have been a part of the Shepherds for several months before you joined us, but I never had time to learn the intricacies of Ylisse's politics."

His gaze turned to the others, eyes finding the Ylisseans. "Alright, I want everyone to tell me their home duchy. I'm not accusing anyone, but the more I know, the better I can plan."

Sully went first. "I'm from Surperius, capital specifically. Kellam's from one of the towns south of there."

Stahl nodded to Ricken. "Ricken's family runs my hometown. We're both from Themis, as is Maribelle."

Robin sniffed, he already knew that. "Vaike, Libra, Miriel, where are your homes?"

Vaike scratched his head, Armads acting as a support. "I'm from Draconis, but it's one of the tiny villages. Never met a noble personally till the Exalt came along."

Miriel sniffed. "I'm from Ylisstol itself."

Libra was kneeled in prayer, but he paused long enough to answer. "Naga forgive me, I come from Draconis as well. I was raised in a monastery to the north of the Great Cathedral."

Robin stroked his chin, mind playing with new ideas. "Ok then, has anyone been to Draconis, Clarissa, or Felds recently? Actually, where's Frederick from?"

Chrom answered. "He's from Felds."

Robin clapped his hands. "Alright then. I want the Shepherds from the rebelling provinces to come with me. Nowi, Cordelia, and Lon'qu will join us as well."

Chrom stepped forward. "What of me? My people suffer at the hands of those whose ambition exceeds their sense, I will not abandon them."

Robin stared at him. "And deliver the throne's heir into their hands? Nay, you are best served here preparing to rid the world of Gangrel. Besides, you'll be able to send us help much faster if you're not captured."

Chrom shook his head, but conceded the point. "Very well, but Gaius is going to be our informant. Heaven knows he's been everywhere in Ylisse."

"Ah, you flatter me, Blue." Gaius teased as he entered the courtyard, hard eyes at odds with his grin. "So, where should I go first? I can cut the head off the snake if need be."

Chrom shook his head; waving Robin's considering face away. "No, I feel there's more to this than we know. Carlen's a coward, but he'd never engage in such treachery with Ylisse in its current state. Then there's Duchess Diane and Feld's regent, McCloud. The former's an old ally of Emmeryn's and..."
McCloud's made it no secret that he wants to retire."

Gaius shrugged. "Infiltration it is. Where to?"

Robin gestured for him to follow. "We'll be discussing that shortly. Alright, those I mentioned need to come with me. Chrom, can you send Frederick my way when you have the time?"

Chrom shook his head and strode from the courtyard. Robin knew he was going to talk to Emmeryn and Lissa, which was bound to be… pleasant.

He shook the thought from his head and led the ones he requested to another part of Flavia's palace. It was a large meeting hall that was more than adequate to fill their needs, but Robin refused to sit until Frederick joined them.

A few minutes later, two knights entered the room followed by Khan Flavia herself. Robin blinked at Raimi's appearance, wondering why she was there. "Raimi. While I feel my head hurting at the sight of you, it's good to see you healthy. What brings you here?"

Raimi smirked. "And I feel my leg twitch at the sight of your ugly mug. But, jokes aside, I just finished giving my report to Khan Flavia. She asked that I be here when she met with you."

Robin nodded, noting Frederick's unusually distraught expression. "Well, I'm always glad to have the Khan with us. Please, take a seat, we need to start."

They did so, Flavia starting them off. "So, Ylisse falls into open rebellion a few weeks before we're supposed to invade Plegia. You guys have some damn rotten luck, you know that?"

Vaike grunted. "I like to think we just have interesting luck, lady."

Nowi raised her hand. "Uh, so what's the plan? There is one, right?"

Robin stared at her. "Calm down, that's why we're here. Now then, we'll have to take back Ylisstol of course, but I know that city inside and out and Chrom knows it even better. What I need is information on Felds, Clarissa, and Draconis. What's the terrain like, what are the power centers, that kind of thing?"

Libra and Vaike looked at each other before Libra spoke. "Draconis is a land of mountains and valleys, but the presence of Mt. Prism makes the entire land green and filled with life. The regularity of seasons also means trees grow year-round. It's difficult to navigate outside the main roads with how thick the woods are."

Vaike shrugged. "Less you're a local that is. I know a lot of game trails that lead to some of the bigger towns. Never been to the capital though, even if the Grand Cathedral's supposed to be quite the sight."

Frederick sighed, his face drooping in… disappointment? "Felds is called as such because it is completely flat. In addition, a number of rivers from Draconis's mountains run through the province. Put those two together and Felds makes its mark as Ylisse's breadbasket."

Robin frowned at him. "Why the long face? I'd expect you to be furious, nay, murderous."

Frederick's brow furrowed. "Raimi… described the leader of the riders chasing Harrison. To put it bluntly, it appears my sister has sided with the rebels."

Robin's eyes widened in direct accordance with the other Shepherds, only Nowi able to put a voice
to their disbelief. "What? You have a sister?"

Frederick closed his eyes. "I do. We're barely a year apart, but I'm the younger of the two. Her name's Catherine, and she was sent to Draconis as a squire well before I joined the military. We've only spoken face to face a few times since then and it's been three years since I've received a letter. The only reason I knew she lived was keeping up with my parents."

Robin pinched his nose and turned to Cordelia. "What do you think? Frederick's got more reason than most to take Draconis down. I ask the same of you, Libra."

Cordelia shook her head. "I don't see why not. But, he'd need someone else to go with him, and I'd feel uneasy if it was less than three."

Libra coughed. "I agree to that. Vaike and I can go with him to deal with Draconis, but we'd need to be careful. Getting caught would weaken the Shepherds greatly, and a prolonged conflict will be the end of Ylisse."

Nowi stood, slamming her hands against the table. "I'm going too! I refuse to let my best friend go off and fight without me!"

Robin huffed, his hand falling into his lap. "Libra, how would the people of Draconis react to seeing a manakete fighting their leaders?"

Libra shrugged. "I have no way of knowing. If the priests and clerics are part of the rebels, they can claim Nowi's presence as a trick. But if they're not, we can use her presence as divine proof that the rebels are at fault."

Vaike hopped from his seat. "Then I guess we got our plan! I'll go get Cherche, she'll be a big-"

Frederick's voice thundered through the room. "Do so and you ruin our credibility! The common folk fear wyverns as Plegian harbingers. Bringing Lady Cherche would only lead to them believe we're in collusion with Plegia, damn her actual allegiance."

Vaike snarled, but Gaius put a hand on his shoulder. "Easy, sunshine. Big guy is just worried about her, ok?"

Vaike yanked his shoulder away, but returned to his seat. Robin sighed in relief before turning to the lone Clarissean in the room. "Alright, Sumia, what can you tell us? I don't want to press you, but this is important."

Sumia clasped her hands on her chest, breathing deep but shaky. "C-Clarissa is unremarkable. Its western side rises into mountains with trees on the Ylissean side of the border, but beyond that, it's very similar to Ylisstol itself. They're a proud group, but they prefer defense to anything and the troops reflect it. It's why they turtled when Plegia invaded, so attacking at all goes against their usual strategies."

Robin and the others blinked, Flavia voicing a question for the first time. "I'm sorry; I thought your family was only middling nobility. How do you know so much about their military doctrine?"

Sumia sighed, lips pursed. "My mother's a good friend of Duchess Diane. Or, she was at least. They had a falling out shortly after I joined the Shepherds, but I was schooled alongside the higher-born children before the argument."

Flavia leaned on her hands. "That means you've been to the capital. Is there anything interesting we should know about?"
Sumia shook her head. "Only that it rests on a great hill surrounded by plains. It's the most defensive spot in the province, but I know no secret passages."

Lon'qu grunted. "It'd be best I come with you then. I've some experience sneaking about, thanks to that orange haired rat over there, so I'll be the spy."

Gaius flashed a rude gesture, but the mood failed to lighten. Robin shook his head and looked to Raimi and Flavia. "That leaves me and Cordelia to deal with Felds. I'd like to send Donnel with Sumia and Lon'qu, if only for extra insurance, but may I ask to borrow Raimi?"

Flavia raised a brow. "What for? Surely your journey would be easier without needing to keep her pace, especially since you can fly."

Robin glanced over to see Raimi nodding in agreement. "Well, I'd prefer not to drag one of the other Shepherds into this since Chrom will be staying behind. Better to have a guard for him and Lissa, especially somewhere I know they'll be safe."

The unspoken reminder of the of the latest royal family passed with grimaces on every face.

Flavia stood. "Well, I'd like to, but Raimi's the commander of the largest gate facing Ylisse. You'll have to choose one of your own for this job, but I suggest it not be the dark mage. She'd be caught and burned before you got within a league of Felds."

Robin sighed. "I guess that's all we can do then. All right, just to summarize."

He pointed to Frederick, rolling his eyes when he realized Nowi had squirmed her way into his lap. "Frederick, you'll be taking Vaike, Libra, Nowi, and Gaius into Draconis. Considering the current Duke of the province is behind this rebellion, you'll be in charge of information gathering. Once you have all the information on possible conspirators you can find, arrest him."

Nowi frowned, her eyes going to Frederick. "What about his sister? Can't we… convince her she's wrong or something?"

Robin clicked his tongue. "I'll leave that up to Frederick. She's knowingly serving a rebelling lord though, so unless she repents, the law is clear. Please, Frederick, try and keep a clear head and don't do something you'll regret."

He looked over the room and sighed. "Anyway, that's the Draconis group. Sumia, you'll be taking Lon'qu and Donnel with you to infiltrate Clarissa's capital. Take care not to stand out, it'd be difficult if someone recognized you."

Sumia grumbled something Robin couldn't hear, but Cordelia stood and walked to her side, whispering what could only be encouragement into the other girl's ear. Robin licked his lips and continued. "Lastly, Cordelia and I will be going to Felds with one other Shepherd. We'll be investigating Regent McCloud, but I doubt he's involved. While we're there, we'll search for any signs of co-conspirators. Any questions?"

No one spoke, each contemplating their tasks. Flavia grunted and turned to the door. "Well, I'll have to divert some of the forces we were gathering over to the Longfort until this is sorted. Let's hope these rebels are sloppy or we may yet lose our chance."

She left without another word, Raimi following after a shallow bow. Robin gazed over his friends and felt his mind grow heavy. 

They've fought tooth and nail, through heartache and pain, and these dastards have the audacity to
stage a coup so soon after we lost Emmeryn. Even though her spirit remains with us, the loss damaged all of us, and I fear we may not recover if this isn't resolved swiftly.

When he came from his thoughts, only Cordelia was left in the room. She strode to his side and placed a warm hand on his shoulder. "We should go tell Lord Chrom what's going on."

Robin groaned. "I'll tell him. Can I ask you to go tell the others about what's going on too? I think Stahl's going to be our best option for this trip."

Cordelia smiled and patted his shoulder before leaving the room. Robin took a moment to compose himself before he swept out of the room, dreading the impending argument.

-Nowi-

"Frederick! Frederick, wait up!"

Nowi jogged after her crush, more than a little annoyed that he was ignoring her. The knight had been inside his own head ever since the meeting had let out, and even threats of fiery retribution had done nothing to slow his pace.

Thus, Nowi had another plan, she just needed to catch the man before he ran into a wall.

She groaned as he turned another corner, her steps speeding. *He's lucky I love him. Even when I'm all grown up, he out paces me by a mile. But, there should be a long hallway here...*

Her face adopted a cheeky grin. Time for a sprint.

She turned the corner and put her head down, legs and arms pumping as she roared her battle cry. Her arms met metal and she heard a man's grunt, her momentum carried the both of them to the floor.

She grinned and looked up, only to see Stahl's flustered face. "Uh... you're not the one I was chasing."

Stahl laughed, awkwardness oozing off of him. "Uh, yeah, I guessed as much. Mind getting off of me?"

Nowi squeaked and scrambled off of him, eyes casting for her quarry.

Stahl groaned as he stood up, looking to the hall behind them. "If you're looking for Frederick, he went to his room."

Nowi nodded mutely, cheeks burning in embarrassment. Stahl just smiled and walked past her, calling a greeting to someone down the hall. "Hey, Cordelia, need something?"

His voice faded as Nowi's eyes focused on the door he'd told her about. Now that she thought about it, she'd never seen Frederick's room, or his tent for that matter. She'd only ever seen him out and about and at meal times.

She felt a strange nervousness settle over her, even as her boots clicked against the stone floor. The nerves only strained harder as the door got closer, a sick feeling taking root in her gut. She took a deep breath and raised her hand to the door, but there she paused.

It was strange, to see the hand right then. She'd been in her child form for years on end, to the point she'd long forgotten about her other form. It hadn't been until she'd wanted to prove Robin, and by extension Frederick, wrong that her memory returned.
Now… she'd remained like this for ever longer periods. It had been a long time ago, in a dark and horrid place where she'd learned that if she remained a child, she could remain childless. She'd resolved to stay as one until she met people she could trust.

Needless to say, it had been a long time.

But now, she always found herself as an adult when she was in Frederick's company. At first, he was her savior. Then he was her friend, and then her best friend, and then her beloved…

Nowi shook her head, clenching her hand into a fist. He'd even been kind enough to give her the gloves she wore, somehow keeping a straight face when he'd told her that they'd bring out her eyes. She'd worn the things ever since, the process of hooking the silk around her middle fingers and pulling it up her arms habit now.

Those actions made her heart throb, but now he was in turmoil. Who was she to stand here and act like one of those silly girls in Sumia's novels, when the one she cared for was hurting?

Resolve steeled, she knocked thrice on the solid oak and stepped back. No voice came through the door and there was no sound of movement either. Nowi frowned and tried again, testing the door after a moment longer.

It was unlocked.

Gulping, she opened the door. "Frederick? Are you ok?"

There was still no response, so she slipped inside and looked around. His room was an almost perfect copy of her own, which wasn't a big surprise, but what stood out was how orderly it was. His personal weapons, forged silver, stood on a rack to the side. Not a single rug or piece of furniture had been adjusted or moved from place.

That all paled before the man sitting on the simple bed, his armor still on and a wrapped parcel in his hands. He didn't move, not even when Nowi walked up to him. He only breathed deeply, brow furrowing to the point of uniting his eyebrows.

Nowi bent over, her concerned eyes meeting his. "Frederick… are you ok? You ignored me the whole way here and you wouldn't open the door."

Frederick blinked, his face scrunching in curiosity. "Nowi, why are you here?"

Nowi blew some hair out of her face. "I'm here because I'm worried. You've been really quiet ever since the meeting ended, and you even ignored me when I tried talking to you. Mind sharing?"

Frederick sighed, his head rising to its normal proud place. "I fear it's a personal issue. I appreciate the gesture, but I must come to a decision on my own."

Nowi frowned. "It's your sister, isn't it? I know Robin said the law was clear about what could happen to her, but you wouldn't let that happen to family, right?"

Frederick kept his gaze forward, refusing to look at Nowi. "If it means the safety of the realm, and my lord, then I will do what must be done. I will not enjoy such a task, and I will do all I can to convince my sister to repent, but should she refuse…"

The promise hung in the air, making Nowi gulp. "I-I see. Um… I guess I'll leave you be then. See you later."
Frederick reached out to her, just missing her arm. "Wait. Tell me, why the sudden interest? We've been friends since you've joined us, dare I say great ones. But, you've never once shown such concern for me. Why?"

Nowi paused by the door, mouth opened in disbelief. Sure, she'd teased a number of the Shepherds, men and women alike, about their love lives, but she didn't think Frederick was *this* dense.

Something irrational took hold of her mind and her mouth moved before she could think. "Tell me, Freddy, if I was captured along with... along with Chrom, and you could only save one of us, who would you choose?"

Frederick's eyes widened, his hand pulling back from Nowi. "What...? Nowi, that would never-"

"Tell me!" Nowi demanded, a well of emotions choking her.

Frederick took a deep breath, pinching his nose to ward off a headache. "Nowi... I would have to choose Lord Chrom, but let me explain myself!"

Nowi didn't hear a word after Chrom's name. The irrational feeling came on even stronger and she couldn't stand to be in the same room as Frederick. Her only recourse was to run.

And run she did, slamming the door open and taking off down the hall, ignoring Frederick's calls until they were long silent.

Frederick couldn't muster the strength to go after her, drained and angry at all that had happened. He had enough control to shut his door and lock it, but something snapped in him when his eyes found the parcel on his bed.

He grabbed the parcel and dashed it against the wall, the sound of bending metal and breaking glass piercing the silent room. Frederick panted for a few minutes, but panic soon overtook his anger.

*Oh, Naga please let it be ok.*

He ran to where the parcel lay on the floor and gingerly lifted it onto the lone chair in the room. Even as he did so, small purple stars tinkled from the cloth. He swept up the stars as best he could, but dread filled him as he unwrapped the cloth.

Frederick cursed as the item finally came into view, his worst fears realized. It had once been a glorious tiara, gold and silver vines entwined and studded with purple sapphires. Their meeting point bloomed into leaves that curled and embraced each other, creating five distinct openings to hold the crown jewels.

The left and right held triangles of polished jade, attained at great cost from an Outrealm cave. The top and bottom held half circles of pure onyx, obtained as a favor from the Outrealm merchant. Lastly, the centerpiece was a rectangle of pure sunstone, the edges carved to match the gems it bordered.

The centerpiece, the sunstone, had been a reward for services rendered, given to him by Chrom himself two years before Robin had joined the Shepherds.

Now it was all ruined. The sapphires had shattered from the impact, along with the jade and onyx. The metal was twisted and dented, the delicate reliefs and carvings crushed.

Only the sunstone remained whole, but two thin cracks ran the length of the gem. They weren't large, but they divided the stone's surface into four uneven parts and ruined the facets.
Frederick sighed, turning from the ruined gift and sitting back on his bed. The gift had been made especially for Nowi, Frederick having gone through the Outrealm gate with Robin and Chrom's permission. The manakete had mentioned that her current circlet was getting old and worn while she'd never received a gift she could really keep.

Thus, when she said her birthday was coming up, Frederick had taken it upon himself to give her something that would not only show his appreciation of her friendship, but also give her something that would last.

Except it wouldn't last. He'd destroyed it in a fit of confused rage. One most unlike him.

Frederick's hands clenched, the force making them shake. Damn you, Catherine. By betraying your oath, you've forced me somewhere I wouldn't wish my worst enemy.

His eyes burned with a fury rarely unleashed, a silent promise blazing in them. Repent, sister. Repent or I shall make your suffering grander than all of hell!

-Cherche-

Today was a cruel day.

Cherche had first woken to find that her dear Minerva had come down with an unfortunate fungal infection on her right side, making the scales itch madly. It would take the poor wyvern a week of constant care to be right again, and that was after Cherche wrangled three stable hands into helping her remove the infected scales.

It was similar to a type of infection that some of the Shepherds had gotten after marching through damp areas, making their feet itch for a week.

But, that was only the start. Due to the need to tend for Minerva, Cherche had been forced to skip the morning’s training. It wasn't until she'd deemed Minerva in good enough hands that she'd even left the stables.

Shortly thereafter, she'd heard the awful news. Ylisse was at war with itself, and Vaike, who'd only been cleared for battle a few days ago, was going into the thick of it.

She felt so powerless.

Minerva was her greatest ally and confidant, the two of them inseparable and unstoppable. But Vaike, rough edges and all, was her closest friend beside Virion and had somehow charmed her silly. The last thing she wanted was to leave him alone in a den of jackals. But without Minerva, she was little more than a hindrance.

Oh, sure, she had training in other disciplines, but what use could the Shepherds have for a woman that had extensive training in heal-

Cherche smacked her forehead, feeling truly foolish for the first time in a long while. She may not have been able to go with Vaike proper for that reason, Libra was there after all, but she could at least volunteer as a healer for another group.

It was better than nothing, all things told.

With her idea solidified, Cherche stood from the bench she’d been thinking on for so long and set out to find Robin. It was commonly known there was no way in heaven Robin would let Chrom leave Regna Ferox, so he'd become the de facto decision maker on the rebellion. None knew Lissa’s
opinion on what was happening, as no one had seen her that day.

Shaking the thoughts from her head, Cherche walked a familiar route to a simple, uninteresting door in an uninteresting hallway. She knocked on the door five times, in a specific pattern that all the Shepherds knew, and waited.

A moment later, the door opened to reveal a surprised Cordelia. "Oh, Cherche, do you need something?"

Cherche smiled. "I'd like to speak to Sir Robin if I could. Is he busy?"

Cordelia shook her head. "How many times has he told you to stop calling him sir? Anyway, he's talking with Sumia right now, going over what needs to happen in Clarissa."

Cherche sighed in relief. "Then I am not too late. May I come in, I have an offer for him and Sumia."

Cordelia frowned and turned back into the room. "Robin, Cherche has an offer for you… No, I don't know what it is, she hasn't told me… What? oOf course it's not about Vaike; she's far too calm… Alright, fine."

Cherche blinked, not sure what she had just witnessed. If she didn't know any better, they'd acted like your average married couple. The thought made an amused smile rise on her face, a smile that Cordelia didn't miss.

The other woman's cheeks warmed. "Uh, just ignore that. He'll see you now, come in."

Cordelia stepped aside and Cherche strode into the room, finding Robin and Sumia seated at a small table in the center of the room. The table was covered in maps and charts that made sense to none but Robin, and there were dark spots on the parchment next to Sumia.

The poor woman was the first to greet Cherche, eyes puffy and red. "Hello, Cherche… Is Minerva okay? I heard she was sick."

Cherche gave as reassuring a smile as she could. "She'll be fine. Had to take some scales off, but she'll be ok. I left the stable hands with detailed instructions on how to handle her."

Sumia sighed, relief replacing melancholy for a moment. "Thank Naga."

Robin rolled his shoulders. "Alright, Cherche, what's this offer? Minerva can't fly and I wouldn't send you on her for reasons I'm sure you've already realized. I'm not sending you with Vaike either, there's too many in that group as is."

Cherche stared at him. "Much as I wish I could convince you otherwise, that's not why I'm here. I would like to volunteer as a healer for Lady Sumia's group."

Robin blinked, hand flying to his chin. "That's right, Virion told me you were trained as a cleric. Small wonder I saw you running around in sage robes and Valkyrie gear in the Outrealms."

Cordelia strode from the door to Robin's side, giving a good punch on the shoulder while she was at it. "Oh, be quiet. You were doing anything and everything that didn't involve a Pegasus or Valkyrie training."

Robin rubbed his shoulder, silently wondering why he didn't wear his armor. "It's because men aren't allowed on pegasi or allowed to be Valkyries, which is a load of crap by the way, but I'm not here to argue that. Cherche, what's your logic for volunteering?"
Cherche shook her head, silently ruing not placing a bet on the two across from her. If Robin didn't confess to Cordelia by the time all this was over, or vice versa, someone was bound to explode. "My logic is that I'm an experienced healer. I would never claim to be of Lady Lissa's caliber, but I'm perfectly capable of keeping pace with Father Libra and Lady Maribelle."

Robin tapped his cheek, thinking on the idea. "You know... that's not a bad idea. You're perfectly capable on a horse, and I've seen you use Helswath to deadly effect, so I've no objection. Sumia, would you be ok with Cherche coming with you?"

Sumia nodded. "Certainly, it... it would be reassuring to have her with us."

Robin smiled. "Good, then that's settled. Cherche, you'll be meeting with Sumia, Lon'qu, and Donnel tomorrow at dawn. Your group will be the second to leave after the group bound for Draconis departs tonight."

Cherche rocked back in shock. "Tonight? Isn't that too soon for preparations to be complete?"

Robin shook his head. "Nay, it's later then I'd like. We only have until the end of this month to try and put down this rebellion or we lose our chance to take out Gangrel. I refuse to dally while the possibility of such bloodshed waits for us like a viper!"

He slammed his hand on the table, making Cherche jump. "U-understood. I'll go and prepare now."

She bowed and left, still startled by the sudden outburst. Voices echoed from the room as Cherche walked down the hall, but her mind had settled on her next destination. After wandering through the cold halls for a while, she finally found the one she'd been looking for.

Right as he was thrown across a courtyard and slid to a stop in front of her.

Cherche looked into the courtyard, wide eyes finding a sheepish Kellam. "Sorry, Vaike! Ice made my foot slip."

Vaike groaned from his spot on the ground. "Expectin' it at this point, tin man. Ah, hey, Cherche!"

Cherche reached down and helped him up. "Hello, I was looking for you. Not exactly how I expected to run into you, but it works."

Vaike chuckled. "Aw, you'll make me blush. I was goin' to make my way to see Nerva after I finished with tin man over there, but I guess you can tell me how the old girl's doin'."

Cherche sighed. "She has a mild case of scale-itch. It's not threatening in the least, but she can't fly with it. Also... I volunteered to go with Sumia's group."

Vaike choked on his next words, sputtering until his voice returned. "W-what? But, Minerva's out o' commission and Robin said you weren't going to go!"

Cherche placed a calming hand on his shoulder. "I'm going in the role of a healer. Yes, I'll be bringing Helswath with me, and yes, I'll be making elixirs for everyone tonight."

Vaike's jaw clicked shut. Was he that obvious?

Cherche chuckled, her hand migrating to his cheek. "Vaike, you're a dear friend. I dislike that you must go and confront your fellow countrymen without me, but Robin's logic is sound. All I ask, is that you be careful."
Her laugh came a little louder this time. "Though, your recklessness is charming in its own right. Can't take that out of you."

Vaike rubbed his neck, awkward as always. "Hey, uh, Cherche? Can I ask ya somet'in'?"

Cherche tilted her head, hand falling from Vaike's cheek as her heart sped. "What is it?"

Vaike was looking everywhere but at her, his voice overflowing with anxiety. "See, uh, I was wonderin' if you got one of those fancy family names. I mean, we got that Olivia girl with us and she has one, and so do lots of other Shepherds, so …"

Cherche frowned. Where had this line of thought come from? "I do indeed have a surname, if that's what you're asking. My father was the one to earn it as he served Lord Virion's own father with great distinction. Why do you ask?"

Vaike gulped and turned, but cursed when he saw Kellam had long left. "Dammit tin man, you were my back up."

He turned back to see an unamused Cherche glaring at him, her arms folded across her chest. "Answer me, Vaike."

Vaike grunted and rubbed his neck again. "I, uh, just wanted to ask. When this is all over, I know people'll get all this glory and stuff, I mean why wouldn't we with myself around? Uh, that's not what I meant."

He started sweating under Cherche's annoyed gaze. "Look, I was wonderin' since if you had one, you could help me try for one. I don't come from a family, bein' a street rat and all, but I was hopin' to start sometin', where I can really belong."

Cherche's posture softened, but there was a glint of disappointment in her eyes. "Oh… I suppose that's a noble goal, if a trifle petty should you ask me. I suppose I can't talk, since I had a family growing up, but you'd likely be better served asking elsewhere. I'm not exactly… persuasive."

Vaike guffawed, missing the look of anger that flitted over Cherche's face. "Not persuasive? You could charm a badger out of its fur with just a look. Now, can you tell me? Just so I have something to work with, if nothing else."

Cherche huffed, disappointment and annoyance making her curt. "Orso, that is my name. It means 'bear' in Roseanne's tongue. Now, I have elixirs to brew. Good day, Sir Vaike."

Cherche turned on her heel and walked away with all the poise she could muster. She wasn't sure what she'd been expecting when Vaike asked something of her, but it certainly wasn't that.

Vaike moved as if to stop her, but pulled back instead. He didn't know what had made her so angry, but his mission was accomplished for now. He'd have to sort this problem out later. Preferably after securing Virion's permission to court her… with a lesson or two on how to do it correctly.

*Not from that dandy though. Kellam won Sully's heart, so he's the best to ask.*

Vaike walked over and pulled Armads from where it had lain forgotten during the conversation. As he hefted it over his shoulder, a thought brought a grin to his face.

*Hmm… maybe, Vaike Orso is the name I should have. I've always been called a great bear, and it*
He chuckled and sashayed out of the courtyard, ignorant of just how much groveling was ahead of him.

-Robin-

Night arrived with the finality of a blizzard. Snow coated the ground, white muted against the clouds that covered the sky and blocked the moon.

Robin sat in Chrom's quarters, contemplating the remaining Shepherds and their inevitable wait. He would be going along with Cordelia and Stahl to Felds, and in their time away there would be no guiding force for those that remained behind.

A flash from the table beside him revealed Emmeryn, her presence graceful as always. "I see you are troubled. Tell me, why are you so deep in thought when your fellows leave so soon?"

Robin snorted, glancing sidelong at the ghostly Exalt. "I contemplate your brother's actions when Frederick and myself are not here."

Emmeryn shook her head. "I will be here to stop any bullheadedness on his part. Besides, he understands his role in this trying time, as do you."

Robin turned to face her fully, a slight glare forming in his eyes. "You know, I was surprised at how well you took the news of this rebellion. Did you suspect this would happen?"

Emmeryn shook her head, sorrow coating her being. "Nay, not in my lifetime or those of my descendants. I was once naïve enough to think such a thing could never occur, but I know now that it was bound to happen. I just wish it were for greater reason than a gross grab for power."

Robin's glare dissipated. "I agree. Not only does Gangrel wait in the wings, but the rebels foolishly splinter their own power by turning it against their countrymen. It boggles the mind, but we shall find the truth."

Emmeryn smiled at him, her sorrow lessening, if only just. "I have no doubt that you shall. Now please, go see your friends off on their journey. To know that you have confidence in them will doubtlessly be a great boon."

Robin sighed, but stood and strode to the door. He paused with his hand on the knob, a glance over his shoulder all he gave. "As much as I hate to say it, your era has ended. From here on, it will be a time of fear and suspicion. It will not end until Ylisse is rebuilt and tensions are buried."

Emmeryn sighed, hands hiding her face. "I know…I know. But, I know you can bring it to an end just as fast as it began."

Robin opened the door and turned to face the hallway. As he strode into the night and the door clacked shut, his final words echoed through the still air.

"Were it I shared your optimism."

-Castle Flavia, Main Gate-

The first group was already saddled and preparing to leave when Robin arrived.

Cherche was doling out hand-made elixirs to each member, more going to Libra than the others, but
she was surprisingly silent when she passed by Vaike. Vaike caught Robin's eye, but shrugged helplessly at the questioning look.

Deciding to leave that for later, Robin jogged to a familiar shock of blue hair. "Chrom, how's the inspection going?"

Chrom glanced to him before turning his eyes back to the others. "They're all set to go. Libra has informed me that the trip to Draconis's borders will likely take three days. They could go faster, but it's best to draw as little attention as possible."

Robin looked to the saddled Shepherds, noting the dark traveling cloaks they wore and their bound weapons. They looked ready to go, if distracted in some cases.

Chrom pointed to one of them in particular. "Have you heard anything from Nowi? She's been upset since noon, but refuses to say why."

Robin looked the manakete over, frowning at her dour face. "I wouldn't know. Have you tried asking Frederick?"

Chrom sighed. "He won't answer either, and I didn't want to press. Nowi seems to be avoiding him at every turn."

Robin hissed through his teeth, that wasn't good. "Nowi! Come here for a minute!"

Nowi's head shot up, but she cantered forward. "What's up?"

Robin reached into his robe and pulled out a golden book. "This is Ivaldi, one of the tomes we found during our initial foray into the Outrealms. Should any of you face overwhelming odds, please give this to Libra. He has enough knowledge of magic to use it as a last-ditch effort."

Nowi took the tome with a frown, the book inert in her hands. "Ok… why give this to me?"

Robin shook his head. "Because I know you won't lose it. Even with all our training, none of us can hope to match you in dragon form, so I entrust their protection to you. Please, bring them home."

Nowi folded her arms over the tome, biting her lip. After some time to let her thoughts settle, she nodded sharply. "I will."

Robin smiled and signaled for her to join the group. She did with much more vigor in her body, but she still stayed well away from Frederick. Robin was ready to give the signal to leave, but one more voice needed to be heard.

"Gaius! You come back in one piece, you hear me? I refuse to have you die before you tell me everything!"

Gaius groaned as the one and only Maribelle arrived. "Look, Twinkles, I can't promise anything. But, I've been through scrapes worse than this and came out fine. So don't worry, I'll tell you everything over a nice cup of cocoa when I get back."

Maribelle had the look of someone that had a lot more to say, but Robin had been tracking the moon whenever a break in the clouds appeared. They'd tarried long enough as it was.

"Alright, get on your way! Remember, your mission is to gather information, not engage them! Rendezvous with myself and the others at the Longfort in two weeks!"
His hand flew to his side. "Go!"

The horses whinnied and sped into the night, a cloud of white the only sign that they had left. Silence reigned over the remaining Shepherds, but they slowly returned to the castle halls until only Cherche and Robin remained.

Robin walked up to the silent woman, her eyes never deviating from the cold horizon. "Cherche, is something wrong? You didn't speak with Vaike before he left."

Cherche sighed, coming out of her trance. "I… I don't know. We had a conversation earlier, but he said something that's made me rather upset. Why that is, I don't know, especially since it's so inane."

She turned and left before Robin could get another word in. Robin shook his head and wandered into the castle, heading vaguely in the direction of his room.

As he walked, he saw no one, only the cold air and silence to keep him company. He preferred it, if only because it let his mind wander to simpler things. It wasn't allowed this respite for long though, the next courtyard he passed held something that made his breath catch.

That's… Lissa and Donnel! Are they… are they doing what I think?

Robin hid behind a pillar and turned his eye to the center of the courtyard he'd been walking by. There was no mistaking Donnel's characteristic tin pot or Lissa's pigtails, so it was them, it was just…

They were kissing.

Robin and everyone with half a brain could tell those two were crushing hard on each other, but Robin certainly didn't expect this! It was for the best that Chrom wasn't in the area, lest Donnel be forced to flee long before he was supposed to leave with the others.

Deciding he'd spied long enough, Robin snuck back the way he came and took another route. It took him past the armory the Shepherds had been granted, but an almost imperceptible noise made him pause before the door.

Was that… snoring?

Curious, he opened the door as slowly as he could. It creaked with every movement, making Robin wince every time until the opening was wide enough for him to slip in.

There was only torch light in the room, but it was enough to light the lone figure slumped against one of the pillars inside. Robin sighed when he saw the figure, a fond smile forcing itself onto his face.

Come on, Cordelia. I know you're nervous, I am too, but you do us no good by catching a cold.

The woman of his dreams was still in her armor from the day, but he could see tiny tremors on her arms from the cold air. Crushing his amusement, he walked up and placed the back of his hand to her forehead.

Good, no fever. Let's get you to a proper bed before that changes.

Used to having to move her from numerous nights of falling asleep in strange places, Robin lifted her gently and strode from the armory as quietly as he could.

Yes, he did check to make sure the door was locked. Cordelia would have taken his spleen if he
hadn't.

Ok, he was exaggerating, but she would have been quite cross. Thankfully, that catastrophe was averted and Robin strode through the silent halls with his crush in his arms.

After a time where Robin simply enjoyed the sensation of holding Cordelia close to him despite a steady creep of exhaustion, he finally arrived at her room. The door was unlocked, to his surprise, but a look inside showed nothing out of place.

Glad to see the room as it was supposed to be, Robin walked to the bed and laid Cordelia onto the simple mattress. It took some work to get the blankets over her after that, but she was resting comfortably when he was done.

Satisfied, Robin turned to leave when a wave of exhaustion hit him. It made him stagger in place and he felt his eyes grow incredibly heavy.

More tired… than I thought. Sorry, Cordelia, I just need… a little… nap.

Robin's legs almost gave out, but he was able to sit gently. His head bobbed a few times before he thumped against the pillow on the bed, his face close to Cordelia's own.

The coat would provide Robin's warmth, but it was Cordelia's hand snaking out in an unconscious desire to help and finding his own that made him finally relax.

But, oh, what a morning he would face.

-Castle Flavia, Dawn-

The next group to leave was considerably smaller than the first.

Sumia fidgeted in her saddle, not used to sitting astride a normal horse. Selene wasn't allowed on the principle of being too recognizable, and the less noticeable Sumia was in her home province, the better.

She just wished Cordelia and Chrom were there to see them off. Lon'qu had been able to speak with Olivia for a short time and Lissa had hugged Donnel tightly before they'd jumped into their saddles.

Cherche had used Vaike's absence to make sure she had all her supplies in order, including a pair of staves for emergency treatment.

Sumia just sat there and fidgeted while this happened, unsure of her role in this. Yes, she was a guide, but Robin and Chrom had assigned her another task.

She was the leader of the whole group.

That meant that they moved on her signal and followed her orders, even if she felt unsure about them. It made her so uncomfortable, so incredibly uncomfortable.

I suppose… this is the reality of royalty and commanders. Your every word and order can determine who lives and who dies. I just… I just don't know if I'm ready for this.

Sumia glanced to the horizon, sighing at the brightening eastern sky. "Is… is everyone ready?"

Cherche smiled at her, obviously trying to be reassuring. "We're all ready to go. Just give the word."

Sumia looked to see Donnel saluting her and Lon'qu nodding in agreement. She felt herself relax and
her horse pawed the ground impatiently.

"Alright, move o-"

"Sumia!"

Sumia almost fell off her horse, Donnel nearly joining her if the clanking of his armor meant anything. She looked back to the gate to see a panting and flustered Chrom running towards her.

**Chrom? Aw, he did come to see me off… wait.**

Her eyes narrowed, spotting something slung over Chrom's shoulder.

*Is that… a pack?*

Sumia's eyes shot to the road, her mind realizing Chrom's plan. "Move out, now!"

Cherche and Lon'qu understood the sudden urgency immediately, their horses spurring after Sumia. Donnel though, was still trying to right himself in the saddle.

The moment he did, Chrom joined him.

The horse huffed at the sudden weight, but a slap to the rear from Chrom sent it running after Sumia and the others. Donnel tried his best to regain control of the horse, but he was a far less experienced rider than Chrom, to say nothing of the disparity in their strength.

Thus, he was rendered a bystander as Chrom disobeyed Robin's orders and joined Sumia and her group on the mission to Clarissa.

Who would explode first, Emmeryn or Robin, was something Lissa wondered throughout the entire debacle.

-Cordelia-

The sun brushed against sleepy eyes, scarlet gems parting blearily to foggy surroundings.

*Oh… I fell asleep.*

Cordelia stifled a yawn and blinked a few times, her vision clearing bit by bit.

*Huh… why's Robin here? …Who cares? This is a dream, I can tell.*

It was funny how real it felt. She could feel the warmth of his hand in hers, feel his breath as he lay beside her. It was magical.

*I so enjoy this dream… maybe one day it can become reality, but now… I'll indulge myself before waking up.*

Cordelia smiled and pulled herself closer to Robin, until their foreheads were nearly touching. She pushed forward the small distance and pressed their heads together, marveling at the warmth her dream held.

Then, she claimed her prize.

Robin's lips were soft, molding to hers with a perfection that bordered on divine. The kiss was simple and chaste, nothing but deep love going into it. She pulled back and dove in again and again, each
time taking her fill.

Finally, she just lay there, watching Robin breathe deeply.

*I always imagined he was a deep sleeper. I wonder if he's actually like this when he's not sleep deprived.*

Cordelia giggled and decided for one more kiss before she would go back to sleep and awake in the real world, where her affections had to remain unfulfilled.

This time she reached behind his head and ran her hands through the smooth purple, her lips meeting his in the deepest kiss yet. Her eyes were closed as she enjoyed the sensation, but when she pulled back and opened them once more, shocked opals stared back at her.

Cordelia smiled at him. "Good morning."

Robin continued to stare in shock, an odd occurrence for these dreams. Cordelia frowned at him, ignoring a niggling part of her mind. "Is everything alright?"

Robin blinked once, twice, three times before one of his hands reached over and found her cheek.

He then pinched that cheek and his own at the same time.

Pain blossomed on her cheek, and she expected the dream to fall away, for Robin to be replaced by a poor, smothered pillow.

Except he didn't and that niggling part of her mind took over in a full-blown panic.

"R-Robin? Y-you're not a pillow?"

Robin didn't respond, his cheeks slowly starting to glow. Cordelia's own had long grown hot enough to tempt bursting into flame, but Robin apparently had other plans.

He stood, walked calmly to the door, bowed, and left. All without a word.

Cordelia watched him go, equally silent. All she could do was grab a pillow, clutch it in her arms, curl around it, and cry from sheer mortification.

Never had there been a more inspiring way for the heroes of Ylisse to almost miss the meeting time.

Even as they gathered at the gate, Stahl found himself acting as an impromptu wall between his blushing and silent compatriots, silently wondering what had happened.

Then, Lissa killed the awkwardness with the worst possible news.

"Chrom did what?!"

The shout echoed across the castle, followed by Flavia's greatly amused laughter. There was no way to catch the rogue prince, but Robin swore to tan the man's hide when next they met.

With the awkwardness of the morning buried under the fury of righteous indignation, the final group set out for Felds, the furthest rebel province from the Ferox border.

As they spurred their horses forward, Robin pulled beside Cordelia and performed a series of hand signals. He and Chrom had come up with it during a stint in the Outrealms and subsequently taught them to all the Shepherds.
We'll talk later

Cordelia nodded, but kept her eyes on the road.

A few hours later, they were through the Longfort and on their way, mentally preparing for the trials that awaited them.

All the while, the vultures circled.

-Cave-

"You were turned away? Why didn't you show those barbarians their place?"

The knight in blue, Catherine, kneeled before a council of shadowy figures. "I could not, milady. They had both the high ground and great numbers. To attempt a fight was suicide."

There were murmurs in the shadows, the most common being comments about how the Shepherds had defeated similar odds with far less. Meredith grit her teeth silently, promising to silence such things when she garnered enough forces.

"Enough, gossiping will do nothing."

One of the shadows stood, a fine dress marking her as a noble. "The runaway has likely already informed the 'Prince' of our actions. We must prepare for any intruders, close our borders."

Another shadow stood. "Why should we? The Feroxi only stand as allies against Plegia, they would not attack us!"

Yet another hissed at the protestor. "They have a great tactician on their side and should they make contact with any loyalists, we could well lose it all! The lady's words are sound!"

Murmurs of assent rippled through the chamber, the lady spoke with a hint of smugness. "Then we are agreed. Dame Catherine, you shall secure Draconis's borders. We must allow our dear priests and clerics the time they need to win the populace."

Catherine saluted and left, catching the names of two more captains sent to secure the other provinces.

Draven and Evelyn.

One was a well-known turtle who preferred to keep his men in only the most defensible positions with no exceptions, much to the consternation of his superiors in Ylisstol. At least, until he became the superior when Ylisstol fell.

The other was a guerilla, preferring traps and ambushes to catch her quarry with a minimum of fuss. Her overly paranoid nature was useful against bandits and thugs, but her meticulous tactics limited her use outside of her home province of Felds.

They would make perfect compliments to Catherine's own ruthless strategies, if only until the previous family was fully ousted and a more appropriate ruler could take the throne.

Had it crossed her mind that she may very well have to kill her younger brother to see this plan realized? Of course.

She just didn't care.
Not anymore.
No one spoke the night they left.

Their cloaks whipped about them in the cold air of Ferox, the chill biting at every inch of exposed skin. The first leg of their journey would be the shortest, traveling from Regna Ferox to Ylisse, but it would in turn be the most bitter.

Frederick felt none of the cold, his discipline allowing him to ignore it. Instead, he thought on what little information he had about the province of Draconis and any allies they could find to aid their cause.

*The only one I know that came to Ylisstol regularly was the Bishop of Gariel, head of the Grand Cathedral. He was Lady Emmeryn's teacher when she was learning the ways of the church and inducted her into the Ylissean Sages. If we could meet with him, he would make a powerful ally. Besides him, most of the Draconis citizens in positions of power want little to do with the outside provinces.*

The thud of another horse's hooves came from beside him. "If you're thinking about possible contacts, I already got some. Got a couple guys that can get us into Gariel without issue, give us a base at that. Question is whether your sense o' justice will let them live afterward."

Frederick snorted, his gaze turning to the oddly serious Gaius. "Those who help can be pardoned, though I cannot guarantee that mercy to the hand of these rebels."

Gaius shrugged, his hair whipping about his ears. "All I can ask. These guys saved my hide more than once, so I can tell you they're trustworthy. Question is whether or not the nobles have gone after the Chain yet."

Frederick frowned, vaguely recalling the term. "The Chain?"

Gaius tapped the side of his head. "It's what we thieves call the underworld, away from all the justice and blue blood. Everyone's an informant for someone else, so if you rattle the Chain, everyone knows it."

Frederick shook his head, a roaring gust making him raise his voice. "Then let us hope this *Chain* doesn't give us away! I refuse to have this mission end so poorly."

Gaius cracked a smile for the first time that day. "Aw, it ain't that bad. These guys aren't part of the Chain, that I know of. They won't tell anybody unless we really screw them over."

Frederick huffed and that was the end of the conversation. Gaius pulled away from Frederick's side and started moving between the others, likely telling them the same information. With at least something of a plan in place, conversation returned to the grave until they reached the Longfort.

They were halted, as expected, but were soon waved through the main gate. They galloped for three more leagues after they entered the snowy forest of northern Surperius. Then they turned down a small path. Vaike led the way through the undergrowth, their speed a fraction of what it once was thanks to the uncertain footing.

Frederick kept enough of his wits to follow Vaike's horse, but his eyes continually trailed to Nowi. Her hair was hidden under her cloak's hood, but she went the extra mile by tying her long locks into a bun and a braid that circled her head.
Vaike and Gaius may have chuckled when they first saw the styling, but Frederick could only think of how he’d ruined her gift. Of how, with a single answer and no chance to explain, he’d essentially ruined his friendship with her.

How… he’d strangled any chance of something more.

Frederick shook his head. Now wasn't the time to be dwelling on a broken heart, that was best saved for later.

Nowi was the first to break the silence. "So… after we meet Gaius's contacts, what next?"

Libra kept his voice low. "We will attempt to gather information, discreetly. Gaius will be doing any infiltration necessary, but I've been to Gariel several times in the past. "If it remains unchanged, there are a number of local gossips."

Gaius chuckled. "If you're talking about the local watering holes, most of them are shut. Some ordinance passed by the Duke got permission from the majority of the priesthood and banned a lot of the commoner taverns."

Vaike guffawed at that news, but he somehow kept his voice low. "Really? That's a recipe for disaster if you ask me. Everyone wants a pint at some point, the commoners especially. That's bound to make the locals angry, and stir up a number of unofficial meeting spots."

Gaius shrugged. "It's been going on for a while. See, I worked out of Draconis for a long time, but after the old Archcleric died, the church and nobility started passing all kinds of laws. Most of them were pretty inane things, like marking an official time where everything closes, but they've escalated as time's gone by."

Libra sighed. "Then much as it pains me, we will use their folly to our advantage. Vaike, how long does this trail go?"

Vaike tapped a tree as his horse walked by. "Goes for another five leagues. It'll end just outside of a town called Menagerie, one of the big festival grounds. In fact, one of the bigger ones should be going on about now."

Libra hummed. "Ah, the Festival of Earth. There should be a number of merchants selling everything from crystals to granite blocks. Should be a good place to start before we head out again."

Gaius pulled a stick of rock candy from his coat and started sucking on it. "What do you say, big man? You get final say in this."

Frederick stroked his chin, rolling the information in his head. His gaze once again turned to find Nowi, but his decision was made when he saw interest spark in her eyes. "Very well then. At the very least, there will be less scrutiny for any travelers coming to the town. We can learn some general knowledge and work out a way into Gariel from there."

The logic made sense. Sure, Gaius said he had some contacts that could get them in, but it was always better to have multiple options. Acting as curious outsiders in a small town on their way to the big city would draw less suspicion anyway.

If it gave Frederick the chance to try and find the jewels he'd accidently destroyed, then all the better.

Hearing no dissenting opinions, they fell into a tense silence. Everyone was on high alert for any and all sounds that could signal an ambush. Their nerves were nearly shot from paranoia by the time they reached the end of the trail.
Gaius took point, glancing over the field they found themselves in. Seeing nothing, he waved the others forward and they galloped to the road that cut a clear line in the grass.

Vaike pointed to a spot of light steadily growing on the horizon. "Dawn. We should probably take a break."

Frederick disagreed. "And risk a patrol finding us unprepared? I'd prefer we make the village."

Nowi spoke for the first time in hours, her voice strangely stern. "We are not animals, Frederick. A short rest isn't uncalled for when we've made it this far in one night."

Wide eyes flew between everyone not named Frederick or Nowi, Gaius discreetly signaling his question.

*What's with the lovebirds?*

Libra responded with a shake of his head and another signal.

*I'm unsure, but whatever it is, they need to put it aside.*

Vaike grunted, not wanting to try and figure this out. "Make a decision big guy. We can try for the village now or take a break, your choice."

Frederick seemingly didn't hear, his eyes trained on Nowi's stoic face. The expression sat a little too well on her features, forming a hard, beautiful mask that radiated something akin to authority.

But this was also the woman who had happily stolen his steak and gave it back to him piecemeal with promises of tag. With that image in mind, Frederick was intimidated. "We will continue toward the village for a little longer. I agree that showing up at the crack of dawn is not the best way to avoid detection, but I would prefer a more visible area further from the woods. They may be able to see us, but we can see them should a patrol break off to confront us."

Frederick looked around to see no disagreement, even if Nowi's silence continued to worry him. "We are agreed then. We'll ride for another half hour, and then we'll rest."

He spurred his steed on, hearing the others follow close behind. As expected, the land was grassy hills with stretches of flat terrain every so often, the only sign of humanity being the village they'd spotted after exiting the forest.

True to his word, Frederick signaled a stop a half hour later, reigning his horse in on a small knoll. It wasn't the largest of the surrounding hills, or the most defensive, but it was better than nothing. That, and it provided some nice shade as the sun made its appearance.

As Frederick swung off his horse, his hands dug through the saddlebags and produced a feedbag and bowl. "Here you go, eat up. I'll put the water here."

His horse snorted, but let him wrap the feed around her snout. Frederick pulled a flagon from the limitless depths of the saddlebags and poured out some water.

Satisfied, Frederick looked around. Vaike was checking his weapons while Libra and Nowi were having a quiet discussion, the only things Frederick could hear having to do with elixirs. The only one not working was Gaius, who was walking up to him. "Do you require something?"

Gaius beckoned him closer, pulling the knight's head down so he could hear Gaius's whisper. "I don't know what you did, big guy, but you need to have a talk with our lady friend over there. This
silent treatment and aggression needs to be nipped before we get somewhere really dangerous."

Frederick glared at the assassin. "I'm well aware that it needs to happen. Why do you think I agreed to stopping at this town? Besides, she refuses to speak with me right now; I'd have to kidnap her if we were to talk."

Gaius remained stoic. "She's no stranger to kidnapping, may I remind. As it stands, you two need to at least make a truce until we're done in Draconis. After that, I don't care if you kill each other."

Frederick glared harder, letting some of the rage he'd been harboring show itself. "Watch your tongue, lest I remove it. I know this mission takes priority, and I plan on making that truce the moment I can. Do not think I am so blinded by duty that I cannot think."

Gaius backed off at the fire in Frederick's eyes, a grimace pulling at his lips. "So long as it's out in the open. I don't like offendin' people when they don't deserve it, but I had to be sure. This whole thing's too important to mess up."

Frederick leaned back, cold stoicism returning to his face. "Do you speak as a Shepherd, or as one intent on seducing the Heiress of Themis?"

Gaius's eyes lit with anger, but Vaike had seen them getting testy and jogged over. "Alright, that's enough. You two can sort this out in a sparring match later; I'm thinkin' we should be on our way."

Gaius and Frederick kept glaring at each other, but Vaike's words were able to pierce their anger. They didn't say anything, but turned and went back to their horses.

Vaike exhaled through his nose, silently wondering if this group was the best idea.

After that, no more words were given and they cantered back to the road, ignorant of the shadow that had been watching them since they left the forest.

The shadow scribbled on a piece of parchment, adding details to the portraits. "I should report to Dame Catherine. I have a feeling she'd like to know about this."

The shadow vanished, the Shepherds none the wiser. They reached the town just as the sun parted the horizon.

Vaike gave a low whistle as they trotted up to the gates. Even from where they were, the preparations for a big party were easy to see through the gates. "Man, what was the festival's name again? Last time I was here, this place was a lot less lively."

Libra let a gentle smile rise on his face. "The Festival of Earth. It's a grand celebration for most farmers, since they ask for Naga's blessing for peace and Titan's blessing for healthy land."

A hearty laugh greeted that explanation, a man in a tabard walking up to them with a genial smile. "That's right! We also ask for Viridios's blessing, to receive a bountiful harvest."

He looked them over, eyes sharp even though his smile remained. "You lot travelers? Should probably tell you the provincial borders got closed recently, so I hope you weren't planning on leaving Draconis."

Libra, the least threatening looking of them all, answered. "That's quite alright. We'd heard that the festival in Menagerie was quite the spectacle, so we came to visit. After that, we'd like to see the Grand Cathedral if at all possible. Mt. Prism after that, right?"
He looked back to Frederick, who nodded. It was a good story, even if the timing seemed a little convenient.

"Well why didn't you say so? We gladly board any pilgrims, and since I like the look of ya, I'll point you to the best inn we got. Trust me, the real party starts at night."

Libra bowed his head. "Thank you for your kindness. May we ask your name, sir?"

The man tapped his head. "Name's Mack, I'm in charge of the guards. As for the inn, it's called 'Blue Scale' and I'm friends with the owner. Just mention me and he'll give you a discount, same with the tavern down the street. Enjoy your stay."

Libra's head rose and he spurred his horse. "We will, good sir. I hope you have a pleasant rest of your day."

Libra led the others into the village, their eyes peeled for anyone that may be looking at them and whispering. Thankfully, many were simply curious and more than a few called greetings. Those that weren't…

Well, Gaius had their faces memorized.

Besides that, Frederick was keeping an eye on the stalls that were being set up. So far, he'd spotted several that had pieces of jewelry, but he had yet to see one that sold loose gems.

The ones that sold food would at least give him an excuse to talk to Nowi, but he really needed to try and hunt down those gems. Oh, and get a pie for Gaius, that argument was too petty to leave untreated.

Shaking his head, Frederick called them to a stop. "Alright, I'll go rent out rooms. I'll try and make sure they're secure, but would you mind giving them a once over?"

The question went to Gaius, who only nodded. Was he still mad at Frederick? Yes, but that wouldn't interfere with his work.

Frederick next looked to Vaike and Libra. "Vaike, you know these people. Head over to the tavern and ask around, though try and be discreet. Libra, do you know if there's a chapel in this town?"

Vaike scoffed while Libra hummed. "I believe there is. One of my brothers came this way to minister before we set out for Plegia."

Everyone suppressed a grimace. While not common knowledge, most of the Shepherds had heard the story of how Libra's fellow priests had gone with him to Plegia. He was the only one who made it.

Frederick cleared his throat. "Then please go ask around there. If we're lucky, they can tell us about the Bishop."

Libra bowed and lowered himself from his horse. "Lady Nowi, would you mind keeping an eye on our horses?"

Nowi shook her head. "Sure, I'll take them to a stable. I think I see one… there."

She pointed to a squat building a short ways down the road, hay spilling into the street.

Frederick sighed, silently cursing a missed opportunity. "Very well, at least it's close. Nowi, I want
you to meet with me and Gaius in the rooms, just ask for us."

Nowi huffed and lowered herself off her horse, grabbing the reins of the other two from Vaike and Libra. She set off down the road without another glance.

Frederick sighed again, this time looking to the inn. It was fairly standard as inns went, two stories, wide, windows on the second floor, and the smell of old wood.

Gaius grunted next to him. "Pretty nice, far as I can see. The front's clean at least, and I don't see anything that looks like a blood stain."

Frederick snorted, drawing a curious look from Gaius. "What?"

Frederick smirked. "A fine observation. Mayhaps I needn't apologize if anger makes you so sharp."

Gaius rolled his eyes. "Apologize with custard, and then I'll let it go. Come on, the sooner we do this the better."

He swept up the steps while Frederick clanked after him. Even in cloaks, it was hard to ignore the strange looks they were getting from their armor banging into itself.

The inside wasn't much to write home about, a simple reception area with a number of rooms ringing it and some stairs going up to the second floor behind a simple desk. Sitting at the desk was a reedy man with quill in hand scribbling over a thick book.

The man didn't even look up as they approached. "How many?"

Frederick let Gaius take the lead, his need to be proper a poor habit in these circumstances. "We've got five, my man. Mack said this was the best place in town."

The man looked up at Mack's name, his beady eyes staring at Frederick. "I...see. How many rooms will you need?"

Gaius felt a smirk rise on his face, "Two rooms. One with three beds – the other with just one. We got a couple that prefers their alone time."

Frederick's eye twitched painfully and he stepped forward, crushing Gaius' foot under his boot. Gaius whimpered and limped back a step. "One room with four beds, and a single will do just fine!" Frederick interjected.

The innkeeper eyed them both but then turned back to his book, "I see … alright then, I can't fulfill either request to the letter but," He glanced cautiously at both men again, "I can give you one room with three beds and one room with two." Frederick gritted his teeth and nodded. Gaius smirked, it was a smaller victory than he'd intended but a victory none-the-less.

The innkeeper made a few notes in his book, "Alright, the room with three beds is number four, to your left. Two beds is room 15, second floor on the right. Numbers are on the doors, you can't miss them."

He held out two iron keys, his other hand showing a bare palm. "That'll be fifty silver all told."

Frederick bit his lip, not sure. "That's for a single night, yes?"

The innkeeper nodded. "It is. Normally I charge sixty for that many, but since Mack recommended you, I'll give you a deal."
Frederick sighed and reached into his satchel. "We'll have to take two nights then. Will this cover it?"

He produced a single gold coin, making the innkeeper choke a bit. "Is that… a gold coin?"

Fredrick nodded. "It is. If I remember correctly, it's one hundred silver for every gold, correct?"

The innkeeper nodded vigorously. "It… it is, but we just don't see much gold here! I only charge so much since my inn's the oldest and the best around!"

Gaius nudged Frederick. "It's true. Most of those pastries outside might cost a single silver at most, three copper at least. That sack of yours could buy the finest piece of jewelry here and still be able to clean out the food."

Frederick snorted. "I didn't think Draconis was so bountiful as to charge such low prices. It's three silver for a bushel back home. Anyway, this should cover two nights."

He placed the gold piece into the innkeeper's hand, taking the keys from slack fingers. "We would like to see the rooms. After that, we'll head out for a while, but we would like to know when the stalls open."

The innkeeper nodded reverently. "They start selling at noon, milord. They have plays and dancing when the sun sets too."

Frederick smiled in thanks. "Very well. Gaius, you go see Room 15, I'll check Room 4."

He glanced to his hand and found the room 4 key gone. Turning to his left, he spied a shock of orange disappear behind a door with the number four on it. Frederick felt a foul curse rise to his lips, but he swallowed it. "Looks like I'll be taking the other room then. Good day, sir."

Frederick bowed shallowly before marching up the stairs to the room. It was at the end of the hall, and the key slid into the lock smoothly. Opening it, he sighed.

There were two beds, as promised, but they were separated by only a small nightstand. In the corner, two chairs and a table were poised just beside a large window looking out over the main street.

All normal, if it wasn't for the red sheets and candle arrangements. It was very much a couple's room, even with the separate beds, and it made Frederick groan while running a hand down his face. "Damn you, Gaius. I'm putting salt in your next pie if it kills me."

"And why would you do that?"

Frederick would have jumped out of his skin were he a lesser man. Instead, his brow just twitched and he turned to see an unimpressed Nowi staring at him. "Take a look, you'll see what I mean."

Nowi huffed and pushed him aside, but her jaw dropped at what she saw. "Uh…"

Frederick shook his head, hand mussing his hair. "This would be Gaius's fault. Rather than order a room for the men and one for you he managed to orchestrate this buffoonery."

Nowi's teeth ground together, the action audible. "Excuse me, I need to speak with Gaius."

She turned to try and storm down the stairs, but Frederick caught her arm. "Not so fast. You and I need to talk, now."

Nowi grit her teeth some more and pulled, her strength dragging Frederick, in full armor, along with her. "What do… we… have… to talk about?"
Frederick rolled his eyes. "What do you think? Nowi, we need to speak about what happened in Ferox. If there's any way I can convince you to sit down and let me explain, I will do it."

Nowi stopped, her face hidden from Frederick's view. Silence stretched for a few minutes before Nowi spoke. "There's no point… you'd just leave me alone again if Chrom was in trouble, just like everyone else."

Frederick felt his hand go slack, but Nowi didn't free herself. "But… I guess I'll let you pamper me. I want to go to this festival and enjoy myself, no matter what. Is that too much for you, or are you so set on helping your lord?"

Frederick's hand slipped to his side, a deep breath filling his lungs. "Nowi… I'll… I'll try my best, but I have to do some reconnaissance. If not for the mission, then at least so I'm helping the others."

Nowi folded her arms, face still hidden from him. "I suppose. It'd be rude to make them do all the leg work while I enjoyed myself."

Frederick sighed in relief, even as he started counting the money they'd be losing during this spree. "Thank you. I will do all that I can, you need only ask. If it helps, the stalls open at noon."

Nowi flipped her hair and started walking, not once turning to see him. "I want to eat something. Let's go find somewhere."

It was truly impressive that Nowi had such command in her voice, Frederick noted as they left the inn. She'd never once displayed such ability, not even as a dragon. It was rather harrowing and more than a little worrying, but he hoped his explanation could bring the cheerful Nowi back to them. Back to him.

All the while, as he wondered, Nowi slowly dug trenches in the skin of her arms. She could have ripped her silk gloves to shreds, tearing the ring from her middle fingers when they were gone.

But she didn't. She knew, after she'd had time to calm down, that Frederick was willing to explain himself. She just didn't want to let him, preferring her jealousy of Chrom. *Maybe being pampered will help me out. I decide if he can talk or not, but I won't! I don't care if this is the best day ever, he won't convince me!*

Or so Nowi told herself. In truth, acting so cold and haughty was almost physically painful. It just wasn't in her nature to be cruel or arrogant, but anger had done strange things and she could feel it burning in her breast.

Along with that sick feeling of jealousy that had taken root the moment he chose Chrom over her.

Shaking her head, Nowi looked over the bustling town with a frown on her face. It was tiring to frown for so long, but she needed to keep appearances for now. "Alright, the guy at the gate mentioned a tavern, right?"

Frederick glanced down the road. "I believe he said it was down the road from here. I'm guessing… that way."

He pointed down the road and they set off. With Nowi's hood down, she received many an interested look, though thankfully she'd remembered to hide her ears, but most turned away when they saw Frederick escorting her.

A man in full armor only a step behind a beautiful woman screamed nobility, after all.
There were a few that didn't care, curses muttered under their breath, but Frederick and Nowi ignored them until the tavern came into sight. It wasn't that hard to spot, what with Vaike chugging a pint in plain view.

Frederick felt the urge to remand the berserker, but thought better of it when he saw Vaike conversing with a set of merchants. If he was going to get information here, Frederick was going to let him. "See anywhere you'd like to sit?"

Nowi scanned the open bar, the main room open to the street where they stood. "...There, next to the pillar. Prefer to see the street, make sure I can see the stalls, all that."

Frederick only dipped his head and procured the table next to the designated pillar. No one was there, thankfully, and Frederick courteously held the chair out for Nowi. "Do you have a preference for food or drink?"

Nowi shook her head, not really caring. "Just, no beer."

Frederick bowed and set off for the bar, Nowi settling into her seat with a sigh. She could already hear the other patrons whispering about her, the wonders of having such sharp ears, heh, but one conversation caught her interest.

They were three tables away, a pair of guardsmen on break, and discussing something of interest.

"What's the point of sending soldiers to shut down the border, we're nowhere near Plegia."

"Haven't you heard? The big wigs of the church ruled Prince Chrom ain't fit to rule. Said they were gonna put Carlen in his place."

The other guardsman snorted. "That rat? He hasn't the guts for something like ruling. You ask me, it'd be Lady Diane, Lord Dunwall, or Lady Catarnia. They rule their lands well, so why not them?"

His friend shrugged. "Got me, that's what they decided. Wonder why it was one o' the lesser clerics that made the announcement. You'd think the Bishop'd be the one to spill that kind of information."

A laugh met that. "The Bishop? Please, he's wrapped around that little marquise's finger, there's no way he'd actually make a decision without her word."

His friend's face scrunched. "That's... Marquise Meredith, correct? Didn't she try and win the Prince's eye a few months back?"

Another laugh. "Look, my cousin's part of her guard. Said that she went to that big shindig but got spurned by the Prince pretty quick. Threw one hell of a fit on the way back from what I heard."

Nowi blinked at that information. When had there been a big party involving Chrom's eye?

Her mind turned from that conversation as they descended into inane and vulgar comparisons of women. By that point, Frederick had returned with a pair of mugs in one hand and two plates balanced in his other. "I asked them for a sweeter beverage, but honey mead was the best they had. Besides that, I got you some sweet buns and a pair of Themis-style eggs."

Nowi had to keep herself from drooling. The sweet buns looked divine, a golden glaze oozing down the sides, but she stared at the meatballs that laid beside them. "Um, Frederick? Those aren't eggs."

Frederick smiled, a fork appearing in hand. One thing Nowi had forgotten was that he kept an entire set of utensils on him at all times for such an occasion. He pressed the fork into the meatball and
grinned at Nowi's curious face as the meat parted to reveal a hard-boiled egg sitting in the center of the meat, the yolk solid.

"That, milady, is a Themis-style egg. They only serve them at festivals, so I thought you'd enjoy the treat."

Nowi licked her lips, taking the fork as Frederick offered it to her. Slicing off a chunk, she took her first bite of the treat and felt a smile rise on her face. "This is good! A little chewy with the yolk and all, but it's still really good!"

Frederick seemed to relax. " Truly? I'm glad then. The buns were just in case you didn't like the eggs."

Nowi shrugged, taking another bite from the treat. "I'll still eat those. I want to wander around after this, see what there is to see."

Frederick inclined his head. "As you wish. The stalls should be opening before much longer."

Nowi focused on her food then, not wanting to let her mind convince her heart to just forgive him. She wanted to be pampered damn it, and heaven if Frederick wasn't doing just that.

Vaike's yells and boasts echoed through the otherwise pleasant air, letting Nowi focus on something else. "He doesn't seem to be gathering information."

Frederick glanced to their companion. "Believe it or not, he is. He's drawing attention to himself and listening to the whispers that come of it. Considering many of these people are rather sedate for tavern goers, even this early in the day, there's bound to be something."

Nowi tilted her head, finger tapping her chin in thought. "I… guess that makes sense."

She glanced down at her plate and found it empty, a quick look at her cup showing it in the same situation. When did that happen? "I'm done. Shall we be off?"

Frederick stood and helped her out of her seat, every bit the perfect gentleman. Nowi took it in stride, but she felt her nails prick skin again as they walked back towards the stalls.

"Is there anything in particular you'd like to find?" Frederick asked when they arrived at the first row of stalls. Several vendors were already hawking their wares, but nothing caught Nowi's eyes.

"Nothing for now, I'll tell you when I see something." She replied, her feet carrying her through the gathering crowd. Frederick remained behind her at all times, even as the crowd thickened and she began jostling with the villagers.

It probably helped he had a head on nearly everyone there.

Nowi did notice Frederick's eyes travel to a few trinkets as they walked. Most of the items were, oddly, jewelry, but he never spent more than a moment looking at them.

Eventually, they came across a stall draped in blue and green cloth, a shining selection of loose gems sitting behind guards and steel. Frederick's interest was piqued, if the almost inaudible grunt he gave was any indication, and Nowi decided to humor him. "Let's look in here."

It wasn't like Nowi didn't want to browse either. She'd been a fan of shiny stones for as long as she could remember, which was probably a millennium at most.
Frederick marched right up to what had to be the stall owner, leaving Nowi to look through a pretty set of red and blue gems. She couldn't hear what Frederick was saying, even with her sharp ears, but he was gesturing to two cases in particular.

Curious, Nowi turned her eyes to the cases he was pointing to. One held a jet-black stone that looked about the size of her fist and the other held a green stone that had pleasant swirls in the grain.

Nowi frowned, confused. Why would he be interested in gems? Maybe he needs them for his pebble collection...? No, they're too big. Maybe Gaius needs them? He has been asking about loose gemstones so he can practice making jewelry.

Giving the line of questioning no further thought, Nowi browsed for a little longer before growing bored. "Frederick, let's go. I want to look around more."

Frederick finished handing the merchant some coins and put his purchase away. "Very well then. We've looked through most of the trinket stalls, so what say you to wandering through the snacks?"

Nowi grinned impishly, not able to help the excitement in her eyes. "Yes, that's just what I need! Come on."

She skipped out of the stall while Frederick dutifully followed. They greeted Libra, who was returning to the inn to organize what he'd found, before entering the heavenly realm of roast meats and delicious sweets.

They spent hours there, Nowi sampling every treat that caught her eye while Frederick took the time to catch up on the local gossip. The talk yielded little useful information, but they at least learned that the routine patrol from Gariel had been sent straight to the border.

Considering the size of Draconis, that likely meant most of their troops were tied up in border protection.

By the time Nowi had her fill, and her stomach sported a slight bulge, the sun was going down. She demanded more than asked for them to return to the inn, but a sight drew her eyes one last time.

"Say, Frederick, does that look like what I think it looks like?"

Frederick followed her gaze, a simple smile gracing his lips. "It looks like a dance competition, and anyone can join. Care to try, or do you fear losing all you ate?"

Nowi glared at him, a haughty smirk rising to life. "Oh, you think I can't dance? Well, teacher mine, why don't we use this as a test? We win, I get to dictate one thing from you of my choice."

Frederick looked down at her, suddenly serious. "And should we lose?"

Nowi gulped, taken aback. "Uh… you dictate it, but don't throw the match!"

Frederick scoffed. "Please, milady, I have my pride. It appears they're looking for another pair to join, if that man imploring every couple is any indication. Shall we?"

Nowi glanced down and saw him offering his arm. She huffed, but took the offer and let him guide her up to the man he had spotted. "Excuse us!"

The man turned, stopping short when he saw Frederick and Nowi. "Oh, uh, would you like to join?"

Frederick smiled. "Indeed we do. Is it too late?"
The man shook his head. "Not at all! If anything, I'm glad you've volunteered. Mack, we have the last contestants!"

Frederick and Nowi blinked at the name, looking to see the same man from that morning standing on a stage and waving at them. "Ah, good! Take the spot over there, we'll start up in a minute! In case you didn't hear, the winning couple gets pick of the goods donated for the contest!"

Frederick and Nowi looked to each other before nodding and taking their spot. They weren't truly dressed for this, what with both of them in their battle attire, but a simple dance would be fine.

The players held their instruments ready, launching into a jaunty tune at a signal from Mack. Frederick and Nowi smiled at the sound of the music, recognizing the rhythm that they'd long used in their lessons.

As they swayed and twirled around the open ground, avoiding the other couples with grace born of practice around absent-minded Shepherds, Frederick decided to voice his thoughts. "So, do I get that talk?"

Nowi frowned, even as she spun under his arm. "See if we win, then I'll decide."

Frederick's frown matched her own and they focused on the dance completely. Turns, steps, even aerials flowing between them as the music ebbed around them.

It was simply them and the contact of their hands, both further than either desired and closer than one ever wanted.

Eventually, it came to an end, a stunned silence greeting the panting couple as they held their final flourish. It soon broke with the sound of applause and Frederick pulled Nowi back up so they could take a bow.

"Wow, that was some dance!" Mack yelled as he jogged up to them, a radiant smile on his face. "Y'all won that hook, line, and sinker. So, come on over and pick your prize, I'll get ya something to quench your throats while you look."

He guided them to a long table with a number of items on them before leaving them to look. Frederik glanced to Nowi and gestured to the table. "What would you like?"

Nowi looked over the items carefully, passing over several earrings, necklaces, and other trinkets before her eyes found a simple silk handkerchief. It was embroidered with green and blue lace and had a number of patterns resembling rivers running through it.

She pointed to it. "I'll take that."

Frederick looked at her in shock, hearing similar whispers coming from the small crowd that had stuck around to see what she picked. "Are you sure? There are much finer items here."

Nowi picked up the cloth and held it out to Frederick, her smirk returning. "Well, let's say you've earned the lady's favor. We'll have that talk when we get back, ok?"

Frederick looked stricken, but he took the cloth from her hand and placed a light kiss on her knuckles. "I would be honored, milady."

Nowi only smiled, even as the crowd cooed at them. Mack chose that moment to return, a pair of pints in hand. "Here you are! I got ya some of the clean stuff, don't want our stars retching on something heavy."
Nowi took the ale gratefully, taking a few gulps. The taste was light and pleasant, her thirst melting away. "Ah, that's good! Come on, Frederick, take a swig!"

Frederick didn't look like he liked the smell of it, but he forced on a polite smile and forced a swig down his throat. "Thank you, Mack. But, I fear we must go back to our inn. The night grows late and we will need to do some actual shopping tomorrow."

Mack shrugged. "Ah, that's fine then. I'll take those mugs though, wouldn't want this ale to go to waste."

He winked at them before happily marching into the crowd again. Nowi took Frederick's arm and leaned her head against his shoulder. "Shall we?"

Frederick nodded and they set off for the inn. It was quiet beyond the stalls, most of the populace taking part in the festivities. Even the inn was quiet, not a sound to be heard when Frederick and Nowi entered the lobby.

Frederick immediately felt a pit open in his stomach. "Libra, Gaius? Vaike? Is anyone there?"

Now that he thought about it, his head felt fuzzy. Like he hadn't slept recently and his body was demanding he lay down and rest.

Nowi swayed side to side. "Hey, Frederick… I'm tired. Can you… carry me to bed, please?"

Frederick's vision grew blurry, his mind struggling to put the pieces together. "Nowi… are you there?"

He didn't hear a response, only what looked like a green mat entering his blurry vision a moment later followed by a dull thud.

Finally, his mind broke the fog long enough to put it together.

They'd been tricked

Sadly, that was his last thought before the drug took full control and forced his mind below the waves of consciousness. As his armored form fell to the floor with a crash, figures surrounded both him and Nowi.

"Looks like the sedative worked. Alright, pack them up with the other two. The Lady wants them in Gariel by tomorrow."

The shadow from earlier sighed as their men set to work binding them. "It's truly disappointing. A paragon of knighthood laid low trying to please a woman."

-Unknown-

When Nowi came to, she felt the cold grip of iron around her wrists and ankles.

Panicked, she fought against the restraints as best she could, but her strength simply was not there. After thrashing for as long as she could, she stopped and panted. Blood pumped in her ears and she could barely make out the sound of rattling chains.

Where am I? What happened?

Nowi's vision slowly cleared and her heart clenched at the sight before her.
An iron door and cold stone, her limbs stuck to chains anchored in the wall.

She was in a prison.

Again.

Nowi felt panic rise in her breast, but she forced it down when she made out voices echoing through the silence.

"...want with her... sister..."

"...nothing... orders..."

The first voice was Frederick, there was no denying it. The other was different, but familiar in the sense that it vaguely sounded like Frederick, if he were a woman. It had that same tone of command and authority.

A scream rent the air and Nowi knew it was Frederick. She struggled against her bonds with a renewed strength, but the iron held strong even as she renewed her ferocity with every scream.

Eventually, the screams stopped and there was only silence. Nowi wasn't sure when she started crying, but she could feel the cold tracks work down her dust encrusted cheeks.

Apprehensive, she gathered her courage and called into the silence. "...Frederick?"

The name echoed through the air, but no response came. Deciding he must not have heard her, Nowi tried again, louder this time. "Frederick?"

Again, silence.

Nowi's panic returned in full force, but a new sound met her ears before she could cry out his name again.

The sound of spurting blood and a body meeting the floor.

Nowi's mind went blank with sheer, primal fear. Her voice flew from her throat, each call growing into a screech.

"Frederick!"

"Frederick!"

"Freddy!"
When his vision returned to him, Gaius was glad to find himself in a room rather than a cell. He also had a shaggy beard and brown eyes staring down at him. "Finally awake, eh 'Sticky Fingers'?"

Gaius groaned. "Larson, a pleasure as always. You ever gonna kill that wombat on your chin or did you decide to marry it?"

The man's beard swished, Gaius knew a grin was under there. "Nah, I'll keep to my drink thanks. You, on the other hand, don't know where you are."

Gaius looked past the man and took in the room. "It looks… like I'm at the Smuggler's Hole. How in Naga's name did you get me from Menagerie to Gariel? Hell, how'd we get in the gates?"

Larson, as Gaius knew him, harrumphed. "You were out cold, it was easy to pass you off as a sack of onions. Didn't cost more than three silver this time."

Gaius would have chuckled, but his face grew serious. "How did you get me then? I was drugged, by that damn innkeeper's buddy at the tavern. Was pretty sure I'd be waking up in chains with some sadist stoking an iron in front of me."

Larson shrugged. "I was in that tavern. Came in just as you passed out, then ran for dear life with you over my shoulder when a bunch of soldiers stormed in. Hate to say it, but they got your blonde friend."

Gaius sat up, testing his arms for any lingering side effects. "Got any idea what happened to the rest of my gang? Three others beside the blonde guy, one's a priest, the other's a knight and the last's a woman with green hair."

Larson hummed. "Lora would know more than I would. Your gear's in the trunk over there, I'll see you downstairs."

He stood and walked out, leaving Gaius to swing his legs out of the bed and stand. He was stiff, as expected, but his body still responded normally.

Nodding, he checked himself for any wounds before swiping a shirt and trousers lying on a table nearby. He'd gone running along the roofs in his smalls before, but now wasn't the time for that particular brand of fun.

They were a little large on him, but the trunk opened easily to show his gear. He took out the boots and leg harnesses for his knives first, finding a few of the blades missing. Sighing, he grabbed the leather cuirass with a single metal plate sewn into it, followed by his bracers and gloves.

Finally, he pulled out his cloak and unfolded it, Yewfelle and the Mani Katti sitting in the cloth. Gaius wasn't sure why the famous sword of Lyndis herself was in that mausoleum they had been taken to before they came back from the Outrealms. Nor was he sure why the sword had almost jumped into his hand with the bow when the battle was over.

All he knew was that the blade sang in his hand, and he would use it and the great bow to save his comrades. The problem was, he only had so much ammo for Yewfelle and he had maybe a dozen
knives. Add in the blades on his braces being replaced with climbing claws of his own design and he was left with few options.

*Ok, calm down,* he told himself. *You don't even know where the others are being held... let alone if they're alive. If they are, great, we have a rescue mission. If not, I kill every last bastard with as much as a hint of authority and suffer the wrath of two grieving women and a very angry Prince. No pressure.*

Gaius sighed, his preparations automatic. He didn't even notice the last belt getting tugged into place until Yewfelle and its quiver was slung over his back. Looking around, he nodded, belted the Mani Katti, and left the room.

He knew the hall well, considering he'd been here so many times over the years, but the stench of booze was always something to behold. Coughing, Gaius jogged to the stairs and entered the filthy room that passed for a bar.

A middle-aged woman with greying black hair glanced up from behind the bar, a pipe between her teeth. "Well, if it isn't my favorite candy thief. Heard you got into trouble with the big boys."

Gaius shrugged. "Can't say it's my fault, they're the ones that decided pulling a coup was a good idea. 'Sides, my current employer's a lot better than any I've had."

The woman snorted. "I take that insult personally. I always treat my thieves well."

Gaius smirked. "You never gave out gold coins like they were worthless."

The woman's eyes snapped to him. "So it's true, you're working for the Exalt in Exile now."

Gaius scratched the back of his head. "Is that what Blue's being called now? Man, people come up with titles faster than they gossip."

He walked up to the bar. "Still, it's good to see you, Lora. I hate to break the reunion, but I need info, fast."

Lora puffed a ring of smoke. "You know the rules. Fast information comes at a price, and I ain't letting you drink me under the table for it this time."

Gaius shrugged, gesturing to the empty tables behind him. "Doesn't surprise me, what with the church getting on every tavern's tail. I'll pay; I just need to know where my friends are being held."

Lora stared at him before reaching under the counter and pulling out a bottle of red liquid. "Buy a drink with it. As for your friends, Larson already gave me an overview based on what you told him. It'll be three gold for the information, and another for the sherry."

Gaius rolled his eyes and reached into a hidden pocket of his cloak. "Here's five, so cut the shit and get to the chase."

He slapped the money on the counter, Lora scooped it up before the coins could even bounce. Gaius grabbed the sherry and popped the top, smiling at the sweet smell. "Strawberry? You shouldn't have."

Lora grunted. "It's the only swill you'll drink. My other patrons can't stand how sweet it is."

Gaius snorted at the word 'patrons'. "You actually have customers? That'll be a tale for later, give me the info."
Lora's pipe fell to her side with her hand. "Never seen you so impassioned. Alright, I can give you a name, but that's all I got. Gal's name is Katniss, if that's actually her name, and she's in charge of any and all prisoners. If anyone knows where your pals are, it's her."

Gaius sighed and took a swig of his drink. "It's a start, I guess. I'm assuming she'd be in the officer's quarters, and I know that hunk of rock better than the soldiers."

He stood, the bottle coming with him. "Alright, thanks for the info. Tell Larson he still owes me for that fiasco in Grevis, I'm still chafing."

Lora waved him away, her free hand reaching for a jar of sand on the counter. "Good riddance, get out a here."

Gaius didn't bother watching her purge the bar of his presence, instead climbing the stairs and exiting through the cellar door that acted as the bar entrance. It was evening when he saw the sky, purple and orange mixing in a vibrant hue.

Looking around, he found the alley the cellar sat in to be empty save for a guard Lora hired to look like a drunk. Shrugging, Gaius pulled out his climbing claws and dug the steel into the stone building across from him.

Satisfied with the grip and heft, he pulled himself up and to a foothold. Now came the moment of truth, the claws had dug into the wall easily, but if it took work to pull them out, he'd have to abandon them.

A gentle tug didn't dislodge it, but a sharper one did. Problem was, it made the steel scrape against the stone and the sound made his hair stand on end. Looking towards the guard, Gaius was relieved to see he hadn't noticed the sound. It was pretty obvious when people were pretending, after all.

It would make it a problem when he started scaling and when he got to the top, but that could be worked out later. For now, he did what he did best.

The claws entered the stone and he flew up the wall, sprinting across the roofs as he went.

The nice thing about Gariel, compared to, say, Ylisstol, was that it was built into a valley. That made it so a lot of the buildings had to be squeezed in next to each other, which made it easy to traverse. In the distance, Gaius could see the two areas that were a marked exception from the rest of the city.

The first was the noble district, large homes and some small estates built into the side of one of the mountains Gariel was between. At the top sat the largest manor, where white stone and golden statues shone in the dying light.

It was the seat of Duke Carlen, the one behind the entire rebellion. It rubbed Gaius the wrong way to see so much wealth sitting over the place when the area he left could only generously be called livable.

Then again, it wasn't as hypocritical as the Church.

Since Mt. Prism was only a day's journey from here, the Church of Naga had set up their very own district in the city. Ylisstol may have been the seat of the church, since the Exalt was the head and all, but Gariel came in at a close second.

The hypocrisy came in the gross size of the churches and cathedrals that towered over everything but the noble district. Gold, colored glass, silver, and gems decorated every façade Gaius could see, the most gaudy belonging to the largest of them all.
The Grand Cathedral, original name, towered into the sky. It had two towers that tapered off into an arch that connected them, the symbol of Naga hung between them. Its windows held colored glass that depicted numerous scenes from the church's texts and every edge and corner were wrought in gold or silver while the structure itself was made almost entirely of marble.

For a supposedly humble church, it sure stood out as a show of power.

These weren't Gaius's targets though, far from it. Many a wannabe thief had set their eyes on the grand buildings only to fall into the numerous traps and patrols that kept everything of value protected. Instead, Gaius was heading for a squat, grey building where every patrol that had marched on the streets below him came from and returned to.

Gaius paused on the roof just before his usual vantage point. As he'd expected, there were a number of new additions to the guardhouse, most notably an entirely new wing, but it was separate from the main building.

The reason he knew this? The expansions had required the demolition of the original adjoining buildings, making Gaius's original spot nothing more than rubble. Resigned, Gaius crouched as low as he could and slowly crawled his way to the edge of the building.

He peeked over the edge only to immediately draw his head back when he saw guards just a few feet below him.

Ok, looks like they raised the walls too. Man, I know I've been gone a long time, but this is silly.

Gaius sighed through his nose before peeking over the eave once more. The guards at least kept their heads either forward or down, none of them expecting someone to come from above.

Gaius felt a smirk rise on his face. Why would they expect it? Gariel is a long ways from Ylisstol, Themis, and Grevis. They have nothing to fear.

Yet.

Gaius's smirk vanished, shifting into an assassin's mindset. If he was spotted, every ranking officer would flee and he'd be back to square one. That meant he had to be a damn shadow at all times, lest everything go wrong.

Ok... let's wait on a patrol to come back. The sergeants have to report to the commanders and so on up the line. If they've moved the command center into the new wing, I'll see officers going in and out. If not, they'll be in the main building.

This really wasn't the time for waiting games, but there was no other way. If he jumped the gun too soon and got captured, no one would save them.

For that reason, he dug in his heels and started watching. After a couple of passes and looks to the courtyard, he'd identified officers by the plumes on their helms. The lower ones had solid red, the middle officers had red and blue, while the lone one he'd seen wearing blue had been saluted by everyone.

Nodding, he watched the march of plumes and eventually noted that most were entering and leaving the main building. If he knew anything, that meant the officer quarters were in there.

Now, he just had to cross a higher wall, crowded courtyard, and sneak through the halls of the main building. Said building happened to be a good four floors tall, six carts wide, and three chapels long.
He had a weird measurement system, but it worked.

Anyway, it looked like the guards below him were starting to relax. From his many years of experience, that meant a guard change was coming up.

*About time, the sun set an hour ago. Ok...ready...go!*

Gaius's legs pushed off from the roof and sent him flying through the air. The wall was... thinner, than he'd thought, so he ended up rolling well beyond where he'd planned to land. Gaius didn't have time to think though, as he had to hide behind a low wall that separated the courtyard from the backs of the wall.

He heard the march of steel go by without pause, a mental sigh of relief escaping him. Had he timed that any later the guards would have been on him. Now, he's pretty darn good, but he didn't fancy taking a whole garrison.

Counting to three, Gaius peeked over the edge and saw the path was clear. Waiting another moment to be sure, he vaulted over the wall and ran for a stack of barrels. Diving into a small divot under the barrels, he observed the area before him and sighed.

There was no cover at all, just flat ground. If he made a break for it, someone was bound to see him.

Weighing his options, he spotted a pile of hay next to another low building. If he had to guess, that was the stable, and they'd restocked for the night.

Smirking, Gaius reached back for an arrow, only to come up short. Sure, he could sneak back to the brazier he'd passed on the way here and light an arrow, but that would waste precious ammunition. *Damn, what I wouldn't give to have some kind of magic. Alright, what do I have that can work as a distraction?*

His eyes scanned the area before it came to him. The barrels that lay over his head were likely water, but one of the supports keeping them in place looked a bit worn.

Gaius felt another smirk rise on his face as he slid the Mati Katti from its sheathe. All it would take was one swing...

Metal crashed behind him and Gaius struggled to keep himself from bolting. Judging by the curses coming from behind him, it was just a recruit dropping a load, but Gaius couldn't tell.

Fortunately, the loud sound had drawn the eyes of everyone else, leaving Gaius a small window. Taking it, he ran for dear life. It was a pulse pounding few seconds as he ran, his entire form lit up like a torch from the surrounding light. He could hear and feel every thud, clank, and rattle that his body gave off, fearing that someone would glance over and see him.

A door in the wall started to open and Gaius felt as if everything slowed down.

He could see the grain of the door, how even the boards were, and the glint of the iron bands in the torchlight. A steel boot was the first human thing he saw, followed by the rest of the leg and the hips. Finally, the torso came into view and Gaius knew that this was likely going to be his first kill of the day.

Except, his eyes caught sight of an alcove in the wall, just wide enough to slip through. Taking his chances, he turned his momentum into a jump and rolled through the slip right as voices hit his ears.
"Where is Katniss? I told her to bring me a report on the interrogation hours ago."

The voice sounded vaguely familiar, but Gaius couldn't place it before another voice answered. "I do not know, Commander. She entered the holding cells shortly after you left and hasn't been heard from since."

The first voice, Gaius placed it as a woman, scoffed. "She needs to reign in her sadism. I heard that woman start screaming soon after I left, and I can only hope she didn't kill him. I reserve the right to end my own brother's life."

Gaius blinked, shocked at what he heard. That woman, a Commander at that, was Frederick's sister? Judging by how cold her voice was, Gaius could see why Frederick hadn't tried to talk to her recently.

Wonder why she's a rebel, but I guess I can't answer that question. They said something about holding cells, so let's find someone that knows something.

Nodding, he turned to look down the alcove. The alcove was closer to an emergency passage that led to a simple door at the end. Gaius scooted that way, back pressed as flat as it could go with a bow on it. He tested the door when he got there and found it unlocked.

Testing it, there was no creak from the hinges and Gaius took a peek inside. Much to his bemusement, he heard voices in the darkness.

His face fell flat when he finally realized what was happening.

Naga, people will find absolutely anywhere to do this stuff.

Rolling his eyes, he stepped in and silently closed the door. There was a little light coming from the frames of doors lining a wall he could barely make out, and the noises were coming from his right.

If he was going to get information, the best thing to do was take the gift that was given to him.

Tiptoeing to his right, the noises slowly became clearer. Gaius frowned at the sounds, not liking what he was hearing. Deciding to bite the bullet, he felt his way to one of the doors and grabbed an unlit torch from its mount. Using his claws for sparks, the torch lit up instantly and Gaius blanched at what he saw.

He'd take details to his grave, but some poor guy was getting attacked by two women who were… enjoying themselves at his expense and one another's touch.

Mati Katti flashed from its sheathe and pierced the first woman's chest, the tip exiting just under her naked breast. The other woman's eyes widened before Gaius's claws ripped out her throat. He left her to bleed on the floor and approached the man, the Katti sheathed while he readied Yewfelle. "Hey, you know where the holding cells are?"

The man was trembling on the floor, and Gaius could tell by his emaciated frame he was likely a prisoner. "Hey, can you point me to the holding cells? There's a way out of here for ya if you tell me."

The man was still trembling, but he finally spoke. "T-t-the new b-building. N-new prisoners a-a-arrived y-yesterday."

Gaius nodded. "Ok, good, thanks. Follow me, I'll show you the way out."

The man held out a shaky hand and Gaius hauled him to his feet. As Gaius had thought, the man
was pale and gaunt, angry red welts from tonight rising amongst old bruises. "You got a name, pal?"

The man shivered, barely able to keep his feet while Gaius guided him. "T-Thomas, I was a m-

merchant before all of this b-began."

Gaius hummed, testing the door he'd entered before speaking again. "What got you in the slammer

and into that mess? You piss someone off?"

Thomas shook his head. "I d-don't know. I was accused of h-heresy by the High Cleric h-herself."

Gaius frowned, leading the man to the edge of the alcove. "And who, pray tell, is the High Cleric?

I've been out of polite society for a while."

Thomas took a shaky breath. "L-Lady Yennis. She was p-promoted recently."

Gaius frowned. "Ok, thanks for the tip. Now, can you run? If you can, you need to sprint for that
gate when I say so. When you get there, you'll find the gate unlocked, use it to get out of here."

Thomas stared at him. "W-why?"

Gaius rolled his eyes. "I said I'd give you an escape, and I've done so. Now, ready?"

Thomas nodded, a new determination burning in his eyes. Gaius smirked and held up three fingers,
dropping one by one until…

"Now!"

Thomas took off with all the strength he had, ripping across the ground with a speed only the
desperately hopeful could achieve. It was just enough, as the poor man was through the gate and on

his way out just as another patrol marched by.

Sighing in relief, Gaius looked down the wall to see the building that held his friends.

*I'm coming guys, just hold on.*

He was really hoping that Nowi wasn't awake by the time he got there. If she was, and the soldiers

hadn't found her Dragonstone…

It was bound to get ugly.

-Nowi-

There was no sound.

There was no sight.

There was no touch.

There was no taste.

There was no smell.

Only emptiness.

Nowi's mind wandered the empty expanse that was her skull, vaguely aware of her limp limbs that

remained chained and the primal need to breath.
It was just so unfair. She'd finally decided to listen, to put her jealousy aside and hear Frederick out, and he was gone. She'd screamed for what must have been hours, her shrieks echoing through the empty rooms around her.

The sound of metal on stone had made her look up, only to be greeted with a sadistic grin set in a plain woman's face. She'd crowed about what pain she was going to inflict on Nowi, but all Nowi wanted to know was if Frederick was still with them.

The woman, as if sensing the plea, had laughed. Then, she'd dropped the anvil.

"Your precious knight isn't long for this world. I fear I went a bit too far making him scream, but I have you and the other two to bide my time. Ta ta!"

The woman left, shrieking in laughter, but Nowi ceased functioning then. Her Dragonstone was gone, and Vivaldi had been taken from her. There was no way out of this mess, and the last memory Frederick would have of her was failing to speak.

Her last memory of him would be failing to ask for forgiveness.

Why... why do the gods curse me? Kidnapped at birth and forced to wander for centuries, wondering what new torment would be cast upon me if caught. Then, when I think I've found friends, and one I could give my heart to, I lose my head and break that brief chance. Now, here I am, left to rot until the accursed holders decide what to do with me.

A thought broached her mind's fog, a realization.

I... I didn't turn into a child! If they find out what I am...

A hard shiver shook her entire body, images flashing before her eyes. A cold cell, blindfolded, bare to the world as specially chosen men line up to the sow...

Fire raced up her throat and bile spilled onto the floor. She would rather die than be subjected to such a horrid fate. Her purity would follow her to the damn grave.

She panted, spitting the vile taste from her mouth. Nowi was angry now, angrier than she'd ever been before. She wanted to find that sadistic bitch and rend her limb from limb. She wanted to hunt down the Duke and burn him to ash for daring start this rebellion!

She wanted to hunt down Catherine, drag her before her brother's body, and make her bleed.

The anger started to burn the fog of listlessness, a manic bloodlust rising to take its place.

Nowi simply didn't care anymore, not if Frederick was going to leave her, like so many others.

A voice echoed through her mind, a rune carving itself into her forehead. "Child of Dragons, child of Mila and Threon, heed my voice. I am Ozymandias, King of Crystal and Gems, and I come to you offering power. My works have given rise and fall to kingdoms innumerable, and I offer this power to you."

The voice's volume grew louder with every word, becoming a great, all-encompassing thrum. "Swear your name to me, and my power is yours! Power to end your enemies and make thine heart's desire reality!"

Nowi's eyes glowed white, the rune on her forehead nearing completion. Her mind was made up, this would be the end.
She'd drag every last one of these bastards with her.

Then… then she could tell Frederick she was sorry.

For everything.

The rune flashed, its mark complete, and the laughter of Ozymandias resounded through Nowi's skull.

Then, a roar shattered the night.

-Gaius-

Gaius found it almost insulting that his friends were not more heavily guarded.

A bolt from Yewfelle had removed the lone guard standing by the entrance, a ring of iron keys hooked on a stand behind the entrance door. The first level held no one, not even rats, but the second level held Libra and Vaike both.

They were thankfully unharmed minus some bruising and a nasty cut on Vaike's jaw, but it was with heavy hearts that they descended to the third level and discovered Frederick.

The knight was a mess, plain and simple. Welts, bruises, and cuts littered his naked chest and legs, only a simple pair of briefs keeping him decent. When the door was unlocked and his shackles released, Frederick revealed yet more horror.

His back was a solid mat of congealed blood and scabs, some still oozing from the sundered flesh. It was obvious he had been whipped well beyond the point of viciousness and his arms looked to have been slashed by a razor.

Libra finished his examination and rounded on Gaius. "I need a staff, now! Sir Frederick will not remain with us if you do not!"

Gaius nodded, tossing the keys to Vaike. "I'm on it, Padre. Vaike, go get our little lady, she'll want to be here with him."

He didn't wait for a response and ran to the first level. As he'd been searching the cells, he'd come across a storage room that held unusually powerful healing staffs. If he had to guess, it was so that sadist he'd heard about could keep up her fun.

Considering Frederick's condition, Gaius was honor bound to slit her throat. She'd hurt a mate, even if they didn't get on that well, and for that she had to pay.

He reached for one of the staffs, but stumbled as a tremor shook the building. Dust rained on his head and he looked about for a cause. "That can't be good."

Gaius grabbed the strongest staff he could recognize and hustled back down the stairs. When he arrived, he found Libra trying to force water down Frederick's throat. "Padre, I found a Mend. Think that'll help?"

Libra nodded. "Yes, bring it here. I can cure his cuts and bruises, but I fear it does nothing for the blood loss or possible infection. We should be thankful none of them are infected, or Sir Frederick would have passed long before you arrived."

Gaius shook his head, handing the staff to Libra. "You felt that tremor, right? Is this area usually
rocked by earthquakes, or is that an ill omen?"

Libra sighed as he coaxed the healing magic out of the staff and into Frederick's bleeding form, the flow stopping and skin slowly reknitting alongside muscle and nerves. "I do not know. Sir Vaike has yet to return, and I fear that tremor has something to do with it."

"Guys, we got a problem!"

Speak of the devil, there was Vaike. The blonde berserker skidded to a stop, Armads held in a deathgrip beside him. While Gaius was glad Vaike had retrieved the legendary axe, the panicked look in his eyes was not good. "Vaike, calm down, what happened?"

Vaike drew a deep breath. "Ok, so, I went looking for the pipsqueak when I heard some kind of scream. Sounded like Minerva with a bellyache, so I followed the sound until I found a cell. Problem is, said cell had the wall blown open and a bunch a thrice damned crystal lying all over the place!"

Gaius gulped, feeling a pit open in his stomach, but a strained voice met his ears. "Where's…Nowi?"

Libra brought water to the awakening knight's lips instantly, his voice stern. "Sir Frederick, you shouldn't be talking. I've been able to close most of the wounds and stop the bleeding, but you're too weak to be moved!"

Frederick coughed, but spoke again. "I… know. But… I fear that… I fear that Nowi is in danger. Please, Libra… I cannot stay here anyway."

Libra frowned, his medical logic and priestly empathy battling for dominance. Eventually, his pity won out. "Very well, but you shall be carried between Sir Vaike and myself. Sir Gaius, keep interlopers away as we search for Lady Nowi. Once she is found, we must leave."

Gaius nodded. "Alright, I'll go scout up top. There should have been at least a patrol down here after that tremor and I don't like the silence."

He didn't wait for a response and ran for the stairs. As he ascended the stairs, he slowly heard the sounds of shout and screams reach his ears. Not caring for stealth at this point, he charged through the door and looked around.

Gaius's face drained of blood. "Holy deep fried shit."

-Nowi?-"Rage…rage…rage.

Rage was all there was in the world. It had been briefly sated when it had found that woman, the one that had taunted her, and bit her in half.

That kill just fueled the hunger, the crimson staining unnatural jaws. Wings that should have been incapable of flight took to the air and a hellish roar rocked the sky once more.

She could see the ants below her scurrying away, little taps from arrows attempting to shoot her down. The pitiful attempts were met with a blast of fury, crystals rising to spear those that tried to escape her wrath.

Her eyes found where the ants were scurrying, a truly disgusting temple that spoke of nothing but opulence and complacency. She turned to the temple of sin and her eyes could see someone standing atop the balcony connecting the two towers.
Flying towards the bridge, she pulled up short and stared at the tiny creature. She, for it was a woman, was clothed in great finery, unbefitting one who claimed to be one most holy.

"Oh great dragon," the insect cried, "we beseech you to cease your rampage! We will offer all you desire, so long as you spare these people!"

The dragon stared at the woman, the moonlight and faint fires shining on its emerald hide. The woman was a good actress, but the dragon could see that the woman was pleading for her own life and the life of the conspirators that had fled.

The dragon growled and a voice filled the air. "What I want… is your blood!"

A tail whipped down and crushed the balcony, pulping the woman that had dared tried to approach her.

The dragon's laughter reverberated through the air. "Bring me the rebels! Bring me those that sent my heart to this forsaken place!"

Another roar shattered the air. "Bring me the Duke!"

-Gaius-

To say this situation was bad would understate what was going on so poorly the one that uttered such a phrase should be hung.

Gaius watched as a great dragon of green crystal flew through the night sky, at one point charging to the Grand Cathedral, pausing, and smashing the balcony to rubble with a single swipe of its tail.

Considering he only knew one dragon, Frederick was not going to be happy.

"Sir Gaius, what's happened?"

Gaius looked back to see Libra and Vaike carrying Frederick on a makeshift stretcher. Judging by the bandages, they'd found the same storeroom Gaius had. "Well, we have a dragon flying around spreading death and destruction, the main building over there's a pile of rubble, and I caught sight of a group of knights riding for one of the city gates. Leader had a blue plume, so I assume they were important."

Frederick tried to sit up. "A…dragon? Is it Nowi?"

Vaike grunted. "That's about the size of it. Based on the cell with the crystal and the dragon flying about, I'm guessin' Nowi heard you getting' tortured."

Frederick sighed and laid back. "I thought I heard her voice towards the end. It was before unconsciousness claimed me… and they tried to slash my arm to pieces."

Vaike adjusted his hold. "Then I suggest we go meet the little lady. Seeing you ought to calm her down."

Gaius pointed to the sky. "We'd better get moving then, she's headed for the Duke's manor."

His point was well made and the men took off at a brisk jog, their speed hampered by their injured comrade. Having to dodge pillars holding the screaming dead and crushed buildings was harrowing on its own, but there was one thing that unnerved them more than anything.

The town was silent.
With such a great threat hanging over their heads, one would expect people to be panicking and running wherever Nowi wasn't. Instead, the streets were deserted save for those frozen in crystal.

Gaius shook his head. "Damn, I didn't think the town'd be this bad. It was pretty lively earlier, even with all the patrols."

Libra shook his head too. "It's as if the people here are well versed in hiding. But, why would they have to develop such skills with a seat of the church here?"

Gaius frowned. "I ran into this guy named Thomas when I was sneaking in. He was a merchant that got accused of heresy by the Head Cleric and was being… abused."

Libra growled under his breath. "I will… need to speak with Lord Chrom, when we return."

Vaike added his two coppers. "I like this introspection as much as the next guy, but shouldn't we be picking up the pace? Pipsqueak's been climbing into the sky the last few minutes."

Gaius's eyes widened and he looked to the sky, Frederick's voice taking the words right out of his mouth.

"Oh no."

-Nowi-

None brought forth the Duke and Catherine had long fled the city.

With only one piece of prey close at hand, Nowi was letting her instinct drive her as high into the sky as she could go, eyes locked squarely on the topmost manor. Something told her that this was where the Duke had holed himself up, and she would make him pay.

A vicious grin rose on her crimson stained jaws, her climb complete. Nowi turned to face the manor and began to fall, the power that gave her this form concentrating in the front of her body.

The crystal retracted from the back of her body, revealing pale, soft flesh that even a dull rock could have pierced. Nowi cared not for this, sharpening her focus and speeding up.

The manor grew exponentially, her target a large window that blazed with light. A manic grin stretched across her jaws as her body smashed through the glass, sending shards of deadly glass flying about as her body crushed any bastard that dared to stand before her wrath.

Nowi screeched to a stop before roaring her challenge. "Duke Carlan! Your death has come!"

Oddly, silence was her answer. Looking about, Nowi noticed that the chair in the center of the back wall was askew.

"Coward!" Nowi screeched, her claws tearing the hidden door from the wall and sending it crashing to the marble floor. "I'll have your blood if I have to destroy this entire mountain!"

The passage that spiraled deeper into the rock was too small for Nowi's current girth, but her power sensed this and started shedding crystal until she was small enough to slither through the passage.

Her wings were the first to be shed, along with the majority of her crystal armor. All that remained was thin film of diamond and thicker emerald plates over vital areas, the pale skin of her body easily showing the veins and arteries.

Nowi still didn't care, her claws tearing the stairs and walls around her into rubble as she scrambled...
down the passage, manic glee filling her at the possibility of vengeance.

Her journey carried her deep underground, only torches providing any form of light. Even those were extinguished as Nowi's crusade wound ever deeper, her claws crushing stone and causing collapses in the small rooms she passed.

After what felt like far too long to her rage addled mind, she smashed into a large, stone room.

There were no other exits that she could sense, the power granted to her finding no other opening in the stone. "Carlan!"

It was strange how dark the room was, only a lonely torch off to the side casting any light. Nowi's eyes narrowed before she noticed a brazier that still held wood in the center of the room.

Her claws scraped stone as she walked forward, the lone spike on her tail striking the stone next to the brazier. Sparks danced from the impact, but the brazier lit almost immediately.

Nowi's eyes narrowed at the oiled wood before turning her attention to the table that sat further into the room.

And the corpse that lay rotting in the head chair.

Nowi's eyes widened in disbelief, rage returning tenfold. "No, who stole it?! Who took my vengeance from me?!"

The corpse was the source of the scent she'd been following down the stairs. The stench came from the flesh itself, so this was no double.

Duke Carlen was dead, and he had been for a while.

The realization made all of Nowi's rage disappear and the form she'd assumed slowly began to fall apart. Crystal clattered to the ground and flesh shrunk as human skin began to regrow. Bones cracked back into place and hair reappeared on Nowi's head until the transformation finally came to an end.

Nowi ignored this, mind going blank. She'd given herself to power for the sole sake of ending those that had made Frederick suffer, but only one had been given judgement. The others had either fled or never been guilty in the first place.

Into this empty mind, a voice spoke. "How heart rending. My power was given for the sake of vengeance, but it seems that mission will yet lay unfulfilled. The bargain was struck, dear girl, and the price must be paid. Forgive me."

Nowi's head jerked up, the feeling of crawling skin making her neck go taut. She could not see it, but the rune on her head that stood as proof to the contract started sliding to the right, coming to a stop over her eye.

The rune shone brilliantly, and the scent of burning skin filled the room.

It held for a second, just long enough for the first prick of pain to pierce the haze of Nowi's mind, before it sped downwards.

Nowi screamed.

-Frederick-
Frederick wasn't sure how long it took them to reach the Duke's manor.

He was stuck on his back, unable to do anything as his comrades carried on valiantly. Even Gaius, who he'd long viewed with suspicion, played the role of guardian with a relish rarely seen.

It looked like Gaius was actually serious about something other than sweets. With this display, he had Frederick's unrivaled approval.

Now he only needed Maribelle's father to approve, along with the Lady herself.

It was a testament to Frederick's own listlessness that he could notice such things. Frederick would gladly admit he was one of the most inexperienced members of the Shepherds when it came to amorous feelings, as he'd spent much of his life dedicated to training or protecting his liege.

Then, a manakete with the heart of a child and the face of a woman had appeared before him.

There's was not an old relationship, but it was as strong as any Frederick had formed in his life. There was just something so utterly charming in the way she did things, in the way she spoke, in the way she sought him out for the smallest things.

It felt nice, to be shown that appreciation. Frederick knew all the Shepherds appreciated his work, but none were as sure to show it as Nowi. She'd even promised him after their first dance lesson was over to make sure Frederick knew he was appreciated, even if she had to do it herself.

Did that change the answer he'd given her, just days ago? No.

It would go against Frederick's very soul to abandon his liege, even if it meant leaving the one he'd fallen for so quickly. But, there was reason for his decision.

Frederick trusted Nowi, and knew that she'd never get herself into such trouble if she could help it. Even then, he'd already sworn to never see such a situation come about, so in his mind, the question was irrelevant.

Then again, considering how much better Sumia had been getting…

Frederick shook his head at the exact time Gaius's face appeared over him. "Oy, big man, we're at the gate. Problem is, well, no one's here."

Frederick blinked. "No one? Not even a token guard?"

Gaius shook his head. "Nope, not even that. Haven't had to slice up anyone for a while either."

Vaike waved Gaius over and passed the stretcher handles to him. "Hold on, I want a look at this myself."

Gaius grunted from the weight, but Vaike walked up to the estate gate and looked inside. Frowning, he ran his finger down one of the bars. "Yo, this thing's covered in rust. Gardens are overgrown too."

Frederick frowned while Libra voiced his thoughts. "That would mean no one has tended to the gardens or gate for several months at least. Yet, I see light in the windows, even within that hole Nowi made."

Frederick coughed, drawing the other's attention. "We can discuss why this is later, we must hurry after Nowi."
Vaike nodded and took out Armads. "Alright, stand back."

He wound up and sent the great axe into the gate, the rusted metal bending with a shriek. Another blow wretched the metal from its rusted hinges, the gate crashing against the stone walkway.

Vaike holstered the axe and took the stretcher back from Gaius. "Alright, let's get in there."

Gaius took a look around, just to be sure, before waving them through. "Pretty obvious what to do from here. Let's just hope Nowi doesn't decide to attack us on sight."

Frederick hoped that as well, if only so he would not be forced to watch as his comrades were forced to do battle with one another. Frankly, he just wanted to show Nowi that he was ok, that she didn't need to lose herself.

It was his wish, considering he'd been forced to hide the true extent of his condition.

Libra may have healed his physical wounds, but Frederick could feel hid mind starting to grow foggy and his heartbeat slow. That sadistic woman had placed a poison of some sort on the blade she'd used, crowing the whole time that not even the most experienced healer would be able to detect it before it was too late.

Frederick would not live to see noon, and he would not see the friends he had made again. So his final, selfish wish… was to reassure Nowi and comfort her.

That was all.

Frederick blinked, mind coming back to reality. "A… staircase?"

Vaike grunted from below him, Frederick now carried over his back. "Well, it was kind of hard to ignore the trail of wreckage that led into the greeting hall and the entire false wall that had been ripped out. We had to ditch the stretcher with all the rubble, but the claw marks tell us we're going the right way."

Frederick nodded tiredly, feeling his energy fall a little lower. If they were close, then he could at least make things right.

Their descent was silent from there on, Frederick trying to conserve the strength he had for the meeting to come.

Finally, after far too long, Frederick reached the bottom of the stairs. Vaike picked up speed and stopped in the middle of the room, voice worried. "Oi, what happened? Who's the old guy?"

Libra's voice answered, even as Frederick's vision started to grow dark. "This is the old bishop of the Grand Cathedral. Gaius found him chained in an alcove and covered in wounds. I've stabilized him, but Nowi… I just don't know."

Vaike grunted before gingerly taking Frederick off his back. "Alright, talk to your girlfriend Frederick, we need her to tell us what happened."

Frederick could barely see, but he still heard a familiar voice. "Freddy? You're… you're alive?"

Green filled his view, followed by a teary face. "Nowi…"

Frederick's hand reached up and stroked her cheek, the rough feeling of a scab greeting his skin. "Your… eye."
Nowi gripped his hand, Frederick barely able to feel it now. "That... that doesn't matter. I made my choice, I'll live with the consequences. I'm just... I'm so happy to see you."

Libra's voice came next, the sound strangely far away. "Wait, Sir Frederick, are you ok? Oh Naga, get me an elixir now!"

Nowi's lone eye widened, finally noticing how pale Frederick was. "Wait, Freddy, you're ok, right? You won't leave me, not again, right?!"

Frederick smiled tiredly, his heartbeat barely there now. He had just enough time to say his piece.

"Nowi... My answer as to why... is because I would never dare let you be captured. I trust you... I trust you to stay out of trouble, unlike Lord Chrom. Your question was silly to me for I would never let such horror... occur."

His hand started to fall away, but Nowi gripped it tightly, her head falling to his chest. "Libra, I can't hear his heart! Do something!"

Her yells were far away from Frederick, darkness nearly swallowing his vision. He had one more thing to say, and he spoke the moment Nowi had looked to him once more.

"Nowi... I love you. Find peace... though I am not there."

 Darkness swallowed his vision completely.

His heart stilled and breath paused where it lay.

At last... he knew peace.

At last, he rested.

And with it, came light.
Returning Home

To say the journey had gotten off to a rough start was selling it short.

Sumia had spurred her steed as hard and as fast as she could, but it soon became clear that Chrom would catch up to them. Desperate, she'd ordered Lon'qu into the trees and told him to wait for the prince's arrival.

Sumia didn't need to say what Lon'qu was supposed to do, it was obvious.

Lon'qu led his horse into the forest, making sure it was well out of sight before clambering up a tree and concealing himself in the leaves. The horse tracks in the snow marked the path Sumia and Cherche were taking, but the sudden order and the prince's proximity left little time to perfectly hide the trap.

Lon'qu could only hope the prince was more concerned with catching his paramour than looking up.

Just as he finished settling himself into the tree, the sound of hooves pounding snow met his ears. Chrom was only a few minutes away and Lon'qu needed to time the jump perfectly lest he miss and be forced to play catch up.

Voices reached his ears next, Donnel and Chrom. Donnel was pleading with the prince to turn back and let Sumia do her job while Chrom was arguing that it was his duty to help his people, even if it meant sneaking into enemy territory.

Lon'qu started counting.

Three…

Two…

One…

Now!

Lon'qu leapt from his perch and slammed into something. Judging by the surprised grunt and frightened scream, he jumped on both riders.

Using their surprise to his advantage, Lon'qu pushed against Chrom's central mass and succeeded in dislodging the prince from the stirrups and saddle. Unfortunately, he'd loosened Donnel's hold and the young man reached out for anything to try and keep himself up.

It just so happened he grabbed Lon'qu's jacket.

Lon'qu grunted as all three of them fell from the horse, rolling along the ground in a tangled pile of limbs, armor, and curses. Chrom was sadly alone in his quest to get up; soon finding himself pinned to the ground and tied up with a liberal application of rope.

Seeing that the prince was bound and not going anywhere, Lon'qu breathed easy. "This is foolish, even for your notoriously hard head. What possessed you to try and join us without telling Sir Robin, or anyone else for that matter? Do you doubt Sumia that much?"

Chrom looked genuinely offended. "Of course I trust her! I wouldn't have let her go on this mission if I didn't! However, it is my sworn duty to serve the people with all my strength. If I cannot go
amongst them and learn of their troubles, I have failed as a ruler before I've even begun."

Lon'qu sighed. "Prince Chrom, I understand why you do this, but you must think. These rebels
would be beyond ecstatic to capture you, or your sister. Who knows what horrors they would visit
upon either of you before execution?"

Donnel joined in. "Uh, pardon me, Your Lordliness, but I agree with Lon'qu. Y'all and Lissa are too
important to lose, unlike me or him. If you go, Ylisse gets taken over by them rebels and Khan
Flavia'll probably have to invade."

Chrom's brow shot up at Donnel saying Lissa's name without the usual title, but sighed as the words
finally sunk in. "I…I understand. I'll take myself back to Flavia's palace then and await your return."

Lon'qu wasn't buying it. Bullheaded the prince may be, but he could be wily when given the proper
motivation.

Say, keeping Sumia safe.

Lon'qu looked to Donnel. "Take him back to the palace and don't let him out of those bindings until
Lissa or Khan Flavia are through with him. I will rejoin Cherche and Sumia before continuing the
mission."

Donnel gulped. "Ye sure? Won't it be a might harder to do things with only three o' y'all?"

Lon'qu shook his head. "No, if anything it'll be easier. As long as no one Sumia knows sees her, we
should be able to get inside the capital easily. Neither Cherche or I are Ylissean, so we'll likely be
unknown to the rebels."

Donnel nodded, taking off to gather his horse before getting back on the road. Lon'qu looked Chrom
over one more time before sighing. "Please don't give him too much crap over Lissa. It's pretty damn
obvious."

Chrom shrugged. "What brother would I be if I didn't? Don't worry, I won't give him too much of a
hard time."

Lon'qu smirked. "Your dear sister wouldn't let you be otherwise, right?"

Chrom's only answer was a smirk of his own, though it vanished by the time Donnel returned. After
securing the prince, Lon'qu wished them luck and watched until they were out of sight. Turning back
to the forest, he returned to his horse before setting off at last.

Thankfully, they'd taken care of Chrom before they'd made the Longfort gate, so Lon'qu was able to
meet up with Cherche and Sumia without issue. The only problem was that Lon'qu was now alone
with two women, admittedly two he was decently comfortable with, but neither were Olivia.

Cherche noticed this as they cantered through the gate. "Are you sure about sending Donnel back? It
would have made it a great deal easier on you if he was around."

Lon'qu grunted. "I can keep my cool, just don't touch me out of the blue and we'll be fine."

Sumia cleared her throat. "S-so, uh, the journey's…two days, give or take. Clarissa's a large
province, but, um, the c-capital's in the east."

Cherche smiled at Sumia. "It's ok, we'll be fine. Robin trusted you to lead this mission, and both
Lon'qu and I believe in your abilities."
Sumia shook her head, voice grateful. "Thank you, but I fear I don't trust myself. I mean, I know Chrom's worried about me, Naga he always is, but I can't help and wonder whether I'll be able to make impartial judgements."

Lon'qu narrowed his eyes. "Why's that?"

Sumia sighed heavily. "Well... as you know, my family was close to the Duchess. Unfortunately, after a plague swept through the capital and took my father, the Duchess and my mother had a falling out."

Cherche frowned. "You mentioned that at the meeting, right?"

"I did," Sumia confirmed, "but I wasn't very specific."

"Well, we have two days to hear your story." Lon'qu answered, gesturing to the snow-covered ground. "When we make camp, you can say what you need to."

Sumia nodded and their conversation stalled for now. Instead, they curved down a small road that Sumia remembered following in order to catch up with the Shepherds the first time they'd come to Ferox. It had been lucky that the path led that way, since Sumia only knew one path to Clarissa.

Considering it was a main road, they'd do well to avoid it.

So, Sumia had spent the night before looking over a number of maps, eventually deciding on their current path. It would take them through Superius for the first day while on the second day they would enter Clarissa proper.

Then they'd arrive at the capital of Clarissa, Denaris, the following morning.

While it was a little longer compared to the normal route, the one they were using was a simple farmer's trail and it was highly unlikely they'd be molested on the trip. Considering they wanted to be undetected, the slight inconvenience of the uneven road was well worth it.

In fact, the first day passed without incident. They didn't so much as sniff a patrol from Superius, so they avoided having to answer those questions, and there were no secret incursions they had to stop to save people.

In other words, the trip was incredibly boring and Sumia found herself daydreaming while Cherche started working on a piece of cloth. Only Lon'qu kept his head in the present, pointing out any hazards in the path as snow gave way to mud and grass.

"Alright, let's stop here." Sumia called as they entered the first clearing that day. "We're not in enemy territory, so we can cook tonight."

Cherche sighed in relief. "Wonderful. No field rations tonight."

Lon'qu dismounted with a tired sigh. "Try and be more alert tomorrow. I'd rather not be the only one to actually watch the road."

Sumia and Cherche had the decency to look sheepish, but Lon'qu ignored them in favor of getting out a feedbag and water. After the horses had been taken care of, Cherche gathered some kindling and set to work on a dish from her home village. The stew included beef, peppers, beans, and some spices.

Lon'qu took the time waiting to maintain Balmung, carefully oiling and cleaning the blade. Sumia
did the same with Gae Bolg, even if she knew using it would have to come as a last resort. It was for that reason she'd brought a simple steel lance with her.

The sharp smell of cooking peppers made Sumia's nose wrinkle, she much preferred the smell of honey rolls, but her stomach grumbled nonetheless.

Cherche started pouring out portions as the first stars made their appearance. "Alright, here you go. I only had enough for one portion each, but it's one of the more filling dishes I know."

Lon'qu took his and began to eat without complaint, but Sumia felt herself gag slightly as the spices invaded her nose.

Cherche chuckled. "Don't worry. It may smell strong, but I only used mild spices for this trip. Some of the ones I've seen made could put Valflame to shame with how hot they were."

Sumia tried to be gracious about it, but she couldn't help making a face as she started eating. Cherche was at least correct in that it tasted far better than it smelled, but Sumia found it hard to ignore the smell. Hunger wouldn't lie unanswered though, so she ate all of it anyway.

Once their meal was finished, Lon'qu looked to Sumia. "Alright, how about we continue where you left off this morning. Why exactly did your mother get into a fight with the Duchess?"

Sumia fiddled with her hair. "Well… it had to do with joining the Shepherds. You see, my mother was quite opposed to me going off to join what she called a 'vigilante' group while the Duchess thought it would expand my horizons. I admit that's all my mother actually told me, but I found out through an old friend that almost every member of Ylisse's nobility was trying to get a daughter or son to join."

Cherche shrugged. "It makes sense. Chrom and Lissa are royalty and trying to get in their good graces is only natural."

"That, and they can get a head start on the courting game. "Lon'qu grunted. "Stahl and Kellam have woven more than one tale about ladies trying to catch the prince's eye."

Sumia frowned. "Exactly. The daughters were being sent to either get close to Lissa or to seduce Chrom, the sons were sent with opposite intentions. The real reason my mother didn't want me to go was because she refused to have me used for such reasons."

Cherche smiled. "Yet, you went anyway."

"I did," Sumia said with a smile, "but only because I wanted to do something with myself. I promised my father I'd go and find what I wanted to do before he died and I felt this was a good opportunity."

Lon'qu smirked. "So, the feelings came later then?"

Sumia didn't dignify him with a response, only giving him a glare. "That's none of your business. Anyway, my mother hasn't spoken to me since I left, no letters either, but I'm still afraid she's in danger. We may have had our differences when I left, but I'd still prefer to make sure the rebels haven't harmed her."

"So that's why you're worried about being impartial," Cherche realized. "You fear that you'll prioritize your mother over the mission."

Sumia nodded silently, letting the crackle of the fire fill the silence.
"It doesn't matter," Lon'qu sighed. "Our goal is to gather information and get out. If your mother was close to the Duchess, then she likely has friends in high places. Finding her could equal a week's worth of wandering aimlessly."

"That sounds like a plan," Cherche agreed. "Tell us, are there any others you know that could help, Sumia?"

Sumia smiled; glad to hear the trust in their voices. "Well… there's an old friend of mine that still lives in Denaris. He's the son of the carpenter my father hired to help maintain the house, I've known him since I was a babe."

Lon'qu felt a note of suspicion in his mind at the affection Sumia spoke with. "Truly? When's the last you spoke with him?"

Sumia shrugged. "Less than a month ago. I got a letter from him only a few days before we set out for Ferox the first time."

She giggled. "I call him my 'big brother' because he always acted like one with me. Kind of like Chrom with Lissa, if that makes sense."

Cherche and Lon'qu shared concerned looks but decided to keep their suspicions to themselves. If Sumia trusted this man, they'd go along with it.

Lon'qu cleared his throat. "So, what's the guy's name? Sooner we find him the better if you ask me."

"Jayce," Sumia answered. "He said his dad named him after a character from a book he liked."

Lon'qu stood and stretched. "I guess we have our plan then. We'll go find this Jayce man and get what we can from him. If we're lucky, your mother's safe and can help us as well."

He turned and took up a spot on the edge of the fire's light. "I'll take first watch, you two get some rest."

Sumia moved to protest, but Cherche gave her a stern look and a shake of her head. Lon'qu wouldn't be comfortable alone with either of them and that made for a poor watchman.

Sumia's face conveyed her desire for the opposite. Lon'qu had been the trail guide all day and he needed the rest.

Eventually, Cherche crumbled under the look. She just wasn't able to say no when confronted with such serious eyes on a pouty face. "Lon'qu, you've been guiding us all day. Sumia and I will take first watch, and I suggest you agree lest she orders you."

Lon'qu took one glance back and sighed. There was no way he was going to win against that look either.

It may not have been as potent as Olivia's, but damn if it wasn't scary how similar it looked.

"Very well, but I expect to be woken without being touched," Lon'qu conceded. "If it's for an emergency, then I don't care."

Sumia looked happy at least, so Lon'qu found his blanket and let his exhaustion take over. He was too stubborn to admit it, but he was tired.

Sumia and Cherche were quiet until Lon'qu's breathing evened out. Once it was clear he wouldn't
wake, they sat back to back with their eyes glued to the trees.

"So," Cherche began, "how did you and Prince Chrom meet?"

Sumia's cheeks darkened. "Um… why the curiosity?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Cherche asked with a smirk in her voice. "You're quite in love with him, and dare I say it, he seems equally taken with you."

Sumia sighed. "Well… I guess it's pretty obvious with me. I just don't know how Chrom feels."

Before Cherche could rebuke that statement, Sumia continued. "Don't get me wrong, I can tell he's been beyond generous with me, but you haven't known him as long as I have. Chrom's a very generous and trusting person and I remember him taking the shirt off his back so a poor boy could be clothed."

Her voice turned nostalgic. "I'll admit, when I was younger I didn't have a high opinion of normal people. Jayce aside, the only ones I'd ever met were beggars or servants. Just before I joined the Shepherds, I was given the chance to guide Chrom around the city. He was visiting alongside the Exalt and he wanted to get to know the recruit."

Sumia's head came to rest against Cherche's shoulder. "I got to see that generosity of his up close, and the way the people greeted him and thanked him for helping… it made me see them in a different light."

A pat on Sumia's hand told her to keep going. "After that, I tried to be kind to everyone. I even managed to reign in the temper I had at the time, odd as that may sound. I just don't know if he's been nothing but his good, generous self with me ever since. It's nice to dream, but… I don't want to take that dive with everything going on."

Cherche's hand gripped Sumia's. "I can understand that. Would you like me to share something?"

Sumia hummed before grinning. "Well… what about Vaike caught your attention? It's not every day someone volunteers to be his personal nurse the moment it's offered."

"I knew you were going to ask that," Cherche groaned. "Well, I didn't think much of him at first. He was loud, arrogant, poorly mannered, and to be frank, stupid."

Sumia and Cherche shared a laugh before Cherche continued. "Despite this, Minerva still took to him almost immediately. It baffled me that she could like someone so crude and unrefined, but I saw him on the battlefield for the first time after that."

Sumia clicked her teeth. "He's a sight to see, that's for sure."

Cherche's voice sounded far away, seemingly ignoring the comment. "The sheer ferocity, the instinct in battle, it reminded me of a wyvern fighting for its territory. It made sense then, why Minerva liked him so, he's a kindred spirit."

Cherche sighed. "There's just something utterly charming about him. He's loud, yes, but only because it is expected of him. I've had many a conversation with him in the Outrealms where he never raised his voice. The arrogance is a mask, for Vaike fears being useless and abandoned. His boasts and work to match them are how he pushes himself. Poor manners are a result of his upbringing and the casual nature of the Shepherds, but it brings a life to otherwise stiff meals and meetings."
Sumia's eyes had long since gone wide. Apparently, she wasn't the only one in love; it was just a reversed situation.

"Then, there's his mind," Cherche continued, unaffected by the silence. "Yes, he lacks much in the way of book knowledge and he tends to look before he leaps, but he has a kind of wisdom that many nobles lack. Vaike knows people and how they work, no matter their class. With a dedicated partner, I feel he can reach greater heights than anyone could ever imagine."

Her voice grew melancholic. "Even him."

Sumia finally spoke again. "Wait, 'even him'? Are you saying Vaike doesn't actually believe any of his own words?"

Cherche nodded. "Yes. He doesn't know that I know, but he's had several nightmares over the last few weeks. They all had a common theme, where he's left behind and forgotten by everyone. Somewhere he was the lone survivor of a battle or he simply grew apart from the others. I know how that feels, and I want to do what I can to help."

Sumia frowned. "Go on. I know the sound of someone wanting to vent when I hear it."

Cherche took a shaky breath. "No...no, it's alright. The moon's moved and we should get some rest."

Sumia stopped her from standing up. "Let Lon'qu sleep. Cherche, as a friend to both you and Vaike, I want you to tell me what's wrong. Please?"

Cherche hesitated, but made the mistake of looking behind her. She was greeted with Sumia's pouting face, though her eyes showed the steel of authority that so rarely made itself known.

Cherche pouted in turn. "You can't leave well enough alone, can you?"

Sumia grinned in triumph. "Nope, just ask Chrom! Now, tell me."

Cherche could see she wouldn't be getting out of this so she turned around to face Sumia, her legs crossed in front of her. "I know what it means to fear amounting to nothing. I'm the only child of my family and my parents were expecting a boy."

She gestured to herself. "Obviously, I am not a man. But, my father insisted I learn how to ride a wyvern and enter the service of House Rosanne, Lord Virion's family. My mother, on the other hand, insisted I train as a cleric and become a simple maid if not a prospective bride. They argued for days before my mother convinced my father to at least educate me in things 'ladies' should know."

Sumia frowned. "She sounds very stern, your mother."

Cherche nodded. "She was, I don't deny. Very much the matron of the family, though she did care more than she let on. She never explicitly said 'I love you' until she was on her deathbed, but I knew all the same. My father was similar, but after I tamed Minerva and started going to school on her, he brought me back home and started training me to ride."

Cherche's eyes turned to the sky. "I've never had a stricter instructor. Not even Frederick could match how stringent his commands were or how taxing the training was. He drilled every last piece of knowledge I have about Minerva and fighting into my skull dozens of times. I could never quite live up to his expectations, even as I grew stronger and more agile. He had a set of forms that he said every rider in our family had mastered, but I never did them to his standards."
Now her eyes fell to her knees. "Not once did he say he was proud of me, neither of my parents did. All I ever saw, regardless of how I tried, I could see disappointment in his face. He tried to hide it, but it was an unconscious feeling. I knew then as I know now that he wished I'd been a boy, so he could have taught me everything. Instead he got a girl that could barely finish the forms, let alone master them."

Sumia tilted her head. "Are those forms you're talking about the ones you worked on in your free time? I've seen you at it a few times and I think it looks amazing."

Cherche sighed. "You would think so, for you will not see my father's. When he demonstrated the forms, there was a power and an authority to it that made you quail in both fear and admiration. I could never inspire such presence, even as I learned to make myself threatening by aura alone."

Sumia laughed. "So your dad taught you how to be scary while looking sweet and polite? I don't know whether to thank him or curse him."

Cherche's face morphed into the very thing Sumia feared. "I'm sorry, could you say that again?"

Sumia backpedaled hard. "N-nothing! Anyway, you've been in the Outrealms with us, and Helswath itself chose you as its owner. Surely that means you've amounted to something, right?"

Cherche's smile turned sad. "You'd believe as much, but for me it's not the same. When my father died, he did so defending Rosanne from a large bandit incursion. I never got to show him that I could master the forms and even to this day, I still haven't. Lord Virion has tried to tell me to stop numerous times when I came into his service, but I cannot let this go."

She stood, smile still sad. "It is my burden to bear, but that feeling of worthlessness is shared between Vaike and I. I hope, someday, we'll be able to cast it off and live happily. We're partners after all."

Cherche went to wake Lon'qu, missing Sumia mutter under her breath. "Partners? Are you sure that's how you want to live happily?"

-Morning-

Lon'qu woke them with the sunrise, a cold breakfast of jerky and hard bread meeting them. After choking down the tasteless morsels, they saddled up and took off down the path again, taking care to hide the remains of their fire.

Again, the majority of the trip passed without incident, the only change being increased alertness on the parts of Cherche and Sumia. It wasn't until the sun began to set that the trio stumbled upon their first real clue that a rebellion was happening at all.

They'd been cantering along the edge of a forest for almost an hour when Lon'qu heard the sound of hooves rumbling in the distance. Holding up a fist, the party dismounted and crept to the edge of the tress.

Cherche pointed further down the tree line. "There, I see some footmen coming out of the trees."

Sumia followed the finger and gulped. "They're Surperius, the banner has the colors and heraldry. But, what are they doing here? We're almost to Denaris."

Lon'qu grunted. "Probably a sapper team, though I feel it foolish to march with a banner announcing who you are."

Sumia sighed. "The Surperian forces are known to be… boisterous. Sully's from there, remember?"
Cherche had a sharp remark ready, but the Surperian force came to a sudden halt. Now that Lon'qu thought about it, none of the ostensibly allied soldiers had a horse between them.

His thoughts were answered when a group of horsemen appeared from an adjacent copse of trees, their tabards showing a pattern of blue and black diamonds.

Sumia answered before he could get a word in. "Those are Themisian cavaliers, I can tell by the colors and pattern. We're lucky to be so close; otherwise I may have thought they were from Denaris."

Cherche stared at her. "Do the Clarissian forces have a similar pattern or color?"

Sumia nodded. "Yep, they wear light blue and red, but they have diamonds and triangles rather than straight diamonds."

Lon'qu stored that information for later, keeping his eyes on the two groups instead. "Looks like their leaders are meeting up."

Conversation ceased and they waited for the two groups to meet up. Judging by what body language they could see, neither group was terribly fond of each other, but they at least looked willing to work together.

Then came the sound of clanking metal, steel clad knights and cavaliers bearing the heraldry of Clarissa, a stylized tortoise, emerging from the trees to Denaris.

Sumia felt a pit open in her stomach. "I… I didn't want to believe it."

A clear signal of aggression was given and battle cries filled the air, Sumia averted her eyes from the inevitable clash. Lon'qu turned from the coming battle and jumped back into his saddle. "Come, we should make haste while the enemy is distracted."

Cherche patted Sumia's shoulder. "Come along, the sooner we complete our mission, the sooner we can put a stop to this."

Sumia kept her eyes closed, even as Cherche guided her back to her horse and they took off down the path once again.

It didn't stop the sounds of clashing steel or screams from reaching her ears.

Or the nightmares that would follow.

-Denaris, Gates-

Sumia was very tired when they finally arrived.

Traveler's cloaks had been dawned and a simple paint mixed into Sumia's hair replaced her characteristic grey locks with a more usual dark brown. Cherche swore up and down the mixture would wash out easily and would do nothing to her hair, but Sumia still felt annoyed.

It took her quite some time to get her hair in order and having it in such a state felt like an insult to all the effort she'd put into it.

That wasn't important at the moment, Sumia suppressed a yawn as the trio waited their turn. If Denaris had a single flaw, it was the fact that the city only had a single gate. While the inside of the city was reasonably spread out and well off, as evidenced by the stone buildings Sumia could see
through the gate, there was always a crowd trying to get in.

*That's what you get when you surround the city with ditches and only one gate. It may make the place almost impossible to siege, but trying to get in is a pain even for the Duchess.*

She sighed and shifted in her seat. "How're you guys holding up?"

Cherche shrugged. "Could be better. Tell me, is it always this crowded?"

"Usually, but not this bad," Sumia replied. "If I had to guess, most of these people are from the south and northeast. That's where the borders with Themis and Surperius are."

Lon'qu grunted. "Cut the talk, we don't want to draw attention. Besides, it looks like we'll be up soon."

Sumia sighed but remained silent. Something in her gut told her something wasn't right, especially with how crowded the entrance was. Surely there were other secure towns these people could go to.

"You three, on the stallions! Come forward!"

Sumia blinked but coaxed her horse forward. Two knights were waiting for them as they came forward, another six stood guard in the gate, two more inspected a cart.

One of the knights stepped forward, their voice echoing from their helm. "What business do you have here?"

Cherche spoke for them. "We are here to visit friends and do some trading. You'll find only rations and wood within our bags."

The knight harrumphed. "And the weapons? What use have traders for such armament?"

Cherche kept her smile in place. "The roads are dangerous at present, no? We are too poor to afford hiring guards, so we do what we can."

The knight stared at them from under his visor, eventually pointing to his companion. "Check their bags. If they check out, they can go through."

The other knight stomped forward and started rifling through their bags. Sumia ignored him, knowing he'd find nothing with Gae Bolg wrapped to resemble a far simpler lance. Instead, she kept her eyes on the knight that had spoken to them.

He was making for the gatehouse, waving another knight with a stack of parchments towards him.

Sumia gulped, she had a bad feeling about what was on those parchments.

"Alright, your bags check out. If you plan on staying the night, the inns are cheapest close to the walls."

Those words were music to Sumia's ears. Cherche barely had enough time to thank the knight before Sumia was through the gates and weaving her way through the crowd.

She didn't slow until they were well away from the gate, sighing as her horse cantered to a stop. A moment later, an unhappy Lon'qu and concerned Cherche caught up.

Lon'qu growled as he pulled down his hood. "What the hell was that? You were the one who said we shouldn't be suspicious, but damn if you taking off wasn't!"
Cherche silenced him with a glare. "Sumia, why did you run? Did something happen?"

Sumia took a deep breath. "I think… I think they have portraits of the Shepherds. If they'd had time to look through those parchments, I feared they'd stop us and discover me."

Lon'qu sighed. "That makes sense. Considering how much preparation even getting this rebellion started probably took, not knowing the personal soldiers of your greatest obstacle would be a gross oversight."

"This is all well and good," Cherche argued, "but we must focus on our mission. Sumia, do you know where your friend is?"

Sumia nodded. "I didn't flee through the streets willy-nilly. Jayce owns his own shop in the artisan's district and he works there unless he's called away for a big project."

Lon'qu pulled his hood back up. "Then lead the way. I'd prefer we get out of the streets before those soldiers call for a search."

Sumia pulled her hood back up and they set off down the street. It was considerably less crowded than the main roads, being a side street and all, but Sumia frowned as she looked around.

Is it just me… or are there a few more people here than I remember?

Her observation wasn't the lone view. Lon'qu and Cherche both noted the amount of people that seemed crammed into the narrow street, many of them not even glancing up from the ground as the Shepherds passed.

The smell of the street didn't help. With so many people crammed together, the air ached with the smell of sweat, rotting meat, and excrement.

Sumia wrinkled her nose. Ylisstol didn't really have a problem with the poor and destitute, not with the exalt's diligent work, but this was the worst Sumia had ever seen.

What's happened while I was gone? Surely there are not enough refugees for so many to be crammed here.

Her thoughts ended as they left the road, coming out onto a wider street that was much less crowded and far better smelling.

Sumia breathed deeply, savoring the scent of soap and wood polish that suffused the air. "Ok, he's the shop with a hammer and anvil against blue paint. He asked me for design ideas before I left."

Cherche sidled up next to Sumia. "You seem to remember these things quite well. How does your friend even know where to send these letters?"

Sumia played with her hair. "Well, I always told him he could send the letters to the Shepherd's garrison. I got Chrom's permission and everything."

She giggled awkwardly. "As for remembering details, well, I can't say they always stick. Remind me to tell you how much of a mess I was while Phila was training me."

Silence fell and they spent their time looking around. True to its name, the artisan's district was filled with a variety of craftsmen ranging from blacksmiths to jewelers and back again. Several flower baskets stood prim and pretty on the fronts of the shops, lending a bright look to the otherwise grey and brown buildings.
Cherche sighed as they passed a candle maker. "Reminds me of home. The artisan's lived closest to the noble houses so I was often in the shops looking for whatever caught Lord Virion's fancy."

Lon'qu pointed to a shop with a large opening under its second floor, a sign hanging down. "Is that the shop?"

Sumia nodded, glad Robin had assigned the goal oriented man to her group. "That's the place! I just hope he's in."

She rode ahead and swung herself off the horse, patting her riding pants of any perceived dust. Walking up to the shop entrance, she tested the door and found it unlocked.

*Oh, he must be in then. Probably not expecting customers for another hour, but I've been gone so long, who knows?*

Shrugging, she pushed inside and gaped at the sight. There were carvings, furniture, and effigies spread all over the shop. Some were of horses, some were portraits, and others were religious statues. In fact, the religious items greatly outnumbered the others.

"Excuse me," Sumia called. "Is Jayce in?"

There was the sound something being placed on the ground before a man's voice entered. "He is, and what business do you have? If it's a custom order, you'll be waiting a while."

Sumia smiled, recognizing the voice. "Would you tell him an old friend is here to visit? She really wants to see her big brother."

There was a crash and several curses before the sound of boots thundering down stairs echoed through the store. A door in the back slammed open to reveal a burly young man with a bushy head of black hair and a full beard sprinkled with sawdust. His blue eyes widened before he started laughing.

"Sumia!" Jayce crowed. "What the hell did you do to your hair? I thought I'd be hugging you as you were!"

He came around the counter, still laughing joyously until he met Sumia in the center, sweeping her into a crushing bear hug. Sumia felt her breath leave in a great burst, but patted his back all the same. Lon'qu and Cherche chose then to join them, their gazes equal parts concern and amusement.

Jayce finally put Sumia down. "Oh, 'fore I forget. Jane, get out of the forge and get in here! My little sis came to visit!"

Another door to the left of the shop opened, a woman in a blacksmith's apron walking in. Her brown hair was tied in a braid that framed a delicate, gentle face. She certainly didn't look like someone capable of holding a forging hammer, but there one sat in her hands.

She took one look at Sumia before her face lit up. "Oh Naga, Sumi! It's me, Jane, from when we were kids!"

Sumia lit up too. "Jane! Oh Naga, you married Jayce?! How in the world did that happen?"

Jane bounced up and hugged Sumia hard, almost hopping in place. "Oh, we can explain that over lunch, but what about you? Is it safe for you to be here?"

Sumia nodded against her friend's shoulder. "For now, yes. Oh, these are my friends, Cherche and
Lon’qu.

Cherche waved while Lon’qu grunted. Jayce walked over to them, politely bowing to Cherche before shaking hands with Lon’qu. "Good to see you have friends right now. I was afraid the knights would come for us considering you and the prince have been declared enemies of the state."

Jane immediately cut off any suspicious stirrings. "As if we would ever say anything. Sumi may have been a brat when we first met her, but damn if we don't stick by our friends."

Cherche, seeing the conviction in the woman's eyes, breathed a sigh of relief. "That ease's my mind greatly, Mrs. Jane. I fear our visit is not one of pleasure though."

Lon’qu cut to the chase, blunt as ever. "Can you tell us of anything that may have happened to cause this rebellion? According to the prince, the Duchess of this province was a close ally of the exalt before her death."

Jayce's face grew pensive. "I guess it hasn't got out quite yet."

Sumia felt a pit open in her stomach. "Jayce… what happened?"

Jayce and Jane looked to each other before the man answered. "Duchess Diane is dead. She was found poisoned along with her family a few weeks ago."

Jane caught Sumia as her legs gave out. "Sumi, that's not all. The one that lead the investigation… they found the assassin dead in one of the poor houses. There was a lot of burned parchment in the hearth they found the body by, but one of the pages survived."

Cherche did not like where this was going. "What did the page say?"

Jayce looked at his feet. "The page was a simple order. Kill the Duchess and her family before they grew too powerful. It was signed with the exalt's personal seal."

Sumia couldn't breathe. "N-no… that can't be right! The hierarch, he was a traitor! Surely-"

Jane stopped her, a finger coming to her lips. "Quiet, I see a patrol making its way here!"

Jayce grew serious. "Follow me, I have a safe room in the back."

Lon’qu and Cherche followed immediately; silently glad they’d taken their horses to the back before entering the shop. Jane had to help Sumia along, the poor woman distraught at what was going on.

She didn't speak, even as the safe room door was closed and locked. It was all just too much to think on, especially since she could still remember how the line of succession worked. Duchess Diane and her extended family made up the entirety of the high nobility, with only Sumia's mother having the title of Countess. The other landowners were simple Barons or wealthy commoners.

If the Duchess's family had been killed, then that meant the highest ranking member that could take over was…

*Oh Naga. I've been declared an enemy by my own mother!*

The sound of breaking wood and shouts pierced the door and the darkness within. Lon'qu cursed, realizing the patrol would gladly rip the place apart. "We have to leave."

Cherche had already started feeling around, eventually wrapping her hands around a door handle. Testing it, she felt it give way. "Lon'qu, Sumia, I have our way out! Help me."
Lon'qu scrambled over, but Sumia was having a mental breakdown. Her mind simply couldn't process that the sweet woman she'd known for so long could simply turn on her, on the halidom. It was just too much.

Lon'qu popped the hatch open, dropping down into a pile of old sacks and twigs. Cherche followed soon after, but neither saw Sumia.

"Don't tell me she's still in there!" Lon'qu growled, standing to go get her.

Cherche yanked him down and away, covering his mouth. A moment later, the sound of shattering wood and yells filtered through the trap door. There were sounds of a struggle, but the voices faded away. Cherche carefully picked her way to the side of the building and glanced to the front.

"Damn it all."

It was the knight from the gate, she could tell because he was the only one not on a horse. Sumia was draped over the shoulder of one of the cavaliers, though they were being surprisingly gentle.

"'Ello love. I reckon you should take a nap for now."

Cherche didn't have time to process the strange voice before something hard met her head and she lost consciousness.

Lon'qu, who'd had the sense to clamber up to the roof and out of sight, growled low as Cherche was brought out to the congregation of knights. The whole mission had gone so far south they were in the damn ocean and it hadn't even been a day yet.

"Alright, that's all of them!" The man that had knocked out Cherche called. "Will you be taking them to see her ladyship, Mr. Draven?"

The knight they'd seen at the gate shrugged, the massive metal plates on his shoulders clanking. Lon'qu didn't hear what was said, but based on the way the troops started to move, they were heading for the large palace at the top of the hill.

Lon'qu sighed, feeling Balmung bounce against his thigh. "From reconnaissance to rescue. Still, if the information we seek is anywhere, it's in there."

Determined, though greatly annoyed, he clambered back down when the patrol was out of sight and went to check on Jayce and Jane.

They were unconscious, but alive, and Lon'qu would need them if he was going to rescue his friends.

If he didn't, he'd never be able to look Chrom or Vaike in the eye ever again.

-Sumia-

When sensation returned, Sumia knew she'd been knocked out.

She just didn't expect to wake up in a luxurious room, a fresh pot of tea lying next to her and Gae Bolg propped against a window. Looking around, she took in a four-poster bed, wool carpets, silver candelabra and other such luxuries. There was even a carving of a Pegasus from her old room.

Ok... I'm not in a cell. I guess that's a good thing...

Sumia's mind flashed to Cherche and Lon'qu. "Wait, what happened to my friends?"
"Your friends are in our care." Someone answered. "We'll take good care of them until you meet her Ladyship."

Sumia whipped around to see a large man in knight's armor leaning against a door. "Who are you?"

The man actually bowed. "My name is Draven, milady. I serve her Ladyship in these times of trouble."

Sumia's eyes narrowed. "Wait, 'milady'? Am I not a prisoner?"

Draven looked scandalized. "Keep her Ladyship's daughter prisoner? Perish the thought."

Sumia froze. "So… it's true. My mother declared the Shepherds enemies…"

Draven looked distinctly uncomfortable. "Milady, while I'm sure you're fond of them, the evidence clearly sta-"

Sumia leapt from her chair and pulled him down to look her in the eye. "Evidence?! The hierarch himself gave up the Exalt to the Plegians and you speak of evidence?! Take me to my mother this instant!"

Draven's gaze hardened, if only to try and take control of the situation. "Very well then, she's been expecting you anyway. Come along, but try nothing."

Sumia snorted, but followed him. Another thing she'd noticed was she'd apparently been changed while unconscious as a haughty gown now sat upon her frame, she felt distinctly uncomfortable in the slippers she'd been forced into.

Somehow, she didn't trip over the stone floor as they walked through the halls of the palace. It probably helped that she knew many of these halls from her childhood, but the servants kept their heads down and didn't so much as greet her or Draven.

Finally, they came to the reception hall where Sumia was faced with reality, even as her heart continued to beg for it not to be true.

"Our daughter has returned." Her mother called from the throne, a dress of Clarissa's colors flowing around her. "All hail the woman that shall be Exalt."

Sumia's mind went blank.

What?
If Sumia were to describe her mother, it would take her some time.

First, her mother's name was Selena Pons de Clarissa, the family name taken from her father, Patrick Pons de Clarissa. Second, Sumia was a near perfect replica of her mother, only her hair was long and styled in waves, her mother's was short and straight.

Sumia also had no wrinkles and her hair color came from her father. Selena had light brown hair with a hint of ginger at the roots.

Beyond that, Selena had been a stern, but kind woman that had long held Sumia's best interests in mind. Whilst she'd never been in the military, Selena had made herself at home in the court of the former Duchess and helped her clumsy husband from the shadows.

That mask she'd mastered in the games of nobility was on full display now, her eyes dispassionately gazing at her only daughter. "What say you, dear girl? Surely your time with the exile has not dampened your sensibilities."

Sumia felt old conditioning take over, lessons from a lifetime ago returning from the dead.

She curtsied, feeling both her mother and the few remaining nobles in the hall approve of the gesture. "I apologize for my unseemly entrance, Regent."

Her mother tapped on the throne, the clack loud in the otherwise silent hall. "Unseemly indeed. Surely, you did not think I would cause harm to my own daughter, let alone the first Clarissian Exalt in two centuries."

Sumia felt sweat gather on her brow, unnerved by the murmurs around her. "Excuse me, Regent, but what do you mean? The next Exalt is Prince Chrom, not I."

More murmurs, though they quieted at a signal Sumia could not see. "It is former Prince Chrom. Both the High Cleric and Bishop of Gariel have declared him and his sister as unfit to rule in our current time of crisis. Duke Carlan is to take the throne for a time until a new Exalt may be crowned."

Sumia saw her mother stand, but could only see her feet as she held the curtsy. "That is enough, child, raise your head."

Sumia did so, almost flinching at the cold smile on her mother's face. "I have already spoken to those who understand the edicts of the church. They have agreed to let you, my child, take the throne when everything is over."

Selena stepped up to Sumia and embraced her, the motion cold as if practiced for this very moment. In that moment, Sumia stopped thinking of the woman before her as her mother.

This was a stranger, a dangerous one at that. But it was in both her and Ylisse's best interest that she continue to play along. "I...see. That is a momentous decision; surely it could not have been unanimously decided."

Selena sighed into her ear. "Of course not. There are those still loyal to the Exile, Dunwall and Miranda foremost among them. Catarnia refuses to move out of Grevis, but she's always been a fence-sitter."
She pulled back and smiled that false smile again. "But, we shall take care of them in due time. For now, I believe you should retire to your rooms. You surely need the time to think."

Sumia nodded mutely, mind struggling to catch up. Selena called for Draven to escort her from the hall and the last Sumia saw of her was her back.

Once they were in the halls again, Sumia spoke. "Tell me what actually happened."

Draven grunted. "I already did. Poison caught the duchess and her family with their knickers down and they died real quick. Wolfsbane was the culprit, if you want to know, but the entire case is cut and dry."

Sumia snorted, uncaring of the scandalized gaze a passing maid gave her. "Nothing's cut and dry outside of novels. I want to know what happened, and to see my friends at that."

Draven sighed, the hesitance she'd seen in his frame earlier making its way into his voice. "Milady… that's not possible. Your mother has ordered myself and the guards to keep you in your rooms. The only guests allowed are your mother and your maids, and the only times you're allowed out is during meals or official appearances."

Sumia shook her head. "Then I am indeed a prisoner, and I will be used as a tool for all my days. Tell me, Draven, does that sound like the idea of a mother that cares for her child?"

Draven shrugged, his armor clanking. "Ma'am, I'm in no position to judge. My own mother didn't care all that much for me, and I only found friends when I got into the guard. For all I know, that's how she shows she cares."

Sumia grimaced. "I suppose so… say, when did you join the guard?"

They were in front of Sumia's door now, Draven taking a deep breath. "I joined ten years ago. Now, I can't answer any more questions. Your mother will likely come speak with you later, either here or at dinner. Have a good night, milady."

Draven politely opened the door, but remained silent when Sumia tried to demand he answer more questions. Huffing, Sumia entered the chamber and waited for the door to close. Now that she was alone, Sumia marched to the mantle and unwrapped Gae Bolg, nodding when she found the blade pristine.

*Ok, I've tested this blade on just about everything. But, let's check the windows first.*

Doing just that, Sumia found the hinges gave way easily. Looking out, she gulped. *Ok, I'm in one of the high towers… wait, maybe I can make this work.*

Looking to the bed in the room, Sumia lifted her skirts and marched into the adjoining rooms. Ignoring the couches in the next room and the tea set that had been prepared, Sumia opened one door and grinned at the full closet of fine clothes and towels.

*Perfect. Now, I just need patience…*

Sumia knew that enacting this plan out of hand was grounds for her to be captured all over again. While she was here, she may as well probe for any information she could find.

Leaving the closet, Sumia took a seat on one of the couches and smoothed her dress.

Right as she did so, the door opened and in walked Selena. "Sumia, we have much to talk about."
Sumia smiled, a dead mask from her childhood settling into place.

"Indeed we do."

-Cherche-

Naga her head hurt.

Cherche groaned as sense returned to her mind, a dull throb coming from the back of her skull. Thankfully, it was the only source of pain, but a chill wind bit at her skin.

*Wait a minute… I was in a cloak, and my armor is made to keep me warm when flying.*

Slowly opening her eyes to a bleary grey, Cherche blinked a few times before her predicament became clear.

*Ah, I'm a prisoner.*

She was in nothing more than a simple tunic, her captors at least willing to give her some semblance of dignity. Considering there wasn’t a breeze down south, she’d kept her smalls too.

Now that her mind had a firmer grasp on reality, she tested her arms and legs. The legs were free at least, but her arms had been chained above her head and off to the side.

Judging by the ache in her wrists, Cherche had been out of it for a while.

*Ok… let's think this through, shall we?*

Looking around, Cherche found that her cell was actually very small. Her fingers brushed the walls on either side and the cell door was only a few feet away.

*It's not a proper cell; it's more for holding than imprisoning.*

Using her ears this time, Cherche could hear a conversation further down the hall.

"So, you think the little missus will actually do it?"

Cherche heard an unsure grunt. "Don' know. She's been with the exile, what, six years now? I heard from one of her old maids that she has quite a crush on the guy."

Footsteps and jangling metal started up a moment later, the conversation growing closer. "Well, Lady Selena seems pretty sure. She even told us to stop patrolling so much."

The other voice was almost next to Cherche. "Can't say for sure. I mean, why would anyone want to be exalt when one misstep gets you declared an enemy of the country? I think the clergy are nuts."

By then, two guards walked into view, pausing when they saw Cherche staring at them. The one on the left coughed awkwardly. "Oh, 'ello love. Sorry 'bout the rough treatment earlier, it was my neck or yers."

Cherche glared at him. "So, you're the craven that hit me. How dare you attack a lady from behind."

The man shrugged helplessly. "Now-now, none o' that. Orders are orders, but we made sure the ladies changed ya. We won't harm you, not when you're friends with the missus."

Cherche narrowed her eyes. "Oh, and who is this missus? I only know one girl who you could refer
to and Sumia's only a simple count's daughter."

The two men exchanged looks before the one on the right spoke. "Well… technically she's the next in line to Clarissa's throne and the agreed replacement for the exalt. It's real complicated, so we ain't gonna bore ya."

Cherche raised a brow. "Truly? Last I heard the exalt had two siblings, both of whom have greater claim than Sumia."

Both guards looked distinctly uncomfortable, the one that had punched her messing with the end of his beard. "Look, lady, we don't question things like this. Our job is to make sure the people in town are safe and scumbags stay locked up. By Naga we'll do that, no matter who's in charge."

Cherche almost smiled. "How gallant. Tell me, what are your names?"

The two men looked at each other before the one on the right started. "I'm James. Sorry we had to meet like this, you seem really nice."

The one that attacked her went next. "Name's Bartholomew, though most call me Barty. Again, real sorry for smacking ya. I'll buy ya a drink when this gets sorted out."

Cherche smiled. "That won't buy a lady's forgiveness, but I appreciate the thought. Now, when can I see Sumia? I'd like to speak with her about what's going on."

James scratched his head. "Don't know. General Draven's in charge of her security, so she'll see you when he says you can. Should be pretty soon though, the general's a stand-up guy."

Cherche nodded. "I'm glad to hear it. Also, it pleases me to see that Clarissian soldiers are not animals."

Barty scratched his beard. "Aw, you're too kind. I'm glad you're so amiable to what's going on. Wasn't my first thought, personally, but the general wanted to make sure you weren't dangerous."

James patted Barty's shoulder. "Hey, we need to get back on it."

Barty nodded before bowing slightly. "Terribly sorry, but we need to get back on patrol. We'll be moving you out of those cuffs and into a proper cell in a few hours, but I guarantee you'll be well fed. Just hold out, eh?"

Cherche shook her head. "I'll certainly try, sirs. Um, may I ask where my belongings are?"

James pointed a thumb behind him. "All your stuff is in the guardhouse. Have to say, you had a pair of really fancy axes on ya. One of the maids took them to the lady's study since she wanted to 'keep them safe'."

The words were accompanied by air quotations, Cherche sighed at the sight. "Very well. Good day, gentlemen, I hope we can meet again under better circumstances."

The pair nodded and marched off, leaving Cherche alone again. She smirked once she was sure they were gone.

*Friendly chaps, I quite like them. Got some information out of them too, so this capture wasn't fruitless.*

Now she just needed to get out, find the chambers of Sumia's mother, who was apparently the
Duchess now, and get out. Easier said than done, but working with a number of people that had experience as thieves, assassins, and tricksters had taught her more than a few tricks.

Cherche glanced to the window over her head, noting the low light that made its way in.

Another hour or two and she could start her plan, half-cocked as it was.

Oh, what fun.

-Lon'qu-

Waking up Jayce and Jane had been less than fun.

The couple had taken solid blows to the head and gut, and it took both of them until sunset to come around.

When they did, Lon'qu got right to business. "Sumia and Cherche are gone, the guards got them. I got one name, someone named Draven, and last I saw they were being taken up the hill to the castle. Anything I should know before I go bust them out?"

Jayce got a hold of himself first. "I wouldn't. The castle's built at the very top of the hill and the walls are sheer all the way up. The original builders were paranoid about spies being able to climb in so they shaved every brick until the wall was smooth. Even got a sage to come in and enchant the walls to keep them from weathering."

Jane went next. "All the guards were called back too. A few days ago, a messenger came from Draconis and there was a big uproar in the castle. After that, the soldiers only go as far as the forest, not even bothering with the borders."

Lon'qu nodded. "Ok, now how do you two know all this? I understand Jayce was an old friend of Sumia, but where do you fit in the picture?"

Jane sighed at the question. "I'm from Themis originally. My family moved here when we were young so my mother could take up an open position in Sumia's house. Heavens did the two of us argue, but my mother was hired by the former duchess's son and we had to move. I only met Jayce again when he got hired by the same guy years later."

Lon'qu narrowed his eyes. "Themis huh? Who'd your mother work for before you moved?"

Jane grasped at her skirt. "…Lord Dunwall."

Lon'qu snorted. "Your mother was a spy, that's why you know so much. Let me guess, you're the acting mole for the Duke of Themis-and by extension Surperius as well."

"What?!” Jane gasped. "There's no way, I could be a-"

Jayce laid a hand on her shoulder. "Honey, he's got you pegged. Why would anyone leave a duke's household for a count, especially one of such grand reputation?"

He turned to Lon'qu. "We're both moles. I was approached by a figure called Shade a few weeks ago, saying that there was a conspiracy against the Exalted family and by extension Sumia. I didn't believe him at first, but after the announcement by the church, they found me again."

Jane took over. "I was there this time, and Shade mentioned that the Chain had been rattled by the announcement and the duke had approached one of the 'distributers' as they call the ones who order
the others around. He wanted spies in the provinces that had agreed to the call, and we just so happened to be perfect.”

Lon’qu took a deep breath. "Ok… that's not too surprising. So, are there any plans I should be aware of?"

Jayce and Jane shared a look, Jayce eventually adopted a smile. "Actually… there is."

Lon’qu crossed his arms, a smirk of his own forming as their plan filled his mind.

Looks like he'd be slicing through metal alright.

It'd just be chains instead of plate.

-Sumia-

When the door closed behind Selena, Sumia almost immediately slumped in her chair and started to cry.

The words that woman had spoken in no way resembled the mother that she once knew, the one that she'd named her steed after. Her words had been cold, calculating, and above all condescending.

The entire time they'd been together, Sumia had not once felt like a daughter talking to her mother. Instead, she’d felt like a naughty servant getting reprimanded and sniffed at by a cruel mistress.

What had happened since they'd last seen each other?

Oh, Naga, and the things she said about me and the others…

Selena had gladly spelled out the plan for Sumia, apparently secure in her ability to keep the younger woman under control. Carlan had never wanted the throne of the Exalt, only to keep his own skin and run Draconis towards what he viewed as its future.

Instead, he'd been killed by a young marquise by the name of Meredith who'd gone about and convinced both her mother and a young noble by the name of Theodore in Felds to turn on the Exalted family. Meredith apparently had most of the clergy in her pocket if she could make such a promise, but the biggest shock had been how Sumia was supposed to take the throne.

They would fake the Brand of the Exalt.

Sumia didn't know how, or why, but apparently Meredith had shown the ability to convincingly replicate the brand that marked Chrom and his family as the rightful rulers of Ylisse. In four days, Meredith would come and place the fake brand upon Sumia's flesh and she would be declared a member of the line, the sign only appearing due to the strife in the kingdom.

Selena also described what was planned for the exiled siblings when Sumia pointed out the two of them were still far more legitimate than any sudden relation. Chrom was to be killed, much to Sumia's horror, and Lissa would be used to create a truly legitimate heir.

That way, Sumia could be tossed aside if discovered and the heir be raised by the conspirators into a puppet.

The cruelty and sheer audacity of the plan had stunned Sumia into an obedient silence, only nodding her head as Selena had prattled on and on about how they were going to bring Ylisse into a new age and finally rid the world of the accursed Plegians before storming Ferox and taming the wild north.
It was the ravings of a mad woman.

But what hurt Sumia the most, was how callously her own mother had told Sumia the part she was going to be forced to play. If she could not convince the people that she was of exalted blood, then she would be cast to the wolves.

After all, her mother had said, why let such a clumsy girl join the Shepherds if she wasn't going to do what her mother had wanted and marry the prince? At least now she could be of some use.

It was a betrayal that Sumia simply could not comprehend. She knew that her father's death had driven her mother into deep grief, but to lie about the argument she'd had with the duchess and making the poor woman the villain…

It was just too much for Sumia's heart.

Sumia didn't know how long she was there; only that she cried long past the point of tears and was staring despondently at the wall. Eventually, a young maid entered the room and bowed. "Excuse me, Lady Sumia, but I've been asked to assist you in getting ready for dinner."

Sumia stood automatically, silently wondering how she'd ignored the dimming light. "I see. Are there to be guests or is it private?"

She heard the maid gulp. "Y-yes, there will be guests. Um, her ladyship wishes to formally announce your return."

Sumia turned towards the windows, voice cold. "I see… very well, you may assist me. However, I will choose my own wardrobe."

She could almost hear the maid cringe as she spoke. "Um…her ladyship has requested you wear something very specific."

Sumia almost scoffed. Somewhere, deep in her mind, she was growing scared at how quickly she was turning into this cold, haughty thing. It simply wasn't like her to be so dismissive… or confident for that matter. There had been more than one occasion where the Shepherds had been invited to formal functions and Maribelle had basically bullied her into wearing something.

However, the circumstances demanded that Sumia adopt a mask that she was far less comfortable wearing. Acting like a stereotypical ice queen was not high on her list of priorities, but she could not deny the opportunity set before her.

*Lon'qu, please get Cherche and flee from here. Do not come for me.*

Resolved, Sumia strode towards the closet in the other room, the maid following her. Her mother wanted a doll, and Sumia would gladly give her one. The hard part would be keeping her heart frozen until the time was right.

A raspy chuckle resounded through her mind, nearly making Sumia jump. "So… you seek to grow cold and harsh? Even if it means your friends and beloved will believe you have betrayed them?"

Sumia was too confused to speak, but the voice continued unabated. "No need to speak, child, I can already see that you are resolved to do as I've said. It is intriguing that one so warm and full of vigor would freeze themselves willingly, so I offer my aid."

Sumia finally gathered enough of her mind to respond, feeling a little silly for talking to a voice in her head. *Who… who are you?*
The voice cackled, its words as biting as winter's winds. "I am Artezza, Monarch of Winter and Crafter of the First Frost. Your resolve has intrigued me, Sumia de Clarissa, and I eagerly await if you can conquer the cold with which I shall shackle your heart!"

Sumia tried to speak again, but she could feel her limbs and mind grow cold. Emotion that wasn't pure logic or cunning was pushed under a creeping layer of frost and held there, even as Sumia's personality pushed against the change.

The force was too powerful though, a cold rune etched itself into the skin above Sumia's heart. Sumia as her friends knew her was gone, sealed under a blanket of ice that none save her could hope to breach. All that remained were her neglected senses of cunning, logic, and cruelty.

The maid, ignorant to this change, held up a simple gown of light blue silk. "This is the dress, correct milady?"

Sumia turned to face the girl, voice practically freezing the air. "Correct. Now, fetch me everything I'm about to ask for, and I want not one thing out of order."

The maid shivered at the demand, wondering where the despondent woman had gone. "Y-yes milady!"

Sumia started listing what she wanted, each item chosen for an express purpose.

Selena had the doll she wanted for now, but Sumia had one thing that shone through even the enchantment.

Her love for Chrom would not be denied, and she would show it even if she could not say it.

Now, it was all a matter of patience. To finish the plan Sumia had been told, she'd be taken to Ylisstol and presented to the people. Logically, every conspirator would want to be there in order to see if their plan came to fruition, and if it didn't, present an appetizing target for the remaining Shepherds.

It would truly be a moment of triumph… for Sumia, that is.

-Cherche-

The moment the shadows stretched long enough, Cherche enacted her plan.

Bouncing on the balls of her feet, Cherche hopped and folded herself up, grimacing as her shoulders popped. Twisting her arms, Cherche was able to put her feet on the ceiling and stare at her bindings.

*Ok, the manacles are only secured to some wood. There are a couple of rusted screws, so I should be able to rip this out without too much issue.*

Breathing out steadily, Cherche lowered herself back to the ground, silently glad no one was there to see her tunic fall about her shoulders. That was a sight she'd like to reserve for her husband, thank you very much.

Shaking her head, Cherche took a deep breath and started pulling against the metal. The edges bit into her wrists, but she ignored the pain in favor of focusing on the creaking of the weak screws in the wood.

With a groan most unbefitting a woman of her upbringing, Cherche felt the manacles pop from their moorings and her arms shot forward, sending the metal crashing against the stone.
Panting, Cherche heard the guards down the hall shouting about the noise. With only a few moments to spare, Cherche braced herself against the wall and climbed into the small corner to the left of the door. Her arms and legs shook from disuse, but she held herself there as the guards arrived.

"What the-she's gone!"

"She can't be gone you nit-wit, we're fifty feet high and the lot of us were just down the hall!"

Cherche was beginning to wish they'd either leave or open the cell. It was hard enough keeping herself where she was, let alone staying quiet as they babbled.

"That's enough you bloomin' idiots! I'll go check the floor, you lot see if an'thing's odd about the cell. Remember; don't let your guard down!"

Cherche almost smiled. Leave it to Barty if you wanted someone to speak sense around here, or at least stop squawking. Footsteps rumbled away from her cell, but Cherche was most relieved to hear the sound of a key turning a lock.

The cell door swung open and two guards entered. Since it was a small cell, they had to enter single file.

The high ceiling was how she kept herself hidden from their sight in the small cell, and a smirk rose to her lips when the two were right up next to the broken manacles.

"Wow, these things got ripped right out."

"What do you think did it? Far as I know, only wyverns could do that."

No response came and the guard looked to his left only to find his companion out cold and the prisoner closing the cell door and locking it.

Cherche waved at him before taking off, her bare feet padding against the ground as she ran. Her first order of business would be to retrieve her clothes and weapons before finding Sumia and getting out. They had what they came for; it was just a matter of getting away.

Voices made her stop, but they passed quickly. Sighing, Cherche kept going until she found a well of stairs, light and pleasant conversations coming from above. Deciding that was her best bet on finding her things, Cherche ascended carefully and quietly, gently opening the first door she found.

By the looks of it, she'd found a hallway within the palace, a long rug and numerous suits of armor lining the walls. Servants were running about, plates and goblets held in their hands, and their conversations were what Cherche had heard down below.

One in particular caught her ear. "Has anyone seen Hannah? She was supposed to help with the service!"

Cherche frowned, wondering if this was her way out.

"Hannah got assigned to Lady Sumia, but she asked me to keep her uniform in the kitchen!"

Cherche almost smiled. If there were free clothes, who was she to deny them?

Unfortunately, she could hear yelling from down below. Taking another peek into the hall, Cherche bit her lip and took off running when she could hear and see no one else.

There were no people, thankfully, but Cherche had no way of knowing where the kitchen was and
there was a truly miniscule chance that the servant they spoke of would have clothes of the same size.

She was so distracted by that thought she almost ran into a semi-open door. Spinning around it, Cherche froze when she heard shouts coming in her direction. Thinking fast, she went through the door and closed it, looking around furtively for a place to hide.

There wasn't much though, only a closet and a simple bed marking the room as a servant's chambers. Deciding the closet was her best bet, Cherche slipped through the door and waited.

She heard the door into the room open, except instead of clanging armor, she heard the swish of cloth and the moans of a couple in love. Her cheeks heated as she heard cloth fall to the floor and she decided to rifle through the closet rather than sit there and be paralyzed by her own shame.

Luck was on her side this time, a cleric's dress finding its way into her hands. Why the couple outside had decided to fornicate in a healer's room was beyond her, but the size was only a little bigger than what she normally wore.

Shrugging off the prisoner's tunic, Cherche went through the familiar motions of pulling the dress over her head and pulling the strings into place. There was no armor or crinoline to mess with, but Cherche would have gladly taken it if for no other reason than to feel a little more secure.

There were some boots in there too, if a bit on the small side, but Cherche was simply glad to be in proper clothing again. Now came the fun part, sneaking out of the room without alerting the couple.

Considering she could hear the bed creaking most vigorously, it was likely to be rather simple.

Taking a deep breath, Cherche opened the door as quietly as she could. Keeping her eyes on the door, she crept forward slowly and grasped the handle when she realized something.

There weren't just two voices in the room, there were three.

They were all very...masculine.

Flame rushed to Cherche's ears and she fled from the room, face hidden in her hands. It was just so... inappropriate for a lady like her to walk in on, let alone hear such things!

She rounded a corner and paused to collect herself, only looking up when someone cleared their throat. Seeing an older man in what looked like a butler's suit, Cherche straightened and curtsied.

"Good evening, sir. I fear that I am lost."

The man looked her up and down. "I can guess. Tell me, what's a cleric doing here at this time of night? Shouldn't you and your sisters be elsewhere in the city?"

Cherche cast about for a good reason, eventually deciding on an old lesson from her youth. "I'm here to deliver herbs, good sir. However, I am yet unused to these halls and I cannot find the place I am to deliver them."

The man seemed to relax. "I see. Well, we were running low on them anyway, so I will be sure to thank your matron when next I see her. Please take them to the lady's chambers; they are down this hall and up four flights of stairs. The door leads into a hall that has her personal medicine storage, but I will be sending a guard with you just in case."

The man turned and waved down a single guard, the young man jogging up and saluting stiffly. After a quick rundown, the guard gestured for Cherche to follow him and they set off down the hall
before entering another well of stairs and beginning their climb.

Their journey was made in silence, Cherche stared pointedly ahead while the young guard leading her fidgeted. Cherche honestly felt unsure as to why she'd been given such easy access to the personal chambers of the current duchess, especially after the other had died so suddenly.

However, there was no ambush waiting for her when she arrived, the only guard in sight the one who'd escorted her. He pointed to the door at the far end of the hallway. "That's where all the poultices and herbs get stored. Just put the ones you have with whichever matches, the duchess's personal healer will sort them out later."

Cherche smiled demurely. "Thank you kind sir, I'm sorry for any trouble I may have caused."

Then she slugged him, the one hit sending him to dreamland.

Stuffing him into the medicine room, Cherche started testing doors and windows. Glancing out one such window showed her a long ways from the earth, but she'd flown higher on Minerva before. What really caught her attention was something beyond the town walls.

Namely, the ring of torches illuminating what appeared to be siege engines.

Cherche flew back from the window and wrenched open the nearest door, uncaring of the broken handle. If the city was about to be sieged, then she needed to grab Sumia and meet up with Lon'qu as soon as possible.

It would be bad if they were to be mistaken as enemies, after all.

-Lon'qu-

Waiting for nightfall was perhaps the hardest part of this plan.

After Lon'qu had been brought up to speed, Jayce and Jane brought him to a tavern on the edge of town where the one they called 'Shade' met them. From there, he'd been escorted to a back room where another man with an aura that screamed authority was waiting.

To summarize, Lon'qu had met with Lord Dunwall of Themis, the current duke and father of Maribelle. As expected of Maribelle's father, he was stern, to the point, and no-nonsense. However, he recognized the skill that Lon'qu had honed over the years of training and visits to the Outrealms, he knew better than to address him as a common assassin.

Maribelle certainly got her hair from him though, since the man wore his in a series of blonde curls that resembled a judge's wig.

In any case, Dunwall told him nothing that Lon'qu hadn't already known minus one tidbit. The marquise, Meredith, was the head of the rebellion and had taken up residence in Ylisstol behind a combined force that came from each of the three rebelling provinces.

Lon'qu had grunted at the information before leaving the tavern with Shade, the two sneaking through the street until they arrived at a tower.

Now, they were scaling the stairs within while making sure not a soul knew they were there. Lon'qu was unsure of his temporary companion, but the other man had yet to speak and done nothing to indicate betrayal.

Then again, Shade was a figure from the underbelly of Ylissse, and based on the respect Dunwall had
shown him, an important one at that. There was always the possibility he'd prefer coin over loyalty, the rebels had access to Ylisstol and the gold therein.

"If you think I will betray you," Shade began, "then you do not understand the Chain. The Exalted family has long understood us, even helped those in it slowly leave when they had the ability. But, these rebels have rattled the Chain most harshly and only the most contemptable of our links will work with them."

Lon'qu grunted. "Then why keep them in the loop?"

Shade's voice was flat. "The Chain takes all sorts, so long as they're useful."

Lon'qu chose to leave it at that, continuing the climb until Shade held up a closed fist. Stopping in place, Lon'qu watched Shade open the door he'd stopped before, the black cloak he wore disappearing from sight. Lon'qu heard some grunts and steel meeting flesh before Shade reappeared and gestured for him to follow.

Lon'qu sighed as he did so, giving the bodies of the guards a single glance. "Efficient."

If Lon'qu didn't know better, Shade may have laughed. "Prefer it that way. These men are not at fault, only their masters. I can at least grant them a swift and painless end."

Silence reined once more, the two saboteurs sneaking along the wall. Their target was the gatehouse specifically, but they only had so much time before Plan B was enacted. Considering Plan B involved a great deal of collateral damage, it was in their best interest to be quick.

Lon'qu personally wished he'd had longer to scout out the city at large. If there was one thing he'd learned from the orange rat, it was that sneaking required lots of scouting beforehand and an ability to adapt.

Lon'qu had the latter, but nowhere near the former. It made him grip Balmung's hilt tightly, even as the gatehouse grew ever closer.

Shade stopped them again. "Patrol, on the other side of this tower. Light says only three of them have torches, but I make out numbers."

Lon'qu felt a grin rise on his lips. "Mind if I take these guys? Haven't gotten to pull my weight yet."

Shade turned to him, eyes hidden in shadow. "I suppose… just make as little noise as possible. The last thing we need are knights showing up."

Lon'qu quietly drew Balmung, inwardly thrilling at the light feeling of the blade. The sword was the first weapon in the entire treasure room to have flown to the Shepherds, and even Lon'qu had heard tell of its power. Even in the weakened state it now stood, Lon'qu knew that it was his sword, now and until he died.

Nodding to Shade, Lon'qu slipped into the tower and took in his surroundings. He took in wooden steps leading to a landing with several windows, the only other things to note a few barrels. Dashing to the landing, Lon'qu took a glance out of the one window that faced towards the wall.

As Shade had suspected, a patrol was marching along the wall, three of the men with torches while the other six kept their spears against their shoulders. No knights, thankfully, but a raised alarm could change that.

Seeing the patrol closing in on the tower, Lon'qu crouched against the window and held Balmung at
the ready, waiting to see what the patrol would do. A creaking door and the sound of boots made Lon'qu vault through the window and land with a dull thud behind the last member of the patrol.

A flash from Balmung cut through the cloth around his shoulder and the arm came off. Lon'qu clamped his hand around the disarmed man and muffled his attempted scream. The guard passed out from shock, allowing Lon'qu to set him down and charge at the others.

The next two went down without a sound, Balmung cleaving clean through one neck and lodging itself in another. Freeing the blade, Lon'qu jumped over another soldier and cut through the spine of the one in front of him before turning and slitting the throat of the man he'd jumped over.

By then, the other four had realized something was wrong. Spears fell into hands and steel sparked off the scale of Lon'qu's armor. Twisting through the blows, Lon'qu thrust through the chainmail of another guard before slugging another that charged him.

A flash of crimson steel ended him, too.

With only two left, the guards grew cautious and kept Lon'qu at spear's length, daring him to charge. Lon'qu grinned and did just that, not slowing as their spears closed in.

Then, he grabbed one spear by the shaft and drove it into the floor, using the momentum to flip himself over the strikes and bring Balmung down in a vicious helm splitter. Crimson stained the wall as Lon'qu yanked his blade free, his gaze turning to the lone, gibbering guard.

A knife from the shadows ended him.

Lon'qu frowned as Shade emerged. "I wasn't done."

Shade frowned in turn. "Taking too long, we need to move. Or have you forgotten what's at stake here?"

Lon'qu clicked his teeth and sheathed Balmung. "Right, lead the way."

Shade strode past him and through the door the patrol had come through, pointing to a large protrusion in the wall. "There's the gatehouse. The chains should be inside."

Lon'qu sighed, recognizing the gate he'd gone through just that morning. "I've gone from entering legally to breaking down the door. How time flies."

Shade was unamused. "They had you pegged the moment you showed up. The Chain keeps track of important people, and the Shepherds are most certainly important. There are portraits and descriptions of every member you have."

Lon'qu frowned, that wasn't good. "I have a feeling something bad is going to happen tonight, now that you say that. I'm not sure what, but I'd prefer this be done."

Shade grunted and they set off once more. The walls were deserted all the way to the gatehouse, only a single, bored guard stood between them and their goal.

A knife buzzed through the air and took care of that obstacle.

Lon'qu pushed open the door and climbed to the landing above. "Here we go…wait."

He took a closer look at his target and spit onto the wood. "Damn it, this isn't good."

The object he was staring at was once a coil of chains that opened and closed the portcullis within
the gate. To the side of it was another coil of heavy rope, responsible for opening and closing the series of doors that lead to the portcullis.

Unfortunately, the crank for the chains was destroyed and would not move, the ropes for the doors had been cut while the doors were closed.

In other words, they had no way to open the gate.

Shade joined him, a deep frown on his lips. "I checked the other side, it's the same problem. Someone doesn't want us to get in easily."

Lon'qu glared at him. "Really? There's nothing we can do now, and people will die for it!"

Shade shrugged, voice tired. "People die all the time, Lon'qu. While I apologize for what's going to happen, this is the price that must be paid."

Lon'qu ignored the man, instead crossing to a window and looking out beyond the walls.

Just in time to see torches burn to life and reveal Themis ready to invade.

-Sumia-

Dinner was canceled soon after it began.

Sumia now found herself being herded down a dank corridor with her mother and the other dinner guests, stone faced guards pushing them along as demands to know what was going on were made.

Sumia kept her face neutral through it all, even as cruel glee danced in her mind.

Oh, how precious! The moment something happens they all panic like chickens with a fox, just what they deserve. Especially with how they sneered at my dress, no matter that I wanted them to.

Beneath the veil of ice that allowed such thoughts to be born, Sumia's normal mind was in a similar panic to the nobles around her. Something had gone very wrong and her life would be in danger if she didn't get away.

That panic did not pierce the ice, instead squished by a cunning unknown to her friends. We'll obviously be fleeing, probably all the way to Ylisstol at that. My plan will occur sooner than I expected, but it's no matter.

Such thoughts did not show on her face, only a cold mask revealed itself to the world. Several of the nobles around her appeared unnerved by her expression, but it was apparent her mother was too far gone to care.

Sympathy tried to rise through the ice, but logic crushed it. Her mother was her enemy, but a temporary asset at the moment. It was only natural she serve her purpose before Sumia cast her aside, just as Selena planned to do with her.

By then, they'd reached a large room with several carriages. Horses had already been tied to their spots and coachmen were waving for the escapees to pile inside.

Selena grabbed Sumia's arm. "We'll take the one on the far right. Everyone else, choose what you will and get out of here!"

She would broker no argument and dragged Sumia towards the least grand carriage in the room, even as a commotion erupted from the tunnel they'd left. Sumia silently mused that some sense
remained in her mother's skull, letting herself be pulled along until a familiar voice sounded over the din of panicking nobles and servants.

"Sumia!"

Sumia looked back, blinking in curiosity when she saw Cherche, Helswath slung over her shoulder. "Cherche?"

Selena was having none of it, pulling Sumia along and into the carriage. Sumia glanced out the small window cut into the carriage's side, seeing Cherche carving and crushing her way through any guard that attempted to stop her.

A barked command from Selena soon replaced that image with the sights of rushing greenery. Sumia felt a cold smile rise on her face, even as worry bubbled under the frost.

*Good, good. They'll think me the damsel in distress now, and what swifter response will be given to such a situation?*

She absentmindedly patted the lance that lay at her side, one of the guards having left a simple iron piece in there for protection. It wasn't Gae Bolg by any stretch, but it would serve her purpose.

Settling in, Sumia ignored the screams of her mother as they rumbled and bumped through the forest, even as brief flashes of fire and violent shaking showed they were being pursued. Eventually, these sounds fell away and Selena flopped into her seat with a relieved sigh.

But, when she looked to her daughter, something within her shivered.

Sumia's expression had never deviated during the escape, even as fire and horsemen came for their necks.

Not once.

Something dark squashed the shiver, whispering reassurances and promises that all would go well.

Satisfied with the words whispered to her, Selena fell silent alongside her daughter.

Not a word would be spoken for the rest of the flight to Ylisstol.

Not a word.

- Plegia -

"My Lord, Denaris is fallen, as you predicted."

A dark shadow, almost burning with malevolence, turned to face the voice. "Then I must go see to the ritual. You may go, Validar, but do not fail in your machinations."

The voice stood from where he had kneeled. The dark mage who had attacked Ylisstol, the one presumed dead, spoke slowly. "All is going to plan my Lord. Gangrel's support continues to crumble and converts to your word swell by the day."

The shadow waved a hand in dismissal, Validar retreated from the room. Breathing a deep, satisfied breath, the shadow ghosted through the wall of the room it was in and entered another, larger room.

"How goes the ritual, my Queen?"
A perverse laugh answered him, the room steaming with black mist and pulsing red energy. "Almost done, milord. You were quite right about the misery those two would go through, but I was even able to bind a third soul!"

The shadow rippled, surprise showing in its movements. "Truly? Which of them has shown such heartache that Naga's protection was broken?"

Another laugh. "Why, my dearest friend has discovered cruelty! I even dragged in that little wench Aversa was using as a vessel!"

The shadow laughed. "Sumia, really? I knew that the souls of Frederick and Nowi would be broken of protection this night, but not her. Truly, gifts pile at my feet. I get to meet my oldest friends so much sooner than I expected!"

A figure appeared in the smoke. "Indeed, my Lord. The ritual is nearly complete, and soon the souls you brought with us shall join us once again!"

The shadow moved forward, a familiar shape appearing amongst the darkness. "Indeed they shall… but first, why not let me greet the ones you've already brought?"

The figure in the smoke bowed and led the shadow through the room, arriving at a wall where three piles of ash lay against the stone, the smoke leaking out of the flakes.

The shadow's hand rose. "Rise, my friends."

The ash shifted, giving way to pale bodies clad in faded armor and broken gems. One was a great bear of a man, while the other two were women of much smaller stature.

They bowed to the shadow, their voices speaking in unison. "My Lord."

The shadow laughed in glee, its hand wrapping around the waist of the figure in the smoke.

"Hello Frederick, Nowi, Sumia."

The three stood from their bows, eyes a sinister red color.

In turn, the shadow cast its disguise aside and dispersed the smoke around itself, smirking in turn with its bride.

"We have much to do."
Robin ended up tanning Chrom's hide far sooner than he thought he would.

Soon after his group departed from Flavia's castle, they'd run into a returning Donnel with a tied up Chrom slung over the back of his saddle.

Robin flagged the young man down, dismounted, then threw Chrom from the horse and laid into the prince with the wrath of a thousand aggravated advisors. After giving the man some new bruises to go with the verbal whipping, Robin ordered Donnel back to the castle with explicit instructions to put Chrom under constant watch.

He also authorized Lissa to set up traps, which made Chrom resemble a sheet.

After that was done, Robin returned to his amused compatriots and they continued on their journey. After passing through the Longfort, their horses were spurred into a full gallop. It would be a four day journey to the borders of Felds, nearly taking them to Ylisstol itself before they'd have to veer away.

This forced them to take the main roads, but avoiding patrols took precedent and they had to take several detours down side paths until they wound back to the main road. The first day involved several such detours and they only barely made it into the border of Ylisstol's lands before the sun set.

As they set up camp, an awkward silence permeated the air between Robin and Cordelia. Both knew that they had to speak about what had occurred that morning, but neither was willing to broach the topic of their own accord.

Stahl, ever empathetic and friendly, decided to put an end to it. "Alright, come here you two. I think you need to talk."

Robin and Cordelia reluctantly walked over to him, sitting on opposite sides of the fire Stahl was trying to get going. Stahl didn't start for several minutes, instead focusing on igniting his kindling, but once he had flames roaring away, he looked to his friends.

"Ok," he started. "Let's go ahead and clear the air. Neither of you have spoken outside of hand signals since this morning and we have far more important things to be worrying about than whatever tiff you two have gotten into this time."

Stahl looked between his fidgeting friends. "But, considering neither of you would like to start, I'm going to nominate someone and we won't get food until this is resolved."

Everyone's stomach chose then to growl, only Stahl remained blush free. "Now then… I choose Cordelia."

The woman in question blushed deeply, confusing Stahl to no end. "Uhhhhhh…"

Stahl sighed. "Look, just, tell me what happened first. Then, we can go from there."

Cordelia gulped. "Um, well… the first thing you should know was that I was checking on some of our inventory last night, but when I sat down to rest, I fell asleep."

Stahl nodded in time to Robin, both well aware of this habit.
"But," Cordelia continued, "I didn't open my eyes in the armory. I was in a bed, warm and cozy, and I thought I was having a pleasant dream."

Stahl's brow rose when he saw a blush flare on Robin's face, a smirk soon following. "Tell me, what was going on in this dream?"

Cordelia's hands flew to her face. "It's too embarrassing!"

Stahl replaced his smirk with a kind grin. "Cordelia, we're all friends here. Besides, I have a feeling one of us is far more interested in what you have to say than me."

Robin decided to speak then, no doubt wanting to give Cordelia time to cool down. "I'm the one who found her, actually. She didn't look all that comfortable laying against a pillar, so I took her to her room."

He scratched the back of his head, his own blush deepening. "I underestimated how tired I was though. After I got her comfortable, I tried to leave but my head went fuzzy and I pretty much collapsed on the bed next to her."

Stahl nodded slowly, the pieces fitting together. "Ok… Cordelia, can you finish what happened?"

Cordelia slowly pulled her hands away, though they fell down to grasp at the hem of her dress. "Well… I looked to my side and I saw someone lying next to me. Then I…"

Stahl leaned in, so very close to solving the problem. "Go on."

Cordelia refused to look either him or Robin in the eye, keeping her gaze glued to the ground. "I…kissed them… several times. I thought it was a pillow."

Stahl whistled lowly. "Wow… so, let me guess, what you thought was a pillow was actually Robin?"

Both of his compatriots nodded, not looking at each other. Stahl smiled before deciding to go for the big push.

Considering the bet for these two dating was still open, why not get some extra coin while he was at it? He still wanted them to be happy, don't get him wrong, but pulling one over on Lissa was always gratifying.

"So," Stahl started, his fingers tapping on his leg. "Who were you dreaming about so vividly?"

Cordelia gasped, hands twisting the hem of her dress. "W-why would I share that! It's none of your business who I saw!"

Stahl glanced to Robin, who looked shocked. "It seems Robin knows. Care to share?"

Robin didn't seem to hear him, instead staring at Cordelia. "It was me…"

Cordelia stiffened and Stahl realized he needed to leave. After several long minutes of awkward silence, he bid them luck and went to take the watch.

With him gone, the silence continued between Robin and Cordelia, one waiting for a response and the other trying to build up her nerve.

Come on, you can do this! Cordelia mentally cheered. Who knows when you'll get another chance like this? Tell your nerves to shove it and be brave, damn it!
It was incredibly hard though. Her feelings had gone from indignation, to curiosity, to friendship, to anger, to grief, to dependence, and finally to love. Trying to process that into words would be difficult even for the most eloquent of people, let alone her.

Robin though, was patient. He wanted to hear this from her mouth and hers alone, if only to make completely sure his feelings were mutual. It had, admittedly, been quite the shock that morning when he’d awoken to her lips on his own, but he'd thought it a dream as well.

It was why he'd left after pinching the both of them; it was just too much to process.

Now, he just wanted to know. It would take such a weight off his shoulders and he'd be able to give all his focus when it was done.

Cordelia finally collected herself. "You…you're correct, Robin. I've had that dream… several times the last week or so, and it's been you every time. This was the first time I woke up without a pillow as my companion, though."

Robin ignored her attempt at humor. "Does this mean what I think it means? Please… don't leave me in the dark."

Cordelia had a feeling words alone would not be enough. So, she stood from her spot, walked to Robin's side, and kneeled with her eyes in line with his.

She smiled, a hand cupping his cheek. "Will this do?"

Cordelia crossed the distance before he could answer, lips sealing his response in his throat. The kiss was not the ardent one she'd shared with him before he'd awoken and left. Instead, this one was filled with a sense of longing and contentment that bespoke a deep love.

Cordelia hoped Robin could feel that emotion, and she was rewarded with his arms pulling her close and his own lips deepening the kiss with a similar longing and joy.

After an indeterminate time, they parted. Cordelia's mind discovered her words after the kiss. "I don't truly know when it happened, but I can say I love my best friend. You were willing to meet with me after Sumia and Lissa set us up… and you shared your amnesia so soon after meeting me."

Her head fell to his shoulder, reveling in the warmth of his embrace. "I can honestly say that the next few weeks after that were the best of my life. I'd never been as happy as I was whenever we met, whether it was sparring or playing songs. Then, when we parted, I worried for you constantly."

Robin chuckled, his chin resting on her shoulder. "I can say the same. I was worried about you since the Plegians were still poking at the borders and your patrol was still being cruel. I played my trumpet one night, hoping it would reach you."

He sighed. "Though, our next meeting after that was less than perfect."

Cordelia pulled away from his shoulder, eyes wet. "It… it wasn't, no. I never did apologize for insulting you, I know you were worried."

Robin shook his head. "No, I'm at fault as well. I know duty is a large part of who you are, but my own fear made me speak before thinking."

He reached up and brushed away a tear building in her eye. "I love that part of you too. I'm sorry for being so inconsiderate."
Cordelia shook her head. "No, you were right that duty isn't everything. It's important, yes, but I valued my friendships over that. My patrol and I even made peace…"

Robin shushed her. "It's ok; you don't need to say it. Believe me; I was just so glad to have you back. I swore soon after Emmeryn left that I'd do all I could for you, even if you tried to tell me you were fine."

Cordelia chuckled. "By Naga did you ever. I was pretty annoyed after a few weeks of that."

Robin laughed too. "Yeah, you were pretty clear. To tell the truth, I was hoping you'd forgive me after I gave you the clips."

Cordelia reached up and touched her hair clips, remembering the smooth feel of the stone when she'd held them the first time. "I apologize for not wearing them at first. I still wasn't sure about how I felt at the time, and that skirmish with the Grimleal didn't reflect well on my mind at all."

Robin shivered at the memory, his shoulder throbbing with ghost pain. "Yeah… not our finest hour. I'm glad you came around when it was over though, it felt like we'd become friends again."

Cordelia smiled and pulled Robin into another hug. "That's probably when I figured myself out. Didn't really have the opportunity to talk afterwards, but returning to Ferox after… what happened, was when I really healed."

Robin grimaced, knowing that he couldn't share Emmeryn's current state. "True, I think we all did some soul searching before this happened. Can't tell you how happy I was to get back into a routine again. And be able to play… But, the cavalier arrived then and here we are."

Cordelia sighed in contentment. "Here we are. You know… I had a crush on Prince Chrom for the longest time."

She looked to his eyes, Robin rendered speechless by the raw emotion in each crimson orb. "The day I met you, I'd tried, for the last time, to catch his attention. But… soon after you ran into me, you've been all I can think about. You're not an idol, like he was, and still is to some extent, but I know I can love you with everything I have."

Robin didn't have the words to respond, not until he captured her lips once more and had his fill. "Cordy," Robin breathed as he pulled away, "I've loved you for a long time. I knew that you had a crush on Chrom, Maribelle was prone to bring it up as a test to see if I would stay interested. Something about 'tenacity' and 'deserving a man that could pull her from delusions'."

Cordelia silently promised to find a way to get back at the noble, after she thanked her of course. "Well, I can say with complete sincerity that you've succeeded."

The pair closed together for one last kiss, their long talk ended with three words. "I love you."

For a moment, all was right in the world. No rebellion, no Gangrel, none of the teasing that would doubtlessly rise when all was said and done.

They'd finally taken the leap and landed on solid ground that had been building since the moment they met.

That is… until Robin's mind cracked with pain.
Then came the sounds, the tastes, the sights once thought missing.

So came memories.

*It was a simple home, the shade of date trees providing relief from the blazing sun outside.*

*Three rooms made up the building, a large living room and two bedrooms decorated in a sparse fashion. Two chairs faced a hearth that looked to be only used for cooking, a tapestry with Grimleal symbols decorated the mantle alongside an immaculate portrait.*

A voice chuckled in his ear, low and womanly. "Aw, it looks like my little Robin's curious."

A hand with skin not unlike his own pointed to the portrait, Robin recognized a small bundle in the oil. "That's you, not long after you came into this world."

Hair tickled his cheek as the hand moved to the next figure, standing at the front of the portrait. "That's your sister. Can't really say where the white hair came from, but your grandmother had it, so I suppose it's not out of the question."

Little hands he knew to be his grabbed at the hair, pulling on the lavender strands. "Oh, don't grab Mommy's hair. I haven't finished answering you."

Robin felt himself relax at the laugh in the woman's voice, her hand pointing to the next figure, the one holding what must have been him. "That's me. I must say, you were very rambunctious for one so small, your sister was very annoyed at how long that portrait took with all your squirming."

The hand drew back and tickled Robin's belly, a laugh escaping his throat. It was the sound of a toddler, not the one he was used to hearing.

The hand drew away and pointed to the last figure, the one standing behind his sister. "And there's Daddy! He should be home soon, so you can tell him all about your little adventures today."

Robin giggled, even as his mind struggled to recognize the figures. The sister looked just like a much younger, happier Aversa. She only lacked the Grimleal markings, and now she was dressed in a purple tunic with dark pants.

The older woman had his hair, so it must have been his mother. Her pale complexion was one she shared with her son, if not her daughter, along with short lavender hair that fell just below her chin. Almond shaped eyes held chocolate eyes that, while joyful, held the melancholy of one affected by tragedy.

Finally, Robin recognized the man. He was a good deal more youthful in the portrait, and his hair fell about his shoulders, but there was no mistaking him.

It was the dark mage that had led the assassins against Emmeryn.

While he should have recoiled at the thought that his father lead to Emmeryn's death, if indirectly, he didn't. Instead, he found himself oddly relaxed at the man's appearance.

It hit him a moment later. Both his mother and father were dressed in the robes of the Grimleal, but they were the robes of Sorcerer's, high-ranking members. However, his father had a very familiar coat draped over his robes, one that Robin knew all too well.

Then, there were his eyes, the same ones Robin saw whenever he looked in the mirror.
His father looked too kind to ever have anything to do with an assassination of any sort. In fact, wearing those robes should have meant they'd live in a palace, not this small thing.

Then there was the question as to why his father's eyes had been red when they met in Ylisstol…

His mother's voice reached his ears. "Oh, it looks like Daddy and sissy are coming back. Shall we go say hi?"

Robin only giggled, even as he was carried to the door and out of the house, the last sounds he heard being the happy calls of his family reuniting.

When he came to, Cordelia was hovering over him worriedly, a staff in hand, while Stahl was pulling a flask away from his mouth. "Looks like the vulnerary was all you needed. Cordelia, you can stow the staff."

Cordelia breathed a sigh of relief and vanished from Robin's view. Stahl leaned back as well, a tired smile on his face. "You gave us a right scare. Next time, don't summarize your entire relationship before the confession; legs tend to fall asleep if you do that."

Robin would have chuckled, but instead he grabbed Stahl's collar. "Stahl, listen to me, I just got a cartload of memories and I need you to record them, got it?"

Stahl blinked. "Uh… sure?"

Robin nodded, waiting impatiently while Stahl fetched some parchment and charcoal. While he was waiting, Cordelia returned. "Thank Naga, you're ok."

Robin smiled at her. "You and me both. Just, hold on a second, I need Stahl to be here before I can speak again."

Cordelia frowned, but Stahl came back and sat himself down. "Alright, ready when you are."

Robin immediately began relaying everything that had come to him, from the description of where he was raised to the names that accompanied the faces he'd seen. There were several odds and ends in their too, but most was straightforward.

Stahl sighed as he jotted down the last detail. "Ok, so, to summarize."

He pointed at each point as he listed them. "First, you're a Plegian by birth, as we already knew from the Grimleal marks on your cloak, thanks for giving me nightmares with that book by the way."

Robin shrugged helplessly, he had stood halfway through the story, and paced carefully around their little circle. "Not much I can do about that."

Stahl snorted. "Yeah, sure. Anyway, your family's from one of the more… arid regions of Plegia and both of your parents were high-ranking members of the Grimleal."

Cordelia frowned, her hand entwined with Robin's in a show of solidarity. "I still find that odd. The way you described them, they seemed perfectly normal."

Robin sighed. "Were that I knew. I was only a toddler from what I could see, so it was likely before the Purge got into full swing."

Stahl coughed. "Yes, that's true. Onwards though, so you also know that your father was named Validar, your mother was named Xayah, and the woman we saw with Gangrel, Aversa, is your
sister."

Robin nodded, waving for Stahl to continue. "In addition to this, you remember the vague location of your old home, along with favorite foods, drinks, scents, etc. and finally a single name that has no face to go with it."

Robin breathed deeply. "Severa, exactly."

Cordelia frowned. "That's a composer from the Hero-King's time. She was well known for a number of her ballads and suites about King Marth's journeys and even came up with the Ylissean War Song."

Robin suppressed a chuckle while Stahl blushed, both remembering the last time they'd heard that.

Robin shook off the mirth. "Maybe I remember the name since I like so many of her scores?"

Stahl rolled up the parchment. "There's no way to be sure. In any case, are we good now? 'Cause I'm a hungry son of a leper right now."

Robin smiled, feeling Cordelia lean into his shoulder. "Yeah. I think we're good now. Feels good to get so much off my mind before we get to Felds."

Stahl muttered something about roasted boar, ignoring the new couple. Robin and Cordelia looked to each other before following their companion back to the fire for a hearty dinner.

After that night of revelations, the next two days were fairly mundane. They stuck to what roads they could, avoiding patrols along the way with every detour they could find, until the night of the third day.

They were pushing through the woods that night, eager to reach Felds at long last. Stahl was in front, being the most experienced rider, when he heard something strain under his horse's hoof.

He had only a moment to wonder at the sound before he heard a series of bursting coughs and several darts buried themselves in his armor. "Get down!"

Robin and Cordelia threw themselves from their horses, landing in the brush with practiced ease. Nothing else happened for several moments, Stahl took the time to scan the area carefully.

"Ok," Stahl yelled to his friends, "you can come out."

Robin sighed in relief and started to crawl forward, only to yelp as the ground gave out under him. His hand caught a thick root and he held on tightly as debris fell around him.

"Robin!" Cordelia cried, "are you ok?!"

Robin grunted, glancing down and gulping at the sight of sharpened sticks, a rancid goop sticking to the tips. "Yeah, just... just getting over the fact I nearly got impaled on crap encrusted sticks."

Cordelia's face appeared above him, a rope falling over the edge. "You'll be ok! Just grab the rope and we'll pull you out!"

Robin gulped but grabbed ahold of the rope. "Ok, pull me up!"

Cordelia's face disappeared and Robin felt the rope yank. Bracing his legs against the muddy wall, Robin grabbed onto the rope with both hands, grunting when he dropped a couple inches before starting to rise. "I owe you both a meal for this!"
Stahl called down this time. "Me, yes, but you'll already be taking this lovely lady out on the town when you get the chance! She gets to dictate the reward, if my guess is right."

Robin heard Cordelia grunt in what he thought was agreement. Silently resigning himself to whatever expense they were likely to incur, Robin remained silent until he was pulled onto solid ground.

Cordelia immediately tackled him. "Thank Naga you're ok! To lose you so soon…"

Robin rubbed her back. "Yeah, I don't want that to happen either. We're not in a tragedy, so let's keep it from becoming one, yeah?"

Cordelia hugged him tighter and smacked his arm at the same time. "Not funny."

Robin kissed her cheek; glad he could finally do it without reservation. "I'm sorry, thank you for helping me."

Stahl cleared his throat, amused and exasperated in equal measure. "While seeing you two finally act all lovey-dovey has been a relief, we have things to do."

He held out his hand, darts coated in viscous goo waiting in his palm. "These things are covered in pig crap. It's meant to infect if the poison in the barb itself doesn't finish the job."

Robin looked at the dents in Stahl's armor. "They hit you hard. Anything get through?"

Stahl shook his head. "No, thankfully, but considering the placement of the traps… well, someone knew there'd be people coming this way."

Robin sighed and stood, Cordelia rising with him. "Alright, Cordy, it looks like you'll have to take the middle from here on. No offense, but you don't have as much armor as Stahl or me."

Cordelia huffed. "If you'd let me change into the heavy plate that wouldn't be an issue. But no, I had to go in a traveler's cloak and a dress!"

Robin sighed. "Don't look at me, I'm only wearing a hauberk and some grieves. Stahl's the one who insisted on wearing his full gear."

Stahl laughed. "And gladly at that. Come on, we should keep moving."

Cordelia jogged up to her horse and pulled herself into the saddle. "Make sure to watch your step, the last thing we need is to have that happen again."

Stahl and Robin hopped into their own saddles and the group took off. Robin reigned in hard when he saw something in his peripheral vision. He turned to stare at a spot between the trees, but when nothing moved, he spurred his horse after the others.

The spot he was staring at quivered and slumped, the scout relieved Robin hadn't investigated. They'd gotten orders to keep an eye out for anyone coming this way, and seeing purple and crimson hair confirmed it.

The Shepherds had sent scouts, specifically their tactician, one of their knights, and one of the last pegasus knights in existence.

The scout waited a little longer before abandoning his spot and taking off down a hidden path.

The general would want to hear this.
Linde, named after the mage that helped the Hero-King in his quest, was the largest of the three towns in Felds.

Placed between two rivers, Linde was a hub of trade and commerce with many a merchant's guild claiming a branch within the simple wooden walls. The rivers made it difficult for bandits to attack the town and the forces that patrolled the town were well known for their traps.

Oddly, this was not the abode of the current Regent, Cassius McCloud, but rather the headquarters of one Evelyn Dels. She was the appointed head of the rebellious forces in Felds, and had served with distinction in her many years of service.

What made her the leader though was her unparalleled knowledge of Felds terrain and her ability to design truly nasty webs of traps and snares. Not one bandit had been spotted in Felds since she'd been put in place, and not one soldier from Themis or Surperius had been able to enter.

Until now, at least.

A man ran up the steps to a squat building of stone, the guards waving him through as he flashed the sign of a scout. Entering, he ignored the chatter of soldiers going about their business and sprinted up two flights of stairs before bursting through a pair of sturdy wood doors.

"General, we have spies!"

Blue eyes snapped to the scout along with the gaze of every officer in the room. "What spies?"

The scout kneeled. "We have a report that some travelers tripped the traps we set on one of the roads leading to Ylisstol. The reported purple and crimson hair, the third wore green armor!"

The blue eyes closed. "I see… alright, let's lead them on a chase then. Branden!"

One of the officers saluted. "General!"

A smile bloomed under the blue eyes as silver hair fell around them. "Go and harass them into corridor six, let's see if the famed Shepherds are as skilled as I've been led to believe."

The officer dropped the salute. "Yes General! I'll make sure you get updates every hour!"

The general sighed, her light plate clanging as she stood. "For Naga's sake, would you just call me Eve? Also, hourly reports are excessive; I want them every three until they're in the corridor, then you can switch to hourly."

The officer saluted again before marching out of the room. When he was gone, the others sighed, the general's exasperation the loudest. "I can understand the zeal, since he's new and all, but I don't appreciate the formality."

She looked to the scout still kneeling on the floor. "You're dismissed. Get some rest."

The scout stood, bowed, and left. Once he was gone, the remaining officers started back on their conversation. "I still don't like that Meredith. How she convinced Lord Theodore that rebelling was a good idea is beyond me."

The General, Eve, stared languidly at the one that had spoken. "That's not our purview and you know it. Regent McCloud has left ruling almost completely up to the good count, and that makes him
our boss. We may not like the company he keeps or the timing of this coup, but we have to follow orders all the same."

The officer snorted. "Still, doesn't mean I can't complain. Though…"

The officer smirked in accordance with Eve. "It will be fun to see how the Shepherds do. I want to see if that tactician of theirs is as good as advertised."

Eve turned to look at a map on the wall behind her, little ink marks forming various lines on it. "You and me both…"

-Robin-

They'd crossed into Felds hours ago, their destination the manor of the regent. The air was tense around them as there had been several close calls with patrols and no one wanted to get caught so close to their goal.

Robin in particular was high strung. A niggling feeling they'd been discovered had not left him alone, and the more the patrols forced them away from the original path, the harder that feeling was to ignore.

Robin eventually called for Stahl. "Hey, Stahl, you've been part of the Shepherds longer than everyone save Sully. Are there any important generals that work out of Felds? I didn't get much time to go over everything besides Ylisse's largest concentrations."

Stahl nodded. "The only one I can think of is Evelyn Dels. She's well known for her traps and I wouldn't be surprised if the ones we ran into earlier were her doing."

Robin frowned, slowing his horse to a stop alongside Stahl. "Tell me if this sounds crazy, but have you noticed where those patrols we were avoiding came from?"

Stahl shrugged. "Your crazy has saved our lives more than once. I still remember throwing that bucket of ice water over you."

Robin grunted. "Yes, I remember that quite well. Sully and Chrom were far too amused if you ask me, but I got them back with Miriel's help."

Stahl shivered imperceptibly, remembering the horror of enchanted cheese gnomes. "Yes… anyway, about your observance, I noticed they always came from the direction we were heading."

Robin looked to the front where Cordelia was keeping an eye out. "Yes, but I feel like they always arrived just in time. We haven't had to stray from the same three trails ever since the first showed up."

Stahl narrowed his eyes. "Now that you mention it…"

Robin felt a bolt travel up his spine, eyes flying to Cordelia just in time to see a large net fly out from the trees and ensnare her. "Cordy!"

Curses and panicked neighs met his shout, a silver blade slicing through the rope as best it could. Stahl spurred his horse to help, but a sharp crack rent the air as a pitfall revealed itself and Stahl was flung from his steed.

Robin gazed in amazement and trepidation, reluctant to move from his spot of safety. "Cordy, can you get out of that net! Stahl, are you ok!"
Cordelia called an affirmative while Stahl waved from where he'd gone to check on his horse. "I'm fine, but the pit snapped the old girl's leg like a twig… I can't bind this, she's lame."

Robin grimaced, knowing what needed to happen. They were too far from anything resembling friendly territory to try and bind the leg and limp to safety; the horse would have to be put down.

Stahl was solemn, even as he drew the sword at his hip and soothed the horse. "It's alright girl, it'll be over in a minute."

He looked to Robin. "Do you have a blanket?"

Robin said nothing, retrieving a blanket and handing it to Stahl in silence. The paladin wrapped the blanket around the horse's eyes, the loyal beast stilling. It was as if she knew what was coming, but Robin still had to look away as blood stained the ground.

Stahl remained beside the horse until she grew completely still, cleaning his blade on the blanket before bowing his head in reverence.

By then, Cordelia had freed herself from the final knot and joined them, her own face grim. "So… what are we going to do now?"

Robin gestured to his horse, the poor beast spooked by the smell of blood. "I'll have Stahl ride with me. Based on what just happened, we've been pushed into an entire trail's worth of traps and we can't turn back."

Cordelia stared at him. "What makes you say that?"

Robin pointed to the forest behind them, shadows dancing briefly. "We're being followed. I had a feeling, but one of those shadows moved right after you got ensnared."

"That's just great," Stahl sighed as he stood. "They're forcing us down a particular path and it wouldn't surprise me in the least if the rest of this road was riddled with traps. We'll have to tread carefully."

Robin looked back to his friend. "Indeed, and keep a pace that doesn't allow them to catch us. Those things I saw are probably just scouts, but I don't fancy having a battalion upon us."

Could they fight them off? Yes, but it would tire them and the traps were a problem regardless.

"We may as well go then," Cordelia pointed out. "Staying here does nothing."

Robin nodded to Stahl. "Agreed. Stahl, would you mind leading my horse? I'll use your lance to probe the ground."

Stahl cracked his knuckles, his gauntlets clanking together. "Just let me get payback later, I owe it to my friend."

Robin said nothing as Stahl pulled himself into the saddle and helped Robin sit behind him. Cordelia silently volunteered as a rearguard before they set off down the road, their speed a fraction of what it once was.

As they rode, tension and paranoia started to bubble between them. Robin started to become prone to jumping at shadows and Stahl would yank on the reins for even the smallest alert. Even Cordelia, one of the more even keeled Shepherds, began to see ghosts darting through her sight.
Just adding to the tension were the traps that appeared every few feet. The variety was astounding, ranging from darts and pitfalls to hidden branches and swinging planks with spikes on them.

Wishing to alleviate the tension, if only a little, Robin started talking with Stahl. "So… was the horse an old favorite of yours?"

Stahl sighed. "First one I ever called my own. See, in Themis, most cavaliers have to tame their own horses as a final exam. Since most are wild, it's a rite of passage to go find one and break them. The one we had to leave, I called her Jesse, was the one I got."

Robin poked at the ground before them, tripping a wire that sent another spiked plank flying around. It missed its targets and slammed harmlessly against a tree.

Stahl grunted. "I'm getting real sick of those. Anyway, it was almost five years ago when I found her, just barely mature, but damn if she didn't have some fire in her. Bucking, screaming, biting, she did anything and everything to make me let go."

His voice had grown nostalgic and bitter, Robin sighing sadly as his friend continued. "But, I did it. There was no one in my town that ever thought Jesse could be tamed, but I did it. For a guy like me who'd only ever been average, it was my biggest achievement outside joining the Shepherds."

Stahl sniffed, ignoring some darts dinging off his armor. "Jesse saw me through a lot. Training, parades, bandits, the Risen, and now she's… she's gone."

Robin absentmindedly destroyed the dart launcher, a supportive hand patting Stahl's back. "I'm sorry. I know you've been close to her ever since we met, but I never heard you really talk about her, even when you were hanging out with Chrom and I. Not even a drunken ramble like that time we convinced Vaike to try that bar challenge."

"I agree," Cordelia added. "Theresa's my best friend beside Robin, so I can only begin to imagine what you're going through. But, that doesn't mean it's not a big deal to tame your horse. It starts a relationship, one that lasts unto death."

Stahl looked between Robin and Cordelia, casually dodging an arrow. "Truly? Then… would it be ok if I join you guys in the next playing session you have? I've been working on a piece Cordelia introduced me to in the Outrealms."

Robin smiled and turned to look at Cordelia. "Cordy, is it alright if Stahl joins in on our practices?"

Cordelia smiled back, steering her horse away from what she now recognized as yet another pitfall. "That sounds lovely. I've been quite eager to hear how far you've come."

Their journey continued in silence from there, nerves assuaged for now. The paranoia was still there, but they weren't on the edge of screaming in tension induced madness.

Several hundred yards behind them, stood the officer General Evelyn had ordered to harass them, Branden. "Their morale recovered."
He turned to one of his aides. "Inform the General that they will exit corridor six and arrive at the regent's estate within two hours of your arrival. They've successfully evaded all traps after the first dozen and the only casualty is a horse."

The aide bowed and ran off, leaving Branden to gaze through his spyglass.

*It didn't take them long to learn the cues. Using the lance as a walking stick was a good idea as well, but it was all him. The tactician was leading them through there like the head of a pack, not a single order disobeyed...*

He shook his head. If they were going to remove dangerous forces like ordered, the tactician would have to go first. That level of adaptation could not be allowed, especially when it had taken some of the best soldiers Branden knew weeks to decipher the cues, this tactician knew in only a few hours.

-Linde, General Eve-

Returning to a report just after getting out of the bath was never fun.

Sighing and pushing wet strands of hair from her face, Eve stared down at the messenger. "Alright, let me have it. Before I catch my death out here please."

The messenger kept her eyes on the ground, perfectly professional while her leader wore nothing but a tunic. "The intruders will be outside of corridor six within two hours. They've figured out all tells on the traps and will likely reach the regent's estate."

Eve groaned, already missing the warm water she'd just been in. "Tell Branden to go around through Sven's trail. I'll send Gloria to link up and surround the estate with him. After that, I want them brought back here and put in cells."

The messenger had a single question. "What shall be done with them afterwards?"

Eve smirked. "Don't worry your pretty little head over it. I'm pretty sure the count will want to see them before anything, so let's play it by ear until then."

The messenger nodded and left, Eve thought on her meeting with Count Theodore shortly after she'd heard about the intruding Shepherds.

*He seemed very interested when I told him about the tactician and the red-head. Maybe the red-head's a former paramour that spurned him and he wants to get back at her? Or... something? I can't frickin' guess this late at night, dammit.*

A shiver ran down her spine and Eve's gaze snapped in the direction of Draconis. *I don't know what that was, but it didn't feel good at all.*

She marched off, eager to get into her armor and see this through. Whatever the count may have wanted with the Shepherds, it wasn't up to her.

Nothing had been for a while.
Wolf's Dawn

Robin knew something was wrong the moment their pursuers vanished.

It wasn't an immediate change. Instead, over the last leg of their journey, the shadows that he knew to be enemy scouts had slowly disappeared. The last one vanished just as the estate they'd been slogging towards came into view.

Stahl sighed in relief at the sight. "Praise be to Naga, the place looks pristine. It's almost sunrise, too."

Cordelia groaned from behind them. "Let's just hope the regent doesn't mind early visitors. I don't know about you, but seeing clear field is euphoric."

Robin agreed, his concerns disappearing when the regent's home came into focus.

It was the house he'd seen in his memories, the one he'd seen when he'd first smelled cinnamon and heard Katarina speak. Why this house, of all in the world, would appear in his memories was a mystery he ached to solve, but their mission took precedence.

"Ok," Robin began, "let's get over to the front. I don't know if it's the best idea to just knock on the door, but the sooner we get in, the better."

Stahl spurred their horse without another word, Cordelia following their sedate pace gratefully. It had been a stressful few hours and to arrive uninjured and unchained was a victory in of itself.

Though, Cordelia was still alert enough to notice the distinct lack of guards or servants. Regency may have been a temporary title, but Cassius McCloud had been a prominent marquis from Grevis before Emmeryn chose him to oversee Felds. The previous duke of Felds had died and McCloud's uncle, the traitorous hierarch from Breakneck Pass, continued to act as an advisor to his nephew.

It gave the building a feeling of abandonment, as if no one had lived there for some time. The only signs of life were lights burning in a few of the windows on the second floor. Robin and Stahl had noted the same thing, and they all felt more than a little nervous.

Robin lowered himself from his spot behind Stahl, his limbs heavy. "Stahl, I'm going to take Cordelia in with me. I want you to see if this place has a stable and get these poor beasts fed and watered."

"Sounds good," Stahl replied as he scanned the trees they'd left behind. "Just be careful. I have a bad feeling in my gut and it's not that bear jerky."

Robin frowned, not speaking as Cordelia joined him and Stahl led the horses away.

"So," Cordelia broke the silence. "Shall we knock, at least? I'd prefer to spring the trap while I'm ready for it."

"If there's a trap," Robin countered. "The regent may not be unguarded willingly."

Cordelia nodded thoughtfully and walked up to the door, Robin following behind with a simple steel sword drawn. Mercurius had been left behind in Ferox, but Mjolnir stayed belted to his side for insurance if nothing else.

Cordelia rapped three times on the worn doors before moving aside and letting Robin take the lead.
They could hear someone cursing, the sound muffled behind the doors which opened with a creak.

"What the hell d-"

Robin's blade flew to the speaker's throat, the elderly man in a fluffy robe stopping cold. "Is the regent in?"

The man glowered, apparently deciding Robin wasn't worth the trouble. "No, he's busy having a sword pointed at him by some curmudgeon in a tabard."

Robin lowered the sword sheepishly. "Oh… terribly sorry, sir, we feared there'd be a trap behind these doors."

The regent snorted. "Of course you would. The prince is in exile alongside his sister and the tactician he pulled out of thin air pops up at my door less than a week afterwards."

He looked to Cordelia. "And who's this, your bodyguard? Or maybe a personal wench?"

Cordelia growled, her grip tightening around the silver lance in her grip.

McCloud ignored this. "Ah, that's not it. Too much pride in her eyes to be that, must be a soldier."

He looked to Robin again and sighed. "Alright, come on in. Forgive the mess, I haven't had guests in weeks."

McCloud turned and strode into the house, Robin and Cordelia following cautiously. True to McCloud's words, much of the furniture had tarps lying over them and there was little light outside of the early sun's rays.

Only two chairs were uncovered, their upholstery faded. They were only large enough to fit one person each and McCloud had already taken one.

Robin, ever the gentleman, waved for Cordelia to sit. "Ladies first. Besides, I feel I'll be pacing a lot."

Cordelia rolled her eyes, affectionately slapping his shoulder before sitting down. Her face betrayed her relief and Robin knew he'd made the right call.

McCloud huffed. "I can guess your business. You wish to know why Felds and its forces have turned against the Exalted family."

Robin nodded. "Almost. We'd also like to know why the betrayal occurred when Felds sent troops to help Ylisstol against the Plegians and why you would allow such a thing to happen."

McCloud snorted, his wispy white hair swaying with the motion. "Sending the troops to Ylisstol was my last order as regent. After that, my guards were forced to surrender and I was 'persuaded' to hand power to a count by the name of Theodore. He owns a quarter of Felds lands, so he's got some sway here, but it's not the two-thirds that the duke oversees."

Cordelia's face scrunched at the count's name, a vague memory tugging at the back of her mind. "Can you describe the count?"

"Not sure what good it'll do," McCloud spat, "but I don't see why not. The count's not what you would call vain, but he's very used to getting his way. Helps he's got ok looks and isn't stupid, but damn if he can't take a hint."
Cordelia frowned deeper, the memory niggling at her at the edge of recollection. Robin took over while she thought on it. "If that's the case, then why not leave? Surely there are soldiers that are still loyal to the Exalt here."

McCloud scratched at his robe. "That's what I thought too. See, I was forced into cooperating when I was visiting Linde on business, and I knew that General Evelyn had sworn her loyalty to the Exalt personally. So, imagine my surprise when the woman was at the count's side when everything changed."

Robin shook his head. "Maybe she didn't appreciate the posting? Felds isn't all that prestigious if you don't mind me saying."

McCloud hacked a laugh. "I prefer my old ranch in Grevis, thanks. Too much flat land and wood here if you ask me, not enough hills and grazing ground. Besides, most of the people here are pretty down to earth, the count being an exception, and Evelyn's the same."

Cordelia snapped her fingers, the memory clawing its way back from the dead. "That's it! I met the count you're talking about a couple years ago when he was visiting Ylisstol at the same time I was. It was for the initial military training I'd signed up for before Phila found me, but I remember the count being very… amorous."

McCloud looked pleased with himself. "And there you have it. The count's long been desperate for a wife, but no sane woman would ever pair herself with him since he's an uncontrollable flirt. He's gotten pretty obsessed with someone the last few years though, only ever mumbling about an angel or something like that."

Robin and Cordelia exchanged stunned glances. It couldn't be, could it?

Cordelia cleared her throat. "So… did the count decide this on his own or was he meeting someone?"

McCloud sighed and reached for a table beside his chair, grabbing a pipe that looked worn and well cared for. After cleaning it and putting in new tobacco, he lit it after touching a thin red book. Puffing away, he stared in amusement at Robin and Cordelia's consternated faces. "Don't give me that. I was a mage before I retired, and I have plenty of practice."

His pipe fell to his leg, the hand holding it bouncing in rhythm with his leg. "Now, I do know that he was in talks with someone. Before I was deposed, one of the soldiers that was stationed in his lands gave me a report about a carriage coming and going from the count's estate a few times a month."

Robin jumped on the opportunity. "Did they have any identifying marks? A crest, heraldry, personal colors?"

McCloud broke into a fit, surprised by the enthusiasm. Once he'd calmed down, his answer was tired. "Draconis colors, but it was the general type you see on their forces. No crest on the carriage either, but it flew a banner with two lances crossed over a tree."

Robin didn't know that heraldry and when he looked to Cordelia her face belied her own confusion. "So, we have a symbol at least. Miriel can probably tell us, but we'd need to get out of Felds first."

McCloud sighed. "That's going to be a problem."

He pointed to a window, face grim. "Take a look outside. I'm rather surprised neither of you have heard it by now."
Robin sprinted to the window in question, glancing outside after pressing himself against the wall. "Damn it all."

The house was completely surrounded, soldiers, cavaliers, and knights forming a solid wall that stretched beyond Robin's line of sight.

He rounded on McCloud. "Did you give us up?"

McCloud shook his head. "No way I could. Besides, I like your gumption kid, and treason is something that I never once entertained. If you're here to get information to end this, then I've fulfilled my role, but getting out of here is going to take more than just gumption."

Robin growled and turned back to the window, Cordelia ran to the one next to him

"Robin!" She gasped. "They got Stahl!"

A foul oath spilled from Robin's lips, his eyes spying the emerald armor of his friend being led before the house. They were close enough that Robin could see several bruises marring his face, his armor brutally dented in several places.

Robin took a savage glee when he saw several covered stretchers being carried through the line. Stahl hadn't gone down without a fight.

One of the horsemen sallied forward once Stahl was forced to a stop. Based on his gold and blue plate and signature helmet, he was a paladin too. "Sir Robin and Dame Cordelia, you are to surrender peacefully and return with us to Linde! We do not wish you harm and I promise your safety on my honor and name, Branden das Felds!"

Robin and Cordelia held their positions, not wanting to give away their location.

The paladin outside shook his head, his voice calling forth again. "Again, I guarantee your safety! General Evelyn simply wishes to meet with you, there's no need for violence!"

Stahl's voice rang across the air. "Get out of here guys! These dastards ambushed me out back, they don't want to talk!"

The paladin looked down at Stahl before landing a solid kick to his back, sending him to the ground. Robin almost ripped out Mjolnir, prepared to burn the dastard to ashes, when Cordelia's arm caught his.

Robin turned and her eyes broke his heart. "Cordy?"

Cordelia shook her head, a sad smile on her face. "Robin… you, out of all of us, can't be captured. We have the information, but it only takes one to deliver a message. Please… go. See the instigator behind all of this heartache in chains. I know we'll see each other afterwards."

Robin choked on his words, even as the paladin called out again. "We shall give you five more minutes! Surrender or we'll storm the building!"

Robin felt his mind thrown into turmoil. He couldn't just abandon his friend or his love, but Cordelia's words made a cruel and icy part of his mind whisper that the truth was undeniable. If he wasn't there, then the Shepherds wouldn't have someone that could coordinate between the armies, Chrom would come roaring after them to get his best friend back, and everything they'd been building for after Emmeryn fell would be for naught.
Even still his heart cried against the choice. Stahl had just suffered a great personal loss and was willing to finally move past his perceived averageness while Cordelia had not only seen his heart but reciprocated in kind. To abandon them was a sin beyond redemption.

Cordelia’s hand found his cheek, her lips pressing against his gently. "It’s ok, Robin. You’re not abandoning us, only going to put an end to this. We will be fine, and I won’t be taken without a fight."

Robin returned the kiss desperately, his decision made. "I…I will. Please, don’t do anything reckless. I would rather die than see you hurt, but I know you’re right."

Cordelia kissed him again, her free hand squeezing his reassuringly. "I’ll be fine, and so will Stahl. Please, just go."

Robin leaned his head against her forehead, recording the memory for posterity, before stepping away and letting go. "Regent, sir, is there any way to get out of this house undetected?"

McCloud scratched his chin. "With the time you have? Only for one and you’d need to hurry, but there’s a passage the former tenant built into the cellar. Go down the hall here, through the third door on the right, and find the rack of wine casks that say ‘Denaris’ on them. Push those to the left and you’ll find a door worked into the stone. You’ll have to really push, but it leads off into the forest to the north."

Robin blinked, but took off for the door as directed, internally screaming.

Throwing the designated door open, Robin sprinted down the steps and set a torch alight with a blast of lightning. Well, the troth exploded and scorched the wall, but it provided the light he needed. Casting his gaze around desperately, Robin found the casks just in time to hear the sounds of breaking wood echo down the stairs followed by shouts and clashing metal.

Panic taking hold, Robin mustered all his strength and almost threw the casks aside before crashing through the false wall and taking off down the tunnel. Something rational in him realized that his desperation had left behind evidence of his flight, but a full helping of Mjolnir's might collapsed the tunnel behind him and afforded him an escape.

It felt like hours as he ran with all the strength his legs could give, not once slowing. Even as the tunnel began to slope upwards and reveal a set of stairs, Robin did not slow. Bursting into the forest, Robin continued his frenzied sprint as sunlight began to shine through the leaves.

*I left them! I left them to be captured and there's nothing I can do! What kind of thrice damned tactician am I where I have to leave people so precious to me behind for the sake of information that may not even be important? What the hell am I doing?!!*  

His mind replayed those thoughts over and over again, his feet carrying him through the brush until a large root tripped him.

Crashing to the ground, Robin gripped his leg in pain. There was no doubt he'd sprained it, but he needed to keep moving. The safety of his friend and his love depended on his ability to get away and damn it if this wasn't helping!

Grinding his teeth, Robin pushed himself to his feet and started limping as fast as he could. There were already the sounds of search parties behind him, the wonder of his enemies having horses where he did not.

*No, no, they cannot catch me! I will blow off my own arm and bite my tongue in two before that*
happens! I will not betray the trust they showed me by screwing this up now!

Decided, he looked around until he found a sizeable hollow that had a few bushes concealing it. Scrambling into it, Robin huddled against the far corner after making sure the shrubs were back where they belonged.

Then, he waited.

The sound of hooves and boots came along minutes later. "Is there any sign he came this way?"

"No, his tracks end here."

"Look around, he may be hiding somewhere nearby!"

Metal and boots echoed through the air, Robin's breath halting every time the sounds grew loud. Then, just as Robin heard them contemplate leaving, a voice sounded very close to him. "Wait, there's a hollow over here!"

 Robin grimaced in fear, Mjolnir shakily making its way into his hands. If he needed to fight, he would, but it would give away his position.

Please, please, just go away!

His plea was not answered as the shrubs began to shift, a metal encased grieve appearing at the entrance of the hollow.

Robin held his breath, ready to fight.

A helmet appeared at the entrance, eyes hidden by a shadow staring directly at Robin.

"…Nah, just a wolf den. There's some pups in the back."

"Then get the hell out of there! The last thing we need are a couple of mad wolves baring down on us!"

The helmet disappeared, but Robin didn't dare breath. Somehow, either through the man's loyalty to the Exalt or sheer luck, Robin had not been ratted out. But, instead of moving, Robin remained where he was until the sounds of boots and hooves had long faded into memories.

Finally, sighing in relief, Robin closed his eyes and allowed himself a moment's rest.

"Child, you cannot rest quite yet."

Robin's eyes snapped open, only to be met with two sets of eyes staring at him. One set was purple while the other was solid white, their owners a pair of wolves with yellow and blue fur.

Robin tried to wrap his head around the sight. "Who… who are you?"

The blue wolf tilted its head, the voice speaking again. "My name is Sköll, and this is my brother, Hati. We have been watching you ever since you entered this forest with such a stormy mind."

The yellow wolf growled, a deeper and more masculine voice breaking the air. "We come as messengers from our father, Fenrir. He has an offer for you."

Robin felt his mind stall, the information barely able to be processed. "Wait… Fenrir? As in… the High God of Lightning and Thunder? The one that Lissa and Miriel told me about during a break in
training?"

Sköll gave a grin, all his teeth bared. "One in the same. He is… interested, in the conflict you feel. It reminds him of his own powers and his offer concerns your trials."

Hati scowled, his teeth bared openly as well. "The offer is simple. Our father offers power over Lightning and Thunder second only to him, in exchange, you attempt to overcome the storm that such power draws upon. Do so, and our father will grant power to you again should it be needed. If not…"

Sköll laughed, the sound like that of a jackal. "Father will take something precious to you as he rips the power away. We do not know the details, but your life will be forever changed, forever more difficult."

Robin took a long, deep breath. "I think I'm hallucinating from a combination of relief and nerves. Thank you, but I'm going to close my eyes and find that neither of you are real."

He did so, counting to ten just to be sure before opening them.

The wolves were still there.

Robin closed his eyes and counted to fifteen this time.

The wolves were still there.

This process repeated itself several times before Hati got annoyed and smacked Robin with his paw. If anything proved they were real, it was the jolt of pain from both the strike and the electricity within.

Robin took a deep breath. "Alright, fine, but what use have I for an old god's power? I have a mission to complete."

Sköll chuckled, snout twisting into a hideous grin. "Oh, it's quite simple. With this power, you can waltz into the prison holding your friends and not one thing will stand in your way. You can punish the one that started this mess in the first place, the one who disturbed this land's peace enough for our father to awaken."

Hati snarled. "You can go to your pack and prove yourself the alpha beyond doubt. You can show those that once remembered the bounty given to them by our father's shaping bolts what power is. But, more importantly, you can save the one who causes such turmoil in your breast."

Robin frowned. "I have no need to lead friends as a dominant male. Chrom is our leader, and damn if I will ever try and usurp him from his rightful place. To be a confidant, friend, and advisor are all I desire in life, aside from courting Cordelia."

Sköll and Hati's expressions changed, the former snarling and the other grinning. Hati turned to his brother. "The mortal has conviction."

Sköll growled. "Indeed he does. Tell us, do you still refuse the power? Even if it means the loss of your friends to those that venerate Naga only in word?"

Robin glared at the avatars of lightning and thunder. "Not if it means changing who I am. I made friends as I am and the woman of my dreams fell for me as I am. Changing so drastically for the amusement of your father would be my greatest folly!"
His glare intensified. "You can take your power and shove it! I will rescue those precious to me, and I shall do it as myself, not some puppet!"

The hollow was silent, Robin and the wolves staring each other down and daring the other to speak first.

Sköll chuffed. "You pass, Robin of Plegia."

Hati cackled at Robin's stunned face. "You showed the conviction to turn down easy power. Many have been given the same offer as you, but only one has ever shown the conviction to turn us away."

Robin gulped. "What would you have done if I'd accepted immediately?"

Sköll tilted his head. "Why, I would have ripped out your throat."

Robin's hand immediately covered his throat, rubbing it nervously. "Uh… why?"

"Our father's power is not to be trifled with," Hati explained. "The power hungry or desperate would cause untold damage should they have such power and our job is to offer it and kill those unworthy to wield it. As I said earlier, many have been offered, but we always sensed dark intentions behind their pretty words. You are the first to outright refuse."

Sköll bowed politely. "We are pleased to make your acquaintance and offer a lesser power instead. While it is below the power my brother and I hold, it will serve you well in your mission."

Robin crossed his legs, trying to get some blood into them. "Ok, what is it?"

Hati bowed alongside his brother. "You already shape wolves as part of your spells. The power we shall grant will make these wolves into temporary familiars that you can command."

Robin considered the offer before finally sighing. "If it will save my friends, then I shall accept the power you offer. But, I wish it gone the moment I no longer need it."

Sköll rose from his bow and padded forward. "A request most easily fulfilled. Now, hold out your hands."

Robin raised his brow, but did as instructed.

He regretted it when the two wolves dug their fangs into his hands, the gloves he wore giving way easily as blood stained the ground. Before he could make his pain known, a tingling sensation flowed up his arms followed by an intense burn that made him pass out.

Hati and Sköll released his hands as he slumped to the side, Sköll hissing and spitting. "His blood is tainted by the parasite."

Hati spat too. "It is, but his mind is his own. What do you think, father?"

Footsteps thudded against the ground though no other being was inside the hollow. "His mind is his, as you say. Remain calm, Sköll, he has a greater destiny than you may realize."

The voice was like booming thunder, shaking dirt loose from the hollow's walls. It was gone as soon as it arrived, the two wolves disappearing with a crackle of electricity.
Several Hours Later-

Robin woke to a pounding headache and aching arms, his thoughts cloudy and fractured.

Groaning, he rolled onto his side and tried to collect himself. Based on the shadows around him, it was well past midday.

Geez… damn wolves, biting me out of nowhere…

Robin's mind snapped to clarity as he recalled what knocked him out in the first place. Looking himself over, he was glad to see that everything was where it needed to be. The only difference was a change in Mjolnir's cover, a wolf's face replacing the star in the center of the cross.

"Well," Robin breathed, "let's see what those dastards gave me. Hopefully it's not just scars and pain."

Crawling to the hollow's exit, Robin paused to listen for any sign of life before climbing out and stretching. With his bones back in place and blood returning to his limbs, Robin pointed to an open spot between the trees.

I summon the wolves whenever I speak in Old Ylissean, or whatever Miriel calls my spell names, so let's try that.

Not wanting to start a fire out of hand, Robin decided on a simple call. "Erscheinen!"

On cue a tingle of power ran down his arm, a bolt shooting from his hand and striking the ground. When the flash faded, Robin was left staring at the flickering form of a wolf, albeit one that wasn't much larger than his shoe.

Robin and the wolf stared at each other before the familiar winked out of existence. "Ok, that's pretty amazing. Let's see if I can't get a bigger one and order it around."

Putting more power into the spell, Robin proceeded to summon ever larger, more complete wolves until he was staring at a familiar the size of a full-grown grey wolf, its body yellow and eyes electric blue. When it didn't dissipate after a few minutes, Robin gave it a simple command. "Find food."

The wolf stared at him.

"Damn it," Robin muttered. "Looks like I have to give orders in Old Ylissean too. Essen finden!"

The wolf bowed before flashing away, Robin having to wait only a few minutes before the wolf returned through the bush with a singed pheasant in its jaws.

Robin felt a feral grin cross his face. "This… this can work. Feel like I can make a few more like you and still fight"

The wolf dropped its prey and looked to its master, ready for its next command.

Robin had only one. "Find my friends while I make some for you. I want you to pursue them until you find them then report back to me."

His hand flew forward. "Verfolgen!"

-Cordelia-

Waking up in a cell was never a pleasant experience. Actually, waking up in an armory was the
closest Cordelia had ever gotten to that moment, but the point stood.

Groaning, Cordelia sat up and looked around, shivering when a stiff breeze met her skin.

*Wait a thrice damned minute…*

Looking down, she yelped and pulled the thin sheet she'd been laying under over her exposed body. Some sick bastard must have taken her clothes after the paladin’s forces had knocked her out, and she wanted to know who so she could gouge their eyes out.

"Oh, sleeping beauty awakens!"

The distinctly feminine voice made Cordelia's eyes turn to the cell door. A tall woman with silver hair and blue eyes stood dressed in scale-plate and greaves, her eyes twinkling amusedly. "Sorry about making you go au natural. It was all I could do to keep the count from sitting here and lusting after you."

Cordelia shivered again, this time for an entirely different reason. "So, that means I'm that so called 'angel' Regent McCloud was talking about."

The woman sighed, her eyes never leaving Cordelia's own as she sat in a chair. Laying her arms on the back-rest, the woman lowered her voice. "So, he did give you information. Doesn't surprise me, the old codger always was loyal to a fault."

Cordelia narrowed her eyes. "Wait… are you Evelyn?"

The woman clicked her tongue. "Call me Eve, we'll get along better. Now, I won't insult you with small talk, so why don't you tell me where your tactician friend went?"

Cordelia felt a surge of triumph. "Not a damned clue! I didn't see where he went before your men stormed the house, he could be anywhere."

Eve shrugged. "Ok, that makes some sense. Found a cave in in the cellar when they finally subdued you. By the way, did you have to kill six of my men?"

Cordelia sniffed. "They came at me with blades drawn. I was trained to treat such actions as a threat to my life."

Eve snorted. "Spoken like a true soldier. Ok, how about realizing that if you don't give me something, I can't keep the count off your back."

Cordelia stiffened; dread taking root in her heart. "W-what?"

Eve grew serious, voice cutting. "Frankly, as you are, you'll be little more than a bargaining chip alongside your friend a few cells down. Nice guy, but the count and his friend aren't all that keen on keeping prisoners around. Sides, if I'm honest, the count only joined this coup because of you."

Cordelia's dread deepened. "That can't be, no one could be that obsessed! Besides, I was only eighteen, damn it!"

Eve sighed. "Just seeing you entranced the man in a way I never thought possible. He's like one of those tragic characters that forever pines after an ideal image and never sees the forest for the trees because of it. Made him even harder to deal with as he was, but now he has you in his clutches."

Her eyes were stoic. "If it weren't for me, you would have woken somewhere else and in a condition
I wouldn't wish upon anyone. His sick ramblings have been going for hours based on my last update."

Cordelia curled in on herself, trying to stop the shaking in her limbs as images of her doomed patrol flashed before her eyes for the first time in weeks. "...Why?"

Eve's eyes gained a spark of curiosity. "Why what?"

Cordelia looked up, teary eyes hard and passionate. "Why do this for me? I'm an enemy, a follower of the Exalted family, a family you turned your back on."

Eve grimaced. "Look, that wasn't up to me. The count's my boss, so I gotta do what he says. It took a lot of arguing to keep you and your friend safe as is."

Cordelia's glare intensified. "So what? You chose treason and civil war because it was the easiest thing to do? The Exalt is barely two weeks dead, Plegia gathers its strength to invade once more, and you join a coup because you were lazy?"

Eve had the audacity to look offended. "I've been nothing but loyal! Do you have any idea how much work it took to get all those traps ready? How much time and planning I had to put in to get everything set up?"

Cordelia snorted. "That's just work. You refused to make a hard decision and it cost your men and this kingdom lives that cannot be replaced! And even now, you still refuse to make a decision, telling yourself you can't make it because it's out of your hands!"

Eve stood fast enough her chair fell over. "I haven't been able to make a choice since I was assigned my post! It was the regent first and then it was the count, everything's been over my head since the title 'General' doesn't mean shit if you don't have an ounce of blue blood in your veins!"

Cordelia recoiled at the venom, but Eve had apparently decided now was the time to vent. "I've to deal with nothing but assholes and entitled dastards lording their positions over me since I was born! Damn the fact I almost single-handedly destroyed Felds' bandit problem, my parents were farmers so my accomplishments are obviously the result of my noble superior's 'visionary' leadership!"

Eve started pacing as she ranted. "It didn't stop there, either! After three years of that drudgery, I finally got to lead a garrison up north, but what do I find? Torture, beatings, rape, all the evils of man in one place! My every word was waved away by my superiors and every reform I attempted to put in place was reversed when the little noble boys and girls complained to their daddies that the mean woman was taking away their playthings!"

Her breaths came in sharp pants now. "You know who gave me the title 'General'? It wasn't the Exalt, no, it was the damn count soon after the regent got forced into giving his powers over. It was made very clear that the only reason I was given the position was because I was a commoner and my every decision would not be my own, but that of my betters! It's always been like that, and it will stay like that!"

Rant ended, Eve flopped back into her chair to catch her breath. Cordelia, not really sure what to say at this point, tentatively spoke. "I...I see. I can't say I've ever gone through such a thing, but I know what it feels like to be put down at every opportunity."

Eve snorted. "And how's that? You got looks most women would die for, you're in the personal force of the Prince of Ylisse, and you have obvious skill. I bet you've never worked a day in your life."
Cordelia sighed, standing with the blanket and walking to stand before the cell door. "That's not the case. Both my parents were in the military, my father a simple soldier and my mother a member of the Pegasus Knights. They never got promoted beyond sergeant, but they were content with their lives. My mother retired after I was born, but I helped with everything from cutting wood to cleaning."

Eve had given Cordelia her undivided attention. "Ok, so you have worked. Still doesn't sound all that bad."

Cordelia shook her head, more memories flashing by. "I always admired them, so when the time came I decided to enlist. In Grevis, we don't really have a large military, so most of us get sent to Ylisstol for training. While I was there, it was determined that I had the skill to be a Pegasus Knight and I joined them the following year."

Eve narrowed her eyes. "Still haven't convinced me. Get to the point."

Cordelia sighed, feeling tremors shake her arms that had nothing to do with the cold. "Well, I was the youngest member aside from my friend Sumia. I wanted to show that my being there was the correct decision, so I worked harder than ever before. But… it wasn't enough."

Cordelia sank to her knees, not caring about covering herself now. "Every mistake, no matter how small, was berated relentlessly. Rumors were always whispered behind my back and not one of my comrades ever offered me support, Sumia the only exception. I had to approach every spar as if it was life and death because they'd always fight me like it was. Not one of my superiors ever helped for they were complicit in it."

Eve blinked, surprised. "That doesn't make any sense. Your mother was a former member and the skill you hold is obvious in your frame! They should have been praising the ground you walked on!"

Cordelia smiled sadly, tears pricking the corners of her eyes. "Well… it was all because I had looks, skill, and the audacity to try and show that I wasn't hurting. All of them were jealous of me, and they wanted to break me into a sniveling pile to make themselves feel better. They didn't change their tune until Plegia was breathing down our necks."

Eve stared at her in shock. "Jealousy? That's all it was?"

Cordelia stared back, melancholy clear. "Indeed. They even apologized to me for their behavior since my captain realized it needed to stop before Plegia came down on us. If what she said was to be believed, there was a scolding and beating that took place while I was in town that put all others to shame."

Her eyes lit slightly. "But, I still forgave them. I knew holding a grudge at that point was foolish, but I also knew what jealousy did to one's mind."

Eve put two and two together. "Wait, the Sumia you were talking about, is she the one that Prince Chrom's been trying to court?"

Cordelia nodded. "One in the same. I had a deep crush on the prince not so long ago as he'd saved my life when his family had come to visit my neck of the woods. I'd gone out to collect firewood, but stumbled on a bandit camp and had to flee for my life. Chrom saved me and I tried to catch his eye ever since."

Nostalgia clouded her eyes. "As you can imagine, that strained my relationship with Sumia. It was my fault too, since Sumia never turned her back on me. If I couldn't forgive jealousy after being
affected by it, I'd be nothing but a hypocrite."

Eve was silent so Cordelia drove the point home. "It was not a matter of strength that allowed me to
do what I did, it was understanding. Everyone has strength in them, but they hold themselves back
because of other things. Fear, anger, denial, irrational things like that. I was too afraid that
confronting the problem directly would only make it worse, but once I knew and understood, it
wasn't scary anymore."

Her hand reached through the bars tentatively, offering something Eve could not describe. "You
know the soldiers under your command better than anyone, and you know yourself as well. There's
still time to be brave, to right the wrongs cast upon you. You still have a chance, a chance I was
never given."

Eve stared at her hand. "What… what do you mean?"

Cordelia's voice shook. "Th-the day I was ap-pologized to… Plegia attacked. We… we had just
started eating and… and they attacked. They d-died for me…"

Eve's hand reached out and touched Cordelia's. "I…I'm sorry to hear that. I guess suffering comes in
all forms, not just getting talked over constantly."

She sighed. "Unfortunately, I can't keep the count away for much longer. My personal regiment
controls this prison and the city it lies in, but all it takes is one order and we'll have to leave. After
that, I can't guarantee your safety."

Cordelia sighed. "I…I know. I suppose it was too much to hope I'd be able to change your loyalties
so easily, but I stand by my words. It's not too late to change your position; you just have to be brave
enough to act."

Eve pulled her hand away. "I'll give it some thought. Gonna have to come up with something
though, so I'll go talk to your friend down the hall."

Standing, Eve strode from the cell, but paused just before she left Cordelia's sight. "Oh, and before I
forget."

Bending at the knee, Eve slipped a parcel through the bars. "It's a tunic and some stockings. Gets
cold down here at night."

Cordelia took the clothes gratefully, whispering her thanks before Eve left. A few minutes later
Cordelia could hear Eve start talking to Stahl, the two apparently hitting it off immediately after Eve
realized Stahl didn't know anything either.

Tuning out the casual conversation about the difference between traps for animals and humans,
Cordelia swiftly dressed herself. The clothes were rough and altogether itchy, but they were a much
better option than being naked.

Walking back to the hard cot, Cordelia looked to the small window at the top of her cell. It was
barred, as expected, but her eyes widened at what she saw.

It was a wolf, but sparks of electricity hopped from its fur. In fact, it was glowing in the evening light
and its fur was a sparkling yellow.

The wolf tilted its head before it flashed and disappeared. Cordelia stared at the spot for a long time
after that, even as the sun disappeared and the cell grew dark.
A smile crossed her face and she found the darkest corner in the cell.

Cordelia had an idea and by heaven it was going to work. Robin had found them after all, and it was just a matter of time before he arrived.

-Stahl-

Eve was an interesting woman.

She'd tried to the usual suite of questions, but that gave way to a nice conversation about traps and the types of stew venison could make.

Altogether, they probably spent a few hours on that and a couple other topics. It was a nice reprieve for him as he'd been bored stiff waiting for Cordelia to wake up and not one person had been down to the dungeon since they'd been brought there.

Sadly, Eve had to leave eventually and Stahl was unsure if he'd see her again. It wasn't every day you made a friend with someone who was nominally your enemy.

Before he could ponder that idea further, the sound of boots met his ears. "Alright, the Count wants the man dead and the woman brought to his carriage. Make it quick, this is all so rotten it's making me sick as is."

Stahl tensed, recognizing the voice of the paladin that had captured them. Gazing around, Stahl smirked at the dark room.

*The torches won't reach that corner. Let's see if I can get a few in here.*

Cramming himself into the corner, Stahl held his breath and waited. Voices soon echoed from down the hall. "The woman's not here!"

A curse followed that yell. "Make sure the man is still there! You two, search the cell, I'll head up and see if the others have spotted her."

Voices, boots, and clattering metal sounded through the hall, Stahl spotted a trio of guards jog up to his cell with torches in hand. As he'd thought, the light from the torches couldn't reach his corner and one of the guards produced a set of keys.

Right as the lock clicked open, a great crash sounded through the hall followed by a heartfelt curse and another crash. The guards in front of Stahl's cell went to investigate, only the one with the key remaining.

*Better now than never!*

Springing from his spot, Stahl rammed into the door and sent the iron straight into the guard's surprised face. The metal clanged hard and the guard crashed to the floor, groaning from the headache. Stahl punched him hard enough to knock him out. "Sorry, nothing personal!"

Looking down the hall, Stahl watched as one man was thrown from a cell further down the hall before he heard Cordelia's voice start demanding release. Sprinting for the cell, Stahl reached it just in time to deliver a haymaker to the first guard that emerged.

Metal clanged and bone cracked, the guard dropping like a rock while Stahl nursed his broken fingers. Cordelia, who'd been held between the guard Stahl punched and another one, used her freedom to trip her remaining captor. Grabbing his spear, she smacked his helmet with the butt and
he grew still.

Panting, the two looked at each other and smiled. "So, they actually gave you clothes?"

Cordelia rolled her eyes. "You can thank Eve for that. I think I got through to her, if only a bit, but that's not important. I think Robin knows where we are, so we need to get out of here!"

Stahl blinked. "How could he? From what I could hear, Robin got away. There's no way he'd be able to figure out where we were taken."

Cordelia shook her head. "Look, just have some faith. Were you conscious when we were brought here? Did you see where we went in?"

Stahl held up his hands. "Whoa-whoa, slow down. I was conscious, but they threw bags over our heads after going through the city gates. All I can recall is taking two right turns before I was in the cell!"

Cordelia grimaced. "Ok, it's not much, but better than nothing. Grab a spear and let's get on with it!"

Stahl nodded and they grabbed the discarded weaponry. They hadn't brought anything important on the mission, so now they could just focus on getting out.

Jogging to the end of the hall, it was with great relief they found the stairwell deserted. Stahl took point, much to Cordelia's silent chagrin, but he led them past the first door they came through and stopped at the top of the stairs.

Cordelia poked his shoulder. "What are you doing? The ground floor's down there!"

Stahl shushed her, staying quiet. Cordelia huffed, but grew quiet as shouts sounded from lower in the stairwell.

Stahl pushed open the door in front of them, only speaking when the coast was clear and they were both through. "We need to get out of here, I understand that, but charging headfirst into a hall full of guards is a bad idea. Getting to high ground is always better and the less time we have to run, the better."

Cordelia looked at him with a newfound respect. "Those lessons with Gaius really paid off, huh?"

Stahl chuckled. "You could say that. Now come on, I don't want to get caught so soon."

Cordelia nodded and they took off again. The first few halls were mostly deserted, but the further they went, the louder it got. On the bright side, a glance through a window had shown the building only had two above-ground floors.

On the other hand, the smaller size of the building made it difficult to avoid the periodic patrols. It was only a matter of time before an alarm was raised, they needed to find horses fast.

After evading another pair of soldiers, Cordelia and Stahl found themselves leaning next to a pair of double doors, the bulk of the noise they'd heard so far coming from behind them.

Stahl held his hand to his mouth, indicating silence, before pushing open the door ever so slightly.

A loud voice greeted them instantly. "What do you mean they're gone?! What have you done with my angel?"

Stahl saw Cordelia stiffen, marking the voice as the count if Stahl had to guess.
"We're looking for them now, sir." Eve's voice answered. "We'll see to it that she's delivered to you in Ylisstol. For now, I think it best you go ahead and answer the summons, if only so I can use your retinue to search more effectively."

Stahl heard what he believed to be an exaggerated huff. "I do not care what must be done! Find them, end the man, and bring me my angel! I will have her, even if I have to burn this city down!"

Judging by the murmurs that met that proclamation and the slamming of doors, the count had left. Cordelia was frozen where she was, but Stahl jogged to the hallway on her left and glanced out the window there.

A tall man in stately clothes was stepping into a carriage, the door closing and the entourage surrounding it taking off. Stahl watched the count go until he was well out of sight, sighing in relief when he was gone.

"It's the prisoners!"

Stahl yelped and ran, not knowing where the shout had come from. All he knew was that the carriage had passed a stable and that was their way out.

"Cordelia!" He yelled. "We need to go!"

Cordelia jumped in surprise, but slammed the double doors open and sprinted through. Stahl followed right on her tail, ignoring the shouts and roars of surprise that came from their entrance. They vaulted over the wooden railing that stood between them and the bottom floor, landing in a large lobby with numerous doors leading into equally numerous halls.

Stahl caught a glimpse of a surprised Eve before he and Cordelia were sprinting out the front door.

Four surprised guards greeted them and their meeting was sadly cut short by two lengths of wood slamming into their helmets. Stahl and Cordelia ran as hard as they could, hearing the shouts and calls of soldiers behind them as townspeople tried to get out of their way.

Stahl skidded to a stop in front of the stable he'd seen earlier, gritting his teeth as he felt the skin of his feet peel from the force. "Here it is! Let's go!"

Cordelia turned hard and sprinted into the stable, abandoning her stolen spear before grabbing some reins. Turning to a stall, Cordelia grimaced. "Sorry about this, but I'm in a hurry."

Meanwhile, Eve had saddled up with her officers and thundered out of the garrison. They'd all been more than a little surprised to see their prisoners burst into the lobby of the building, but it had taken them little time to grab their own horses and ride after them.

Though the last thing they expected was to reach the stable the prisoners had been running for only to watch two horses fly out of their stalls and take off down the road, townspeople screaming and jumping out of the way of the stampeding duo.

Eve was dumbfounded. "Wow."

Branden agreed. "Screw skill, this is miraculous."

Another officer coughed. "Well we can still catch them. Gates are closed for the night."

Eve grinned. "Oh, that's right! Ok, I want three groups to form up on me, Branden, and Gloria! Block the roads around the north gate, that's where they're heading!"
She received yells of acknowledgment and hooves thundered down the cobble streets. It would take a miracle for the two prisoners to escape now.

- Robin -

It was a miracle he'd made it by nightfall.

His first actual wolf familiar had returned shortly after the sun had begun to set, dissipating when it arrived and sending a surge of images into Robin's head. Having a vague idea where to go now, Robin set off to the south and eventually ran across a farmer.

The farmer had gladly taken him into his wagon, telling tales to pass the time. Robin had been polite about it, but slowly grew frustrated as the sun began to set.

His frustration had skyrocketed when the farmer had been forced out of the road by an entourage escorting an incredibly tacky carriage.

Vowing to find out who that particular dastard was at a later date, Robin had been forced to settle down and wait out the rest of the ride until the city his wolf had found came into view.

Silently praising Cordelia's use of a relatively rare perfume, Robin thanked the farmer and hopped from the wagon before running towards the city with all possible speed.

A shift in the wind brought the smell of spicy sausage and fresh bread to his nose, his stomach growling at being denied sustenance for so long. Ignoring the pain, Robin ran until he stood before the gates.

Which, as luck would have it, were closed.

_Damn it all! Here I am, with the ability to summon thrice damned lightning wolves, and I can't get into a gate because that farmer decided to pause in the middle of the road for some ass!_

Growling, Robin ripped the tabard from his shoulders and removed his greaves. The wall was rough and sturdy, plenty of handholds and footholds littering it, so if he couldn't go through, he could go over.

Glancing at the gates one more time, Robin smiled at the lack of guards and ran at the wall. Dashing a few feet up, Robin grabbed the first crack and started to scramble up as fast as he could. The wall was thirty feet high, but Robin had been forced by Sully to climb a local mountain when they'd been patrolling in Surperius.

This was child's play by comparison, especially after Chrom had happily done all he could to slow Robin down.

…The Shepherds had a deeply repressed sadistic streak, most of it aimed at the newest member they recruited. Robin had been a little too amiable when first getting to know them, so that had been fun.

Anyway, he was atop the wall in short order. Stopping in place, Robin observed the city.

_Ok, so it's split into quarters. There's the main square in the center, what looks like a bunch of taverns and shops in the northeast, houses in the northwest, forges and craftsmen to the southeast, and what looks like a garrison and stable to the southwest. Actually… what's that commotion below me?_

Looking down, Robin gaped at the sight of crimson hair sitting bareback on a horse, to her left a
man. All around them were cavaliers and soldiers, a rider with silver hair leading the contingent.

*It's them! I have to save them!*

Concentrating his power, Robin called forth as many full wolves as he could. Thirty answered his call, though few were actually well formed, before his order choked through his raw throat.

"Schützen!"

The wolves howled and jumped, electricity shattering the air as the beasts landed around Cordelia and Stahl. Robin panted before looking to his right and glimpsing some stairs. Staggering towards them, Robin worked his way down at a painfully slow walk.

When he got down to the road, the wolves were growling at any that tried to approach, weapons drawn on the soldier's side. "Excuse me, but I think it's time for my friends and I… to leave."

The silver rider, a woman with blue eyes, looked to him. "You must be Robin, then. I'd say it's an honor, but you interrupted us quite rudely."

Robin scoffed, even as exhaustion made his knees quake. "I won't let them get captured, not again. Unless you want these little guys to burn everything in this city to the ground, you'll let us go free."

He stared down the rider, no one speaking, until she laughed. "Well alright then!"

Robin blinked, dumbfounded. "Pardon, I fear I misheard you."

The rider rolled her eyes. "I said alright. I have no love for the count, and now that he is gone on a summons to Ylisstol, I have no reason or desire to keep any of you prisoner."

One of her officers, the paladin from earlier that day, protested. "But General, that goes against orders! They are enemies, we can't just let them go free!"

The woman looked to the young man. "Our loyalty is to Ylisse, not a single count. Besides, I'm currently the highest authority here, what I say goes!"

She looked back to Robin, his jaw on the ground and eyes wide. "You should thank your lady friend there. If it weren't for her, I may not have pulled my head out of my ass. We'll open the gates and get you all horses and some proper clothes before you leave. Just let us know when you plan on taking back Ylisstol, I'd like to be there."

Robin shook his head. "Well… I was expecting a lot of things, but certainly not this."

Amused giggles met his ears, Cordelia's voice greeted him. "That much I can agree on. She had just called for us to listen when you showed up."

She looked to the wolves, the constructs now calm. "But what are these things? Last I remember, you couldn't do this!"

Robin sighed and walked up to her, taking her hand and kissing it. "It's a long story, I'm just glad you're ok."

Cordelia sighed in relief. "Me too."

Stahl watched them in amusement, glancing to his right as Eve cantered up to him. "So, I guess it all worked out, huh?"
Eve smirked. "Indeed it did. Hey, come by sometime when you're not busy, I want to finish that
debate about snares."

Stahl bowed. "It would be my pleasure."

Eve shook her head before barking orders, the wolves disappearing as Robin's power ran out. Stahl
got to help the panicking woman as Robin slumped over in exhaustion, silently musing that their
mission had gone very well, all things told.

If they were lucky, the others had seen similar success.
The last place any of them expected to end up at was Khan Flavia's palace.

After Severa and Morgan were reunited, Lucina and Cynthia had hopped out of the forest where they'd witnessed the reunion and professed a long and overtly dramatic apology comprised of all the sincerity they could muster.

Severa, melancholy and anger forgotten with Morgan at her side, had dismissed their drama. Unfortunately, the royal siblings had continued to grovel until Severa accepted the apology, if only to get them to shut up.

Then it turned into a big group hug, Morgan laughing and crying at finding both her sister and her oldest friends at the same time.

Wanting to celebrate, Severa ordered the camp packed up and their Pegasi saddled. Once everyone was set to go, Severa not once letting go of her sister even as they clambered on Theresa's back, they took to the air and set a course for the nearest town.

Morgan talked non-stop during the prep and their short trip, regaling her sister with the numerous mishaps and adventures she'd been on since they were separated. While Severa knew her sister was perfectly capable of getting into trouble without much effort, the sheer number of times she'd fallen prey to snare traps boggled her mind.

That is, if Morgan wasn't embellishing, which she was also prone to do.

The trip passed without incident and they set down in a little village a few miles south of the Longfort. The villagers were beyond courteous, giving the four of them a nice room in the town's lone inn along with a hearty dinner and plenty of privacy.

Morgan then started telling her tale all over again, answering any question she could with an enthusiasm that Severa had long missed, even if she playfully scolded Morgan every once in a while.

But, that had been the end of their joy. The next day, cavaliers bearing the mark of the Surperius Duchy rode through town, their leader declaring that the Exalted family had been betrayed and volunteers were needed to take back the country from the traitors.

Lucina and Cynthia both went pale at the news, the implications unpleasant. Severa was in shock as well, knowing for damn sure this hadn't happened in their future, so Morgan made a simple proposal.

Go find the Shepherds.

Severa shot the idea down the moment it arrived, but Morgan proceeded to make a compelling argument. The Shepherds already knew them by their pseudonyms, and they'd arrived in times of crisis before, so why not now?

Lucina and Cynthia latched onto that idea with the glee of bears spotting honey. Outvoted, Severa begrudgingly agreed after Morgan unleashed her trademark sad puppy face, but made the demand that Morgan wear a visor like Cynthia's.

Morgan happily agreed before they took to the air again and sped for the Longfort. Lucina recreated her appearance from when they'd first arrived in Ferox and gained them entry when one of the guards recognized Marth's famous mask.
Morgan had to be called back several times after they got through the gate though, her eagerness to meet her parents and childhood heroes shining in her cheeks.

Now they stood before Flavia's palace, none of their earlier eagerness apparent.

Severa rubbed her arms as a bracing wind blew by. "Are we going to go in or not?"

Cynthia hummed, her visor down. "I mean… how could we help?"

Lucina agreed. "Perhaps this wasn't the best idea. We were confused and riled up when the news came, mayhaps we should leave?"

Morgan disagreed, a visor covering her eyes courtesy of Cynthia. "We can't, not after coming so far! I've been up and down Ylisse looking for you guys, I can help! Besides, they'll need all the hands they can get!"

Severa shifted, snow crunching under her boots. "It's just awkward, ok? I don't want Dad to try and corner me for answers when we're trying to help."

Morgan stared at her sister. "I guess… but what about stipulating that we help provided they leave us alone?"

Severa opened her mouth and then shut it. Lucina answered instead. "That could work. Father already knows what I look like, so I don't need the mask or anything, and I'm pretty sure Uncle knows what Sev looks like as well. The two of us can walk in and not cause too much trouble, but I'm worried about you two."

Cynthia laughed. "Don't worry about us! The Doom Patrol never backs down from a challenge!"

Gungnir and Gae Bolg clanged together as Morgan and Cynthia did a silly salute, making Severa scowl and Lucina smile.

"Dingbats," Severa muttered. "Alright, you two wait in the entrance while we ask for the Khan. If we're lucky, we can sort this mess out before having to answer anything uncomfortable."

She got nods all around and the elder siblings set out for the reception hall. They could hear Morgan and Cynthia chattering excitedly as they left, Severa sighing in exhaustion. "Geez, I know I missed her, but I forgot how much energy she had."

Lucina giggled. "Aw, don't be like that. If I recall, it was you that founded the Doom Patrol to try and wear her out."

Severa blushed. "If you tell her that, I'll never speak to you again."

Lucina patted her shoulder. "Your secret is safe with me. Though… I hope this all comes to an end soon. I wouldn't mind getting to go see the world before Valm comes calling."

Severa took Lucina's hand in hers and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "That sounds good. Maybe we'll run into the others while we're at it… or we might run into our parents again."

Lucina frowned and they stopped. "Sev… do you want to stay in Ylisse?"

Severa's free hand started to play with her sleeve, indecision cloaking her. "Well… yes and no. I want to travel and see the sights too, but we did a lot of moving before we came back. Settling down, getting a job, just living… that has its good points too."
Lucina squeezed Severa's hand this time. "We have time to think about things like that, there's no need to decide now. Come on, we shouldn't keep Cynthia and Morgan waiting."

Severa nodded and freed her hand, missing the spark of disappointment in Lucina's eyes. The walk from there was relatively short, but two guards stopped them before a pair of large iron doors. "State your business."

Lucina bowed, Severa following suit. "We seek an audience with the Khan."

One of the guards grunted. "Who are you to ask? The Khan's a busy woman with that revolt going on down south and she's still working to get our armies together to crush Plegia."

Lucina straightened. "My name is Marth and this is Katarina. We've come to offer our services in ending the revolt in Ylisse."

Both guards stiffened before the one to first speak answered. "I see... we've been told that if you were spotted to bring you here, but you've done the hard work for us. Is your companion Catria here as well?"

Lucina and Severa looked to each other before Severa answered. "Yeah, she's in the entrance hall. There's another one with us now, her name's Tethys. Can we see the Khan or not?"

The guards huddled together, speaking in hurried whispers. Eventually, one of them opened the doors with a creak and the other motioned for Lucina and Severa to go through. "The Khan's organizing the merger of two armies currently, but West-Khan Basilio is taking guests in her stead."

Lucina and Severa nodded their thanks before walking through the door, the guard that held the door announced their presence before it closed with a bang.

A loud harrumph greeted them. "Well, if it isn't two of my wayward champions!"

Basilio stomped towards them with a stern frown on his face. "What was that showing in the Selection Tourney? Especially you, Marth!"

Lucina cringed, knowing that trying to explain herself was a fool's errand. "My apologies, Distinguished Khan, but I believe the past has no bearing on why we are here."

Basilio coughed. "Not now, but I'll get my word in later, you'll see."

He turned and walked further into the room, narrating as he went. "Can't say I'd decorate this place in all the blue, I'm more of a yellow man myself, but it does make that damn throne easier to sleep on!"

Basilio laughed, Severa tilted her head in response. "Wait, you sit on the throne? Isn't that only for the Great Khan?"

Basilio waved her off. "Bah, that woman doesn't care if I sit in it or not. All she cares about is that I don't track mud on the carpet-and I keep myself pristine as is!"

Lucina pinched her nose, feeling a headache start. "Khan, would it be ok if we got to the point?"

Basilio rolled his eye. "Alright, fine. You never were one for small talk, even in the brief time we traveled together."

He crossed his arms and scowled. "What are you doing here? After the Selection Tourney the lot of
you disappeared into thin air, only to show up and try to save the Exalt in Ylisse. No one's heard from any of you since."

Severa took the lead. "We've been out and about, nothing to really talk about there. As for why we're here, well, I'll let Marth tell you that."

Lucina nodded and stepped forward. "We heard of the revolt in Ylisse and wish to offer our services to the Shepherds. We may not be members of the Halidom, but it's still home to us."

Basilio hummed, a hand scratching his chin. "I see... well, I can't tell you whether the Sheps will take you, but I'll go get the little lady and see what she says."

Lucina stopped Basilio as he turned to leave, confusion clear. "Lady? Isn't Prince Chrom the leader of the Shepherds?"

Basilio let out a booming laugh. "The crazy dastard ran after his lady love just this morning! In fact, both Chrom and his resident tactician are off on scouting missions. Consequently, little Lissa's making the decisions for now."

Lucina clamped her mouth shut, waiting until Basilio was gone before turning to Severa. "Our fathers are mad!"

Severa shrugged. "Your dad? Oh, yeah, he's mad. Mine on the other hand is just crazy."

Lucina growled. "What's the difference? They're the two most important people in Ylisse right now alongside Aunt Lissa, they can't go cavorting on daring infiltrations!"

Severa tilted her head, cool as ice. "Never took you for one to read mystery novels."

Lucina started pulling at her hair in frustration. "How are you so calm? This is serious!"

Severa allowed a smile to cross her face. "Tactician, remember? Believe me, I'm panicking, I just don't let it show."

Lucina had a retort ready but they were interrupted by a familiar voice. "Oh, it's you guys!"

Lissa frolicked into the room, her robes swaying with the movement. She was very chipper, to Lucina and Severa's eyes, especially given her sister and role model had died not a week prior.

Lissa looked them up and down. "Yep, you two are girls alright. Guess I have to pay Robin after all."

Lucina gulped. "You... had a bet on our gender?"

Lissa grinned. "Yep, hope you don't mind! Robin swore up and down you were a girl Marth, while I thought you were a dreamboat boy. That doesn't matter though, I was told you guys wanted to help."

Severa took over for her dumbfounded friend. "That's why we showed up. If you need anything from us, we'll be glad to give it so long as no one tries to pry into our personal lives."

Lissa nodded. "Sounds good to me! You just missed Robin and my brother, but I'll make sure they leave you alone. For now, why don't you go and grab your friends? Introductions are in order!"

She pointed to Lucina. "You're staying with me though, I want to know why you're carrying Falchion."
Lucina grimaced and Severa took that as her cue. "I can't really say…"

The door clanged shut and Severa was gone, Lucina internally crying at being abandoned. Lissa ignored this and bounced forward to grab Lucina's hand. "Please? I promise not to tell Chrom when he gets back!"

Lucina cast her eyes everywhere but Lissa's face, knowing her aunt's infamous puppy eyes were out in full force. "I can't. It's very important that I keep as much of my past a secret as possible. It's for both my own safety and those around me!"

Lissa pouted. "Fiiiiinnccee!"

Letting go, Lissa looked back to the big iron doors. "Your friends sure are taking a while. I thought they'd be here in a jiffy."

Lucina sighed in relief. "We have two pegasi with us, so they need to stable them. It'll probably be a few more minutes."

Her face grew concerned. "But, what of you Princess Lissa? I don't mean to be rude, but I didn't expect you to be quite so… energetic."

Lissa's smile grew melancholic. "I don't blame you. I'm just doing my best right now, even if that just means putting on a smile. Thanks for the concern, though."

Lucina's concern deepened. "Have you… said your goodbyes? How… how can you be so strong in the face of the Exalt's passing?"

Lissa sniffed, eyes moistening. "I… I have. A friend of mine, Donnel, helped me get my head out of the snow. The other Shepherds have been great too and I've been indulging a hobby in mythology. Miriel's been really helpful finding the books, so it's been fun."

Lucina smiled gently. "I'd love to hear about it when there's some down time."

Lissa wiped her eyes. "Thanks, that sounds fun."

The creak of hinges ended their talk, Severa walking through with Cynthia and Morgan in tow. Lissa blinked when she saw Morgan, her face still obscured by a visor. "I don't recognize you."

Morgan smiled and waved. "Name's Tethys! Glad to meet you."

She bowed politely, Severa rolled her eyes at the display while Cynthia giggled.

Lissa took a deep, composing breath. "Alright, it looks like you're all here. Follow me; I'll put you in Chrom's room while I gather everyone up."

Turning on her heel, Lissa skipped away with the time travelers following. Morgan had a tight grip on Cynthia's hand as the young Princess tried to hold herself back from tackling her aunt and crying all over the floor.

Lucina was in similar straights, only the necessity of a calm attitude keeping her from doing the same. Even then, Severa took no chances and kept a firm grip on Lucina's arm.

Reaching a non-descript door after several minutes of walking, Lissa laid down some rules. "Understand that if you take anything in there, we'll toss you in the dungeons. Don't try and hide it either, Miriel can spot something missing at a hundred yards and I'll have her sweep over the room.
after I retrieve you."

Lucina looked offended. "We are not thieves. Our offer to help is as genuine as anything!"

Lissa nodded, eyes beaming. "Good answer! Now then, there's a table in there with a few chairs. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Lissa turned and went on her way. The girls looked to each other before shrugging in unison and opening the door. As Lissa had said, there was a small table with three chairs around it along with a hearth and a bed. Cynthia hopped onto the bed with a laugh, the others taking the chairs.

"Man," Cynthia breathed. "I had such a hard time not hugging her."

Lucina smiled at her sister. "You and me both, Cynth. It didn't hit me when we met her the first time, but she sounds so much younger than she is."

Severa sighed. "I just hope this doesn't last too long. We may keep them off our backs for a little while, but questions are going to be asked regardless."

Morgan groaned. "Not that again! I know we're not supposed to do too much, but can't we give some things away? Not even right away, maybe after Sev and Lucy come into the world?"

Severa stood up and bopped her sister on the head. "Dingus. We all want to tell our parents everything, but we can't predict shit if we do! Hell, this whole revolt is out of the blue, and we didn't change all that much!"

"I disagree," answered a new voice. "You've done quite a bit my dears."

Everyone jumped, Morgan and Lucina fell out of their chairs while Cynthia hopped to her feet brandishing Gae Bolg.

Severa, after realizing she wasn't under attack, pulled her arms off her head and stood from where she'd curled up on the ground. Turning to the source of the voice, her jaw dropped. "No…"

Lucina groaned as she pulled herself up, rubbing the back of her head. "Who's… Naga in heaven!"

Cynthia's eyes widened. "Aunty Emm!"

Emmeryn smiled from her spot in Severa's chair, amusement shining in her eyes. "Hello girls. I'm glad to see you in good health, Lucina, and this must be Severa."

Severa gulped, speechless. Emmeryn turned to look at Morgan, who'd frozen on the ground. "Who's this? I don't remember hearing you mention a redhead among your friends."

Morgan squeaked. "Hello… Um, you know who Lucina is?"

Emmeryn smiled at the redhead. "I do. I met her back in Ylisstol some time ago and she explained her quest to me."

She winked. "I figured out who she was, so don't think she broke any promises."

Morgan gulped. "Well, uh… my name's Morgan. I'm Sev's sister, younger sister, Your Grace."

Emmeryn sighed. "Oh stop with that. I'm not the Exalt, not anymore."

Her eyes turned to Cynthia, who'd frozen after calling Emmeryn's name with tears streaking down
her face. "You must be Cynthia. Please, take off the visor, I wish to see my niece's face."

Gae Bolg clanged against the floor, followed shortly by the visor Cynthia had been wearing. Teary blue-grey eyes met Emmeryn's own sparkling cyan. "I…"

Emmeryn opened her arms, her face gentle and kind. "It's ok my lovely girl. I've wanted to meet you since the moment Lucina told me about you."

Cynthia sniffled and hiccupped, shaky steps carrying her forward until she collapsed before Emmeryn's seat and cried into her lap. Emmeryn smiled and stroked the girl's hair, contentment radiating from her.

"Sweet girl," she cooed. "I'm sorry we weren't able to meet in Ylisstol, but I also understand not wanting to be found by the Shepherds. There's no need to be sad now though, I finally got my wish to meet both of my nieces."

Cynthia smothered her wails in Emmeryn's robes, the soft wool absorbing her tears. Lucina, after her surprise and shock faded, felt suspicion take hold. "But… we saw you die, Aunty. We arrived in Xaldornos just in time to see you fall."

Emmeryn sighed, reaching down to the side of her seat and placing a blue jewel on the table. "This is why I'm still here, Lucina. The gem you see before you is where my soul now resides, a gift from my mother that I had locked in the Royal Archives long ago. I was reminded of it when we talked to each other in the plaza and I retrieved it in secret when we returned from the Plegian Trade Pass."

Cynthia's sobs quieted. "Then… I'm not actually in your lap?"

White light flashed in the gem with Emmeryn's every word. "I fear not. The body you feel is a construct, something I am able to manifest whenever the gem in which I reside is close to a font of Naga's power. I can still feel as a human would, but no blood pumps through me."

Her hand ran through Cynthia's matted hair. "I'm sorry, but this still means more to me than you'll ever know. I may not be here in the flesh, but I can still help you and your parents in the years to come.

Emmeryn laid a kiss on Cynthia's head, feeling the poor girl's sobs redouble at the news. Sniffles met her ear from across the table and Emmeryn opened her arms again. "It's ok, Lucina, my state is not your fault. Please, come here and let me hold you again."

Lucina tried to put on a brave face, but Emmeryn's pleading expression forced bitter tears to fall. Walking stiffly, Lucina couldn't help but tense as Emmeryn's hand cupped her shoulder.

Emmeryn's face grew sad. "I don't blame you for being upset. It took Lissa a long time to accept what happened to me, and I still see her tense when I speak with her. I only ask that you give me this once, so that I may treasure the feeling for as long as I exist."

Lucina looked away, not wanting to give in when all that remained of Emmeryn was a phantom. "… I can't."

The words were whispered, strained and aching, but Emmeryn only nodded. "I understand… Cynthia, I'm sorry, but I need to go. Lissa could come at any moment and seeing me speak with you could ruin your story."

Cynthia was slow to collect herself so Morgan helped her up and walked her to the bed. Emmeryn gave Cynthia a pitying look before addressing Lucina. "As I said when we first met, I love you both
more than my own life. A spirit I may be, but I do not regret my choice. This revolt is my worst nightmare given form, but I have faith that Chrom and his friends will see both it and the war with Plegia to its end."

She smiled as her form began to fade. "Peace will come, and when it does, I hope you'll find it in your heart to forgive me for leaving you with only a false body to hold."

With that, Emmerlyn vanished and the jewel dulled. Lucina stared at the jewel for what felt like an eternity before Severa's voice broke her daze. "Well, that was unexpected."

Lucina glared at the other girl, not appreciating the humor. Severa held up her hands in defense. "What, you got a better way to describe that?"

Lucina held the glare another moment before fixing her seat and flopping into it heavily, her brow heavy with anger and bitterness.

Severa glanced over to see Cynthia still weeping into Morgan's shoulder, her younger sister offering the distraught princess comforting words that never made it past the haze of despair.

Sighing, Severa spoke to the room at large. "Guess I'll be doing the talking then. Buck up people, we'll have to be on our best behavior."

Absent nods answered her, Severa huffed before a knock came through the door. "Come in!"

The door creaked open and Lissa's head appeared. "Sorry for taking so long. We, uh, had a situation."

Severa's eyes narrowed. "What kind of situation?"

Lissa grimaced. "Well… just follow me, you'll understand."

Severa blinked, but managed to round up her despondent friends and frowning sister before following Lissa. The young sage tried to keep a conversation going, but Severa and Morgan only gave one word answers while Lucina and Cynthia didn't speak.

Giving up, Lissa led them through several more corridors before arriving at a large courtyard with close to a dozen people waiting inside.

One of them had a familiar shock of blue hair and was bound in the center of the group, a boy with an overly large hat playfully poking him with a length of wood.

Lissa sighed and gestured to the bound man. "My dear brother, ladies. Bound and brought back after getting scolded by Robin, our tactician. Please, shame him; you'll never get another chance."

Severa felt an evil smirk rise on her face. "Can I poke him?"

Lissa gestured to the boy. "Ask Ricken. I got my fill already, so if he says yes, have at it."

Severa strutted forward to claim her place, leaving Morgan to take over as group mouthpiece. "So, I guess this is everyone?"

Lissa nodded. "That are here, yeah. The guy in the big hat's Ricken, the woman with glasses is Miriel, the creepy girl is Tharja, guy in the big suit of metal is Kellam, the rehead's Sully, girl in the silk and gold is Olivia, mister tin-head is Donnel, and Ms. Curls is Maribelle."

Morgan nodded as she spotted each one, shivering at the intense stare Tharja shot her way the
moment Morgan looked at her. "So… are we going to go meet them?"

Lissa shrugged. "May as well. Hey guys, I brought the people!"

Chrom growled from his spot as Severa poked his leg. "We can see that! Now untie me right now, I'm not going to run off half-cocked again!"

Sully snorted. "The fact you need to say 'again' is all the reason we need to keep you tied up."

Chrom glowered at her. "Then tie up Lissa too! I can't stop her pranks if I'm like this!"

Lissa laughed. "Oh please, there's no way I'd be-"

She was immediately tackled by Sully as Kellam and Miriel produced a long length of rope. Shortly thereafter, Lissa was steaming next to her amused brother, equally immobilized.

Kellam wiped his hands. "Now then!"

He turned to the dumbfounded girls, a kind smile on his face. "I haven't seen the three of you since the attack on the palace. I already explained who you three are to Tharja, but who are you?"

Kellam's finger landed on Morgan, who smiled excitedly. "My name's Tethys! I'm friends with these guys, but we only reunited recently."

Miriel spoke next. "Indeed, yet you do not show your face like Katarina or Marth. We are allies here; there is no need for secrecy."

Morgan gulped. "Uh… Kat, is that ok?"

Severa shook her head. "Go ahead; they'll see you without the visor at some point. May as well do it while everyone's here. Same goes for you Catria."

Morgan nodded and took off the visor, shuffling shyly at the attention she was getting. "Uh… is something on my face?"

Miriel hummed. "Your eyes, they are similar to Katarina's. Tell me, are you related?"

Severa and Morgan looked to each other before Severa sighed. "We're cousins. Enough about us though, what can we do to help?"

Chrom grew serious. "At this point in time, help us get organized for the march to Ylisstol. None of our expeditions will return earlier than the end of this week and we need to be ready for whatever information they bring."

He nodded to Kellam and Sully. "Tethys, you can help these two make sure we have enough weapons and provisions in case it turns into a siege."

Morgan bounded up to the two, saluting energetically. "I'll be in your care! Don't be afraid to work me hard!"

Sully gained a terrifying smirk and Kellam sighed. "I hope you know what you're getting into."

Morgan frowned before Sully snatched her arm and dragged her away, Kellam following at a more sedate pace. Ignoring this, Chrom looked to Ricken and Miriel. "Marth, I want you to help these two to research the regions surrounding Ylisstol. You seem quite knowledgeable, so you'll be best served there."
Lucina nodded stiffly, still trying to order her thoughts. Ricken walked up to her and smiled widely. "Come on, there's a lot of books we need to go through!"

Lucina didn't respond to his enthusiasm, instead turning and following Miriel who'd already set off.

Ricken frowned. "She's not all that friendly, is she?"

Chrom shrugged. "Not when we've been involved. Just do your best, that's all we can ask."

Ricken sighed and jogged after them, leaving Tharja, Olivia, and Maribelle.

Chrom nodded to her. "Catria, you'll be helping Tharja, Lissa, Olivia, and Maribelle make poultices and other mystical brews. You just need to deliver the ingredients; they'll handle the actual work."

Cynthia cringed, silently hoping she wouldn't trip too much. Lissa sighed from her seat on the ground. "That's good and all, but I can't move!"

Tharja rolled her eyes. "Imbeciles, the lot of you. Hold still."

Cynthia shivered at the rasp in Tharja's voice, memories flashing through her mind of the times Noire would visit with her parents and Tharja would grow upset at something.

Thankfully, Tharja just compressed a Ruin spell onto her finger and sliced through the bindings. Lissa sprang to her feet and groaned happily. "Thank Naga! Alright, let's go you guys!"

Lissa skipped away, Cynthia following hesitantly while Tharja sighed and followed them. Olivia, too shy to speak in the face of the strangers, followed along at a much greater distance.

Maribelle, quiet until then, looked around to see she was the only other Shepherd present. "A warning for you and your group."

Her gaze hardened to steel as she looked at Severa. "I will not tolerate harm to any of those here, least of all Prince Chrom or Lissa. Do so, and I will end you personally. Am I clear?"

Severa glared in turn. "We're here to help, like every other time we've showed up."

Maribelle huffed before leaving, sharp comments uttered under her breath.

Chrom and Severa were now alone, Donnel long since gone to check Morgan. They stared at each other for a few minutes before Chrom broke the silence. "Tell me, are you Robin's sister?"

Severa took an involuntary step back. "What? No, I'm not his sister!"

Chrom continued to stare at her. "Yet you seem to know him quite well…"

He sighed. "Look, I'm not going to pry any further, but Robin's my best friend. You have no idea how ashamed he is of his amnesia, even if he doesn't show it, and I first saw hope spark in his eye when we first met in Ferox. Please, if you can, help him. I will do anything you ask, just help him!"

Severa was rendered mute at the request. Chrom kept his gaze locked onto her for a long time before realizing she would not speak. "Forgive me; you'd likely prefer to know what you'll be doing. For now, you'll be working dual roles. First, you'll be my liaison to your group until this crisis is resolved. Second, you'll be helping Flavia and myself organize our forces and draw up plans based on the information Miriel can dig up."

His gaze was determined. "Sound good to you?"
Severa let out a long sigh, slowing her racing heart. "That… works, I guess. If it helps, I'm in charge of planning for my group alongside Marth."

Chrom nodded. "Perfect, that'll help immensely. Now, one last thing…"

His gaze turned furious. "Get me out of these damn ropes!"

Severa sighed and pulled Mercurius from its sheathe. She had a feeling this was going be a long week and that was without anyone recognizing their weapons.

-One Week Later-

Severa hated being right at times.

Chrom had neglected to inform her that helping organize forces and come up with ideas was code for playing mediator between him and the Khan. Considering they were two very strong-willed people with their own ideas on how to handle things, the only way anything got done was via shouting.

She wasn't the only one who had trouble either. Cynthia was still incredibly shaken by the revelation of Emmeryn's fate and it made her far more clumsy than normal. Tharja and Maribelle's scolding had increased in intensity throughout the week until Lissa had been forced to have Cynthia help only her and Olivia.

Oddly, Tharja had apologized to Cynthia for her outbursts, explaining that the regents she needed were rare and their destruction set their group back by a significant margin.

It was just her way of apologizing tended to involve a lot of meaningless threats with the actual apology put somewhere between them and a disturbing stare.

Frankly Cynthia wasn't sure who was scarier, an angry Tharja, or an apologetic Tharja.

Maribelle on the other hand didn't apologize, at least outwardly. Lissa had to explain that the little treats that appeared in their work area were Maribelle being contrite and aware of how she tended to cross the line.

If there was a positive, it was in the form of Olivia growing more comfortable around Cynthia. The dancer even showed the young princess several uses for medicinal plants that even Lissa had been unaware of.

Even Lucina didn't escape trouble, despite her relatively cushy job. After displaying an in-depth knowledge of Ylisstol that had outstripped Chrom's own, Miriel and Ricken took to interrogating her for every scrap of information she could provide.

Seeing the famous intensity of Miriel's intellect had kept Lucina up for the next few nights, even as she was instructed to por over a small mountain of texts that dated back to the 2nd Zaran dynasty six hundred years ago.

She couldn't complain of course, not when Miriel and Ricken had easily twice the number of tomes with far more thorough notes than her. If Lucina had one saving grace in that group, it was her fresh perspective.

Finally, poor Morgan swiftly grew to regret her words. Asking Sully to 'work me hard' was perhaps one of Morgan's greatest mistakes alongside stealing Severa's pudding when they were little and trying to handle Gungnir when Cordelia was still with them.
She'd been told to carry crates of weapons, armor, and supplies in stacks so tall it was impossible to see and when she inevitably stumbled was forced to clean it up and start again. Sully called it boot camp. Kellam had been kind enough to carry her to the quarters she was assigned at the end of the day while apologizing for his fiancée's behavior.

Morgan, ever the optimist, didn't quit, but she suffered in a way that would make even Kjelle pale.

It was good work though, if only because they had an honest structure and schedule for the first time in years. Yes, they were exhausted, but it felt like they were making real, honest progress.

Then that ground to a halt when the first scouting team returned.

Severa had been in yet another meeting, this time going over infiltration points for sappers, when Olivia had burst into the room. "Khan Flavia, Prince Chrom! The Draconis team has returned, but they have casualties!"

Chrom sprang from his seat. "Take me to them, now!"

Olivia and Chrom blurred from the room, Flavia and Severa hot on their heels. After winding through the now familiar halls of the palace, they arrived at the entrance hall to the panicked calls of Lissa and Miriel.

Hearing panic in Miriel's voice made a pit of dread open in Severa's gut, and it only deepened as they reached the shouting healers.

"What the hell happened?" Chrom demanded. "I need news, now!"

A gruff voice answered, ratty blonde hair revealing a tired Vaike. "We got news alright… just didn't think it'd cost so much."

Chrom rounded on his friend. "Vaike! What happened, where are Libra and Gaius? Frederick and Nowi?"

Vaike sighed, the bruises under his eyes deepening. "Libra and Chuckles are off resting. They were falling asleep on their feet trying to keep them stable."

Chrom grew increasingly frustrated, even as Flavia stormed past him to get close to the healers. "Who's 'them' damn it?! Answer me Vaike!"

Flavia's voice interrupted the shouting. "Chrom, get over here!"

The lack of a friendly nickname underscored how serious things were, Chrom and Severa pushed their way through the Shepherds that had gathered around the healers to see the patients.

Severa's gut fell into her feet. "No…"

The first one she saw was Frederick. His skin was the color of death, his entire torso bereft of armor and clothes, only bandages covered him. Were it not for the shallow rise and fall of his chest, Severa would have thought him dead.

What caught her eye among the brilliant tapestry of pale skin, arteries, and veins, was a spider web of black tendrils that radiated from a spot on each wrist. They'd stopped half way up his forearm, but anyone could tell it was potent poison.

Gulping in revulsion, Severa turned her gaze to the other stretcher and nearly screamed.
It was Nowi, her skin a similar color to Frederick's and her breathing just as shallow. Unfortunately, where Frederick's malady was marked by the black webs on his arms, Nowi's scars were far more permanent.

Twin scabs ran the width of her eyes, the eyelids pulled back to show milky purple where radiant gems had once shined.

Nowi was blind.

Chrom fell to his knees beside Frederick, eyes desperately finding Lissa. "Are they alive, will they make it?!!"

Lissa grit her teeth. "I don't know what the damn poison is! The scabs are already healed on Nowi and I'm not a miracle worker! Miriel, help me get them to the recovery ward, we need elixirs and Recovery staffs immediately!"

Miriel and Lissa took hold of the stretcher Nowi was on, orders continuing to fly from Lissa's mouth. "Kellam, Sully, get Frederick and follow us! Go-go-go!"

Sully and Kellam jumped at the call, faces solemn. The two stretchers disappeared down the hallway and all was silent for a time.

Then, Chrom picked himself up and stalked toward Vaike. "Tell me… everything!"

Vaike sighed, a hand running through his hair. "First things first… Carlan's dead, has been for a while."

Air fled the area, Flavia roaring at the news. "He's the one that supposed to be behind this! How can he be dead?!!"

Vaike shook his head. "We found the Bishop of Gariel chained in the duke's manor. He told us that the leaders behind the revolt are a marquise named Meredith, a countess named Selena, and a count named Theodore. Under them are several barons and the heirs to four other counts along with middling clergy. The High Cleric was part of it too, but she's dead now."

Chrom was staring daggers at Vaike, but Severa stomped towards him. "How?!!"

Vaike grimaced. "I ain't all that sure. We stopped in a town called Menagerie to try and see what we could find, festival gossip and all that, but they had portraits on us. Libra was going over what he’d found when he got ambushed, pretty sure the innkeeper ratted us out. I got drugged in a tavern while Frederick and Nowi got drugged at the festival. Gaius got stuck with a dart from what he told me, but a friend of his got him out."

By then the others had gathered around him. "We were taken to Gariel and locked in the garrison dungeons. Gaius got brought there too by his friend and got us out, but something had happened to Nowi before he got there. By Libra's guess she had awakened shortly after nightfall when a bitch named Catherine had been interrogating Frederick. Poor girl had to listen to him get tortured for hours after that."

Severa felt bile rise in her throat, but a hand in hers showed Morgan seeking comfort. Severa swallowed and squeezed Morgan's hand as Vaike's tale wound down. "They slit his wrists with poisoned blades after that, and Nowi went berserker. I heard a roar and a crash before Gaius showed up to free us. Frederick was in bad shape when we found him, but the poison didn't show at first and Frederick stayed quiet about it even when he woke up."
Another sigh. "Nowi... Nowi had turned into some kind of super dragon. Her entire hide was made of emerald and she shot some kind of light that made these big pillars of crystal sprout from the ground and crush people. There was a lot of blood as we followed her trail, but we saw her crush a part of the Grand Cathedral. That's how the High Cleric died."

Chrom had long grown silent, his face descending into a grim mask. "What else?"

Vaike gulped, voice thick. "Nowi crashed through the duke's manor, but we found it mostly abandoned when we arrived. That was the first sign something was wrong. After that we just followed the gashes through a false wall and stairwell until we arrived at the hidden meeting room. Nowi was lying on the ground, weeping, while we saw the duke's corpse sitting in the head chair. Gaius found the bishop in an alcove nearby, but Nowi crawled over to Frederick's side when she saw he was alive."

Tharja spoke up for the first time. "Wait, the girl's blind. How could she have seen him?"

Vaike looked ready to cry. "She wasn't at the time. One of her eyes looked like a blade had sliced through it, but the other was normal. Frederick started speaking and we all realized it was his peace."

He looked Chrom in the eye. "Frederick died. He asked Nowi to find happiness and just... went still. Libra tried all he could, but Frederick was gone as could be. At that point Nowi pretty much lost her mind, screaming for him to come back, when we saw a light spring over her last eye. I don't know what it was, but I smelled burning skin before it put out her other eye."

Chrom's grip tightened hard, knuckles popping from the force, while the others couldn't look from the ground.

Vaike shook his head. "I don't know what that did, but Frederick started breathing again. We watched as that black shit crawled away from the rest of him and concentrated in his wrists. Nowi fainted and Libra was on them immediately. They both had pulses, they were both breathing, and each was in sync with the other. We had a thrice-blessed miracle happen and no idea why."

Chrom took several deep breaths before speaking again. "Vaike... you did all you could. Thank you for bringing back the information, it's very important. Please get some rest."

Vaike sighed and left to do just that, the others stewing over the new information.

The silence broke when Chrom's fist slammed against the wood of the wagon Frederick and Nowi had been brought it. "Damn those traitors! I'll have their heads!"

Ricken had started sniffling during Vaike's report, but now he was crying. "There... there are people in our home that can... do this?"

Tharja laid a pitying hand on his shoulder. "The world holds all types. I'm not the most pleasant person, but if Plegia can hold good people like Mustafa then Ylisse can hold scum."

Lucina walked up to Severa, her hand finding Severa's own in a silent show of support. "Come on, we need to go."

Severa nodded silently. Morgan had been escorted from the room, her eyes misty and lip trembling as she left her sister behind. Severa and Morgan had been closest to Nowi out of their aunts and they'd need time to process what had happened.

Lucina guided Severa silently, not speaking even after she'd opened a door and Morgan had rushed into her sister's arms, whimpering.
Lucina sighed, leaving the two sisters to their grief. Instead, she walked down the hall and nodded to Cynthia who joined her. "At least they're alive."

Cynthia sniffled. "I know that... but did you see Uncle V? He didn't even notice we were there."

Lucina shook her head. "We have to take the positives with this, Cynthy. We can grieve when we're alone."

Cynthia's arm wrapped around Lucina's. "You promise?"

Lucina patted the arm. "I do. Let's just see what's needed, ok?"

Cynthia nodded and they returned to the entrance hall. Chrom was alone now, just staring at the large doors that led outside, but he turned to face the two arrivals. "Catria, Marth, I'm glad you're here. I need you two to wait here and meet with any of the teams that return before reporting to me."

He glanced behind them. "Where's Katarina and Tethys?"

Lucina grimaced. "They're looking over their own supplies for now. They'll return to their duties when they finish."

Chrom appeared frustrated. "I see. It's good for them to be so proactive, but I've never gotten so much done in a meeting since Robin left. Sully's been singing Tethys's praises too, so the sooner they're back, the better."

He turned and started walking away before looking back to the daughters he'd one day know as his. "You two have been a great help, too. Miriel greatly appreciates your insights, Marth, and Lissa has told me of your help many times Catria, mishaps and all."

Smiling, Chrom turned and bowed. "Thank you for your service. When all this is over we'll have a lot of rebuilding to do and we'd be honored to have you join us."

Cynthia and Lucina looked to each other, surprise etched on their faces, when Chrom turned again. "Think on it, there's no need for an answer just yet. Just remember what I asked, ok?"

Lucina and Cynthia bowed, humbled and moved by the gratitude in their father's words. Chrom waved to them before he entered a hall and disappeared.

Feeling their spirits raised, the sisters found a spot on a pillar and began their vigil.

Barely twenty minutes later, it came to an end.

The doors burst open and two haggard riders galloped inside, their horse's hoofs banging against the stone.

The first to dismount was a man with wild hair and an equally wild look. "I need Chrom, now!"

Lucina jogged up to him. "Lon'qu, correct? What happened, where's Ms. Sumia?"

Lon'qu glared at her before sighing. "Now's not the time to question why you're here. I need to speak with Chrom, it's urgent!"

Lucina leaned back at the urgency in his voice, apprehension sickening her throat. "I'm supposed to tell him whatever you have to say. Please, just tell me."

Lon'qu growled, allowing his companion to answer. "Sumia's been taken."
Lucina felt her world freeze, gaze creakily turning to see a tearstained Cherche. "What?"

Cherche wiped at the frozen trails on her cheeks, voice wheezing. "Sumia's been taken by the rebel's, to Ylisstol. It's her mother, Selena, she took over Denaris and brought Clarissa to the rebels side!"

Lucina could barely think, struggling to keep her voice steady. "What else?"

Lon'qu snorted. "Lord Dunwall of Themis and Duchess Miranda of Surperius sieged the city. It fell swiftly after the walls took their first pounding. No one with an ounce of sense liked being under Countess Selena for even a brief period and the commanding general surrendered citing the needs of his people."

Lucina nodded stiffly. "I understand… is there anything else?"

Cherche sighed. "Only that the quick surrender has allowed Themis and Surperius to rally their forces together. They'll be awaiting Prince Chrom outside of Ylisstol's borders when the Shepherds are ready."

Lucina felt her mask slipping so she gestured to Cynthia. "This is Catria, she'll help you unload if you need it. I'll go inform the prince."

Cherche nodded gratefully and Lucina strode away. She knew that leaving was essentially abandoning her sister to face the news alone, but they both couldn't go, it would be too suspicious. Besides, Cynthia was strong enough to keep her cool, but if Lucina lost it here, Cynthia would break down as well.

Seeing that her pace had taken her into a deserted corridor, Lucina felt her legs go weak and she braced herself against a wall.

Tears welled, but Lucina refused to let them fall. She couldn't cry, not when she had a message to deliver, but it didn't stop her thoughts from forcing their way out.

"Mother… please be ok."

-Severa-

There was no way of knowing how long they'd been crying.

Severa had run out of tears long ago, her only recourse to whisper reassuring, but empty words to the heartbroken Morgan.

Trying to explain the two girls' affection for Nowi would require too much time, but it was easy to summarize. In their time, Robin and Cordelia had been officially inducted to the nobility at large as a baron and baroness respectively. It gave them land in Felds that lay only a day's journey away from Frederick and Nowi's own homestead, the pair made into a baron and baroness pair as well. Due to their proximity and the constant need for Robin, Frederick, and Cordelia to be in Ylisstol, Nowi took on the role of overly excitable aunt.

While she'd only ever been alone with Morgan and Severa a handful of times, her visits always meant a time of joy and smiles rather than furrowed brows and whispers. Nowi had even been the lone Shepherd to not travel to Valm in their time, though the reason had never been divulged.

She'd taken care of both babies and young children until the world went to hell, just as Kjelle turned five.
Severa and Morgan loved Nowi dearly for the years she'd cared for them, seeing her blinded was simply too much.

Severa blinked after she felt Morgan still. The poor girl had cried herself to sleep.

"Oh Morg," she whispered. "We got you back little over a week ago and now this happens. Why can't anything go right for us and stay that way?"

Silence was her answer and Severa sighed. Morgan would have to try and come to terms with it later, and Severa didn't have time to properly deal with it either.

A pulse from her back made Severa grit her teeth in pain. Ever since she'd seen Nowi, the pulses had become more frequent and intense. It was a wonder she hadn't passed out by now.

Vowing to find both chocolate and a vulnerary come hell or high water, Severa gently lifted her sister onto the sofa and made her comfortable. Morgan still whimpered, even in her sleep, but Severa had to regretfully free her arm. The action made Morgan cry out briefly, but her voice faded into tiny whimpers again.

Severa felt like the greatest jerk of all time right then, but she drew on the cold well of rationality she'd nurtured for years. Determined, she patted Morgan's head before turning on her heel and leaving the room.

_Ok, there's probably another meeting going on, so I should get over there. Last thing we need is Flavia and Chrom getting into a fistfight._

Sighing, Severa set off for the meeting, her pace slowly speeding up as she began to hear raised voices echo down the hall. The sound of clashing metal made her take off in a full-blown sprint.

Skidding to a stop, Severa threw open the door guarding the fight. "What in Naga's name is going on here?!"

All action stopped, Flavia's blade holding Chrom's Falchion in place while Lucina tried to pull the enraged Chrom away. It was only Severa's arrival that allowed the lot of them to come up for air.

Lucina finally pried Chrom away and Flavia laid her sword on her shoulder. "Thank heaven you showed up girl. This man's a raging mess of worry and hormones right now."

Chrom snarled at her. "You refuse to help! One of my own is in the clutches of those traitorous dastards and two that made it back are either near death or crippled! We will march on Ylisstol – with or without your help!"

Severa groaned. "Look, would someone fill me in? All I know is the names of the conspirators and nothing else."

Lucina pressed her palm to her forehead. "I'll tell you. I think our illustrious leaders need to calm down."

Flavia nodded. "Good idea. We'll meet back here in ten minutes, alright?"

Chrom snorted and stormed out of the room. Severa didn't like the rage burning in his eyes, but it had to be for a good reason.

The last time she'd seen such anger in his face, the Shepherds had returned from killing Gangrel only to find out Valm had invaded.
Flavia rolled her eyes and took her leave, Lucina crossing the distance between herself and Severa in three strides.

Severa wasn't expecting Lucina to embrace her, nor was she ready for tears to begin falling.

"Mom's been captured," Lucina sniffed. "It… my grandmother's one of the conspirators. Sh-she took mom to Ylisstol."

Severa blinked, arms encircling Lucina automatically. "But why? There's nothing the rebels could want with Aunt Sumia, not even decent intelligence. Unless… they know your dad loves her."

Lucina hiccupped. "At least… at least Clarissa is out of the rebellion as a whole. The capital surrendered after Themis and Surperius destroyed the walls and the general in charge called for all soldiers in the province to stand down."

Severa rubbed her back. "Hey, that's great news! That means we don't have to worry about soldiers coming from the northwest when we go to Ylisstol."

Lucina nodded. "It is… but that likely doesn't include any that went to Ylisstol."

Severa grimaced, that was true.

"In any case…" Lucina sighed, calming down at last. "We need to hear the last report from Felds before anything's likely to get done. Considering the distance, it probably won't be until tomorrow."

Severa took a deep breath. "That's… probably for the best. Your dad needs to cool down and I need to get Morgan and myself ready to see our parents."

Lucina nodded and they parted. "I need to go see Cynthia. I had to leave her with Cherche and Lon'qu, but I need to make sure she's ok."

Severa smirked. "Just be her big sister for now, ok? None of that leader business."

Lucina smiled back. "I'll do just that."

She turned and left, Severa took a seat at the table and settled in to wait.

Chrom, who'd caught a small part of their conversation and been hidden by the door when Lucina left, frowned.

Severa, Lucina, Morgan, and Cynthia… good names, but I wonder why they hide them? Then there's the part about parents…

Shaking his head, he decided to play along for now. "Katarina, I'm lucid! May I come in and not expect to be attacked?"

Severa looked at the open door, frowning. "Khan Flavia's not here yet, you can come in."

Chrom did just that, taking a seat across from her and resting his chin on his hands. "There's a lot to do."

He smirked. "Robin's going to have all kinds of fun catching up."

Severa smirked right back, a fun idea taking root in her mind.

"That he will."
Riding back took a lot more energy than he expected.

Admittedly, Robin had been slung over the side of a horse like a prized kill for two straight days. He could be forgiven for feeling incredibly tired. Especially when both his friend and his kind-of-but-not-quite girlfriend were the ones to put him in that position.

Robin wouldn't actually consider Cordelia his true girlfriend until they had a proper first date.

Beyond that, their little group had to go through the usual set of detours until they reached Surperius territory. Just because Evelyn had pledged her support didn't mean everyone had gotten the memo when they passed by.

Robin was more than a little relieved when they finally passed through the Longfort. It was only a couple hours ride to Flavia's castle and then they could rest.

Cordelia sidled up beside him. "It'll be nice to see Theresa again. I hope she won't be too mad at me."

Robin chuckled. "Yeah, I remember one time when I was on stable duty. She tried to take off my fingers when I gave her a carrot."

Cordelia blushed, embarrassed by her mount's behavior. "Yes, she's not a fan of those. Sorry again for not telling you."

Robin shrugged. "It's fine; you were preoccupied at the time. I was more upset with Gaius laughing at me over it."

Stahl pulled up on his other side. "You stole his custard for that right? What was the ransom price again?"

Robin smirked. "Latrine duty. He paid up without a second thought."

Cordelia frowned in thought. "Wait, wasn't that when Lissa put that weird poultice she'd bought into everyone's food?"

Robin nodded, remembering the distress everyone was in. Lissa may have found it funny at first, but the smell had made her regret the action.

Cordelia's face morphed into a grimace. "I don't think I ever got back at her for that… then again, I think Prince Chrom and Frederick did a good enough job scolding her."

Robin was about to shoot back when he glimpsed their goal ahead of them. "There's the castle! Not exactly home sweet home, but close enough!"

Stahl laughed. "Agreed! Come on, I need hot food and a lot of it!"

Cordelia laughed in agreement and they galloped the rest of the way. Their excitement faded when they reached the entrance hall, a notable anxiety hanging in the air like smog.

Robin narrowed his eyes. "I don't see anyone. Dismount and get your things ready, this may get ugly."

Cordelia and Stahl nodded, dropping from their horses. Robin did the same before calling into the empty space. "Is anyone here? We need our horses stabled and to meet with the Khan!"
Some footsteps sounded in the hall, a pair of aides rushing up to them. They apologized for not appearing sooner, but the group had arrived just as the shift switched.

Relieved, if only slightly, Robin asked where Flavia and Chrom were before a familiar voice reached his ears. "Robin, Stahl, Cordelia, we need you guys in the meeting room, now!"

Sully rounded the corner at a full sprint, boots squealing against the floor as she slid to a stop. Robin tried to protest the sudden urgency, but Sully grabbed both him and Cordelia by the wrists and started to drag them away.

Stahl attempted to get in front of Sully and slow her down, but the woman known as the second coming of the Bull would not be denied. The guards and servants of the castle were treated to an entertaining sight as they slowly worked their way through the halls, but it came to an end when Kellam arrived.

Robin sighed from where he'd been thrown over Kellam's shoulder, Cordelia being carried under his arm like a log. Stahl had been able to use Kellam's arrival to force Sully into a hold of his own, but that invited retribution so he was being hauled like fresh deer.

Cordelia cleared her throat. "Kellam, while I appreciate this is important, there's no need to carry us."

Kellam's face was stone. "Sorry, but no time. You'll see when we get there."

Robin and Cordelia looked to each other, neither liking the grim answer. A familiar feeling a dread seeped into Robin's mind as they turned a corner and were carried towards a door.

Kellam set them down. "You guys are the last team to arrive. Naga be praised if you have good news."

Robin's dread tripled. "What do you mean?"

Sully grunted as she put Stahl down. "Libra, Nowi, and Cherche are inside along with the Khan and Chrom. Also, we got some unexpected help, but please don't rush them."

That still didn't answer Robin's question, but Kellam was already banging on the door. "Robin and his group are here. We're sending them in!"

The doors opened to show a grim Libra. "Praise be to Naga. Come in, we need to get started."

Robin looked to Cordelia and Stahl before following Libra through the door.

Only to see Katarina staring at him nervously.

"Kat-!"

Chrom's voice cut through the room like steel. "Do not mind her! I'm about to get all of you up to speed while praying to heaven and any deity willing to listen that you have good news!"

Robin blinked and took a breath. Libra was off to the side, his expression a hard, grim line. Cherche stood across from Robin, worry written on her face. Nowi sat beside Libra, her hair hiding her face, but her posture communicated a deep despair.

Finally, there were Chrom and Flavia. They stood to either side of Katarina, the Khan cool and composed while Chrom looked ready to commit genocide.

Robin gulped. "So… what did I miss?"
Nowi, surprisingly, was the first to answer. "Robin?"

Robin looked to the manakete, concern lacing his voice at her emotionless tone. "Yeah, it's me Nowi."

Cordelia walked over to her friend, equally concerned. "I'm here too... and so's Stahl."

Nowi trembled before her head turned up and Cordelia nearly screamed.

Tears fell from the milky purple eyes, pooling in the divots of the scars crossing them like a cruel river. "That's good... I-I can't really tell anymore."

Robin tore his gaze from her ruined eyes, even as Cordelia ran and pulled Nowi close, sobs shaking them both. "What the devil happened?! Why's Nowi blind, where the hell is Frederick, why is Katarina here, it's all just too damn much!"

Flavia held out a hand. "It's simple, really. Nowi was blinded on her mission and Sir Frederick was nearly killed. They did a lot to tell us that Duke Carlen has been dead for some time along with the names of the other conspirators, Meredith, Selena, and Theodore."

Stahl stepped forward. "Theodore's in Ylisstol. Cordelia and I were captured by the Feldian General Evelyn, but we managed to escape soon after night fell. We watched the count leave the barracks we were in before escaping ourselves."

Chrom growled. "Then that leaves one unaccounted for. Sumia's been taken by the other."

Cordelia's head shot up. "Sumia was kidnapped?!"

Cherche stepped forward. "I watched her get pulled into the carriage myself. They somehow eluded a force from Themis and Surperius that surrounded Denaris, and General Draven surrendered after the first barrage."

Robin growled at that news. "Was it that Selena woman?"

Cherche nodded and Robin heard Cordelia let loose a piercing wail. He was beside her immediately. "Cordelia, what's wrong?"

Libra answered for her. "Selena was the one to take her. The problem is Selena is Sumia's mother."

Robin blinked, mind falling further behind. "What? Her mother? That... that doesn't make any sense!"

Cherche held back a sigh before adding. "I spoke with General Draven after he'd been taken into custody. Countess Selena had become noticeably harsher after the duchess and her family had been killed in a plot. It seemed to him like the woman had lost her mind."

Robin groaned and slumped against the table. "Stahl, how are you so calm right now?"

Stahl sighed. "I'm screaming on the inside, trust me. I just need to hear everything else."

Robin glared at him before looking to Chrom. "I assume the reason I didn't arrive to an empty castle has something to do with our new arrival then?"

Chrom grunted. "Arrivals. Katarina here brought Marth and Catria along with a new face, Tethys."

Robin turned his glare to Katarina, the girl flinching at his look. "I guess I should thank you. Without
that help, I'd either have a dead or captured Prince on my hands!"

Katarina put on her best smug face. "I guess… surprised you haven't strangled him yourself though. These two fight more often than two drunkards over mead."

Robin felt a smirk begin to rise, but he crushed it. "Be that as it may, I'm still grateful. Considering your secrecy since we first met, seeing you willing to aid us is a needed boost."

He looked to Chrom, eyes sharpening. "Thankfully, we come bearing good news. General Evelyn is no fan of Count Theodore and only obeyed him due to him taking the regent's powers. After Stahl and Cordelia had some time with her while imprisoned, they convinced her to follow her own thoughts."

Chrom's features lightened along with the others. "Does that mean what I think?"

Stahl smiled at last. "General Evelyn has pledged her support in retaking Ylisstol. She gathers her forces as we speak."

A welcome wind of relief rushed through the room, even Nowi cracked a grin. Chrom allowed a smile of his own to show through. "That's the best news I've heard in two days. Robin, I have to ask you to stick around with us and keep things going. Cordelia, Stahl, you two can go and rest."

Cordelia shook her head. "I'd like to go with Nowi if I can. Will you inform me if anything develops involving Sumia?"

Robin walked to Cordelia's side and put a hand on her shoulder. "I will."

Kneeling in front of Nowi, Robin tried to let confidence suffuse his words. "Nowi, I'm glad you're alive. We'll make sure the dastards that got you like this pay, alright?"

Nowi nodded meekly, her eyes incapable of showing emotion now. "I…I'm counting on you. Do it for me and Freddy. But…"

Her hand shot out and gripped Robin's shirt hard, the next words delivered with an intensity Robin had never heard. "I want you to find a woman named Catherine. She's Frederick's sister and responsible for me and Frederick's states. When you find her, I want her alive, and I want her to fucking rot!"

The vehemence in her voice made Robin nod rapidly until his mind caught up. "Y-yes! We'll make sure to do just that!"

Nowi's grip loosened and a sigh escaped her lips. "Sorry, it's just when I think about it I get angry."

Cordelia's hand found hers and squeezed it. "I understand. If something happened to Robin I'd be angry too."

Nowi smiled, a glimmer of mischief returning. "Oh, did it finally happen? If so, I need to go tell Lissa."

Cordelia shook her head. "I'll explain on the way. Can you walk?"

Libra stepped in. "Lady Cordelia, if you could take her left side. She's still weak and needs the support."

Cordelia nodded and helped Nowi from her seat. No one spoke as Nowi was escorted from the
room, Stahl broke the silence when they were gone. "I'll go ahead and get some rest too. Cherche, why don't you do so as well? You look like you haven't slept."

Cherche smiled at him. "Trying to keep Sir Frederick stable does that to you. It took the healers hours to get that crap out of him."

She started for the door. "I'll take you up on the offer though. I'll need to make sure I'm rested when the time comes."

They left, Robin the lone member of his group remaining. Sighing, he looked away from the door only to be greeted by cheeky grins from the three across the table.

His eyes narrowed. "What?"

Flavia examined her knuckles. "Oh, just glad to finally see the supposed genius get his head out of the sand."

Robin's eye twitched. "That it?"

Chrom crossed his arms. "I'm happy for you. It's been almost painful watching you two dance around the issue the last few months. So, when's the reception?"

Robin's hand twitched, a spark of energy escaping. "Ask me that after you save your damsel. Oh wait, that'll be me asking won't it?"

Chrom walked around the table and sent a fist crashing into the crown of Robin's head. "Say that again when we're sitting around drinks you arse monkey!"

Robin glared at Chrom and sent a fist crashing into the prince's jaw. "Insults now, eh? Fine then you righteous git! I've had words ready for you since I met ya!"

Chrom wiped his jaw and spit. "Bring it hornblower!"

The two proceeded to get into a juvenile fistfight, their need to vent bringing out petty insults and minor issues that had been bubbling under the surface.

Katarina turned to Flavia. "Are they always like this?"

Flavia shrugged. "I don't think so. Maybe the stress of it all's made them need to do something stupid. Personally, I think we should let them settle this and get their heads on straight."

Katarina shrugged. "Works for me. Got anything we can snack on while waiting?"

Flavia smirked and grabbed a package from under the table. "Fresh bread. Came out of the oven barely an hour ago."

Katarina smirked in turn and the two settled in to watch.

Oh, the joys of witnessing slapstick after a draining week.

-Castle Flavia, Infirmary-

She had seen nothing but blackness ever since that day.

Nowi breathed deeply as she thought on the events that had cost her the right to see. The first had been fueled by rage and accomplished nothing, her greatest regret.
The second had been her greatest pride.

As before, a voice had entered her mind and spoken to her. Except, it was not the booming voice of the King of Crystals. Rather, it was a much softer, gentler voice.

One she could vaguely recall from long ago.

It had asked her if Frederick was special to her. Asked if Frederick was someone that, even if it meant giving up everything, Nowi would stand beside for eternity.

Time had frozen for her then. Nowi spent what felt like hours deliberating if Frederick was that kind of person before memories came to her one by one.

Frederick's unfailing politeness, his willingness to keep her around even when she grew annoying and clingy. His glad instruction in dance and the conversations they'd have over dinner and training about inane things.

How he'd put up with her petty jealousy and forgiven her in his last moments...

...The decision was simple. Frederick had done more for her and been a greater friend than any in her entire life. Nowi had been ready to give her heart to him and if it meant he would live...

The voice had chuckled when Nowi's resolve solidified, praising her for her decision. It grew sad after that, saying that a price would need to be paid for Frederick to live.

Nowi offered anything.

It took her other eye.

The pain had made Nowi faint again, but when she'd awoken in the infirmary that night to only blackness, she'd panicked. It was only after Libra and Maribelle heard her screams that they arrived and restrained her.

It took Nowi hours upon hours to calm down. Her eyes had shown her such wonders over the years that it was agony to try and accept they were gone.

It took confirmation of Frederick breathing to get her to accept the sacrifice, if not necessarily come to terms with it.

Frederick...

She knew they'd sat her beside his cot, Cordelia and Libra kindly guiding her to a simple chair. The priest had given Frederick a once over before excusing himself and now the silence stretched between the two women.

"Nowi," Cordelia whispered. "Can you tell me what happened?"

Nowi remained silent for a moment, collecting her thought before answering. "...In order to give him life, I had to pay a price. My right eye was taken as payment for an attempt at vengeance, but my left was taken so that Freddy could live."

Cordelia frowned. "That...that sounds like you've communed with Naga."

Nowi shook her head. "No, not quite. The first was something called Ozymandias, but the second never introduced itself. All I know is that I feel connected to Freddy in a way that I never was before, to anyone. It's almost like... how to explain it?"
Nowi felt her head move as if to look at Cordelia but stopped herself. "Vaike told me after I calmed down that whenever Frederick would feel pain I would grimace in turn. It's like our bodies are synched or something."

She could hear Cordelia hum at the idea. If there's one thing Nowi had grown thankful for after being blinded, it was her hearing.

A groan stopped any response, Cordelia gasped. "Nowi, Frederick's waking up!"

Nowi leaned forward, but she was too fast and fell from her chair. Her arms caught her, but she scrambled about for the edge of Frederick's bed where his hand lay.

_Freddy…Freddy…_

A slim hand grabbed hers and pulled her up. "Nowi, do you want to be the first thing he sees?"

Nowi nodded shakily, not trusting her voice.

The slim hand guided her slowly, only to be replaced by a familiar hand. Nowi traced the callouses and rough patches dreamily, wondering at the blood pumping through them.

"…Nowi?"

The voice made her heart skip a beat. "Freddy?"

Another groan answered her, followed by a cracking voice. "Where… am I? My vision's… blurry."

Cordelia's voice sounded from beside Nowi. "Castle Flavia's infirmary. They brought you here in bad shape, but Lissa and Maribelle helped you pull through with help from the other healers."

Nowi felt Frederick's hand wrap around her own, the warmth of life making her eyes close though there was nothing to see.

Then she opened them.

_What the…?_

Around her were ghostly outlines, two figures showing clearly. One was standing next to her, their frame wreathed in a gentle flame, while the one laying before her looked like blue stone.

"I…I can see something…"

Nowi must have said it aloud because the flame-wreathed figure reached out a hand and grasped her shoulder. "Wait, Nowi, you can see?!

Ah, that explained it. The figures and outlines were people and the room respectively. That meant the burning figure was Cordelia and the blue stone was Frederick.

Boy did that make sense or what?

Frederick's voice pierced her thoughts. "Cordelia, why do you sound so relieved? What do you mean Nowi can 'see'? I still can't…make anything out."

Cordelia tensed, the fire of her figure dimming, so Nowi answered. "I'm blind Frederick. Or… at least most of the time."
Frederick's grip tightened around her hand. "Explain."

It was not a question and Nowi was more than willing to answer. First, she had to get rid of their audience. "Cordelia, could you give us some privacy? Send whoever you think best in about an hour, ok?"

She could see the flicker of flames, Cordelia obviously considering. "…Fine, but I'll be back soon."

Nowi nodded. "That's good enough."

Cordelia's flaming outline strode to the outline of the door and vanished, leaving only the cool blue rock of Frederick in sight. Silence stretched while Nowi gathered her thoughts, Frederick didn't press.

"…I was angry," Nowi confessed. "I heard you being tortured, but I swear that I heard you murdered as well. There was such rage in me that I just wanted everyone who caused it to die. Some being spoke to me then, called himself Ozymandias, and offered me a chance to quench my rage."

She sighed. "I wasn't in my right mind so I accepted. It's a haze of violence after that, but I do remember finding the duke dead and a burning before my eye was taken. I screamed for a long time before Libra arrived and stopped the pain."

Frederick's hand gripped tighter, urging her on. "You have no idea how relieved I was to see you. Even though I'd lost one eye, I could still be there. Then… you started talking and…and…"

Nowi sniffled, fighting back another wave of tears. She'd cried enough, it was time to be strong. "You died…" she whispered at last. "Your heart stopped beating, I felt you grow cold. Libra did everything he could; even Gaius tried every trick he could think of. We didn't know what to do…"

Frederick broke his silence. "Then how am I here?"

Nowi stroked his hand, unsure of what he would think. "I was made an offer. Unlike Ozymandias, this voice was soothing and kind, like you'd think a mother would be. The only reason I listened was because it sounded…familiar."

She took a deep breath. "It basically asked what I was willing to give, what I was willing to lose, if it brought you back. Your life depended on my answer."

Frederick sighed. "Your answer was your sight then?"

Nowi shook her head, a smile tugging at her lips. "Not quite…"

Using her new form of sight as best she could, Nowi guided herself until she was next to Frederick's head. As she'd moved, she could see her own arm and body, the entire frame encrusted with crystals of varying size and color.

Ignoring this, Nowi leaned over until she was sure she was before Frederick's face. "My answer… was to offer everything. I was and still am willing to give anything and lose everything to get you back. …Does that make me weird?"

Frederick's free hand came around and she felt it cup her cheek. It was weird seeing the limb as blue stone despite the warmth radiating from it. "Not at all… In fact, my answer would have been the same."
Nowi gripped the hand. "Does that mean… what you said before was true?"

Frederick's laugh was music to her ears. "I meant every word. I was sure my time was up, so why would I keep anything else hidden?"

Nowi couldn't help herself. Leaning down, she made sure her forehead rested against his before closing the gap and claiming his lips as her own.

It wasn't a passionate or romantic thing; Nowi just put her lips on Frederick's. She had no clue what to do beyond that so there they were.

Nowi eventually pulled back. "I'm glad it's still true. I've been crushing on you pretty hard, but I didn't realize it was something real until… you know…"

Frederick chuckled. "I understand. Honestly, I felt like scum to be telling you such a revelation when I was soon to leave. It was why I wanted you to find peace."

Nowi kissed him again, lingering a little longer before pulling back. "I don't know if I would have, but for now, I have it. Can we… give this a real go when it's all over? I can't fight anymore."

Frederick stroked her cheek. "Gladly. I will assist you in every way I can."

He sighed. "I just wish I could take back our argument before we left for Draconis. I'd have been able to give you my gift."

Nowi tilted her head. "You had a gift for me…? Oh, that's right! My birthday was coming up."

She frowned. "But, it's not for another week. You can still give it to me then."

Frederick sighed and his hand fell from her cheek. "I cannot. I was so frustrated after the argument I broke the gift against the wall. I couldn't salvage it, everything but the centerpiece was ruined. It'd take me another month to get the pieces together again and two weeks on top of that to have it remade."

Nowi put a hand on his chest, both to shush him and support herself. "What was it? You have me all curious now."

Frederick sighed. "It… it was a circlet. You told me over dinner a few weeks ago that your old one was starting to break down. It had been with you barely a century from what you'd told me, so I wanted to give you something more… permanent."

Nowi giggled. "Aw, that's so sweet! I wish I could have seen the original, but… I'll wait for you to do what you want. Far be it from me to tell you what to do."

She thought Frederick smiled. Features were hard to see considering all she could make out was a frame.

"I'll do just that," he laughed. "Though, I find myself growing tired, Nowi. Would you mind telling me what you see? Or… how you can see?"

Nowi pulled back, her grip on the hand by his side never loosening. "I can see… outlines and frames. There's… six beds in here, tables, chairs, a door, the walls, and a large window over there. Those are the outlines. As for the frames, those are around people. I see you as… a silhouette of blue rock."
Frederick coughed in surprise. "A blue rock? I suppose I wear a good deal of blue, but it is Lord Chrom's personal color…"

Nowi giggled. "It's probably just how I view people. I'm not sure why, but when I'm holding your hand, I can see these things. It's a mystery."

Frederick sighed. "Indeed it is… Nowi, would you stay with me? I would like to rest."

Nowi carefully took a seat. "Gladly."

Frederick's breathing quickly slowed, Nowi smiling at his sleeping form. He must have been truly tired.

"Hey, Nowi! How's our favorite knight doing?"

Nowi looked up and almost had to shield her eyes. A small frame in the vague shape of a woman in robes walked in, holy light blazing from her body. The voice placed her as Lissa, but Nowi simply couldn't face her.

"Nowi?"

Reluctantly, Nowi freed herself from Frederick's grasp and blessed darkness returned. "Sorry, Lissa, lost in thought. Here to check on him?"

Lissa's giggle was her answer. The shuffle of cloth and scrape of soles on stone let her follow Lissa's movements, but neither spoke until Lissa was done.

"Alright, he's coming along nicely," Lissa cheered. "He won't be ready in time for us to march, but damn if we're not going to make sure those dastards pay for this! We'll get Sumia back with us and everything'll be hunky dory!"

Nowi smiled at her enthusiasm, listening intently as Lissa started giving instructions.

They may not be able to retake Ylisse, but Frederick and Nowi would be ready to finish the fight when it came time to end Gangrel.

They owed their friends that much.

-Severa-

The fight between Chrom and Robin took far longer than Severa had thought it would.

Flavia had polished off the last of their snack almost an hour ago, and the fight was still going on. It wasn't much of a fight to be sure, they just tiredly slapped at each other, but it was swiftly growing dull.

"Ok, I think we're good," Severa sighed. "Who says we all call it a night and get some well-deserved sleep?"

"Hear-hear!" Flavia seconded. "Robin, you got here in the evening, but the moon came out long ago. Let's get our heads on straight and get to it tomorrow, eh?"

Robin staggered away from Chrom's last blow, his breathing labored. "Yeah… I think that's a good idea. Actually, can I ask Katarina something before I go? Privately, please?"

Chrom pushed himself off the wall where his punch had carried him. "Yeah, let's…let's do that. I'm
Robin bumped fists with Chrom as he left, Flavia playfully punching his arm as she followed the exhausted Prince.

Robin and Severa stared at each other for a few minutes before Robin got them started. "So… why are you here?"

Severa glared. "To help? What, you think that's not a good enough reason after we've saved your sorry hides time and again?"

Robin pinched his nose. "No, that's not it. The last you and I spoke, I realized your name wasn't Katarina, it's something else. I even vaguely recall that you told me you couldn't tell me the 'truth'… so to speak."

Severa grimaced. "That still stands. Everything's already changed in ways that we don't understand and messing with this further only makes it worse."

Robin stared at her. "The way you say that… it makes it sound like you traveled through time."

Severa's face was stone. "Like that could happen. No, we just want to end this war as soon as possible. There was just no inclination that a rebellion of any scale would occur, let alone one that appears to be so unpopular."

Robin sighed. "On that, we can agree. Were this staged shortly after the Purge ended, I could understand, but this has poor timing and impatience written all over it."

Severa planted her hands on the table. "Exactly. My group knew that the Shepherds would need help with this and we wanted information. It's mutually beneficial."

Robin walked around the table, leaning against the edge when he was beside her. "Again, that sounds right. But, should I still call you Katarina, or do I try and guess your real name?"

Severa smirked, not thinking it could do any harm. "I'll give you three guesses. Once those are out, can I go?"

Robin nodded, deciding to throw out some random guesses before confirming his suspicions. "Gladly. Now then… Heather?"

Severa shook her head, not even close.

"Jennifer?"

Severa felt a smirk rise; her mind assured he'd never get it right.

"…Severa."

Ha, like she…oh.

Robin stole her smug look. Apparently, she'd gotten it from him. "Judging by the surprise, I'm right. Now then, I'm assuming you don't want others to know, so I won't spill, but when this is over I want answers."

Severa gulped. "Uh… look, don't tell anyo-, wait you said that already. Um… how did you guess?"

Robin shrugged. "Believe it or not, I entered a relationship with a wonderful woman just a few days
ago. That event pretty much triggered my memory for the first time in a while and the name 'Severa' came to me. I knew you were related to me in some way, the hair shows it, but at this point I think we're just cousins of some sort."

Severa jumped on the opening. "That's closer than you've been, but I still can't say anything. It would be beyond irresponsible and I would get screamed at for hours."

Robin sighed. "I guess that's all I can ask. Thanks for at least agreeing to speak with me; I know it's not easy trying to deal with those two."

Severa smiled. "You're best friends with a prince, it can't be that bad."

Robin rolled his eyes with a laugh. "You say that, but you don't really know him. Man can't handle anything stronger than wine and the two of us got into one mess after another trying to figure out my tolerance."

Severa started towards the door, Robin followed her. "What's yours then?"

Robin scratched at the back of his neck. "Liquor. Found that out after Gaius snuck some bottles into a party we had for him, Panne, and Cordelia after they joined the Shepherds. Boy did I make a fool of myself."

Severa smiled and prodded him for tales the rest of the time they were together. In her time, Robin had never really shared the stories of his days with the early Shepherds, even when confronted by both of his daughters.

They separated at a fork in the halls, Severa wishing Robin goodnight before going on her way. She made sure to turn a corner and wait a second before peeking into the hallway she'd left.

Robin had turned to walk in the opposite direction, his steps vigorous and determined.

A figure with crimson hair at the end of the corridor made his destination clear.

Severa giggled silently before setting off with a skip in her step. The song her parents had played long ago and the first one she'd heard her father play months ago hummed past her lips all the way to her room.

Opening it, she found it filled with her friends and sister, their eyes flying to her when she entered. Curious, she closed the door and locked it before speaking. "What's up?"

Morgan hopped from her seat and approached Severa slowly. "Well... I ran into Mom..."

Severa's eyes widened. "And...?"

Morgan scratched the back of her head. "I kind of challenged her to a spar and got my ass kicked."

Severa's eyes took in the way Morgan was holding herself, obviously tender. "What did you do to earn that much punishment?"

Cynthia jumped in, a teasing grin on her face. "She tried to tease Aunt Cordy about her hair!"

Severa's eyes widened. "Morg! You know she treasures that mane of hers, she's beaten people unconscious for less!"

Morgan pouted. "You share it ya know. You won't let anyone but Lucy brush it."
Severa put Morgan into a friendly headlock, rubbing her knuckles against her sister's head. "Because you can't comb anything! You cut yours short so you wouldn't worry about it!"

Morgan screeched in protest. "No noogies!"

Severa chuckled and let her go. "Get some sleep Morg, you won't be moving well tomorrow."

Morgan groaned and shuffled to her bed, flopping into it without a care.

Severa smiled before looking to Cynthia and Lucina. "Well, I suppose I'll get to the point."

She sat on Morgan's bed, hands kneading the blanket.

"Dad figured out my name."

Lucina gasped but Cynthia answered. "Wait, he figured it out?! Did Emmeryn tell him?!"

Severa shook her head. "No, Dad came straight from the entrance hall to the meeting. He said that some memories came back and that my name was among them. He doesn't know I'm his kid, he thinks we're cousins of some sort."

Cynthia sighed in relief. "Thank Naga, that would get ugly fast."

Lucina snorted. "It's why we never revealed our real names. What confounds me is how your name showed up in his memories. By rights, he should have no knowledge of your name, yet it appears that he was able piece it together."

Severa frowned. "Now that you mention it, he did say that he knew Katarina wasn't my real name. It was after I killed the leader of Emmeryn's assassins, but he was close to falling unconscious so I thought he was confused."

Lucina shook her head. "At this point it doesn't matter. We cannot reveal ourselves to our parents lest we pressure them into marriage. I want them to be as genuine to each other as they were in our time, not getting together for our sakes."

Cynthia smiled at her sister. "I don't think we have to worry about ours. Dad was destroying dummies in a courtyard for hours after he heard Mom got taken."

Morgan piped up. "Our mom looked absolutely ecstatic to me. She said she got a boyfriend, but all she'd tell me was he had 'opal eyes'. Pretty obvious our parents are more or less set."

Severa smirked. "I saw Dad running off to meet her before I got here too. Now we just need to make sure they survive the next few battles and we can get out of their hair."

Lucina grew pensive. "Girls, I need to ask you something. It's very important."

Her friends looked to her, each curious. Lucina took a deep breath before asking a question that could change everything.

"When all this is over… and our younger selves come into this world…"

She sighed.

"Would you like to stay in Ylisse on a more permanent basis?"

Morgan gasped. "Lucy… do you mean what I think you mean?"
Lucina nodded, face set in her usual determined mask. "I am."

"Do you want to join the Shepherds?"
Return of the Rightful

Five days after Sumia had been taken to Ylisstol, she met the head of the rebels face to face.

The day had been… boring, to put it lightly. Sumia did not speak unless spoken to and her responses were clipped and cold enough to freeze blood. Beneath the mask, she sneered in annoyance at being confined to a guest room in the palace. Beneath the sneer and under the ice placed on her heart, Sumia prayed for Chrom's safety.

When the door opened for the first time that day, Sumia stared as a woman in golden armor and with a face that resembled Frederick's came in. Shortly thereafter, a woman with an aura of entitlement and jealousy entered as well, a staff in hand.

She was short, but her dress did its best to accentuate the curves that she had doubtlessly fostered to incur the envy of her peers. Aside from that, the white and gold dress only drew the eye to the woman's auburn hair and deep brown eyes set into a pretty face.

"Marquise Meredith I assume?" Sumia observed. "What brings you to my room today?"

The woman put on a smile Sumia knew was fake. "I'm here to see the future Exalt. Your big day is tomorrow after all."

Sumia internally grimaced, wondering how anyone could fall for such sickly-sweet words. "Then you are here to create the brand?"

Meredith's face morphed into a sneer and a hand snapped out to grip Sumia's hair. "I'll do that after I make you squeal a bit."

Sumia had enough time to wince before she was wrenched from her seat and slapped, hard. She barely had enough time to process the pain before her hair was pulled again and her head was forced up.

It was slapped again.

Raise… slap.

Raise… slap.

Raise… slap.

Sumia could taste blood, both pooling in her mouth and rising from bruises. The hand tightened its grip and Sumia was pulled up to find Meredith glaring at her, insanity sparkling in her muddy eyes. "I do not see why a prince would choose something like you. He had every reason to choose me, from my looks to my experience, and he spurned me for you!"

She threw Sumia's head to the table, a crack rending the air. "You'll be a puppet though, serving the worthy. It's all a girl from Clarissa could ever ask for, especially since your father bumbled his way to the grave."

Sumia turned her head up and snarled at Meredith, rage burning its way through the ice in her breast. "You bi-!"

An armored fist met her head, Meredith smirking as Sumia tried to recover from the other woman's
strike. "Let that serve as a lesson. I need your face in order for tomorrow though, so I'll deign to fix you up a bit."

The staff in her hand glowed, but a malicious spark danced across her eyes. "I hope you don't mind a scar, I'm not exactly experienced with this."

Sumia stewed in humiliation, her teeth grinding together as she tried to keep her head.

"Oh, and Catherine's going to do you one last favor."

Sumia felt her hair yanked again. "You don't need this hair, puppets should only wear the wigs their masters choose."

Fingers snapped and steel rasped, Sumia finally tearing up.

Naga… please let them come soon…

-Chrom-

"We'll arrive tomorrow."

Chrom stared at Robin as they sat in the prince's tent. They'd finished their meeting with both Lord Dunwall and Lady Miranda barely an hour ago, both explaining their forces to the prince and what their spies had told them.

"Don't give me that look." Robin sighed. "The moment we knew Frederick wasn't going to die on us we were on the road. Taking the positions of Lord Dunwall's army and Lady Miranda's army into account, the fact we'll be at Ylisstol by noon tomorrow is impressive enough."

Chrom scratched his cheek. "Robin, do you think I should just go ahead and do it?"

"What 'it' are we talking about?" Robin asked. "Do you mean going to see Libra about that mole on your ass?"

Chrom glowered at his cheeky friend. "No, and how do you even know about it? What I mean is, should I ask for Sumia's hand when we get her back?"

He kept talking, warding off Robin's surprised grunt. "Look, I know I can't go and ask her father for his permission and I can't do the things normal guys do when they're getting ready to ask. But, this worry I've had ever since I learned she was taken has only solidified my feelings."

Robin tilted his head. "You have to ask her father for permission to marry her? How does that make sense?"

"Right," Chrom groaned. "You only recently figured out Cordelia was romantically inclined towards you, hell you recently found out what romantically inclined meant."

He waved off Robin's glare. "Go ask Maribelle about the etiquette, I'm not the best at explaining things like that. Anyway, what do you think?"

Robin cooled his glare and held his chin. "Well… from what Lissa told me, she'd been trying to get some kind of 'plan' going so you guys would get together. Pretty sure it went up in flames when Maribelle got captured, but most everyone I've asked talked like you'd been dating for a while."

Chrom's face slackened with every word, but Robin kept going. "There's more than a few bets that you'd propose by next month, but all this has understandably captured everyone's attention."
"Why am I not surprised?" Chrom groaned. "When all this is over, we're going to have a big talk about everyone's compulsive gambling."

Robin smirked and stood. "Well, I need to go over our lines with Katarina. I'll see you later tonight."

Chrom waved and remained where he was, contemplating what would come after tomorrow.

_We have the forces to surround Ylisstol completely and there's reason to believe that only the soldiers in the palace are loyal to the rebel leaders. I still don't know what possessed them to do this, least of all Lady Serena, but we'll have answers before necks._

Biting his lip, Chrom knocked on the arm of his chair. "Alright, whoever it is, come in."

Two people entered the tent, Vaike and Cynthia smiling at him as they approached.

Chrom didn't like those grins. "Alright, what is it this time Vaike? I don't have time to duel you."

"It ain't nothin' like that!" Vaike protested. "I just came to ask if you think I should ask Cherche to dinner when we get back from Plegia."

Chrom's brow shot up. "Thinking that far ahead? Last I saw, you were passed out in a wagon drooling while Cherche tried to keep Minerva from snuggling with you. That doesn't scream, 'prepared for battle'... or dating for that matter."

Vaike snorted. "I plan to clean up for that, and I haven't lost Armads since I got a hold of it. Ya need to have more faith in your pal!"

"I do," Chrom countered. "I just have precedent that you don't plan for things. You've always flown by the seat of your pants, so why should I expect it to change?"

Vaike grew sheepish. "Got me there... but the past don't matter. Look, I want to see if I can take some time off from the Shepherds, if Cherche agrees to go with me. After everything's over with, she's going to need someone to help her settle in and I want to be that person."

Chrom stared at his old friend for a long time, neither breaking eye contact. "...You really love her. I don't think you've ever given me such a selfless reason for vacation time."

Vaike picked at his cheek. "Yeah... never wanted to make someone smile so much, not even Lissa when she got sad."

"Well then," Chrom said, slapping his knees and standing. "You have my permission. First things first though, you actually have to get her to say yes."

Vaike smirked and held out his hand, Chrom gripping his forearm in turn. They shook and Vaike went on his way, Cynthia stepped forward. "That was fun to watch."

Chrom shook his head. "What business do you have for me today?"

"Nothing too big." Cynthia answered. "Katarina and Miriel wanted me to tell you they've come up with a plan for the infiltrators."

A breath exploded from Chrom's mouth. "Did they tell you this plan or do I have to go meet them?"

Cynthia shook her head and reached into a bag at her side. "No, they explained it to me. Here, I have the map they marked and everything."
She took out the parchment and laid it on the table, Chrom walking beside her and leaning on the wood. "So, the first point is in the western wall?"

"Yep, right in the merchant district." Cynthia said. "After that, they'll work their way through the back alleys until they arrive next to the outermost gardens."

She dragged her finger along the line of charcoal before stopping at a portion of the palace's outer wall. "Marth used a hole that you bashed into the wall in order to meet with you and Mr. Robin on the night the Exalt was attacked. "Considering only you and she know about it, it should still be there."

Chrom had the decency to look contrite. "Right… that thing. Really need to get it fixed. Well, if my blunder can make this plan work, I'll live with it. What happens next?"

"Well, hopefully very little." Cynthia shrugged. "If what we've been told is true, the troops not in the palace may very well open the gates for us. If that happens, the infiltration team can just go in, capture the rebel leaders and rescue Ms. Sumia, and then it's clean up time."

Chrom sighed through his nose. "Well, that's the best case scenario. Who's leading the infiltrators again, someone named 'Shade' or something?"

Cynthia rolled up the map and put it away. "That's the one. Lord Dunwall's paid for their services and supposedly they're an Ylisstol native. Mr. Gaius may not need the help, but Mr. Lon'qu and Ms. Olivia will need the extra know-how."

"Alright, thank you for bringing this to me." Chrom said. "We'll need to coordinate with them from beyond the walls, so tell Gaius we'll be using fire signals."

Cynthia saluted. "Yes sir! Oh, 'fore I forget, Princess Lissa wanted me to ask if you'd like to join her, Mr. Donnel, and Marth for dinner."

Chrom frowned, feeling like there was more to the question. "…I don't see why not. Most of my friends are going to be with their lovers and damn if Robin and Cordelia aren't going to be filling the air with sap tonight."

Cynthia smiled wanly before dropping her salute. "Sounds good. I'll take my leave, sir."

Chrom waved and sat again when she was gone. Taking out Falchion, Chrom gazed at the blade before looking to the corner of his tent. "I wonder if they'll come to the gate and grandstand?"

Gradivus's blade gleamed, as if answering Chrom's question.

"Well, if they do…" Chrom growled. "You're going into Catherine's black heart. I don't care for whatever reasons she may have, Frederick's her brother and she nearly allowed him to die. I will not let such a thing stand."

Snorting, he sheathed Falchion and left. He needed to see if anyone would spar with him, lest he go mad from the wait.

-**Robin**-

"Alright Ricken, I know you haven't used fire all that much, but let's try again."

The young man nodded and held up both hands. In one was a simple Fire tome while the other held the great Forseti. "Ok, ready."
Robin nodded and looked to Miriel. "You ready Miriel?"

The woman nodded and held out her hand, magic script flaring to life. The target of choice was a cliff that Sully had spotted on the march, Robin decided to use their downtime to test an idea he'd had.

"Alright, fire!"

Ricken ignored the pun and channeled Foresti, the vortex born with a fraction of its normal power. Once it was stable, Ricken shot a simple ball of fire into the vortex.

As it flew through the vortex, the flame ate at the wind around it and the ball grew into a self-contained inferno almost touching the edges of the vortex. When it reached the end, it slammed into the cliff and Miriel snapped her fingers.

Heat bloomed and rock shattered, a massive explosion rocking the ground and sending everyone flying. When his ears stopped ringing and the world steadied, Robin blinked at the cloud of dust reaching into the sky. "...Whoa."

"Whoa indeed." Miriel stated. "I never expected such a collision would obliterate the cliff side."

Ricken coughed from where he'd slammed against a tree. "Well, I didn't make the vortex that powerful. Any slower and the fire wouldn't have fed and any faster would have snuffed it out."

Robin staggered to his feet. "That still doesn't explain the explosion. Miriel, can you examine the rocks the cliff was made from? I have to go and reassure everyone we're not under attack."

He didn't wait for an answer and set out for the city of tents that made up the so-called Loyalist army. Someone probably heard the blast and the cloud reached high into the sky by now. He wouldn't be surprised if Chrom was waiting for him with a frown able to kill a lesser man.

When he got to the border of the tents, there was someone waiting for him. Rather than blue though, they were red and hopping onto a Pegasus.

"Cordelia, it's ok!" Robin shouted. "We were testing an idea and the cliff decided to explode. No one's hurt and I came to inform everyone."

Cordelia had her reins raised, but lowered them with a sigh at Robin's shout. "So that's what it was. You just about gave everyone a heart attack."

"Yeah, sorry about that." Robin apologized. "I came over as soon as I could."

Cordelia dismounted and walked up to him. After regarding Robin for a moment, she punched his arm. "No more experiments when we're on the march. The last thing any of us need is you getting hurt."

Her eyes softened. "It'd devastate me if anything happened to you while I wasn't there."

Robin rubbed his arm. "I'm sorry, I know I shouldn't be worrying you with the attack tomorrow. It's just so... maddening to wait."

"I understand." Cordelia said. "Sumia's in their clutches and they had the audacity to hurt our friends. I will bring their mad delusions to an end, personally if need be."

"Get in line." Chrom growled as he walked up, fixing a sheepish Robin with a withering glare. "I
assume that blast had something to do with you?"

Robin nodded and repeated his explanation, making those that had gathered behind the prince leave and Chrom groan. "Great, now I have to go and talk Lady Miranda off the cliff. Then I'll have to convince Dunwall he doesn't need to put sixty men around Maribelle at all times."

The prince threw up his hands and stalked away, Cordelia watching him go at Robin's side. "I don't think you'll be getting that bonus."

"Had to bring that up, didn't you?" Robin accused. "It's not my fault Sully sent me the bill for all those urns she broke, and I didn't have any emergency funds after Minerva kept eating those boars!"

Cordelia patted his shoulder, musing on her boyfriend's lack of a spine at times. "Well, why don't we go get something to eat? I was so caught up in inventory this morning and trying to see if you were ok I forgot breakfast."

Robin nodded and they set off, hand in hand. "Say… do you want to head back to The Melting Pot when we're done in Ylisstol and Plegia?"

"Sounds good to me." Cordelia agreed, pecking his cheek. "Our first date should be where we first became friends."

She smiled at him. "Also, I don't mind if you call me your girlfriend."

Robin laughed, scratching his head as he tried to ignore the envious whispers around them. "Well, I want to take you on a proper night out first. Call me stubborn, but that's what I believe."

Cordelia rolled her eyes and they lost themselves in harmless chatter. They would have to be all business tomorrow, but for now they allowed themselves to relax.

-Severa-

"Sweet Naga, what was that?!"

Severa looked around furiously as the sound of a blast washed over her. Whatever it was, it came from the direction she'd seen Miriel walk off to a couple hours ago.

Deciding the soldiers close by could handle whatever it was, Severa turned back to the parchment in front of her. "Ok… where was I?"

Unknown to basically everyone, with only Morgan playing the exception, Severa had a hobby she'd yet to indulge in for some time.

Composition.

She wasn't sure what making little marks on a page and calling it sheet music did for her, but it was relaxing nonetheless. It had started shortly after Severa had discovered an old book in the family library, the faded pages describing notes and how to write them on paper.

For the daughter of two musically inclined parents who enjoyed listening more than playing, it was an interesting find.

From there, she'd read and written her own music in secret, at one point creating a score by herself in two weeks.

Severa and Morgan had been waiting in the family room, both eager to show their parents the pile of
parchment Severa had created. Then Sumia had walked in instead, weeping.

Severa groaned and stowed the parchment. She wouldn't get any work done if all she did was reminisce and make her back hurt. "Geez, why do I have to stay so positive?"

"It's because of your mark." Someone answered, making Severa fall out of her chair in panic. "Don't be so surprised girl, I mean no harm… today."

If that wasn't Tharja's voice then her name wasn't Severa Prisma Volk! "…Ms. Tharja?"

The dour woman scowled at Severa, hugging a black bound book close to her. "Yes, but drop the 'Ms.' Anyway, to answer your question, it is the mark you bear that forces you to be so… understanding."

She took a step forward. "If you'd like, I can examine it for you. Maybe even figure out a way to stop the pain."

"No," Severa refused. "I don't even understand how you know I have a mark, but I refuse to let you leer at me!"

Memories of being the accidental target of a sniffling curse and her parents' subsequent wrath made it hard to trust the dark mage, especially her younger, less mellow self.

Tharja's scowl deepened. "I will not 'leer' at you. I happen to be the only person in the country that can help you get over the pain."

She took another step forward. "You do well hiding it, but during the meetings in Ferox I saw you wince whenever you scowled or raised your voice. Each time you would reach for your back as if to massage it but you stopped yourself."

Severa gulped and scrambled back from the dark mage. "Just, mind your own business! Go stalk the priest or something!"

"Oh, I'll do that later." Tharja promised. "What I want to do now is get a look at that mark. I plan to help, so what's stopping you from taking the offer?"

Severa growled, hand going to Mercurius. "I don't trust people who just barge into my tent. Besides, what could you do? How do I know you're not going to curse me into doing whatever you want?"

Tharja sighed and her hands welled with purple miasma. "I will swear an oath if that makes you feel better. If I break it, I'll turn into a newt for the rest of my days."

Severa continued to glare at Tharja before she let go of Mercurius. "Alright, swear you won't say anything to anyone else about this unless I say so. No curses or hexes to force compliance either, we stop when I say so."

Tharja smirked. "Very well, but watch what you say next time. A more innocent girl might get the wrong message."

She cackled at Severa's blushing face before placing the miasma against her chest. A moment later it seeped through her skin and Tharja sighed. "It is done. Now, the mark please."

Severa breathed deeply before turning and taking a seat on the floor. She took off her coat carefully before grabbing the hem of her shirt and pulling it off. "Happy?"
Tharja hummed in response, cold fingers tracing the mark and making Severa shiver. "I recognize this mark… you're of Grimleal blood, like Robin."

"What of it?" Severa snapped.

She yelped a moment later when she felt Tharja's fingers began to trace beyond the mark. "The hell are you doing!?!"

"Tracing your magic lines." Tharja growled. "To answer any questions, they're what let you use magic in the first place. Most aren't born with them, but it's rare for anyone to have lines as wide and long as yours. Based on this, I'd say you have three magic pools."

Severa tilted her head and Tharja continued. "Most magic users have two pools, areas where their magic lines converge and extend from. They're usually formed around the brain and heart, but you have lines extending down into your legs. As for the pool they come from…"

She tapped Severa's back, right in the center of the mark. "It's right here. The pool's a dark magic though, something I've never seen before. It'll take me some time to find a counterhex, but I don't believe you'll be with us long enough for me to find it."

Severa pulled her shirt back on and enveloped herself in the familiar warmth of her coat. "What makes you think that?"

"Just your group's behavior," Tharja said, "It's not unnoticed how you all hesitate around the Shepherds – it's no secret you want little do with us outside of business."

Her eyes narrowed. "Sully mentioned you appeared devastated when Nowi and Frederick were brought back to Ferox. It's almost as if you know them quite well…"

Severa gulped, ready to charge and take on Tharja if need be, but the dark mage shrugged. "It's none of my business. If you do decide to leave, you may want to go look for a specific guy in Plegia. So long as he's not dead, he'll be able to find a way to break that pain curse."

She left without another word, Severa slumped over in relief.

Lucy, we can't stay. If they've noticed this much stuff just from us being careful, staying any longer than defeating Gangrel risks exposing us.

Severa sighed and went off to find her friend. It was unfortunate that they couldn't stay.

All that work Cynthia and Morgan had put into trying to find an apartment in Ylisstol would be for naught.

-Chrom, Next Morning-

"So, you're Evelyn."

Chrom stared at the woman across from him, silently musing she could have been Robin's sister as well. The Feldian general was dressed in her normal gear of silver scale-mail with matching greaves and gauntlets. A yellow tabard bearing the symbol of Felids flapped in the breeze.

"That's me, Your Highness." The silver haired woman answered. "I apologize again for all the trouble my forces got your soldiers into. Hard to counteract orders when the guy just talks over you all the time."
Chrom shook his head. "It's in the past. I'm just glad you came to your senses and joined us."

Evelyn scratched her head, looking to the other people around her. "Well, call it a feeling, but I can't exactly stand here with the prince, Duke Dunwall, and Duchess Miranda and still feel the rebels are in the right."

The duchess pushed her brown hair out of her eyes, the chips of green glinting. "I'd say so. Personally, I wish I wouldn't have had to meet His Highness in such straights. Especially since I was only able to say goodbye to the Exalt just yesterday."

"Agreed." Dunwall muttered, his blonde curls ruffling with the breeze. "I simply wish us to march and end this. My daughter is greatly distraught over Lady Sumia's condition and I do not wish Ylisstol to be held by those unworthy any longer."

Evelyn gulped audibly before looking back to Chrom. "In any case, we're ready when you are. I'll march in from the east after you've begun the siege, finding out I've turned on them may very well break the defenders will to fight."

"That's if they fight in the first place." Miranda sniffed. "I believe that these rebels greatly underestimated how much they'd need Carlan's old network. Agents loyal to us could infiltrate Ylisstol easily, some even being helped by the guards from Clarissa and Felds. Only the ones from Draconis followed the rebels' orders to the letter."

Chrom sighed. "Then we shall have a hard fight at the palace. Draconis is known for making the most loyal troops in the halidom, as well as the most fanatic. It wouldn't surprise me if they believed every drop of drivel the rebel clergy vomited."

"It'll be fun trying to clean out those bastards." Dunwall spat. "Then there's the matter of Grevis."

Miranda held up a letter. "I received a missive from Duchess Catarnia. She's decided that Grevis should side with Prince Chrom."

"Took her long enough." Chrom snorted. "Though I suppose Cordelia will be happy to hear her homeland and family are still with us. Is there anything else?"

When no one spoke, Chrom dismissed the meeting and went to find his sister. After fruitless searches of the medical tents and storage areas, Chrom finally found Lissa in his tent, staring at the Fire Emblem. "How'd you find it?"

Lissa shrugged, absently tracing the contours of the metal. "I know where you like to hide things is all. I'm just... not looking forward to spilling blood in our home. Again."

Chrom laid a hand on her shoulder and squeezed gently. "We'll do all we can to prevent it. I won't answer with steel unless they give us no choice."

Lissa gripped his hand, trembles belying her steady voice. "I know you will. Um, when we get settled, I need to talk to you ok?"

"Of course," Chrom answered. "But first things first. Are you ready?"

Lissa took a breath and turned to meet his gaze. "Absolutely. Let's go take back our home!"

They bumped fists and Lissa scrambled out of the tent, Chrom smiling at her back. "I'm glad you're so strong Lissa." He whispered. "It soothes my soul to see you can take care of
yourself."

Nodding, he strode to the corner of his tent and grabbed Gradivus. "Now then…"

"Let's march."

-Sumia-

How hilarious it must have been to the marquise to see her like this.

A hood over her head, a simple dress that wouldn't have appeared out of place in any remote village, and no shoes.

Sumia silently glanced around the dark room, noting her mother staring directly ahead while the one she'd heard called Count Theodore grumbled madly in the corner. If the distasteful glares Selena was giving the man meant anything, this was not a perfect hegemony.

Meredith stood by the door, cackling and leering at Sumia while Catherine stood beyond the door in preparation for the call to come.

A moment later, Catherine entered. "The people are gathered and the Loyalists come close."

The three rebel leaders stood and organized themselves, Sumia silently smirking as her chance to strike came close. They were filed out of the room by Catherine and another pair of guards, Draconian Knights if the plumes were anything to go by.

They walked through several corridors before arriving at a balcony, one Sumia recognized. It was the one Emmeryn had stood upon when she gave speeches to the populace.

Shoved forward, Sumia barely collected herself before Meredith stepped into the light and greeted the silent masses below. "People of Ylisstol, we have fortunate news this day!"

Her hand swept back towards Sumia. "Today, we would like to announce that a new, true-blooded member of the Exalted line has come forth! Unlike Duke Carlan, who has gladly rescinded his claim to the throne in light of this revelation, she is marked by Naga herself!"

That sent mutters through the crowd, confused gazes landing on Sumia's cloaked form.

Meredith smirked. "I can see none of you believe me. That's quite alright, skepticism is welcome in the face of such a bold claim."

Her arms went wide. "But, ponder no longer! I will show you the Mark of Naga that places her of Exalted blood! Come forward and show your subjects the mark!"

Sumia stepped forward at the cue, knowing that it was nearly time. She just needed to play along for a little longer.

Turning around, Sumia gripped her hood, hesitated slightly, and dropped the fabric away.

Gasps and shouts rang through the crowd, disbelief and confusion washing over the citizens like a tide.

Sumia very much had a Mark of Naga, the brand of exalted blood standing out prominence. If only it wasn't decided that Meredith would place the brand on the back of Sumia's head.

She wouldn't have been shaved bald otherwise.
Meredith held up her hands for silence and was granted it. "Now that you see the truth, I call upon the brave soldiers that defend this city to man the walls and give the guests making their way across the plains a warm welcome."

Her voice climbed to a screech. "Show the Exiled Prince that he and his allies are not welcome in Ylisstol, or this land!"

"For the Exalt!"

-Chrom-

"Naga in heaven, what did they do to her?!"

Chrom growled as Gaius relayed Sumia's condition to them, the assassin having returned from a covert run to confirm their infiltration routes. Cordelia was obviously sickened by the description, as her horrified shout showed, and the other Shepherds looked ready for blood.

"That's not all." Gaius sighed. "I got a decent look at the supposed brand. It's almost a complete match for Blue's mark."

Angry mutterings answered him, the gathered Shepherds only silenced by a wordless yell from Chrom. Once his lungs were spent, the prince spun on the spot and drew Falchion. "Launch the signal! We charge the gates for both our kingdom and our friend!"

Steel rang and parchment scraped, a trio of fireballs roaring into the sky.

For a moment, all was quiet.

Then the earth shook and thunder rang, the sounds of thousands of boots marching in step. Hooves dug dirt from the roads and spears were clanged against shields in a great show of intimidation.

Entire columns of cavaliers and knights marched forward, the vanguard of the many soldiers behind them. Spears, axes, swords, and bows were held in steady hands while mages standing at the very back began their chants.

Again, all was still as the great mass—the combined force of three duchies—came to a halt. The middle columns parted in unison, allowing an invention that had existed solely in Miriel's notebook to roll forth.

It was a great cart of wood and steel, a long beam of wood hung in the center of the cart's frame. At the end of the beam sat a great iron head, forged into the shape of a square with one purpose.

Smashing open the gates.

As the cart rolled past, pushed by two teams of six, the columns began their march once again. They were less than a league from the gate when they could see the small figures of archers on the walls.

Everyone tensed the moment they were in range, but no arrows flew.

They grew close enough to make out individual stones in the wall, the colors and designs of the flags, and the light shining on the armor of the archers.

But no arrows flew.

The cart rolled into the gatehouse, stopping just short of the gate itself. The teams left their spots and grabbed the ropes at their sides, pulling on them with all the strength they could muster.
The beam slowly pulled back with the groan of straining twine, climbing and climbing until it reached its apex.

The ropes were released and the beam fell.

It slammed into the gate with the force and sound of an explosion, the sound nearly making the armies jump. Immediately after, one of the crew slumped over, an arrow in his shoulder.

Roars shattered the air and the Siege of Ylisstol was on.

-Olivia-

_Sweet Naga, what am I doing here?!_

She was crawling through a tunnel filled with a foul stench, following Lon'qu's back as they tried to keep their boots out of the noxious sludge that oozed along the bottom.

Olivia was the back of the group, with the 'Shade' person up front followed by Gaius and Lon'qu. They'd peeled off from the other Shepherds the moment the contraption Miriel called a 'battering ram' had been pushed forward. While the soldiers on the walls were distracted by the spectacle, the infiltrators had made their way to one of the drainage tunnels and entered the city.

Why she had been brought along was still a mystery.

Olivia sighed through the mask she wore. "Will anyone tell me why I'm here?"

"You may not think it, but you're stealthy Babe." Gaius answered. "You've spooked just about everyone in camp with your dainty steps… Put the sword away Mister Super Swordsman, I'm not trying to flirt with your girl."

Olivia's face burned under the cloth, but Shade's voice cut through the air. "Quiet back there, we're nearly out. We can speak when we've captured the rebels."

Silence descended and they continued their crawl. As expected, they found a ladder that led into the wonderful world of fresh air in the back alley of a smokehouse.

Olivia tried to ignore the succulent smell of smoked fish and pork, but it was hard with the smokers going. Even with the clangs and shouts of battle echoing through the streets, it appeared the general citizens were unconcerned.

"This is weird." Lon'qu muttered. "Why would anyone in a besieged city go about their lives like this? If anything, it looks like they're getting ready to throw a party."

"They are," Shade grunted. "Many of the people are looking forward to Prince Chrom and Princess Lissa's return. Damn the fake Exalt they showed earlier today, no one wants the marquise in power anymore."

Gaius sighed and checked Matti Kati. "That doesn't explain why the archers are fighting."

"They're from Draconis," Olivia realized. "They're fanatics from what I've been told, so why wouldn't they oversee the gates?"

Shade grunted and gestured for them to move. "Point made, but let's get going. We're still at least twenty minutes from our destination and we don't know how many thorough-bred soldiers there are."
They checked their weapons again before sprinting through the alleys. Shade led them through several twists and turns with the ease of a native, silently confirming the rumors Gaius and Lon'qu had heard. Olivia did her best to keep up.

After a time, and with the crash of the battering ram still echoing faintly through the air, they reached the palace walls.

"Would you look at that." Gaius mumbled. "Blue really did smash a hole in the wall."

Olivia silently wished she'd never have to cross blades with Chrom. If he could smash a six-inch hole in the wall by accident, she'd hate to see what he could do when serious.

Shade immediately started widening the hole with a hammer. "This leads into the gardens. If they've even an ounce of sense, not one guard will be here."

Olivia frowned before her hands snapped around Shade's. "Quiet!"

Shade ceased moving instantly, Gaius and Lon'qu going still as well. A moment later, faint voices wondering at what they thought was digging passed by.

"...Good ears." Shade whispered. "Never thought there'd be any of them here."

Lon'qu patted Olivia's shoulder. "That's the other reason you're here. You can hear a pin drop in the middle of a noisy tavern with everyone singing along while you dance. If that's not talent for an infiltrator, I don't know what is."

"Take in the sight Slim." Gaius mumbled. "Super Swordsman touching a woman without going red is rarer than diamonds."

The masked guide appeared amused, but began to widen the hole again. "The front gate won't last much longer. Let's get in and give them a warm welcome."

The others pitched in until the hole was wide enough for everyone to fit through. Once inside, they split into two teams, each with a different objective.

Team One was Shade and Gaius, their goal to capture the rebel leaders.

Team Two was Olivia and Lon'qu, their goal to find Sumia and get her out of the palace.

Gaius had infiltrated twice before, so he led Shade through the halls. So far, there were few guards and the ones they saw were heading towards the front of the palace and away from them.

"They sure don't seem keen on protecting the inner rooms." Gaius muttered. "Then again, I haven't seen any of the Draconis forces since we came in."

He gagged as Shade yanked on his shirt, just stopping Gaius as golden armored Draconis Knights marched by with nary a glance.

"Point made." Gaius grumbled once the knights were gone. "But that's the first pair I've seen all day."

Shade held up a finger to their mask and waited another moment before gesturing for Gaius to go. Rolling his eyes, Gaius sprinted down the deserted hall and knelt next to a pair of oak doors.

"Ok, these're the doors into the reception hall." Gaius whispered once Shade joined him. "Beyond that's the Throne Room, and if I was an egomaniacal nut job, I'd sit myself right in the big chair."
Shade nodded and held up a fist, three fingers, and a flat palm.

"You can talk you know," Gaius growled. "But fine, on three…"

Shade counted down until they held a fist, Gaius opened the door and dashed inside with his Katti drawn.

A punch to the gut sent the air out of him, another cracking against his cheek and sending him rolling across the ground. He popped to his feet and skid another inch, eyes casting about the room.

_Six targets, two of them by the door I just came through. Shade took a hit, but they dodged the follow-up. All of them are either swordsmen or knights, but the one by the throne doors looks like the most important._

Said figure was dressed similarly to Gaius, but she had the normal arm blades typical of most assassins. Shade hissed when their eyes found her. "Durma!"

The woman waved languidly. "Shade, pleasure as always. Can't say I want to be here right now, but you know how these things go."

Gaius glanced at his compatriot. "Care to share?"

"Durma's one of mine." Shade growled. "At least she was. Tracker, blackmailer, assassin, you name it. She cut ties with me and mine six months ago, last I heard she was in Draconis."

Durma tucked a lock of black hair behind her ear. "Yes, well, when the Marquise of Gariel comes to you offering more gold than you'd ever want, one tends to listen."

She glanced at Gaius. "You know, it was pretty easy to tag you guys. I get you weren't trying to be all that stealthy, but taking a break in a field wasn't your best idea."

"You're the one that ratted us out." Gaius growled. "My mates almost died because of you!"

Durma shrugged, brown eyes uncaring. "Just business hun, what they did after I told them you were in Menagerie was out of my hands."

"You know nothing!" Gaius barked, charging the relaxed assassin. "My friends are blind and half dead! This is personal!"

Two of the swordsmen moved to intercept him, but Gaius slithered around their strikes. He took barely a moment to open their throats before continuing his charge.

He noticed Durma tense just enough for Gaius to know she was going to try and jump over him. He brought the Katti down to his side, ready to swing up and slice her open. Instead, her foot kicked out and met his knee, the bone popping out of place.

Gaius's momentum sent him crashing into the door, gritting his teeth in pain. He knew there was no moving right now, not unless he could pop the knee back in place.

"You've got an eye and skill." Durma noted. "Even got some experience too. Anyone else, you'd have opened them hip to shoulder."

She glared at him, the first sign of emotion in her otherwise stoic face. "But I'm no amateur or journeyman. I've dealt with people of your skill before and I know my way around them."

Gaius yelped as he forced his knee back in place, ignoring the pain in favor of standing and
regarding Durma coldly. "I see… so what can I do here, eh?"

It was a rhetorical question. Shade had already used the distraction to kill the other guards and Gaius could tell Durma didn't want to take on both of them at once.

Gaius nodded to his compatriot. "She's all yours, big dog."

Before Durma could move, Gaius threw open the door he'd slammed into and rushed into the Throne Room, leaving Durma to steam. "Cheeky man."

A blade sliding from its sheathe caught Durma's attention. "So… I guess I can't just walk away?"

Shade pulled their mask down and pulled away their hood, red hair falling around equally red eyes. "No, not after you tried to sell me out to the Victor Bandits."

Shade, a woman that Robin would recognize as Anna the Merchant, pointed her blade at Durma. "My sister lost an arm for your betrayal!"

She swung her blade low and charged the other woman.

"And no one harms my family!"

-Lon'qu-

Finding Sumia was proving to be something of a challenge.

Lon'qu growled as he cut down another Draconis knight. He wasn't sure why, but he and Olivia had run into what looked like a hive of the bastards.

Olivia was still rather hesitant to kill the fanatics, going mostly for disabling strikes, but Lon'qu made sure they stayed down for good. The problem was it looked like they were getting closer and closer to a target, and the knights would not leave them alone.

After killing another Draconian, Lon'qu finally found some room to breathe. "Olivia, where are you?"

Silence, and Lon'qu finally noticed that the knights that had been swarming them were gone.

And so was Olivia.

Dread smacked him across the face and his feet trailed fire as he ran. "Olivia!"

Any bastard that tried to stop him was killed brutally and mercilessly. His charge had been taken and by Naga she would be safe. If not, everyone in this castle would die before he took his own blade and cleansed his honor.

Rounding a corner, Lon'qu cast his gaze down two corridors before a piercing scream sounded to his right.

"Olivia!" Lon'qu roared, recognizing the scream. "I'm coming!"

Taking off, he killed another group of knights before four of them jumped on top of him and crushed him under their girth. He tried to twist Balmung around, but the blade was kicked from his hand and he met eyes glowing red with madness.

Like a Risen.
"Well, this is the mad beast slaughtering his way here, eh? I have to say, I'm not impressed."

The red disappeared, if not the madness. "I suppose I should introduce myself. I am Theodore Drak, Count of Linde and Regent of Felds. Tell me, who are you to bring me such a prize today?"

"A prize?" Lon'qu growled. "Olivia is no prize, release her at once!"

Theodore laughed. "Why would I? She's not my angel, that bitch Evelyn saw to that, but she's a lovely thing nonetheless. I'll enjoy relieving some stress before I toss her out."

He brushed at his hair, an eager grin rising to his face. "In fact, I have a fun idea! You there, bring the woman here!"

Lon'qu gasped, "You wouldn't!"

"Oh, but I would!" Theodore chuckled. "I've seen the light since Her Ladyship Meredith came to meet me. She has shown me so many truths and pleasures that I could have scarcely imagined before!"

Lon'qu wanted to retort, but the sound of boots and Olivia's screams made him crane his head. "Olivia!"

"Lon'qu!" Olivia cried. "Please, don't look! I don't want you to see me like this!"

Theodore giggled. "Please, someone make sure he sees this! I want him to take in every…last…detail."

Lon'qu's head was grabbed and his eyes were forced open until he saw Olivia being dragged forward.

She was in tears, her armor long since ripped off and her shirt ripped open to show her naked chest. Lon'qu was too scared and angry to be embarrassed, but his rage boiled when the Count walked up and grabbed a breast. Olivia mewled in pain from his rough touch.

"I'll be glad to show you how I break them in." Theodore whispered. "Maybe you'll learn something, or… maybe you'll even thank me!"

Lon'qu's mind went blank, a voice thundering through the void. "My price shall be discussed later, defender, for now I give you my strength! Know that Asura, defender of the heavens, stands by your side!"

Lon'qu agreed without a second thought, simply gritting his teeth as pain erupted in his shoulders and the weight on him began to lift.

Bony claws ripped their way from his shoulders, flesh tearing alongside cloth and leather. Metal screeched as it was torn into pieces, the sickening sound of flesh slithering up the bony claws filling Lon'qu's ear.

The speed of the growth redoubled as the count affixed his lips to the underside of Olivia's breast. With a roar bordering on the demonic, Lon'qu threw his captors from him, the metal of their armor cracking the walls and pillars around him.

At a silent command, Balmung flew to his right hand and seven copies blurred into existence, one for each new hand. The count, having halted his transgressions at the roar, turned and screeched at the
sight. "Protect me you fools!"

The ones holding Olivia dropped her, allowing the poor woman to curl in on herself. Lon'qu didn't blink, his blades blurring forth and slicing through the soldiers like they didn't exist.

He spared just enough time to ensure Olivia was safe before he blurred after the count.

Behind him, the corpses began to dissolve into a putrid purple smoke, the laugh of… something, echoing through the air.

A blast of water cleansed the air. Olivia looked up slowly, eyes shining blue.

"Lon'qu…"

-Sumia-

It was time.

Sumia had been left alone with Selena, Meredith, and Catherine. They'd be left to, as the madwoman put it, take their proper place.

Now alone with her mother and with Gae Bolg to defend herself, Sumia had her opportunity.

The question was whether she could go through with it.

_She's not your mother._ The ice reasoned. _This is a husk, something that mocks the woman you love-ending her existence can only be a mercy._

_But my mother she remains,_ Sumia argued. _She need not be killed, only helped. Disarming her and rendering her unconscious should be enough!_

The internal debate had been raging since she'd been given the lance, Sumia ignoring her mother's mad ravings. It was obvious from the moment the great cart had arrived that everyone in the palace was doomed.

Meredith and Catherine had run, leaving their conspirators as sacrificial lambs.

Something Selena said caught Sumia's attention. "…Say again?"

Selena waved the question away. "Oh, I simply wonder if the Exile can actually fight. His personal knight is dead from what Catherine told me, so we'll get to see if the Exile lives up to his reputation."

Sumia's mind blanked, even the ice unable to speak. Then came rage, burning, bubbling, and altogether passionate, rose past the ice and into the open.

"You bitch!" Sumia roared, Gae Bolg gunning for Selena's neck. "You promised they would remain unharmed!"

Selena dodged the lance with frightening ease, Sumia catching a glint of red in her mother's eyes. "Why, I never promised such a thing did I? I only said those who came with you would be spared."

Sumia's vision went red and she began to swipe and stab at her mother, leaping over the furniture of the room and tearing the skirts around her waist to free her legs. Every strike and blow was dodged and turned aside though, the red in Selena's eyes slowly growing until they were only crimson.

It hit Sumia the same moment her first strike landed, the blow sending Selena's head around to a
"You're not mother..." Sumia whispered as the creature's head twisted back into place with a sickening crack. "You're a Risen..."

The creature cackled, rancid purple smoke rising from her arms. "Of course, silly girl! Your mother would never dare agree to such treachery, so Lady Meredith killed her and used the corpse! To think, you would fall so readily for such an obvious fake!"

It charged Sumia and slammed its fist into her side, ribs cracking under the force and making Sumia fly into the wall. She used Gae Bolg to steady herself, blood staining the ground as she coughed.

_I've had enough of this!_ Sumia thought as blood filled her lungs. _This creature and that bitch Meredith have killed my mother, Frederick, and many others. I will not permit them to get away with this, even should I die!_

Crimson stained the ground again, a kick from the creature adding bile to the sticky pools.

_Chrom... though this may kill me or turn me into something you must kill, do not mourn for me..._

Her gaze turned up to meet the red eyes of the creature, veins of white and blue appearing in her brown orbs.

_I've made my choice... my love._

The ice around her heart cracked, slowly at first. The creature frowned as it felt the temperature drop, eyes widening as it realized what was going on.

It smirked. "Good."

Ice exploded from Sumia's body, jagged spears and blades shooting in all directions. The creature could barely blink before a half-dozen icy spears skewered its body and impaled it against the far wall.

Panting, it looked up to see Sumia jerk and crack out of the ice. Her body was pale blue, the sites of her wounds stitched together with frost and her bald head pulsing with light blue veins. Sumia, or whatever she was, stalked forward with Gae Bolg in hand, the legendary blade encrusted by frost.

The blade ghosted forward when Sumia was close enough, the tip coming to rest on the creature's heart. "You will trouble this world no more."

The creature cackled before its head went limp and a familiar voice spoke. "...Sumia?"

Sumia would not be fooled. "You are not my mother, creature. She died the moment Meredith decided to approach her."

The lance pulled back.

"Begone."

The blade shot forward and Sumia caught sight of the creature's eyes. Except, they weren't the baleful red of the Risen.

They were her mother's eyes, full of shock and sadness before the light left them.

Sumia recoiled as the final sleight of hand revealed itself, horror clenching her heart in its grip.
Selena Pons had never been killed, she'd been possessed. It was a dark manner of blood magic Sumia had read about, Robin forced the Shepherds to read the book so they would know. So they wouldn't make this mistake.

Meredith had never touched Selena.

As the revelation settled in, Sumia curled into herself and felt her head press against the ground.

There, alone with the corpse of her mother, Sumia did the only thing she could.

She wept.

-Gaius-

The Throne Room had a single occupant.

Gaius hissed as his knee pulsed with pain, his anger just barely enough to cloud the sensation. "Catherine… I take it?"

"It's Dame Catherine knave." Frederick's sister stated. "Is the Exile so loose with his guard that a common thief can enter and not know his betters?"

Gaius glared at the stoic knight. "You ordered Frederick killed. You are the reason they aren't here with us right now!"

The Katti whistled through the air, ancient steel thirsting for blood. Catherine appeared unimpressed. "Sir Frederick was a threat to my liege's safety. I simply removed the problem, even if I did not order him to die."

Her eyes hardened. "I wished to do that myself."

"You're a bitch!" Gaius snarled. "It's clear that your liege is mad yet you follow! Rather than cooperate and show yourself worthy of your title, you sided against your family, your blood!"

Catherine smacked the butt of her lance against the tile, the sound dulled by the wide room. "I have no family! My decisions were made with a clear conscience – what would a thief know of family?"

Gaius grit his teeth and freed a dagger from his boot. "More than you, apparently."

The dagger flew from his hand, but Catherine knocked the blade from the air. She charged the hobbled Gaius with all the power of a stampeding bull, her blade trained squarely at his heart.

Gaius let his leg collapse, turning the fall into a roll and striking with the Katti. The blade nicked the metal of Catherine's armor, but her lance spun around and sliced through his clothes. A thin line of blood bubbled from the shallow cut, but Gaius contorted his body around and sent his useless leg into Catherine's own knee.

It was like hitting a damn wall, Gaius gasping in pain before Catherine punched him, the blow cracking Gaius against the ground.

Aware his ribs were either bruised or cracked, Gaius's anger blazed past the pain and his blade lashed out to meet Catherine's cheek.

Again, like hitting steel, but Gaius could see the woman wince and he took solace in the wide gash as her lance spun around and its silver head flashed.
Gaius screamed as his bad knee was taken, blood spurting from the amputated limb.

He panted as his mind forced itself through the haze of pain, the silver blade poised over his heart. "So... why?"

Catherine snorted. "I see little reason to tell my life story, but no one has wounded me in years, so I'll give you the short version."

Her breathing quickened. "I'm the older sister, but my family is... traditional. My parents met my birth with dismay as I could not carry on the good name, I was being paired off from the day I could walk."

Gaius could just make out the lance tip trembling. "Even when I started to show martial prowess, they forced me into lessons befitting a 'lady'. Oh, how happy they were to welcome little Frederick into the world, never mind that I'd been asked to be brought to Ylisstol itself for further training."

Deep breaths barely made it through the haze of Gaius's blood loss. "Lady Meredith gave me a chance though. I had defeated my brother in yet another sparring match, but he was praised for his work while I was ignored. Except, my lady came forward and asked to take me on as her aide. She had seen my prowess and wished to make me a knight worthy of her."

Gaius slowly smirked, spotting the Throne Room doors opening slowly as Catherine finished. "My parents thought she'd make me into a proper 'lady' and sent me off with nary a word. The only letters they've sent is to give me yet another prospective partner! And my brother? Oh, he only inquires as to business, never my health or how I've fared."

Her breathing evened. "So, no, I don't care what happens to a kingdom that my parents or brother chose to serve. That kingdom decided I was worthless except to carry children. I will follow Lady Meredith wherever she may go, even to hell itself!"

Gaius felt himself nodding, both impressed and faint. "Can't... say I don't... understand the zeal..."

He smirked and summoned the last of his strength, the Katti biting into Catherine's ankle. "But... Frederick's still with us... and I don't let... people who harm my mates... go unscathed."

He barely heard the knight gasp in pain before a loud shout rent the air, metal tore flesh, and Gaius knew no more.

-Chrom-

"Maribelle, get on Gaius now! Everyone else, take that bitch away and find Meredith!"

The Shepherds stormed the Throne Room, Lissa and Miriel begrudgingly removing Gradivus from Catherine's limp shoulder before a low-powered blast sent the golden knight to the realm of dreams.

Chrom snatched the ancient spear from his sister's hand and stalked towards a familiar door. Meredith could have gone one way and one way only, the question was where in the maze of hallways.

Robin joined him. "You thinking what I'm thinking?"

Chrom nodded and Robin began to bark orders. Everyone was to spread out in groups of two and search every room from there on out. Robin and Chrom, with assistance from Katarina and Marth as they were the last pair and there weren't that many rooms, took off for the place they felt most important.
Winding through the hallways like thunder, the Shepherds slowly split up to check the rooms, calls and shouts echoing behind Chrom's group. They marched hard and fast until Chrom stood before a door, the Fire Emblem pressed against it to allow Emmeryn to whisper the password.

The runes in the door glowed and the door creaked open, Chrom cursing at the sight of lit torches curling down into the earth. "She's here! Hurry!"

Despite his words, the group was not able to hurry down the stairs. While Robin hadn't noticed it when he'd first gone down to the Archives, the steps weren't very long.

Once they were near the bottom, the group could hear a kind of chant flowing through the air, a dark miasma bubbling up from the base. With the help of the torches, Chrom spotted the traitorous Marquise first. "Meredith!"

The chant ceased, Chrom and Robin rushing forward to try and take the madwoman's head. The miasma they'd seen earlier suddenly shifted and snapped around their limbs, immobilizing them.

Meredith laughed. "Perfect! I've been having a hell of a time trying to get in here!"

She turned towards the great stone doors, ignoring the girls that had made the floor but were watching her cautiously. "To think… behind this door stand the greatest treasures Ylisse has ever known. To have it so close, yet so far…"

Meredith looked back to them. "Oh well, my mission is complete. The one you chose, Prince Chrom, is nothing but a feeble wreck and I have sown discord in a land that refused to see my virtues!"

A dark portal, like the one that the assassins had used to get into the palace so long ago, flashed into existence. "I will be back at some point, if only to claim what's mine. Do tell little Lissa and Maribelle that I'll enjoy breaking them like I did Sumia."

Katarina and Marth saw their chance slipping away and charged, magic script blazing to life while Marth blurred forward.

A hand appeared in the portal, which Meredith took easily. "Ta-ta!"

She vanished into the portal, Chrom roaring and straining against his restraints with all the strength he could muster.

Katarina and Marth stopped their charge, too late to change anything, but tensed when a figure in a tactician's coat stepped out of the portal. "No need to be alarmed, I mean no harm."

The figure held up their hands, voice placing them as male. "I just wish to answer some questions."

Robin growled as Chrom continued to howl. "What answers could you possibly hold?"

The male shrugged. "Simple, Meredith was never the mastermind behind this. What idiot would try to start a rebellion that was so unpopular?"

A laugh entered the voice. "No, she was but a pawn. This whole thing was a plan orchestrated by Gangrel before he went mad, and it appears to have worked quite well."

He gestured to his right, as if to point them in the right direction. "I would like to, as a representative of Plegia, ask that you remove Gangrel from power. This plan was his own and few found it favorable to begin with. And don't trouble yourself with Meredith or the count."
The hood lifted enough to show pearly white teeth. "Plegia likes traitors even less than Ylisse."

He turned to return to the portal, but hummed and paused. "Actually…"

He turned around and Katarina stiffened. "I feel I know you from somewhere… Aha!"

Fingers snapped and Katarina collapsed, screaming as her back exploded into searing, white-hot pain.

The figure tilted his head. "I see, so the mark you bear is that strong, eh? Interesting…"

His hand scratched at his arm. "Well, that is something for the future. I bid you all a good day and wish you luck in removing the Mad King's pawns."

He bowed and turned, one more statement echoing through the air as he vanished.

"Maybe Plegia and Ylisse can be… friends."

-Sumia-

She didn't know how long she was stuck in that room, weeping before the mother that had borne and nurtured her.

The mother she had killed.

Sumia was an emotional wreck, emotions that had been frozen under a sheet of ice for days allowing themselves to run rampant. The most prominent were loathing, anger, sadness, and something a little out of place if you asked her.

Relief.

Mom… I'm so sorry… I wish I could have saved you, talked to you again…

It was a weight off her shoulders that her mother hadn't betrayed anyone. While possession wouldn't hold up in a court, Sumia knew that her mother was innocent.

Selena had still been her mother, only sealed under an evil hex.

" I see… you have overcome the ice, though certainly not how I expected."

Sumia hissed as Artezza spoke to her for the first time since Denaris. "…What do you want?"

"To collect the price." Artezza answered, voice bored. "By overcoming the ice, you have proven yourself worthy to be its avatar. That means a specific sacrifice."

Sumia snarled and looked to one of the ice shards, somehow expecting the reptilian eye of blue staring from it. "Haven't… you taken enough already?"

"No, but I won't take something all that important." Artezza drawled. "From today forth, you will not feel heat. The sun will no longer warm you and no blanket under heaven could hope to hold off the chill."

The eye narrowed as if annoyed. "I am being forced to allow a concession, however. Make sure you thank Naga sometime later, my great niece is allowing you to feel the warmth of both your love and your children when the time comes."
Before Sumia could process that, her muscles seized and all warmth fled from her. Everything was cold, her skin dancing with needles and eyes watering to try and stop from freezing.

"The price is paid." Artezza intoned. "Call upon my power should you wish, Sumia Pons, but know that it is nothing to be controlled immediately."

The eye faded, a last warning in the air.

"Learn, or all you hold dear will be lost in frost."

Sumia panted, breath misting, before she forced herself to her feet. Her clothes were ruined and her wounds held at bay by ice, but through it all, Gae Bolg remained solid like the day it was forged.

She reached out and took hold of the weapon, finding solace in the grip and letting it steady her.

... Very well. I may not feel warmth again, but I will do all I can to make the sacrifice of my mother worth it. Even if I must do everything myself.

Her musings came to an end as the door creaked open, familiar pink hair catching Sumia's eye. "Olivia!"

The dancer waved wearily, an unconscious Lon'qu slung over her back. "Sumia… I'm glad you're alive…"

Sumia stood shakily, hand trying to play with hair that wasn't there. "Me too… does this mean what I think?"

Olivia nodded. "Yes, Ylisstol is under our control. I saw some of the others earlier with some of the Loyalist troops."

Sumia sighed, relief shining through. "Thank Naga… what happened to Lon'qu?"

"I'll explain later." Olivia sighed. "Unfortunately, he'll have to learn how to swing a sword with his left hand from here on out."

She turned and gestured for Sumia to follow. "Come on, I think we all deserve some rest."

Sumia nodded and followed, all the while the populace cheered the return of their rightful rulers and the end of the brief, but scary, rebellion.

-Ylisstol Palace, Night-

Robin sighed as he wandered the halls of the palace, wondering at what had happened that day.

The minute the gate came down, everyone not in gold surrendered. Outnumbered, they fought to the last man, but even then, it was nearly bloodless. I got beaned by something Cordelia called a cannoli when we started to march towards the palace, but that was some poor shopkeeper trying to greet us.

The party that had been thrown for the conquerors had been… surprising to say the least. No one, least of all Robin, had expected the populace and much of the garrison to greet them so enthusiastically.

Groaning, he turned his mind back to the rebel 'leaders' as they were.

Selena was dead, much to the despair of the Shepherds after Sumia had explained what happened.
Chrom had pulled the poor girl into his embrace the moment she finished, the pair crying in each other's arms.

The count had been yanked into a portal like the one Chrom and Robin had seen Meredith escape through, but not before Lon'qu, in a state reminiscent of what happened to Nowi, cleaved the man's right hand from his body.

Then there was Meredith, supposedly a pawn in Gangrel's schemes. While Robin felt no sympathy for the selfish woman, he could at least pity her fate. Plegia had many ways to deal with traitors. None of them pleasant, to put it mildly.

Then there was Catherine. Chrom had taken one look at her after they'd sorted out the palace and ordered her locked in the little-used dungeons. The disgraced knight hadn't spoken once as she was taken away, only stiffening when Chrom yelled that Frederick would decide her fate.

Outside of that, there was much work to be done. Meredith and her compatriots may have been the instigators, but many minor nobility and clergy had gladly taken part to try and gain more status and land. What was going to happen to them was still being hotly debated between Chrom and his allies.

Shaking his head, Robin relaxed a bit at the familiar scent of cinnamon. "Cordelia, you're still up?"

His love came up beside him, a sad smile on her face. "Yes, well… I wanted to help where I could."

She gestured to her side, Robin smiling at a tired Sumia. "Sumia, are you sure it's ok to be up and about?"

"I'm sure." Sumia answered. "I can't really sleep right now."

Robin nodded and they set off in a random direction, small talk flowing intermittently before Cordelia asked a question that had been in the back of Robin's mind. "Do you think Marth and the others will join the Shepherds?"

Robin frowned, playing with the idea, but ultimately shook his head. "I don't think so. They came to help us with the rebels. With them gone, they have no reason to stay here."

"I thought as much," Cordelia sighed. "I wish they would though. Katarina seems to hold a lot of sway over your memories and you've been fast friends with the others."

Sumia scratched at her scalp, her decision to forego an itchy wig unspoken. "I find them quite nice as well. I only briefly got to meet them earlier but they're all kind girls."

Robin smirked and pointed down the hall. "Well, considering they like to leave mysteriously, why don't we have one more talk with them?"

Cordelia and Sumia smiled as they saw the group of girls walking towards them, both able to see the sad looks on each face.

"What are you doing up, Lady Sumia?" Lucina asked. "Wouldn't it be best if you go to bed?"

Sumia chuckled. "I can't sleep Marth, but thank you for your concern."

"What are you girls doing up?" Cordelia asked. "I'm here because I wanted to keep Sumia company, but what of you?"

Robin shook his head as the girls grew downcast. "You're leaving, aren't you."
It wasn't a question.

"We don't want to." Morgan answered. "We've just played our part. No point sticking around with so much of the world to see."

Cordelia and Robin exchanged looks, knowing the sound of someone trying not to cry. "Are you all sure? There's plenty of room in the Shepherds and there're many opportunities here in Ylissstol as well. You don't have to leave if you don't want to."

"We must." Lucina said. "As Tethys said, there is much of the world we wish to see. All of us believe that peace will settle upon Ylisse before long and we wish to leave it that way."

Sumia took a step forward, smiling sadly. "I understand… would you do me a favor then?"

Cynthia stepped up to join her sister. "What would that be Ms. Sumia?"

Sumia strode forward and enveloped the sisters in a hug. "Thank you, for everything."

Lucina and Cynthia stiffened at the action, but slowly relaxed, embracing their mother together for the first time in years.

Robin and Cordelia approached Severa and Morgan. "Thank you both. Without you and your friends' help, we'd have likely faced months of planning."

"I don't need thanks," Severa mumbled. "Anyone with any sense could have done what I did."

Robin reached out and patted her shoulder. "No way, it takes patience beyond mortal men to keep Chrom and Flavia on track. You not only kept them cool but organized the skeleton of the final plan before I even arrived."

"Your help wasn't lost on us either, Tethys." Cordelia continued. "Sully was singing your praises from the top of the Khan's Palace, and Kellam's called you a 'tough firecracker'. Believe me, that's very high praise."

The couple bowed, Severa and Morgan fidgeting at the show of respect. "Thank you both and your friends for all you've done. We wish you safe travels, and the knowledge that should you return, we shall greet you with open arms."

Morgan whimpered and looked to her sister. Severa sighed and nodded. "Alright, but make it quick."

Morgan rushed forward and nearly tacked Cordelia, hugging her mother tightly. "Thank you… we'll keep it in mind."

Cordelia patted the girl's back. Robin glanced at Severa, who was looking anywhere but at Morgan. "Cordelia's got enough room, there's no shame in hugging it out."

Severa sighed, but strolled forward and joined the hug. When you're made, may as well give in.

After a moment, Robin heard Sumia gasp, the woman almost leaping out of the hug she'd been sharing with Lucina and Cynthia. "Sumia, are you ok?"

The shout drew Cordelia from her embrace with her daughters, her legs carrying her to Sumia's side. "Sumia, what happened?!"

Robin turned to the girls. "Go find a healer, anyone that may be up! We'll do what we can for her!"
The girls nodded and ran from the hall, each realizing it would be the last time they saw any of their parents for a very-very long time.

If ever.

As they ran, Sumia stared at her hands, eyes unfocused. "Warmth…"

"They were… warm…"
It took some time to calm Sumia down.

Lissa was the first to hear of her friend's condition and outran everybody to reach her, but the prognosis was relatively simple.

Sumia needed to sleep.

It was easier said than done though, especially since Sumia didn't respond to anyone's words. Not even Chrom, when he arrived, was able to get her to calm down. Desperate, Lissa raced down into the palace stores and gathered a selection of herbs Ricken had told her about.

Sprinting back, Lissa found that Libra and Miriel had already set out the necessary tools to make what Lissa was thinking of.

Several minutes later, Cordelia forced Sumia's mouth open and Lissa poured the drought down her throat, Chrom helped her swallow.

The effect was immediate, Sumia's breathing slowed and she was soon asleep.

Lissa sighed as the panic died out. "Thank Naga, that was scary."

She looked to Robin and Cordelia. "Any idea what sent her into that? Marth told me you were here with her."

"We don't know," Cordelia answered. "We were actually speaking with Marth and friends before Sumia started panicking. Sumia embraced Marth and Catria, showing she was grateful and all, but a few minutes later this happened."

Chrom sighed, wondering why it all came back to them. "Let me guess, they're gone?"

"That they are," Sully confirmed. "Saw them hoofing it out of the palace on my way here."

Chrom growled, but took Sumia into his arms. "We'll worry about them later. Thank you all for coming, but Sumia's fine now. Lissa, come with me, everyone else should get some rest."

He didn't wait for anyone to speak, instead picking Sumia up and striding off. Lissa took off after him, leaving the others to slowly disperse until only Robin and Cordelia remained.

Robin frowned and began to stalk down the hall. "I'll be back."

"Not without me," Cordelia countered, stopping him in his tracks. "We do things together, alone hasn't been working out lately."

Robin almost smirked. "When I first met you, I never thought you'd say that."

Cordelia rolled her eyes and trapped his arm in hers. "I've changed since then... and so have you. Last I checked, you didn't confront people by yourself."

Robin did smirk this time. "But I do still run off half-cocked when I have an idea... Alright, fine, but we need to hurry!"

Robin took off running, Cordelia did her best to keep up. But, no matter the training she'd had,
Cordelia simply could not run very long. So, when Robin arrived in time to see Severa tying her blade to Morgan's saddle, Cordelia was riding piggyback.

"There they are!" She cried. "Stop you two, we have questions!"

Severa, who'd had her foot in the saddle, almost jumped over Theresa. "Tiamat's tits! Go, fly, I'll pull myself up!"

Morgan whipped the reins and Theresa took to the air, Severa dangling from the pegasus by naught but a strip of leather.

Robin cursed, hand stretching towards the girls. "Verfolgen!"

A bolt shot from his hand, but it appeared to dissipate well before reaching the retreating pair. Cordelia growled at their lost quarry, but grew curious as she felt Robin rumble with laughter. "What's so funny?"

Robin shook his head and started back to the palace. "Oh, just that I put a little spell on Tehthys' mount. It's a tracking beacon, so I can send one of my wolves after them whenever I want."

Cordelia grinned and hugged his neck. "Smart man. I knew I chose a good one to fall for."

Robin patted her arm, a wry smile on his face. "Yes, well…"

"Let's see if I can live up to that over the next few years."

-Chrom-

He'd been sitting long enough for the sun to rise.

Lissa had long left the room, promising to check in after breakfast, but Chrom had barely noticed. All he could see was Sumia, his love, sound asleep. Reaching out, he ran the back of his hand over her scalp, feeling the cool skin where her hair had once been.

It had never occurred to him how much he loved that hair. It was a wonderful grey that reminded him of the peaceful, cool fog that rolled over Ylisstol in the summer months. A secret pleasure had been to run his hands through it whenever Sumia needed comfort.

Now it was gone, and her life nearly with it.

*You put so much effort into keeping it pristine…* Chrom thought. *Even though you're clumsy to this day, you always made sure this was at its best. Now it's gone, and Gangrel started it all…*

Chrom squashed his rising anger. Sumia was alive and her hair would come back, as sure to heal as her soul. Chrom wasn't going to bring her to the fight with Gangrel, not after her panic attack, but he would at least give her something to look forward to.

Hopefully she would accept.

A groan pulled Chrom from his thoughts, his hand going to hers. "Sumia… are you ok?"

Sumia opened her eyes slowly, head lolling over to see Chrom. "Oh… hello Chrom. Did I get sick?"

"You could say that," Chrom said. "You had a panic attack and we couldn't calm you down. Lissa had to have Cordelia force a sleeping draught down your throat."
Sumia sighed. "I see… I'm sorry, I thought something had happened, but looking back on it, I shouldn't have lost my cool like that."

"Care to share?" Chrom asked, squeezing her hand absentmindedly. "I swear I won't speak a word of this."

Sumia sat up, pulling her hand from Chrom's grasp and placing it on her cheek. "Ok… I was thanking Marth and Catria the only way I felt worked, with a hug, but after a few moments of that I felt something I wasn't expecting…"

She glanced at Chrom before continuing. "See, you know I was found by Olivia in a room full of ice. I'd been… enchanted by a being calling itself Artezza and it made me act and think coldly. It was like having ice over my heart."

"Wait," Chrom interrupted. "Artezza? That's the name of the ice god, the one most Feroxi venerate."

Sumia shook her head. "I don't know if this was the same one and I'm kind of hoping it's not. Anyway, after I'd resolved to put my mother out of her misery—but before I knew she was possessed—I broke through the ice and caused that… mess."

Chrom took her hand from her cheek, silently urging her to finish.

Sumia smiled at him. "The being spoke after I'd killed her. Said I was 'worthy' or something and… took the feeling of heat from me. I haven't felt heat since then… until I held those two girls."

She looked at Chrom, curiosity in her eyes. "Um… before I finish, can I ask what's on your mind? You've been fidgeting ever since I woke up."

Chrom… blushed. "Uh, well, i-it's not that important…"

Sumia tilted her head, curiosity doubled. "It must be if you're stuttering. Go on, you can tell me."

Chrom's blush deepened and his hand went to a pocket Sumia knew was in his shirt. "Well… these last few weeks have made me realize something. Losing Emm, getting lost in my anger, and then almost losing you… life's too precious to hold myself back due to fear."

His hand went into the pocket and pulled out something Sumia had only ever dreamed she would see.

A ring.

"Sumia," Chrom began. "We've been friends for many years now, but I never had the courage to tell you the truth. …I love you, more than anything, and I want to ask if you would be both my best friend… and my wife."

Sumia hid her face in her hands, small tremors that had started when he showed the ring growing into full sobs. "Chrom… oh gods… I didn't think you'd say that…"

Chrom reached out and put his free hand on her shoulder. "I know I'm not the best person you could have ask you this question, but I want you by my side, always. It doesn't matter to me if you have faults, everyone does, but I want to make the most beautiful and loving woman I've ever met happy."

"Beautiful?" Sumia whispered. "Chrom… look at me. I'm bald, I have scars all over my face that will never go away, I've destroyed who knows how much—"
Chrom shushed her, arms wrapping around her. "I said it doesn't matter. To me, you are more beautiful than Naga herself. Even then, looks are nothing to me, it's you I love Sumia. You the person, not your body or your face or your hair."

Sumia sobbed again, face going to his shoulder as she hugged Chrom hard. Silence boomed in the room before Chrom felt breath tickle his ear. "...Yes."

Chrom pulled back, a grin rising on his face. "...Yes?"

Sumia looked him in the eye, tears gathering in her eyes. "Yes, Chrom... I want... I want to be your wife."

Chrom pulled her back into a hard embrace, enjoying the feeling of each other and the euphoria of reciprocated feelings. Sumia was the first to pull away, love at last showing in her eyes. "Chrom... thank you."

She leaned towards him, Chrom met her half-way in a tender kiss. They stayed there for a moment before pulling apart.

"I can finish now," Sumia breathed, taking Chrom's hand again. "I was given a concession in exchange for not being able to feel heat as normal people do. I can feel the heat I lack from two sources, my love... and my children."

Chrom rubbed her hand, willing to wait on giving her the ring for now. "And me? Am I warm?"

Sumia smiled and snuggled into the crook of his neck.

"Like the sun."

-Emmeryn-

Something was... strange.

Within the crystal she called home, Emmeryn pondered on the happenings around her.

*Why is it that the Shepherds attract the power of such beings? First it was Nowi with Ozymandias, then Sumia with Artezza, and then Robin with Fenrir. Now Asura and Tiamat have chosen representatives among the Shepherds as well.*

Emmeryn knew all the names the Shepherds had only ever heard of. Naga was the most venerated of the gods as she was closest and most active among the humans. That didn't mean she was anywhere close to the most powerful.

As she contemplated the strange occurrences, a small light appeared before her eyes. "...Hello?"

The light whirled and dove, as if trying to speak. Emmeryn didn't know how, but she understood the message. "Someone wishes to speak with me?"

The light brightened, as if proud of itself.

"I see," Emmeryn said. "Tell me, who wishes to speak?"

The light dimmed and moved side to side.

"You can't tell me?"
The light buzzed up and down.

"Very well," Emmeryn sighed. "I just hope it's important."

The light blazed and disappeared, only to be replaced by a glowing figure wrapped in every color of light. "I assure you, Emmeryn Adler de Ylisse, that what I have to say is quite important."

Emmeryn felt her soul strain at the presence, its power magnitudes higher than anything she'd ever known. Yet she could tell it was holding back much of its might. "…Who are you?"

The figure grew a smile of green light. "I am Horakthry, and I have come to give you a purpose."

Emmeryn would have gaped were she capable of it. "…Horakthry? The Creator of Light?"

The figure bowed. "The one and only. I am not in my full splendor, of course, but it's a pleasure meet you in person."

It stood. "Now then, onto business. You've no doubt noticed that many of my children have begun taking an interest in your friends."

Emmeryn steadied her spirit as best she could. "…Indeed, I have. Most of the High Gods have been dormant for millennia, why the sudden interest in mere mortals?"

Horakthry chuckled, the sound like church bells. "That's a secret that I cannot yet reveal. However, you will be playing a part that is more than just an advisor to your brother."

The god snapped its fingers and Emmeryn found herself in a great auditorium, fantastic beings surrounding the floor on which she suddenly stood. The great throne stood empty.

"Welcome babe," Horakthry laughed. "From today forth, you are the Shepherds representative in the great Choral. Listen well, as we have much to teach."

The figure of Horakthry smiled again, this time with purple light as its mouth. "And you forgot one Shepherd that has already been chosen, the very first in fact."

"Your dear little sister is my arbiter, and it is through her the others have been chosen."

Emmeryn sank to her knees, barely comprehending what was going on. "…How?"

A blast of light and sound came from her right, drawing Emmeryn's eyes to a massive wolf of pure energy. "Your sister is our eyes. Through her interactions, we have seen the Shepherds."

The crack of rock sounded on her left, this time drawing her gaze to a giant beetle coated in precious gems. "Through the Shepherds actions we have judged which are most suitable for our… gifts."

Finally, the sound of freezing water drew her eyes to the front once more, a giant blue-white lizard fused to an ice pillar looming over her. "Now it is up to us to decide when these gifts are received, if at all. The Shepherds may be suitable, but they are not necessarily worthy."

The great beasts disappeared and Horakthry took the stage. "This is why we require you, Emmeryn. One set of eyes will not be enough. You are both representative and oracle, to deliver our decisions on champions and the price they must pay to receive the gifts."
It held out a hand. "Do you accept?"

Emmeryn slowly collected herself before standing. "…No."

Horakthry flickered. "No? You would turn down the chance to learn all you can, knowledge that has long been lost to the mortal world? You would rob your friends of the chance to hold power beyond anything they could ever wish for?"

Emmeryn’s soul hardened. "I would, no matter the offer. Your so-called gifts have done little save harm my friends, and Lissa must have been scared beyond reckoning if she hid your existence from me. Besides, I will not allow them to become your pawns or your servants if you only come to them when they're desperate."

She looked into the auditorium's seats, staring down gods with a steel only she could muster. "You call yourself gods, but you are naught but selfish manipulators! It is small wonder your worshippers left for a more merciful hand if all you do is look for mortals that interest you and proceed to pick apart their lives!"

Silence fell on the auditorium, bemusement and shock the most prominent expressions on the congregation.

That is, until one of them began to laugh.

Emmeryn followed the laugh to the top of the auditorium where a large set of simple brass scales waited. "Well said, I don't think there's been a mortal soul invited here in millennia to ever tell off this band of half-wits!"

The scales shrunk out of sight and there was the sound of clanking for several minutes before they reappeared, hopping towards Emmeryn. "I like you girly, why don't we talk for a while?"

Emmeryn blinked as more laughter began to fall on her, even Horakthry's form blazing back to its usual luster. "…I'm sorry, what's going on now?"

The scales bounced in place, a laugh coming from them. "Why, you passed! You showed the gumption necessary to be part of this gathering and did something I've been trying to do for eons!"

The scales settled. "Now then, where were we…"

-Robin, Two Days Later-

"Who'd of thought we'd be hearing you got engaged the day before we set out?"

Robin and Chrom were riding in the front of a wagon, all the Shepherds save three in the caravan. It had been quite the surprise when Lissa had gone running through the palace screaming that bets were due, though there had been a great deal of confusion at first.

It was then they all realized that there were too many bets among them to keep track of it all.

Joy replaced the confusion after Lissa slowed down enough to explain and Chrom arrived with Sumia in tow, his signet ring shining on her left hand.

Sadly, a messenger from Ferox arrived the day after to find a mass of hungover Ylissians. The short version was that the Shepherds needed to march immediately or they'd miss the chance to end Gangrel and bring peace to the continent.
The news had sobered the Shepherds quickly, especially when a wagon carrying Frederick and Nowi arrived a few hours later. Sumia was in no shape to go to battle after her ordeal and a physical by every Shepherd with an ounce of healing experience revealed neither Frederick or Nowi would be able to fight either.

Were it not for Duke Dunwall and Duchess Miranda, Chrom would have been far more hesitant in ordering the Shepherds to march. The two had taken the news of his engagement, with varying degrees of acceptance. While Dunwall had admitted to being hopeful his daughter could have caught Chrom's eye, he was still happy for the pair.

Miranda was far more cheerful, gladly offering to start instructing Sumia in governance while the other Shepherds were away. With their friends in good hands, the Shepherds left in good spirits.

Which led back to Robin's comment, which Chrom didn't appreciate. "Give me some credit. At least I didn't propose immediately after a battle."

"But that would be so like you." Robin countered with a smirk. "I can see it now. If this rebellion didn't happen, we'd have charged Gangrel, met up afterwards, we'd leave you alone with a worried Sumia…"

He ducked a punch. "Come on, it coulda happened!"

Chrom grunted and looked into the back of the wagon. "What about you back there? Any plans for Dunwall's daughter?"

Gaius popped a chocolate in his mouth. "Well I told her the rest of the story about what happened with me and Dunwall last night, dear ol' dad backed me up and everything. Never thought the woman could tear-up, let alone apologize."

He snorted. "Got threatened to 'stay away' from her afterwards by the Duke. Pretty sure it was the overprotective dad talking so I didn't take it too seriously."

"You got balls Gaius," Sully laughed from her mount. "Didn't think you'd ever be interested after she started tearing into you."

Gaius glanced in front of their wagon where Maribelle was chatting with Cherche. "Well… let's just say I don't regret busting into the vault the first time."

Robin grinned at his friend and leaned back, catching a flash of red pass overhead. "You know what… I'm looking forward to the end of this. Relaxing doesn't sound that bad."

"You looking forward to time with pretty lady!" Gregor shouted from his spot in the wagon. "Gregor looking forward to time in town, more money than Gregor could ever need!"

Chrom smirked at the mercenary. "Isn't Miriel recruiting you for her experiments? Last I saw you downtown, she had you trying to find moss."

Gregor shrugged. "Eh, Gregor can't say no to pretty face. Terrifying intelligence, but good to talk when book not in face."

"Miriel doesn't read all the time?!" Sully shouted. "When? Only time I don't see her with a book in her face is in battle or bathing!"

Robin groaned as he sat up. "While that vein of conversation would no doubt be entertaining, let's be a bit more serious. Everyone ready?"
His friends grew serious, nods exchanged as Robin pointed toward the horizon. "Good, because in three days we'll be through the mountains and upon Gangrel. Underestimating him is, to put it blandly, a bad idea. Let's be careful and get it done, then we can discuss our plans."

He reached into his coat and pulled out a deck of cards.

"Now then, who wants to play blackjack?"

-Severa, That Night-

"What are we going to do now?"

It was a good question. With Gangrel soon to be a thing of the past and Valm not to arrive for at least two years, there was little for the girls to do.

Lucina sighed, not sure how to answer. "Well, there are still Risen about. The Shepherds and Ylissean army can't be everywhere at once."

"Yeah, but we ran from Ylisstol." Morgan pointed out. "Mom and Dad came running after us and I don't think we'll be able to stay quiet on who we are if they find us."

Cynthia sighed as she poked at the fire. "Ferox is pretty big, but it's not a good idea to be there during winter. We'd have to deal with whether the summit happens on time, as well."

Severa stood and stretched, eyes on the stars. "Well I can only think of staying in North Ferox during the summer and South Ferox during the winter. They'll ask Khan Flavia to keep an eye out for us, but the only other option we have is staying in Grevis."

Lucina grew grim, which didn't escape her sister's eye. "Lucy?"

Lucina stood, drawing everyone's attention to her. "Guys… I think only you three should go to Grevis."

Severa hissed and stalked up to Lucina. "What are you talking about, we move as a group!"

Lucina put her hands on Severa's shoulders, holding her off. "Look, I don't mean that I won't be with you. I just think I should be the one to travel to Plegia every once in a while, to check on the summit location. Besides, we ran so fast from the palace we forgot our purses."

The group dropped their heads. The purses had all their gold in it, so they were left with ten silver between them at best.

"Well the summit's not supposed to be for two years." Cynthia argued. "We can get some money, rent somewhere, and still take care of Risen packs in Grevis. It's not like we'll be getting rusty."

Lucina sighed. "I know, but… I feel like I'll get too comfortable with that life. I don't want us to get too attached to people we'll inevitably have to leave."

Severa sighed through her nose before she looked at Morgan. "Morg, it's time."

Morgan blinked before grinning widely. "It is?! Alright, Cynthia, come with me, we need to take axes to these trees immediately!"

Morgan hopped from her seat and dragged Cynthia to Theresa's side. Ignoring the princess's questions, Morgan retrieved two hatchets from her saddlebags and dragged Cynthia into the woods.
Now alone, Lucina stared at the suddenly uncertain Severa. "What… was that?"

Severa played with her hair, hands running through one of the tails. "Well… Morgan and I came up with this idea shortly after you decided to pose as a boy. We didn't want it to be… weird, so we only ran it by Laurent and Owain before we went through the portal."

Lucina tilted her head. "What's the idea?"

Severa sighed and stopped playing with her hair. She steeled her eyes and took Lucina's hands in hers, entwining their fingers on an impulse. "Lucy… I want you to marry me."

Lucina's jaw dropped, her mind grinding to a halt. "…Say again?"

Severa wanted to rip her hair out but held off the urge. "Look, Lucy, I like you, you like me, we both know that. I'd go far enough to say I love you, with all my heart, but the plan's simple. Most of the world at large thinks you're a guy anyway, and a random priest isn't going to question a young couple seeking a quick marriage."

Lucy was stuck on one part of that. "You… love me?"

"We had this conversation already!" Severa screamed. "We agreed to give it some time after that talk at Marley's and guess what, I think I love you more right this minute than I ever did before. So just listen to the rest of this and then we can make out!"

Lucina nodded dumbly, letting Severa groan a curse before continuing. "As I said, no priest is going to question getting married if you're dressed like a boy. We do that, and both us and our sisters can get work in the town nearby. Add to that we can dye our hair and I can put a patch over my eye while Morgan does something similar."

She gestured to the field around them. "This place is good real estate too! There's enough wood, we can build whatever we need and still be within an hour's flight from town. No one would guess the people that are killing all the Risen are based here, so we're good for a while!"

Severa stared at Lucina for a time before sighing. "Are you ok with it? We can still go to Grevis and apprentice ours-"

She was cut off as Lucina pulled her into a desperate kiss, Severa's eyes widening at the force she was using. Deciding that this was a yes, Severa returned the kiss with equal force. Sloppy didn't begin to describe the press of lips between the two girls, but they were working out more than a decade of hidden feelings.

Considering no tongues were used or clothes were ripped off, they did very well.

Morgan and Cynthia, who were watching from the edge of the trees, kept looking between their sisters and themselves. "Our sisters are making out."

Morgan nodded.

"They'll likely be incredibly embarrassed in five minutes."

Morgan nodded again.

"We're going to be legal sisters-in-law."

A grin with the nod this time.
"We're going to be building our own cabin."

A grimace with the nod.

"We'll likely be caught soon after we're forced to go somewhere public and save lots of people."

Morgan shrugged. "What can you do?"

The two younger siblings shook hands, put the hatchets over their shoulders, and walked back into the woods.

They could hear the new lovers apologizing to each other profusely even as they hacked away.

-Plegia, Underneath Xaldornos-

The miasma of putrid magic hung heavily in the room, a dark figure gliding through the black wisps.

"Is the ritual complete?" It asked, the voice placing it as male.

A giggle met the question, the figure of a woman appearing in the miasma. "Yes, it is. The marquise was a good conduit for Olivia's soul and the count was a better match for Lon'qu than I thought."

The man chuckled, his hand finding the woman's waist. "Good, then we have enough to set the plan into motion."

He looked to a corner of the room that was almost completely black. "Validar, is everything ready for you to take the throne?"

"It is, my Lord." A raspy voice answered. "All that's left is Gangrel's death at the hands of the Shepherds. After that, there is a boat at the coast waiting for your agents."

The man laughed, barely noticing the woman making circles on his chest. "Very good. The seals are in place and I grow stronger by the day, and this sabotage will only make my power greater still."

He looked to another corner of the room. "Go my agents, do what you can to slow Valm's fleet construction. Remember, do not draw too much attention before they are strong enough to invade. After that, feel free to weaken both sides as much as you wish."

Five figures melted from the shadows, each with a cursed weapon in their grip. All of them bowed to the man before disappearing into the miasma, the man dismissed his servant.

He turned to the woman. "Now then… where were we?"

The woman giggled and pulled his lips to hers, the thin garment she wore falling to the ground and joining the ashes of the many who'd died in that room.

What a joy it was to make love in an old executioner's chamber.

If you're a demon, that is.

-Chrom-

"It's time."

Chrom stood on the top of a hill, the Shepherds and Feroxi army behind him. They created a number of routes through the mountains during previous incursions into Plegia. Flavia and the Feroxi soldiers
waited for the Shepherds on the plains where they crossed the previous day.

Now they stared down at a large plain, several make-shift fortifications set up in front of a small castle. Bridges crossed over a river to the east and more fortifications were set on the opposite bank.

Robin sighed beside Chrom. "This should be easy. I see few soldiers over there and the fortifications can't have been there for more than a few days. But…"

"It reeks of an ambush." Chrom finished. "What do you think, Flavia?"

The Khan frowned as she surveyed the field. "The structures wouldn't hold more than three hundred men altogether. The castle probably has more than that, but we outnumber them 3-1 at worst."

Robin crossed his arms and peered into the distance. "If that's the case, then we can just form a spearhead. Line up and drive straight for the heart."

"Best plan I've heard all day." Flavia snorted. "Why don't we put a pair of platoons on the bridges and end this?"

Chrom hummed. "If it ends this quickly, then I'm all for it. Robin, tell the Shepherds we'll be the vanguard. Flavia, we'll be counting on your men to deal with the majority."

Robin nodded and began barking orders, Flavia smacked Chrom's arm to offer final words. "You've changed kid. I look forward to your reign."

She laughed and marched into the ranks of her army, orders roaring from her throat. Beyond that, only the sound of boots and armor rang through the field while the army took their position.

At the front stood Sully, the metaphorical tip of the spear. To her flanks stood the few knights that had volunteered to come with the Shepherds, their horses pawing the ground impatiently. Behind them were the foot soldiers, led by Kellam and Donnel, before mages and swordsmen brought up the rear.

Behind the Shepherds stood the Feroxi army, their numbers stretching well back of the front. Only two people were in the air, Cordelia and Cherche, but the key to the plan lay not in their sheer volume of numbers.

It lay in the fist-sized rocks that Miriel had collected from the cliff she'd blown up by accident.

Every mage had been given a handful of the rocks and a tome of fire, the goal simple. Blow every piece of hastily built wall to smithereens.

Chrom, sitting behind Cherche for this battle, drew Falchion. "Ylisse and Ferox, this is the day! We shall charge the walls of the Mad King and bring his retched tyranny to an end! For peace, for those lost in this senseless war, for those yet to come! Charge!"

The army roared its answer and began to charge. First it was a walk, then a jog, then a full sprint as the riders separated from the army at large. As expected, Plegians began to pour out of the weak stone, but they were swiftly crushed under the hooves of the rides or skewered on their lances.

The riders couldn't destroy them all though and the two armies met in a clash of steel, screams, mud, and blood.

Mages on both sides rained destruction on the vulnerable and slow while archers attempted to pick out stragglers and the wounded. With the combatants so close together, many of the Shepherd mages
couldn't cast their most powerful attacks for fear of friendly fire.

That didn't mean some couldn't slaughter the Plegians wholesale. Robin summoned wolves to his sides that flashed into the screaming mobs, the familiars ripping Plegians to pieces or burning them with energy.

Stahl rode through the mass, his every pass nipping at the rear of the Plegians until he was close enough to toss his bag of stones over the wall of a crumbling fort. A sphere of fire screeched from the sky and met the bag, blowing the fort to pieces. The debris laid low Plegians and a few unfortunate Feroxi.

Cordelia, who'd delivered the blast, swerved through the sky with all the skill she held. After the blast had ruined the fort, every archer immediately turned their attention to her and the sky was black with projectiles.

Below her, Libra slung the injured over his back and fought to the back of the army, where Miriel and Lissa were providing emergency aid while Gregor turned any Plegian that tried to get close into chunks.

Throughout the carnage, Cherche had her eyes glued firmly on the castle. It was the lone sound structure on the field and her job was simple.

Deliver Chrom to the Mad King's door and leave.

To a normal mind, it was madness, but Chrom had good reason to be going in. He had back-up.

"Can we hurry it up!" Vaike called from beneath Minerva. "I don't enjoy being held like fresh meat down here!"

Cherche frankly wanted to kill Robin sometimes. While it was true there was no way Chrom would be going anywhere alone, they could've fit Vaike into the saddle rather than make him a dangling target.

"Ah, that was close!" Vaike shouted. "Watch it down there, I need this arm!"

Chrom chuckled wearily. "Cherche, we may as well go into the dive. I think the shock's starting to wear off."

Cherche sighed and angled Minerva down, swooping towards the castle walls. Chrom palmed the bag of rocks Miriel had given him and he pulled his arm back. "Ready?"

Cherche nodded and tapped the Fire tome at her hip. "Ready."

Chrom took a deep breath and heaved the bag toward the castle as they roared past it. "Now!"

Cherche's hand shot out, magic script blooming to life as the bag fell into a pillar of flames. The results were explosive enough to blow a chunk out of the wall and send every soldier in the courtyard scrambling for cover.

Cherche pulled Minerva around and descended into the courtyard, the wyvern letting Vaike go when they were close to the ground. Vaike landed with a grunt, but pulled Armads off his back and started waving it around. "Bring your best shot bastards!"

Chrom hopped from his seat once Minerva landed, waving for Cherche to leave as he joined Vaike. "So, you know what to do right?"
"Keep this lot on me while you deal with the madman." Vaike answered. "Good luck Chrom, we'll be comparing notches later, yeah?"

Chrom smirked and drew Gradivus. "We'll see whether the others get here before that happens. Let's go!"

They charged at the closest Plegians they could find, Vaike crushing one under Armad's weight while Chrom skewered another on Gradivus before pointing to the doors leading into the keep. "Vaike, open the door!"

Vaike flew towards the door, spinning on his heels until Armad slammed into the wood. The force was enough to shake the door in its frame, the lock holding it smashed into useless scrap.

Chrom nodded his thanks before throwing the door open and running in, Vaike's bloodlust fueled roars ringing in his ears. The keep was quiet, strangely so, and Chrom was unmolested as he sprinted for the top floor.

He arrived to find a single figure looking out a window so small it was almost funny. The flaming orange hair and yellow vest placed him as Gangrel and Chrom hefted Gradivus onto his shoulder.

_Find peace from your madness Gangrel_, Chrom internally snarled. _You owe Emm that much._

The great lance flew through the air, trained squarely at Gangrel's heart, but steel rasped through the air and Gradivus was deflected into the wall instead.

"Well-well," Gangrel cackled as he looked at Chrom, a Levin Sword in hand. "Would you look at this? The little prince came to do me in personally! And alone at that… whatever happened to 'working together' eh?"

Chrom drew Falchion, but he was unnerved. Gangrel sounded far too calm, his usual mad glee absent, but Chrom could see the madness shining in the Plegian King's eyes as he strode forward. "My friends are doing their duty and I shall do mine. Your reign ends today Gangrel, whether it be in chains or in the earth."

Gangrel started chuckling before it grew into a loud cackle, his smug grin returning. "Chains? Why little prince, I will die today, but before that happens… well."

He pointed his sword at Chrom. "I will rob Ylisse of its royal family, starting with you."

The duelists began to circle each other, looking for an opening that they could use. Gangrel grew impatient and swung his blade, a lance of lightning racing for Chrom. Chrom rolled away from the energy and sprinted for Gangrel, dodging the blasts as best he could.

Those that hit made Chrom hiss in pain, but his grip held steady as he reached Gangrel.

His first strike was turned away and so was the second. A fist connected with Gangrel's face and sent the king stumbling, but he caught Falchion on the jagged edge of his sword. The two pushed against each other for a moment before Chrom overpowered Gangrel and pushed the jagged blade away.

Falchion flashed and scored a shallow cut on Gangrel's chest, but Chrom paid for his aggression with a kick to his side.

Gangrel hissed as his leg met the metal, but the force was enough to push Chrom away.

Gangrel began to fire more bolts and their dance repeated itself again and again, Chrom always
trying to close the distance while Gangrel tried to fry him alive.

Gangrel, though, was more desperate. The longer they fought, the more certain it became that the Shepherds or Feroxi would reach the fort and pour in. If he was to have his revenge, he needed to take it.

Chrom grunted in surprise as Gangrel charged him for the first time, Falchion moving just in time to catch a stab. Gangrel grinned at the opening and punched Chrom's temple, dazing the prince.

Grabbing Chrom by the throat, Gangrel threw the prince across the room with all the strength he could muster, the prince thudding off the ground and losing his grip on Falchion as he rolled into the wall.

With the sacred sword gone, Gangrel leapt on the downed prince, but found his blade held back by the shield Chrom wore. "The Fire Emblem!"

"That's right you madman," Chrom grunted. "So close yet so far."

Gangrel's face twisted in a grimace and called on the power of his blade. "Die!"

Lightning flowed from the blade and burned Chrom with all its wrath. Chrom screamed as every nerve in his body flared in warning, his lone free arm spasming with every jolt.

"This is how all humans die!" Gangrel cackled, literally smelling his victory in Chrom's burning skin. "Alone, weak, and scared! Know this as you go and greet your precious Naga!"

Chrom grit his teeth, and glared with all the strength he could muster as his hand closed on the handle behind him. "Not…today!"

Gangrel snarled before something dribbled past his lips. Suddenly weak, Gangrel took his hand off the blade and wiped his lip.

Blood.

Gangrel's face drooped and he looked to his side, the blade of Gradivus sticking out of him. "…Oh."

They were both still for a moment, Chrom breathing hard as the shock left his system. With Gangrel distracted, he scrambled to his feet and stood back a few paces, half-crouched to continue their fight.

Gangrel stood still and then looked up at Chrom, licking absently at the blood on his chin. His expression contorted from wrath to grief, and then something akin to confusion. His body seemed to realize it was dying then, because he fell back hard, Gradivus clanging on the floor but still clinging to his side.

Gangrel stayed on the ground so Chrom crept forward and then sat. He kept the Emblem between himself and Gangrel, but otherwise let himself relax. It was clear any threat was gone.

In the silence Chrom said: "You'll bleed out soon"

Gangrel sighed, his voice lacking its madness when it passed his lips. "Looks like I will."

He looked to Chrom. "You're… Chrom, right?"

Chrom nodded. "That I am."

Gangrel chuckled weakly and leaned back on his arms, Gradivus sticking out of him like a macabre
"Well… I don't think I've had so clear a mind for some time. Never realized how much you grew up."

He smirked. "Funny, isn't it. By the time I get my head above water this happens."

Chrom shook his head and stood to walk to Gangrel's side, kicking the Levin Sword away just in case. "I can say the same… didn't even remember we'd met before the war until a few weeks ago."

"Has it been that long?" Gangrel asked. "The years have blurred since I took the crown. All I can recall is violence and more violence. Never wanted this, you know, and you probably hate me."

Chrom nodded. "I do. Emmeryn shared your reasons with me before she was captured, but I still hate you... even now."

"I'm not surprised," Gangrel sighed, spitting blood before continuing. "I've done much evil in my life, nothing that a simple apology could ever hope to rectify."

He looked at Chrom, expression peaceful. "While you may hate me, I can at least know that my life will serve as a lesson. Know that your blood will follow you wherever you go and so will the burdens it carries.

He began to slump over and Chrom remained where he was. "...Anything else, King Gangrel?"

Gangrel hacked a laugh. "First time... you've ever called me that. ...Tell me, you ever talk to that girl of yours?"

"I did," Chrom answered. "We're engaged."

"Engaged!" Gangrel hacked, blood staining his lips further. "Well, when you see her next, hold her close. ...Oh, one more thing."

His hand shook reaching into his vest, skin paler than it had any right to be. "I've... kept these close for a long time. Don't know why I didn't burn them, but I'd like someone who appreciates comedy to have them."

Gangrel's hand drew back and presented Chrom with several long pieces of parchment. "Here... take it."

Chrom took the parchment and began looking it over. "What is it?"

"A... comedy." Gangrel whispered. "I finished... writing it... just before I left... Ylisstol. Never did get... to act it out."

Chrom sighed and reached over, closing the dead king's eyes. "I'll see it put to the stage. You as the Plegian King can burn, but I want the one who would entertain children to be remembered. Goodbye Gangrel, may what good you held pass into Naga's arms."

He looked at the parchments and gingerly rolled them up and placed them into the pack at his hips. "Also... thanks for the engagement gift."

He stood, pulled Gradivus from Gangrel's remains, and strode to the door. Vaike stood on the other side beside a simple man in a tabard with Plegia's emblem sewn into it. "What are your burial rights?"

The man bowed to Chrom. "Cremation, milord. The ashes are used to nurture a family's fruit tree."
"I see," Chrom sighed. "Then go and see to your dead. Vaike, go and bring Gangrel with us. I want to watch him burn."

Vaike nodded and went into the room, Chrom walking down the stairs and out into the courtyard. He was met by Robin. "It is done?"

Chrom nodded, his gaze turning to the field where the dead were being collected. "Yes."

"It is done."

-Night-

Only the Shepherds were in attendance that night.

In accordance with Plegian customs, the dead had been burned early in the day and their ashes collected. Flavia had seen to her dead after presenting Robin with the list of reparations she'd be requesting from the Plegians for the cost of the war.

Knowing that the Plegians would fold to any demands given, Chrom asked for only enough to repair the damage done to Ylisse and Ferox, along with one favor, before the messenger was sent.

An hour later, Plegia agreed to the terms and peace was achieved at last.

The favor stood before the Shepherds, a pile of wood covered in oil and arranged like the pyres of the soldiers that had been cremated earlier in the day. On it lay Gangrel's corpse, the Plegian negotiators all too happy to be rid of the king's body.

Many of the Shepherds vehemently protested doing anything for Gangrel. His actions cost them dearly and leaving him for the crows was their justice.

Chrom silenced them by pointing out how like Gangrel they sounded. The implied hypocrisy made lambs out of the once raving doubters.

Now they waited, Chrom staring up at the pyre. "To think it would actually end."

Lissa nodded, eyes red from earlier tears and the torch she held. "Yeah…"

She looked to Chrom. "Why… exactly are we doing this? He's the reason Emm…"

Chrom stroked his sister's head, taking the torch from her while her grip was loose. "Emm would have wanted us to show respect. He may have done great evil, but that doesn't mean we're not able to move past it."

Lissa nodded and Chrom placed the torch against the oil-soaked wood.

It caught immediately, the flame building into a grand inferno. It was a pyre fit for a king, maybe one Gangrel didn't deserve, but something Chrom felt necessary nonetheless.

The siblings retreated into the crowd of Shepherds, all watching silently until the pyre collapsed and embers filled the air.

One by one, they left until only Chrom and Robin remained. Robin, seeing Chrom wouldn't be leaving, asked the question he'd been pondering since the pyre had been built. "Why?"

"Because he was as much a victim as anyone," Chrom answered. "His actions earned my hatred, that
I don't deny, but he was a product of something that has played out for centuries.

He looked to his friend. "I may not be able to answer violence with kindness like Emm can, but I do wish to end such evil when it presents itself. I don't want others to go through what has stolen so much from us and Plegia alike."

Robin nodded. "I see… well, I did say I'd help you with anything, so don't hesitate to ask me if you need it."

"Gladly," Chrom laughed. "I'll need a lot of help in the years to come. Emm and Gangrel have both shown me that."

He reached into his pack and pulled out a roll of parchment. "Look at these."

Robin took the parchment and unrolled it, eyes widening at what he saw. "…Where'd you get this?"

Chrom smiled and grabbed an urn that lay next to his feet, his words carrying on the wind.

"From an old bastard."
Aftermath

It was quiet the morning after Gangrel burned.

The camp went about its business with little in the way of conversation, everyone suffused with a fog of exhaustion that had rolled in overnight. They had been going full-tilt, doing everything they could, for months on end. Now, with the crisis averted and the land at peace, their tired souls demanded rest.

Chrom may have been more than willing to grant that rest, but they needed to get home and hammer out the next few years.

The prince snorted as the realization passed through him. It would take that long to get everything back to the way it was, let alone beyond that.

"What's on your mind?" Lissa asked as they walked towards a wagon. "You've been quiet all morning."

Chrom smiled at his sister, placing the box of vulneraries she'd asked him to carry into the wagon. "Just thinking on how much work's still left to do. I hope Sumia's ready for that. Hell, I hope I'm ready for that."

Lissa sighed and patted his arm. "You and me both. I'll be doing anything you're not and I'll be dealing with all the noble ladies and their rumors. Well, the ones that weren't part of the rebels."

Chrom hummed and caught sight of Donnel hauling supplies to another wagon with Kellam and Gregor. "Those rumors wouldn't happen to be because of that thing you wanted to tell me, would it?"

Lissa sighed and hopped into the wagon bed, eyes flicking around. "Look, you can't say what I'm about to say to anyone, especially Maribelle. I want to let her get lost in some things before I break the news."

Chrom crossed his arms and nodded. "Please, go on. It's not every day you choose to share a secret with me."

Lissa sighed and put on her sternest face. "Ok, so, I know I've been harping on about your love life and the other Shepherds for a while."

Chrom gave her a flat stare. "Indeed. Robin informed me you apparently had some elaborate plan to get me and Sumia to confess to each other."

Lissa muttered an oath before continuing. "That aside, I've… kind of put myself in the same position. Not oblivious like you, but more what Vaike and Cherche are getting at."

"So, getting ready to date, but not quite." Chrom mumbled, internally laughing. "Who's the guy? I need to make sure he understands his position."

Lissa glared at him. "Oh no you don't. He's nervous enough as is, and I refuse to let you play the overprotective card. 'Sides, I'm pretty sure he's already proven himself."

"I think he has too." Chrom chuckled. "Mind lettin' me guess? I think I know who it is."
Lissa tilted her head, curiosity clear, until Chrom whistled at Stahl. "Hey Stahl, mind if I borrow Donnel?"

Stahl looked between Chrom, Lissa, Donnel, and the wagon he'd just finished filling before shrugging. "Go ahead, I want no part in this. You'll find me with Sully if all goes well."

He left and Chrom walked over to guide Donnel to them. Both Lissa and Donnel glanced at each other nervously while Chrom looked between them. "...So, to state the obvious, you were talking about Donnel."

The pair blushed and looked away. When neither spoke, Chrom sighed. "I admit, had you told me this before we first went to Ferox, I would've been completely against it."

He smiled at them. "However, I've seen Donnel's bravery personally and I've seen him defend you many times. He has a lot to learn if this is to work, as you likely know, but at the very least I'm glad you've been able to follow your heart."

Donnel and Lissa were shocked into silence, neither willing to believe Chrom would give his blessing so readily. Chrom decided he'd said enough. "Now then, I'll leave getting the ground rules set up to you. Just make sure you're not too public just yet, I believe everyone would like to get home and rest."

Chrom turned and strode away, ignoring the excited squeals of his sister as he went. There wasn't much left to do outside of pack the tents, so Chrom found his and began to work. A flash of light interrupted him, but he continued to pack his things. "What can I do for you, Emm?"

Emmeryn smiled from her seat on his cot. "I'm so proud of you, Chrom. You may not have been able to save Gangrel, but that was a beautiful thing you did. Also, thank you for letting Lissa live her life, even if it doesn't end up working out."

Chrom shrugged and closed his pack. "It's the least I can do. Lissa is her own woman, she can take care of herself, and I'm no animal. If I'm to learn from the past, and keep it from repeating, I must learn to leave it where it belongs."

Emmeryn stood and embraced him. "My little hero's all grown up. Engaged, soon to lead Ylisse, and letting reason speak with emotion on equal footing."

Chrom's hand gripped her arm, taking solace from Emmeryn's presence rather than the fake limb. "I still believe that you were a better leader than I can ever hope to be. I will try my best, but I'll need all the help I can get."

"And I will do all in my power to do so." Emmeryn whispered. "So will your friends and your love. Seek them out and you will find all you need to lead our home into the future."

Chrom sighed and freed himself from Emmeryn's embrace. "I will be sure to share the work, though leadership is my burden to bear. Thank you, Emm, it's all I can do not to run home this minute."

Emmeryn chuckled and began to fade. "Finish the rest of today's tasks and everyone can go home. I'll speak to you again after we are home."

Chrom nodded and she disappeared. Alone again, Chrom sighed and started working on his tent at large.

He needed to speak with Robin about a very important job.
Robin finished the last of his thoughts and closed the journal. He'd started recording the goings on of his mind soon after going to Ferox when he found his brain too disordered to focus on anything, even playing his trumpet.

Now though, he was wondering what he was going to do next. Yes, he wanted to court Cordelia to the best of his limited romantic ability, but he didn't have anything outside of the Shepherds that… paid. He also didn't have a house, many personal belongings, or even a history to claim as his.

Sighing, he stood from his desk and went back to his packing. It was obvious that everyone wanted to leave as soon as possible, so the delay to write likely wasn't appreciated.

"Robin?"

Robin looked to the flap of his tent and smiled as Miriel entered. "Miriel, to what do I owe the pleasure?"

Miriel hummed as she looked around. "I see you're still not ready to depart. You really should follow your paramour's example; such a mess reflects poorly on her."

Robin rolled his eyes. "Says the perennial mistress of superfluity. What do you need?"

Miriel huffed and adjusted her glasses. "I was able to find another cropping of explosive rock in the surrounding woods yesterday. Now that I have done a more complete analysis, it should be possible to find other deposits across Ylisse."

"But what use could we have for rocks that blow up when burned?" Robin queried. "I don't see a use for them aside from war."

Miriel shook her head and held up a pebble. "Not quite. The rock does explode when subjected to a sudden invasion of heat, such as a blast of fire. However, observe what happens when I slowly add lightning."

Robin blanched, but couldn't stop Miriel from activating her thunder tome. He expected a blast to burst his ears and scorch his tent, but that didn't happen. Instead, the pebble began to…glow, for lack of a better word.

Miriel nodded at Robin's hanging jaw. "As you can see, when subjected to a steady electrical current, the stone lights up. The more power I channel into the stone, the brighter it glows, but should I try and increase the power too quickly…"

Robin felt her magic surge and the rock burst.

"It breaks." Miriel finished. "I feel there's a way to harness this, but I require Chrom's permission to pursue this endeavor. Can I trust that you'll speak to him about it after we return?"

Robin hummed and cupped his chin. "I agree, it does warrant further study. But…why come to me? Surely you could have asked Chrom yourself."

Miriel adjusted her glasses and Robin felt her usual intensity relaxing a little. "The prince will be greatly preoccupied when we return, as will many of us. You are the most likely to see him while this goes on and thus the most likely to deliver the message in the near-future."

"I see," Robin sighed. "Thank you for bringing this up, I'm sure Chrom will be thrilled. I'll get my
stuff together now, you can go."

Miriel sniffed, but left without another word. Robin shook his head and set about packing everything away until all his things were ready to move and the tent was rolled up.

"Finished at last." Panne noted as she walked by. "Your mate has been waiting for you to check in."

Robin rolled his eyes at the taguel. "Would you stop calling people each other's mates? None of this lot are married yet, unless Libra's been doing his duties behind my back."

Panne smirked at his considering face. "Pairs of taguels were always considered mates. We never had any of this… courting nonsense."

Robin raised a brow at her. "Our first conversation in a while, and this is what we're talking about? I assumed you'd be asking about safe places you could go now that the war's over."

Panne frowned, arms crossed over her armor. "I already have a place in mind. Prince Chrom informed me of a region in Surperius that's sparsely populated, close enough that he could still contact me. It will be a nice place to settle, if only for a time."

"You mean to live with Virion." Robin realized. "He was boasting about a lovely plot of land in a sparsely populated region of Surperius, but still close enough to reach a large town within a day. … Why?"

Panne sighed, her nose pinched in a futile attempt to ward off a headache. "Virion is… something else. Most of the others approached me out of curiosity, as I am a taguel and the first any of them had seen. It wasn't until later that they saw me simply as Panne rather than a taguel."

Robin nodded, internally rueing he'd tried to learn about the taguel before the woman. Being alone in the world when he first woke up, he should've been more sympathetic. "I do thank you for being willing to share. I know it wasn't easy being among us when humans have done such evil to you."

"No, it wasn't." Panne sighed. "It still isn't, to an extent. Virion though, was unique. He approached me because I was a woman that appeared lonely. I did not appreciate the chauvinism, but he made the distinction that I was a person before a taguel. I wish to see if that ability to see all as people remains, even in private."

Robin smiled at her. "I see. Well, he may be dramatic, but I think you'll see that he's a good man. Though, I do expect that you'll come visit Ylisstol from time to time, right? It's always a great time when you spar with us."

Panne smirked and waved her hand vaguely. "We'll see. I've liked my time with the Shepherds, I'd even say that you've become friends at that. I never thought it was possible, but here we are."

She turned and strode away. "I suggest you get moving. Your mate is likely impatient."

Robin scowled at her back. "For the last time, she is not my mate!"

Panne waved back the shout and Robin was left to stew for a moment. Panne was right though, so Robin grabbed his things and made for the gathering of wagons that would take them home.

-Cordelia-

"Is that everything?" Cherche asked as she placed her tent into a wagon.
Cordelia hummed as she looked over her list. All but one of the tents was accounted for and most of the supplies had been loaded. "We're still missing a few ration crates and Robin hasn't stored his tent yet. I sent Panne to go get Robin and Vaike went to grab the crates. We'll be ready to leave soon."

Cherche nodded and looked to the gathering of wagons. "If I may ask, what are you going to be doing now that the war is over? I'm sure your talents will be in great demand."

Cordelia sighed and placed her list on the wagon behind her. "I'll be going around and gathering the Pegasus Knights that remain. Our Order is in shambles, but it's not yet dead. After that, I'll be recruiting, training, and altogether rebuilding the Order."

She smiled shyly. "I'll also be seeing plenty of Robin. We've already made plans to visit the restaurant where we became friends for our first date."

Cherche chuckled. "That's very nice, though I hope duties won't keep the two of you apart too long. Heaven knows how busy we'll be and I know I'm not the only one without permanent living arrangements out of this lot."

Cordelia pursed her lips. "Now that you mention it, I don't own a home myself. I've lived in the Pegasus Knight barracks for several years now, but the thought never crossed my mind."

Cherche shrugged. "It's just a thought. Personally, I want to travel around Ylisse a little bit, see the sights. Do that for about, oh, six months before I try and find a home of my own."

Cordelia nodded, she could respect that. "Have you talked about it with Chrom or Vaike yet? You are part of the Shepherds, so the prince needs to give you leave. As for Vaike, well, you've worked with him long enough it'd be rude not to tell him."

Cherche bit her lip, not sure how to answer that. "I'll be sure to inform both Prince Chrom and Virion about my plans, but Vaike… I'm not sure how I could break it to him."

Cordelia crossed her arms. "How so? Yes, he's going to remain with the Shepherds, but that doesn't mean you can't just tell him. In fact, I'm sure he'll be more than happy to hear you've decided to travel since he'll get to run into you at some point."

Cherche sighed, pushing past Cordelia to take a seat on the wagon bed. "Cordelia… you know he has feelings for me, right?"

Cordelia took a seat next to Cherche, willing to let work go for now. "Of course, he's not subtle about it. Seeking you out at every opportunity, buttering up Minerva, he even got Frederick to teach him to waltz. Though… why do you ask?"

Cherche fidgeted. "Cordelia… I don't know how I really feel about him. There's so much potential in him, even if he doesn't show it, and I feel like we can grow to become great partners. I just… I just don't think he should choose me."

Cordelia stared at her friend, not seeing the problem. "Why? You're smart, you're kind, if scary at times, and you're one of the few that can calm Vaike down. Why wouldn't he fall for you?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Do you think he's not good enough?"

Cherche openly snarled at Cordelia. "Never say that again! He is a wonderful man, none here can deny that. He may not be the smartest, but he understands what it means to be considered worthless!"

Cordelia flinched back, not expecting the shout. Neither was Cherche, if her embarrassed face meant
anything. Looking around, Cordelia called out to the startled Shepherds. "Don't worry, just some disbelief at what Cherche needs to do when we get back."

That mollified most of them, but a few kept curious eyes on Cherche nonetheless, especially Vaike. He couldn't speak to Cherche or Cordelia right then, but Cordelia could see him considering just dropping the barrel he was holding.

"Look, Cherche," Cordelia whispered. "I'm not going to pry into why you feel worthless, which is further from the truth than I could ever begin to imagine, but if it's true, then Vaike is a kindred spirit. You two may not necessarily be destined for each other, but you're close friends. At the very least, he deserves to know what you'll be doing."

Cherche stared at Cordelia with something akin to wonder. "Your words… you don't want Vaike and I to lose the chance. Like what almost happened with you and Robin in the desert."

Cordelia nodded, her hand rubbing the scar on her arm absently. "Exactly. Robin and I were lucky and we took the plunge even though we were unsure. By all rights, we have a bright future ahead of us, and I want that for you too. I want that for everyone."

Her other hand came to rest on Cherche's shoulder. "That's why you just have to try. Again, it can just be telling him what you're doing, but don't let fear leave you with regrets. Alright?"

Cherche smiled and pulled Cordelia into a hug. "Thank you, Cordelia. I'll be sure to talk with him later, but I need permission from Prince Chrom first. Also, your boyfriend's coming this way."

She broke the hug and hopped out of the wagon with a wave. Cordelia returned the wave before retrieving her list and looking to a sheepish Robin. "Took you long enough. Put the tent here, we just need to get the last of the rations put away and we'll be going."

Robin laughed nervously and placed the rolled-up canvas next to Cordelia. "Sorry about that, I was catching up on my thoughts. You ready to head back?"

"More than ready." Cordelia said. "But, you know me. Already thinking on things that need doing like finding the Pegasus Knight survivors, recruiting new members, and so on. I also need to get myself a proper house, can't just live in the barracks all my life."

Robin took her hand and squeezed gently. "Well, don't run yourself ragged. I want to make sure we have plenty of nights to enjoy together, especially over a good meal."

Cordelia leaned forward and rested her head on his hand. "You and food. I swear, you like eating almost as much as Stahl does."

Robin laughed and kissed her cheek. "Try eating roasted bear meat like your life depends on it, you get an appreciation for well-cooked food after something like that."

Cordelia kissed him, on the lips this time. "Rations are no fun either, may I remind. I hope we'll have a good time after we get back, but first things first."

She hopped from the wagon, hand still in Robin's. "Let's get everyone together and set out. I want to see how Sumia and Nowi are doing before we dive into the nitty-gritty."

Robin nodded and followed her, silently glowing at how comfortable Cordelia was with her affections. It was truly wonderful to see her so happy, especially after they walked by Chrom and a very small voice in the back of his head was silenced.
Cordelia never once glanced at the prince. Her every word had been truth and whatever doubts his own mind may have engendered withered.

Her heart was his and his hers, as they'd promised.

Now it was time to go and build the life they wanted.

-Sumia, Ylisstol-

"So…I bow first?"

Duchess Miranda sighed at Sumia, the poor girl mixing up the lesson once again. "No dear, that's not it. You'll be Queen of Ylisse soon, everyone bows to you, not the other way around. The only time you bow is in another royal's court. Now, try again."

Sumia sighed, but dutifully started the greetings again. It annoyed her that she hadn't actually learned anything to do with ruling yet, but she at least understood the importance of the etiquette she was going through. The last thing they needed was to insult any of the loyalists with Sumia's clumsy manners.

She cursed as she flubbed a greeting. "Duchess, can we move on to something else? I understand that manners are important, but we've been at this for hours."

Miranda sighed through her nose. "I suppose so. You've improved, but be sure to practice your greetings for foreign guests."

She placed the list she'd been reading from on a side table. "Now then, as you've told me you wish to be a more hands-on ruler when the time comes, I need to teach you about three things. Trade, logistics, and accounting."

Sumia was obviously confused so Miranda continued. "Trade is important for obvious reasons, it's the life-blood of the Halidom. Knowing how it functions and what goods go where is always important if you want to have a healthy economy. Logistics helps you understand both your own army and that of your enemies. If you know what it takes to field one, then you can track both your own army's progress and that of your enemies without over-extending."

Sumia was nodding along, so Miranda knew she was interested. "Accounting is, objectively, the most boring of the three, but it's also the most vital. It will allow you to better understand loans, funding, and other matters of finance. It's usually better to leave the busy work to a royal accountant, but knowing what's going on can help you spot flaws and negotiate with merchants."

Sumia nodded. "I see… when can we begin?"

"How about right now?" Frederick asked as he entered the room. "Forgive the interruption, Duchess, but I took it upon myself to borrow some simple documents pertaining to the topics you mentioned. They should serve as a good starting point."

Miranda stared at the knight before clearing her throat. "Well, I'm not the best teacher when it comes to these subjects, even if I'm versed them. I'll go find the head accountant and have them teach you, but I will be checking in from time to time."

Sumia smiled and bowed to Miranda. "Thank you, Your Grace. I know it's not easy to teach me so much."

Miranda rolled her eyes. "You're doing it again. Remember, I bow to you, not the other way around."
If you wish to thank me, an appropriate spot at the celebratory feast would be quite enough."

She winked and left the room, Frederick took the vacant seat with a sigh. "She's very direct."

"She is," Sumia agreed. "But she's a great teacher, too. I didn't know half the things she told me, and we're still on the basics! It'll be a while before I can even remotely call myself a queen."

Frederick smiled at her. "Yet a queen you shall be. I always wondered if the day would come when milord would take the crown with you at his side, but I never imagined it would happen like this."

Sumia grew solemn. "Yes… I always hoped my mother and I could come to terms with each other, but now I'll never have the chance. I can only hope she's proud of me, wherever she is."

Grim air settled between them and Sumia tried to dispel it. "How's Nowi doing? Has she been taking well to her lessons?"

Frederick nodded, gaze tired for the first time Sumia could remember. "As well as she can. The healers have told her that she should stick to one form when not a dragon since the difference is so great between a child and an adult. Aside from that, she's making progress with a cane, but writing and eating by herself are still some ways off."

Sumia held back another sigh. "I see. I'm glad to hear she's at least making progress, it'll help put the others at ease too. My next question is, what are you going to be doing? Obviously, you'll still be serving Chrom, and myself, after our wedding-which is very weird-but what beyond that?"

Frederick smiled at Sumia. "Mostly, I will be training new recruits and coordinating with whoever milord designates the Shepherds' field commander. I will also fulfill my promise to Nowi and help her until she can be completely independent, though that will likely require me to be her live-in caretaker for a time."

Sumia smirked this time. "Really? Well, looks like you and Nowi are going to be a couple and housemates. Try not to make us host a wedding at sword-point, ok?"

Frederick glowered at her, though there was no heat in it. "I will always be a perfect gentleman with her. Nowi's sight was given in exchange for my life, it is only right I dedicate myself to her as best I can."

Sumia giggled at his answer. "That's just like you Frederick. Chrom is lucky to have you as his protector, and Nowi even more so to have you as a boyfriend. I hope your time together is as lovely as can be."

Frederick allowed a glimmer of a smile to cross his face. "As do I. In any case, I should return to organizing the castle guard. Nowi has been…insistent that I take her into town."

Sumia tilted her head. "What for?"

Frederick grimaced, next words the most unsure Sumia had ever heard from him.

"She wants to practice moving in public…as a couple."

Sumia couldn't stop herself. There was simply no way anyone would after discovering that Frederick got nervous with public affection.

For the first time in days, Sumia laughed without restraint.
It sucked being blind.

Well, she shouldn't say that considering she was blind now, but it really put her day to day routine into perspective. Getting dressed was a chore of epic proportions, then she had to figure out where the door was, navigate the halls, and find a chair. Then came an entirely separate set of steps just to eat!

It was hard and Nowi found herself yearning for the ability to see normally regularly. She was able to steel her resolve with the reminder that Frederick lived because of her sacrifice and Frederick had done everything and more to help her.

"Milady?"

Nowi snapped back to reality, the voice of her personal healer breaking through the fog of her mind. "Sorry Natalie, where were we?"

A voice slightly older than hers sighed. "Milady, have you finally decided which form you're willing to take on permanently? We cannot proceed much further until you choose."

Nowi hummed and retreated to her thoughts again. She'd still turn into her dragon form, that odd sight she gained when touching Frederick followed her there, even though it was blurry, but she was stuck between the other two.

On one hand, she'd been in the shape of a child for centuries. It allowed her to play, wander, and altogether act as only a child can. It also made her far more approachable and people were always kinder to her as a child, not to mention she could fool around.

On the other hand, her adult form afforded her a great deal more respect and she could go and have fun with the adults. While it brought more danger with the mature body, it also let her be around people that were mature enough to understand her feelings and comfort her.

In the end, it came down to a simple question. If she was going to seriously pursue a relationship for the first time in her entire millennium spanning life, what did she want to be?

…When put that way, the choice was obvious.

"I will… remain as an adult. I've traveled the earth as a child for centuries, it's time for a change of pace."

Nowi could hear Natalie mutter 'centuries' under her breath. It was tiring to hear people get awed by her age and true nature, but Natalie at least kept herself professional. "So, now that that's out of the way, what do I do?"

Natalie hummed. "Well, first you should turn into your adult form. I know being a child helps with travel, but you need to be an adult and stick as one."

Nowi sighed and carefully reached into her pocket, the familiar comfort of her dragonstone right where she left it. A moment later she felt a rush of vertigo before it settled down and she felt her adult body ease into the chair. "Ok, now what?"

Natalie mumbled something before continuing. "Now that we know what form you're in, we need to carve you a cane so you can walk. After that, we'll continue teaching you all the basics until you have a home of your own. From there, a live-in caretaker of your choice will lead you through the
house and familiarize you with it until you can navigate on your own. After that, it's life as usual."

Nowi felt herself frown. "That's... vague."

Natalie's voice was apologetic. "It's only a basic outline. It'll be a few days before we can start your treatment in earnest and you'll have to choose a caretaker too. When that's done, we can start getting you right again, ok?"

Nowi's frown turned to a smile. "Thanks Nat, you've been a big help ever since I got here. Mind being my friend, even after I finish?"

The gasp that followed made Nowi's grin widen. "M-m-milady! You are of Naga's own race, how could a humble healer like me ever be worthy-!"

Nowi sighed and shook her head. "Nat, enough of that. I am no divine being and I do not wish to be treated as one. Just be my friend, they're all I've ever wanted in the world."

She felt a hand in hers and Nowi knew that another friend had been made. "Thank you, and I, uh... already know who I want my caretaker to be."

A door opened and Nowi heard the clank of metal on stone. "Nowi? What's going on?"

Nowi smiled as Frederick's voice washed over her. "Just in time, Freddy. We have some things to talk about."

-Three Days Later, Chrom-

Arriving in Ylisstol once more, the Shepherds found a city in celebration. Each Shepherd was hailed as a hero in the streets, their caravan turning into a makeshift parade as they wound through the streets and to the palace.

Chrom and Lissa in particular were given entire cheers, many of the citizens dubbing Chrom the 'Ender of Madmen' while Lissa was called 'Saint'. Both knew that the titles were unlikely to stick, but they were embarrassed by the showing nonetheless.

At the gate to the palace, the Shepherds were greeted by Duke Dunwall, Duchess Miranda, Frederick, Nowi, and Sumia. Chrom spotted Sumia first and hopped from his spot at the front of the caravan, rushing forward to envelop Sumia in a tight hug and fervent kiss.

Wolf-whistles met the action, but Robin decided that if Chrom was going to do it, he may as well follow. Hopping from his wagon, he held out his hand for Cordelia. When she took it and her feet met the ground, Robin pulled her close and leaned her back in a passionate kiss of his own.

Even more whistles and cat-calls met that action and soon Kellam and Sully outdid them all with the most dramatic pose imaginable. Shame most people couldn't see Kellam do it, but it would live in the annals of Shepherds history forever.

Cordelia gave Robin a good smack for that stunt, but he wore a silly grin the entire way into the palace.

Chrom returned to his home hand in hand with Sumia, his fiancée happily updating him on what was going on and what had been decided in his absence. While everyone was certainly ready to celebrate the day away, a few things needed to be done.

Chrom sighed as he walked into the palace's central garden, the urn holding Gangrel's ashes in hand.
He'd informed Sumia, Miranda, Dunwall, and Robin of his plans, but only Robin was ok with the idea.

"I still think this is an insult." Miranda muttered. "The Mad King is responsible for your sister's death, and great suffering besides. Why would you do him the honor of nourishing the orchid your ancestors planted?"

Dunwall grunted his agreement. "And the pear tree at that. Your mother and sister's favorite fruit should have purer soil than that urn of hate."

Chrom sighed. "As I said, Gangrel is as much a victim here as anyone. I do not deny his atrocities, and I do hate him as you do, but that is what led to the Purge. If I wish to follow Emm's example and avoid the mistakes of the past, I must be willing to forgive."

He looked both nobles in the eye. "As should you."

That cowed them, but Sumia strode to his side, stopping his march once again. "Chrom, I understand you wish to forgive, but is this truly what you want? That tree will hold more than pleasant memories of your family if you do this."

Chrom patted her arm. "I need it to, my love. I must remember both the good times and the bad times if I'm to be half the ruler Emm was."

Sumia nodded and let him pass. Chrom glanced around to see if anyone would try to stop him, but found none. Satisfied, he strode to the elder tree and knelt at its base. "Hello Mother, I know I haven't visited in a while, but here I am."

The tree was silent.

"Emm's gone." Chrom whispered. "I couldn't save her. She's still with us, in spirit, but I will miss holding her when I come home. We've suffered so much loss these last few months…"

A smile came to his face. "But not all is grim. I'm engaged to a woman I've long loved and Lissa has followed her heart to a young man I'm sure you'd approve of. I've grown closer to those in my company as well as seen it grow into a family all its own. I met my best friend in a field to the south and he's dating my fiancée's best friend as well. How funny that we should both fall for Pegasus Knights."

Chrom laid his hand on the smooth bark. "I hope you can understand what I'm about to do. These ashes may represent the suffering of our people, but they also represent a lesson that I'm glad to have learned."

He placed the urn on the ground and opened the top.

"From even the most horrid of acts… can come the most beautiful of things."

With those words, he poured the ashes into the soil of the tree, mixing it thoroughly with his own two hands. Satisfied, he retrieved a cup of water from the garden's fountain and wet the soil. "Grow well, good tree. You hold the lessons of great tragedy in your wood now."

He bowed his head in a brief prayer before turning and striding toward Sumia and the nobles. "Come, we have much to do."

They nodded and followed the prince, eventually reaching a large room in which sat an equally large table. Every seat was held by either a Shepherd, commander, guild-master, or someone of similar
import. The head of the table had four seats open. Robin was seated immediately to the left of the head seat, the subsequent chair on Robin's left remained empty.

Chrom's entrance quieted the chatter, no one speaking until he'd taken his place between Sumia and Robin. Dunwall sat next to Robin as Maribelle was in the next seat on the left while Miranda took the seat on Sumia's right.

"Now then," Chrom said unto the room. "Let's address the biggest concerns first. There are still rebels among the lower nobility and clergy, how are we going to go about dealing with them?"

One of the women present, dressed in cleric robes, stood. "We would like to be the ones to remove the clergy that took part in this heretical revolt. Such greed and lust has no place in the church."

"The one you elected as Head Cleric was part of it." Libra noted. "We already have some names from the Bishop of Gariel, leave the matter of the traitorous clergy to the crown."

The woman stared at Libra before sitting. "Very well, if the bishop gave you the names. I simply wish the church to retain its good standing."

"Its standing is the least of your concern, madam." Chrom said. "The revolt's involvement went all the way to the top of the church. If we do a truly thorough house cleaning, your influence and very existence will be at stake. Considering the circumstances, I'll be installing Libra and the Bishop of Gariel as temporary heads of the church until you can review your practices and see to it this doesn't happen again."

The woman didn't look pleased, but she bowed her head. "As you wish, Exalt."

Chrom grimaced at the title, but moved on. "Then I leave the clergy in capable hands. Now, as for the nobles, we can again thank the Bishop of Gariel for the names of all the noble conspirators. In accordance with Ylissean law, their lands and titles are to be seized and distributed at my discretion. Question is, who's going to evict them?"

"I would like that honor, milord." One of the commanders volunteered. "My men and I have been eager to get back at the dastards for thinking Ylisse their oyster."

Sumia looked to him. "You're one of Duchess Catarnia's correct? Where is the good lady, we were expecting her?"

The man appeared sheepish. "She sent me as her representative, Your Highness. I was eager to run the rebels from the city, but I was ordered to remain in Grevis until we knew more."

Sumia hummed, but allowed Chrom to take over. "Would you mind if I assigned Duke Dunwall and his forces to assist you? I don't doubt your loyalty, but the sooner it's dealt with, the better."

The man bowed. "I'd be honored to have the duke with us."

Chrom nodded and looked to Robin. "Do you have the reports on Gariel?"

Robin sighed and gestured to the parchment on the table. "It's in there somewhere. To summarize, there's a lot of structural damage and casualties from Nowi's rampage. Part of the Grand Cathedral collapsed after she wrecked the arch and we were able to confirm that the corpse in the duke's estate was Carlan. Thankfully, the troops courtesy of Duchess Miranda were able to get this information with little trouble."

Miranda cleared her throat. "Yes, it seems almost all of the fanatics were brought here to Ylisstol."
The more sensible commanders were left in charge and they swiftly agreed to cooperate. Mind, they've given the condition that Lady Nowi and Sir Frederick never step foot into Draconis ever again."

Every eye turned to Frederick and Nowi, the knight stoic answering for both of them. "I see no issue with such a condition. I do not wish to enter Draconis for the rest of my life after what occurred."

Nowi nodded. "Same, I don't want to be anywhere near that place. It'd be too painful for me and the people I hurt…"

Chrom plowed on to the next issue before anyone could start demanding Nowi pay for causing the damage. "As recompense, we'll use the jewels and gold that line the Grand Cathedral as collateral to repair the damage. I can't give lives back, but the church is known for their generosity in times of need. Now then, how are we looking in terms of trade and logistics?"

One of the guild-masters stood. "I represent my fellows, milord. Due to the short nature of the rebellion, trade wasn't disrupted to any significant degree. We may have lost a few hundred gold overall, but the loss can be made up with a temporary tax decrease."

"We'll discuss that in more detail later." Sumia said. "This is a general meeting, not a negotiation table. Now, the logistics please?"

Cordelia raised her hand, taking a parchment from Miriel. "We're still counting casualties, but it numbers somewhere in the thousands. Ylissitl may not have seen much conflict until the siege, but the Plegian invasion nearly wiped out the Pegasus Knights and greatly diminished our standing forces. At this point, Ylisse has three professional armies numbering two-thousand each, the militias barely double that."

One of the other commanders stood. "To add to that, we still don't have all of our supply lines put together. Sir Robin's work may have the merchants on board, but we have no way of distributing the supplies effectively at this time."

Chrom sighed and rubbed his neck. "Doesn't surprise me. Anything else?"

The room was silent as everyone looked through the parchment before them, but no one spoke after that. Seeing the meeting at its end, Chrom stood. "Alright, so our biggest issues as it stands are removal of the remaining rebels and restoring our armies and supply lines. I'd like everyone with more detailed requests to meet with me over the coming weeks, make an appointment with Miriel. For now, you're dismissed to your duties."

Chairs scraped on stone and chatter filled the air again as the attendees began to file out of the room. Chrom watched them go with a thoughtful frown, but pinned Robin in his chair with a look. Once everyone save Sumia, Robin, and Cordelia were gone, Chrom spoke. "Robin, I'd like to offer you something."

Robin blinked at his friend. "Offer what? You don't mean to make me your paper-jockey again, do you?"

Chrom cracked a smirk and Sumia giggled. "No, not that, I'll get actual clerks to do that this time. Instead, I'd like to offer you one of the titles that are up for grabs."

Robin's eyes widened in direct proportion to Cordelia's. "You… mean to make me nobility?"

Chrom nodded. "I do. You've done enough for even the lowest commoner to have been granted the title, why shouldn't I?"
Robin felt his head bow automatically. "Thank you… Chrom. I, uh… don't know what to say!"

Chrom smirked at him. "Don't get too excited. I'm giving you a small Barony in Felds to start with. You'll need to learn to manage that land before I can reasonably give you the title I wish to grant."

Sumia looked to Cordelia, who was silent. "Don't think you're being left out of this, Cordelia. It is tradition for the Pegasus Knights' Commander to hold a noble title, and you shall be no exception. Your lands are, conveniently, located right next to the ones Robin will be overseeing. Don't be surprised if you see them little though, you'll be spending a lot of time in Ylisstol."

Cordelia's jaw dropped for a moment before her mind caught up. "Then I give stewardship to Robin. My work will require me here at almost all times, I will be unable to effectively oversee the lands."

Chrom and Sumia smiled at their friends. All according to plan.

"Anyway," Chrom coughed. "We don't require either of you for the rest of today. I suggest taking this evening to relax and unwind. We'll have plenty to keep us busy in the future."

Everyone laughed in both amusement and nervousness. It may not have looked it on the surface, but there were many sleepless nights and headaches ahead of them. Robin and Cordelia excused themselves from the room, leaving only Chrom and Sumia.

A comfortable silence stretched between them, both glad for the quiet after the past weeks, but Chrom broke it. "Sumia… I'd like to fulfill my promise now, if you don't mind."

Sumia titled her head. "What promise? Far as I'm aware, you've done everything for me and more. Especially with my bald and scarred head getting all the looks."

Chrom was grateful she was taking the situation so well. "I told you when we got back, we'd finally get your boots fitted right. It's time to make it happen, and with boots fit for a queen."

Sumia's eyes lit up and she hopped over to Chrom and embraced him. "Thank you-thank you-thank you! Maybe now I won't trip in the damn things!"

Chrom chuckled and rubbed her back. "Let's go see the cobbler. You'll need a whole new set of shoes if we're to do anything remotely correct."

Sumia squealed in delight and dragged Chrom from his seat.

"What are we waiting for?"

-Robin-

It wasn't every day you were given a Barony and stewardship of another Barony within minutes of each other.

Robin sighed as he walked down a hall of the palace, Cordelia at his side. "That was a surprise. I may have been the unofficial secretary of the royals before the war started, but who says I can rule anything?"

Cordelia smiled at him. "You help keep the Shepherds in order, a task I doubt even a competent count could pull off, let alone a baron. You'll be fine, just make sure to ask if you ever need help with something. Most of the Feldian nobles are pretty genial, with some notable exceptions, so you should be fine."
Robin glowered at her. "Says the one that pushed her lands on to me. I know you'll be busy, but if you're just going to hand them over we may as well merge them."

Cordelia laughed. "That is an entire process you do not want to go through right now. My family was part of a land merger once and it took months to get everything in order."

Her hand found Robin's. "Besides, we're supposed to relax, right? We're in Ylisstol, there's celebrations going on everywhere, it's a perfect night."

Robin's hand squeezed hers. "Then how about we meet in the main square at sundown? We'll go get a nice meal, wander the celebrations…"

Cordelia pulled him into her, chin resting on his shoulder. "And we can play the night away."

Robin wrapped his arms around her, glad to know no danger hung over them now. It may come in the future, as all things may, but this was just him and her.

Cordelia pulled away first. "Well, I need to go get my things put away before getting ready. See you in a few hours?"

Robin pecked her nose. "I'll see you then."

Cordelia smirked at him before leaving. Robin remained in his spot until long after she was gone before letting a horrified grimace cross his face. "Shit, I don't have anything nice! The cloak, yes, but nothing else!"

His conundrum was likely blown out of proportion. He was planning to take her back to The Melting Pot as agreed and it wasn't exactly a formal establishment. Even still, it would be his first actual date and he wanted to do his best!

Decided, he ran to the Shepherds' barracks, avoiding well-wishers all the while. Once there, he rushed to his room and dug through his things before finding his purse. "Alright, I know my sizes, so let's see if a tailor's open."

Robin ran out into town, not knowing that Cordelia was… similarly worried.

-Cordelia-

"Where is it?! I know I left it here, there's no way it could've been found by the rebels or the Plegians!"

Cordelia was amid a mild panic. While she did have a few hours to get ready, she knew from experience that taming her hair would take up a good chunk of that time. Instead, she was trying to hunt down a gift her parents had sent her shortly before meeting Robin.

Throwing a spare set of pauldrons across the room, Cordelia groaned. "Why isn't it here?!!"

She turned back to her mess of a room and began to dig again. She may not have her original idea, but at least she still had her casual dress. Taking out the simple white dress, she stripped off her armor and made for the baths.

It was always best to be fresh, and she hadn't bathed in days with all their travel.

-Robin-

"Thank you!"
Robin jogged out of the tailor with a relieved grin. He hadn’t been able to procure something he felt appropriate, but the shopkeeper had been able to get him a nice shirt and pants. He’d be wearing his normal boots and cloak though, so he needed to get back and polish everything!

Ignoring anyone that called to him, Robin made the barracks in record time. After placing his purchases in his room, he set to polishing and oiling his cloak and boots. That took him a good half-hour before he was satisfied.

After that, he bathed, shaved the small stubble that had begun to grow on his chin, and patted on some lavender oil. It was good for both scent and burn from what Libra had told him, so all the better!

It never once crossed his mind that he was going to great lengths for something so simple, but he still dressed carefully and made sure everything was in order before sitting down and looking out the window.

"Wow, I have another hour at least."

Realization crept in that the time would be spent fidgeting and if he tried to read he’d likely forget what time it was. Thus, in interest of not angering Cordelia, he took his time walking to the main square.

"Yo, Rob!" A voice he recognized as Gaius called. "What’s with the new duds?"

Robin glanced down at the simple white shirt and blue vest he was wearing under his cloak, the pants a dark navy. "Well, I’m going out. Cordelia and I wanted to have a fun night before we got buried in work."

Gaius clicked his tongue. "Ah, well just so you know, you may run into some of the other couples while you’re out there. Nowi in particular was very interested in getting out with Frederick."

Robin hummed. "Well I hope they have a good time. I should be going though, I promised to meet Cordelia at the main square soon."

Gaius waved and left, Robin caught a wink thrown his way before the assassin was out of sight.

Robin decided it wasn’t worth it and made his way to the main square. As expected, the entire square was a big party and everyone was taking part with unimpeded joy.

Robin took a seat in a quiet corner and kept his eyes peeled. It was almost the meeting time so Cordelia should arrive soon.

After a few minutes, the voice he was waiting on met his ears. "Robin?"

Robin glanced up and felt his jaw drop. "Cordy…?"

Cordelia smiled at him, eyes sparkling. "The one and only. New clothes though? You shouldn’t have, it’s just a night out."

Robin felt his tongue refuse to move. Cordelia was dressed in the white gown he’d seen her in when they’d played in Ferox, though a lavender ribbon was tied around her stomach this time. Equally white shoes were strapped to her legs, skin allowed to breathe after being confined in riding boots for weeks. Finally, her hair had been miraculously tamed, the crimson locks pulled back into a low ponytail.

"Wow," Robin uttered, slack-jawed. "I knew you were beautiful, but damn. I feel like a troll next to
you."

Cordelia giggled. "That's kind of you, but I'm not the only one to work hard, am I?"

Her hand came to his cheek. "You're very handsome, and thank you for putting in all the work. It's not the most formal occasion, but I love it."

Robin's hand came up and stroked her hand. "Shall we go? I think tonight's going to be great."

Cordelia nodded and looped her arm around his when Robin stood. "I think it'll be a great night too."

They strode into the city, making their way to The Melting Pot and the fun to come. When looking back, years later, they would always agree on what that night was.

One of the best of their lives.

-Severa-

"I am amazed at how little this all went to plan."

Nods were her answer, the group of time travelers cantering down a road in Felds. How'd they get here from that night in Surperius, you may ask?

Well, the idea for the marriage went just fine, Lucina had the certificate sitting in her pack at that moment. It wasn't much of a ceremony, to put it lightly, but Marth and Katarina were officially husband and wife.

Problem was, they found out that the land they were going to construct the cabin on was not only owned, but its owners had returned while the group was at the church. With that avenue closed off, they'd attempted to leave, only for one of the guards escorting the landowners to recognize them.

That had led them on a merry chase that forced them into Felds. Severa and Morgan were happy to be back in their home state, but they needed to find a place where Robin and the Shepherds were unlikely to find them.

"You know," Morgan muttered. "It wasn't my fault they got so pissed about the logs. Lucy was too caught up in her little fantasy."

Lucina sighed from behind Cynthia. "I already apologized for that. I didn't think I'd get the idea of building a home on that specific spot so dug into my head. Besides, we were all belligerent with how condescending they were."

Cynthia grunted her agreement. "Aye to that. Jerks wouldn't even let us rent. Though…"

She glared at Severa. "Did you have to set the forest ablaze to prove your point? That's not something easily forgiven or forgotten."

Severa pouted. "I got mad, ok? Why do you think we left in such a hurry, just because the guard recognized us? Anyway, where are we again?"

Lucina pulled out a map. "We are… right next to the Lightwing Barony. I believe Commander Phila was the baroness of this one, so its headless right now."

Severa smirked. "Then they won't mind some new residents. I know for fact no one really lives here since the Barony's small, we should be just fine."
"It also happens to be right next to what will be the Volk Barony." Lucina noted. "We'll need to choose somewhere well away from your old house."

Severa shrugged. "Not a problem. Daddy didn't get the dukedom until shortly after I was born, so we should be fine. Let's just be subtle and they'll leave us alone."

"Subtlety is far from our strong suit." Morgan snorted. "If anything proves it, it's that blaze."

Severa rolled her eyes. "Yeah-yeah, rub it in. Anyway, let's turn north at the next crossroads. That'll take us into Lightwing and we can get to work."

"It'll be a change, for sure." Lucina chuckled. "Mysterious saviors against the Risen, and we've already saved our parents a few times at that. Maybe they'll start writing songs, right dear?"

Severa blushed. "Please don't call me that when we're not using our fake names. You can call me your girlfriend, but we're not actually married."

Lucina smiled at her. "I know, but seeing you get flustered for anything that doesn't make you angry is a rare treat. I plan to milk it for a while."

"Sweet Naga, would you two stop flirting? It was one thing with your heads in the dirt, now it's just sickening!" Cynthia gagged.

Lucina started pinching her sister's cheeks so Severa spoke to Morgan. "You still have the hatchets?"

Morgan patted her saddlebags. "Yep, all ready to make our new home. Though, uh… would it be ok if we dropped in on the old house from time to time?"

Severa sighed. "I don't think so. Let our parents live their lives while we live ours. We'll see them on a more permanent basis after Valm comes, but who knows when that'll be? Just give them time, we'll see the house eventually."

Morgan nodded. "Alright… is your back still ok?"

Severa sighed and absentely rubbed the spot. "It is, so far. I still don't know if what Tharja said was meant to help, but I don't have the time or the ability to go find Mr. Henry. I'll live, just like always."

Morgan frowned, but didn't press. "Alright… by the way, you'll actually help build this thing, right? You won't pretend to have other things to do just to skip out?"

Severa had the audacity to look scandalized. "Morgan! When have I ever skipped out on helping?"

Morgan glanced at her sister. "There was cleaning the living room, helping with dinner, building the tree house, passing your guard rounds on to Owain-"

Severa hushed her, glancing to Lucina desperately. When she was sure Lucina hadn't heard, Severa looked back to her smug sister. "You've made your point nose-bleeder. I'll help, and by Naga it'll be the best cabin ever made!"

Morgan laughed at the boast and they went back to their normal banter, none aware of the figure watching them from the crest of a hill.

"My daughters." The voice whispered. "Oh, how I wish to bring you into my embrace again. I have a queen beside me, but it is not complete without my princesses…"
The air rent with the crack of thunder, but the figure did not move. "You do not control me, Fenrir. I may come and check upon my progeny should I wish."

The monstrous wolf behind the figure snarled, teeth of lightning bared. "You do not get to speak of progeny, parasite! I may be unable to erase you from this world, but you are forbidden from these lands. Begone, lest the pact holding me back be breached!"

The figure shook its head. "I will be gone momentarily, wolf. I know what my role in this is, but can you not spare some sympathy as a father yourself?"

"You are no father!" The wolf howled. "Enslavement or death, that is all you offer! Begone!"

The figure huffed before taking one last look at the time travelers. "Very well. I am forever patient, and I shall have my family again."

The figure disappeared followed by the wolf, its last words carried on the breeze.

"And we will rule this world far better than so-called gods."
First Steps

Several days after the celebrations and revelry came to an end, the Shepherds descended into the palace dungeons. None had been to this place before, but all walked with grimaces and barely constrained anger.

The sentence of Catherine would be given today, her fate hanging on Frederick's words.

Frederick himself was still of mixed feelings on the matter. While he could commend his sister for following her oath, doing so had put both Chrom and Nowi in mortal peril. Frederick did not care for his life so long as those two were safe, but Gaius had called him to the infirmary the night before.

Standing beside the assassin's bed, Frederick listened as Gaius recounted what Catherine had told him. Frederick had no idea his parents had been so... neglectful to his sister and he cursed his own sense of decorum for driving her further away. While her actions were unforgivable, Frederick could certainly understand what drove her to them.

A squeeze on his hand pulled Frederick from his thoughts. "Yes, Nowi?"

"Shouldn't your parents be here?" Nowi whispered. "We just left them in the main hall."

Frederick shook his head, picturing the stern facades of his parents. "They want nothing to do with this. Catherine is no longer part of the family as far as they're concerned. She'll be stripped of her surname and struck from the family ledger."

Nowi hummed, her steps slow and careful. "Actually... what is your surname?"

Frederick pushed back a smile. It was nice of her to ask, especially since Frederick had insisted she be there regardless of how long they took to reach the dungeon. "Well, I was given the opportunity to take a surname after I was knighted and chosen as Chrom's personal guard. My original family name is Blackridge, but my new one is Caomhnoír."

Nowi tilted her head, curiosity shining through closed eyes. "What on earth does that mean? It sounds like a wine. A super pretentious wine."

"It means 'guardian'," Frederick sighed. "I chose it because it was the title given to the royal guard back when Ylisse was founded. It... inspired me."

He glanced at Nowi's smiling face. "Now that I think about it, can't you see while holding my hand?"

Nowi chuckled nervously. "Well... let's just say calling Lissa a bright spot is no exaggeration. Besides, I need to get used to having my eyes closed, being blind and all."

Her tone was light, but Frederick heard the small crack at the word 'blind'. It still stirred his anger that Nowi had been forced to such lengths because he hadn't been cautious, hadn't lived up to the moniker Chrom had given him. It also stirred something warm that she cared enough to give up something so precious so he could live.

"We're here." Chrom intoned. "Frederick, her cell is at the end of this hall on the right. We'll be here, as you've requested, but do not hesitate to call us."

Frederick looked away from Nowi to find every Shepherd gazing at him. "I will, milord. Thank you
for allowing this."

Chrom sighed, hand finding Sumia's. "I don't like it, but you've done enough for me to grant this favor. Frankly, you deserve more."

Frederick shook his head, but Sumia interrupted any answer. "Don't try and turn such praise away, Frederick. All of us know and appreciate your duty and work, it's why we call you friend. I wouldn't have lasted in the Shepherds were it not for your patience in training."

"She's right." Sully echoed. "You made me pull my head out of my ass. Got me serious about my training and look at me now. We owe ya more than we can repay, so let us do this much."

Her sentiments were echoed by every Shepherd that Frederick had trained, even Vaike.

"Thank you," Frederick said, humbled by the support. "It has been my pleasure to serve the Shepherds and I look forward to continuing my service in the years to come. Though it may not be with you band of rowdy apes."

That received a number of low chuckles.

Frederick sighed and let go of Nowi's hand. "Now then…"

He strode forward, past the encouraging gazes of his compatriots, liege, and love. Frederick could hear low whispers as he distanced himself from the Shepherds, but he kept his eyes forward.

Frederick slowed his steps as he approached the cell Chrom spoke of, making sure his boots clanged against the stone floor. With a deep breath, he took the last step and gazed into the cell. "Sister."

Catherine's head rose, stained bandages wrapped around her shoulder and cheek. "…Frederick."

"I have been told to decide your fate." Frederick stated. "As you know, treason demands death."

Catherine scoffed, hand running through her ratty hair. "I know, it's just the manner of execution. Got something creative in mind, or are you bland as ever?"

Frederick's breath exploded from his nose. "I want to know why you never came to me with your grievances. Gaius has already shared why you chose to side with the rebels, but I want to know why you never considered asking to meet."

"Why do you think?" Catherine growled. "You were so wrapped up in caring for the royal brats any letter would've been ignored. We both hold our loyalties too sacred to let something like family get in the way of it."

Frederick shook his head. "While that may have been true when I started, I believe you should have done so anyway. But, that is in the past… tell me, have they informed you of what happened to Meredith?"

Catherine shook her head.

"She was taken by a Plegian mage." Frederick answered. "Though 'escorted' may be more appropriate. Prince Chrom discovered her attempting to break into the Royal Archives with dark magic before the Plegian arrived and took her away. She's likely dead."

He could almost hear Catherine's teeth grind. "Then I have failed in my duty. Tell me my death, Frederick, and leave so I may mourn."
Frederick took a deep breath before sighing. "Your sentence… shall not be death."

Catherine shot from her spot in the cell and banged on the bars. "What are you saying?! Treason is to be punished by death, and my failure should lead to it twice over! Is this your way of paying me back for Draconis? I never ordered you tortured!"

Frederick's brow shot up. "Truly? Well, that makes it all better, doesn't it?"

He turned around and waved his hand. "No, your sentence is something I believe to be more … fitting."

Catherine snarled at him, but held her tongue as the sound of boots grew close. A moment's silence revealed Chrom and Nowi, the prince glaring at Catherine. "Have you decided her fate?"

"I have," Frederick nodded. "She has no liege now and wishes for death. I will grant her something worse, so long as Nowi agrees."

Chrom looked to Frederick, intrigued. "Oh? Nowi, will you agree to what Frederick has in mind?"

Nowi hummed, fingers tapping on her temple. "Well… sure, why not? I'm blind because of her, so I'll let Freddy do his thing."

Catherine couldn't help a snort. "Freddy? Oh, how the mighty fall before their lovers."

Frederick ignored her and nodded at Chrom. "Fetch Tharja and see if my father will grant me the family blade. We'll be through with this before long."

Chrom narrowed his eyes, but left to retrieve Tharja. A barked order sent Stahl racing to the surface, but Frederick ignored the commotion in favor of Catherine and Nowi. "You're both no doubt curious as to what I have planned."

Nowi nodded. "Yeah, why do we need Tharja? You don't plan on using her in some kind of weird ritual, do you?"

Frederick cracked a grin. "Of course not."

"Then what?" Tharja asked as she joined them. "I fail to see what you'd need me for if not that."

Frederick shrugged and looked to the steaming Catherine. "Simple, I require that you bind her with a curse that makes it so she cannot harm another, unless her liege is in danger."

"I have no liege!" Catherine screeched. "Your prince saw to that!"

Frederick grinned. "Why, of course you do."

He gestured to Nowi. "She's right here."

Nowi gaped, struggling to process that, while Tharja started giggling wickedly. "That's brilliant. I'll throw in a few more lines to cover any loopholes, but I assume you don't want total obedience?"

Frederick nodded, keeping his eye on Catherine who was too angered and shocked to speak. "Correct."

He strode forward and looked Catherine in the eyes, cool stone against raging emotion. "If there's one thing we share, sister, it is our hatred of failure. My sorry state and failure of both Chrom and Nowi are punishment enough, but you… I feel that there's still something in you that can be saved."
Frederick leaned back as Chrom returned, a jeweled sword in hand. "Were it anyone else, I would have you beheaded. But, I will deny your wish for death and instead give you new purpose. In this, you shall be either redeemed or made to suffer beyond measure."

He took the sword from Chrom. "A most fitting punishment, Catherine."

Catherine continued to growl and snarl at him, fresh red staining her cheek, before the fire extinguished as she realized death was not her destiny. "...I am at your mercy. I have enough sense and pride left to know when I am beaten."

"Wait, can I say something?" Nowi interjected, face twisted in thought. "How would this even work? I mean, I've literally never had anyone swear an oath to me, not once!"

Frederick shrugged. "It's quite simple. Catherine shall swear her life and support to you until either the oath is released or one of you dies. As I intend to make sure you never leave this plane until you so wish, it's a lifelong pact. Tharja will place a few binding curses to make sure Catherine's not being clever."

Nowi nodded, ignoring Tharja and Chrom discussing the ingredients the dark mage needed. "Ok... so what do I do? If it involves that sword you mentioned, I may end up slicing something I shouldn't."

Frederick chuckled. "Don't worry, I'll lead you through it. Milord, are we ready?"

Chrom sighed and shrugged. "The curses will need to come later, we don't have worm hearts. You can do the oath, so long as we keep your sister under guard until Tharja does her work."

Frederick nodded and looked back to the curious congregation. "You can join us, my friends. We require witnesses."

The Shepherds rumbled down the hallway, they began muttering in disbelief when they found Catherine still breathing and Frederick guiding Nowi into what most recognized as a commendation ceremony.

"You wish to make this traitor Nowi's vassal?!" Maribelle objected. "She's responsible for both Nowi's blindness and the scars that mar your body, Frederick!"

"'Tis quite odd." Virion agreed. "What made you decide such recourse was necessary?"

Frederick smirked, though the action was tired. "She wished for death. I simply refused to grant it and will bind her in something that will keep her from seeking it. Either redemption or suffering, that is the price for her zealotry."

Sully cackled. "That's great! Oh boy, it's fun seeing that sadistic streak getting used on someone else!"

"Hear-hear." Kellam muttered. "I'll keep her under guard though, just to be safe."

Gaius chuckled, Libra supporting him alongside a crutch. "I like it, good job."

"Hush you," Maribelle scolded. "You shouldn't even be out of bed. Frederick, are you sure? What about you, Sumia?"

Sumia smiled and scratched her scalp. "I see no issue, and neither does Chrom. Go ahead."
"I'm quite sure, Maribelle." Frederick answered in turn. "Robin, Cordelia, would you be so kind as to undo the lock and Catherine's bindings? If she tries to attack, I'll slay her immediately."

"As if she'd get far." Vaike scoffed. "You got Teach and Cher here, she wouldn't make it one step."

Panne added her two cents. "Not even half a step with all of us. Though I believe we have nothing to fear, at least today."

She pointed into the cell where Catherine had already taken her place in supplication, her form oddly serene compared to the earlier rage. Robin walked up to the cell and pulled out a set of keys. "I grabbed these expecting to pull out a body. Talk about a change of plans."

He turned the lock and opened the door, Cordelia and Frederick led Nowi into the cell and before Catherine.

Nowi gulped, voice steady if unsure. "Catherine das Felds… do you, uh, swear to uphold the protection and livelihood of, uh, Lady Nowi-gods that's weird-no matter the dangers arrayed before her or her children? Do you swear to remain open and honest with her, even unto your dying breath? Do you swear to, uh, never betray or harm the lady so long as you live?"

Catherine held out her hand, voice uncolored by emotion. "I promise on my faith that I will be faithful to the lady, never cause her harm and will observe my homage to her completely against all persons in good faith and without deceit. So I swear before these witnesses, the crown, and Naga."

Nowi reached forward nervously until she held Catherine's hand between hers. "I, uh, accept your oath and… promise my protection in return?"

She turned her head, obviously searching for Frederick, but stopped herself. "Is there something else?"

Frederick strode forward, the sword he held rasping from its sheathe. "Your part is done, Nowi. Now it's my turn."

Nowi nodded and let go, stepping back so Frederick could take her place. "Catherine, you have been stripped of your family name and struck from the family's ledgers. As of today, you have no title and no family to call your own."

The sword's tip came to rest on Catherine's shoulder. "The title I now grant is no honor, but a cloak of penance. From today forward you are known to the world as Catherine die Reuige and you will hold that burden until the day you are redeemed in the eyes of those you wronged."

"I accept this burden." Catherine intoned.

The sword tip moved to her other shoulder. "Your face shall be hidden and known only to those who've born witness to this ceremony. Thy liege shall determine if and when your face is shown and when your name is spoken, none save the Exalt may overturn her. So the oath is sworn and the weight laid."

The sword was returned to its sheathe and Frederick took Nowi's hand. "We're done here. Milord, I leave the rest to you."

Chrom nodded and began his orders, Robin and Cordelia hauling Catherine to her feet. "Kellam, Stahl, I want you both to guard this new vassal at all times. Miriel, Gregor, help Tharja gather the ingredients she needs. Everyone else, return to your duties."
The Shepherds scattered, Kellam and Stahl taking charge of Catherine while Robin and Cordelia followed the rest out of the dungeon in a storm of whispers. Chrom waited a moment before looking to Sumia. "Well, time to put those decorum lessons to good use. We'll need to inform the Blackridges."

"They're not gonna like this." Sumia groaned. "Let's just hope they won't stir up trouble over it."

Chrom chuckled. "You're taking to those lessons with Miranda so well. I didn't even think on such things until Emm made sure to beat it into me."

Sumia's face twisted along with everyone that heard that. "The thought that Lady Emmeryn could hurt anyone…"

"I was definitely the exception," Chrom sighed. "I remember getting more than one welt from her training staff growing up."

Sumia shook her head, disbelief clear. "Let's… talk about that later. Come on love, we have work to do."

Chrom could have sworn someone made a whipping noise, but he brushed it off as his imagination and followed Sumia. Frederick and Nowi shared amused grins with Kellam and Stahl before they left the dungeon as well.

"So, what are we doing now?" Nowi asked once they returned to the surface. "I don't need to meet with Natalie for another hour or two."

Frederick hummed. "Well, you still need a cane… why not get that?"

Nowi started to answer before a familiar voice reached them. "Not so fast lovebirds! We got so caught up with things downstairs, Chrom forgot to give you this!"

Frederick rolled his eyes as Lissa skipped up to them, smile blinding as always. Frederick noticed Nowi's hand slip out of his again, but her eyes remained closed. Was Lissa really so bright in Nowi's sight that she had to remove it completely?

"Yo, Frederick, I'm talking to you." Lissa growled.

Frederick snapped to attention. "Forgive me, milady, I was distracted. What did you need to give me?"

Lissa narrowed her eyes before adopting a posh tone. "Ahem. Sir Frederick, for services rendered both past and present, I Lissa Spatz de Ylisse would like to present you with this deed. It confers unto you land laying just northeast of Ylisstol and rights to all that lay within its borders. No house or other buildings yet sit upon its soil, but you are free to do as you so wish with it."

She took a deep breath, her face red from holding onto the unusual formality. "In other words, you can actually build your own house rather than rent out of the palace. Believe me, I don't like being on the receiving end of those jokes anyway, so congrats!"

Frederick took the deed slowly, opening and scanning it to make sure everything was in order. "…I don't know what to say…"

Lissa winked at him. "Well, since you'll be taking care of Nowi here, why not consult with Natalie and the other healers about building a house to help her out? You don't both have to live in it, but it gives everyone somewhere to stay, right?"
Frederick was silent, staring at the deed while glancing to Nowi every so often. It wasn't a bad idea, especially since Nowi would need somewhere to learn that was normal. "...Very well, I shall bring it up when we meet with Natalie later."

Lissa giggled. "Good! I'll see you guys later, I have to make sure no one's trying to butter up Donny."

She turned and skipped away, Frederick watching her go until she was out of sight. "...You can take my hand Nowi, Lissa's gone."

Nowi did so instantly, milky purple meeting the world once again. "Sorry, she's just so bright. Feels like I'll go blind all over again if I look too long."

Frederick shook his head and started the trek to the infirmary. "In any case, we should head for the meeting. We'll have a nice chat with Gaius before Natalie arrives, alright?"

Nowi grinned and launched onto his back for the first time in weeks. "That sounds great."

Frederick grunted, but quickly adjusted his hold and continued his march.

If he were honest, this was far more ordinary than anyone looking in would know.

And that was its own comfort.

-Vaike-

"Man, talk about irony."

Cherche stared at Vaike, curious. "You know what irony is?"

Vaike gave her a sidelong glare. "Of course, that whole situation in the dungeon was ironic. I may not be the sharpest tack, but even I could see it."

"Then everyone was thinking the same thing." Cherche chuckled. "I too was expecting that woman to be killed. Being made a vassal to the one you caused to go blind though... that's a new one."

Vaike grinned. "You betcha! I know a lot of stories from word-of-mouth, but first I've ever heard of that. Frederick's got more of a sadistic streak than I thought."

Cherche nodded and they fell silent, simply enjoying each other's company. It wasn't a busy day, at least compared to their friends who oversaw putting Ylisse back together, so they were strolling through Ylisstol's main street.

Vaike did notice the Cherche was oddly nervous, catching her glance at shops advertising travel supplies more than once. He didn't want to bring up what she was thinking about, at least not where it was so crowded, so he pointed to a random shop. "I got the munchies, what about you? Fancy a snack?"

Cherche blinked, as if coming to from a daze. "Well... I don't see why not. What were you thinking of?"

Vaike shrugged. "I'll eat just about anything, so I leave it to you."

Cherche smirked, but kept her quip to herself. "Then I choose... that."

She pointed to a small stand advertising fig tarts and gingerbread stuffed with sweet almonds. Vaike
grimaced at the idea of figs, he hated those things, but he liked gingerbread. "Alright, let's go."

He led them to the stand and purchased a tart for Cherche and a ginger roll for himself. They took their treats to the nearest bench and ate silently, Cherche going back to her thoughts while Vaike tried to think of a subtle way to ask her what she was thinking.

Well, he tried that anyway.

"So, what's eatin' at ya?"

Cherche sighed and cleared away the remains of her last bite. "Can I not simply be with my thoughts?"

Vaike took a bite out of his bread. "Normally, yeah, but I've caught ya looking at stores with travel gear. You wanting to take a trip or something?"

Cherche bit her lip, aware she was partly caught. "At some point, yes, but I mostly need to replace my own supplies."

"Liar," Vaike sighed. "Come on Cher, you can tell me anything. I thought we were already clear on that."

Cherche frowned, staring straight ahead. "Vaike… you're right, I'm sorry. I wish to tour Ylisse in the coming months, if only so that I may see more of the country that I've fought for. I… didn't want to distract you from your duties as a Shepherd."

Vaike frowned and leaned forward, resting is arms on his knees. "Cher, that ain't the real reason. If it was just distraction, you wouldn't try and hide it from me. Hell, Minerva doesn't know what's up with you and that's saying something!"

Cherche's frown turned to a grimace. "Vaike, it really has nothing to do with you. It's my own demons and I need to face them. I just need some time to do that, is all."

Vaike looked at her before his hand landed on her shoulder. "This have anything to do with the scar here? I remember you saying that 'Nerva gave it to you when you first found her, but nothing else."

Cherche shrugged off his hand. "Vaike, as I said, it's something I have to do alone. Just trust that I'll sort this out and come back better for it, ok?"

Vaike didn't look convinced, but he nodded. "Alright, fine. But, you have to agree to dinner with yours truly before I'll let it drop."

Cherche smiled. "Oh, coercion, is it? Very well you rapscallion, I agree."

Vaike chuckled and stood. "You gotta stop using words I don't know. Want to head back? I'm sure 'Nerva's getting upset with us gone."

Cherche held out her hand and Vaike helped her stand. She didn't let go though and reveled in the embarrassed flush of his cheeks.

I'll be back Vaike, don't you fret about it. We still have much personal growth before we can call ourselves worthy partners in battle. …Let alone anything more.

Her grip on his hand tightened, not letting go until they returned to the palace and went their separate ways.
"I need to do what?"

Robin stared at Duke Dunwall, mystified. He hadn't been sure what was going to happen when the duke had called for him, but the current topic was nowhere near the top of his list.

"As I said, Sir Robin," Dunwall huffed, "you must attend a formal introduction ceremony after you've taken stock of your new lands. It is an entrance to the nobility at large and allows you to start making connections."

Robin hummed. "Can't that wait? From what my reports have said, only one of the rebel barons has been caught while the others hole up in their estates. Not exactly the best time to do this."

"True," Dunwall conceded, "but it will need to happen. It's not just you either, everyone that takes over the seized titles will need to attend as well. Lady Cordelia will be having one, no doubt."

Robin pinched his nose. "Can't we just have a big one where everyone's introduced? Doing it one by one sounds like a waste of time and resources, not to mention awkward for Cordelia and myself."

He waved off the duke's response. "Don't think I don't know my position, sir. I'm in a relationship, but no one aside from the Shepherds are aware of it. Considering I'm just a baron with nothing in the way of influence aside from a close friendship to the realm's royalty, I'll be a prime target for seduction and manipulation."

Dunwall snorted, amused. "You understand the game better than most newcomers, that's for sure. If it makes you feel better, most will be too shaken by the rebellion to attempt anything. Especially should the prince and his fiancée be there to help."

Robin shook his head. "I think we should just kill two birds with one stone. Let's hold our formal introductions at the same time as Chrom and Sumia's reception, that way the new title holders can avoid any unpleasantries while everyone's focused on brown-nosing."

Dunwall smirked. "Not a bad idea, though we both know someone's going to be unhappy about it. Anyway, the other reason I'm here is to offer my official support."

Robin's brow shot up. "What's the catch? Duke's don't offer their support to just anyone without a reason."

Dunwall coughed, his embarrassment apparent. "Yes, well, I would like to know something in exchange for my support. Namely... who is that Gaius?"

Robin couldn't stop the smirk that rose on his lips. "I'd heard from Maribelle you're protective, but coming to the local amnesiac tactician to learn about a thief? Why not just ask Shade, I'm sure that would be a better source?"

Dunwall shook his head. "Shade was injured defeating the assassin Durma. As I'm sure you know, she's not in the best of shape."

"Nor that she was the one who sold me my trumpet." Robin muttered. "But if I can ease your mind, Gaius is a fine man. Yes, he has a sugar addiction, but he's stuck by us after we stood by him. So long as he has reason to trust you, there's nothing to fear."

His eyes narrowed. "He also went in and rescued the entire Draconis scouting team by himself, with no regard to reward, and he saved your life when your steward wished you dead. If he hasn't earned
the right to at least try to court your daughter, then I don't know what will."

Dunwall's face grew stern. "I see they've shared the story with you. I do not fear Gaius himself, he
lost part of his leg in service of this realm and saved my life. What I fear is that his past will come
back to haunt him one day and put my family in danger."

Robin rubbed his forehead. "That's not something I can speak for, milord. I have no past, so I cannot
understand your concerns, but if Maribelle is to grow into the duchess she will one day be, then she
must be allowed to make her own decisions. Besides…"

He stood and looked out the window of the room they were in, eyes falling on the large windows of
the infirmary. "She's powerful as is, and one of the greatest healers in the realm. If she cannot defeat
the shadows from her place in the light, then Gaius will gladly enter the pit and slay them for her."

-Gaius-

"Come on Twinkles, I can walk."

Maribelle glared down at him, cheeks red in anger. "No, you cannot! That stunt you pulled just to
speak with Robin was bad enough as was, but now you coerced Libra into dragging your sorry hide
into the dungeons! If that wound got infected, I'd have to take the rest of your leg!"

Gaius smirked at her irate face. "But it didn't now, did it? Besides, the sooner I can get used to
moving around again, the sooner I can go get a new foot carved. What do you think, should I go for
oak or something more expensive?"

Maribelle looked ready to murder him. "You will not speak of prosthetics until your leg heals! I don't
care if I have to walk you through every step of rehab myself, you will do this right!"

"Glad you care Twinkles." Gaius chuckled. "But seriously, I need to get back to work as soon as I
can. With Shade out of commission, someone has to take over her network."

Maribelle glanced behind her where she spotted Anna sleeping peacefully in the cot. Durma had left
quite the gash on the spymaster before getting her throat opened. "Yes, well, it need not be you.
There are certainly those that can handle it while you regain your strength."

Gaius sighed. "Look, I need to earn my keep. I got lax on the last mission and I damn near lost my
buds. I have to do something to help or I'm just dead weight."

"You think you're dead weight?" Maribelle scoffed. "At least you did something. I was stuck in
Ferox while all this was going on making poultices. I have the power to summon twisters on
command, yet I was relegated to support because I was too 'recognizable'."

Gaius frowned. "You felt useless too, huh?"

Maribelle sighed. "Of course I felt useless. My dear Lissa was making sure everything was
coordinated between us and even our mystery guests did more than I. Ricken even found the sewage
line that got you into Ylisstol in the first place."

Her gaze softened a touch. "But, I can at least see to it that a valued member of the Shepherds and a
good friend is taken care of. I assigned Nowi to Natalie for that exact reason and it is why I take
charge of your care even now. You're still a boar, but I can at least tolerate you now."

Gaius smirked. "Never thought those words would ever be said. What do I need to do to get decent
food in here, lose a hand?"
Maribelle smacked him. "None of that, the last thing I need is you getting ideas. Remain here until I return, we'll start working on moving what's left of your leg later."

Gaius kept his smirk as Maribelle stood and strolled away. It wasn't every day that Twinkles was ever even remotely kind to him, but she'd lightened up since he told her the whole story.

Frankly, he was glad to help and save two innocent lives while otherwise catching a traitorous dastard.

That, and he got to spend more time with the lady than he thought he would, especially since all that riding had given her some great thighs.

So, he noticed these things, he was only human.

"Heh, perv."

Gaius rolled his eyes and looked to his neighbor. "Very original, Shade. Or should I call you Anna now that you're unmasked?"

Anna snorted. "Just call me Anna sugar, we'll get along better. Besides, pretty ballsy of you to say you'd take over my network."

"You hide behind a mask and make yourself sound like a man." Gaius drawled. "Wouldn't take much for me to slip in and take over. Wouldn't take much for anyone to do it."

Anna shrugged. "That's the point, but I've been Shade for ten years. My contacts know my mannerisms by now, so it would take more than some fake to take over. But..."

She smirked. "I wouldn't mind teaching you the ropes, if you let me make a deal."

Gaius narrowed his eyes, but another voice answered instead. "What deal are we talking about?"

Chrom strode into the infirmary with a stony face, fixing Anna with a stern glare. "Your network is obviously vast considering Lord Dunwall came to you for assistance, so what would it take to place one of my friends at the head?"

"How sneaky," Anna chuckled. "Didn't think the leader of the halidom would ever stoop to meet the criminal element, let alone control it."

Chrom's glare hardened. "Were it up to me, I'd put every murderer to the sword. But, this rebellion has shown me the need to be flexible. Your contacts will lie unprosecuted, Shade, so long as Gaius takes your position and uses it in service of the halidom. Should they turn, they'll be treated like the rest."

Anna's grin grew. "Well then, that makes my life simple. See, all I want in exchange is for the crown to show some favor to my family's business. We deal in exotic goods, but taxes are... burdensome."

"You will receive no such break," Chrom growled. "I can designate them as trusted suppliers and give a royal certification, but all shall be taxed the same regardless of status. I'm not so naïve as to believe taxmen follow those laws to the letter, but I refuse to bend the principle."

Anna scrutinized Chrom for any cracks before humming. "Well, you certainly have that backbone of steel. Alright, I can live with that. We'll make more money than we'll know what to do with if you keep your word."
She sat up and held out her hand. "We got a deal, Prince Chrom. I'll start getting sugar-boy up to speed after he can walk again."

Chrom shook the hand. "Good, but remember who you're messing with. This man's fancied by a walking tornado, and you don't want to mess with that."

Anna just grinned and Chrom left. Silence reined for a time before she spoke again.

"Shame he's taken, I like a man with spine.

-Sumia-

"What was that?"

Sumia looked up from her small mountain of documents as a shiver that had nothing to do with her perpetual feeling of cold passed down her spine. Across from her, Cordelia frowned. "Something happen?"

Sumia frowned too. "I… don't know. Just a shiver, but it felt like that time when someone tried to attack Selene."

"Your sixth sense?" Cordelia tried. "I mean, there's no way it could be Selene, not with Olivia watching the stables today. Maybe Chrom got some bad news?"

Sumia sighed. "I hope not. Also, would you mind telling Robin I'm sorry next you see him? I didn't realize all this paperwork got shunted on to him before the war started."

Cordelia giggled and passed Sumia another logistics list. "It's a lot, that's for sure. How're your lessons going?"

"About as well as expected." Sumia sighed. "Miranda does her best, but I catch myself daydreaming at times. You wouldn't believe how annoying it is hearing people whisper about this peach-fuzz called hair that's finally decided to grow back while trying to go over finance and etiquette."

Cordelia shrugged. "Just be glad your hair's coming back as is. Besides, I've got my fair share of things to learn too. I've only been able to find one other surviving Pegasus knight and she's one of the trainees that didn't see battle. No one in Ylisstol knows of anymore, so I'll have to expand the search."

Sumia shook her head and scanned the list before signing. "Well I wish you luck. Heaven knows if I'll ever get enough time to actually talk to Chrom this week."

Cordelia frowned and put down the other report she held. "Have you not been able to discuss things recently? I mean, you're going to get married."

Sumia stilled her writing with a sigh, standing from her chair and walking to the window overlooking the city. "We have talked a bit about it, but we've gotten buried in work. Chrom's trying to get the people in order along with our military and trade while I've been playing catch-up and running the logistics. I want to have a nice talk with him about it, but life just hasn't let us."

A grimace crossed Sumia's face. "Besides that, we'll have to start meeting with the loyalists soon. We received a missive saying Duchess Catania's going to visit next week and she'll be arriving at the same time as most of the other nobles. That's not going to be fun."

"Speaking of," Cordelia sighed, pushing a folded piece of parchment towards Sumia. "My parents
want to see me. They couldn't leave Grevis with Catarnia's orders in place, but now they want to check in."

Sumia hummed before a thought came to her. "Your mother used to be a Pegasus knight, right? Why not ask her to take on an advisory role until the order gets back on its feet?"

Cordelia shook her head. "It won't happen. My mother's been out of practice for some time and the training structures changed since she was part of the order. Even then, she never wanted to be in a senior role."

Sumia frowned. "Well, if you say so. You gonna tell them about Robin, or are we going to have a scene straight out of a romance novel? You know, the one where the guy wanders in and all that?"

Cordelia rolled her eyes. "Of course I'll tell them. If anything, they're likely to be glad I stopped fawning over Chrom. Can you imagine how awkward things would be if Robin weren't here and you got engaged to Chrom?"

Sumia shivered. "Yeah… good point. Count me among the glad party then, if only so we don't have to try and sort out that mess in addition to all this."

Cordelia gave her a thumbs-up. "Aye to that. Anyway, you need any more help for now?"

Sumia glanced at her pile of parchment before shaking her head. "No, I think I got this. Go ahead and see to getting that recruitment drive started, the sooner we find new riders the better. I'll even pop in every so often to help out, if I can find the time."

"That'd be great." Cordelia said as she stood. "I'll leave you to it now. Need to make sure Dunwall hasn't tried to rope Robin into something he'll regret."

Sumia waved and picked up another sheet, a groan filling the air at what she saw.

"Why on earth are we getting marriage proposals for the first-born, we're not even wed for Naga's sake!"

-Cordelia-

Cordelia barely held in her chuckle at Sumia's frustrated shout. While it was weird to be getting such things so early, it certainly wasn't unexpected.

Now where's my dear Robin?

She chose a random direction and let her feet carry her along. She knew Dunwall had called Robin for a meeting, but where they were holding it was a mystery. Deciding to ask the first person she found, Cordelia's gaze landed on Donnel and Ricken.

What are they up to?

Striding towards them, Cordelia made sure to announce her presence. "Donnel, Ricken! What are you guys sneaking around for?"

Donnel jumped and a sack went flying into the air. Ricken attempted to catch it, but missed by a bare inch. Cordelia had to hold in her confusion and amusement as flour went everywhere. "So, uh, you two looking to bake something?"

Ricken coughed flour from his lungs and patted his robes before answering. "That was the idea,
yeah. Donnel wanted to try and see if he could recreate some of his hometown recipes."

Cordelia hummed, liking the idea. "Well, who would get to partake? I assume both of you, but is there any other reason?"

Donnel puffed some flour out of his pot before setting it on his head. "Well, we were thinkin’ of giving some to Lissa. She's been awful down the last couple days, least from what I've seen. Thought this could cheer her up."

Cordelia frowned. "When has Lissa been down? She's been her usual cheery self whenever I've seen her."

Donnel scratched his cheek. "See, that's the thing. She's all chipper whenever people're around, but the minute she's alone it's like she's 'bout to cry. I don' know why, but I want to help."

Cordelia cupped her chin, trying to think of a time Lissa had been sad recently. "…I still can't think of anything. But if you're right, than I leave it to you guys to figure this out. Who better to fix her mood then two of her best friends?"

Donnel blushed and Ricken chuckled, but Cordelia bid them farewell. She didn't want to stick around and clean up that mess, not when she had to clear the recruitment drive with Robin and Chrom.

After wandering through several hallways and greeting anyone she met, Cordelia finally spotted her quarry. "Robin!"

Robin perked up and turned as she jogged up to him. "Hey, what's up?"

Cordelia smiled and pulled him in for a peck on the cheek. "First, hello. Second-how did your meeting go?"

Robin scratched his head, cheeks dusted with pink. "Hello to you too. As for the meeting, well, Dunwall wanted to inform me about my formal introduction ceremony whenever I survey my new digs. That, and he wanted to ask about Gaius since he and Maribelle are starting to circle each other."

"That sounds like an overprotective dad alright," Cordelia laughed. "I've heard Maribelle complain about how overbearing he is at her tea parties."

Cordelia seemed to stiffen at the mention of fathers. "Everything okay?" Robin asked, "Something wrong with fathers."

Cordelia grimaced. "Oh… we've known each other long enough, eh?"

Robin pecked her forehead. "Of course, and I've never been happier as long as I've known you. So, what's up?"

"You don't remember much past meeting me," Cordelia muttered, embarrassed. "But, to get to the point, my parents will be coming to see me next week. It'll be happening when Duchess Catarnia visits as well, so don't be surprised if you don't see me that day."

Robin frowned. "Well… I should at least make time to meet them. I mean, they raised the most wonderful woman in the world, so they're doubtlessly great people!"

Cordelia smiled. "That's kind of you, Robin. I just need some time with them alone, ok? It's going to take a lot to get them up to speed before adding you into the mix."
"I guess," Robin sighed. "Alright, I'll leave you to it. I still wish to speak to them, if only so I can thank them."

Cordelia tilted her head. "What for?"

Robin grinned and kissed her flush on the lips.

"For giving this world an angel."

-Lissa-

"Chrom, can we talk?"

Lissa caught her brother exiting the infirmary, her resolve steady though her gut was doing backflips.

"What about?" Chrom asked. "I already know about Donnel, what else is there to say?"

Lissa gulped and grabbed his arm. "Just… comes with me. It's about what happened with Nowi, Sumia, and Lon'qu."

Chrom grew serious and allowed Lissa to guide him into the heart of the palace, they eventually stopped in the gardens. Lissa strode to the pear tree and took a seat. "Come on, this is important."

Chrom sat next to her and the siblings looked up to the tree. Lissa didn't remember her mother, only that the pear tree had been her favorite spot to relax. It was here she'd come to relax too, and she could already feel it soothing her nerves.

"So…" Chrom prodded. "What's on your mind? Did you find something that could help us figure out what happened? What made our friends transform?"

Lissa sighed, face drooping. "Not… really. See, remember when we went to Donny's village? How I was able to do those really thin beams?"

Chrom cupped his chin, thinking back to that incident. "Yeah… now that I think about it, you've never been that precise since. You don't mean doing that was something similar to what happened with the others?"

Lissa kept her eyes glued on the pear tree. "Yeah… if a lot less extreme. I didn't lose anything since there wasn't some pact or anything, but I did hear a voice that wasn't mine."

Chrom took a deep breath. "I see… so who talked to you?"

"Horakthry," Emmeryn answered as she shimmered into existence. "The Creator of Light itself. I was pulled into a meeting with the god not long ago and was told that Lissa has been chosen as an… arbiter."

Chrom's teeth ground. "It appears the gods see fit to make those around me into their playthings. At least Lissa was not bound in a contract, and I can only hope they'll stay away from the others."

Lissa sniffled, sadness and fear rolling through her mind. Of course Chrom was angry, he had every right to be. She may as well start packing…

A hand fell on her shoulder. "I do not blame you Lissa, nor am I upset with you. Something like that is scary, especially when you didn't know what was happening. While I wish you'd have come to me sooner, I appreciate that you've told me now."
His hand fell away. "As for you, Emm, I want to know why you got dragged into a meeting with this thing. Also, we need to get you ready to come on as an assistant, so you need to test how far your body can move before disappearing."

Lissa felt like crying. She'd been expecting Chrom to start ranting and raving at her, not accept it out of hand and tell her it wasn't her fault. A few tears did escape, but a gentle hand brushed them away. "Dear Lissa, there's no reason to cry. What the gods do is out of our hands, all we can do is move forward. Now, why don't you tell me about Donny? I've been eager to hear about him ever since Chrom mentioned him."

Chrom took that as his cue to leave. "I'll make sure no one interrupts you. Just remember, if someone does show up, you need to go."

Lissa heard Emmeryn agree before the construct of her sister's soul settled next to her. "Whenever you're ready."

Lissa took a deep breath and began to tell Emmeryn about Donnel. From when they first met in Ferox to her rescue, to the night she'd confessed her feelings and forced a kiss on him. All throughout, Emmeryn listened with the patience that defined her and offered Lissa a shoulder to cry on.

"Donnel sounds like a fine young man." Emmeryn whispered when Lissa ran out of words. "I hope to meet him soon and see for myself. I'm glad you've followed your heart Lissa, and know that I will be here to support you should anything go awry."

Lissa wrapped her arms around Emmeryn. "Thank you, sis… gods, why did I have to get so emotional about this? It's you guys, you'd never hate me."

Emmeryn patted Lissa's head. "We could never hate you, Lissa. All we ask is that you put your faith in us as we have done with you. Now, am I right you wish to go see your boyfriend?"

Lissa blushed, pink mixing with the red around her eyes. "Jeez, hearing it said out loud is kind of embarrassing."

Emmeryn giggled and kissed the crown of Lissa's head. "Now you know how Chrom felt all those years you've teased him. Go on, I'll talk to you and Chrom later tonight about what I found. First, enjoy today."

Lissa pulled back from Emmeryn and nodded. "Alright… I'll do just that! Thanks again Emm, I couldn't ask for a better big sis!"

Emmeryn nodded and Lissa hurried away. A moment later, Emmeryn's form began to fade. "Ah, that must be the limit. Let's pop back to the jewel and see what's going on."

Her form disappeared, soul returning to the gem. She never noticed the shell-shocked Sumia that had witnessed Lissa leave and Emmeryn fade.

"What the...?"

-Donnel-

"Alright, that's long enough."

Donnel reached into the oven with his glove and pulled out the pie crust, the smell of roasting meat and vegetables filling the air.
Ricken wiped away some drool. "I think that's a success right there. All the others smelled like feet, but this… this smells good."

"I reckon so," Donnel agreed. "Never thought we'd use that much flour or lamb though. Have to apologize to the cooks later."

Ricken grinned. "Well don't mind me, I can make another one myself now and apologize for the both of us. Just get that thing to Lissa and make her get back to her old ways! …Do you mind telling her not to target me for a prank, since I helped?"

Donnel chuckled. "I'll be sure to let her know. You take care now, ok?"

Ricken waved and Donnel stored his prize before leaving. The scent continually entered his nose and he felt his mouth water at the reminder of home, but he stayed strong. More than a few people tried to stop him and ask what was in the basket, but Donnel excused himself and got away as quick as he could.

"Donny!"

The voice was music to his ears, but Donnel had to keep a firm grip on his basket as Lissa flew into him, arms wrapping around him and cheek pressed against his. "Lissa! What's gotten into you?"

Lissa smiled at him. "I'm just glad to see you! We haven't gotten to have fun in a few days."

Donnel chuckled nervously and held out his basket. "I uh, noticed you weren't all that chipper since we haven't gotten to meet. Ricken and I made this to try and cheer you up."

Lissa took the basket and breathed in the lovely scent. "Ah, this smells great! Come on, you and me need to have a picnic this minute!"

She grabbed his arm and started dragging him away, Donnel stumbling to keep up. "Wait, right now?"

"Of course!" Lissa crowed.

"When do I need an excuse to enjoy spending time with you?"

-Chrom-

"So, your limits about the height of the palace."

Chrom was sitting across from Emmeryn in his room, the siblings hashing out where Chrom would need to be for Emmeryn to successfully enter the palace and take her place as an assistant.

"Give or take a few feet." Emmeryn confirmed. "Plenty of room altogether, especially if I'm given a room and office not far from yours."

Chrom scratched his chin, "Well, that settles it for now. When would you like to show up?"

"Preferably after you've wed." Emmeryn said. "That'll mean Miranda and Dunwall will return to their duchies and I can avoid their scrutiny."

Chrom huffed, but had to agree. "That would make things easier. The question is whether we should let Sumia in on this or not, especially since you'll be working with both of us."

"Why not now?" A new voice asked.
Chrom nearly leapt out of his seat and Emmeryn vanished in panic. Once he caught his wits, Chrom looked to his door to find a stern Sumia glaring at him, disappointment leaking from her eyes.

"You have a lot of explaining to do."
Chrom stared at Sumia in ill-concealed fear, his love's disappointment boring through his soul. "Sumia, I can explain-!"

"Then do so," Sumia said as she strode into the room, moving a chair aside. "But bring forth your sister as well, so that I may hear why she has hidden herself."

Chrom grimaced, but shook his head. "Emm, come out."

Emmeryn shimmered into being again, returning to her own seat with regret clear in the air around her. "Hello, Sumia… I was hoping this meeting wouldn't happen for a few more weeks."

Sumia took a seat and crossed her arms at the siblings, glare still in place. "Don't lie, it doesn't suit you Emmeryn. Now, explain how the woman I saw die is here with us and why you never deigned to inform me of it."

Chrom bit his lips, trying to find the words. "The things is… Sumia, look, Emm is dead. What you see here is a construct through which Emm's soul speaks. Emm herself lies within the jewel that you've seen me with over the last few weeks."

Sumia nodded slowly. "And what is this miraculous jewel?"

"A gift given by our mother," Emmeryn answered. "I did not know of its properties for some time, but I'd worn it for years in memory of our once peaceful family. I briefly had it placed into the Royal Archives for safe keeping, but I changed my mind the day I gave Chrom the Fire Emblem."

Sumia's frown deepened. "Forgive the skepticism, but that sounds strange. When did your mother gain a gem that could hold a soul, yet not use it to save her own life?"

"Emm explained when she first appeared." Chrom sighed. "The gem itself is one of Naga's artifacts and searches the soul of whoever bears it at the moment of death. Emm was given the gem before our mother died, so it was not in her possession when she passed."

Sumia worked her jaw, frustration clear. "That doesn't explain why you didn't share this with me. I can understand that revealing Emmeryn was alive, or whatever this state is, to the public would be ill-advised. However, I am your fiancée, and strange as it is to say it, the future queen of Ylisse. I'd say this is something I need to know."

"That's what we were discussing." Chrom sighed. "And Emmeryn insisted that we keep the number that knew to a minimum. Besides myself, only Lissa and Robin know."

Sumia jaw tightened. "Lissa I can understand, but why Robin?"

"Because he was in a rut." Emmeryn answered. "They both were. Lissa felt that my death was her personal fault and that all she'd done and would do could never make up for it. Robin was similar, but he attempted to bury himself in work to hide from the shame. In order to save both heart and mind of the Shepherds, Chrom and I agreed to reveal my survival to them first."

Chrom kept going before Sumia could open her mouth. "Emm wishes to remain dead to the outside world. The construct can change its appearance to suit Emm's needs and we were planning on bringing her on as an advisor after the war was over. Then this rebellion happened and we've been too busy putting the pieces back together to involve you."
"Just because it makes sense doesn't mean I'm not mad." Sumia muttered. "Besides, when were you going to tell me? After we'd wed?"

Emmeryn nodded. "Around then, yes. By that point everything would have settled down and we could tell you without adding undue stress. But, as is apparent, that is no longer the case."

"No," Sumia drawled sarcastically, "it's not. Look, I'm willing to let this drop because you've given me reason for hiding it, but by Naga I'm staying mad at you until next week."

Chrom hung his head. "I'm glad to receive so light a punishment. Um, would you like to stay with us? We were going to start deciding on Emm's disguise before you came in."

Sumia tilted her head, a hum bubbling in her throat. "I… guess? I mean, I found this out because I saw Lissa crying on Lady Emmeryn's shoulder in the garden earlier. I was convinced I'd seen a phantom and was coming to talk to you when I heard her voice. That's what made me mad."

Chrom fixed a sheepish Emmeryn with an annoyed stare. "I told you two to keep it brief."

"What could I do?" Emmeryn defended. "Relief and grief must both be expended in their own time, no force on earth can change that. Let us count ourselves lucky that Sumia came straight to you."

Chrom's eyes widened, mind latching onto that last sentence. "What if someone else saw? Just having rumors would be bad enough, but…"

Sumia laid his concerns to rest. "I was the only one in the gardens. I didn't see or hear anyone else in the halls beside Lissa and Lady Emmeryn."

"Well that's a relief," Emmeryn said. "Though please, Sumia, stop calling me Lady. You'll be my sister in law before long, just call me Emm."

Sumia blushed. "I… I'll try, I guess. Um, anyway, I'll leave this with you. I need to go and think on all this."

She held a parchment out to Chrom before standing to leave, head cradled in her hand. Once the door was shut, Chrom locked it and went back to his seat. "Wonder what this is?"

Opening the parchment, Chrom scanned over the words before groaning in frustration. "For Naga's sake, we just finished a war. People need to get their priorities in order."

Emmeryn took the parchment from Chrom's hand, giggling after she read it. "I just love how they used and/or when referring to your first-born. Have to give them attention to detail, if nothing else."

"They're trying to court a child that hasn't been conceived or even thought of!" Chrom growled. "We have ruined roads and a severely depleted army and they're worried about this!"

Emmeryn patted his shoulder, eyes sparkling with laughter. "Let the nobles play their games, it makes for great stories. I'll handle the response so you don't scare this poor baron off; it likely took either great stupidity or great courage to even write this out."

Chrom shook his head, mind turning to other subjects. "Let's leave that to rot for now. Emm, we need your disguise to be something that no one would ever suspect."

"I'll remove the brand and change my hair color." Emmeryn granted, the changes taking place before Chrom's eyes. "Besides, I've always been curious what I'd look like with dark hair."
Chrom shook his head, wondering at the floor length field of black hair Emmeryn had spontaneously grown. "Just... try not to trip on it. Anyway, you need to change your eyes too, probably height and facial features at that."

Emmeryn rolled her eyes, the light-blue orbs shifting to amethyst and her face growing softer. "I'm quite aware of what needs to change. Now, I'll need a new voice too, so here's some ideas."

Emmeryn cleared her throat before a sultry, sinful voice came out. "How's this?"

Chrom flushed, horrified. "No! You sound like some... seductress!"

Emmeryn giggled before her voice changed again, this time wise and matronly. "This?"

Chrom bit his tongue. This one was much better than the first, but... "You sound like Old Nurse Nan. Doesn't really match your appearance."

Emmeryn gave him a half-lidded glare. "What are you, a theatre director?"

Chrom raised his brow at that voice, liking it the most out of the bunch. "That almost sounds like a girl version of Robin. It matches the look, so I think it's a contender."

"Now you sound like a tourney organizer," Emmeryn shot. "You've been spending too much time around Vaike."

Chrom shrugged. "Hey, I have to know who you look like when the time comes, otherwise this gets awkward. Last thing is your wardrobe, any ideas?"

Emmeryn shrugged before her sage robes became stained with maroon. The garments shifted to a simple gown with a white cape over the back. "There, now I show I'm affiliated with none of the duchies."

Chrom nodded, looking Emmeryn's new body over for any identifying marks. "...Looks good. We'll work out the voice later, but I like what you came up with. Ever think of being a novelist? You're quite creative."

Emmeryn giggled and returned to her normal shape. "Thank you, Chrom, but perhaps later. For now, I'll leave you be, General Evelyn is waiting for you to meet with her."

Chrom smacked his head. "I'll have to apologize for making her wait. Talk later?"

Emmeryn smiled and faded away, Chrom stowing her jewel before leaving. The hall outside was empty, thankfully, but Chrom soon returned to the hustle and bustle of the palace. Servants, guards, clerks, and various others milled around, though they made way for him as expected. Chrom would have preferred they never notice him, but his new position made it mandatory.

Wishing to escape the unsubtle gazes, Chrom kept his pace measured but quick. It was only a few minutes later that he arrived at his destination and entered the room.

Only to find Stahl and General Evelyn having a lovely discussion.

Chrom stared at the pair for a moment before clearing his throat. "While I hate to break this up, we're behind as is."

Stahl and Evelyn jumped at his voice, both popping to attention with embarrassed blushes. "Prince Chrom!"
Chrom shook his head, amused. "Calm down. Evelyn, Miriel told me you wanted to discuss Felds' fate?"

Evelyn nodded and dropped her salute. "I do, milord. Felds had little to do with the rebellion outside of Count Theodore, so I was hoping repercussions would be light."

"She did help us," Stahl reminded. "I think that helps."

Chrom gave his friend a curious look. "I wasn't thinking of slapping Felds with any particular punishment anyway. As you say, the province at large was meager help to the rebellion and General Evelyn turned to our side with little convincing. If anything, I was just going to tack on a grain tax for a few months before dropping the issue."

Evelyn's relief was stark. "You're too gracious, Prince Chrom. Um, if I may, could I ask to serve as head of the Feldian forces until a new duke is appointed?"

"You already are," Chrom noted. "But I don't mind giving my stamp if you need it. I'll be expecting regular reports from you after you get back, and don't think Robin won't let me know if you're up to something."

Stahl chuckled. "That's right; you made the poor guy a baron if Felds."

Chrom smirked, but kept his eyes on Evelyn. "Beyond that, I'll also be calling bi-monthly meetings for the heads of each province. However, with three of them headless, it'll be you and two others representing the people for now."

Evelyn pursed her lips, but she looked intrigued. "Well, that's not what I expected walking in here today… Can I make one more request?"

Chrom raised his brow, the silence prompting Evelyn to continue.

"I would like Sir Stahl to serve as my liaison to Ylisstol," Evelyn said. "I've been told by many of the Shepherds he is quite dependable and I've seen him in action. Good insurance, don't you think?"

Chrom blinked, dumbfounded. Stahl was too, if his response meant anything. "Say what? I was pretty sure I'd be staying with the Shepherds, and I don't have anywhere to stay in Felds."

"You can take one of the officer's rooms in Linde." Evelyn offered. "We have a few that aren't being used."

Stahl remained stunned by the offer, so Chrom offered his two gold. "The fact you have open officer rooms does not inspire confidence in Felds' forces. But, that's what I'm letting you clean up, and it's not like the Shepherds are going to be anything more than an emergency force at this point."

Stahl's jaw dropped. "What do you mean Cap-err, Prince Chrom? I thought the Shepherds would still be your personal force!"

Chrom had the decency to look sheepish. "Well, I can't be there to command anymore. Maybe during another war, but everyone has lives outside of the Shepherds. I'll keep a ledger of everyone and where they are, but otherwise they're free to do as they wish. Oh, and I'll be sure to find somewhere in town to host a reunion at least once a year."

He patted the disappointed Stahl's shoulder. "Besides, it's not like we won't be seeing each other. Kellam and Sully are joining the royal guard with Frederick, so we'll all be here whenever you're in town. Just don't let that Feldian Rye Ale go to your head, alright?"
Stahl was still obviously broken up about it, but he put on a brave face. "Ok… I'll be sure to make time for Sully to whip my ass into shape when I visit, but only if I have three days stay over."

Chrom laughed and held out a hand, the friends trading grips. "You and me both. We can lament our sore behinds over breakfast the next day."

"I'll hold you to that," Stahl laughed. "Um, is there anything else you wanted to discuss, Eve?"

Evelyn, who'd watched the exchange with vague amusement, snapped back to reality. "Not that I can think of, no. I had this big speech prepared about how Felds didn't deserve to be punished, but that got thrown out the window. Guess I'll be seeing you soon, eh cowlick?"

Stahl scowled at the nickname, but Chrom excused himself and left the two to bicker. Honestly, Chrom was glad that Stahl had found someone to talk to about his hobbies. The poor guy had made plenty of friends in the Shepherds, but seeing him talk with Evelyn was the most relaxed Chrom had ever seen him.

A smirk crossed his face. Time to add another bet to the ledger too.

-Libra-

"How goes it?"

Libra glanced up from the text he was reading, eyes blurry from staring at the writing for so long. "As well as can be expected, Lord Virion, like I told you an hour ago."

Virion shrugged and flipped the page of his own text. "Yes, well, I simply wish to hear if you've discovered any further revisions. Our dear friend here is starting to cramp."

Libra rubbed his eyes and sighed. Ricken had volunteered to compile the revisions Libra felt needed if the church was to survive, but the poor boy was wincing with every stroke of his quill. "Then we shall take a short rest. Ricken, you can take what you have to Miriel, she'll see that it's delivered to the bishop."

Ricken hid his relief well, but Libra could see the young man slump in his seat. "I'll get right on it. Hope she doesn't try and make me get something weird this time either."

Libra almost smiled at the resigned tone as Ricken left. Of course Miriel would steal him to do something; she always did, no matter the messenger.

"In any case," Virion coughed, "I would like to point out something I found here. In the section dedicated to priest and cleric requirements, there's no mention of having to know scripture or the edicts of the church, only that they can heal."

Libra hummed. "That's too broad. Healing magic may require the desire to heal, but sadists would desire healing so their victim's suffering could continue. Honestly, Lord Virion, the more we go through this the more thankful I become to my lost brothers."

Virion shrugged, hand reaching for a cup of tea at his side. "Well it doesn't surprise me all that much. Back in Roseanne, there were entire schools dedicated to training clerics and priests. It helps that the Mila Tree is a short pilgrimage from its borders, but the requirements to get in to any of the schools are far stricter than becoming clergy here."

"I know," Libra sighed. "But that's why we're here. I don't understand why Prince Chrom decided to appoint me as one of the church's leaders, but I will gladly leave the politics to Bishop Adrien. The
moment we have a workable set of rules, I plan to resign."

Virion sipped his tea. "Well… I can't say that surprises me. You do seem more suited for a personal role rather than overseeing the entire church."

"That is how I prefer to minister." Libra agreed. "And I'm not one for administration either. It will be a relief to leave this behind."

Virion raised a brow at his friend, curiosity clear. "What exactly do you plan on doing? I may not go amongst the locals that often, but I've heard the soldiers whispering whenever a simple priest walks by. The church is, for lack of clarity, seen as a traitor worse than the military rebels."

Libra pinched his nose, a headache pounding between his eyes. "As well they should. The Head Cleric, second only to the Exalt in the church, was a collaborator and so were many of her advisors. It'll be months before we have the full picture, and many more before we've removed every rat."

"As should be expected." Virion conceded. "But you didn't answer my question."

Libra frowned before folding his hands and laying his chin on them. "I… don't really know. We've been so busy I've never stopped to think about it."

"Well you probably should." Virion sighed, closing his text and standing. "This may take some time, but life goes forever forward. I'll leave you to it, just be sure to take your own advice and rest."

Virion left without waiting for a response, Libra finding himself alone for the first time that day. "What I wish to do… An innocent question with grand implications."

He had little time to ponder on the question before his door opened, the ever-moody Tharja stalking inside.

"What can I do for you, Tharja?" Libra asked, mentally preparing himself for Tharja's antics. The woman would not leave him alone when it came to her amorous advances and even his patience would be stretched thin if she was particularly persistent.

"I need your advice." Tharja mumbled. "I find myself… unoccupied as I await the worm hearts to bind Catherine. As I wandered through town, a band of sniveling children accosted me and refused to leave me in peace. Neither my attempts to evade them or threats of harmless curses scattered them. Tell me, how does one disperse such… interest without turning them into toads?"

Libra felt a wry smile bloom on his face. "Not good with children huh? Well, to be honest, most are too curious to ever consider danger at first. If they're scared, they'll run, but otherwise it's an endless barrage of questions until they're tired or drawn to something else."

He tapped his cheek. "All you can really do is have patience. Even then, children aren't all bad, their minds are still fresh to the world and can look at things in ways you and I can barely imagine. You never know, some may be wiser than any sage could hope to claim or more creative than a sorcerer."

Tharja scowled. "So, you're saying to let them harangue and pester me without consequence? I must do something lest they decide I am something to climb on when I retrieve important ingredients!"

Libra shrugged. "Well, you must not have been very convincing when trying to drive them off. Children can, despite what I said, feel danger and will flee if threatened. However, should you harm a child, none in the Shepherds, least of all I, will ever speak to you again."

Tharja glared at him. "I'm insulted to hear you think so low of me. I simply wish to be left alone, but
no harm would befall them. At worst they'd be a toad for two seconds and they'd be back to normal before knowing what happened."

"We both know curses don't always work." Libra countered. "Let's just hold off on the idea, ok? Instead, why not share with me why you'd ask a priest for help dealing with children..."

Tharja licked her lips and clutched her tome tightly. "I ask... because I have a reputation to uphold. It ill befits a dark mage to be seen as caring or nurturing... or motherly."

Tharja spat the word like a curse, but Libra saw through the veneer of disgust. While surprising, he was glad to see that Tharja held a soft-spot for something that wasn't dark magic.

"Well," Libra began, "all I can say is try to be patient. They probably just see you and your way of dress as novel. Give it a few days and they'll find something else to occupy their time."

Tharja didn't like this answer, her scowl showed as much, but she forced her attention to the books scattered across Libra's desk. "Are you still going over the texts?"

Libra nodded, pointing to one of the smaller texts. "Not by myself, Lord Virion and Ricken were helping as well. We've made some progress, but there's still several tomes to go through on the church's inner workings before we can safely leave it to Bishop Adrien."

"Then Chrom and Sumia." Tharja muttered. "Well, are you taking a break? I need help in the library, the way they've arranged the place doesn't make any sense."

Libra's brow rose. "No attempts to seduce me today? Did the children really rattle you that much?"

Tharja looked away, scowl deepening. "Look, drop the kids already. Can you help me take stock of the library's tomes on dark magic or not?"

"Very well," Libra chuckled. "But would you mind if I accompanied you next time you go into town? I would like to see if those children come to you again, I'll be able to advise you better that way."

Tharja mumbled something, likely a curse, but Libra shrugged it off and stood. "Come, I'll explain how the library is organized while we walk."

Tharja hid her eyes behind her bangs, but followed Libra regardless.

"It's not my fault they're so damn chipper... or cute."

-Cordelia-

"Ok, that's the last of the announcements."

Cordelia patted her pile of parchment against the desk she'd taken over, her erstwhile assistant slamming their head into the wood. "Thank Naga, that was torture."

Cordelia smiled at Sully, well aware the other red-head wasn't a fan of design. "Well, you were very helpful. These would have been much longer if you hadn't helped with the message."

"We could've left the scribing to, you know, the scribes." Sully groused. "I had to miss lunch with Kellam because of this."

Cordelia scratched her cheek, sheepish. "Sorry about that, I'll make it up to you somehow. Say, now that I think about it, weren't you get placed in the royal guard?"
Sully pulled her head from the desk. "That I was, same with Kellam and Frederick. Frederick's technically the captain, but he won't be taking formal power until Chrom and Sumia tie the knot."

Cordelia laid the parchment down. "Plenty of time to get Nowi situated, good. Guess that means you'll be handling duties for the meeting next week?"

"Yeah," Sully groaned. "Most of these bozos still couldn't find Kellam if he was right in front of them. Tried telling them the old trick until they got used to it, but no one listens."

Cordelia nodded, one of Robin's stories coming to mind. "That doesn't surprise me. Robin's told me that Gaius didn't start heeding that advice until Kellam scared the life out of him a few times."

Sully smirked, remembering the assassin's haunted face. "Yeah, fun times. Anyway, it'll be a lot of work since I have to be so visible. Even more so since my family's decided it would be a good time to come down."

Cordelia sighed. "That sounds like my parents. They couldn't leave on account of Duchess Catarnia's orders, but I don't understand why they'll be coming with the duchess. Last I heard, my mother's Pegasus was still in perfect health and it's only two days to Ylisstol by flight."

Sully shrugged, unconcerned. "The crisis is over, but I'd sure as heck want to stay in time with the big wigs right now. You know, plenty of guards to keep you safe while everyone tries to figure out new patrols."

Cordelia had a feeling that wasn't the case, but speculation would get them nowhere. "I can ask when they arrive. Getting back on track, let's get these to Miriel. She'll see them distributed."

"That woman's taking on far too much." Sully grumbled, grabbing her stack and standing. "If she keeps going like this, it wouldn't surprise me if she exploded."

Cordelia grunted as she hefted her own stack. "She has Gregor on her payroll now, along with any poor soul she can round up. I heard Lissa mention the palace hasn't been this efficient in ages."

"That's what happens when you clean out the formal positions." Sully grunted, leading them out of the office they'd been in for hours. "Most of the people I met here barely did anything outside of advise. Getting some actual clerks and a few competent heads makes all the difference."

Cordelia frowned at her friend, dodging around a hurried page before speaking. "It almost sounds like you're criticizing Lady Emmeryn."

"I don't mean to." Sully grunted. "I just think that she ended up putting too much stock in the pomp and ceremony. Her ideals are something to be admired and I've never seen a better negotiator, but she never really called her staff out for being lazy. Only Captain Phila did her job with any regularity."

Cordelia's face drooped at the reminder of Phila, but she pushed the sadness away. "Loathe as I am to admit it, I see what you mean. Robin told me that a great deal of official documents were shoveled his way that he had no reason to be dealing with. I'd even heard Prince Chrom mention the sheer stacks of parchment Lady Emmeryn had to work through on a given day."

The pair stopped in the hall, realization hitting them.

"All our problems are because old men and women were lazy!?"

-Miriel-
"This needs to be given to Duke Dunwall immediately; it's the plans for improving the roads."

The nervous aide took the parchment from Miriel's hand, the poor boy fleeing the chaotic room with all haste. At the center of it sat Miriel, three stacks of parchment to her sides and two experiments in front of her.

Running back and forth across the room was Gregor, the jolly mercenary hustling between the various clerks and Miriel to make sure everything was how his 'employer' wanted it.

"Oi, you get order wrong! Miranda lady first, then Robin!"

He also made sure to yell his corrections as loud and hammy as possible. Miriel initially found the practice to be distracting and unnecessary, but the ratio of corrections to non-corrections had fallen drastically because of it.

Apparently, being embarrassed by a large brawny man made these normally quiet people competitive.

Turning her mind away from such things, Miriel adjusted one of her apparatuses. "Attempt twenty-five, seeking to create a steady source of power for the rock. Material: copper."

She'd tried other metals already, and several showed promise, but none had been cheap. Just getting the gold necessary to make the small clasp on the glow-rock, as she'd come to call it, took Gregor on a trip to the Outrealms.

That had been fun to explain.

*Copper should be able to create a good source, previous experiments with it showed that electricity flows well through it. The question is whether it can be controlled.*

With everything in place, Miriel sent a spark of lightning into the end of the copper wire she held. A moment later, there was a faint glow from the rock that held for a few seconds before fading.

"That's progress." Miriel mumbled. "Only gold held longer than that."

A hand landed on her shoulder, Gregor's grinning face greeting her annoyed glance. "Work going good! May finish task for day. Relax with Gregor later, maybe over good meal?"

Miriel remained stoic, but a quick look around the room showed Gregor was correct. "...I have experiments that require my attention, Gregor, I will not have time after these forms are finished."

Gregor frowned. "Sure? Miriel working too hard again, you explode if go much longer."

"Your grammar still needs work," Miriel sighed. "I'd almost think you didn't know how to speak if you didn't keep turning in my assignments in perfect Ylissian. Why do you speak like that?"

Gregor shrugged. "Eh, is personal choice. Gregor speak perfect words like you, but this speech of home. Wandering make Gregor homesick, way of speaking helps."

Miriel hummed before taking a parchment from one her piles and scanning it. "Very well, at least it's something... reasonable. Take this to Clair; she's in charge of checking the numbers for all taxes."

"Gregor on job." Gregor agreed, taking the revised fruit tax from Miriel. "You no answer Gregor's question."

Miriel sighed, eyes flitting between Gregor and her experiments. Why not?
"Very well, but I can only spare an hour."

-Cherche-

"Thank you."

Cherche took her purchases with a smile, her usual armor replaced with a long cloak and a sturdy dress.

Today, she would be leaving Ylisstol.

The Shepherds had been adamant that she stay and find a place to live, Chrom and Sumia even offering her the position of palace matron. While she was humbled to be offered authority over every servant in the palace, Cherche turned them down with a smile.

Exiting the store, Cherche checked to make sure her boots were still perfectly laced before setting off. Many of the people waved to her, Cherche's brief stay unhindered by her gentle personality, 'good day's' and deals offered to the woman that had so quickly endeared herself.

Cherche returned the greetings politely, but sped her steps. If she allowed herself to get caught in the flow…

She may never leave.

Sighing, Cherche arrived at the palace gates and was waved through. It took barely three minutes to reach the stables, but Cherche grimaced at what she saw:

Vaike, who was for some reason being embraced by a whining Minerva.

"I'll miss you too big gal." Vaike said as Cherche approached. "Take care of Cher for the both of us. I'll make sure you come home to the best beef a man can buy, aight?"

Minerva whined sadly; smoke puffing from her snout as she nuzzled Vaike's shoulder.

Vaike patted her snout before turning and spotting Cherche. "Oh, you got back sooner than I thought you would. Just, uh… sayin' goodbye to 'Nerva."

Cherche put on a neutral mask. "I can see that. Are you sure that's your only reason?"

Vaike scratched his head, searching for the words. "Well… I wanted to say goodbye to you, too. Then I thought it'd be awkward and the last thing I wanted was to leave us on that note. So… yeah."

Cherche regarded him for several moments, surprised that he wasn't here to persuade her to stay. "… I see. Well then, know that this is only a temporary parting, unlike what the majority of our comrades believe."

Vaike blinked, almost gaping as Cherche gave him a radiant smile. "I believe this experience will better me, in ways that I can only imagine. You've told me of the Outrealms and how useful they are, but I feel this will be better than any of that."

She stepped forward and cupped Vaike's cheek, smile never fading. "Let's use this time to better ourselves so that, when we reunite, we'll be partners none can match."

Vaike took hold of the hand cupping his cheek, a sad smile on his face. "Partners huh? Yeah… that sounds right."
Cherche rubbed the back of his hand with her thumb before pulling away. "I need to get going. We must make the next town by night-fall."

Vaike nodded and stepped aside. "Have fun. Maybe I'll go travel awhile once everything settles down. Maybe... maybe we'll see each other."

Cherche's smile softened into something serene, her voice a ghost as she passed him.

"I'd like that."

No more words were spoken as Cherche mounted Minerva, Vaike waving farewell as the duo took to the sky. "I'd like that too."

-One Week Later-

Cherche's presence was dearly missed shortly after she'd left.

When Duchess Catarnia soon to arrive, Chrom and Sumia had ordered the palace prepared with all due haste. The problem was Duchess Miranda hadn't informed the pair of Catarnia's... expectations until the day after.

Chrom scoffed at the list Miranda had given them, but Miranda swiftly reminded them that this was both to secure Ylisse and a chance to show their strength. After all, had Catarnia turned toward the rebels, it was likely the insurrection would not have fallen so easily.

With this in mind, Chrom and Sumia had to dive into the plans and revamp all their orders, which meant four days of panicked confusion. Had Cherche been there, her gentle temperament and ability to silence any overbearing designers would have made the process far smoother.

Regardless, the preparations were completed the night before the meeting, the organizers crashing into their beds. None dreamed or stirred, too exhausted to do anything, but they woke with a vigor born of indignation.

This would go right or there would be war!

Metaphorically of course, but the last thing anyone wanted was for something to go wrong and for all their hard work to be for nothing.

Chrom fidgeted, Sumia equally nervous next to him. Much to his chagrin, Chrom had been seated in the Throne Room, but he drew the line at taking the throne itself. He was not Exalt and Sumia was not queen, the gilded chair would stand empty.

"She should've been here by now." Sully muttered, decked in full armor. "The gate spotted her flag an hour ago."

Chrom nodded, silently rueing that Frederick wasn't there. He had gone to survey his new homestead and wouldn't return until tomorrow.

"Just be ready." Sumia whispered back, Miranda in the chair next to her. "The tardiness is probably deliberate."

Cordelia's nose wrinkled, her armor pristine and shining behind Sumia's shoulder. "She wishes to see how we'll react?"

Robin nodded, his place behind Chrom's shoulder. "Sounds right. Impatience shows she's in control,
"You've been paying attention," Dunwall muttered, mirroring Miranda's position. "Catarnia likes her games. Don't rise to meet her taunts and she's harmless, but she's good at getting under your skin."

Lissa shifted from next to the throne. She wasn't sure how she'd gotten the position of throne-keeper, but she did not like it. "Maribelle's told me about that. Chrom, try and keep your head."

"I have all I need to stay calm right here." Chrom answered, taking Sumia's hand.

Sumia smiled at him, but the doors creaked open to reveal a stoic Stahl. "Presenting Duchess Catarnia de Grevis and her retinue."

The doors opened further and admitted a stream of people, all dressed in the finery of their positions. At the head stood a short woman with golden-brown hair falling in waves behind her, dress a deep orange with blue embroidery.

Chrom locked eyes with her, the woman's dark brown eyes calculating. "Duchess Catarnia."

The woman curtsied just low enough to be appropriate. "Prince Chrom, Lady Sumia. It's my pleasure to see you both in good health."

Sumia spotted a glimmer of amusement in the Duchess's eye. "And us as well. We have much to discuss."

Chrom raised his hand and a table was placed in front of the group, chairs presented to the visitors. Catarnia was given the finest seat, Robin spotted her giving Miranda a patronizing smile.

"To begin," Chrom started. "We wish to know why you did not come to the immediate aid of Ylisse when the rebellion began. You were aware that the Shepherds were coordinating with the Feroxi, but you stood by."

Catarnia took a parchment from the man next to her, a playful smirk in place. "As my missive explained, I had little information. For all I knew, either side could be the rebels, and I didn't want to support the wrong side."

Dunwall snorted. "You insult me Catarnia, my loyalty to the crown is well known. The moment I allied with Miranda, you should've known who was who."

Catarnia bowed her head politely. "I still didn't have anything beyond that. I don't deny my isolationist tendencies make crises such as these difficult to react to, but I knew the royal family was safely in Ferox. I could afford to take my time."

"Not with Gangrel still in power." Lissa countered, though she did not move. "Were it not for the sacrifice of my sister, Ylisse could very well have been ground to dust under Plegia's heel while you dallied."

Catarnia's eyes sharpened, but Chrom returned her attention to him. "Regardless, we're glad you came to our side. Your adjutant has already informed us that your lands require no aid, but that you offer none either."

"It's only par for the course," one of the retinue answered. "We suffered no damage or casualties in the insurrection, but we raised no further forces either. Our forces and revenue are still enough to keep Grevis running, but that is all."
Chrom glared at the weedy man, feeling there was more to that statement. "Nothing at all? I'm quite sure that Grevis is involved with trade, surely that caused some damage."

"Our ports were left alone." Catarnia stated. "But we can discuss the specifics later. Instead, I would like to know if you've discussed who will be taking over Clarissa and Draconis. Felds belongs to General Evelyn right now, so I assume you already have an idea for it."

Chrom shared looks with his friends and advisors before nodding. "We have an idea for Clarissa, though I haven't spoken to the one I wish to offer quite yet. Draconis will be taken over by Marquis Darien of Themis. He's Lord Dunwall's right hand and we're well acquainted with his abilities."

Catarnia nodded. "I see… well, I can certainly say you've made a good choice for Draconis. Would you mind sharing who you wish to put in place for Clarissa? Grevis has always enjoyed good relations and I wish them to continue."

"Believe it or not," Sumia began, "she's here right now. Chrom and I wished to tell her privately, but if you insist."

Catarnia nodded, eyes scanning every woman present. "I insist, earnestly."

Chrom sighed before pointing to his candidate.

Lissa.

The table broke into mutters, Lissa unable to stop her jaw from slamming into the floor. "What?"

"Your sister?" Catarnia mused. "Why would you put her forward? Is she not already a royal?"

Chrom pursed his lips. "Sumia and I have discussed many things with both Lord Dunwall and Lady Miranda. One such thing is that we are, ultimately, mortal. Should some tragedy befall us before an heir is born or the heir comes of age, then it will be up to Lissa to rule."

"Following that thought," Sumia continued, "we believed she'd need experience. Clarissa is not heavily populated and Denaris is the only major city. It will be good for her to learn there, as much as we learn here."

Catarnia's smile became almost predatory. "I think that's a wise course of action. Would it be alright if I visit with Princess Lissa before I return? We'll need to speak about the relations between our lands."

"Not without me present!" Maribelle hissed. "In fact, I ask to be appointed as her personal advisor!"

Mutters broke out again, Dunwall pulling his daughter close and whispering furiously. Maribelle returned fire with her own words, neither side giving an inch, while Chrom and Sumia consulted with their friends.

"I think it's an ok idea." Robin muttered. "Lissa's a free spirit, she'll need someone to keep her head out of the clouds."

Chrom shook his head, eyes turning to find his shell-shocked sister. "Maribelle coddles her too much if you ask me. Lissa won't learn, she'll only be duchess in name."

"That's if she even accepts." Sumia pointed out. "Even then I agree with Maribelle. Catarnia's dangerous, polite as she's been, and I fear Lissa could get toyed with if someone strong-willed isn't there."
Cordelia glanced to Catarnia and Miranda, the two ladies having a polite, but heated discussion. "Lissa's strong-willed enough, she just needs someone to talk to. Maribelle has a nasty habit of deciding things for her, even if it's been small things up until now. Personally, I'd let Donnel and Ricken go with her, let them act as a buffer against both Catarnia and Maribelle."

"That's not a bad idea." Robin mused. "Ricken wants to be an advisor to both of you in the future, this would be good experience. Donnel needs to learn how to be around nobles and commoners alike, a rebuilding court would be a gentler dive."

Sumia pulled Chrom close, voice a tickle against his ear. "They make good points. Lissa would probably be more willing if we have three of her best friends go too."

Chrom nodded. "Sounds good."

He rapped his knuckles on the table, silencing the mutters. "Lady Catarnia, we'll allow you to meet with Lissa, so long as she agrees. However, Lissa will not be going to Clarissa alone."

Lissa finally got out of her own head. "Wait a minute, I haven't agreed to any of this!"

Chrom held out his hand, silently asking for patience. When Lissa didn't speak again, Chrom continued. "Lady Maribelle will be going with Lissa. They're old friends and this will give both valuable experience for when they must take other positions. In addition, I'll be sending two Shepherds with her, Ricken Eltz and Donnel."

"They are experienced in matters of both nobility and commoners." Sumia continued, forestalling any arguments. "Ricken's family may have fallen on hard times, but they are still an old and highly respected Ylissean family. Donnel may be a commoner, but Lissa owes her life to him many times over. I can think of no better friends for her to count on in her time as duchess."

Most at the tables appeared placated, but Catarnia looked none too pleased. "So, you wish to leave Clarissa in the hands of children, is that it?"

Chrom glared at the woman, irked. "In case you haven't noticed, there are few here that have a single grey hair to their name. Your advice will doubtlessly be invaluable, but none of us are so arrogant as to believe no mistakes will be made."

Sumia rose from her chair in sync with Chrom. "For now, this meeting is adjourned. Lady Catarnia, we will host another, smaller meeting later today. I believe we'd all benefit from a reprieve."

The congregation bowed to the couple, as was proper, before dispersing in a storm of voices and rustling cloth.

As Lissa marched up to him with vengeance written on her face, Chrom's head whipped to Sully. "Go find Kellam and your family, this'll be a while."

Sumia sighed as Lissa dragged Chrom away. "Same to you Cordelia, we won't need you or Robin the rest of the day by the looks of it. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have go save our ruler from his own forgetfulness."

Sumia rolled up her sleeves and marched away, determination and shoes that finally fit keeping her upright. Cordelia took a moment to marvel at her friend's sure-footed gait before shaking her head. "I think I know where my parents will be. Robin, would you like to meet them now?"

Robin gulped, nerves choosing then to flare. "Uh, sure… where would they be?"
Cordelia cocked an eyebrow before shaking her head. "Don't be so nervous, they're kind people. Just don't spill anything on them and you'll be fine."

"I guess," Robin fudged. "But can you blame me? I've never met anyone's parents, let alone my girlfriend's. All I have are those romance novels you and Sumia made me read."

Cordelia begrudgingly agreed. She didn't have to go through with it, as Robin had no family of his own, but that was an awful thing to be thankful for. "Point made, but it's not going to be one of those things where the dad threatens you. My father's a genial man and my mother's been accepting of others since I was born."

She patted his shoulder. "You'll be just fine, as I've said a dozen times before. Now come on, we can't exactly meet them in uniform."

"This is my uniform and casual wear." Robin snarked. "Unless you want me to show up in my formal robes and over-dress."

Cordelia punched his shoulder, their armor clanging. "Get changed wise-guy, I'll meet you in the courtyard in twenty minutes. Then I'll take you where my parents want to meet."

Robin smirked and left, silently filling his mind with calm thoughts and patience.

He'd need a lot of it.

-Twenty Minutes Later-

"I thought you said no uniforms?"

Cordelia pouted, her old flight dress and boots replacing her commander uniform. "One of the maids thought my clothes needed cleaning. This was the only thing I had."

"And here you praise initiative." Robin laughed, looking the same as when he'd first joined the Shepherds. "Well, you still look as lovely as ever. In fact… this is like when we first met."

Cordelia held her pout as she cast her mind into the past. "You know… you're right. I'm not wearing armor, obviously, but… I guess we've changed."

"We have," Robin agreed. "Though don't be surprised if you walk in to my office one day and find me with a beard. If anything hasn't changed, it's paperwork."

Cordelia giggled and took his arm, leaning into his shoulder. "Well, we can think on that later. Come on, we don't want to be late."

Robin nodded and they set out. The streets were livelier than usual, the arrival of Catarnia bringing merchants and travelers that had folded into her caravan. Robin could see families and friends reuniting, merchants gladly hawking wares that had grown scarce over the course of both war and insurrection.

Cordelia pulled him closer, the crowd growing thicker. "I hope there's still a table when we get there. I didn't think the duchess would bring this many people."

"The borders were closed for months." Robin mumbled. "Traders, friends, everyone with a reason to leave probably hopped on the wagon. Wouldn't surprise me if it doesn't calm down until Duchess Catarnia departs."
Cordelia hummed before tugging on his arm. "This way. It's only a little farther."

Robin followed gladly, not recognizing the square they entered. "Is this new?"

"It is," Cordelia confirmed. "Most of these buildings were old houses, but a fire several months before you came cleared them out. No one was hurt, thankfully, but it was decided to sell the foundations and all this popped up."

She pointed to one of the storefronts, a sign reading 'Marley's Grill' hanging in the window. "That's the place."

Robin guided them to the window and peeked inside. "It looks nice. Wait, let me guess, those are your parents?"

He pointed to a booth towards the back, a man and a woman already chatting away on one side of the table. The man had brown hair and a well-trimmed goatee while the woman had blazing red hair with light streaks of silver.

"That's them," Cordelia muttered. "How'd you guess?"

Robin chuckled at her sarcastic drawl. "You know anyone else with hair like yours? At least now I know who to thank for giving you such beautiful locks."

Cordelia flushed, feeling his hand play with a loose end. "Don't say that in public, you dork! Look, are you ready? Once we're in, nothing short of a spontaneous pregnancy is getting us out."

Robin stared at her, dumbfounded. "…Who's?"

"Sumia's," Cordelia muttered, embarrassed. "Just forget it, I don't know why I thought of that."

Robin shook his head and took a deep breath. "Alright… here we go."

He led Cordelia to the door and opened it for her. The smell of grilling meat and vegetables hit his nose and his mouth started to water. "Good place."

Cordelia ignored the comment and entered, waving to her parents. "Mother, Father, we're here!"

The pair in the booth looked up and Robin felt a pang in his heart at how their faces lit up. Cordelia jogged forward and met her parents in a warm hug, Robin hanging back by the door.

What am I doing here? Robin thought as the family chattered and caught up. This is their reunion, I have no place here. Maybe I can slink away while they're distracted…

His hand found the door handle, but another took his arm. "Hey, what's up?"

"Liar," Cordelia whispered. "Look, I'll hear what's wrong later, but right now you're going to have a nice dinner with my parents. You may not see it, but they're very excited to talk with you."

Robin didn't get a chance to respond. Cordelia dragged him to the booth where her parents sat down again. Cordelia ensured Robin was stuck between her and the wall.

"So, this is the famous Robin." Cordelia's mother began. "It's a pleasure to meet you. My name's Diana, this is my husband Rodrick."
Cordelia's father nodded. "I hope you don't mind me saying, but you're a unique man."

"I… get that a lot." Robin chuckled, awkwardness hanging in the air around him. "Far as I know I'm the only one in the country with purple hair."

Diana smiled at him. "Or prismatic eyes for that matter. Would you mind telling us more about yourself? We've been very curious ever since Cordy first mentioned you."

"So I wasn't the first to come up with that." Robin muttered. "Well, I'm twenty-one, about two months younger than your daughter. I've been with the Shepherds for almost a year now, though Prince Chrom has seen fit to grant me some land over in Felds. Um, I like to read, talk with friends, train, and I enjoy playing my trumpet when I find the time."

Rodrick smirked. "Another musician, huh? I swear, I'm the only person I know that doesn't play something."

"That's because you have no sense of rhythm." Diana shot. "I'm lucky to get through a waltz with you and not have a bruised foot."

Rodrick scowled, but Robin could tell it was good natured. Honestly, he wasn't expecting Cordelia's parents to be so… open. "Um… anyway, I'm currently the tactician for the Shepherds, but I'm not sure what my role will be going forward. I do need to go see my new land, but I don't know when that'll be."

Diana nodded. "If I may ask, what were you doing before joining the Shepherds? Cordy never really specified in her letters."

"A scholar." Cordelia answered, surprising Robin and her parents. "Prince Chrom told me how they met near Southtown and Robin helped fend off bandits. He was wandering from place to place at the time, so he took up Prince Chrom's offer to join."

Robin, blinked, not expecting the story, but Rodrick laughed heartily. "A man with brains, I like it! Nice change of pace from all our fool neighbors."

Diana shook her head. "Just because we have the lake to fish in doesn't make the others fools. Nor does you being the carpenter."

Rodrick gave his wife a cheeky grin, but Cordelia interrupted. "Now that we've gotten introductions done, what have you two been up to? I was worried when I heard the duchess closed Grevis's borders."

Diana sighed, playing with a silver strand of hair. "Really, nothing much. All we could do was worry after you since no letters were being sent. Seneca's too old to fly anymore and I'm too out of practice to have been of any help."

"In other words," Rodrick continued, "it was business as usual. Can't tell you how relieved we were to hear Plegia and the rebels were taken down."

Diana reached across the table and took Cordelia's hand. "We'd like to hear what's been going on since your last letter. All we knew was that you were finally moving on from the prince and were going to try after a patrol."

Cordelia sighed. "Can we order first? It's… a long story."

"I'll do my best to help." Robin assured her. "It's been an ordeal."
Diana and Rodrick exchanged a worried glanced, but a young man with a notepad in hand came up and gave them some pamphlets. "Terribly sorry for the wait. My name's Andrew, I'll be your server tonight. Please, give the menus a look, I'll take drinks in the meantime."

Orders were given and idle chit-chat filled the air until their food came out. They ate silently for a time before Cordelia took the plunge.

"To start," she began, "I was sent on patrol in the northwest, to fort Firald."

She glanced to Robin, seeking solace, and sighed when he nodded. "That's when everything came apart at the seams."

Diana and Rodrick listened to Cordelia's tale patiently as the hours wore on, stopping her only to get details or clarification. Robin was always sure to make sure the parents had as much outside perspective as possible, if only to balance Cordelia's own feelings and recollections with reality.

By the time the tale was done, their food was long finished and Cordelia's parents were somber as could be.

"I'm fine now." Cordelia said, a sniffle breaking the attempt. "Everyone's been so good to me and Robin's been the greatest friend I could ever ask for. It's… it's why we started dating."

Diana sighed and stood. "Come along, my sweet. I think it best we all go back and rest."

Rodrick nodded and stood as well, but made way for Diana to come around and embrace her daughter with all her strength. "My brave girl… I'm so glad you've found happiness, after all that's happened to you. I could never be prouder."

Cordelia embraced her mother just as hard, the pair soaking in each other's love. Rodrick smiled at them before looking to Robin and holding out his hand. "Thank you for being there for her. I'll want to hear how you two met later, but for now, I don't think I could've wished up a better man for my daughter."

Robin gaped at the praise, barely remembering to shake Rodrick's hand. "That… that's beyond anything you need to say sir, I'm not that great."

"Nonsense." Rodrick scoffed. "You've gone above and beyond to help her, that means something to this old man. I think you've both got a bright future ahead of you, individually and together. Do yourself a favor and have some confidence, you sure as hell have mine."

Robin nodded dumbly, not sure how to respond. Rodrick smirked and patted his shoulder. "I should get Diana back to the inn. I trust you can take her home, so hop to it!"

Robin coughed as Rodrick slapped his back. The older man laughed again before prying his wife off of Cordelia and bidding his daughter goodbye. Cordelia gave him a much briefer hug and waved until they were gone.

"That went well." Robin stated, voice cracking at the end. "I think they like me."

Cordelia stared at him, stunned. "Like you? It looked like they were considering adopting you halfway through the meal!"

"That would be awkward." Robin mused, laughter bubbling in his chest. "But I think I know another reason your father was smiling."
Cordelia tilted her head, clearly curious, when Andrew returned. "Thank you for your business. The gentleman that just left asked to place all the meals on one ticket, so I will have to assume that you'll be paying for it."

Robin almost laughed at Cordelia's indignant face. "Go ahead, I'll take care of this."

Cordelia nodded with a growl, taking off after her parents. "Dad, you can't just have a heartfelt conversation and leave someone else the damn bill!"

Robin shook his head and fished out a bag of coins from his coat. "Here, that'll cover it. Keep the change too, you did a good job."

Andrew looked shocked, but Robin bid him farewell and entered the bustling streets once more.

_Hmm, past sunset already. Hope Chrom's still alive, Lissa looked ready to murder him._

He glanced back and stared at the quaint restaurant, something warm rising to the fore of his mind.

_I don't know what it is about this place, but I like it. I'll have to take Chrom and Sumia here at some point, maybe we can get it marked as the Shepherd's official reunion spot._

Smiling, Robin followed the sounds of Cordelia scolding her father. It had been an interesting day so far, and by the looks of things, it would continue to be so.

_-Sumia-_ 

"Next time, inform Lissa ahead of time before dropping a rock in the lake."

Sumia stared at Chrom's exhausted form, the prince groaning atop his bed. Lissa had made her displeasure at being nominated as a duchess heard loud and clear, Chrom getting smacked with a roll of parchment whenever he tried to interrupt.

Both Chrom and Sumia proceeded to tear Lissa's protests apart when she finished venting, but it had taken far longer than either had expected. So much so that they'd had to delay their other meetings until the next day.

"If anything, it was a good thing." Chrom finally answered. "She showed she has the will to be duchess."

Sumia pursed her lips. "Still, don't drop the anvil like that unless absolutely necessary. We don't need some sourpuss in Clarissa to decide Lissa isn't able to rule and raise a big stink."

"That's what Jayce is for, right?" Chrom countered. "Maribelle, Ricken, and Donnel too. Besides, it'll be three years at the absolute most."

Sumia shook her head and looked back to the parchment she held. "I guess. I have to finish this economics assignment, you go ahead and rest."

Chrom frowned, mind working on an idea. "You sure you don't want to talk about something else?"

Sumia shook her head. "No, this one's over something we'll be talking about tomorrow. I want to make sure I'm caught up."

Chrom sighed and sat up. "I'll get my armor off first. Hold on."

He stood from the bed and entered the sitting room, the sound of clanking metal following shortly
thereafter. Sumia was too focused on her list of items, so she never noticed Chrom finish and sneak up behind her.

Until he picked her up by the waist.

Squawking in alarm, Sumia almost punched Chrom before she was deposited on the bed, Chrom climbing in beside her. "Are you mad?! That nearly scared the life out of me!"

Chrom smirked and pecked her nose, receiving a slap to the head for his trouble. "Well, I'd like to spend the night with my lovely fiancée. The meetings can wait, relax for tonight."

Sumia pouted, but snuggled into his hold. They laid there for several blissful minutes before Sumia decided to broach the topic she'd been thinking on in her spare time. "Um, Chrom?"

Chrom grunted, engrossed in rubbing his hand through the light fuzz that Sumia could barely call hair.

"Stop that, I'm being serious."

Chrom sighed before turning his eyes to meet hers. "What do you wish?"

"Um," Sumia stalled, trying to think of a good way to broach the topic. "When… do you think we'll be wed?"

Chrom's face lit up in understanding. "That would be important, wouldn't it? Guess that's what happens when we get busy… I'm good anytime you are, really. I could call in Libra to do all the formalities and be married tomorrow or we could do the whole spectacle. It's your choice."

"That's not an answer." Sumia huffed. "It's not just my wedding, it's yours too. We have to be a team, that's what we agreed on when you proposed."

Chrom chuckled, falling more in love with her right there. "You're right. How about we start discussing the details when Catarnia leaves? We'll have everyone together and can hold off on the big split until the ceremony's over. Sound good?"

Sumia finally smiled. "Yeah… that sounds good."

She yawned, eyes drooping tiredly. Chrom stroked her cheek, Sumia nuzzling his hand. "It's late and we have a long day tomorrow. Let's go to sleep, the work can wait."

"If… you insist." Sumia yawned again.

Chrom didn't say another word, stroking her hair again until Sumia drifted off to her dreams. He didn't know it, but the announcement of wedding plans would only add ever more to their plates.

Along with the madness of their friends, who would panic over a wedding that wasn't even theirs.
In the morning, Chrom and Sumia had a nice discussion over breakfast and decided their ceremony should take place in the spring. It was several months away and this would let everyone get themselves settled and the country on its way to normalcy.

It also let Kellam and Sully have their ceremony without having to worry. The pair had waited long enough and it was the least Chrom and Sumia could do.

It didn't stop Chrom's prediction from coming true. Everyone had gathered in the entrance hall after Chrom had called for them, but the date had barely left Sumia's lips before everyone started shouting.

Pandemonium reined for several minutes before Chrom ordered Frederick to quiet everyone. Frederick did so with a call to attention, every Shepherd snapping an instinctive salute, even Sumia.

Once settled down, they instructed everyone to take their questions, requests, and other inquiries to Sumia later. Work on the preparations could continue after they'd finished the day's tasks.

This was how Robin ended up sitting in his office with Duchess Miranda and General Evelyn, their business pertaining to him. "You want to include all the militia with the resupply plan? We haven't even finished a final draft, let alone negotiated with all the suppliers."

Miranda shrugged, bags clear under her eyes. "I'm aware, but I don't think there will be much negotiating. Everyone's scared of the possibility that violence could break out. No sane merchant will turn down any offer we make, not when we're the only trustworthy bulk consumers."

"We need the supplies too." Evelyn added. "The regular forces didn't get the negotiated shipments before the war broke out and we lost our usual suppliers in the insurrection. If we don't include the militias in the deal, we'll have a clear disconnect between forces."

Robin sighed and tapped a rhythm on his desk. "You know, I'd much prefer helping Chrom with his wedding plans, but I see why you came to me with this. I'll see to getting a meeting with the guild masters, but I want you both to work with Frederick and Virion on this."

Evelyn nodded her understanding, but Miranda had a question: "Is Sir Frederick able to take on his duties so soon? I thought he'd be busy taking care of his charge, Lady Nowi."

"She's being taken care of," Robin answered. "Lissa assigned her a personal healer, a specialist with blind patients. It'll be several months before Nowi's at a point she can move into a house on her own."

Miranda nodded and stood. "Thank you, Sir Robin. Hopefully things can continue to run smoothly, we may even get to go home at this rate."

Robin inclined his head as Miranda left. Evelyn remained where she was, a curious look on her face. "Excuse me, Sir Robin, but may I ask you something?"

"Call me Robin," Robin answered. "Everyone else does."

Evelyn cleared her throat, clearly unfamiliar with the casual tone. "Right. So, S-Robin, I wanted to ask your opinion on something."

Robin raised a brow. "What could you ask me? If it's about our mission into Felds, I'm not
apologizing."

"Not that," Evelyn sighed. "First, I'd like to apologize for my subordinates' actions. Branden's heart is in the right place, but beating a prisoner will not be tolerated, nor will going around my orders. I simply wished to hear what you considered an appropriate punishment."

Robin hummed, feeling that the woman wanted to ask something else. "Well, he looked very stiff and unyielding from what I saw. I'm guessing it was his first time leading an operation on his own?"

Evelyn sighed and scratched her head. "It was. I thought going on an investigation would be a good first command. I didn't expect him to apprehend your friends, let alone harm Sir Stahl to such an extent. Heck, he was responsible for Lady Cordelia's state of undress when I found her."

She stopped Robin before he could start plotting murder. "Count's orders, not his choice. Guy was griping and cursing the orders all the way—for what it's worth."

Robin buried his murderous thoughts. "I see… well, I'd call him overzealous. Do you have any other commanders that he could study under? Preferably someone that could keep a closer eye on him?"

Evelyn hummed in thought. "I do. Her name's Gloria and she leads Linde's knights. I think she'd be a good teacher, alongside Sir Stahl."

Robin blinked before his memory kicked in. "That's right; Stahl got transferred to Felds on your request. I agree that he'll be a good teacher and should mellow Branden, just be sure to have plenty of food on hand."

Evelyn laughed, words faster than her mind. "I haven't seen anyone make as much as a dent in our rations. The wonders of being in the country's bread basket."

Robin had a feeling she'd regret that statement, but moved on. "Anyway, why'd you choose Stahl? He told me you hit it off while he was captive, but not much beyond that."

Evelyn shrugged, a smile showing itself. "I think he's a fresh perspective. Too many in Felds aren't concerned with the country at large and that showed during the war. Sir Stahl will go a long way helping me change minds."

Robin nodded and extended a hand. "I'll be sure to help as well. Looking forward to seeing my new digs when I can."

Evelyn took his hand and shook it. "I look forward to your help, Robin. Who knows, I may even get you a housewarming gift."

Robin chuckled and bid her farewell. Once Evelyn was gone, he finished the report he'd been writing before heading for the stables.

As he walked, he spotted servants and Shepherds alike running amok through the halls. Most were going to and from one room in particular, so Robin decided to delay his trip and pop in on the royal pair.

After dodging a steaming Maribelle, Robin entered the room to find Sumia trying to talk Sully off the metaphorical ledge while Chrom struggled to ward off a migraine. "Things going well I see."

Chrom sighed. "Yes, well, we told Sully that we'd like for her to be the first bride out of our friends. As you can see, she's not taking that offer lying down."
Robin nodded sympathetically. By the sounds of it, Sully was beyond insistent that her wedding could wait until after the work was done. Sumia, in turn, was trying to point out that the work would never be done and they'd wait forever at this rate.

Robin patted Chrom's shoulder. "Well, that aside, what have you decided on so far?"

Chrom shook his head, Sully leaving the room while Sumia chased after her. "Most of the traditional items are already decided. The ceremony's in Ylisstol's cathedral, what with the Grand Cathedral being stripped of its riches and repaired. Libra's the officiant, considering his position, and the reception's here at the palace."

Robin nodded slowly, taking it in. "Ok, that makes it a little easier. What else?"

Chrom heaved a groan and grabbed his head, clearly frustrated. "Nothing! I know it's not until spring, but damn it, I knew everyone would start panicking over it! You wouldn't believe how many people have come in to ask about seating let alone interrogating Sumia about a dress."

Robin frowned. "Why would they… wait, seriously?"

"Exactly," Chrom confirmed, reading Robin's question. "You'd think people wouldn't care that much about influence, but that's how the people see things. If it wasn't clear already, sitting at the head table means you have my ear and Sumia's."

Robin sighed. "And the further from the table, the less influence. Well that's all kinds of fun."

Chrom pinched his nose again, headache coming back. "You have no idea. On the other hand, we have decided on our respective parties, if only ten minutes ago."

Robin blinked; amazed they'd already done so. "Who're the lucky people? If we're still talking politics, everyone's going to be sucking up to them."

Chrom smirked, glad to hear it. "Well, Sumia's maid of honor is Cordelia."

Robin expected as much.

"You are my best man"

Robin knew Frederick would…

Wait.

Robin stared at Chrom, unable to process his words. "Wait… me? Why not Frederick? He's known you far longer."

Chrom smirked at his flummoxed friend, loving the dumbfounded frown. "Sure, he has, but that was as a protector. We didn't become real friends for quite some time, and even then, it was still in his capacity as servant. I've never had more honest fun and freedom than I've had with you, that's why I want you to be my best man."

Robin took a moment to process that. Then another… and another…

Chrom waited patiently until Robin finally got out of his own head. "I… humbly accept, Chrom. I don't know what my duties will be, but I hope to make your big day one to remember."

Chrom stood and traded grips with Robin. "Same to you. While I know this next request is sudden, could you inform Cordelia of her role as well? I trust you'll be able to handle her reaction."
Robin silently hoped he could. His girlfriend was normally very even keeled unless she got very embarrassed or excited. This was bound to make her very excited. "I'll do what I can. Mind telling me the rest of the party when I get back?"

Chrom nodded and wished Robin well right as Sumia hurried back into the room, a frantic Lissa right behind her. "Chrom, we need to head downstairs now! Maribelle's trying to throttle Vaike!"

Chrom shot up, frustration filling his voice. "What the hell did they do this time?!

Sumia shook her head, wondering the same thing. "We don't know, but it sounds like Maribelle and Vaike got into some kind of argument over catering. Yes, I know it's foolish, but that's what happened."

Chrom growled before striding from the room. Robin took a moment to greet Sumia and Lissa as they left, then took the long way to the stables. He could hear what sounded like a lot of yelling, but avoided it for the most part.

When he got to the stables, Robin found a large group of young women milling about before a raised platform, mutters filling the air.

Oh that's right. Today's the recruitment drive… Good crowd if you ask me.

Robin decided to stay out of sight. His face was likely to draw their attention away from the event.

As if on cue, Cordelia exited the stables with two other women, one about the same age as her while the other was easily a decade older. "Welcome!"

The crowd quieted as Cordelia took the stage. "Thank you all for coming. If I may ask, how many of you heard of this through our announcements?"

A dozen hands went up.

"Ok, who heard from friends or family?"

Two dozen went up this time.

"Finally, who saw the crowd and wanted to give it a shot?"

Ten went up.

Cordelia took a deep breath. "Alright then. As many of you no doubt know, the Pegasus Knights were almost destroyed in the war. As of right now, the three of us are all that's left."

She gestured to her left, the young woman stepping forward. "This is Eris. She's the lone survivor of the eastern knight division. Don't doubt her courage on her looks, she held off thirty Plegians by herself as she escaped."

Eris nodded modestly, even as the crowd wondered at her.

"This," Cordelia continued, gesturing to the older woman, "is Dalila. She was in charge of training the northern division, but barely survived after being shot down. She has more experience than either I or Eris put together, so listen well."

Robin blinked at that choice of words. Wasn't this a recruitment drive, not an orientation?

Cordelia didn't answer his question. "I won't lie; the training and schedule will be grueling. Our
country is in dire straits and it will take work to return it to what it was."

She straightened a little, pride radiating from her. "But, the Pegasus Knights shall do all that and
more. We have defended this realm from all threats since its founding and we will continue to do so.
For it is not on the ground the people find hope, but in the sky where we fly! Whosoever chooses
this path will be a part of something grander than they are and enter the halls of those that protect the
people!"

Robin had to give her credit; Cordelia was certainly keeping the crowd's attention.

"We've all heard the stories of those that joined the ranks of the Pegasus Knights," Cordelia
continued. "My question to you is, are you ready to join them?"

A cheer rose from the crowd and Cordelia allowed herself a smile. "That's what I like to hear. Those
who want to enlist; please step forward and speak with Dalila. Everyone else, thank you for your
time and we wish you the best."

Robin smiled as well, only a few of the crowd choosing to leave. Most started to gather around
Dalila, which allowed Cordelia to slip back into the stables. Robin snuck around the crowd of
recruits and entered the stables to find her leaning against the wall. "You ok?"

Cordelia looked up and smiled when she saw him. "Oh, Robin, what brings you here?"

Robin strode forward and helped her to a stool. "Just checking in, seeing how things are going. Quite
the crowd out there."

Cordelia sighed and leaned on her hand. "Well, sure, but not as large as I'd hoped. I got a look at
Commander Phila's documents recently and got a tally on the members of our order. Did you know
that we had barely six hundred before the war?"

Robin blinked at the number. "Really? A squad had what, ten per? That's less than sixty squads, not
nearly enough to cover the country."

Cordelia sighed and rubbed her temple. "I know; it was quite the surprise. Thing is, after reporting
that to Miriel and Sumia, I was told we'd need to triple that number to have an effective force."

Robin's jaw dropped. "…Seriously? There's no way you can find that many in Ylisstol!"

"The big issue's price," Cordelia added. "We have all the pegasi we need to make the numbers work,
but members have had to pay for their own equipment per tradition. All the supplies to start cost one
thousand gold."

Robin choked, not ready to hear that number. "Only successful merchants, at the very least, can
afford to pay that! Small wonder there were so few knights, every last peasant was cut out before
they could try!"

Cordelia nodded. "That's why I've asked for the kingdom to pay for the supplies. We have enough
saved from our Outrealm forays to pay for six hundred recruits and Miriel projects we'll have enough
to pay for the full force in three years. The next problem's getting them all up to speed."

"Babes teaching babes."

Cordelia agreed. "We'll need instructors fast and a thorough overhaul of our training. A normal class
takes two years to graduate, but I'll be selecting those with the best skill and temperament to act as
extra instructors. That way we can start sending them to other parts of the country to train and gather more recruits. It'll be tough, but I think we can do it."

Robin patted her shoulder. "I think you'll do it too. If it takes your mind off things a bit, Sumia's decided on her bridal party."

Cordelia perked up, eager to hear the news. "Who's in it?"

"I don't know everyone," Robin admitted. "I do know that she's chosen you as her maid of honor."

Cordelia froze, jaw slamming into the floor. "...Really?"

Robin nodded, but pulled her into a hug when tears started to form. "I'm Chrom's best man too, so we'll be seeing even more of each other than usual. Sound good?"

Cordelia nodded against his shoulder, trying to hold in the happy sobs.

It wouldn't do for the commander to be seen like this, after all.

-Lon'qu-

"Again!"

Lon'qu growled, but thrust his blade into the dummy again. The man had isolated himself from everyone he knew for the last few weeks, even declining to stay in the palace infirmary. Instead, he'd found the first healer who knew something about left-handed rehab and dragged them away.

Now, he was slowly relearning how to fight with his left hand, the nub of his wrist the only remainder of his right hand. It could still stabilize his blade, thank the heavens, but his strikes lacked the power they once held.

Three thrusts later, the healer called the session to a close. "You're doing very well, Sir Lon'qu. While you still favor your weight on the right side, I can see the power in your strikes returning."

Lon'qu grunted and carefully sheathed the practice blade. "How long until I can fight again?"

The healer shook his head. "It's still several months before I'd let you into serious sparring. I'd say close to a year of constant work before you can return to battle as an asset, and even then you'll have to focus more on precision until your strength returns."

"If it ever does," Lon'qu muttered. "I will see you later today."

The healer nodded and left Lon'qu alone, the swordsman staring at the nub of his hand before walking to a wall and punching it with the stump. Again and again he punched, uncaressing of the raw pain that ripped through his arm with every impact. It was that damn count's fault that he'd been forced to accept this burden, to accept this... stain.

The only thing that made it bearable was the fact it saved Olivia from a horrid fate.

Lon'qu sighed through his nose and glared at the bloody nub. "I will overcome you. It doesn't matter if it takes the rest of my life, I will never have to make that sacrifice again. I'll be stronger than the entire world if I have to be."

The silence was his answer. Lon'qu took enough time to dress his wounds the healer left behind before setting off for the palace. He didn't wish to speak to any of the Shepherds, far from it, but he had to check in on Olivia. She'd found a specialist all her own, the problem uniquely hers.
Lon'qu slipped into the palace and avoided any prying eyes in the panic. He'd heard about the wedding plans, but it baffled him so many were panicking so early. In any case, he found the room he was looking for and slipped in.

"One, and two, and three…"

As expected, Olivia was at work with her instructor. The kindly woman had been surprised when a dancer of Olivia's caliber had come to her, but agreed to help all the same.

Soon after they began, it was clear why Olivia had found a dance instructor in the first place.

"Waagh!"

Lon'qu winced as Olivia stumbled and smacked into the floor. She'd been getting better, but her current abilities were a far cry from the assured and mesmerizing dancer she'd once been. Olivia was so embarrassed by her current state, she hadn't told anyone why she was suddenly terrible.

Except Lon'qu.

-The Siege of Ylisstol, Day After-

Lon'qu had woken in the infirmary with a pounding headache and one less hand.

That was fun.

He'd had the misfortune to awaken at night and some small sense of propriety kept his rage from making itself known as loudly as possible. Instead, all he'd done was stare at the stump of his hand with all the fury and anger he could muster.

Slowly, it had cooled into steel-coated determination. Screw whatever wounds he had, it didn't matter. He would beat Basilio, one handed or otherwise, there was no other option.

Eventually, his mind wandered back to Olivia. When he didn't see her anywhere in the infirmary, Lon'qu threw on his blanket as a coat and bared the burn of the cold floor to search for her.

She wasn't in the infirmary, or the surrounding rooms, but he heard a distinct sound, one he was familiar with from too many occasions.

Olivia sobbing.

Silently praying it wasn't as bad as he feared, Lon'qu guided himself through the halls until he found the room the cries came from. Opening the door slowly, he was surprised to find an open room with wall-length mirrors.

He ceased to focus on the mirrors as he found his charge, Olivia on her knees and sobbing into her hands. Not wanting to spook her, Lon'qu approached slowly and loudly, making sure she knew he was there.

When she didn't bolt away, he took a seat next to her. "...What happened?"

She whirled around and pulled him into a hug, crushing his chest in her grip. "You're ok… thank the gods… you're ok!"

Lon'qu blushed and instinctively recoiled, but Olivia held him in place. Eventually, he calmed his racing heart and patted her shoulder. "You wouldn't have left me if I wasn't. Please, what's wrong?"
Olivia sobbed again, refusing to let go. Lon'qu could tell he wouldn’t hear anything for a while, so he let her cry into his shoulder.

Eventually, right as dawn began to poke through the windows, Olivia calmed down. "I... I made a bargain. I wanted that count to let me go, to let you go... so I made a bargain."

Lon'qu narrowed his eyes. That sounded eerily familiar to what happened to him. "Who did you make this bargain with?"

Olivia sniffled and pulled back, finger wiping away and holding up a tear.

Which then started to float.

"Tiamat was her name." Olivia answered, gaze turned from Lon'qu's frown. "I didn't know the name until yesterday. I... bargained with the High Goddess of Water."

Lon'qu sighed and gestured to his nub. "Then what did you pay for that power? It must have been something dear if you're crying like this."

Olivia shook as more sobs wracked her body, chest heaving with shallow breaths. "I... I..."

Lon'qu broke with tradition and hugged her this time, lone hand stroking Olivia's back. He'd seen Robin do this with Cordelia so he hoped it would work here. "Calm down, it's ok. I will not judge you, no matter what, you know that."

Olivia choked back more sobs before her voice came back. "I... I can't... I can't d..."

She took a deep breath.

"I can't dance anymore!"

Olivia descended into sobs again, Lon'qu dumbfounded. "...That doesn't make sense. How can you not dance, it's practically muscle memory!"

Olivia shook her head, tears twinkling in the growing light. "I... I don't know. Water flowed over me after the bargain and it was like everything was washed away with it. It took me ten minutes to remember how to walk and move on my own. Then, after you were in good hands, I came here to practice and relax when... I fell over on the first move."

Lon'qu nodded slowly. "I... see. Is there anything you can do?"

"No," Olivia choked. "It's like... the moves are in my mind's eye, I can see how the dance is supposed to go, but my body refuses to move. It's like I'm a beginner all over again."

Lon'qu sighed and cupped her shoulder. "I doubt it's what you want to hear, but we'll have to move on. You may have to start over, but so do I. It's... not easy, but we can do it. Right?"

Olivia still shook, her loss deep, but the words soothed her enough to stop crying. "I... I guess..."

Lon'qu nodded and let her hug him as long as she wanted. They may have met as guardian and charge, but they'd become something else over time and this confirmed it.

They were friends, and they would work through this together. Like always.

-Present-
Thus, they worked. Lon'qu was making swift and steady progress with his tasks, but Olivia had been forced to examine her style as she built herself from the roots. There was a lot more going on in dance than she’d ever realized, being self-taught, and it was daunting trying to learn anew with two left feet.

But, she persevered. In fact, as Lon'qu watched, she was able to make it through a very basic set of movements with a semblance of her former fluidity.

"Very good," the instructor praised. "I don't know what caused you to lose so much obvious skill, but I can certainly see you're a quick learner. Let's call it a session for now though, we'll start again later today."

Olivia blushed and bowed to the instructor. Once she was gone, Olivia turned to find Lon'qu standing at the door. "Oh, hello."

Lon'qu felt a smile rise unbidden. "Hey, see things are going well I see."

Olivia did her best to mirror the smile. "Kind of, I guess. To put it into words, it's like I'm a newborn babe learning all over again. None of my muscles are as limber as they used to be, and it'll take months before I'm flexible enough to do the more demanding routines."

To demonstrate, Olivia leaned back into a normal torso stretch. Lon'qu felt his eyes drawn to her toned body, which was very weird for him, but she stopped barely a moment later. "That's it?"

Olivia nodded and relaxed. "It's like I aged fifty years over night I'm so stiff. Have to work in the minimum of dress too if I'm going to work my joints correctly."

Lon'qu blushed, mind conjuring an image unbidden. "Remember to lock the door."

Olivia stared at him for a moment before her words processed. "Oh, uh, right… please stop staring at me!"

Lon'qu obligingly looked away, a smirk on his face. This felt far more normal than talking about rehab.

It wouldn't be bad if they could get back to it… maybe on a more permanent basis this time.

"Hey, Lon'qu, why are you blushing? I'm on the other side of the room."

"Nothing."

-Severa, Two Months Later-

"Well… it's a house."

Morgan raised a brow at her sister, holding up a well-drawn picture of a two-story cabin. "This is what we wanted."

She put down the picture and pointed. "That is what we made."

Severa cringed. Compared to the picture, the structure before them was far cruder and almost ugly. The wood making it up was uneven, the windows were weird shapes, the chimney was leaning to one side, and it looked like the roof was made of scrap wood.

"I think it has plenty of charm." Lucina said, patting her hands of sawdust. "Four rooms on the second floor, a dining room and kitchen, sitting room, and a porch. Not bad for a first try."
Cynthia groaned and flopped onto the ground. "It took us two months to do this. Damn Risen, why can't they stay dead?"

Severa shook her head, eyes going to her bandaged hands. "We've been asking that question since forever, no point dwelling on it. Besides, at least we don't have to worry about most of the necessities- aside from bed frames."

Morgan groaned. "I refuse to let you make them. I haven't seen such rickety things since we had to cross that bridge going back to Ylisstol."

Severa glared at her. "You didn't have to cross it! I was having seven different panic attacks going across that thing while you flew donuts in the air!"

Morgan stuck out her tongue, but Lucina intervened. "Sev, she's right, for different reasons. Look at your hands; you could barely hold an axe let alone a hand saw or shaver. Relax; we'll be done with bed frames a lot quicker than everything else."

Severa had to agree with that. There was no way she'd be of any help as was. "Fine, guess I'll take the first trip into town. You got the list?"

Cynthia produced three long sheets of parchment. "Had everything checked by Lucy this morning. Morgan double checked so now it's your turn."

Severa took the parchment and read through the items. Everything was there by the looks of it, except for one absence. "Do we want to make the mattresses or am I buying them?"

"You'd have to get a wagon regardless." Lucina answered, giving Severa a sack of coins. "Honestly, it's cheaper to get the materials ourselves. Those villagers may have been thankful for clearing out that Risen pack, but they didn't give us that much."

Severa tossed the bag a couple times before sighing. "Alright, fine. Cynthia, I'll be taking Selene this time. Just letting you know before I start."

Cynthia shrugged. "She needs a good flight. Hopefully we'll be done with the frames before you get back, then we can relax."

"After we get everything put away." Morgan reminded them. "Then we get to learn how to spy on the local military for info and deal with any Risen. If we're lucky, everything occurs on schedule, if not, we get discovered and captured until we spill the beans."

Severa swatted her sister. "That's the thinking that'll get us caught. Besides, I need you to come with me. I can't handle too much with my hands like this."

Morgan raised a brow, but acquiesced. "Alright, if you're sure. Cynthia, don't let Lucy try and carve anymore designs, I don't want her losing any fingers."

Cynthia fired off a mock salute, giggles filling the air, while Lucina trapped Morgan in a headlock and noogied her mercilessly. Severa allowed Morgan to suffer the consequences before rescuing her and leading them both to a small pile of bottles and flasks.

Pointing to the vials, Severa got them started. "Ok, what color do you want?"

Morgan hummed before choosing one. "I'll take blonde today. Always wondered what I'd look like with Aunt Lissa's hair."
Severa huffed and grabbed a bottle at random. "I don't care which. I just hope no one looks too closely at us, our eyes are too easy to identify."

"I quite like our eyes." Morgan countered, pouring part of the bottle into a basin of water. "It really shows we're sisters. How many other people can claim that they have two eye colors and mirror their sibling?"

Severa poured out some water into a separate basin and undid her twin-tails. "None besides us, that's why I'm worried. Now, remember how to do this?"

Morgan nodded and gathered her hair between her hands. "Ready when you are!"

Severa nodded and took a breath before pouring her bottle in and mixing until the water was a dark blue. "Do it."

Morgan laughed before taking a breath and immersing her hair in the golden-yellow water, stopping just as her eyebrows entered. Severa did the same, but she had to roll up her sleeves and force her much longer hair into the liquid lest it float.

They kept themselves there for the better part of twenty minutes, concentrated solely on their task, before Severa sighed. "Alright, you're good Morgan."

Morgan pulled herself from the water slowly, making sure it drained well before shaking it dry. Every last strand had been stained a bright gold, the dye working wonderfully. "Man that stuff works. We're, uh, sure this washes out, right?"

Severa grunted in answer. Seeing her sister preoccupied, Morgan set about making sure Severa would have everything she'd need to dry off and not mess up the dye. After another ten minutes, Severa drew her hair, now midnight blue, out of the water. "Geez, that took awhile. My neck's all stiff."

Morgan shrugged and handed her a towel. "I rubbed this with that scouring powder. Should get the dye out of your skin."

Severa accepted the towel and cleaned herself of the stained skin, leaving her hair to air dry. "Thanks. Actually, blonde's not bad on you. Scarlet's still best, but not bad."

Morgan giggled and pointed to Severa's hair. "You look like Lucy with that hair. Who knows, maybe people will think Uncle Chrom had another kid."

Severa glared at her sister. "That is disgusting and you know it."

Morgan shrugged and started for the cabin. "I'll guide Selene, just focus on trying to see straight if you wear the eye-patch."

Severa scowled and grabbed the patch, muttering curses as she put the thing on. It was super weird to cover one of her eyes like this, but it lowered the chance of being discovered if her prismatic eye was covered. A scarlet eye, while still unusual, wasn't as bad.

They soon took to the air, banter flying alongside them to the town. Soon after they were gone, Lucina wandered over to the stack of dyes and felt herself gulp. "Oh no..."

Cynthia, seeing her sister pale, went to check on her. "What's up?"

Lucina pointed to the bowl of dye. "I think... Sev used my dye."
Cynthia blinked before giving the pile of dyes a thorough search. Coming up empty, she fixed Lucina with a sympathetic stare. "Had to let them find out sometime."

"I know," Lucina sighed. "But I was hoping we could settle in a bit before that happened."

Cynthia shook her head and pinched a lock of Lucina's hair. A hard rub later, the blue gave way and Cynthia held up her stained fingers. "It's your own fault for letting the dye wear out this much."

"We've been busy." Lucina countered. "And I haven't had the privacy to do it. I'm just afraid Sev and Morg won't like being lied to for so long."

Cynthia's face went flat. "It's hair, Lucy. There's no reason for them to be upset. Shocked, sure, but not upset. Why would you think they'd be upset?"

Lucina pursed her lips before sighing. "I don't think either of them remembers my natural hair. I was talking to Sev last week and she mentioned how blue had suited me ever since we were little. Morgan even said she'd been jealous of the color when she was a child."

Cynthia blinked, not expecting that. "Wow... uh, memories are fickle I guess? Who knows what we've remembered wrong at this point."

Lucina had to accept that logic. "True enough. Let's just hope they take it well."

"May as well get it cleaned out." Cynthia suggested. "It'll take a bit with the dye all the way in the roots."

Lucina nodded and set off to take a long, relaxing soak, if only so she could gather her thoughts. Cynthia, on the other hand, grabbed some tools and set to work making bedframes, Lucina on her mind the whole time.

It was about time she let go of the burden on her shoulders, literally and metaphorically.

-Cabin, Next Morning-

The problem with having to get a wagon was it took a lot longer to travel than flying.

Lucina had been on pins and needles the entire night, her bath alone only adding to the anxiety. It was all she could do to not flee the water as she watched the separate bucket she'd set aside turn dark blue as she washed her hair.

Cynthia had done her best to calm the anxious princess, but her sister wouldn't listen to reason. Instead, Cynthia busied herself getting the cabin interior resembling something of a home, though not much could be done before the Volk sisters returned.

Everything aside from personal effects and cloth items were set, so Cynthia was happy.

In any case, the sisters waited on the cabin's porch well before sunrise, listening intently for the sound of wheels. When the rumble rang through the air followed by the voices of the sisters, Cynthia had to keep Lucina from bolting into the house.

"Hey guys!" Morgan called from Selene's back. "Theresa didn't miss me too much, did she?"

Cynthia waved back. "Not too much! Took me a little longer to feed her than usual. How about you guys?"

Severa directed the pack horses to just before the porch, gesturing to the wagon bed. "Pretty simple.
They could tell we were new, so they didn't expect us to know how to haggle. Didn't even use all our coin."

She glanced around the porch and frowned. "Where's Lucy? Practicing?"

Cynthia looked around and groaned. "For the love of-!"

She marched into the cabin, leaving Morgan and Severa to stare at each other as a commotion started. A moment later, Cynthia kicked the front door open and dragged Lucina out of the house, face red with exertion. "You will face them or I will make you!"

Severa blinked upon catching sight of Lucina. "Did… you grab dye by accident?"

"I think it looks cool." Morgan offered. "Kind of works with her personality."

Lucina frowned and sighed. "Guys… this isn't dye. It's… well…"

Cynthia rolled her eyes and pointed to the ashen grey locks Lucina sported. "Natural hair girls, that's what this is."

Severa and Morgan blinked and spoke in unison: "No it isn't, she has blue hair."

Lucina looked away, hands clasped in front of her. "Girls… it's true. I've been dyeing my hair Father's color for almost seven years now. I'm… kind of surprised you don't remember."

Morgan was silent so Severa spoke for them. "Wait… what? I remember you having blue hair the day we met! Every time after that too!"

"…Memories are finicky." Morgan mumbled. "I know that you've always had purple hair, but all I can remember was seeing you with red hair that one time Dad pulled a prank on you. I saw you with red hair in my mind for years until I got over it."

Severa glared before looking at Lucina with uncertain eyes. "But… why keep it a secret from us? It's not that big a deal and I feel kind of stupid for forgetting. Hell, why do it in the first place?"

Lucina's voice was quiet. "After Mother and Father died I… had to draw on the Hero-King as best I could. Then there's the fact that no one would see me as the leader I needed to be with Mother's hair. It's... it was unfair, but I was determined."

"Bullshit." Severa said, blunt disbelief making Lucina look at her. "You didn't give a damn what people thought about your looks. That was Cynthia and she got out of that phase years ago. What's the real reason?"

Lucina felt all eyes on her, even Cynthia looked puzzled. "What's she mean, sis?"

Lucina sniffed, feeling tears in her eyes. "The… the last thing I said to Mother, before she left, was how much I hated my hair. I hated the color of it, since I thought it was bland, and I yelled at her about wanting someone else's. I… I called her ugly and didn't want ugly hair."

She hid her face in her hands, sister and friends shocked into silence. "I… I didn't see her off that next morning, Cynthia. I was hiding behind a pillar trying to figure out how to apologize for being such a brat. Then… she left and I never got the chance."

Lucina was crying now, but she wasn't done speaking. "That's the reason I dyed it. The Marth resemblance was just a convenient excuse. I… I still don't feel worthy to show this hair as my own,
not after seeing Mother's heart break. I… I'm sorry, I need some time."

No one stopped her as she entered the cabin and went to her room. All Severa and Morgan could do was start unloading the wagon with Cynthia to give Lucina time to think, but they made a silent resolution.

Lucina would not be allowed to hide anymore, even if they had to pour out all the dye they had. They owed her that much.

-Four Months Later, Robin-

"So, this is my new place."

Robin hummed as he looked at the small house. It was well built and sturdy from what he could tell. Plenty of clear, well-kept land around it; the back even featured a two-stall stable.

Hopping off his horse, Robin got a closer look at the home and found it was a little larger up close. From what he could tell, an entrance hall made up much of the lower floor, aside from what he hoped was a kitchen and dining room.

"I didn't think it would be so close to my land." Frederick agreed, accompanying Robin at Chrom's request. "The barony is small, but the homestead is just barely appropriate."

Robin sighed and strode to the door, a steel key appearing in his hand. "Well, let's give it a look. I don't want to get introduced in town until I've given this a once over."

Frederick nodded and followed him inside. "It appears clean at least."

Robin nodded and began to wander around. The entrance hall took up most of the ground floor, dining room and kitchen aside. A small hallway led to the back field, there was little in the unfurnished rooms so Robin soon found himself upstairs.

There were two bedrooms, a master and guest if he had to name them, and a small library. "Not bad if you ask me. A lot bigger than my room in the garrison."

Frederick joined him. "The stable is sturdy as well. Honestly, this seems more like a quaint merchant's home than something belonging to a noble."

Robin shook his head, preferring it that way. "Well, Chrom did say I wouldn't be seeing much of it with my duties in Ylissol. I'm actually glad it's small, let's me keep it clean on my own."

He gestured to a pair of chairs in the library. "May as well chat. We don't need to be in town for another few hours and I've gone bow-legged."

"I did tell you not to slouch." Frederick reminded as he took a seat. "Mayhaps you should listen to the experienced rider next time?"

Robin scowled and changed the subject. "How's the construction going?"

"About as well as can be expected." Frederick sighed, pinching his nose. "Nowi's been very keen on her lessons with Natalie, but I can tell she's itching to try and dance again. I talked with Natalie about it and she approved adding a room for us to dance. Problem is that set the finish date back another month."

Robin grimaced. It was already hard enough finding workers that could construct such exact plans,
but new additions three months in were bound to make everyone upset. "I hope the workers were ok."

Frederick shrugged. "I made sure to throw in a bonus. Had to dip into our Outrealm hoard to do it, but Prince Chrom gave me permission."

"We're alone, Frederick." Robin sighed. "Stop calling Chrom 'prince' when among friends. Anyway, how's the new vassal working out?"

Frederick licked his lips, a sure sign he was thinking. "That's the thing; it's working almost too well. After Tharja placed the binding curses, it's like Catherine was never our enemy in the first place. I even interrogated Tharja to make sure she hadn't added some kind of mind-altering hex. It's… strange."

Robin hummed, finding that odd as well. "Maybe she's just as serious about this penance as you hope she is. I mean, that month she spent waiting on Tharja could've given her the time she needed to reflect."

"I hope so," Frederick sighed, "because Nowi's taken quite the shine to her. I do my best, but I can't be there for all the lessons or keep Nowi beside me at all times. In fact, she's gone off to check on the workers without telling me and brought Catherine with her."

Robin let out a low whistle. "I wonder what gives her that trust. Nowi's a trusting person, as we both know, but even she'd be wary around a bound traitor."

Frederick was silent for a moment before something came to him. "…Do you think it has something to do with the sight she gains with me? Nowi's described Lissa as a blinding light and I appear as a mass of rock. Maybe… she can see someone's true nature?"

Robin frowned. If that was the case, Nowi suddenly became one of the most valuable people in the world. "If true, then Chrom has a job for her. Every ruler from here to Valm would have a job for her."

"As would every criminal with delusions of grandeur." Frederick muttered. "I will speak about it with her, as it is Nowi's choice. I simply detest that we may one day have to use it."

Robin smiled at his friend. "You know, I never thought I'd see you care about someone more than Chrom. Yet, here I am, watching you court a manakete. Life is funny, isn't it?"

"I have borne witness to an amnesiac rise from the dirt to heroism." Frederick answered. "I have seen him win the trust of my lieges and myself. Then I watched him win the heart of the most sought-after woman short of Lady Emmeryn. Life is indeed funny, my friend."

Robin froze, the words strange in his ears. "I think that's the first time you've called me a friend."

"You are." Frederick chuckled, face relaxing a touch. "I just never thought it needed to be vocalized. Now then, shall we go? It'll be a long review of the town and the rest of your lands before we can return and tame the palace."

Robin shivered, remembering the argument that had broken out over silverware. Why it had happened, Robin did not know, but they'd had to restrain Virion and Dunwall from attacking each other. Nor did he want to know what Panne had said to Virion if it made the fop quiet down instantly.

"We'll deal with that when we get there." Robin eventually sighed. "For now, let's just be glad..."
Sumia and Chrom are going to get fitted. Heaven knows it'll give them some peace."

Frederick grunted and stood. "Agreed. I feared that if Sumia looked at one more dress design she would've frozen the entire palace."

"Just be glad she doesn't practice those powers inside." Robin groused as he followed Frederick.

"It's a lot harder to get frost out of a library than you think."

-Two Months Later, Ylisstol-

After much work, preparation, near fights, actual fights, and more stress than either Chrom or Sumia ever wanted, the day had arrived. The entire city woke well before dawn in order to get everything ready – there was an entire daily process the royal couple would have to follow.

 Tradition was onerous like that.

For example, Sumia had been taken out of the city. She was currently waking up in a coaching house about an hour away from Ylisstol, her bridal party joining her. "Ugh… who's knocking?"

Sitting up and stretching with a yawn, Sumia got out of bed and walked to the door. "Hold on…"

She opened it a peek and smiled at her guest. "Oh, Cordelia, you're up already?"

Cordelia nodded and almost threw the door open. "If anything, we're late! Come on, we need to get you ready, now!"

Sumia blinked before Cordelia grabbed her arm and yanked her out of the room, ignoring any protests the soon-to-be-queen voiced. The entire coaching house had been rented out for the bridal party, per tradition again, as the bride to be had to be 'presented' to the people before entering the cathedral.

Sumia thought it was a dumb rule, but she couldn't do much about it.

In any case, the rest of her bridal party were already in the main room. Dresses, perfume, shoes, and other odds and ends filled the tables as bridesmaids and assistants ran to and fro. Sumia was at least glad she'd been able to pick her bridesmaids, rather than have to choose some stuffy woman she didn't know.

In order, the bridal party ran Cordelia, Lissa, Sully, Maribelle, and Nowi as a recent addition. Chrom had told her that they were one lady short of even parties, so Sumia had gone with Nowi after Miriel had excused herself and Frederick made a request.

To say the manakete had been excited would have been an extreme understatement.

Sumia thought no more on it as Cordelia sat her in a chair. "Alright ladies, the bride is here! Finish whatever you're doing and get dressed!"

The room flew into an even greater frenzy, Lissa fighting her dress while Maribelle attempted to get Sully into shoes. It was pandemonium everywhere around Sumia except for the lone island of calm she sat in.

Sumia played with her hair, the grey locks finally back to their normal volume if not their length. In fact, her natural curls hadn't shown up yet, leaving her in a messy bob that was screaming to be combed. "So, uh, what am I doing?"
"Nothing," Cordelia insisted, directing an attendant to start on Sumia's nails. "You are to sit there and let us make you beautiful. And eat something; we don't want you fainting at the altar."

Sumia sighed, but let her friends do as they wished. It was clear they were all hurrying to get ready on time, but Sumia felt almost Zen.

She guessed almost dying and committing matricide made matters such as these seem trivial.

I wonder if Chrom's in a similar state?

-Chrom-

"For the last time, I don't need a crown!"

Chrom's aggravated shout sent a reedy assistant away, a simple band of gold hurriedly taken from the room. Chrom sighed and pulled on his pants, the white fabric shining. "You'd think they'd get the hint at some point."

Robin grunted from across the room, Kellam helping him with his cuffs. "You shouldn't complain. It'll only take us another hour to get everything together. Sumia probably hasn't even gotten into the dress yet."

"True," Chrom growled, "but I have to give a thrice damned speech introducing her to the city after the reception. Emm would have a field day with this."

Robin knew she was; he could see the gem she called home twinkling merrily in the strengthening light. Frankly, he was glad the ceremony would be before noon, the sooner this madness was over the better.

"How goes it, Frederick?" Chrom called after buttoning his shirt. "You receive any word?"

Frederick shook his head, watching the groomsmen from the door. "Not yet, milord, but assuming Lady Cordelia keeps everyone on time they should be in sight within two hours."

A chuckle showed Gaius pulling a sock around his new foot, the polished wood gleaming before it was covered. "I can only imagine Stumbles is doing her best not to explode, same with Twinkles. This whole pageant is screwed up."

"Can't do much about that." Kellam said, grabbing his cufflinks. "Have to abide by tradition until the new couple can change them."

Chrom huffed and reluctantly took the cologne Ricken offered him. "It'll be the first thing I do. Trust me. Beyond that, I hope Stahl and the others are ok keeping the people organized."

As if on cue, Vaike burst into the room. "Sorry I'm late! You would not believe the crowd outside."

Robin immediately directed Vaike to his suit. "I don't care that you hate shirts, you will wear this!"

Vaike held up his hands, annoyance clear. "Hey, I agreed on it months ago. I ain't that forgetful."

"Hope not," Kellam chirped. "Nowi would be beyond mad if you were."

Vaike felt Frederick's gaze bore into the back of his head, so he started to change without complaint.

Chrom almost chuckled before he was presented with a coat of pure white lined in gold, his personal seal etched into it with blue thread. "Sweet Naga, I'm getting married."
Robin laughed alongside everyone else in the room, Ricken speaking for them. "Just hit you?"

"Hard," Chrom muttered. "Just thinking of everything we've done until now, from the reforms and getting the country together, this seems way too grand for a simple wedding."

Frederick disagreed vehemently. "Quite the opposite milord. This showing binds all who witness it in the surety that the realm is stable and no further upheaval should be expected. I say why not let them revel in it? They may need such a memory to draw on down the line."

"I agree," Robin chimed. "Besides, it's Sumia, the one you've loved for years! Just do what I do during the meetings with Catarnia and ignore everyone except the one across from you."

Chrom gave him one hell of a stink eye. "That's why you were never productive in those meetings. Here I thought you were day dreaming about the dates you and Cordelia keep having."

Robin shrugged and pulled on his coat. "Well, work dates. We've had about three actual dates what with everything going on."

Chrom groaned and accepted the coat, a new cape soon placed over his shoulders. "Alright, I'm almost done. You lot ready to do this?"

He received a hearty cheer, his groomsmen returning to their preparations while Frederick went to check on things downstairs.

Let it never be said weddings are easy, but directing a reception with a duke and a duchess taking the reins was not what you would call peaceful.

- Sumia -

After what Sumia guessed was another hour, her nails were done and everyone had gotten themselves into their dresses, white gowns lined in gold that befitted the occasion. Sully looked incredibly uncomfortable if you asked Sumia, but the woman always did prefer armor to skirts.

Cordelia, still in command mode, directed everyone to take a seat. "Alright, while Sumia gets dressed, you're all getting your hair done! Don't ruin it or so help me…! I can't think of a punishment, but it will be severe!"

Sumia chuckled at the cowed faces of her friends and assistants. Cordelia had really learned how to command after a few months of training new Pegasus Knights.

Cordelia guided her to a separate room and Sumia beheld the dress she'd be wearing. "Wow… I'm getting married…"

Cordelia smiled and pulled Sumia into a hug. "Didn't we used to talk about our fairy tale weddings when we were young? Looks like we both got our wish."

Sumia returned the hug with tears in her eyes. "I… I know, and it makes me so happy. I just… I just wish Mother and Father could be here to see it…"

Cordelia stroked Sumia's back, soothing the tears as best she could. "I'm sure they're watching right now and marveling at the woman you've become. I know I am."

Sumia sniffled again before pulling back from the hug. "Thanks, Cordy. I hope I can pay you back some time."
"I know you will," Cordelia laughed. "Now then, let's get you dressed!"

Sumia was not expecting Cordelia to try and rip off her nightgown.

"Cordy, what are you doing?! I can dress myself damn it!"

-Ylisstol, One Hour Later-

It started with a trumpet.

All across the city, citizens milled about getting ready for the ceremony and the post-ceremony festivities. Before the trumpet rang from the front gate, everyone was happily going about their business and chatting excitedly.

Then the trumpet rang.

All activity ceased, soldiers marching forth in resplendent ceremonial armor to clear the main street. The people were too excited to get mad at the soldiers, even when they had to force over-eager spectators out of the way, but all waited excitedly for the gates to open.

Twenty minutes later, the trumpet rang again, joined this time by a single ring of the cathedral's bell. Then, with a groan, the gate opened to admit the visitors, cheers shattering the air.

Knights astride grand steeds decorated in white, gold, and light blue salled through the gate, armor resplendent silver. Their leader, Stahl, was decked in ceremonial plate that shone emerald and made him appear far greater than his stature belied. Even his cowlick had been tamed.

In the center of the escorts were carriages drawn by a team of two pure white horses each, the middle carriage drawn by two pegasi. It was at the sight of this carriage, decorated in gilded pictures of pegasi and the Exalt's brand, which drew the most ardent cheers.

It was also the only one with a roof; the occupants hidden from view, whereas the other carriages had their occupants clear to see. It was mostly for safety reasons that the bride remained hidden, but it was clear the people loved her regardless.

The procession wound through the streets at a decent clip, confetti and flower petals thrown into the air by celebrating citizens, and a trumpet rang every time the carriages passed an important landmark.

Frankly, it drove the bridal party batty, unless it was Maribelle, so they were more than a little relieved to arrive at the cathedral.

Compared to the Grand Cathedral in Draconis, this wasn't an ostentatious structure. This was four large rectangular buildings, the chapel situated in the center while offices and other rooms stretched back on either side. Colored glass filled the windows and various reliefs and simple stone statues decorated the cathedral's exterior. The building glimmered tall and imposing in the warm sun, a daunting reminder of what this wedding meant not only for the couple but for the nation they represented.

More soldiers in their grand armor lined the stairs leading into the sanctum, a carpet of forest green and cobalt blue ran up the steps.

The bridesmaids were the first to exit the carriages with their attendants, forming a half-circle around the main carriage. The cheers of the crowds still filled the air, but as Sumia carefully set foot on the ground for the first time in hours, she remained almost completely obscured from view.
They took the steps slowly, each step measured as practiced, and entered the cathedral to find Miranda and Frederick waiting beside the chapel doors, the rest of the room empty.

"Wow," Miranda gasped as she got her first look at the party. "You're all so lovely, I'm jealous! Right on time too, they just finished seating the guests."

Sumia smiled from behind her veil. "Thank you, Miranda. Personally, I just want to get this over with, if only so Chrom and I can actually enjoy our day."

Miranda chuckled and turned to the bridesmaids. "Alright ladies, you know the order. Let's knock 'em dead!"

Sully, Nowi, and Lissa cheered the decision while Maribelle gave her best smile.

"Whenever you're ready." Cordelia told Miranda. "Sumia's been ready since we got here."

Miranda chuckled again and stood before the door, Sumia ushered back and out of sight. With a deep breath, Miranda pushed the doors opened and allowed the creak of the hinges to guide the congregation's eyes to her.

She was honorary Mother of the Bride after all. With her walk down the aisle, the wedding was on.

Once she was down the aisle, the bridesmaids took their turns to walk forward. First went Sully, who was met by Kellam and guided up the aisle. Then Maribelle, who was met by Gaius for their turn. Next went Lissa, who was guided through the gazes of the crowd by a nervous Ricken.

Nowi was the last of the regular bridesmaids, a genial Vaike gladly leading her to the agreed spot. Finally, Cordelia took her turn to walk out, more than a few angry mutters coming from the young bachelors as Robin came to meet her.

"You look beautiful." Robin whispered as she hooked her arm around his. "I love the ponytail."

Cordelia giggled, her bouquet of white lilies shaking. "Why thank you. Sumia's the real show though, but I hope you don't mind if I keep my eyes on your handsome face."

Robin chuckled as well and led her to the altar, both taking their positions with all the surety of practice. Now Chrom stood alone, dressed in his white and gold vestments beside Libra in full bishop regalia.

Outside the chapel, Frederick was speaking with Sumia. "It's time."

Sumia nodded and took his arm. "Frederick… thank you for doing this."

Frederick smiled at her, eyes warm. "How could I refuse such a heartfelt request? It is my honor to stand in place of your father."

Sumia smiled, mind casting back to a few months prior. They'd started getting more details down about the order of events when Sumia was forced to choose stand-ins for her parents. Choosing Miranda to stand in for her mother was mostly as a reward and show of thanks on Sumia's part, but Frederick was different.

He'd done so much for both her and Chrom over the years that no other, in their minds, could ever hope to stand in for the late Count Pons. It had been quite the sight to see Frederick overcome with emotion.
He'd even shed a tear.

Frederick clearing his throat brought her back to reality. "Ready?"

Sumia nodded and they stepped forward, the congregation rising to their feet as an organ began to play.

Chrom had to stop himself from gaping, though he didn't entirely succeed.

Sumia was dressed in a gown of two parts. A skirt of royal purple ran from her knees down, hiding her feet from view, while the white dress atop the skirt was lined in gold and blue, the thread shining in the light of the chapel. Her train followed behind unassisted, Chrom's symbol sewn into it, while a purple aster was pinned behind her left ear.

Gasps and excited mutters greeted Sumia's grand appearance, many wondering where she'd found such a dress. Sumia internally sighed in relief, glad that the dress was going over well.

The royal tailor had not been happy to hear the traditional dress was being foregone.

Regardless, Sumia put on a smile as Frederick stopped before the altar turning her around and lifting her veil. With a bow, Frederick returned to his seat on the bride's side of the aisle, Shepherds dominating the front pews alongside old friends.

Giving Jayce and Jane a grin, her friends crying tears of joy at the sight, Sumia walked the last few steps to the altar with baited breath.

Naga was merciful, she didn't trip.

Once she stood still, Libra began his part. "You may be seated!"

The congregation sat as one, Libra launching into the sermon that he'd long since memorized. Much like the rest of the wedding, it was rather dramatic and full of pomp, but they were allowed one reading of their choosing.

"Milord, milady, please hold out your hands." Libra instructed after he was done with the required scripture.

Chrom and Sumia did so, eyes only for each other. Libra took their hands in his and began the blessing.

"These are the hands of your best friend, young and strong and full of love for you, that are holding yours on your wedding day, as you promise to love each other today, tomorrow, and forever."

"These are the hands that will work alongside yours, as together you build your future."

"These are the hands that will love and cherish you through the years, and with the slightest touch, will comfort you like no other."

"These are the hands that will hold you when fear or grief fills your mind."

"These are the hands that will wipe the tears from your eyes; tears of sorrow, and tears of joy."

"These are the hands that will tenderly hold your children."

"These are the hands that will help you to hold your family as one."

"These are the hands that will hold you when fear or grief fills your mind."

"These are the hands that will wipe the tears from your eyes; tears of sorrow, and tears of joy."

"These are the hands that will hold you when fear or grief fills your mind."

"These are the hands that will help you to hold your family as one."
"These are the hands that will give you strength."

"And lastly, these are the hands that, even when wrinkled and aged, will still be reaching for yours, still giving you the same unspoken tenderness through their mere touch."

Libra let go of their hands, though Chrom and Sumia did not. "Who here holds the rings dearest? Those ancient symbols of love everlasting?"

Robin and Cordelia stepped forward, "We do, Father."

The rings were given to Chrom and Sumia, their hands reluctantly parting.

"We now call upon His Highness, Chrom Falk de Ylisse, first of his name, to step forward and speak his vow, his promise, and his oath." Libra intoned, stepping back to give Chrom center stage.

"Sumia," Chrom whispered, voice only for her to hear. "You are the love of my life. I've loved you for years and I swear on this day and every day to come that I will never stop loving you. Our trials and tribulations have seen us grow into people that I can scarcely imagine, yet here we are. I am truly blessed to have known you. No matter what happens, or has happened, know that you are my heart, my best friend, and the only one for me."

Sumia felt tears prick at her eyes and swore Chrom had a few gathering in his as well. In fact, Chrom's voice had risen throughout his vow and it sounded like many of the Shepherds were getting emotional as well.

"We now ask Lady Sumia Pons de Clarissa to step forth," Libra called over the sniffling Shepherds. "To speak her vow, her oath, and her promise."

Sumia took a step forward as Chrom stepped back, her voice steady enough to surprise everyone, even herself. "Chrom… you are the love of my life. Not once over the years have I thought of another, so long as I could be near you. Now, as I stand here, having walked beside you through tragedy and heartache, I can say it for certain. There is no other on this earth for me, and I know we will see many happy days henceforth. So I swear to you, my friend, my sun… my very soul."

Sumia choked on the last word, but none dare think ill of it. Many of the Shepherds were outright bawling and it was plainly obvious that Lissa's mascara had begun to run. If the princess had lost all composure, everyone could lose theirs.

Unless you were Libra, of course. "The oaths have been spoken before the eyes of Naga and the Halidom. Are there any here who would object to the joining of these two souls in holy matrimony?"

Every Shepherd turned and glared into the crowd with enough force to kill small animals.

There were no objections.

"Then you may exchange rings," Libra intoned, Chrom and Sumia sliding the bands onto each other's fingers. "Prince Chrom and Lady Sumia, you have expressed your love to each other through the commitment and promises you have made. With these promises, I hereby pronounce you man and wife."

His hands rose to the sky, voice belting the final words. "Today, your kiss is a promise, to both yourself and the kingdom!"

"You may kiss the bride!"
Sumia almost fell into Chrom's arms, a passionate kiss sending them and the crowd into euphoria. It would take a while for everyone to calm down and all the parties to make it to the reception, but that was a worry for a little later.

For now, everyone reveled in the feeling of joy that permeated the air, as they had borne witness to a great thing.

A new era.

-Cathedral, Balcony-

A woman sighed as she watched the congregation move towards the palace, a deep longing to join them in her eyes.

Especially when she caught sight of one man's blonde hair.

"I really shouldn't arrive unannounced." Cherche muttered, eyes trailing to the roof where Minerva kept watch. "I'd heard the news, but I didn't think it would take me this long to get here."

She sighed and turned back to the line of people, her friends laughing merrily. She wished to join them, she did, but there was still a task she needed to complete.

Then, she would allow herself rest.

Then, she could finally take her happiness in hand.

Cherche sighed one more time before starting the climb to the roof. They needed to leave while the guards were still distracted, otherwise things would get awkward fast.

Once she was gone, Emmeryn shimmered into existence, watching Cherche go. "Curious… what could have brought her back unannounced?"

Shrugging the thought off, Emmeryn looked to her compatriot. "I think it was a lovely ceremony, personally."

The faceless marionette that stood next to her did not move, its steel skin shining in the sun. "I simply never believed I would ever be tied to that damn lizard… But, it was a good ceremony, showed the strength of the nation."

Emmeryn rolled her eyes, the marionette's voice like steel grinding on steel. "Only you would focus on that, Svarog. In either case, it surprises me that you have chosen my brother for your trial. Has he not already shown his worth?"

Svarog's blank expanse creaked before a jagged smile appeared. "In body, he has the potential. Now I must see if his spirit can bear the burden and price."

Emmeryn sighed before beginning to fade. "I must still note that I oppose the plans you and yours have created. I care not for the reasoning of Horakhty, Armityle, or The Scales."

Svarog began to sink into the stone. "Your objection was noted, child."

"The question is whether you have the power to make our plans change."
Worth

When everyone woke up the day after the wedding, it was to pounding headaches, several blocks of property damage, and enough spilled wine to make a sommelier die of shock.

The royal couple were nowhere to be found at first, but when Lissa went off to get herself cleaned up, she found a torn part of Sumia's dress hanging on a door leading to Chrom's rooms. This being Lissa, the find soon spread amongst the palace and no one was surprised to see a radiant Sumia later that day.

Or an exhausted Chrom.

"She is insatiable." Chrom muttered that night, Robin staring at him from across a desk. They'd spent most of the day dealing with the aftermath of the reception, so this was the first chance they'd had to talk.

What a way to start it off.

"I really don't want to hear about your sex life." Robin deadpanned. "Nor do I want that image in my mind."

Chrom shrugged and scanned a piece of parchment. "It's the truth though. Here I thought she'd be nervous and it would be kind of awkward but tender. Boy was I wrong, she jumped right in."

He hung his head. "Literally."

The thought of Sumia jumping Chrom's bones sent Robin into a fit of giggles. Chrom remained stoic, expecting as much, and let the tactician have his fun. "Just be glad I did enough to please her. I feared she'd start frosting the room if I didn't wear her out."

"Well you got some use out of your stamina." Robin chuckled, taking another parchment off the desk. "Now, to get off of this fascinating subject, is everyone heading home soon?"

Chrom sighed and nodded. "Yes, all save Miranda. Dunwall must return to his lands and Lissa's getting packed for the move to Denaris. Beyond that, most of the guests have already departed and I received a lovely message from the Khans after I made it downstairs."

Robin snorted, remembering the message scrawled in Flavia's horrid penmanship. "Then we can have some peace from politics. Actually, before you head out, I wanted your opinion on something."

Chrom raised a brow, curiosity growing as Robin pulled out a stack of parchment. "What could you need to ask now? I thought we covered everything for today."

Robin shook his head and pointed to the first sketch. "Honestly Chrom, I don't think our forces are outfitted enough or organized efficiently. Yes, we have weapons and staffs, but other essentials like armor and medicine are hard to find beyond elite units."

"It's expensive to equip large units like that." Chrom reminded him. "We can't encase every poor sod in steel, there's not enough of it. The cuirass and helmets are the best we have."
Robin sighed and pinched his nose. "I know mining the iron is hard, but I believe Ricken and I have come up with a solution."

He handed Chrom the next page, this one with a diagram for a crane. "Rather than strip mine the land, we propose using the expertise of the miners to mine only the veins without damaging the land. They may even be able to find rich ores in previously exhausted mines."

Chrom had barely a moment to process that before Robin started rambling. "The extra iron can be funneled to the large towns where specialists can forge it into any type of armor possible, from chain to plate, and allow for greater coverage. Heavy units can get entire suits while light units can have an entire suit of mail with scale plate on top, like General Evelyn. Then, we can give everyone helmets that encase the head and deflect blows."

He took a breath, Chrom too wide-eyed to stop him. "Hammers will still crush plate and a strong enough arrow would still pierce, but it will be a damn sight better to equip everyone with at least some steel rather than all leather. This could save lives!"

Chrom kept his eyes on the panting man, trying to understand the sudden zeal. "…Where did this come from? If what you say is true, then we have quite the boon for our forces, but I never thought you'd take an interest in such things."

Robin flopped back into his seat, flailing when the chair nearly tipped over. "…I went to visit the wounded shortly after the siege was over. Cordelia was along since she'd heard one of the Pegasus knights was injured."

-Castle Infirmary, Night After Siege-

They'd entered to the smell of blood, water, and clean bandages. Most of the patients had gone to sleep, but healers still moved from cot to cot in search of maladies to cure.

One healer noticed them and called a greeting. "Sir Robin, Lady Cordelia, what can we do for you tonight?"

"I heard there was a Pegasus knight being cared for here." Cordelia answered. "Is that true?"

The healer nodded. "Ah, you must mean Lady Eris. She joined the army shortly after we entered Ylissol's borders, so I'm not surprised you hadn't heard yet. She's at the end of the ward, last bed on the right."

Cordelia nodded and gave Robin's hand a squeeze before following the directions. Once she was gone, Robin looked around. "So… what's the main problem here?"

"Arrows and blades mostly." The healer sighed, gesturing to the cots. "The rebels had few mages, but any burns or lacerations have been taken care of: The others though, are the lucky ones. Lot of them bled out before we could get to them, and even then infection sets in."

Robin shook his head, watching a pair of healers shroud one cot, the body still. "Is there anything that could've been done? After something like this, there's bound to be changes."

The healer stroked his beard. "Personally… I'd say giving them more protection is key. The knights may have all the plate they need, but the regular soldiers are in grave danger if they're hit anywhere not reinforced with steel. Even adding a shirt of chain would help immensely."

He sighed and bowed to Robin. "I don't expect that to change though. Most of these people are in units far too large to be equipped in armor like that. I must ask your leave though, I have letters to
"What kind of letters?" Robin asked, though he already knew.

"Condolences to the families. I've had to write almost twenty tonight alone and I fear it will simply grow."

-Robin-

The room was silent as Robin finished his tale, Chrom's face stormy. "I see… then I will throw my full weight behind your endeavors and I'm sure Sumia will agree."

"Thank you, Chrom." Robin sighed. "My other idea that came from that visit… is to shrink the size of individual units and armies at large. As they stand, there's too many people in any one army to organize effectively, that does nothing but hurt the Halidom."

Chrom raised a brow once more. He hadn't seen Robin this passionate about something since he'd first started learning music. "Ok, but please make it quick. I have a feeling Sumia's going to hunt me down if I don't leave soon."

Robin cracked a smile before handing Chrom another page. "This is an overview. Basically, I've divided our forces into seven categories. There's light infantry, heavy infantry, spearmen, archers, light cavalry, heavy cavalry, and magic support. Light infantry and spearmen have seventy-five soldiers per unit, at most, along with archers. Heavy infantry has sixty soldiers at most. Light and heavy cavalry have forty soldiers while magic support has twenty-five."

Chrom hummed in thought. "Alright, that's smaller than the current hundred. Sounds more specialized too."

"Exactly," Robin said. "It lets our units focus on one task to their upmost rather than trying to be a dozen things at once. Also, I don't think there should be any more than twenty units in any given army. Anything larger than that and communication becomes too inefficient for a battalion to respond."

Chrom started smiling. "I see; flexibility as a whole, but specialized individually. Question is, how are you going to make this work with the kingdom's forces? And where do the Pegasus Knights play into this?"

Robin grimaced. "That I have yet to figure out, and the Pegasus Knights only just got their first batch of recruits. If they're going to go anywhere, it's light cavalry, and they don't have the numbers to make even a single unit yet."

Chrom stood and placed the pages back on the pile. "Well, I think it has merit if nothing else. Why not try and implement your ideas over in Felds first? If it shows promise, then we can expand."

Robin smiled and shook Chrom's hand. "I'll do just that, thanks for letting me ramble about it. Now, I believe you have a wife to find."

"And you have a girlfriend to save." Chrom shot back. "Heaven knows Cordelia's already buried herself in work."

Robin let out an irritated sigh, bidding Chrom farewell before sinking into his seat. The room was silent for a time before Robin started muttering to himself. "It's been her passion since the day she promised to rebuild the order. Try as I have, there's always something else going on. Haven't done a duet since before the rebellion."
The creak of windows buffeted by wind was his answer. Groaning, Robin gathered his parchment and set off, his destination the Pegasus Knights compound. The castle was quiet at this time of night, most everyone with any sense asleep, so Robin saw only guards as he wound his way to the gates.

The moment he stepped outside, Robin had to pull his cloak tight against him. The wind was both howling and cold, winter's last assault on the land baring down from the north. Shivering, Robin threw his hood up and did his best to keep his skin covered.

The poor guardsmen were dressed in winter gear, but Robin could see them shiver at their stations and huddle around the torches. His pity went out to them, but he remained focused on his goal and entered the city. As expected, few were out and about with the strong wind, signs and shutters banging in a flinch-inducing cacophony.

With the lack of people, Robin arrived at the compound's gates sooner than he'd expected. By the looks of it, the guard rotations hadn't come to their post yet. Making a note to inform Dalila her recruits were slacking off, Robin took out the spare keys Cordelia had given him and unlocked the gates. Not a soul was awake, even though candles lit the hallways.

Robin allowed memory to guide him through the halls, making sure to keep well away from the main quarters. He didn't want that set of accusations coming his way, thank you very much.

Instead, he entered a set of double doors that led into a long hall with various doors lining it. At the end stood a larger door that was more ornate, a plague with the word 'commander' placed front and center.

Robin sighed at the sight of light under the door, a sure sign someone was in. "Damn it, Cordy, you promised."

Walking up, Robin rapped on the door twice before opening it. "Cordelia, how many times do I have to… oh."

Cordelia was seated at the room's lone desk, face down on the wood and snoring away. Across from her was Dalila, the older woman nodding in Cordelia's direction. "Just in time, Sir Robin. Would you mind taking the commander to her room? She fell asleep discussing flight routes."

"I'm surprised you're not telling me to get out." Robin muttered as he walked behind the desk. "Oh, and your girls are slacking off. I didn't see anyone patrolling."

Dalila sighed and pinched her nose. "You're the only male I trust to walk around this place unsupervised. If your gaze ever wandered, it'd be a sure sign of a curse or an imposter. And thanks for letting me know, I'll be sure to get tonight's group on stable duty."

Robin chuckled and removed his coat, throwing the sleek material over Cordelia's back. "I've been meaning to ask but, how've they been? With all the preparations and meetings I haven't been able to check in."

"Not bad, all things told." Dalila answered, shuffling some pages in hand. "There's a few that really excel at the training and a few that need work. Otherwise, everyone's been matched with a Pegasus."

Robin nodded and pulled the chair back before scooping Cordelia into his arms. "Well, I'm glad to hear it. Good night, Dalila. Or should I call you Lieutenant?"

Dalila grunted and stood. "Just Dalila, you're my superior as far as rank goes. Just take care of the new commander, alright? That girl's been through enough, but she's the thing the Knights have been waiting on for years."
Robin paused in the door, nearly gone by the time Dalila finished. "What do you mean?"

"She's a fresh perspective." Dalila answered, gesturing for Robin to accompany her through the halls after she locked the door behind them. "Considering the Knights have been mired in traditions laid down several centuries ago, we need a new mind up front. It's why Phila was so taken by Lady Cordelia."

Robin snorted. "Just because she's a commander doesn't mean you have to call her Lady. Then again, I can see what you mean. The tactics I observed when watching the Knights in drills were… outdated, to put it kindly."

"You forgot ineffective." Dalila growled, grabbing a torch from its anchor in the wall. "Those techniques were made to fight mages and light infantry, but they never adapted to the increased use of wyverns and knights by Plegia. Same with focusing too much on aerial combat, not enough stuff on foot."

Robin grunted and watched Dalila walk on ahead. "Yeah, well… Cordelia can't run very far, so perhaps it's best she not teach those lessons. In fact, you make many good points, so I wonder why Phila didn't mention you."

Dalila stopped before a door and banged on it. "Girls, what the hell are you doing in your cots?! Next rotation was supposed to be out an hour ago!"

Robin almost laughed as the thud of bodies hitting the ground and the clanking of armor getting thrown on echoed from the room. A few minutes later, a set of six panicked women in disheveled uniforms fled the room, not even acknowledging Robin. "Quite the taskmaster."

"I've trained my fair share and that always works." Dalila sighed. "And the reason I wasn't mentioned? Those ideas of mine were considered too radical, so I was pretty much exiled to my last post. Taught myself how to land if I got shot down, it saved my life, and here we are."

Robin hummed but paused when they arrived at a T in the hall. "Looks like we'll be splitting here. Keep up the good work, Lieutenant, I'm counting on you to help Cordelia get her legs steady."

Dalila smirked and nodded to Cordelia's sleeping form. "She's got a good head on her shoulders and a boyfriend most would kill for, in addition to all her friends. If anything, I'll be asking her for advice in a couple years."

Robin chuckled and bid Dalila farewell. A short walk soon put him in Cordelia's room, the space barren of decoration like he'd expected, and he put her in the bed. "Well, at least you're not wearing your armor."

That was a point of pride for Robin. After talking and going out with Cordelia for almost a year now, he'd finally convinced her to take off her armor outside of training or patrol. Sumia had come to him in tears the first time too, weeping that her friend had at last grown past her insecurities.

That busied Robin, cleaning up the frozen tears, but he was still proud of Cordelia.

Taking a seat, Robin watched the slight rise and fall of his girlfriend's chest, content that she was sleeping peacefully. It had been stressful for quite some time now, so she needed the rest as much as anyone.

"What does our future hold?" Robin muttered to himself. "I still do not think myself clever or kind enough to give you the life you deserve. Who am I to even attempt such a thing. No matter the friends I've made or the battles I've won, I am still a no-name and an outsider. There… there are days
when I've pondered simply disappearing into the country, never to bother others again."

Cordelia did not stir, her breath deep and even.

"I suppose it's a good thing you can't hear me." Robin chuckled morosely. "I'm sure you'd tell me
that I was more than worthy, and that everyone would miss me. I'm sure you'd say that there is no
one else for you… yet I still wonder if someone else couldn't make you happier."

That was, in the end, all Robin wanted. If there was a purpose to his life, now that war no longer
consumed his mind, it was that one thing.

Make Cordelia happy, no matter what it may be or who it may be with.

The strength of that conviction… if anything, to him, that was love. True love, where Cordelia's
happiness took priority over anything.

Even the possibility of a broken heart.

Robin pushed the thoughts away with a sigh. He needed to get back to the palace and get some rest
if the meetings were going to go well the next morning.

"…Robin…"

Robin blinked but found Cordelia still sound asleep. That had been her, right?

"…no more… muffins… I want… cinnamon rolls… big ones."

Oh, this was precious.

Cordelia was apparently having a dream about her favorite sweets, with Robin as the baker if her
continued mutterings meant anything. It only made Robin's mood fall though, after the amusement
faded. The woman before him was truly a wonderful existence, a radiant light in a world that not so
long ago was full of doubt and fog.

He… didn't deserve her. Not after the hell she'd gone through, not after the heartbreak he'd sent his
friends into. Not… not after he'd damned an innocent woman to un-life within a gemstone.

A crackle of electricity met his ear and Robin turned to find a wolf of lightning next to him. "…Hati?
Why are you here?"

"Because you doubt, Ser Robin" The wolf answered. "You have delivered victory to these
people many times and stand hailed as both hero and visionary. Yet, here I find you, sinking
into self-loathing before the woman you turned down godhood for."

Robin scoffed. "You never once mentioned godhood, only power. Even then, if that's what you've
come to ask, then my refusal stands."

Hati chuffed and glared at him. "Nay, that is not my purpose this night. I simply offer…
satisfaction, if you will."

Robin turned his head back to Cordelia, voice subdued. "What could you possibly offer me? If I
recall, had I accepted your first deal out of hand, you'd have ripped out my throat."

Hati growled and scratched the ground. "You seek to find your own worth, that is what holds
you back from your potential. I offer the chance to find the worth that you seek, should you be
willing to seek it."

Robin stared at the wolf again before Cordelia snorted and muttered again.

"Robin… no… I don't… want a ring…"

Robin felt the floor open under his feet and he almost fell out of his chair. Sure, it may have been sleep talk, but… the mind was uninhibited when asleep. One's true thoughts flying about unfiltered like birds free from a cage.

Maybe… she was just as doubtful about Robin as he was.

"…Very well… what must I do?"

Hati flickered, a hint of pity in his voice. "There is an old cavern at the fringes of the place you call Grevis. In the ancient days, long before the countries of this land existed, an altar to my father was erected. None have gone to the altar since the earth swallowed it in a cataclysm millennia ago, yet intact it remains."

Hati shifted and took on the form of a rod of lightning. "Within the altar lies the first bolt of lightning from which my father was born. Titan and my father are not on… the best of terms, so he cannot retrieve the bolt. Traps and illusions placed by Titan also bar entrance by all save those equipped to get past them."

"I assume that I'm able then?" Robin muttered, eyes shadowed.

Hati nodded and shifted back to a wolf. "Indeed. When you took the power to create familiars, Mjolnir was given the ability to defeat the traps in the cavern. In turn, Mercurius is one of the few blades that could see one through the illusions."

Robin was silent before whispering. "How does that prove worth?"

"None in the millennia since the altar was taken by the earth have reached its resting place." Hati answered. "And the illusions have long since made the area seem cursed. The few that live in those areas are long beset by madness or persecution."

The wolf's head tilted, and a toothy grin formed on its maw. "If freeing that land and making a High God owe you a debt does not prove worth, nothing will."

Robin was silent again before standing and removing a piece of parchment from his pocket. He hurried to the desk and scrawled a short message before leaving.

Hati stayed beside him the entire time. "Then you agree to undertake this challenge. My task is finished, Sköll shall be your guide once out of the city."

Robin nodded and marched from the compound, ignoring the shivering women on guard, and made his way to his room in the garrison. Once there, he opened a chest and filled it with everything he'd need for the journey while a few extras made their way into a sack.

Once done, Robin grabbed his things and stalked into the stables, rousing a horse and saddling it. Right as he was getting ready to mount, a voice met his ear. "Robin, where are you going in such a hurry?"
Robin paused, one foot already in the stirrup, only to find Panne of all people. "What are you doing here?"

"Asking a question." Panne said, blocking Robin's path out of the stable. "Did something so drastic happen that it requires you to flee into the night after a grand celebration?"

Robin stared at her before shaking his head. "I just need to get to Felds soon. With the preparations complete, there's no better time to move in."

Panne narrowed her eyes into a glare. "With the moon hidden behind clouds and winter winds blowing? Do you think me that gullible?"

"This has nothing to do with you." Robin whispered, frustration tingling his tone. "This is something that concerns only me and my life. Please… step aside."

Panne kept her glare. "Whatever your mad quest is, know that it will bring nothing but worry and fear to myself and those you call friends."

Then, she stepped aside. "But it is not my place to stop you. The consequences are yours, and I only hope that you will be satisfied."

Robin gave her a grateful nod before spurring the horse out of the stable and into the night. Panne watched him go before turning and walking away.

"Should that satisfaction be death, then you were never worthy in the first place."

-Morning, Cordelia-

Sunlight streaming through the window woke her up, Cordelia sat up with a stretch and a yawn. "Where am I…?"

She rubbed her eyes and squinted, vision a little clearer. "Oh… it's my room. Dalila must've taken me here…"

It was rather shameful, in Cordelia's mind, to have fallen asleep during their meeting. The subject was very important after all and needed to be taken care of.

It's just… being a commander was hard! There were so many things to keep track of and so many meetings to attend-in addition to getting Sumia's wedding ready and training the recruits. Honestly, it was a wonder she hadn't nodded off somewhere else!

Sighing, Cordelia got out of bed and started to stretch. If she was going to stay limber with so much work behind a desk, she needed to fit it in somehow. After that was done, she spied a parchment on her desk and went to grab it.

"To Cordelia," she muttered, recognizing the handwriting. "Wonder what Robin needs to tell me."

Unfolding the letter, Cordelia read the contents slowly, eyes widening and grip tightening until the parchment was crumpled into a ball. "What… what is this?!"

Her feet carried her out of the room, ignoring the greetings and calls of alarm from those she passed in her haste. Entering the stable, Cordelia swiftly saddled Theresa and took to the air, eyes scanning the city with a desperation she didn't know she had.

After circling the city a couple times, another rider pulled beside her. "Commander, what's going
on?! Dalila told me you left in one hell of a hurry!"

Cordelia barely noticed Eris, the other woman’s brown hair flapping wildly in the wind. "Robin, where are you? Damn it, you don’t do stuff like this!"

Eris groaned and flew in front of Cordelia, making Theresa rear back and whinny. "Commander, would you explain what’s going on! The recruits are in a panic and I saw the queen getting saddled on my way up here!"

Cordelia’s mind was elsewhere, even as she answered. "Eris, cover for me, I have to go check on something. If Sumia asks, just mention Robin!"

Eris didn’t have long to process that before Cordelia shot past her, Sumia pulling up a moment later. "What’s got her in such a hurry?"

Eris groaned and cradled her head. "The commander said something about Sir Robin, Your Highness. Beyond that, I'm uncertain."

Sumia frowned and nodded. "Thank you, Captain, return to the complex. I'll speak to my husband about this."

Eris caught the blush on Sumia's face. Seemed she still wasn't used to being called Your Highness or calling Chrom her husband.

-Cordelia-

The wind ripped at her skin and hair as Cordelia soared through the sky, two destinations in mind. If Robin's letter meant anything, then she would find him in one of these places.

As a sudden thermal lifted Theresa into the air, Cordelia called the letter's content to mind.

*Cordelia*

I regret to inform you that I will be leaving Ylisstol effective immediately. A personal problem has made itself known and I must take care of it. I apologize for the sudden notice, but... I cannot involve you in this. I am sure to face danger and may not return, so... I ask that you do not wait.

There is much joy in your life, I've seen it in your eyes these past months. Much more than I could ever hope to match. Should I survive this trial, then I may return, but there is no guarantee. So please, should your heart find another, take it and forget this foolish man.

You deserve to be happy, no matter what. I only pray you’ll do so and enjoy the future you’ve earned.

Your friend,

Robin.

The letter made her confused, angry… almost betrayed. Had Cordelia not shown him how much she cared? How she was willing to stand beside him no matter the trial? Were his words to her just that? Could he possibly believe… that she’d ever give her heart to anyone else?

Cordelia shook the blasphemous thoughts from her mind. Robin was her one and only, that was clear after meeting her parents. Hell, the times he’d come in to work with her, had been a soundboard during these stressful months, they were all but fused at the hip!
Then there were the smaller things. A compliment here, a snack there, maybe something minor getting done before she thought to ask. It was all there, Cordelia just didn’t understand why he’d tell her not to wait.

She could wait until doomsday and never see a man like him again.

**Maybe he heard the rumors.** A voice whispered to her, smoldering with a dark fire. *You know the one, where you chose to settle for Robin after Chrom was engaged. How do you know there hasn’t been something to give that a kernel of truth?*

Cordelia's head snapped up and whipped around, but she saw nothing save the sky and ground below. "Who's there?"

All was silent. After a moment, Cordelia chalked it up to nerves and continued on her way. A moment later, Theresa alighted next to the nearly finished frame of a home, workers staring as she ran inside.

"Nowi, Frederick, have you seen Robin?!"

"Dumb question," Nowi began, holding up a finger. "I can't see anything."

Frederick smacked his girlfriend-in-all-but-name over the head. "Nowi, behave. Cordelia, what's got you in such a hurry? I assume it has to do with Robin, but we haven't seen him."

"Naga damn it!" Cordelia cursed, making everyone pause and look at her. "I need to check his house, maybe he's there!"

She turned to run, but an iron grip latched onto her arm. Cordelia turned and snarled at the sight of Catherine, the disgraced knight's face hidden by a helm. "Let go of me!"

Catherine did not, allowing Nowi to stand and guide herself over to Cordelia's side with her new cane. "Hold your Pegasus and calm down. What's happened with Robin that you're so flustered?"

Cordelia continued to struggle, so Frederick strode over and snatched the crumpled letter from Cordelia's grip. Why she hadn't placed it somewhere else or lost it to the wind was a question for later. Straightening the letter, Frederick scanned it word by word.

"Well this is a fine mess."

Nowi tilted her head, but with the workers still staring, she knew it wouldn't be shared. "Guys and gals, take your lunch outside please. This stuff is personal."

Twin glares from Frederick and Catherine sent the workers scrambling out of the house, Nowi turned back to Cordelia when she heard sniffles. "Freddy, what's up?"

"Cordelia is upset, rightfully so." Frederick answered, offering Cordelia a handkerchief. "Robin seems to have gotten word of a personal issue and run off on his own."

"Cordelia is upset, rightfully so." Frederick answered, offering Cordelia a handkerchief. "Robin seems to have gotten word of a personal issue and run off on his own."

"Personal issue? Robin has *personal* issues? I thought he couldn't remember anything, that makes it hard to have personal issues!"

Nowi looked like she'd been told a dark secret. "Personal issue? Robin has *personal* issues? I thought he couldn't remember anything, that makes it hard to have personal issues!"

Frederick hummed and put a hand on Cordelia's shoulder. "If I may presume to know something you don't about Robin, remote as the chance is, I think I know what this is about."

Cordelia's head whipped to him, gaze intense enough to make Frederick blink. "Tell me!"
Frederick cleared his throat, concern growing. "Robin has, since Lord Chrom took him in, struggled with his sense of identity and self-worth. No matter the victories he led us to, every minor failure has weighed heavily on his mind."

Now Nowi and Catherine were paying just as much attention.

"I know that because of my… initial distrust of him. It made me quite observant of his moods and body-language. From there, I could see fear enter him whenever something went wrong or against his predictions. To put it simply, he believes that if he's anything less than perfect, then everyone will abandon him, and he'll be back to where he was."

"Alone and confused."

Silence greeted him, but Frederick saw realization spark in Cordelia's eyes. "Looks like you had even more in common than you thought, no?"

"…Yes," Cordelia whispered, tears gathering in her eyes. "And I think I know where he's gone. Those wolf familiars he summoned in Linde, the want to be worthy… he's gone to Fenrir's Canyon."

Frederick and Catherine both sucked in sharp breaths, but Nowi remained confused. "I'm glad for the information, it'll let me apologize for being a burden on him, but what's this canyon?"

"Fenrir's Canyon is a large crag near the southwest coast." Catherine answered, taking the question as a sign to speak. "Thunderstorms form regularly over its terrain as the warm, wet air from the ocean is funneled through to meet the cold air from the mountains. The old settlers believed it the abode of Fenrir, High God of Lightning, and thus named it after him."

Nowi nodded and gestured Frederick closer. Whispered words were exchanged, and Frederick left, Catherine making sure Cordelia didn't run off while Nowi took the time to think. "Cordy… what do you think made him chose now to do this? We've been free from war for almost a year."

"I don't know," Cordelia muttered. "I mean, we just had the royal wedding and we haven't been able to see each other nearly as often. Duties, preparations, it was a miracle if we got five minutes."

Nowi hummed again. "Maybe he just felt you were distant? I mean, he probably understood you were busy, but were you the one who found the time to meet or was it him?"

Cordelia already had an example ready to shut down that line of thought, but Nowi's face made her pause. The manakete had always been expressive but being blind had made her even more so. The pause made her discard the example. Then another… and another… and another… Oh Naga.

Robin had always made the time to come see her, not the other way around. Cordelia had never sought him out or made time for him.

Not once.

He must have thought you were losing interest. The voice whispered again. And why wouldn't he? So focused on your work and pleasing your superiors, just like always. Still just a little girl chasing a fairytale.

Cordelia's head whipped around, making Nowi tilt her head. "Cordy, what's wrong? It sounds like you're trying to see something."

Cordelia growled and finally wrenched her arm from Catherine's grasp the same moment Frederick
returned. "It's nothing, I just need to go, now! I need to talk to Robin before he does something stupid!"

"It's likely too late for that," Frederick sighed. "But, I know you'll find him, and I have no doubt Lord Chrom has already begun the search as well. When you locate him, give him this."

Frederick held out a small box covered in blue felt, a gold latch on the front. "He ordered it a few months back, but it looks like he gave this home as the delivery stop. It's important, so take care of it."

Cordelia nodded, took the box, and ran from the house. Once she was gone, Nowi smiled at Frederick. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Indeed," Frederick confirmed. "Though I do hope it will still be useful when all this is done."

-Robin-

Sköll knew his trails.

That was Robin's thought after the wolf led him to the coast in just short of a day. They hadn't even needed a full gallop to do it either, but Robin could only hope that those trails weren't… mystical in nature.

Regardless, they'd arrived at the barren coast shortly after sunrise. Sköll directed Robin to retrieve whatever he felt necessary then leave the horse. After that, they would hike down a rocky hill before entering the canyon.

Grabbing his things, Robin sent the horse galloping for the nearest town and followed the wolf. His boots crunched and scraped along the razor rocks, but he kept his cloak away from the clawing edges. This thing had survived too much to get ripped to shreds on rocks.

By midday, black clouds and the peal of thunder filled the sky. A storm that this area was famous for had formed in short order, Robin soon found himself drenched in rain and forced to abandon soiled items as they went.

Several hours later, they stood surrounded by rocks that looked eerily like twisted corpses. Every one had razor edges, one taking off some hair when he ducked under it while another sliced into his hand when he tripped and had to catch himself.

"You can see why few venture here." Sköll said from his spot in a cave's entrance. "Titan has made it hazardous for all but the most determined to enter this place."

The wolf grinned, teeth flashing with the thunder. "But, you are more determined than mere men, are you not?"

Robin glared at the wolf and hauled himself to the cave entrance. "This where we're going?"

"Where you're going." Sköll countered. "I am not welcome beyond this point. If you require direction, simply know that the altar is at the deepest point in the cave. All you can do to reach it is to go ever deeper."

Robin grunted. "Wonderful advice, thanks. …Very well, no time like the present."

Sköll nodded and Robin took his first steps into the cave, noting that the rock here was much smoother than that outside. In fact, he was slipping!
Robin lost his balance and began to slide down the rock, his cries of alarm echoing off the walls until he disappeared into the darkness.

Sköll watched him disappear before glancing to his right. "Then Agni has begun her trial?"

The will-o-wisp next to him brightened in response.

"Then she will pursue him, even into this place. Titan… will need to be distracted."

Sköll turned from the cave and howled to the sky, the storm stilling for a moment. Then lightning lashed at the earth, Fenrir roaring a challenge to the toiling High God of Earth.

The world was silent for a moment before the earth shook and cracked the crag into an ever-greater crevice, the message clear. Titan would not interfere so long as Fenrir did not attempt to save his favored.

An uneasy truce, but one that gave Robin a chance.

Speaking of Robin…

-Cave-

When the world stopped spinning and shaking, Robin found himself in pitch blackness. That was remedied by a quick spell, but the lightning in his hand showed only smooth walls and lots of bones.

Looks like most that were brave enough to attempt this trial never got far past the entrance.

Sighing, Robin stood up and dusted himself off. He only had a pair of canteens and some jerky, not to mention another glance showed his point of entry was in the ceiling. A bad start to be sure.

…There was nothing for it. If he was going to be worth anything, this would be nothing. With that in mind, Robin set off for the lone tunnel he could find and began to explore.

For a while, there was no change, simply rock and darkness, but Robin began to… hear things. At first, he played it off as his own paranoia, but it soon became clear that something was here with him. *One of Titan's traps no doubt*. Robin thought as he drew Mercurius. *It's supposed to be something pretty bad if no one's been able to overcome it. Best we nip this in the bud.*

Lightning gathered in his hand and lashed forward, slamming into a side passage with a bang. Robin dashed into the smoke it made, energy surrounding Mercurius for both light and cutting power.

He spotted a shape in the smoke. *There!*

Mercurius descended and a cry filled the air, one Robin recognized all too well.

"Sumia, oh gods, what are you doing here?!"

The smoke cleared enough to show Sumia lying on the ground, blood pooling under her body from the massive gash Mercurius had left in her chest. "Robin… why?"

Robin fell to his knees and tried to staunch the flow. "Sumia, hold on! I-I can fix this!"

"Why?" Sumia muttered, light fading from her eyes. "Weren't you… the best?"

The light vanished, Sumia along with it, her body greying into stone and the blood fading away.
Robin sat there, panting in panic and grief, until it registered. "A trap… and an illusion? Must I… must I kill those I love?"

As he'd thought, these gods were cruel. To force those who enter into such torture for a grudge was… unforgivable!

Growling, Robin retrieved Mercurius and set off once more. The tunnels all went one way at least, the side passages nothing more than dead ends with traps that would make Evelyn proud. In fact, they all burrowed deeper into the earth.

Unfortunately, as he went, a pattern emerged. A large room would pop up every so often and each time Robin would be forced to fight his friends and comrades. The insults and words they said… it preyed on every insecurity he'd had since he'd woken up.

Leech… spy… murderer… thief… no-name… outcast… fraud…

Cuckold.

That last one had come from a specter imitating Chrom, Robin slaying him with a vengeance and weeping upon the ground.

It was almost too much, to hear every accusation he knew he deserved yet never received as his heartbeat rose to deafening thunder. It was his fault that Emmeryn had died, that Sumia had been rendered eternally cold and Nowi blind. It was his fault that Lon'qu and Gaius were crippled. His fault that so much grief had befallen those nearest him.

It was his fault for not being worthy of their friendship, or Cordelia's love. She had every right to get absorbed in her work and only see him when Robin forced her too. She deserved someone like Chrom, if not the man himself, and Robin would never be that man.

He didn't deserve to be.

It was then he realized Titan's true ensnarement and why so many failed. The earth heard all secrets and worries, no matter the whispers used, and every one was used to drive those to a single realization.

Only death would redeem them of their errors and mistakes. Only death would make those around them happy and healthy, never to fear misfortune from their presence again.

Sadly, this was the lone remaining thought of rationality before Robin was consumed in grief that he'd been hiding for almost a year. All it did was drive him forward, through the passage, and into a large room with an ornate door.

The door stood silver and gold, not tarnished in the slightest, with reliefs of wolves and lightning dancing across it like fire. In the center stood one great wolf, its head held high and proud as it howled. He'd made it, this was the altar.

But, that was no longer his goal.

Instead, he stared at the phantom that marched into the room, another identical passage its entrance.

Crimson hair and eyes, Falcon Knight armor, a hint of cinnamon in the stale air of the cavern, and Gungnir bared at their side. Robin felt himself begin to laugh, seeing the anger building in the woman's eyes when she saw him.
It was only right he meet his end here.

"Cordelia…"

-Cordelia-

"Thank the gods for the rain."

Cordelia's mutter was met with a snort from Theresa. They'd entered Grevis just after midday, flying straight for the storm in the distance. It would be nearly impossible to find Robin amongst the gales and thermals that the storm contained, but after they landed Cordelia found a soggy trail of items that could only be Robin's.

They were quite varied too. She found soiled parchment, clothes that she'd helped patch during the war, a traveling chess set he'd promised to teach her with, and… oh gods…

She picked up the soaked leather case, the latches slick with water. "Robin… why would you leave this?"

Determined, she added the case to Theresa's saddle and continued through the jagged rock, the trail leading into a ravine running with water and studded with rocks sharp enough to nick leather and slice hair.

Why do you continue your search? The voice said, Cordelia used to its provocations at this point. *We both know there's little chance he's alive at this point. Why set your heart on such a foolish man when there are many more eligible men in this world?*

Cordelia growled and pulled her cloak tighter. The trail stopped just below a cave and, seeing no easy way out of the ravine, Cordelia assumed that was where Robin had gone.

Theresa jumped onto the cliff before the cave and Cordelia dismounted, Gungnir in hand and a staff over her back. If Robin had been injured, then she'd need it. "Wait for the others, Theresa. If… If I'm not back by sunrise, return to Ylisstol."

Theresa snorted and nuzzled Cordelia's hand. Nodding, Cordelia took a few steps into the cave, but she too slipped on the stone and was sent spiraling into darkness. After who knows how long, she caught her bearings and rubbed at her sore back. "That… hurt."

Standing, she called magic to the staff on her back, the green light illuminating a room full of bones and stone. Wondering just how many foolhardy people had attempted to venture this way, she was at least glad to see no fresh corpses.

She turned at the sound of scraping and watched the passage out close of its own accord. Across the cavern, another stone shifted aside to reveal a deeper corridor.

"That's… spooky."

Shaking her head, Cordelia marched through the passage, a few exploratory turns showing her that the main passage was the lone, non-booby-trapped place to walk. Eventually, she reached another room filled with bones.

A sound met her ears and Cordelia whirled around, Gungnir striking out and meeting something fleshy. A gasp filled the air and Cordelia gaped at who she'd sliced. "…Phila?"

The blue haired woman coughed blood, Gungnir's blade having sliced straight through her abdomen.
"Cordelia… what have you done?"

Cordelia immediately tried to pull out her staff, but Phila collapsed to the floor and whispered something Cordelia never thought she would hear. "I thought… you cared…"

A gasp came from the new corpse and Cordelia began to weep, not noticing the body turning to stone. "Phila… I care, of course I care! I'm… I'm so sorry!"

A sob racked her body, but Cordelia finally noticed the change. "An… illusion? This must be what mother told me about…"

Swallowing her guilt, Cordelia's grip on Gungnir tightened before she set off. The pattern soon set in, Cordelia forced to duel with those she cared for and loved. Every word stoked a desperate, passionate flame of denial that was soon filling her head.

Coward… failure… cold… doll… suck-up… envious… spurned…

Homewrecker.

A specter in the shape of Sumia had hurled that accusation before Cordelia decapitated the construct with a roar. Anger, despair, and self-loathing were coursing through her blood like fire, a dark passion smoldering in her breast.

A tiny, rational part of her realized the ruse. This place was designed to drive those that entered mad. It was damn effective too, as the rest of her mind had decided that the only thing that could stop both the ghosts and that damn voice was to find Robin and end it.

Whether that be in confirmation of the worries or denial, she did not know. All that mattered was finding Robin.

Cordelia's feet carried her through the passage with a vengeance, stamina born from a rage she once thought tamed. It was only the barest hint of her mind that took in the next room, as the rest was focused on the figure on the other side.

Robin.

Cordelia's lips twisted into an open snarl as Robin began to laugh, likely another construct sent to torment her.

"Cordelia…"

It sure sounded like him, but so had the others. Now was not the time for words, it was the time for action.

Sadly… that action was to charge him, Gungnir aimed squarely at his arm.

The one she'd injured soon after their reunion.

Robin saw the strike coming and turned aside, sparks flying as legendary steel met in a brief clash. Leaping away, Robin held Mercurius to the side while lightning gathered in his palm. "Come then, puppet! I've suffered enough already, what's one more?"

Cordelia snarled and took hold of Gungnir, one hand on the back and the other directing the blade forward. "What have you suffered, creation? There stands not one bad memory in your empty head!"

Robin took immediate offense to that and threw his lightning, the bolts lancing forth only to be
smacked out of the air with a twirl of Gungnir. Cordelia took the opening and charged, blade flashing across Mercurius as Robin parried or turned aside the blows.

"I have stood with the weight of the world upon my shoulders!" Robin shouted, a thrust of Mercurius sending sparks off Cordelia's pauldrons. "Not a day has gone by where I am not expected to lead and advise royalty! What right have I, one with no memory, to handle such a task? Who am I to have such expectations cast upon me?"

Cordelia answered with three rapid thrusts of her own, the last scoring a scratch on Robin's cheek. "Who are you indeed! A man with no past, yet you have the ear of the prince? When many more have been working years for even a glance? I was there, working above and beyond, but nothing happened!"

Robin roared and charged, his reckless attacks rewarded with a blade in his shoulder and Mercurius cleaving through Cordelia's armor to carve a nasty gash. "So you admit it! Was there... was there anything ever there? Or was I just some kind of sod that you could latch onto?"

"Oh, is that what this is about?" Cordelia shouted back, Gungnir pulled free for another blow. "You know what? Yes, I did love Chrom with all my heart, I was envious of Sumia for holding his attention, hated her even, and I hated you too! What pain have either of you known? What work have you put in that could ever win such love and admiration when I put in thrice that and stand hated!"

Gungnir twirled around and smacked Robin away, the tactician rolling along the floor before leaping to his feet. A gesture and a mutter called almost twenty wolves to his side, a feral scowl on his face. "You speak of pain?! Sumia had to kill her own mother – I had to watch the Exalt die because of my failure! What have you endured? Petty insults?"

"Petty insults!" Cordelia cried, charging forth with fire beginning to blaze around her. "I was harassed and put down mercilessly from my first training session! I had to bear it with a smile and tell my parents that all those around me were kind when they were cruel! I have been dealt every short hand in life, no matter the work I put in!"

Robin ordered his wolves forward, but Cordelia slew them one after another, rage pushing her through the murderous electricity. "When I failed, I was mocked and taken to task, even by the man I loved!"

Three charged in unison, one for each part of her body. Cordelia impaled the first, twirled Gungnir, and split the next in twain before leaping over and crushing the last one with the butt of the lance.

"When Sumia failed, though? Everyone was tripping over themselves to help her! Advice, extra training, an ear to listen, all was offered to her! What did I get if I needed help? Nothing but being told to... to Figure. It. Out!"

Her last words followed the death of the last wolves, Cordelia making a beeline for Robin. Robin was ready though and he ducked inside Gungnir's reach to stab Mercurius through her leg. "I had no such help! My every word could have very well meant my death or those around me! Were it not for divine intervention, Frederick would be dead! On my orders!"

Cordelia reached down and wrenched Mercurius from her wound, rage making her feel no pain and granting her unparalleled strength. A fist came round and sent Robin to the dirt, Mercurius meeting Gungnir once more as Cordelia attempted to impale him.

"Why are you so self-sacrificing!" Cordelia screamed, frustration joining her rage. "You have had all
the things I could ever hope for, yet here you spout the words of a spoiled man! Count your blessings, fool, not everyone has them!"

Robin growled and summoned more lightning, fire meeting the bolts this time. "What you call blessings, I call a curse! I have no identity beyond that of the tactician who all see as a savior, as the one that can solve everyone's problems! I must contend with the responsibilities thrust upon me perfectly or be turned into an outcast in the only home I've known!"

"Perfection?" Cordelia snorted, tone derisive. "As if you would know. Perfection grants no quarter to those it is expected of! You were forgiven for the death of Exalt Emmeryn, for the injuries the Shepherds sustained! Yet, were it I that stood in your place, I would've been excoriated as the greatest disgrace in Ylissean history!"

Robin snarled and sweated, the heat from the flame leaking out of Cordelia's skin overbearing. With a shout, a blast of lightning slammed into her chest and blew her off. Robin scrambled to his feet and smacked a blast of fire from the air, words silent this time. There was no arguing with this zeal-clouded, bull-headed woman. Not when she'd shouted so much and attacked his every fear. Instead, he readied his blade and summoned more wolves. Cordelia in turn took her stance, fire dancing down her body like a demonic aura.

Malice most unlike either combatant filled the air between them until they charged once more, steel and magic filling the room with light and sound. Each blow was long memorized from training together, but new tricks and variations left both bloodied and aching the longer the fight wore on.

Unfortunately, Cordelia had always been the superior warrior. It was only her lack of stamina that kept her airborne, but anger and a raging inferno of emotion had removed that limit.

Robin grunted as Mercurius was smacked out of his hand, Gungnir's butt slamming into his gut and driving him to the ground a moment later. A hand grabbed his neck and Cordelia pulled him upright, unearthly hatred in her eyes. "Now, it ends! All my life, I have been forced to watch as others more blessed than I receive the rewards that I deserved! Now… now I can finally take at least one of them from this world and show the others what taking fortune for granted gives them!"

The flames on her skin burned into Robin, his skin blistering and blackening under the intense heat. Robin scrambled to release to release her grip, but when Gungnir leveled with his heart he ceased struggling.

The lack of struggle gave Cordelia pause. Every construct she'd fought had hurled vitriol and accusation until they died, so what was this new trick?

"You're right." Robin whispered, no longer feeling pain as the nerves in his neck died off. "I don't deserve any of the fortune that has been given to me. All of it and more should have gone to someone more deserving… more capable. I'm sorry, Cordelia… you deserved so much better."

Cordelia watched in disbelief and growing horror as Robin looked her in the eye, acceptance and resignation in the prismatic orbs. "Just… know that I don't regret loving you. Even if your heart belonged elsewhere, and you found a better choice, I wanted you to be happy. So please… end my unworthy existence and take that happiness in hand."

"It would make everything worth it."

Gungnir trembled in Cordelia's grip, her hand loosening until Robin fell to the floor again. Her breaths came fast and panicked, rationality and horror wresting her rage into submission.
"No-no-no-no-no, you're an illusion!" Cordelia cried. "You're not Robin! You're not who I came to find!"

Robin's breath was ragged, only luck keeping the damage from his burns away from his jugular. "Are… you not an illusion? Another… of this cavern's tricks? Why… if not, then why… are you here?"

Cordelia dropped Gungnir, the lance clanging against the floor as she gripped her head. "I… I came to tell you how stupid you were! To stop you from getting hurt! But… but, I hurt you… I hurt you!"

Cordelia's voice was a screech, the woman desperately trying to pull the fragments of her mind that the rage had shattered. It was this damn cavern, that must be it, it had made her into a monster that would dare hurt the man she loved!

"It's not just… the cavern." Robin croaked. "This place… confronts you with your deepest fears. Brings them to the surface and forces you to… confront them. We… didn't…"

Cordelia sunk to her knees. "Then… everything I said… every word and insult…"

"Was something we truly felt." Robin sighed, voice weakening. "No matter… how small it was, this place… brought it to the surface… I… never felt worthy of anything I was given…"

He coughed hard, blood spilling past his lips. One of Cordelia's attacks had gotten him in the abdomen. "Nor… did I ever feel like I was truly… loved. Everything… hinged on me being a perfect tactician. Even… your interest in me… was due to that… No one cared… about Robin the man… only the… tactician."

Cordelia was frozen, eyes taking in every gash and wound she'd put in his body. "That's… that's not true! Everyone loves you, Robin, I love you! What could… lead you to believe such things?"

"Were I not gifted at tactics, would you have ever seen me?" Robin asked. "Would any of them have seen me? Or would I be just another face in the crowd, left to wander the world? Not as I see it… but I still wish them happiness, and you most of all. Please, just leave me here and go find your peace."

He smiled, even as Cordelia began to weep. "None of what you feel… is any more your fault than my own. Jealousy, stubborn beliefs, anger, resentment… it's all part of being human. I know… I know that you can overcome them, Cordy, and live the life you desire."

Cordelia wept for a few moments before she realized Robin had gone silent. Panic joined her mess of emotions and she crawled to his side, hands searching for a pulse and her staff while the fire on her skin flickered out.

…It was there, but so weak and fast. Robin's skin had gone cold and clammy, sweat starting to soak him to the bone and a look up showed his pupils had exploded. Robin… was going into shock.

"No-no-no-no-no." Cordelia muttered, staff glowing with magic. "Not after that, not after you gave me all the reassurance in the world while I tried to kill you. Not after all the shit we've been through before this."

The healing magic entered Robin's body and swiftly closed the smaller injuries. Cordelia was more concerned with closing the wounds quickly, so rather than leave unblemished skin, large scars replaced the ragged gashes. Then, there were the burns on his neck.
The magic cleared away the blisters around the black mark on his throat, but Cordelia had to dig out a small knife to clear away the dead skin. The process was slow and difficult, especially as Cordelia's hand trembled when she saw the shape of the mark.

It was quite fitting that she'd never be able to look at Robin again without seeing the hand-shaped scar on his neck. Now, she had a physical reminder of what holding on to juvenile grudges could reap.

But that was fine, because she planned from here on to see that reminder every day. No matter what she must do.

"Robin, please, stay with me." Cordelia whispered, feeling Robin's pulse slow but not strengthen. "I never cared if you were worthy or anything like that. I only cared that you were a kind man, one who was willing to meet with me despite the rumors I know you'd heard. You… did everything and more."

Robin's breathing was slowing down, Cordelia trying to keep his blood going by propping his feet up. "Robin, please! If it's a question of worth, then there are none more worthy of my heart than you! Making you feel unloved is far and away the worst crime I have ever committed, such is my shame!"

She grabbed his hand and held it against her heart, urging his to match it. "Damn it… why did we have to almost kill each other for this to come out? Why are we so damned stubborn?"

"Why did it take me this long to see how much I loved you?"

Silence was her answer, Cordelia only able to take solace from Robin's continued breaths and heartbeat. Then, as if defiant, Robin's hand tightened around Cordelia's. "You… really mean that?"

Cordelia kissed him, long and hard. When she had her fill, she pulled back with tears flowing down her cheeks. "Of course I mean it! I've meant every word of support and love I've ever said, despite that childish part of me that muttered in the back of my mind! Robin… I have never been happier than when we met and became friends, not even when I was younger and fantasized about a life with Chrom."

Robin appeared stunned, so Cordelia continued. "You have been everything and more to me, Robin, that's why I think you should never question if you're worthy. Would someone unworthy have been there for me after my unit sacrificed themselves? Gone to such lengths to see me healed, even when I didn't want to be? Forgiven me for lying and nearly dying over petty vengeance? Loving this hot mess of a woman despite the pain I've brought?"

Robin had a wry smile on his face at that confession. "We're both… hot messes, aren't we?"

Cordelia hiccupped, both laughing and crying. "Yeah… we are. It's why I want to ask you something."

"Can you ever forgive me for being such a terrible friend and even worse girlfriend?"

Robin's smile sent relief racing through her veins. "Of course, … I love you, Cordy, there's nothing to forgive. I just… want you to be happy."

Cordelia pressed her head against his palm, faint from the purge of her anger. "Thank you…"

Oh wait… there was more to that faint feeling now that her head was out of that horrid quagmire. She'd been losing quite a bit of blood.
An emergency flash of the staff staunched the flow, but she collapsed next to Robin, the pair staring up at the dark ceiling. Only the fire Cordelia had cast gave any light, and now it was swiftly fading.

They lay there, content for a time, before Cordelia found the strength to reach into the pouch at her side and pull out a box. "Robin… you know what would make me the happiest woman in the world right now?"

Robin blinked and looked to her only to find the blue and gold box offered to him.

"Will you marry me?"

Robin let out a wheezing guffaw. "Aren't I supposed to ask that question?"

"Who gives a damn?" Cordelia giggled. "We just tried to killed each other and now I'm proposing to you with the ring you ordered. If that's not enough to buck tradition, I don't know what is."

Robin wheezed a few more laughs before taking the box. "I accept your proposal with all my heart. Though… this ring belongs on the one it was made for. I just know… that it'll make you into even more of an angel."

Cordelia turned over on her side and kissed his cheek. "You are so sweet. I'm glad we met, Robin, no matter the mishaps. I look forward to being your wife."

"And I your husband." Robin yawned, exhaustion calling him to rest. "But… first we must complete what we came for. Then, this ring shall be flaunted for all its worth."

Cordelia nodded and slowly got to her feet. "That, I look forward to. Can you stand?"

Robin took a deep breath. By the looks of it, his pulse was strong enough to move. "Yeah… but I'm going to need help."

Cordelia nodded and helped him sit. Then she looped his arm over her shoulder and lifted him to his feet. Robin wobbled a bit, but Cordelia steadied him with all the care she could. It was only right that she support him now, after everything.

Setting their gazes on the great door, they walked towards it and hoped there would be some way to open it. It began to glow with energy as they drew close and opened of its own accord, revealing a room with light shining through the ceiling, illuminating a great stone altar.

Atop the altar stood a truly monstrous wolf made of pure lightning.

"Fenrir," Robin whispered, awed by the sight. "I… I don't understand."

Cordelia stared as well, but her attention was drawn to the little sphere of blue flame that floated from the altar and stopped before her. It dimmed and brightened in a set pattern before appearing to nod. Then, the light from the ceiling brightened and a murderous heat suffocated the room.

A stream of flame erupted from the cracks in the room, yellows, oranges, reds, and blues filling the air. The streams converged next to the great wolf and began to form a slender shape with a dozen wings taking vague shape. Then, with a flash, the fire congealed into a serpent with a dozen feathered wings spread along its length.

"Hail mortals," Fenrir boomed. "You have completed the trial of Titan and accomplished the goal with which you set out. Congratulations, for you are the first to ever do so."
The serpent hissed, words filling the air with heat. "I am Agni, High Goddess of Fire. My trial too has been completed. Cordelia de Grevis, you have tamed the raging fire which this cavern stoked where no other has been able to do so. You are deemed worthy in my eyes."

"As are you, Robin de Ylisse." Fenrir growled. "For overcoming the storm of doubt that raged within, you have proven yourself worthy in my eyes. The power of my sons was but a pittance before what is now offered."

Robin and Cordelia stared at the gods, stunned into silence. They didn't know if this was some kind of hallucination brought on by blood loss or if it was real and they should prostrate themselves immediately.

Agni's laughter hissed through the room. "Your confusion is understandable, but there is little time for explanation. In fact... Fenrir has misled you, if only just."

"This power is not an offer, we are giving it whether you like it or not."

Cordelia and Robin had barely a moment to process that before flame consumed Cordelia and lightning lanced from Fenrir and speared Robin. Pain was all either knew as the elements ravaged them, neither knowing when the torture would end.

Then, as suddenly as it began, it was over.

"All power has a price." Agni hissed. "And ours is no exception. Cordelia, you live your life surrounded by color and vibrancy that, until now, you have taken for granted. Henceforth, you shall see no color in this world. All you see shall be ash."

"Robin," Fenrir boomed. "Your earliest memories and dearest convictions are tied to smell. That is what I claim in place of my power. Never again shall you smell the scent of your love, or your friends."

Robin and Cordelia panted, already feeling the changes take place. Cordelia's vision was turning grey, even Robin's vibrant purple hair dulling to slate. Robin, in turn, could no longer smell the stale air of the cavern or the sweat and blood that coated him. Or Cordelia.

Fenrir and Agni exchanged glances. "However... Artezza and Ozymandias have set a precedent. In accordance with The Scales, we give a lone exception."

"Your children shall be all you can see and smell." Agni said. "You shall know how precious they are by this blessing alone."

The gods began to fade. "Our time in this world is at an end. Go forth and fight your battles, Chosen, but know that this power is untamed. Control it, or destroy all you hold dear."

"Curse our names if you must." Agni hissed as Fenrir disappeared. "But we do not do this lightly. Many have come seeking our gifts, you are the first to receive them. Make of that what you will."

With that, they were gone. All was silent for a moment before Cordelia and Robin collapsed, exhaustion and their new power sending them to the realm of dreams.

When they awoke, it was to a bright sky. They were laid out amongst the rocks, their weapons and items stacked neatly next to them. Robin spoke first. "Did... that just happen?"
Cordelia looked over and spotted the scar on his neck along with the grey of his hair. "Yes… I think it did. Everything's… grey."

Robin drew in a breath, but no scent greeted him. "Then we are like Nowi, Sumia, and Lon'qu now. It appears that the Shepherds have drawn the attention of these beings, and now I fear for all of us."

"There's nothing we can do." Cordelia whispered. "All we can do is try to make use of this and move on with our lives. That's what everyone else is doing and it is the only sensible solution."

Robin nodded and sat up, hand shading his eyes. "How long… do you think we were gone?"

Cordelia hummed and thought. "It couldn't have been more than two days, why?"

Robin pointed to the horizon. "Well, I guess seeing everything in grey makes it hard. Looks like they sent an army to find us and I think Sumia's at the head."

Cordelia blinked before narrowing her eyes. Now that he mentioned it, she could see a lump of grey moving in the distance alongside spots flitting about in the air. "That must've taken at least a week to get together. We… have a lot of explaining to do, don't we?"

Robin nodded, but opened the little blue box; the ring was a gold band inset with pearl wings, the feathers encircling a red diamond. "Yes, well…"

He took out the ring and slid it onto Cordelia's finger, his fiancée smiling merrily.

"I think they'll forgive us."

-Four Months Later-

"Gods, you lot can hold a grudge."

Robin's observation was met with scowls, the Shepherds running to and fro trying to get everything organized. Despite Robin and Cordelia's explanation of what happened and the apparent disappearance of the cavern, the Shepherds had given the pair a cold shoulder for almost three months.

Literally, in Sumia's case.

Regardless, by the time they finally apologized and accepted what happened, the date of the ceremony was less than a month away. Thus the current scramble as everyone tried to play catch-up.

It was the end of summer in Ylisse, the air warm and humid. The church for the ceremony was a smaller affair than the cathedral in Ylisstol, but Robin and Cordelia wished to be married in their new home of Felds. It was only through the dedication of Diana, Roderick, Robin, Cordelia, and Evelyn that they were able to finish on time.

Besides that, Robin had implement his proposed restructuring of forces within Linde. Evelyn, acting as the leader of this experiment, soon reported that coordination and efficiency had skyrocketed. In fact, the new organization procedures combined with Evelyn's propensity for traps had rendered Felds Risen and bandit clear.

Cordelia had also apologized to her recruits and swore to never run off again. They'd been gracious about her reasons for leaving, making Cordelia quite proud, but she could tell they still had a long way to go. Even if four months had already weeded out six of them, the rest appeared ready for the long haul.
Now though, Robin was busy directing his groomsmen. He'd been ready for some time, the wonders of being on top of things, but he was still wrestling with one thing in particular.

"Why exactly do I have to wear this cape?"

The question went to Chrom, the prince frowning at him. "It's your family symbol, remember? You had to come up with one after I gave you the barony."

Robin sighed and looked the cape over. Black velvet was the base material, purple and scarlet thread used to stitch a wolf's head over a crossed sword and lance. He'd originally designed one with two swords, but changed it to a lance on a whim.

Now it was all too appropriate.

"And as for grudges." Chrom continued. "You told us that you were essentially going to commit suicide in some misguided belief that you were only kept around for your brain. I was amazed, and still am to some degree, that you thought so little of us."

Robin grunted and clipped the cape to his vest. "And as I said, you all came to me with your problems, I was practically the local shrink. Besides, didn't we already have this fight?"

Chrom snorted, recalling the confrontation shortly after Robin and Cordelia had been found. "Yes, we have, but I still feel the need to remind you."

Robin tapped the side of his neck, the scar so much darker than the rest of his skin. "You don't need to. I see a reminder every time I look in the mirror."

Chrom grimaced but went to finish getting ready. Robin had chosen three to be his groomsmen this time, albeit on short notice, so Stahl and Kellam were joining Chrom today. Stahl, in a twist the Shepherds did not see coming, was the best man.

Why? Well, Chrom was a stubborn man and Robin had to choose someone. Stahl, being the kind soul he was, had been among the first to apologize and thus received the position.

I do hope Roderick and Diana aren't running themselves ragged. Robin thought as he settled in to wait. Heaven knows it isn't easy trying to direct everyone.

-Diana-

"Where are those carnations, they need to be here now!"

Diana was frantically directing the Shepherds throughout the reception venue, a simple restaurant that Robin and Cordelia had come to enjoy when they were in town. Linde had other, larger establishments, but this was strictly private.

Olivia ran up to Diana, the carnations in hand. "I'm so sorry, ma'am! The flowers just got here!"

Diana ripped them out of Olivia's hands and placed them on one of the tables. "That can't be helped, now go check on the people in the kitchen! I need to know if everything will be ready on time!"

Olivia fled, ducking under Frederick who was carrying several bowls of fruit and nuts. A crash filled the air and Diana almost screamed. "What is it now!"

Donnel popped up from behind a booth. "Sorry! Lost my balance, but nothin' dropped!"

Diana breathed a sigh of relief, a look over the room showing most of the preparations in place.
"Good, then I'm going to check on Cordelia. You lot, finish things up and get to the pews!"

She received a chorus of affirmation before marching out of the venue. Roderick was waiting outside and fell in step with his wife. "Well, all things told, it's not a disaster."

Diana snorted. "They didn't help with jack until a month ago. They're lucky I didn't forbid them from attending in the first place."

Roderick patted her shoulder. "Our daughter and soon to be son-in-law did do something quite foolish. Their friends had a right to be angry, though I wish it hadn't lasted so long."

"I'm well aware." Diana sighed. "But this is supposed to be a joyous time, yet here we are, running around like headless chickens. It's a wonder we were able to find Cordy a dress."

Roderick hummed, remembering how hard it was to find something suitable given Cordelia's new inability to see color. "Yes, well, it all ended for the best. Now, I assume you want to give her a talk while I get everyone in position?"

Diana nodded and Roderick split off, entering the front doors of the church. Diana went through a side door and wound through the halls until she found a door with rather raucous noise filtering from the other side.

*Oh dear.*

*Cordelia-

"For the last time, I do not need to switch bouquets! I can't tell what it looks like, so it doesn't matter!"

Cordelia's frustrated shout sent Lissa scrambling away. The girl had come to give some extra help, but now she was trying to change everyone's mind about everything. Who knew someone that wasn't a bridesmaid could be so nerve-wracked?

"Cordy, she's just trying to be helpful." Sumia tried, her dress on and hair nearly to its original state. "I know it's been stressful, but you should be relaxing."

Cordelia gave her a hard side-eye. "Not when she says to do a drastic change so suddenly. I'm happy as I am, thank you, there's nothing I want changed. Honestly, this has been more work than *your* ceremony."

Sumia laughed awkwardly. It really was their fault that everything was getting done on such short notice. So little help meant things like hairdressers, artists, and other minor but important details had to be foregone.

Hell, they'd had to go with plain white gowns as bridesmaid's dresses since Cordelia hadn't had any bridesmaids until just last month. Trying to get those things made to order was too tall a task for the timeframe.

As such, the lady Shepherds were pulling double duty. They'd been rotating from this room to the reception venue and back for the last few hours trying to get everything ready.

Evelyn hummed from across the room, helping Panne add traditional taguel ornaments to her hair. "Well, I'm just glad to be here, personally. Never been to a wedding before this one."

Cordelia nodded and turned to look at her last bridesmaid. "Cherche, how are you doing?"
The woman shrugged, trying to be still and let Maribelle do her work. "About as well as can be. Still very surprised you invited me after I came back."

Cordelia smiled at her. "Well, we were all glad when it happened. Are you sure you can't tell the story yet?"

Cherche smiled, the gesture sad. "No… that is a tale for later. Let us see to getting you wed, then maybe I'll share."

Cordelia frowned, but rolled her shoulders as Miriel fit the last part of the dress into place. "There, you are done."

Action ceased for a time as the others came over to coo and awe at Cordelia, the woman taking it graciously before directing them back to the others. Taking a deep breath, Cordelia smiled.

*Well, it may be more hectic than I thought, but it looks like everything's going to happen on schedule. I'm… I'm finally going to be the bride, to the love of my life and with my friends around me. Looks like dreams do come true.*

Cordelia let out a little giggle, low enough to be missed by the others. After a time, they finished their work and a knock hit the door. "Girls, can I come in?"

Cordelia smiled and hushed the others. "Yes, Mother, please come in."

Diana opened the door and nodded to those inside. "Alright, I see you're all done. Would you mind giving me some alone time with my daughter?"

"Not in the least." Sumia agreed, standing and ushering the others from the room. "Please, take all the time you need."

Diana gave Sumia a sympathetic smile and hug. "I'm sure your mother is proud of you, honey. Were it within my power, she'd be here."

Sumia smiled and hugged Diana back. "I know, thank you. Now then, we'll be waiting for our guest of honor, don't take too long!"

Sumia left and shut the door, Diana taking in the sight of her daughter, ready to be married. "You look… so beautiful, my love."

Cordelia smiled and stood, giving a little twirl for the heck of it. "I hope so. My goal today is to make Robin's jaw drop."

"I think you succeed every day if that's your goal." Diana laughed. "Anyway, I wanted to give you something before you went down the aisle."

Cordelia tilted her head, curious, when Diana pulled out a length of silver chain with a locket on the end. "Remember this?"

Cordelia nodded, nostalgia coloring her eyes. "It's… the locket Dad made after we got that painting done. It must've been… ten years ago."

Diana nodded and placed the necklace around Cordelia's throat. "Indeed it is. It is to remind you, sweet girl, that your family is always here for you. Whether that be me, your father, or Robin."

She hugged Cordelia. "I'm just so proud and happy for you. Robin is an amazing man and I have
seen how happy you are with him. I could not ask for a more joyous day."

Cordelia nuzzled Diana's shoulder. "Me too, Mom. I… I never thought I'd actually do this, let alone with someone like Robin. Life's a funny thing, huh?"

Diana sniffled. "It is… now then, we shouldn't keep them waiting. I need to make sure everyone else's make up is running before I start crying."

"Mother," Cordelia sighed, amusement in her voice. "Why is that your chief concern?"

Diana laughed and led Cordelia from the room. "Oh, you know me, I don't like being the first to break down."

Cordelia laughed as well, the sound like bells. When they arrived at the chapel doors, Roderick was waiting for them. "Cordelia… you put angels to shame."

Cordelia smiled and hugged him. "Dad compliments don't count… but thanks, I'm happy you're here."

"Wouldn't miss it for the world." Roderick laughed. "Everyone's inside already, including Robin. You ready?"

Cordelia smiled and took his arm. "Dad… I've been ready since he put that ring on my finger."

Roderick felt a proud grin burst to life, stepping forward with his daughter and opening the door. "Then let's go."

-Robin-

Robin almost leapt out of his skin when the organ began to play.

They'd all been waiting patiently for the ceremony to start, both parties in position and ready to go. Libra was, once again, officiating the event. Robin grew antsy as the time passed.

Even more so when Diana walked through the door, joy beaming across the chapel.

Then, the organ began and the doors opened, Robin didn't bother to hold his jaw up.

Cordelia strode forth dressed in a gown of white that rippled into waves at her knees, splitting towards the bottom to show her white heels. A silver necklace rested upon her throat, the felt lining beneath it shining in the summer sun. Behind her trailed a train of red and purple silk, Robin's symbol sewn into it with gold thread, while her veil fell over scarlet hair tied into a curly pony-tail. Finally, a bouquet of crimson roses was held in her free hand while a purple aster was pinned behind her right ear.

Truly, Robin had seen an angel, and she was walking towards him.

Once before the altar, Roderick lifted the veil from his daughter's face, a kiss to her cheek his farewell. Letting her go, Roderick took his seat in the pews and Cordelia strode to her spot across from Robin. The sight of her hairclips framing her face made his heart melt.

Libra began the ceremony shortly thereafter, but neither bride nor groom paid a lick of attention. They had only eyes for each other, and, seeing this, Libra sighed. "As this is not a truly grandiose ceremony, would it please everyone if we skipped to the blessings?"

Robin and Cordelia snapped out of their daze to give Libra embarrassed nods, the congregation
cheering in answer.

"Very well," Libra chuckled. "Then I shall give the reading this pair has chosen."

He took a deep breath and began. "Marriage is a commitment to life, to the best that two people can find and bring out in one another. It offers opportunities for sharing and growth that no other human relationship can equal; a joining that is promised for a lifetime. Within the circle of its love, marriage encompasses all of life's most important relationships."

"A spouse is a best friend, a confidant, a lover, a teacher, a listener, and a critic. There may come times when one partner is heartbroken or ailing, and the love of the other may resemble the tender caring of a parent for a child. Marriage deepens and enriches every facet of life."

"In marriage, happiness is fuller; memories are fresher; commitment is stronger; even anger is felt more strongly, and passes away more quickly. Marriage understands and forgives the mistakes life is unable to avoid."

"Marriage encourages and nurtures new life, new experiences, and new ways of expressing love through the seasons of life. When two people pledge to love and care for each other in marriage, they create a spirit unique to themselves which binds them closer than any spoken or written words."

"Marriage is a promise, a potential made in the hearts of two people who love. Marriage takes a lifetime to fulfill."

Libra cleared his throat and turned to the congregation. "Are there any here that would dispute these words and this marriage?"

None spoke, even the wind was still.

Libra nodded and looked to the best man and maid of honor. "Then I ask those that bear the rings, symbols of life and love everlasting, to step forward."

Stahl and Panne did so, Panne receiving the honor as the first to congratulate the pair rather than be mad. This made Sumia more than a little upset, but Cordelia pointing out how long it took her to come around made the queen sheepishly agree.

Robin and Cordelia took the rings from their friends, simple silver bands, and slid them into place. Now, the part everyone wanted to hear.

"We now ask that Sir Robin Volk das Felds step forth and speak his vow, promise, and oath."

Libra stepped back and Robin stepped forward, hands finding Cordelia's. "Cordelia… I can honestly say that I've never known a better person than you. You are kind, caring, funny, and altogether the most lovely person I've ever met. Though we have fought, suffered, and bled, my love for you has held strong from the day I first knew what love was. I promise, no matter what the future holds, or what trials await, that my love will never change. It will always be here, my angel, whenever you need it."

"I love you, Cordelia. Those words are my oath, and they shall stand until the sun itself dies."

Cordelia squeezed his hands, tears gathering at the corners of her eyes. Libra, seeing she was about to explode, hurried through the next part. "We now call upon Lady Cordelia de Grevis to step forth and speak her vow, promise, and oath."

"Robin," Cordelia breathed. "Until the day I met you, I was lost in a cycle of resentment and
helplessness. A light, a curiosity, you were the one I needed to pull free from the mire. Even when I lost myself time and again, you were there for me. You… you may call me an angel, but you are my savior. I have never known such happiness and love as I have with you, nor will I know it with another. Before those that listen, I swear that my heart is ever yours and my eyes only for you."

"I love you, Robin. My words are my bond, and they shall stand till death and beyond."

Robin had tears in his eyes now, many in the congregation sniffing. Even Panne was dabbing at her eyes, clearly overwhelmed.

"Then, with no objection and vows fulfilled, it is my honor to name you husband and wife." Libra called, voice booming through the air. "First strangers, now wed before the eyes of Naga and Ylisse, your lives have led you to this one moment."

"You may kiss the bride, and Naga be with you."

Cordelia leapt into Robin's arms, lips smashing into his with all the passion she could muster. Robin kissed back with equal force, their friends cheering and celebrating for all to hear.

Truly, a wondrous day.

"What a sight." Severa sighed from her spot in the church's second floor pews. "Never thought I'd ever see our parents get married."

Morgan nodded and blew her nose. "Yeah, we only got to see that painting. Mom looks beautiful in that dress! And Dad looks great too!"

Lucina laughed at her friend's sob, a content smile on her face. "If I recall… both our mothers thought we'd one day wear their dresses, right?"

Severa took her hand, a similar smile in place. "Yeah… though I don't think I'd want to. Prefer my wedding to be more than just a pass of the torch."

Cynthia giggled, arms circling the older girls. "Well, it was fun seeing, that's for sure! Still sad we couldn't see our Mom and Dad tie the knot, but boy was it a party afterwards."

"You got that right." Morgan laughed. "But we should go, they're starting to let out."

The time-travelers stood and snuck out of the church, mounting Theresa and Selene before flying home. They had other work to do, no time for parties.

Robin and Cordelia though… witnessed something different.

For Cordelia, it was a flash of purple in the corner of her eye.

For Robin, it was the scent of cinnamon on the wind.

They smiled and kissed again.

Perhaps life wasn't that cruel after all.
Peace was a surprisingly busy time, if you asked the Shepherds.

From new responsibilities and places to be, it was a sad truth that the company began to drift apart after Robin and Cordelia's wedding. They didn't want to, but circumstance simply didn't allow them to remain as close as they once were.

For example, Robin and Cordelia. Despite their marriage and newfound resolve to never leave each other to wallow in the despair that had led to their near-fatal fight, it was a chore to find the time they wanted. Robin had been promoted to the Duke of Felds soon after his new organization ideas bore fruit and Cordelia welcomed another class of recruits.

They still found that time, it was just hard. Factor in moving into the ducal manor and it was a wonder when they found themselves done early one fall night.

Which meant only one thing, music practice.

The couple set themselves on the upstairs balcony, looking over the grounds with a half-moon lighting the sky. They had been able to get more practice in than ever before and now they were set to work on their most complex piece yet.

"So, where did you find this one?" Robin asked as he set up his stand. "I didn't believe any of Severa Uro's original pieces still existed."

Cordelia shrugged and strummed a chord. "I got that as a gift, actually. Eris was going through a village to the south and happened across it on break."

"What for?" Robin asked, taking his spot next to the rail. "I know for fact your birthday isn't soon and there's no other significant event upcoming. Unless you've been neglecting to tell me something."

Cordelia shook her head. "No, it was a thank you for taking her back into the Order. She wasn't sure she had a place anymore with most everyone gone, so my coming to see her in the infirmary made her indebted."

Robin chuckled. "I bet you tried to turn that down right up until she showed you the parchment. I'll have to thank her when we head back to Ylisstol next week."

Cordelia tilted her head, confused for a moment, but smiled. "Oh, that's right. The big reunion Sumia was talking about in her letters. It'll be fun to see everyone again."

Robin nodded, glancing into the dark autumn forest. "Yeah, it'll be nice. How long has it been since we were last together?"

Cordelia hummed in thought. "I think… two months, give or take? Remember, we had that big announcement where the military got reorganized, right after our honeymoon."

Robin remembered that, though more for the sheer amount of chaos that reigned during the honeymoon and the surprisingly open-minded way Cordelia approached intimate acts.

Then again, when you've nearly killed the one you love and then proposed to them, Robin shouldn't have been surprised by that. The first time was certainly as tender and loving as he hoped, but after
that…

He shook his head of the wandering thoughts, his blush making Cordelia laugh. "You scandalous man! You were thinking of the honeymoon, not the meeting!"

"In my defense, the meeting wasn't all that exciting," Robin drawled. "We just stood there and watched our friends give a speech before talking every conservative off the cliff."

Cordelia laughed again. "Well, regardless, it'll be fun. Now then, to the main event."

Robin nodded and held his trumpet ready, the melody soon flowing through the air. It was a peaceful night and a peaceful life now that so much was done. What could be bad about seeing old friends?

-One Week Later-

"Why did I ever think this would be a peaceful gathering?"

Robin wondered the thought aloud as the reunited friends drank and danced with a merriment reserved for the happiest of drunks. They'd rented out Marley's Grill on both Robin and Chrom's recommendation, the staff more than happy to host royalty and heroes alike, but Robin could tell they'd probably regret that decision.

Next to him sat Sumia, the queen not partaking in anything stronger than water. "Well, what can I say? We've had five separate engagements announced and many of them haven't seen each other in months."

Robin conceded the point grudgingly. While Frederick and Vaike announcing their respective engagements hadn't been all that surprising, the other three came as surprises of varying degrees.

Lissa and Donnel? Surprised at it being so soon, but definitely expected.

Stahl and Evelyn? Again, a surprise, but Robin had watched the too practically court each other without saying anything over the previous months. The wonders of being the duke and your friends had to give you reports.

Virion and Panne… that was a shock. Apparently, something big had happened on their land and it had drawn the two together in a way that Robin could only call tight. That's what set off the current round of drinking and merriment.

"Actually, I've been meaning to ask." Robin stated as he gave Sumia a glance. "How did Chrom take it when Donnel came to ask his blessing?"

Sumia smiled helplessly, waiting for Sully to finish flipping Ricken into a table before responding. "Well, he was very corny about it. Cold shoulder, over the top threats, that kind of stuff. Poor Donnel was too nervous to see Chrom was playing with him, so he had to cut it short before Donnel had a stroke."

Robin winced as the Shepherds began playing chicken with table legs as lances. Lissa took on all comers with a throaty roar. "Well, I'm glad it wasn't that bad. Heaven knows those two deserve to be happy.

Sumia grimaced, recalling the reason for their engagement. "Yeah, uh… let's get to something happy. I figured out how to make sculptures! It's really helped me with fine control."

Robin smiled and took a sip from his ale. "That's cool, pardon the pun. I'd love to see some of your
work tomorrow."

"How about you?" Sumia asked, taking another sip of water. "I bet it's been hard learning how to handle that power of yours with all the duties."

Robin sighed and placed his ale on the table. "It is, to be honest. I still control the wolves, but I can't seem to summon as many as I want and the power's never what I want it to be. It shouldn't be surprising that lightning is hard to control, but damn if it's hard not to burn things."

"I believe your wife has more trouble with that." Another voice said, Miriel joining them. "I have come to our discussions to find the fields aflame more than once with her at the center."

Robin shrugged. "It's especially hard for her. She can't tell where the flame starts and the grass begins, not to mention she's having just as much trouble with controlling the power as I am. I'm lucky I can direct the energy into the dirt."

Miriel sighed before gesturing behind her. "I hope you do not mind, but this is the only refuge in this establishment. May I sit?"

Robin pointed to the seat behind him, guffawing as he watched Chrom get suplexed by Kellam while he was getting suplexed by Cherche. Sully's vow of revenge only made it better!

Miriel meanwhile was staring at Sumia, gaze sharper than usual. "Your Highness, are you alright? You're looking pale."

Sumia grimaced, cheeks flushing. "I'm always pale, Miriel. Can't feel heat, remember?"

Miriel shook her head, noting Sumia's pulse start to pound in her neck. "No, that wouldn't make you pale. What I mean is that you're paler than normal, I can see your veins."

Sumia's grimace deepened and she paused before letting out a sick burp. "Uh oh."

Sumia's whisper was all Miriel needed to launch out of her seat and pull Sumia to her feet, the scholar guiding the queen through the chaos. She had to use low powered blasts to stop the revelers from delaying them, which destroyed more furniture, but she got Sumia into the bathroom.

"Oh gods…"

Sumia barely whispered the words before she hunched over and her dinner left in squelches and splashes. Miriel was kind enough to keep the queen's fully regrown hair out of her face, but she continued to observe her all the while.

Once Sumia was done, Miriel leaned down and began prodding the queen.

"Miriel… what are you… doing?"

Miriel gave a light tap to Sumia's gut. "Testing a theory. Tell me, when did you begin to feel ill? Have you been able to stomach anything stronger than water or light meals?"

"I think… a week ago?" Sumia answered. "The healers… said I got a sickness and needed to fight it off with some poultices they gave me."

Miriel hummed before noticing something that made her freeze. "Sumia… have you gained any weight recently?"
Sumia frowned at her friend, not liking the note of panic in Miriel's voice. "I… don't think so. I've been training like usual, but I did notice a bit of a belly so I cut back on the desserts."

Miriel covered her mouth, something Sumia would dare call joy showing in the woman's eyes. "When did you last have intercourse?"

Sumia blazed red. "What, Miriel-?!"

"Answer me, it's very important!"

Sumia squeaked and looked away, embarrassment rendering her mute. Miriel took a deep breath before reaching down and taking Sumia's hand. "Sumia, please. I know it's embarrassing for most people, but this is a very important question."

Sumia still didn't look at Miriel but nodded. "It was… about two months ago. Chrom and I have been too tired to uh… do it since then."

Miriel didn't speak so Sumia looked back to see the scholar with a wide smile, which damn near made Sumia faint.

"Sumia," Miriel began, voice professional despite the joy in her face. "It is my great pleasure to inform you that… you're two months pregnant."

"She's what?!"

Miriel had barely a moment before the bathroom door was kicked in and flung into her, slamming the scholar into the wall as Cordelia and Sully rushed inside. Both women had come to clean themselves up after their poor behavior, but the news shocked them sober.

Cordelia was immediately performing the same tests Miriel had, only for Sumia to stop her. "Is it true, Sumi? Is what Miriel said true?!

Sumia was very dazed, but she kept her grip and nodded. "I… think so."

Sully let out a great roar before scooping her friends up and spinning around. "Sumia, that's awesome! Hey, hey, can I be an aunt, can I?"

Sumia was in her own little world, so she didn't answer. Instead, small explosions enveloped Sully and Cordelia's heads, rendering them both still and covered in soot.

Miriel pushed the door off her, face stoic despite her disheveled clothes. "Calm down, both of you. The last thing we need to do is stress Her Highness more than necessary, especially with all those drunks outside."

Cordelia coughed and backed up, Sully lowering Sumia to the ground where the queen remained in a daze. "Well, what should we do? I mean… we can't just leave."

"Yes, we can." Sully argued, a scary look of determination crossing her face. "And I know just how to do it."

Cordelia and Miriel looked to each other before sighing. Once Sully was set on something, no one could stop her except Kellam, and he was passed out with his head in a table.

All they could do was get Sumia out of there while the chaos went on.

- The Next Morning -
Emmeryn took a deep breath as she popped into existence next to an out of the way shack in the woods around Ylisstol. It was finally the day where she'd go to the palace and join on as an aide to Chrom and Sumia.

*I hope they're not too hungover. It would make this a lot harder.*

Shrugging, Emmeryn's shape changed to the agreed form. Brushing her new black hair back, Emmeryn glanced down the road both ways before fixing her gown and cape. "Alright, here goes nothing."

Setting off, Emmeryn soon fell into the road's traffic, her appearance drawing many looks and whispers among the travelers. Emmeryn kept a serene smile on her face and greeted anyone who greeted her, the sound of her voice strange to her ears.

Entering the city was very easy, as suspicion since the rebellion was only present in the border towns. Even that was going away too, which pleased Emmeryn greatly, and she gladly took in the sights as she walked.

*It's been some time, but everything looks even better than when I was last here. Everything looks newly painted, the streets are spotless, and I don't see a single citizen that could be suffering.*

The sound of boots and metal drew her attention, a squad of twenty-five armed soldiers marching by. Emmeryn stared after them, noticing the new tunics they wore and their silver spears.

*Wow, so that's what Robin's idea looks like. As much as it pains me to see such heavy armament in peacetime, I can't deny they look much better.*

Humming, Emmeryn continued on her way, noticing more squads of soldiers patrolling and performing their duties. Some were helping unload items, others were keeping an eye on children, and yet others kept watch on merchant sales.

*What a wonderful idea. I guess you need to do something to keep the garrison from getting bored.*

Emmeryn stifled a chuckle, but still she grew embarrassed when she arrived at the main square.

There was a thrice damned statue of her, right on top of the fountain!

*Chrom, I told you not to do that. Now I must look at that gaudy thing every time I want to go out!*

Sighing, Emmeryn went on her way. She stopped again when she found a group of soldiers standing guard by a large series of wrecked storefronts.

"Um, what happened?"

The swordsman turned to her, face hidden by his helm. "Oh, this? Yeah, the Shepherds got together last night and really turned things upside down. I heard it spilled out because Lady Sully grabbed Sir Gaius and threw him out of Marley's Grill."

Emmeryn gaped, both at the sound of that story and the fact that it was probably true! "I… see. Um, I actually need to go to the palace, would you mind directing me?"

The man shrugged, his armor clanking. "Just keep going down this road, you'll see the gates pretty fast. Don't be surprised if you don't get an audience though, the royals and their advisors are pretty busy."
Emmeryn smiled and bowed, the man shifting in embarrassment. "Thank you, kind sir. I wish you a good day."

With that, she turned and continued down the street, silently rueing that her brother and friends were such terrible drunks. There was no doubt they would be beyond hungover.

Thankfully, when she gave the name Jennifer Daly at the gate she was ushered into the palace and straight to the throne room. Once in front of the door and feeling ready, she nodded to the guard.

The guard nodded and knocked thrice on the large doors. "The Lady Jennifer Daly, prospective aide to the queen, has arrived."

There was silence before the doors opened, Emmeryn striding forward to find a too-happy Sumia and grumpy Chrom flanked by Frederick, Kellam, and Sully. All of them, excepting Sumia, were clearly hungover.

Emmeryn curtsied, barely keeping a smirk off her face. "Greetings, Your Highness. I am Jennifer Daly and I have come to offer my services to the crown."

Chrom scowled at her but kept his voice steady. "What skills do you offer? All the positions in this palace have been filled save one."

Emmeryn smiled demurely and stood. "I offer experience and aid to both His Highness and Her Highness in matters of internal diplomacy, external diplomacy, civics, and scholarly knowledge. I have done all that and more for many years in service to my family's business."

Sumia hummed, a knowing look in her eye. "Well, that does fill the position we're looking for. Question is, how do we know you'd be loyal and competent?"

"I can work on a trial basis." Emmeryn answered. "Minor items which you cannot be bothered with but are too important to be left with a clerk. If I show my worth, then you shall know I am genuine."

Chrom and Sumia shared a glance before nodding.

"You'll be working as an aide to Lady Miriel." Chrom began, motioning for Frederick to be silent when the knight attempted to protest. "Survive her and your competence will be beyond doubt."

Sumia nodded to Frederick. "Sir Frederick shall be your ball and chain, so to speak. He knows loyalty better than anyone, so if you are true, then he'll know."

Emmeryn nodded, but sighed internally. Looks like she'd have to add Frederick to the circle—which was already worryingly large. "Very well, I look forward to working with you both."

Chrom waved his hand in dismissal. "One of the guards will see you to a guest room. Get yourself settled and report to Miriel, for now we'll hammer out what Frederick's to expect."

Emmeryn bowed and left, almost smiling as Frederick began to give a doubletly exhaustive list of reasons why Chrom and Sumia shouldn't trust her. Emmeryn welcomed it, for it showed he was still their tireless protector, even with a new charge to his name.

As a guard came forth and began to guide her, Emmeryn overheard... whispers.

"What an announcement this morning, right?"

"Who'd have thought it would happen so soon?"
"I wonder when they'll know?"

Emmeryn frowned at the whispers, something niggling at the back of her mind. Tapping the guard on her shoulder, Emmeryn cleared her throat. "Excuse me, what announcement are they talking about? I don't remember hearing anything in the city."

The guard grunted and turned a corner. "Doesn't surprise me. They just told the palace staff since we have to wait for the Exalt to feel more himself."

Emmeryn just loved that people called Chrom Exalt even though he'd foresworn the title during his wedding reception. "Well, since I'll be here for some time, would you mind telling me? Only if it's no trouble, of course."

The guard shrugged before stopping in front of a door. "This is your room, please get your personal items stored and head for the third floor, that's where Lady Miriel's office is."

The guard opened the door and Emmeryn strode through. "Thank you, kind dame. And, the announcement?"

The guard blushed at the compliment. "Oh, uh, yeah. Well… the queen's got a bun, apparently."

Emmeryn froze, eyes growing wide with shock and jaw slamming to the floor. 

"…Say again?"

The guard chuckled and closed the door, her words echoing through Emmeryn's mind.

"The queen's pregnant."

Emmeryn stood there stunned, never expecting such a thing to happen when the pair had been wed less than a year. It was only the need to keep things on track that allowed her to prepare her things and set out to meet Miriel, shock held at bay for now.

Oh boy, tonight would be fun.

-Night, Severa-

"Did anyone else hear that?"

Morgan looked up from the fire pit and tilted her head. "Yeah… was that a scream?"

Severa nodded and looked around. "I don't think it was close, but man, that sounded more like a… shout of joy? What's so joyous that it could make someone scream like that?"

Morgan shrugged and started poking the burning logs. "Beats me. I just want to get home, we can finally relax after this patrol."

"What patrol?" Severa snarked, gesturing to their pristine gear. "I don't know what Dad did, but I haven't seen a Risen in months! Or bandits or anything!"

Morgan glowered at her. "Hey, at least we get to go see things. Cynthia's off trying to track down that Naga's Tear up in Ferox with Lucy, not exactly a fun job this time of year."

Severa grimaced. That had been a long and bitter argument on both sides, especially since someone would have to head to Carrion Isle for a scouting mission soon. "I guess…"
Morgan's glower was replaced with a sad smile. "They need something to do, Sev. We both know those two are too task-oriented to just sit at the cabin and wait on things."

"I know," Severa sighed. "But this just means we won't see them for almost a year. It wouldn't surprise me if our mini-versions started popping up by then."

Morgan smiled and scooted over to Severa. "I wouldn't mind being the big sister this time. Maybe I'll get to see what it's like bossing my younger sister around."

Severa glared at her. "Twerp. They'll be like, toddlers. You can't boss around a toddler."

Morgan shrugged. "True, then I'll just be their favorite, so they always come to me and ignore their prickly and mean biggest sis."

Severa grabbed Morgan and held her in a headlock. "What was that?"

"I'm sorry-I'm sorry!" Morgan cried, trying not to laugh. "Look, it's fine. We'll have to meet the parents at some point, so why not go ahead and-"

Severa let go of Morgan and shot from her seat, the older girl stalking to the edge of the firelight. Morgan stared after her, concerned. "Sev?"

Severa stood still for a moment before she began to pant, hands going to her back. Her breath quickened until she was hyperventilating, falling to the ground and writhing in agony.

"Severa!" Morgan screeched, rushing to her sister and cradling her, an elixir appearing in her hand. "Stop moving, this'll help!"

Severa let out an impressive shriek of pain, Morgan sure she saw black miasma leaking from Severa's back.

Ah crap, this must be like what happened when she went down to the Archives! Come on Morg, think, what was the spell Dad taught you?

She remembered as soon as Severa's writhing knocked the elixir from her hand. "That's it!"

She pinned Severa as best she could and placed her hand on the small of Severa's back. "Slaap parasiet, dit meisje is niet van jou te houden, noch de jouwe te verslinden! Slaap de slaap van de dood! (1)

The miasma quivered before retreating into Severa's back, a quick inspection showing the mark had grown.

"Shit," Morgan spat. "This isn't good."

She reached down and hooked her arms under Severa's shoulders to drag her back to the fire. Theresa trotted over and whinnied, nuzzling Severa's face in concern.

"It's the mark." Morgan said, more to say it than assuage Theresa. "The damn thing's gotten bigger. Dad warned us about this."

She froze and tore off her breast place and shirt, breathing a sigh of relief when she found her own mark the same size as it had always been. If that thing ever grew beyond her cleavage, they were in trouble.

Severa though…
"It's the demon." Morgan muttered, stroking Severa's hair. "It has to be. We... we always suspected, but damn it. I didn't want it to be true."

Morgan felt tears in her eyes. It wasn't just that the mark made them descendants of Grimleal, they'd already dealt with that alongside their friends.

The fact that it had grown meant only one thing.

They were the daughters of Grima himself.

Their dad had betrayed Chrom.

Their dad had killed their mother.

Their dad had killed everyone.

Their dad had... tried to kill them.

A hand stroked Morgan's cheek. "Hey... don't think that. That... thing isn't dad, no matter what the damn mark means. Just... just ignore it."

Morgan looked down to find Severa awake, the older girl still grimacing in pain. "Sev... how can I not think that? All those rumors, all those whispers... they're true. Dad... Dad destroyed the world."

"It. Wasn't. Him."

"Grima's a parasite, we both know that! It's far more likely he took Dad's body after killing him, almost certain, I bet! Do you really think our dad could do anything like that?"

Morgan sobbed, tears starting to fall. "Of course, I don't! Daddy's too nice to ever do that, but do you think anyone else will believe that? Lucina and Cynthia sure as hell won't, not when Grima killed both their parents with Daddy's body! Do you think they'll suffer us now that we're actual threats?"

Severa grimaced as another lance of pain shot through her. "I... I don't know. We'll just have to keep this between us I guess."

"Keep this secret?" Morgan hissed, freeing herself from Severa's grip. "That'll make things even worse!"

Severa tackled her, even as the impact made her vision go white with pain. It took her a moment to regain her bearings, but Morgan didn't struggle. She sobbed instead.

"Morg..." Severa began, wrapping her arms around her sister. "We have more than a year to figure this out, no matter what. I'm sure we'll come up with something that'll make everything ok."

Morgan sobbed into the dirt, Theresa nuzzling her partner in a vain attempt at comfort. Severa merely held her sister close after that, feeling tears of her own prick at her eyes.

Why was the news always bad?

-Morning, Robin-

"I didn't think there'd be such a grand response."

Cordelia nodded, glancing up from a report to smile at him. "Well, it's not that big a surprise. After all, they're a pair for barely a year and already have a child on the way. There's more gossip on how many royal children will join the world than anything else."
Robin chuckled, but the sound was strained. "I'm, uh, kind of surprised you're not with Sumia right now."

Cordelia frowned and put down her report. "I didn't want to add onto the stress. She's under enough already with the healers trying to give her advice, not to mention having to prepare herself for all the unsolicited attention."

Robin laughed awkwardly, eyes darting around the room. "Well, that would do it, right?"

"Robin…" Cordelia began slowly, using her 'unhappy' tone. "What's got you so flustered?"

Robin kept glancing around the room, but Cordelia either stood, twisted, or bent down to make sure they were eye to eye. After a few minutes of this, Robin gave in. "Well… Chrom came to me asking how to take care of kids."

Cordelia gaped, not expecting that at all. "Why would he do that?"

"Said I have experience taking care of children." Robin sighed, his suffering making Cordelia chuckle. "But I fail to see how dealing with the Shepherds could ever transfer to a new life. No way a tactician like me could be a good enough father to advise others."

Cordelia tilted her head, heart fluttering nervously. "Is that what has you so worked up? I understand hearing Sumia was pregnant shocked everyone, especially me, but I didn't think it would set your mind on children."

Robin sighed and played with his sleeves. "I didn't want to, but after we married and were given the duchy, I started getting proposals like what Chrom and Sumia got. You know, the ones asking about possible betrothals to ours when the time came. Heaven knows I've wanted a family of my own after seeing yours, but I'm still… uncertain."

Cordelia smiled sympathetically, her hand reaching across the table to grip his. "I understand your doubt, Robin. I won't deny that I started thinking about it soon after all the chaos died down. It may be soon after we've wed, but… I don't think I'd mind having another reason to come home."

"Gee, thanks." Robin laughed, voice cracking. "It's just… I know nothing, still know nothing. I just don't feel ready."

Cordelia stood and strode to his side before kissing him. After he calmed down, she pulled away. "Robin, I don't think I'm ready either. Let's see about it later, after Chrom and Sumia are settled in, then we can worry."

Robin sighed and nodded. "You're right, I suppose I was just getting swept into the flow. Do you think it'll be smooth this time, as in… we won't have too much trouble getting things ready?"

"I hope so my dear, I hope so."

-Several Months Later-

"We can't catch a break, can we?"

Chrom grunted at his friends and hefted his wife into his arms, her belly well past her waist and sweat matting her hair.

It appeared the day had come, right in the middle of spring. Sumia had been through quite the gauntlet over the course of her pregnancy, both healers and Shepherds worrying over her constantly.
The healers because this was Sumia's first pregnancy and she had a bad habit of getting colds. The Shepherds because she had been chosen as an avatar of Artezza and were very worried for her child.

Poor Chrom, though, had the worst of it. While Sumia was dealing with her over-worried friends, healers, and changing body, Chrom dealt with everything else. Dignitaries coming to give well-wishes, Chrom took them and sent them away as quickly as he could while being polite. A flood of betrothal contracts coming in after Lissa worked her magic and discovered the baby was a girl?

Chrom burned the lot of them, with maniacal glee.

When Emmeryn came to discuss the pregnancy after she'd formally joined the palace as Jennifer, Chrom made damn sure his sister would not tease Sumia or otherwise cause her stress.

Poor man even kept the kitchen on their toes because if Sumia's cravings were not satisfied, the ovens would either be frozen in her hormonal rage or Chrom would do it himself. Which, considering his track record of only being able to roast things, led to many new ice sculptures.

It started when Robin and Chrom were discussing expanding the country's roads. Across the table, Sumia was reviewing trade shipments with Cordelia.

Sumia paused as she felt a trickle of liquid run down her leg, a quick check showing it to be clear. Her face turned stoic, she turned her seat around, and very calmly said. "Chrom…"

"I think my water just broke."

Then the pain hit.

Chrom had briefly panicked before he went into 'protection mode' and ordered Cordelia to gather every healer in the palace. The woman sprinted out of the room, voice booming through the halls and drawing everyone's attention.

Chrom, meanwhile, jogged out of the room with Sumia in his arms and Robin beside him step for step. "The healers did say she was due soon."

"Soon, not today." Chrom grunted as a wave of nausea made Sumia groan. "Now I want you to stand guard at the door when we get there. No one except the healers are allowed in."

"Even Jennifer?" Robin asked as they turned a corner, the sight of the marching Exalt and groaning Queen making the guards clear the halls with all possible haste.

"Even her." Chrom answered. "She can't heal, so she's no good right now."

Robin nodded and slowed to a halt as Chrom kicked in a door and strode into the infirmary, shouts filling the air. Robin caught the sound of Lissa and Maribelle taking charge of the healers inside before he shut the door.

For several minutes, he had to order servants and guards away, only opening the door once when Libra himself sprinted up. Beyond that, the Shepherds in town began to trickle in as the hours passed, Sumia's cries of pain echoing through the air.

Eventually, Cordelia arrived with Miriel in tow, the scholar slipping through the door. Robin slammed it shut immediately after, a burst of sound showing everyone inside working hard.

"How's she doing?" Cordelia asked after catching her breath. "I haven't heard anything."
Robin nodded to an open chair, the servants graciously bringing seats for the Shepherds to keep them from standing. "About as well as can be expected. Libra came out earlier to inform us that she's doing well for a first-time mother, but they're worried about blood loss. Sumia's pretty hearty, but this is beyond anything her body's gone through."

"No duh," Cordelia spat. "It's birth. Painful doesn't begin to describe what's going on in there, but damn if it isn't worth it."

Robin sighed and closed his eyes. "Cordelia, don't bring that up now. Let's see this through, then we can talk."

Cordelia looked guilty but stayed silent. She'd slowly grown more enamored with the idea of a child as Sumia's pregnancy had worn on, mostly from seeing Sumia in her sweet and happiest moments. That, and Cordelia had taken to keeping an eye on her recruits' children when she wasn't training them. It was so interesting to see the small lives marvel at mothers' training, Cordelia could admit she'd begun to wish for something similar.

Robin though, could only see the sheer stress his friends were going through. Yes, he would privately admit that he'd never seen Chrom happier than he had been whenever Sumia was nearby. The sheer joy in his voice when he spoke of his daughter-to-be…

It was infectious.

Robin shook the thoughts free, only to notice the hall had gone silent. A moment later, the doors flew open and a crowd of healers exited, murmurs ghosting between them, but the Shepherds were staring at the last to exit.

Maribelle sighed and wiped her hands with a towel. "Well… it's done. Both mother and daughter are perfectly fine, but very tired. We'll be letting Sumia rest while Lissa takes care of the little one until Sumia's ready. Chrom has ordered that everyone go to the guest rooms for today, they'll share the name and child tomorrow."

The Shepherds breathed a sigh of relief. With the stress of the last few hours, everyone was looking forward to some rest.

Robin cast a glance back at the infirmary as he walked away, his eyes catching a glimpse.

Chrom stood next to the cot with Sumia, a bundle of pink cloth in his arms. The wonder and love in those eyes…

…Robin wanted it too.

-Next Morning-

The first to arrive at the infirmary were Robin and Cordelia, the pair eager to meet their new friend. Within sat three people in addition to Sumia in her cot. Chrom, Lissa, and… Jennifer?

"Pardon me, but what are you doing here?" Cordelia asked. "I could've sworn we were the only ones called."

Jennifer smiled at Cordelia. "Oh, it's quite alright. I've already held my niece and I look forward to doing so many times after this."

She stood and looked to Chrom. "Have fun explaining that, I'll be working on those proposals for
fortifying the smaller outposts."

She left the infirmary, leaving a thoroughly confused Cordelia behind. "What... was that about?"

"I'll explain later." Chrom sighed. "First things first. Don't you want to meet our newest member?"

Cordelia immediately forgot her confusion and almost jumped forward. Robin held her back, despite his own eagerness to meet the baby.

Once beside the cot, Sumia tilted her arms and pulled back the top of the pink bundle. "Robin, Cordelia, I'd like you to meet Lucina. Named after her great-grandmother on my side."

"I shot for Emmeryn." Chrom laughed as his friends marveled at the pink, beautiful newborn. "Boy was that a fight. I think we went through, what, eight or ten names?"

"More like two dozen." Sumia giggled, voice quiet as Lucina squirmed. "But, we did want her godparents to see her first. I just know she'll be the light of this palace."

Robin and Cordelia were stunned. They'd come in here expecting to greet the new life, not be told they were godparents!

"Don't give us that look." Lissa giggled. "I've already been given full on Aunt honors, but these two were adamant you would be godparent. Personally, I think it's a good choice."

Robin recovered first and bowed. "I'm beyond humbled. This... this is an honor that I will never foreswear."

Cordelia did the same, but Sumia stopped her. "Enough of that, both of you. Now, while she's calm, why not hold your goddaughter?"

Cordelia reached out and took Lucina tenderly, a finger tickling the baby's cheek. "My, my... you're a lovely girl, Lucina. Just like your mother."

Robin leaned in and took in the sight of his goddaughter. "She's... beautiful. And if I'm not mistaken... she has your hair, Sumia."

Sumia beamed at her friends, Chrom speaking instead. "Hearing that news made me the happiest man alive. Now I have two people with my favorite color."

Lissa smacked her brother. "Stop being corny, we still have a bunch of people left to go. Robin, Cordelia, I'm going to have to ask you to leave. We still have a lot of people to greet."

Robin chuckled quietly. It took a nudge to remind Cordelia to give Lucina back, but they wished 'Duchess Lissa' goodbye before sprinting from the room while the sage gave her best glare.

She may have been a duchess, but dammit, it was annoying enough without her friends calling her that!

Once outside the infirmary, Robin and Cordelia looked to each other and walked down the hall. As soon as they were around the corner, they turned and shouted the same thing.

"We're having one!"

"What?"

"You agree?!"
"What are we waiting for?!"

Cordelia leapt into his arms and they ran straight to their rooms.

Pity the fool that had to go get them later that day.

-Nine Months Later, January-

A lot can change in a year.

Most of the Shepherds were engaged or wed after Lucina's birth, the ceremonies simple affairs that not everyone was able to attend.

Nowi and Frederick's was the only one that everyone was able to come to, those afterward slowly decreasing in attendance until the last with only half the Shepherds able to make it.

Beyond that, Ylisse had finally settled into the reforms set by Chrom and Robin, the country enjoying a boom of wealth that saw even the lowest of peasants with more money than they'd ever hoped to see. Banditry had been all but eliminated with the new military organization and wealth, the Risen serving as little more than targets for recruits to cut their teeth on in real combat.

Lucina had shown herself to be a bright and energetic child. She loved playing with her parents, but, like any other child, screamed and wailed whenever she didn't get the attention she craved. The new life kept her parents on their toes, but the parents would never trade her for anything, especially when her laugh was all they needed to recover from a hard day's work.

Robin and Cordelia, in turn, were the second pair to begin expecting. Cordelia had no choice but to leave the Order in Dalila and Eris's capable hands, which left her at home where she began learning to play lullabies and knit clothes.

She couldn't fly, but that was to be expected.

Regardless, Robin made himself into a barrier to the world much like Chrom had, but he had fewer issues to deal with. It was nice to get a hide from the Khans like Chrom, but this one was more suited for the colder weather of a Feldian winter.

Cordelia swiftly turned it into a cute coat.

He still saw his fair share of betrothal requests after Libra announced their baby would be a girl. Chrom and Sumia were adamant Lucina and the child would be best friends, Robin could only hope.

Now though, they were making their way back to Ylisstol. It was agreed, as Cordelia's pregnancy advanced, that she would go to Ylisstol to give birth as they had larger stores of medicine than Linde. Not to mention Lissa would be in town that winter as part of an envoy from Clarissa.

The carriage jostled as it passed over a small divot, Cordelia sucked in a breath. "Can't we make this… smoother?"

Robin patted her arm, his body doing its best to brace her. "We'll be there in a few hours, don't worry. Everything will be fine and so will our little girl."

Cordelia gave him a strained smile but hissed as the carriage pulled to a stop. "What's… going on?"

Robin frowned and assured Cordelia he'd check before exiting the carriage and spotting someone he'd nearly forgotten about. "By the gods… Katarina?"
The woman in question stared at him before looking to her compatriot, Tethys. "I told you heading to town today was a bad idea."

"How was I supposed to know this would happen?" Tethys asked, gesturing to an overturned wagon. "And it's not my fault the snow hid the pothole!"

Katarina glared at Tethys before looking back to Robin, who was starting to snarl. "I can already tell you're about to demand answers, but I have little doubt your wife's in the carriage. Why not just hold off on that and let us accompany you to Ylisstol?"

Tethys and Robin stared at her like she was insane. "Say what?"

Katarina shrugged. "We had to go all the way to town to get our items, but now they're ruined. Only Ylisstol has them in stock this time of year and we got lucky a trader had them. Now, we don't have a choice."

Tethys didn't look sure, but a glance to the wagon made her sigh. "Fine… I guess. Can we just get a promise not to get locked up? I mean, it's not like we've done anything the last couple of years."

Robin growled but couldn't deny this. "Look, I do want answers, I won't deny it, but I have something a lot more important going on right now. You can come with us, but I want you both in here where I can keep an eye on you."

Severa nodded and motioned for Tethys to dismount. "Do you have someone that can lead our Pegasus?"

Robin knocked against the carriage and the groom leapt from his seat and took Theresa's reins from Tethys. Looking behind him, Robin glowered at the spearwoman marching behind them. "And the reason you weren't questioning them?"

The woman saluted. "Forgive me, Your Grace, we happened upon them by accident. They were almost done, and we thought it best to simply let them finish and leave. We didn't want to add to the lady's stress."

Robin sighed and nodded. "While appreciated, please follow your duties next time."

The woman saluted, and Robin turned back to Katarina and Tethys. "Alright, get in. We don't have time to sit here in the cold."

Katarina and Tethys shared a nervous glance before following Robin into the carriage, the sisters bearing Cordelia's surprised gaze stoically.

"So…" Cordelia began after the silence stretched for a time. "What have you two been up to?"

Katarina glanced to Tethys, who spoke. "Nothing much… um, we were originally taking care of Risen that popped up, but that's not a problem anymore, so… yeah."

Cordelia didn't like the non-answer, but Robin put a hand on her knee. "It's alright, dear, there's no need to make small talk. I'll have a talk with both of them while we're getting settled."

Katarina and Tethys grimaced, but no words were spoken the rest of the trip. Instead, Robin and the girls kept their attention on Cordelia, who had begun to flush then pale as they pulled up to the palace.

Then, she stumbled as Robin was helping her out of the carriage, a cry of pain escaping her lips.
Robin was beside her immediately, Katarina taking off like an arrow into the palace to call for a healer. Tethys told the groom and driver to stable the horses and Theresa while the escorts returned to their posts.

The authority in her voice sent them scrambling, Tethys leaned beside the groaning woman. "You don't think this is what I think it is, do you?"

"I pray not." Robin growled, deciding to throw caution to the wind and haul Cordelia into his arms. "But I'm not going to sit here in the cold to find out!"

Tethys was quick to cradle Cordelia's head, the woman groaning as contractions began to set in. Father and daughter hustled up the stairs as fast as they could, Lissa meeting them with a stretcher the moment they were inside.

Robin left Tethys behind, following the stretcher and his wife all the way to the infirmary. All he could remember was Katarina walking up to Tethys before Frederick appeared, likely to detain them.

The next few hours were the most stressful of his life. It seemed like Cordelia cried out in pain every minute, her hair plastered to skin as sweat soaked her body and her skin grew deathly pale. Lissa was doing everything and then some, at one point finding that Cordelia's body temperature was dropping far lower than it should be and swiftly enveloping her in arm towels.

Then came the blood. And more screams. All while he could do nothing except hold her hand and do all he could to comfort her.

Then came a new cry, mixed with a final push and Cordelia's groaning shout.

"It's a girl!" Lissa cheered, handing the infant to Miriel who'd arrived halfway through. "And she looks completely healthy! Cordelia, great job!"

Cordelia panted in exhaustion, but a weak smile made its way to her face. "That… was fun."

Robin almost kissed her. If she could remain humorous after that ordeal, who was he to be upset?

"Robin… can you do something for me?"

Robin immediately leaned down, her hand in his. "Anything my love, you need only ask."

Cordelia chuckled weakly before she was given the cleaned and swaddled infant. "Can you… name her? I really… need to sleep…"

Robin nodded and reached out to stroke his daughter's cheek, the name they'd agreed on whispering past his lips. "Severa… I'm so glad you're here."

The infant whined a bit but was otherwise calm. Robin, in turn, looked to find Cordelia nearly asleep. "Anything else?"

Cordelia's eyes fluttered, but she voiced her last request. "Find… those two… get answers… why…"

"Why did I… see them in color?"

Robin felt a vein bulge on his head. Now that he thought about it, scents had tickled his nose when they were with him, but he'd dismissed it as worry and stress playing tricks on his mind.

Now, he knew that it was no trick.
Standing, he turned and gave Severa to Lissa before marching for the door. "Lissa, Miriel, take care of them. I have some questions for our uninvited guests."

Neither healer nor scholar got a word out before Robin was out of the ward and sprinting through the halls. If Frederick had detained them, there was only one place they could be.

The guardhouse.

Robin skidded to a stop before the guardhouse doors, not even acknowledging the soldiers on duty before throwing open the doors and storming in. Lightning was beginning to spawn around him as emotion took over, but he just barely kept it in when he spotted Frederick before one of the cell doors.

"Move, now."

Frederick stared at his friend for a time before shaking his head. "Nowi is having a discussion with our guests right now. You must wait your turn."

Robin stalked forward and got in Frederick's face. "You will move, or I will make you!"

Frederick's gaze was stony, only the click of the door stopping his response. "You're done?"

Nowi nodded as she walked out, cane in hand and eyes closed. "Yes, we're done. They're no threat, I can tell you that, but I'm more concerned about my friend in the ward. Robin, why would you leave Cordy alone after your daughter's birth?"

"She asked me to get answers." Robin bit out. "I've come to get them."

Nowi hummed but shrugged. "Fine, sourpuss. You really need to lighten up, today's a joyous day! Freddy can you take his weapons, so the room isn't a mess if he gets frustrated?"

Frederick nodded and liberated Robin of his weapons, the man growling again before stalking past Nowi and entering the room. Katarina and Tethys both sat before a table, tension clear in their bodies, but it skyrocketed when they spotted Robin.

"Sit," Robin commanded when they tried to stand.

They did.

Robin stared at them both with hard eyes before taking a deep sniff.

Cinnamon oil.

"By the gods." Robin whispered as his anger left in a rush, his body slumping and knees going weak. "I thought it just a story."

Severa and Morgan traded glances before looking at Robin again, the man gazing at Severa with a strange desperation. "Lord Robin, are you ok?"

"Severa." Robin whispered, making the elder sister go ramrod straight. "That's how I know your name… you're not my sister… or my cousin… or anything of the sort."

Robin took a shaky step forward. Then another… and another… and another…

Severa and Morgan remained frozen, neither knowing what to do even as Robin came to a stop before Severa.
"My baby girl..." Robin choked, tears beginning to gather in his eyes. "All grown up... and I only just met you..."

Severa leaned away from him. "What, are you insane?! There's no way I'm your daughter, I'm way too old!"

"I know why you're here." Robin sobbed, his hand going to the table to support himself. "There's only one way. The Rite of the Scales..."

Severa's eyes widened and Morgan tried to salvage the swiftly deteriorating situation. "T-That's just a story! The Scales don't exist, it's all a legend!"

Robin stared at them both before turning and collapsing into the opposite chair, sobs shaking his body. "I... I know it to be all too true... I... have met High Gods... and... ugh."

He wiped the tears from his eyes. "I was given a power by force and had my sense of smell taken from me. Food barely has taste and since that day I haven't known the sweet perfume my wife loves to wear. Yet, here we sit, and I can smell cinnamon on you both clear as day."

Robin's voice cracked, and he took a moment to compose himself, the girls silent.

"...I was given a lone concession to my loss. Only my children would be whole to me, as they would be to my wife. To her, all the world is grey as ash, save the baby she now holds, and you."

Robin looked both of his daughters in the eye. "There is no other explanation. You... are my children. From a time that, I can only assume... is nothing but horror."

"I'm... I'm so sorry."

The room was silent, both sides too deep in thought, shock, or guilt to speak. It dragged and dragged until Morgan found the courage to speak. "There's... there's nothing to apologize for. We're here of our own accord, the future has no bearing on you."

Robin looked up at the admission. "No, it does. I have failed at something if it brought you both here, something beyond important. Why should I not at least apologize for bringing suffering to my daughters?"

"Because it was not you that caused the suffering." Severa whispered, eyes hidden behind her bangs. "It was something else. Please... don't make us tell you. It's not the time for it."

Robin sniffled, but found the strength to stand, walk around the table, and kneel between the girls. "Please... tell me what you can. I wish to know all about you, my lovely girls."

"But also know that I couldn't be prouder knowing who you are. I have taken much evil from this world, and it soothes my soul to see I've put good into it as well."

Morgan could take no more, almost falling out of her chair and crushing Robin in a tight embrace. No words came from her, as only tears and wails could hope to express her sorrow and relief.

Severa barely held on, even as Robin held Morgan close. "I remember that Kat... no, Severa said you were her cousin, but that's obviously untrue. Let's see... are you Morgan?"

Morgan nodded against his shoulder, still sobbing.

"Then we did choose that name." Robin mumbled, hand running through Morgan's hair. "We almost
went with Morgan the first time, but I see that both names found their bearers all the same."

He looked to Severa and placed a hand on her arm. "Will you not join us, Severa? I wish to know all about you as well."

"Why should I?" Severa snapped. "You've wanted us captured and interrogated from the start, so how do I know anything you do is genuine? It could just be an act."

"You could just be pretending to care about us, so we'll spill the beans on things and send everything off the road."

Robin's hand tightened around her arm. "I... I understand what you mean. But, I swear, that I so dearly wish to know you, to give what you've so plainly desired since you hugged me back in the Ferox arena."

Severa kept her eyes hidden, but Robin felt her begin to shake. "...Swear it."

Robin blinked at the croak of her voice, Morgan pulling away to stare at him wearily. "Yeah... do the oath, that'll prove it."

Robin wondered at what they meant, but a lance of pain brought another memory to him, the first in years. Then, he knew the words.

"I swear on both my name and my blood that what I say is true. No word from my mouth has held a hint of deceit, nor have my gestures been false. All I say and all I do is true as the wind and sure as the storm."

"So says the tactician, who bears the world." Severa and Morgan finished, both sobbing. Morgan dove back into Robin's hold. Severa stood to try and hold herself back.

Robin wrapped an arm around her shoulder. "Let it out, my dear. You're safe here, there's no need to be brave now."

And Severa did, whirling in place and burying her face into Robin's chest, the sisters crying their eyes out at finally seeing their father again, holding him again, speaking to him again.

It was a dream come true, and even the state of their friends was lost in the wave of relief.

Robin held his daughters close with a content smile. While the future they'd come from had doubtlessly been filled with trials beyond anything he'd know, their presence gave him hope.

Perhaps... he was cut out to be a father after all.

Then, a thought hit him.

"So... your mother sent me here, believe it or not. How exactly are we going to explain this to her?"

The sound of boots walking away reminded them of their guest outside, who was doubtlessly off to fulfill his duties.

In other words, tell Chrom.

Severa and Morgan pulled back from their father and gulped, already dreading what was to come. Severa could already hear Lucina screaming at them.

"Severa, what the hell did you do?! Why were there soldiers at the cabin waiting for us! What the
hell are you doing with Robin right this minute!"

Oh, that wasn't Severa's imagination. While they were having that heart to heart, the door had slammed open to reveal a pissed off Lucina and nervously laughing Cynthia, several guards with stoic masks standing behind them.

"Uh oh…"
Lucina was in quite a pickle.

Here they were, in Ylisstol, staring at their friends sobbing into Robin's arms. It was fairly obvious why this tearful embrace had come about, considering the date and reason for Robin being here, but it still irked Lucina to no end!

They'd changed things enough as was, adding their true identities into the mix was bound to make everything awkward and confusing all over again. Not to mention just plain weird.

Yet, they'd been captured by Ylissean troops, right as they came home from a patrol. Not even a chance to put their feet up before Lucina and Cynthia found themselves in a wagon to the great city.

And, only to find this mess.

Lucina didn't know whether to scream or pout.

"Uh… hi, Lucy." Morgan tried, a strained smile on her lips. "We uh… weren't expecting this either."

Everyone could hear Lucina's teeth grind. "No, really? Because it looks like you're having a grand ol' time while everything we've worked so hard for goes to shit!"

Her voice rose to a shout, Morgan cowering behind her sister. Lucina swearing was a rare sight, and it looked like she was about to break her record.

"Lucy, calm down." Severa said. "I can explain this."

Lucina advanced into the room and stared down at Severa, mustering all her anger into a wicked glare. "Please do. Maybe then I won't whup your ass like I did Owain."

Severa shuddered, not liking this Lucina. She'd only shown up once before, when Owain had almost gotten five people killed by trying to be dramatic, but here she was again.

Severa gulped and gave it her best shot. "Well, we were on our way back when the cart ran over a pothole the snow had hidden. Everything went flying and we couldn't salvage the oil. While we were trying to figure out what to do, his carriage came by."

She gestured to Robin, who was keeping quiet and merely observing their conversation.

"We needed the oil, as you well know, so there was little choice but to hitch a ride. Problem is, Cordelia had her first contraction the moment after we arrived, and we got stuck in the holding cells. Then he came in and somehow figured out who we are."

Lucina was unmoved. "So, you're telling me this was all some quirk of fate? That there wasn't another damn way to get that oil? Or am I hearing the tale of a naughty child that doesn't want to admit her godsdammed desires got the best of her?"

Severa snarled, not expecting the insult. "Well excuse me for being found out! How was I supposed to know there was a book that described what brought us here, huh? Or that Cordelia would go into labor the moment we got here?"

Lucina returned the snarl. "And how, pray tell, did you plan on getting out? Last I checked, there's more than a few walls and a couple thousand soldiers here. Those are shitty odds and you know it. A
tactician wouldn't do something so foolish unless she wanted to get caught!"

Severa felt a vein throb in her neck, but Lucina wasn't done. "I'd be less mad if you wouldn't try and justify it! You wanted to meet Robin, you wanted to go home! Stop lying to me damn it, it's only pissing me off!"

Severa reeled back, shock flashing across her face, but Lucina was on a roll now. "I've asked you, time and again, if you wanted to stay in Ylisse! I asked if you wanted to join the Shepherds, but you never committed to anything! I've had to compromise on goals to achieve even a semblance of peace, yet here you are! What was the point of the cabin if you were just going to run off the moment an opportunity appeared?"

"What was the point of asking you anything when all you do is go off on your own, damn that others may feel the same way?!"

The room was silent, Lucina panting after screaming for several minutes. After taking a moment to collect herself, Lucina's face drooped in disappointment. "Severa… I just want everyone to be happy and safe, you know that. It… it breaks my heart that you didn't trust me enough to share your true feelings, especially when I was already considering something."

Severa looked away, shame weighing on her shoulders. Seeing as nothing more would be said, Robin cleared his throat. "Guards, you may return to your posts. I'll take care of this, but make sure the Exalt and his wife join us soon."

The guards saluted and left, Robin ushering the girls into the room. Once inside, he gave everyone a chair before looking at Cynthia. "So… may I ask your true name as well?"

Cynthia frowned, discomfort clear in every fidget. "I… guess, what with the cat out of the bag. My name's Cynthia, I'm Lucy's younger sister. It's uh… nice to see you again, Uncle."

Robin felt very weird being called that, but it was nice in its own way. "So, you're like Morgan then. I guess my family was closer to Chrom's than I ever imagined, but… I'd like to apologize to you two as well. It's only right, though my daughters insist I hold no blame."

Saying that was also strange, but Cynthia gave him a big grin. "It's ok, none of what happened is your fault. We just want to make it so the little ones don't have to go through it."

Robin was touched by the selfless goal, but a knock on the door drew him away. Opening it, he found Nowi staring at him. "I'm guessing you've heard?"

Nowi nodded and brushed past him. "I did, kind of hard not to what with you sobbing, but I did try to stop Freddy at the very least. Couldn't catch him though, running into a suit of armor tends to do that."

Robin allowed a wry grin before grabbing another chair and putting it at the end of the small table. Nowi plopped into it, her head straight and face set in a frown.

"First things first." Nowi began. "Robin, I visited the infirmary. They've already seen to the documents, so I'm officially an aunt. Thank you for that, and Sumia chose a middle name already."

Robin shrugged. "Prisma, I know. I quite like that name, but we'll see how things go."

Nowi rolled her eyes without doing so. "Yes, we will. Now, why on earth do we have time travelers, and all of them my nieces? I don't know about you, but that's strange no matter how you slice it."
Lucina and Severa were still fuming at each other, so Morgan came to the rescue. "We're here because of many reasons. Chief among them being the Risen, more specifically their ruler."

Robin and Nowi's mood darkened. "You mean Grima?"

Morgan nodded, Cynthia spoke next. "Exactly. Almost ten years from now, Grima was resurrected. All that destruction and death… humanity was on its last legs."

"Most of the Shepherds were dead." Morgan whispered, bad memories coming forth. "Only Aunt Lissa was still with us at the time of the ritual and she sacrificed herself to buy us time. Even then, we almost didn't make it."

Robin pressed the heel of his hand to his head. "Everyone? The whole company, gone?"

Morgan and Cynthia nodded, neither willing to speak further.

Silence fell once more, Nowi and Robin unsure of how to proceed. It was clear the past was a very sore subject for all involved, but trying to broach the future was bound to set off one of the older girls.

Instead, Robin went for something he'd been wondering about. "Why, exactly, did you need oil? Call me nosy, but that seems an odd purchase in winter."

The room's mood fell further, if it were possible. Robin swiftly regretted his question, but Severa spoke for the first time since she'd sat down. "The… oil was very special. It was cinnamon and vanilla oil, specifically. We needed them for…"

She trailed off, but Lucina finished. "The anniversary."

Nowi and Robin looked confused. Then the door opened again to admit Chrom, Sumia, Frederick, and little Lucina.

Chrom stared at the gathering with something akin to resignation. "So… that old story was true, huh?"

Lucina didn't look at her father or mother, preferring to stare at the ground. Cynthia did the same. "Lucina, Cynthia," Chrom called, making the girls look up. "Those are your names, correct? May we see if what Frederick says is true?"

Lucina gripped at her collar before standing. "We have little choice, Cynthia. I… I will show the Exalt, you show the Queen."

Cynthia nodded and stood as well, gulping audibly as she approached a stoic Sumia.

Lucina was equally nervous as Chrom walked up to her, almost shaking in fact. In contrast, Chrom remained solid as steel and peered closely at her. "The Brand…" he whispered, words heavy. "Lucina... it is you…"

Sniffles drew the room's attention to Sumia, the woman cradling her infant close while Cynthia buttoned her blouse. "She... she has the Brand as well, and your hair, Chrom. It's... it's true."

Chrom looked between the girls, obviously overwhelmed, until he spotted the weapons that had been confiscated and placed in the hall. At least that mystery was solved, if nothing else.
"You both deserved better." Sumia hiccupped.

Lucina and Cynthia looked to their mother, who was on the verge of tears. "All we left… all we left were a lance and a sword. You deserved gardens, sun-filled days, peaceful nights, and so much more… oh gods…"

Little Lucina began to fuss, not understanding why her mother was so upset. Chrom took the child from Sumia's arms and bounced her gently. After a moment, Chrom walked back to Lucina and held the babe up to her. "See that?"

The child blinked at Lucina before a wide grin stretched across her face and a happy squeal filled the air. Chrom smiled at the sound. "Yes, that's your big sister. Well, biggest sister."

He turned and went to Cynthia, Lucina falling to her knees in disbelief. "This is your other big sister. Aren't you a lucky girl to have two lovely big sisters?"

The infant squealed in glee again, Cynthia unable to give voice to the emotions in her chest.

Chrom chuckled and returned to Sumia, an arm circling his wife's shoulder before looking to their girls. Each was more beautiful than all the stars in the sky or the greatest jewels, and each far more precious at that.

He was glad to know that he wasn't a total failure as a father.

"Welcome home, Lucina, Cynthia." Chrom said. "We're glad to have you here."

Sumia managed a smile through her tears, the droplets freezing and clinking on the ground. "More than we could ever say. Would you… like to join us for a meal? I would love to talk with you."

Lucina and Cynthia didn't know what to do. They'd expected a lot of things, but immediate acceptance? Not in their wildest dreams.

"Don't look so shocked." Chrom chuckled when no answer was forthcoming. "Believe it or not, we've dealt with many strange things. While our daughters traveling through time may be high on the list, it doesn't crack the top three. After all, we were pretty sure you were our children soon after the rebellion."

Sumia giggled, eyes shining with joy as the girls tried to process that. "We'll explain over the meal. I think you've both done enough to deserve one with your family."

Lucina felt a smile rise unbidden, her own joy burning away the fog of disbelief. "I… We would be honored… right, Cynthia?"

Cynthia sobbed and nodded, Sumia putting a tender hand on her shoulder that only made Cynthia cry harder.

Robin clearing his throat brought the family back from their own little world. "Pardon me, for I do not wish to break such a tender scene, but I assume we'll be keeping this quiet? I don't think we'd want the others going on a hunt should their own children now roam this world."

Chrom glanced amongst his family before nodding. "That is likely for the best. We can sort out details later. For now, I wish to dine with my family. I'll leave your daughters to you, Robin, but try and hold off on informing Cordelia until she's recovered a bit."

Robin smiled and waved as the Exalt took Lucina's hand and led her from the room, Sumia doing the
same with Cynthia. Once they were gone, Frederick walked up to Nowi. "I believe it would be best if we gave the families some space the next few days."

"Agreed," Nowi said as she stood. "Robin, we'll keep the others from learning of this or bothering you for the next few days. After that though, we'll want to know our nieces."

Robin chuckled. "Yes-yes, I'll make sure of it. Good day you two, we'll speak later."

Nowi grinned and left, Frederick barely a step behind. Once they were gone, Robin took a vacated chair and looked at his daughters. "So... may I ask what that anniversary Lucina mentioned is?"

Severa groaned, not wanting to get even more mushy. "You can, but that doesn't mean we'll answer."

"Well, she won't," Morgan quipped. "I will though. I feel like you deserve to know, ya know? Maybe it's just a way of getting it off my chest, but that doesn't matter."

She waited for Robin to give her a nod before starting. "The reason for the oil is because that was what you and Mom always used. It was your favorite scent and Mom loved wearing it, so we were always around it. But, after everything went south, the oil was incredibly rare. We only had two small jars of the stuff between us."

Severa decided to pitch in. "Every year, around the time we first got the news you wouldn't be coming back, we'd take some twigs and soak them in the oil. Just the tips, but it was enough for us to light and pray. It was a reminder of happier days... of why we kept fighting."

And why they wore the scent now, though that fact went unspoken.

"You should have seen our faces when we found the new jars." Morgan said with a forced laugh. "Gods, the stuff was priceless, but here it's only thirty gold. We blew almost all our funds on those jars."

Robin closed his eyes, a thought coming to him. "How about... I get you replacements?"

"Don't you dare." Severa growled, a twitch of pain darkening her face. "That is our ritual, no one else's. Even though you're technically our father, I will not let anyone take it from us. Not the smallest bit."

Robin felt a pang of sadness shoot through his breast. Was this what it was like to be... shut out by one's own? If it was, he certainly wasn't looking forward to little Severa's teenage years.

Many of the parents among the guards swore those years were the worst.

Regardless, Robin still smiled. "Then at least let me compensate you for the loss. Don't think of it as me paying for the oil, more as an apology for being such a... distrustful man when you had nothing but good intentions."

Severa leaned back with a huff. "That's what you're supposed to be. Heaven knows I don't trust easy."

"Nor is she all that honest." Morgan quipped again. "Though, I think we've taken enough of your time. We'll stick around, I can tell you'll want us to, but please go see to your real daughter. I have no doubt she misses her father already."

Robin's heart ached at the resignation in Morgan's voice. Did they truly believe that he considered
little Severa his only daughter, after hearing all that and seeing the normally stoic Lucina break down in tears?

"I will go see to her, as you say." Robin said as he stood. "But I will send for you both to meet Cordelia tomorrow."

He strode for the door but paused after opening it. A deep breath filled his lungs before he looked back and smiled at the girls.

"After all, she'll be so excited to learn we gained three daughters today, not just one. It makes today so bright, I fear it a dream that will disappear."

With that, he was gone, the girls left in utter shock at his unspoken offer.

"Morg?"

"Yeah, Sev?"

Severa looked to her sister, clearly unsure. "Did… did Dad just ask us to move in with them?"

Morgan nodded slowly. "I think so… it's just…"

She groaned. "I finally found drapes I liked, do we have to move?"

Severa sighed and put her feet up. "Frankly, it wouldn't surprise me."

"We both know what happens when Mom and Dad get their mind set on something."

-Morning-

Cordelia had known nothing but darkness since she'd gone to sleep. Exhaustion stole her body's ability to dream or to think, nothing but a black slate worth noticing for who knew how long.

Then, a line of light appeared, and Cordelia stirred, eyes opening blearily to find a faint beam of light falling through the infirmary's window. "Oh… it's morning I guess."

She reached up and rubbed her eyes, her vision clearing enough to look around. "Where's… Severa?"

"Right here," Someone said, the voice on Cordelia's right. "She's a really sound sleeper, you lucky woman."

Cordelia looked over and smiled when she saw Lissa, a bundle of pink in her arms. "Is… that so? Well, then I should be thankful she inherited Robin's sleeping habits."

Lissa giggled and passed the infant to Cordelia when she held out her arms. "I'm curious to see what her eyes look like. Lucina has the brand in hers to go with Chrom's eyes, so maybe Severa got yours? Kind of like a happy mixture."

Cordelia grinned and trailed a knuckle down Severa's cheek, marveling at the smooth skin. "That would be nice… but I can't help but feel it'd make Severa and Lucina complain about not having matching features."

Lissa giggled again and shook her head. "Maybe, who knows? I'm just glad that the birth went well, Sumia's was a real scare half-way through."
Cordelia hummed as the memory returned. Sumia had been doing well when the strain had made her lose control of her powers. It was only Chrom's voice and the combined might of every healer in the palace that kept Lucina from freezing in the womb.

Maybe that was the reason the little girl's hair was grey?

A whimper drew Cordelia back to her bundle of joy, the infant stirring. "So, I assume she needs to eat?"

"That she does." Lissa confirmed. "Most of them get their first feeding soon after they're born, but you two fell right asleep. Just hold her to your breast, stroke her hands and feet, and stay relaxed. She'll do the rest."

Cordelia did as instructed, reveling in the warmth of her child before hearing the doors open to admit her other favorite human. "Good morning, Robin."

Robin's smile was radiant, her husband walking to the cot and taking a seat. "I'm glad to see you both up. You deserved all that rest and more."

Cordelia chuckled, but Lissa cleared her throat. "Well, this is nice, but I'm going to give you both a quick summary of what to do next. I know we've gone over it before, but better to be safe."

Robin and Cordelia paid rapt attention as Lissa gave her instructions, Cordelia looking away briefly when she felt Severa's lips find their goal. Then she stared, surprise etched on her face. "Um, Lissa? They don't open their eyes for a little while, right?"

"No, they can open them whenever they like." Lissa answered, peering over to look at Severa. "Oh… that's not something you see every day."

Robin looked too and frowned. "She… has two eye colors."

And, the infant did. Severa's right eye looked to hold a multitude of colors on a white background, just like Robin, while her left was a shining red that could only come from Cordelia.

"Miriel had a name for this." Lissa mumbled as Severa continued to suckle. "It was long and fancy, but it basically means your daughter has two separate colors, one for each eye. Don't worry, it's nothing serious, just a cosmetic difference."

Cordelia breathed a sigh of relief, but she noticed Robin frown. "Something wrong?"

Robin worked his jaw silently before setting his gaze on Lissa. "Would you mind giving us some time alone? I'd like to be with them before all the madness starts."

Lissa was more than willing to grant that request, but she was a little unsettled by Robin's somber face. It was like he was about to share some dark secret.

Once she was gone, Robin held up his hand and summoned a wolf. "Go get them, it's time."

The wolf bowed and flashed away, Cordelia growing more worried the longer the silence stretched. "Robin… what's going on?"

Robin sighed and leaned on his knees. "Well… I went and got answers yesterday, as you asked. Thing is, I believe those answers would be better served coming from the source."

Cordelia had only a moment to process that before the door opened and two familiar faces entered.
"Katarina? Tethys? Robin, what's going on?"

Robin waved the girls forward and they took a seat by the cot, Cordelia ever more confused. What were these two doing here?

"Cordy," Robin began, "I need you to listen until I'm done. It's a bit of a story."

Cordelia nodded slowly and Robin relaxed. Looks like she'd picked up on how serious he was. "Cordelia, these two have been using false names since we met them. They're not Katarina and Tethys, or cousins for that matter."

He pointed to Morgan. "This is Morgan, the younger sister."

Morgan smiled nervously, a little wave her only response.

"This," Robin continued, "is… Severa, the elder sister."

Cordelia's eyes narrowed, she gave both girls a closer look and then her jaw dropped. "Robin… does this mean what I think it means? Or are you dropping a load of horse-plop on me like that time you tried to remodel the kitchen?"

Morgan and Severa snorted, clearly amused, but Robin was serious as death. "Cordy… these are… well they're our daughters, both of them. The Severa here beside me and the one in your arms are the same."

Cordelia gave him a look that showed just how batty she thought that claim was.

"Severa, show her."

Severa rolled her eyes but turned and lifted her cloak and shirt, the Grimleal brand standing prominently on her back.

Cordelia's eyes sharpened, and she unwrapped little Severa, the same brand in the exact spot as the young woman next to her.

"There's no way." Cordelia muttered, confusion clear. "Unless… gods damn it, that book was true."

She sighed as realization set in. "Morgan, right? Do you also have a brand?"

Morgan nodded and unbuttoned her shirt, opening it to show the brand between her breasts. "That I do. I'm… kind of surprised you aren't in deeper denial."

Cordelia shook her head, a small smile on her face. "Dear, I tried to kill my husband in a fit of self-loathing and rage before proposing to him in front of the altar of an ancient god. My children coming back in time is not the strangest thing to happen to me."

She looked to the girls, smile widening. "That does explain why you're in color. I'm… sad that we've had to meet like this without falsehood between us, but I'm still glad to see we weren't complete failures as parents."

"Our greatest success sits beside me after all, and I'm sure our little one will love her sisters as much as we love all three of you."

Morgan held in a squeal of joy, but Severa's sour voice darkened the mood. "Why the hell are you all so accepting? Lucy and Cynthia got accepted immediately, and now us? Why the hell are you guys just taking this in stride? How can you say you love us just as much as that baby when you've
Robin smiled and wrapped his arm around Cordelia. "Severa… I don't think you quite get how parenthood works. Though you two may not have come from us as we are, you are still our daughters. That doesn't change, no matter the time or place you find yourselves."

"It's as he says." Cordelia said, voice gentle. "I have loved the child in my arms from the moment I knew she was coming. I have loved you two, though I did not know it, since you left us two years ago after the rebellion. Today is a miracle, and I would ask that you come greet your sister and be greeted in turn."

"You're no longer alone. You're part of our family, whether you believe it or not, and that means more than the world to us."

Morgan shot forward but was careful of her younger sister while she embraced Cordelia. Severa sat back, disbelief clear, so Robin came around and wrapped his arms around her. "It's alright to feel happy. I know I could never hope to understand your struggles, but I want to give you some vestige of the joy you've been denied."

As Severa returned the embrace, Robin felt his heart ease. The previous day's stress and worry were replaced with relief and anticipation.

He had a feeling that, no matter the omens the girls' presence brought, the times ahead would be bright.

-Four Years Later-

And so four more years passed in joy and jubilation.

Lucina and Cynthia were welcomed into the palace and royal family with little fanfare, the pair not wanting the rumor of other exalted descendants to rise amongst the populace. But, while they stayed with their parents for two years, enjoying much of the love and joy they'd long missed, it eventually came time to return to the cabin.

The tot-sized versions were less than happy to see their big sisters leave, but neither little Lucina nor little Cynthia knew the true identities of their elder counterparts. That would come later.

At the very least, it was not a permanent parting. Lucina had been gladly inducted into the Shepherds, her steady presence turning the small party into a formidable peace-keeping force, more specialized than the Ylissean military.

Cynthia, in turn, joined the Pegasus Knights, fulfilling her childhood dream. Her skill with both lance and tome soon saw her promoted to squad leader, where her natural charisma and leadership turned her into Cordelia's second-in-command, sharing the title of Lieutenant with Dalila.

Eris didn't want to be higher than Captain, so she was glad to see Cynthia get that job.

Severa and Morgan were no less active after they'd been brought into the fold. The family would, when gathered together, perform their favorite songs well into the night. It was quite a surprise to Robin and Cordelia to find both girls were talented at music, Morgan a gifted pianist while Severa was blessed with great vocal abilities.

It certainly explained why the younger Severa had such powerful lungs, as demonstrated whenever the little girl was startled or upset.
As for jobs, Morgan took over as Captain of the Pegasus Knights in Felds so she spent her days training recruits, giving reports to Cordelia and Robin, and training. Her free time was spent with family, friends, or in town.

Severa had taken on an apprenticeship with Robin, her time spent studying tactics, challenging Robin to games, training with Cordelia, Morgan, or Lucina, and composing in secret.

She wasn’t quite confident enough to share just yet.

For them, those same two years were bliss before they moved back to the cabin. Little Severa and the infant Morgan were just as upset as their royal friends to see the elder girls leave, but they didn’t know of the connection they held either.

Thankfully, visits from Nowi and Frederick with their daughter, Nah, cheered the little girls right up.

In fact, the four years saw every couple amongst the Shepherds bring children into the world. The parents would share stories of humorous escapades and trade advice every few months at their reunions, the children eventually joining them where the party would become one giant game.

None grew content though. With the presence of the future children, Robin and Chrom became more aware of threats both domestic and abroad, Gaius and his network constantly brought new troubling information.

One subject began to appear constantly a few months after the girls joined the halidom, one that had both families and friends worried.

The country of Valm had been expanding rapidly, conquering their neighbors one after the next through force or capitulation. Then, two years after the first reports arrived, they received word of a fleet being built, it's purpose clear.

Invasion.

With that news in hand, Ylisse and Ferox did all they could to strengthen their defenses and study their enemy. It was unlikely they'd be able to stem the tide completely, not if the number of ships was accurate, but it at least gave them hope and something to start with.

And thus, it was here, in his home, that Robin found himself giving chase to the naked rear of his youngest, the little ball of scarlet hair and energy screaming about not wanting a bath.

Robin rounded the corner and damn near slammed into a mountain of steel. "Gods Catherine, make noise why don't you!"

The helmed knight had an air of amusement about her before pointing into the room. "I believe your daughter has been caught, milord, as has her partner in crime."

Robin leaned to the side and laughed when he found Morgan and Nah stacked atop each other and held by Nowi and Evelyn. Stahl and Frederick were outside getting the carriage and horses ready, so Robin was helping with the children.

Well, attempting to, they were nimbler than their size belied.

"Thank you both." Robin said as he passed by Catherine. "I'll take Morgan and Nah out back. Mark and Severa are already finished, so why don't you help those two get themselves in order?"

Evelyn nodded and handed over a giggling Nah, an equally giddy Morgan going to Robin a moment
"You'd think they wouldn't be this excited. We saw Kjelle and Inigo not two weeks ago."

"Oh, you know them," Nowi laughed, taking her cane back from Catherine. "They'd be this giddy if they hadn't seen their friends in an hour. Heaven knows Severa's been going on and on about seeing Lucina and Cynthia again."

Evelyn couldn't argue with that. "Fair point, Nowi. Come on, we should make sure they don't get their clothes confused again."

Nowi laughed and followed the general, Catherine right behind as always. Robin looked to the two little girls and gave his best teasing frown. "Now why would you not want a bath, girls? Surely you don't want the tubs to get lonely?"

The gasps he received showed the girls hadn't thought of that. With his victory assured and the girls limp with childish remorse, Robin placed them under his arms and carried them through the manor like firewood.

Opening the back door, Robin sidestepped an eager little boy sporting green hair and wrapped in a towel. "Oh, I thought he was upstairs already."

Dismissing the thought, Robin sauntered towards the small creek that ran through the land, Cordelia seated under the shade of an apple tree. Next to her were several tubs and basins, the water inside steaming merrily.

"Good, you got them." Cordelia said as Robin walked up. "Come you two, the sooner you bathe, the sooner we can get to the party."

Morgan and Nah moaned and groaned, but a glare from Cordelia tamed them. Handing the children to his wife, Robin stretched. "We should be ready in about an hour, right?"

Cordelia nodded as she put Morgan in one of the tubs. "If everything's on time, yes. We're going to Marley's, right?"

"Where else do we go?" Robin asked. "It's not my fault they're the only ones willing to bare the property damage."

Cordelia chuckled as Nah splashed around in her tub. "We compensate them generously and you know it. Go and check on Severa and Mark, you may need to save them from Nowi."

Robin leaned in and pecked her cheek before going back to the manor, his feet following the path upstairs unbidden. By the sounds of it, Nowi and Evelyn were using Mark as a model for various clothes, the wonder of being the only boy amongst the three families, so Robin went to Severa's room.

A knock later he found his little girl flat on her back, feet in the air, all tangled up in ribbon. "Severa… what happened?"

"Mr. Ribbon won't listen to Severa." The little girl cried. "Severa just want pigtails!"

Robin had to hold back a laugh. Why Severa insisted on using the third person when referring to herself, he didn't know. "Well, why don't I help you convince Mr. Ribbon to listen? I'm sure he'll help if we work together."

Severa lit up and let Robin untangle her and straighten her frilly dress. At the very least, the little girl was able to dress herself just fine, so she usually just needed help with her hair.
Robin had done said hair many, many times ever since she'd had enough to style it. As such, he gave a childish explanation to the ribbon that Severa was more than happy to add to before he began to weave the lace through her hair.

In fact, he had enough material to tie the tails in place and make small ornaments in the field of lavender, Severa giggling at the golden curls he'd made. "Thanks Daddy!"

"Anything for you my darling girl."

Severa stood from the stool she'd been on and wrapped her little arms around Robin, not quite able to reach all the way around. "I love you, Daddy. Severa know one day she'll beat you at the game, then Daddy proud."

Robin pulled his daughter close, a dreamy haze in his eyes. "I'm already proud of you, Severa. I'm proud of both you and your sister."

"I always will be."

With that, he ended the embrace and took Severa's hand. "Come along, we should go see how your uncles are doing. Heaven knows what we'll find if they're left alone."

"Lots of cheese!" Severa gleefully cried, hitting her uncles' guilty pleasure on the head. Robin wasn't sure when the two of them had become such connoisseurs of cheese, but living in a region known for bread and cattle probably helped that along.

Regardless, they exited the manor to find two carriages ready to go. One was for Robin and his family, ducal perks, while the other was for Frederick and Stahl's families. It was pretty obvious which was which considering one had Robin's family seal slapped across the doors.

"Frederick, Stahl!" Robin called to his friends, the knights turning from the horses to greet him.

"We're almost ready to go." Stahl said when Robin and Severa were closer. "Really, all we need are the kids and ladies."

Frederick patted one of the horse's sides. "These beasts are quite impatient too. Looking forward to thier oats when we reach the palace no doubt."

Severa giggled and reached for the horses. "Horsies! Daddy, can Severa go on ride when we get back?"

"You'll have to ask your mother dear." Robin said. "For now, why don't we get inside? I don't think we'll be waiting much longer and you know what that means."

Severa's mismatched eyes lit up. "Lucy and Cynthy! Oh, Severa can't wait to see them, and I know Morgy can't wait too!"

Robin smiled wide, noises from the manor making him look to see the rest of his family and friends making their way towards the carriages.

The sight branded itself into his mind with his next words.

"I have no doubt that we're all eager, my child. Today is a day of celebration, after all."

-Night-

And what a celebration it was.
The trip had been made in peace and comfort, the families calling tales and jokes between the carriages as they rode to Ylisstol. Once there, they were taken to Marley's and greeted by an enthusiastic crowd of Shepherds and children, little Lucina blurring through the crowd and crashing into Severa like a ram.

From there, they moved the party inside and began to eat, drink, and make merry. The children screamed, yelled, laughed, and played as enthusiastically as their parents, each one a spark of life amongst the steadier flames that tended them.

Then came the time for gifts, where little Kjelle and Inigo were placed at a table and given many things to celebrate their third years. Almost all were toys or clothes or something that made the small children squeal.

The Shepherds knew they spoiled their children rotten, but they did so anyway. Especially since Inigo and Kjelle were miracles. Sully had been rendered nearly barren after the Plegian War. Olivia hadn't been sure she'd be able to have children after an incident before she met the Shepherds.

Regardless, the children eventually ran out of energy and fell asleep, Nowi volunteered to keep an eye on them while the adults caught up. That soon dissolved into yet another famous Shepherd’s Brawl though, but no one could say it wasn't an absolute blast.

Then a panicked man in full armor slammed the door open and ran right up to Gaius. "Sir Gaius, I received word from one of your men on the coast! It's an emergency!"

Gaius sobered instantly, stopping his drunken song. "What happened?"

The man leaned in close, Gaius growing ever dourer with each word. Once the man was done, Gaius dismissed him and turned to find Chrom and Robin.

"The fleet has launched." Gaius said, those words making everyone bolt upright. "They'll be at our shore in barely two months. One and a half if they get good winds."

The room was silent. They'd been preparing for this, drafting plans and coming up with counter attacks since the moment they knew about the fleet. Yet, as they looked to their children, some small part of their minds wished that Valm would stay where they were and let peace continue to reign. So much for wishful thinking.

"You all know what to do," Chrom said eventually. "Gather your families and take them to their havens. I will make a formal announcement in two days."

Sumia stood and joined her husband. "I'll call together our forces and rush all current orders. Meet at the agreed place and time."

The Shepherds bowed to their Exalt and began to gather their children in a storm of mutters and whispers. Chrom and Sumia retrieved the slumbering Lucina and Cynthia before leaving the restaurant, making swift plans for Lon'qu and Olivia to inform Ferox before disappearing into the night.

Robin and Cordelia were the last to leave Marley's Grill, the pair wishing to let their girls lay in blissful rest for as long as they could. Thankfully, the girls still slept as they were carried to the carriage and the family left Ylisstol.

"I heard the news just now," Jennifer said as she materialized in the carriage, shifting to Emmeryn a moment later. "Chrom and Sumia have already begun drafting announcements and orders."
Robin nodded, Cordelia took the construct's hand. "Thank you for telling us, Emmeryn. We'll talk more once we've returned, but please, be with your family tonight. Heaven knows it's the last opportunity we'll have for some time."

Emmeryn sighed and disappeared. She'd revealed herself to Cordelia after the time travelers revealed themselves. At that point, Cordelia just threw up her hands and said 'to hell with it', welcoming the former Exalt with amused exasperation that left Emmeryn in stitches.

Now though, they were silent as the carriage rumbled down a different path than normal. Instead of making for Felds, they'd turned towards Grevis, the trunks under the seats bumped louder the longer the silence went on.

They'd agreed, after many long arguments, that the girls would stay with Cordelia's parents in the event of war. Being the meticulous people they were, everything the girls would need for a long stay had been packed into the carriage and made ready to go at a moment's notice.

A moment like now, sad as it was.

"It'll be the first time they wake up without us, Nowi, or Evelyn to greet them." Cordelia whispered a few hours into the trip. "I can't even bear to imagine their faces."

Robin pulled her into a hug, melancholy hovering in the carriage like a fog. "It is for them we must leave. If they are to grow and know every joy and failing of life as they should, then we must leave to fight. We... we won't fail them again."

Cordelia knew what he meant and turned her mind to their elder daughters. What would they make of this news?

And... what would they think about going to war once more?

-Big Severa, Two Hours Later-

The knock on the door came hard and loud, the noise jolting Severa awake. By the looks of things, she'd fallen asleep at her desk again. Lucina's cloak was cast over her as a blanket.

Severa stood with a yawn and stumbled towards the door. "Who could it be at this hour?"

Another hard knock made her wince, but she was able to unlatch the door with a minimum of fumbling and open it to a surprise. "Uncle Frederick? What are you doing here so late, did the carriage lose a wheel or something?"

Frederick's stoic gaze was nothing new, but it held a hint of sadness that set Severa on edge. "I have come to inform you of a new report. Valm's fleet has launched and will be here in two months. We go to war, dear niece, and we will need all the hands we have to see it end."

Severa felt the floor fall under her feet, Frederick's hand shooting out to steady her. "I know it's been long expected, but your reaction is all too close to my own. I had my fill of war with Plegia, but if the Valmese desire the destruction of my family, then I shall fight."

"...As will I." Severa mumbled, hands clenched tight. "I've finally remembered what happiness and joy are, like hell I'm letting some godsdamn country with delusions of grandeur take that from me or anyone else."

Frederick looked damn proud. "Then I look forward to sharing the field with you. Go, tell the others, I must hurry home and prepare Nah's care."
Severa nodded and embraced Frederick before he disappeared down the path. Once he was gone, she stepped onto the porch and looked to the stars.

*I can feel it... this weight in my gut, the shivers down my spine. It's just like it was before Grima came back. There's danger ahead and it's on me to navigate it.*

A deep breath calmed the raging sea her mind was becoming, if only for now. By the looks of it, her apprenticeship was officially over.

Now, she'd be one of the Shepherds, deciding the fate of nations with her tactics alongside Robin and the royals.

Joy.

With that, she set her mind on what they knew: maps and strategies flying through her thoughts as she returned to the house and went to rouse the others.

At the same time, many leagues away, Robin and Cordelia tearfully gave their children to Rodrick and Diana, the parents kissing their daughters one last time before forcing themselves back into the carriage and onto the road.

The last image they had of their little ones were their creased brows in the light of a lantern; Miriel's old discovery of that strange rock found use as a vastly superior light force. It meant they could see their children clearly.

Yet, that light only broke the hearts of the departing pair. Their children in the arms of grandparents, cases left upon the ground, despair heavy in the air, and no guarantee the smiles of that afternoon would ever return.

All cursed the existence of war that night… all save for the boats bearing the invaders, their hulls creaking and groaning like damned souls upon the waves of the sea.

And in their wake followed the baleful red eyes of demons, their plan proceeding beautifully.

Now it was time to begin the game, where only one of two outcomes would come to pass.

Renewal or ruin.

And the demons knew quite well which they preferred.
Battle of the Harbor

The call to war was met with a resounding roar of forges and the thunder of boots, every willing Ylissean traveling to the cities to join the military. The foresight of Robin and Chrom saw that every large town held a military barracks, stables, offices, and smiths galore.

Thus, when new recruits were taken into the barracks, they were swiftly organized, equipped, and trained under the careful eye of old soldiers chosen for their ability to teach war.

The regular forces were also martialed and began the march to Ferox, further intelligence marking the great Port Halzac as the invasion force's landing point. A grand parade was even held in Ylisstol to bid the royals farewell.

Robin was just glad everything had gone smoothly. While it was quite a sight to see men and women dressed in resplendent silver plate and chainmail, trimmed with the regalia of knight orders, it was a relief to know all their finances were in order to support this army.

"Yo, Rob, you thinkin' on something?"

Robin glanced up from the ground, Lissa was staring at him. "Nothing much, just glad the parade went well. Real morale boost."

Lissa chuckled and shrugged, a halo joining her usual robes. "Well, we all got new gear, it'd be wrong not to show it off. How else are the people going to know how great we are?"

Robin smiled and fiddled with his cloak. The old thing was still in good condition, but he'd gotten some leather padding added to the interior just in case, "Well, I guess that's true. I just wonder if what we have is enough, you heard that last report."

Lissa hummed. "So what if they have, like, 200,000 soldiers in the whole fleet? We have almost 50,000 and I bet they're all worth ten Valmese!"

"I can only hope so," Robin sighed as he looked to the line of soldiers stretching into the distance. "It'll be six months before the next round of recruits are ready and another six before the ones after that. We only have ten armies to their forty, as it stands."

The flap of wings interrupted them, Minerva settling to the earth right as Cherche hopped off and joined the conversation. "They can't land all those forces at once. I remember telling the war council that the Valmese require time to unload their mounts before they become effective."

"Yes, you did." Robin groaned as Lissa greeted her friend. "And so did Virion. We're aware of their abilities and it is why we have Flavia and Basilio seeing to the port. The question isn't so much if they'll send a vanguard, as you've mentioned in our meetings, but how big it'll be."

Cherche nodded, giggling at Lissa's grimace. "We'll do what we can, that's all you should be worrying about. Besides, every soldier here is far better equipped than the Valmese footmen, so we will simply overcome quantity with quality."

Robin stared at the pair before laughing. "You two are pretty simple minded when it comes to stuff like this. Makes me wonder how Gerome and Owain will turn out when they're older."

"Owain's my boy, that's for sure!" Lissa crowed, ever willing to talk about her son. "And he has the best dad a boy could ask for, why wouldn't he be the best when he grows up?"
Cherche shushed her. "That's enough, Lissa. I love Gerome just as much as you love Owain but let them choose. I believe they could be quite the gentlemen or scholars should they will it."

"Not with how much Gerome loves Minerva." Lissa grumbled. "Takes to swinging an axe like a fish to water, too."

Robin cleared his throat before the argument could start up again. The pair were normally the picture of friendship, as were most of the Shepherds, but they'd started having disagreements on what they should do as the children got older. "Regardless, we still have stuff to do. Cherche, let me say that I'm beyond glad your idea worked out, it's made mobilization much easier."

Cherche bowed her head. At first, no one had thought about creating a formal wyvern knight order, on account of their use by Plegia, but Cherche had other ideas. After much arguing, threatening, negotiating, and lots of stress relief with Vaike, it happened.

The first Ylissean Wyvern Knight Regiment was established with Cherche as the inaugural commander.

Considering the many wyverns and pegasoi that now shared the skies above them, Cherche's work had paid off brilliantly.

"I should probably get going." Lissa sighed. "Heaven knows I'll get in trouble if Frederick doesn't see my mug helping."

Robin had one more thing to add. "Cherche, go ahead to the port and join the others, we should be good here."

Cherche nodded and hugged Lissa before they left. Robin watched them depart before glancing wistfully to the air, flutishly searching for a familiar plume of red.

Curse having to watch over the bulk of our forces. I wanted to go with the vanguard like most of the Shepherds, but no, I am required to be here and smooth over every hiccup and ruffled feather.

Thank the heavens for Severa, I'd fear more for the others were she not there.

Robin scratched at the scar on his neck before strolling into the mass of humanity below, already knowing he'd have far too much to do in far too little time.

-Severa-

"Auntie, I really need to go over these plans, is this really the best time?"

Severa's question made Nowi laugh, the manakete tapping the ground with her cane. "You've been at those maps since you woke up. Even skipped breakfast from what Morgan told me, so I'm here to have a talk with you."

"What, exactly, do we need to talk about?" Severa sighed, leaning back in her chair. "I've already told you all the stories I had these last few years and everyone's agreed on the plans."

Nowi grinned, milky eyes staring at Severa. "Well, I wanted to ask you about something I've been curious about. See, I've been able to use my partial-sight while away from Frederick, as you know, but I noticed something while I was practicing."

Severa didn't like that grin. "What are you up to?"

Nowi looked far too smug. "Nothing, just sharing. So, I noticed that the couples I run across have a
kind of string tying them together. I knew it was couples because I saw one with me and Freddy and the others, but you know how everything's metaphor for me."

Severa really didn't like where this was going.

"The thing is, the strings weren't always the same thickness. New couples and those close to a break-up were thin, but those that were either in love or happily married had thick lines. Trust me, I've been around enough people to know, so, as to what I wanted to ask…"

Nowi leaned forward and crossed her arms, grin widening. "Why is it that I see a string between you and Lucina?"

Severa's eyes widened and she flailed in surprise. "W-what?! What does that have to do with anything? And how do you know you didn't see, like, a spider web or something?"

Nowi's face went blank. "Honey, you know I can't see anything like that. Besides, your string with her is the brightest shade of red I've seen. Even your parents, the happiest pair I've met, only have a gold thread."

"How's that a ranking?" Severa groused, looking away. "Look, that's something we've kept quiet on for years now, we agreed to leave it for time to sort out. There's nothing to talk about."

Nowi frowned and scooted closer to Severa. "Sev, take this from someone who's lived a long time and almost let something wonderful slip from her grasp. We are going to war and there's no guarantee that we'll come out of it whole. You need to get this off your chest or you'll live with regret all your life."

"I know that!" Severa snapped, hand gripping her cloak. "I was in a war before I came here, remember? I know what I'm doing."

Nowi's frown deepened, but Severa turned back to her maps. "Well, if you say so. I just want you to know that I'm here, willing to talk like always. I wouldn't be an aunt if I couldn't do that much, right?"

Severa didn't answer so Nowi excused herself and left the tent. Outside was the usual cacophony of noise, thus their ability to talk privately, but Nowi was long used to the crowds and weaved through easily with the aid of her cane.

Truly, she'd never seen this many well-armed and armored soldiers in one place. Sure, the elites would always show up decked in steel, but even the common spearman had no less than a full chain suit with leather underneath. Truly, Chrom had chosen well when he'd made Robin Grandmaster of Ylisse, and Sumia was better at logistics than anyone gave her credit for.

That, and Nowi had systematically removed every spy and snake from the bureaucracy over the last four years. Now only competent people ran things, no matter their birth station, and the kingdom flourished.

The wonders of what she dubbed 'true sight'… and Gaius's connections.

Regardless, Nowi had a feeling the Valmese would be in for a surprise, especially with the Shepherd's first-hand accounts of their tactics and strategies. Should the fleet commander be dogmatic, this would be easy no matter the difference in number.

The problem was what they'd do after that. Surprise only worked once, after all.
"Nowi! Chrom needs you, said he had an argument that needs your advice!"

Nowi sighed and turned to find a figure of earth marching towards her, his steps loud. "Got ya, Kellam. What's going on, if I may ask?"

"The usual junk." Kellam answered, casually lifting several large crates in one arm and slinging a barrel under the other. "We got a volunteer in that's proven to be pretty skilled, but she's demanding to take over as her regiment's commander."

Nowi groaned and pinched her nose. "I'm guessing she came out of Ferox?"

Kellam's smile said it all. "Thing is, she got assigned to Sully's regiment. I've already talked Sully out of beating the girl black and blue, but Chrom wants to know if she's trustworthy to take on a lesser role. Ask me, it's like looking at a younger Sully in heavier plate."

Nowi tilted her head, intrigued. "Alright, lead the way. If we've got someone that passionate, maybe something good will come down the road."

"Or abject disaster." Gaius sighed as he materialized from Kellam's shadow. "Hot heads aren't good commanders outside squads, and this girl seems to think physical strength is everything."

Nowi ignored the startled shouts of the soldiers, long used to Gaius's entrances. "Remind Maribelle to make you stop doing that. I remember more than one time you'd show up to get Brady from his play-dates and scare him to tears."

Gaius scratched his head. "Force of habit darling, can't help it. But yeah, I need you to lead me to the big cheese too, I can't find him in this mess."

Kellam shrugged and put down his load. "I guess we still haven't gotten everything quite organized yet. First mobilization in more than twenty years… yeah, this shouldn't surprise anyone."

He turned and started through the crowd again, his companions following in the wake of his bulk. Everyone recognized them, they were Shepherds after all, but they only returned greetings to their friends.

It was rather hilarious seeing Tharja forced to hold up an idol while Libra did his preaching to some of the soldiers, but she'd bear with it to please her husband. How else did that pair run an orphanage and take care of little Noire?

Regardless, after a lot of walking, they arrived at the largest tent in camp, officers of every shape and size coming and going. They could already hear shouting, and Nowi knew a pissed-off Sully when she heard it.

"You haven't led shit girly! Don't think you can come in here and demand my position if all you've done is beat off a pack of Risen!"

Kellam pushed the tent flap aside and Nowi beheld the gathering. There was Sully, her form raging magma, along with Chrom who resembled a statue of steel. Oh, it looked like Maribelle and Stahl were in too if the mass of saplings and raging storm cloud meant anything.

"Nowi, thank you for coming." Chrom sighed when he saw her. "These two have been arguing for a while, would you mind giving your thoughts?"

Nowi glanced to the other girl in the tent, glowering at Sully based on what she could see. Her body was reminiscent of fertile earth with crags of magma flowing over it.
Ah dang, it's another one. Kjelle, why are you arguing with your mother?

A fun note was that Nowi now knew what the strange combinations she saw meant. When the royals had first shown her Lucina, Nowi had seen the infant as a delicate piece of ice, but with bones and a heart of steel. Then, when she'd seen Severa, the girl was a bright font of lightning with a gentle flame burning within her chest. And... something dark that she dare not mention.

In other words, the children of those with the auras of unique individuals would have a combination thereof. It was how she'd confirmed the presence of the future children when the older Lucina and Severa matched their smaller selves.

For the curious, Morgan burned like coal with arcs of lightning racing along her skin. Cynthia shone with steel skin and a heart of clear ice that turned the steel to a rainbow.

How poetic.

A cleared throat snapped Nowi back to reality. "Oh, uh, sorry, just thinking."

She looked to the gathering before guiding herself to Chrom and leaning next to him. "Chrom... um, that's one of Lucy's friends. I think it's Kjelle, based on what I'm seeing."

Chrom's eyes widened. The children hadn't wanted to reveal their true natures until their friends were found, but searches had come up empty. Until now, it seemed. "I see, what should we do?"

"Probably ask Lucy." Nowi whispered. "In the meantime, keep her distracted. Don't want her running if she suspects something."

Chrom smirked. "Sounds like a plan. Sully, take this volunteer to the training yards, have Ricken sort her out. If she can't beat him, there's no place for her here."

Sully had a downright wicked smile on her face, but Kjelle only growled. If Nowi had to guess, Ricken wasn't much of a threat back in the future, so this was bound to be fun. "I'll follow them, I need to speak with Marth anyway. She should be there as well."

Recognition, that seals it. Oh, I can't wait to see this, she needs to get taken down a peg from what I can tell.

Chrom gave his permission for everyone to leave, Nowi following Sully and Kellam out of the tent while the others started talking with Chrom. It looked like Kjelle had barged in and interrupted them.

"You are blind."

Nowi blinked before looking over, Kjelle's outline facing her. "Oh, it may look like that, but I can get around just fine. My sight isn't normal, but I'm no liability. My husband saw to that, trust me."

She proved it by gracefully dodging a hurried pair of swordsmen, their armor clanking loudly.

Kjelle grunted at the sight but was otherwise silent until they reached the yards. Nowi could see Lucina's icy form in the center.

"Marth!" Nowi called, making Lucina look up. "I gotta talk to you! Also, do you know where Ricken is?"

Lucina blinked at the request before gesturing to another field. "He's working with the other mages."
"Is it important?"

"You'll see." Nowi giggled, mischief in her voice. "Also, I wanted to ask if you recognized that girl after I tell them where to go."

She turned and yelled at Sully, who was still glowering at Kjelle. "Ricken's in the next field over! I'll join you guys in a minute!"

Sully grinned and ran off, Kellam far more courteous in guiding Kjelle away. Once they were gone, Nowi turned to find Lucina had paled. "Lucy? Is that one of your friends?"

Lucina gulped and shook her head. "It… it is. I guess she didn't recognize me without my hair dye, but that's Kjelle."

"Does that mean we can finally spill?" Nowi whispered, leaning in close. "It's been torture having all of you so close but not getting to visit with everyone else!"

Lucina pursed her lips. "I… don't know. I need to speak with Severa and our sisters first."

Nowi wasn't happy about that, but she heard people cheering so the fight must've been starting. "Well, let me and your father know later. Cordelia and Sumia are the only ones beside us who know right now, but I'd feel better if we expanded that circle soon."

Lucina nodded absently and wandered from the yards. Nowi watched her go before turning and jogging to the circle of onlookers. After working her way through the throngs, Nowi found an amusing sight.

Ricken, now a grown man after the years of peace, was toying with Kjelle. Not even atop his horse and in normal robes, his every move countered Kjelle's with an almost insulting degree of ease. Worst part was, he was using a sword and always dodging her charges.

"Hold still you coward!" Kjelle shouted after another failed lunge. "How can you call yourself a Shepherd and run from a fight?!"

Ricken shrugged, baiting another charge. When she did, Ricken sidestepped and tripped her, the weight of Kjelle's armor carrying her to the ground. Less than a second later, Ricken was atop her and his blade under her throat. "That's my win."

Kjelle was pinned but didn't speak. Ricken decided to dispense some wisdom. "I don't deny you have more strength than me, and far better defenses, but you charge in recklessly. That armor may protect you from a lot of damage, but all it takes is a quick dodge and you're done. Your footwork is obvious, and your moves could be seen a mile off, any experienced soldier would have taken you down.

"There's talent in you, clear as day, but you'll need a lot more work before you even sniff leadership."

With that, his blade moved away, and he left Kjelle stewing on the ground. The crowd was hooting and hollering, but Nowi was more interested in Sully. If the rolling magma on her form meant anything to Nowi, she'd call the knight worried.

Nowi approached her slowly, "You look concerned? Something up?"

"I don't know." Sully sighed, scratching her head in thought. "I just felt kinda… bad, I guess. It's like I started feelin' concerned for that loudmouth and wanted to punch Ricken."
Nowi suppressed a grin. Sully always did have unusually strong maternal instincts, even among the Shepherds, and it looked like she already recognized her daughter. "Well, knowing you, you'll want to turn that loudmouth into someone to be proud of. Have at it!"

Sully grinned and marched towards Kjelle, Kellam taking over. "You know, I feel like there's something familiar about that volunteer. I'm not quite sure what it is, but I swear I know that shield, same with the eyes."

Nowi gulped as he looked to her, his eyes visible as green lights. "I won't ask if you know something, though I can tell you do, but please try and make sure that the truth comes out soon. I doubt the others will take the secret well if you wait much longer."

Nowi shuddered as Kellam went back to work. The man was silent, nearly blending in to the background despite every Shepherd knowing how to spot him. Honestly, he probably knew or suspected more than anyone, even Gaius.

No matter, we'll see what the girls say. If everything's in order, we can finally bring the family together.

With that thought, Nowi disappeared into the mass of soldiers, eager to find something else to do. So eager in fact, she missed a small figure with a brown bob of hair and twin braids slip by, a familiar crystal in hand.

"Was that… mother?"

-Morgan-

"Heave you sons of bitches' heave!"

Morgan cringed as Flavia's voice boomed through the air, the soldiers below pulling a great contraption into place. It was a scaled-up version of something Miriel had made many years ago, its production rushed after she'd demonstrated the small model's ability to hit ships with greater accuracy than traditional catapults.

There was a lot of technical jargon that made Morgan's head hurt, so that's about all she knew about this thing other than it was heavy.

Speaking of the sage, Miriel was observing the harbor from a ledge in front of Morgan, marking notes while Gregor looked around with a spyglass. "There is many spots to land, yes? Why harbor important to ships?"

"I believe you were in Valm at one point, dear." Miriel stated, making another mark in her book. "Surely you've seen the ships at some point. There's no practical way to deposit so much material and so many troops without this harbor's facilities, thus they will attack here."

Gregor shrugged. "Gregor only see fishing boats and merchant ships, no warships. Divided Valm was good for pay, easy to go fight bandits from lord to lord, but Gregor not know what they do for warships."

Morgan groaned as the couple continued to talk, bored out of her mind. Yes, it was important to get a better view of where the defenses were being placed, but did she have to escort Miriel and Gregor? Gregor was still his jolly self, but Miriel hadn't quite mellowed to the point of being approachable.

It would take a couple more years with Laurent before that happened.
"Tethys, would you come here?"

Morgan looked over to see Miriel waving for her. "What's up?"

"Would you tell the Khan that they need to move the trebuchet another twenty yards?" Miriel asked, pointing to a small out-cropping below. "That position will have ideal coverage and visibility."

Morgan nodded and grabbed Theresa's reins. Once she was out of sight, Miriel hummed. "I wonder when they'll finally let everyone know?"

"You mean Tethys and others are time-walkers?" Gregor laughed. "Gregor knew having brainy wife was good, but never think up that."

Miriel sighed and flipped through her notebook. Several pages were filled with a variety of descriptions, each given by the various captains tasked by Miriel to watch for specific individuals. One page described a male taguel, another a manakete with brown hair, and two detailed a studious mage and a blonde archer.

The physical details were a note for note match of the children from four Shepherd couples, and the girls that had joined the halidom four years ago matched with the young royals and heiresses of Felds. It was too much of a coincidence to think all these children and young adults would be so similar, especially when Miriel had spied the brand on 'Katarina's' lower back.

Then she'd read about the Right of Time and everything made sense.

"Eh, they will tell in time." Gregor said, glancing to his wife. "Right used only if need great, and they here to help. Best not distract others with thoughts of wandering children."

Miriel closed her book and nodded. "That is for the best… though I do wish to speak with Laurent should we get the chance."

"It is only right we apologize for leaving him to such terror, though I doubt he'd forgive us."

-Sumia-

"Have there been any sightings?"

Cordelia shook her head and Sumia sighed. They'd had squads circling the air for almost a week, but the fleet still wasn't in sight. What was keeping them?

"If I may speak?" Cordelia asked.

She continued at Sumia's nod. "One of the wyvern squads noted storm currents brewing about twenty leagues off-shore. It's blowing out to sea, so it wouldn't surprise me if the fleet was delayed a few days because of it."

Sumia hummed and tapped her chin. "That would do it. Gaius may get top notch information, but even he can't account for nature. Small wonder we're here two days before they're supposed to land with no fleet in sight."

Cordelia nodded and handed Sumia a leaf of parchment. "I received this via messenger yesterday. All of the soldiers and supplies will be here by tomorrow, so we'll be able to get everyone briefed in time."

Sumia scanned over the page and let a small smile through. "It'll be good to have everyone together
one last time before this starts. We can finally let everyone in."

Cordelia blinked, not understanding what Sumia meant. "There's plenty of shelter, I don't see who
we'd need to let in."

"Oh, sorry." Sumia giggled. "I meant that we can go ahead and tell the others about the children.
Lucina and Cynthia came to tell me about it a few minutes before you landed."

Cordelia took a moment to process that before smiling widely. "I'm… so glad to hear that. It's been
so hard not telling everyone."

"And hard on the girls too." Sumia agreed, standing and stretching with a groan. "We've heard all
those stories about the adventures and fun times they've had with the Shepherds. I just wish it was a
better time."

Cordelia strode to her friend and clapped her shoulder. "We were all putting it off, better now than
never. Let's get everyone in and we'll tell, hopefully they'll take it well. Though… how did the girls
come to this decision?"

Sumia let an amused smile cross her face. "Well…"

-Lucina, Three Hours Ago-

"Are you mad?!"

Lucina cringed as Severa seethed at her, Cynthia stood off to the side watching. "Sev, the others are
starting to show up. I saw Kjelle earlier and I swear I've seen Noire and Laurent too. Why not now?
The truth has given our parents great determination and I don't want anyone else robbed of their
parents."

Severa pinched her nose, trying to ward off a headache. "Lucy, we're in a war-camp, not the best
place for family reunions. Besides, Morgan isn't here, and if the others are here we'd need their input
about being revealed or not."

"That cat's out of the bag already, Sev." Cynthia said, making the pair look at her. "I mean, do you
really think most of the Shepherds haven't put together who we really are? Uncle V aside, everyone
else is pretty smart."

Severa smirked. "Ouch, I wonder if he'll need salve later. Anyway, if that's the case, then why
haven't they said anything? I don't know about you, but it sure feels like most of them don't trust us,
even after four years."

"We did join unannounced and with full confidence from the most skeptical man in the Shepherds." Lucina reminded them. "Perhaps they simply saw no reason to confront us with that vote of
confidence, and as for no trust, do you really think they would have thrown all those maps at you if
they didn't believe you could handle it?"

Severa leaned her head back and groaned. "Damn it Lucy, why are you so empathetic? Fine, if you
want to tell them, that's up to you. At this point, I don't care either way."

"That's not true Sev." Cynthia laughed, standing and patting her friend on the back. "We've all
missed Aunt Cherche's famous roast pork, same with having story time whenever Olivia was in
town. And I remember you convincing Uncle Kellam to help you pick apples."

Severa only scowled, but the blush on her cheeks blunted the look. "Just… go. I have things to do
before Morgan gets back and Mother made us promise to get dinner together."

Lucina and Cynthia traded grins before they hugged Severa goodbye and went off to inform Sumia or Chrom, whoever they ran into first.

-Sumia-

"And that's how they decided."

Cordelia giggled and adjusted her armor. "I swear, Severa tries so hard to put on a cold front, but she melts under even the slightest kindness. That, her friends, and a good nap. Heaven knows she got something from Robin besides the mind and features."

"She got everything else from you!" Sumia laughed, waving for Cordelia to follow her. "I swear, I saw her with her hair down a couple times, and I thought she was you! Only thing that stopped me was the purple color."

Cordelia laughed too, waving to some of the troops as they left the tent behind. "Yes, well, I remember when we had that big ball two years ago. I was trying to find you in the crowd, but I mistook Lucina for you. When she curls that hair, you two are very similar."

Sumia ran a hand through her hair, smile dreamy. "It's strange, but wonderful if you ask me. Both of them look so much like us, with a few features from their fathers, while their sisters are a more… pleasant mix I guess. They're just so… beautiful, and so strong."

"We've been saying it for years and it doesn't make it any less true." Cordelia said wistfully. "Though, I've been meaning to ask you something."

Sumia glanced at Cordelia curiously. "Do you have the time? I'm sure you'll be needed in the command tent before long and I have to sortie soon."

"It's nothing much," Cordelia hedged. "It's just…"

"Do you think Lucina and Severa fancy each other?"

That question stopped Sumia cold, Cordelia taking a few more steps before realizing the queen had stopped. Sumia in turn slapped a hand to her head and dragged it down her face. "That explains so much."

Cordelia looked very confused, so Sumia elaborated. "Lucina's been very particular about looking her best whenever you and the girls come to visit. She'd stress for hours if that shirt or that dress would get a compliment out of Severa, same with make-up and jewelry. Geez, I can only imagine what living together must be like."

Cordelia tilted her head. "That sounds like what happens with Severa. I don't remember ever giving so much fashion advice, and Morgan's come calling just to complain about her at times. Good heaven, they have it bad."

"Makes you wonder where it sprang from," Sumia sighed. "But we can worry about them later, we have work to do. Don't play matchmaker while I'm gone, ok? We do that together."

Cordelia glowered at Sumia, making the queen laugh. With that, they split to go about their duties, silently hoping that they could make their daughter's slow-dance speed up a bit. Maybe they'd even get to be in-laws!
"Why the heck do I keep shivering? It's spring for heaven's sake!"

Severa mumbled a few curses before flipping to the next page in her book. She'd been ordered by Morgan at spearpoint to take a break when the redhead got back, so here she was reading an old set of stories while Morgan napped loudly behind her. Why did her sister snore so loudly again?

_Oh, right, allergies. Damn oak pollen._

Severa tried to block out the snores as best she could. Morgan deserved the rest, especially since she'd be on the night shift soon. Compared to the hustle and bustle of the day, evening was far more relaxed as the mess tents got ready to serve ravenous soldiers.

Unfortunately, Severa didn't get more than a few paragraphs in before someone knocked on the tent post. "Sev, are you in?"

That was Lucina, what could she need? "Yeah, I'm in. What, is it time to tell the big secret?"

Lucina pulled the tarp back and entered, voice quiet when she saw Morgan asleep. "Not quite, we need Cynthia to come back from her patrol before that happens. I wanted to talk to you about something else before we got dragged into battle."

Severa tilted her head before patting the spot beside her. "Well then I'm glad I decided to read on my cot. What's up?"

Lucina took the spot with uncharacteristic hesitation. In fact, she was fidgeting and shaking so much Severa could feel it. "Well… it's something important to me, very personal. It's just… it's been six years and I haven't gotten an answer."

Answer? What… oh… that's what this was about.

Damn.

"Lucy," Severa sighed, her back starting to ache. "This really isn't the time-"

Lucina's head whipped around, her glare silencing Severa. "How is now not the time? We are soon to go to war and we may end up separated, even dead. I don't want any regrets going into this Sev, and this question, this need I've put on hold for six years is one of the last. Please, tell me…"

"Do you love me? Because I can say for certain that I love you more than anything… even my family."

That last confession was whispered, the words making Severa's heart jump into her throat. She couldn't breathe, couldn't think…

But the answer was clear, she'd known for years. All it had taken was to finally be put before the one thing she felt Lucina would never be without.

Lucina's eyes widened as Severa leaned forward and kissed her, unable to respond. Severa held the kiss for a moment before leaning back, eyes shining. "Lucy… you're such a dunce at times. Of course, I love you, I've loved you since we were girls. I just… always thought you wouldn't care for me, since your family's so important…"

Lucina's arms shot out and she buried her nose in Severa's shoulder, hiccups of relief filling the air.
"Severa, you're the most important person to me. Yes, I care for my family, deeply, but they're not you. You've been my best friend for years, through every ugly phase and trial the gods could throw at us. All the time you've shown me nothing but support, how could I not love such a beautiful person?"

Severa wrapped her arms around Lucina, leaning on her shoulder too. "Well, same goes for me. You led us all through that nightmare before we came back in time, and you led us even when the others weren't there. If anyone's beautiful, it's you… the looks are just a bonus."

"Gee, thanks." Lucina hiccupped. "I uh, fell in love with you eyes first, if we're being honest here. I love how they shine when you laugh and… damn it, this is too much."

Severa chuckled and snuggled tighter. "You're telling me. Do you have any idea how hard it is not to stare when we're training? Or how hard it was not to break down when we were in the cabin? To think, we could've solved this a while ago."

"We're both stubborn," Lucina sighed, hiccups done for now as she leaned back. "But… I don't think that's always a bad thing. We were stubborn enough to keep loving each other, even in our fear."

Severa pulled back too, but soon touched their foreheads together. "Yeah… even if I feared a broken heart, at least I can still love the Little Ram."

"And I can still love the Purple Pup." Lucina whispered, Severa groaning at her long-dead nickname. "That sets my heart at ease, knowing I have something so close to fight for."

Their lips drifted closer together as they talked, warm breath tickling them. Severa spoke again after a long silence. "I guess… this is what it feels like for our parents. Having something to love… I'm so happy… I just don't know if I deserve it…"

Lucina silenced her as their lips met, the kiss long, deep, and passionate. They'd finally moved passed their own worries and anxieties after years of waiting, so why let even a vestige of doubt exist now? They loved each other, deeply, and there was nothing that could separate them, not after the trials they'd endured to reach this moment.

They didn't expect the heat building in their chests, the kiss growing even deeper as they pulled close together, instinct beginning to guide them.

Then a particularly loud snore from Morgan made them pause, they separated, panting.

Severa caught her breath first. "Lucy, uh… let's try and keep that under control, ok? At least take me to dinner first."

Lucina did her best seductive look, but to Severa it just looked like she was pouting. "Are you sure? I don't mind dinner, but we both know Morgan can sleep through a thunderstorm."

"Trust me, she'll know." Severa muttered, recalling a few times when Morgan had woken up because of Severa's… private time. "Besides, we both know we'll have to head for Valm. That's two months on a boat with our own room."

Lucina gained a hungry glint in her eyes, a chaste kiss holding a smoldering burn. "I look forward to it. But, we still have some things to do. Work before pleasure, as I always say."

Lucina stood and made for the flap, a sinful gaze thrown over her shoulder and a roll in her hips as she left. Severa watched it all appreciatively before groaning and hiding her face in her hands.
"Thank Naga Morgy didn't hear any of that, I'd die if she did."

"Geez, I knew you guys had some tension the last few years, but I thought you'd start fornicating right there! Glad I didn't decide to sneak off, you may have!"

Severa's face drooped in horror, she turned slowly to find a grinning Morgan sitting up in her cot. "You... heard all that...?"

Morgan smirked. "Yep, and I never thought I'd hear either of you be so emotional... or talk dirty at that. Lucina being seductive is... weird."

Severa could do only one thing as her face turned an interesting shade of puce. She fainted.

"Damn it, Sev, it's not that bad! You've heard me have those dreams too, it's not like we're ten!"

-Night, Sea-

"They're waiting for us."

The ship's commander sighed as he gave the spyglass to his subordinate. The vanguard had made better time than expected, but they'd run into a squall and were delayed back to their original timetable. It shouldn't have mattered, but it looked like General Yen'fay's suspicions were true.

The Alteans had spies in Valm, good spies. Their landing dock on the west coast was lit with torches, it was obvious the enemy had catapults ready to fire.

"Landing in the day is suicide, Commander Dalton." The man's subordinate noted. "Even if we made the docks intact, they'll have archers and mages ready to rain hell on our heads, not to mention barricades and spears."

Dalton grunted and turned from the sight. "Then we land at night. We've faced similar odds when we invaded the south coast back home, I doubt they'll be expecting a night attack. Even still, send a messenger to the main fleet and request more ships. We'll need more men if we're going to establish bases further inland after removing this rabble."

The soldier saluted and ran off to do just that. Dalton in turn took one more look at the coast, then to the sky. "Their patrols stopped for the night. I'm glad I had all the boats extinguish their torches before we spotted land, we'd have been sitting ducks otherwise."

In either case, Dalton barked orders for the vanguard to make for the docks. His ship would take the lead while the others would follow once they'd created a suitable distraction. The Alteans would pay for not using night patrols, but the success of this mission came down to how many the enemy had gathered to oppose them.

Without the port, the invasion could not commence, and Dalton would be damned if he let the first attack of the glorious Valm Empire upon Altean soil end in failure.

Not when he'd been given command of this vanguard by Emperor Walhart himself.

-Gaius-

"Twinkles, they're here."

Gaius's voice made Maribelle jolt awake, the noblewoman blinking rapidly. She'd gone off to get a
few minutes shut-eye in between rotations, choosing a chair in the small inn they'd commandeered as a watch-post. It felt like she'd barely closed her eyes before her husband showed up. "Who… showed up?"

"Valm's here." Gaius said, energizing Maribelle instantly. "We can't stop the first two boats, but I've already got the big guys firing on the others. I need you to help organize everyone, the signal fires are lit, but no one else here is fast enough to give the details."

Maribelle shot to her feet and marched from the room, Gaius barely a step behind. "What are the estimates for those boats, and have any of the trailing boats been hit yet? Also, how did our patrols not see them? They've been running day and night!"

"The ships are low, flat, and narrow." Gaius answered as they entered the frantic lobby. "They had no fires on deck, so their torches were extinguished. From the air, they'd blend with the waves. Best estimates place about three hundred to three hundred and fifty men per boat."

Maribelle's very presence made soldiers part, the woman steel-eyed. "That's seven hundred at most, but that's enough to take hold of the harbor and surrounding districts. We need to get the soldiers there quickly or this will be far harder than it needs to be."

Gaius nodded and peeled off, but not before pecking Maribelle's cheek. "I'll find you afterwards, just be careful."

"I'm always careful, dear." Maribelle whispered, gaze softening. "I should be telling you that."

Gaius gave her a roguish grin, but she was gone before he could say anything else. With that done, he began to march down the street, feet taking him to the harbor as cloaked figures began to appear around him. "I want all of you watching every nook and cranny. Not one of those bastards gets away. Kill them if they resist, but cowards are useful."

His arm flew out and the figures dispersed, the Mani Katti appearing in his hand. "Now then…"

He melted into the shadows.

"Time to hunt."

-Tharja-

They just had to show up on her shift, didn't they?

Tharja scowled as she watched two boats pull into the harbor, planks and ropes flying to the dock followed by soldiers of varying quality. Most were standard spearmen, though not as well equipped as the Ylissean and Feroxi forces. Cavalry and knights followed; Tharja spotted horse archers, a novel idea, paladins, dark knights, and great knights.

"They certainly don't lack for cavalry."

Tharja grunted, keeping her eyes on the enemy. "Loathe as I am to say it, Virion was spot on. You think your axe can get through those knights?"

Vaike guffawed and bounced Armads on his shoulder. "Please, this ol' boy can cleave through stone. Put these muscles behind it and nothing can stop us!"

"What Cherche sees in you, I'll never know." Tharja muttered before looking behind Vaike to the unit of mages under her command. "Keep the spells simple and direct, too much damage to the
harbor won't help. Wait until they've sent search parties, hit, then retreat."

The mages saluted and scrambled to their spots, Vaike taking Tharja's spot behind the corner. "Let me know when, I'll get their attention."

"Don't let your bloodlust get ahold of you." Tharja muttered, patting his shoulder. "Cherche won't be happy if I have to bind you again."

Vaike grew solemn, a nod his only answer. Tharja sighed and hid, the darkness welcoming and slithering along her limbs. Goetia pulsed in her hands as a wicked grin spread across her face.

No one separates me from my loves… and lives.

-Stahl-

"Form up, make a line! They'll be here before long!"

Stahl's voice called out ever-more instructions as soldiers scrambled to their positions. No one was expecting an attack during dinner, especially two days before the Valmese were supposed to arrive, but the signal fires had given them some warning.

Hopefully it would be enough.

"Spears in front, behind the barricades!" Stahl shouted, voice hoarse. "Shields and swords behind them, archers behind that! Watch your marks and hold steady!"

He was one of many forming the defenses through every street, forced to part from his wife in the confusion, and while he knew the defenses could hold, all of those with him were green. Not one had fought actual human opponents, only Risen. That was bound to show in the battle.

"Remember your training!" Stahl called as the sound of hooves and boots came from around the corner. "Remember the homes and people you fight for! Their memory shall give you strength this day!"

The soldiers roared their approval, the first line of Valmese cavalry showing themselves.

Crimson and silver, just like Cherche and Virion said. They don't look all that intimidated by us.

"You are soldiers of Ylisse!" Stahl roared, his troops cheering as the Valmese advanced. "These invaders think themselves conquerors, but we shall never harbor their fantasies! Show them the might of Ylissean steel and your stalwart will! Show them the courage of our people!"

The cavalry began to charge, lances and swords glinting in the firelight as bolts began to fly from the horsemen in the back.

"Archers, fire!"

The archers strung their bows as one and loosed, arrows breaking on the armor of the riders, but piercing the horses and joints when the aim was true. Those struck howled and screeched in pain, but the charge continued unabated.

Right into the shadows hiding the stakes.

The first wave was skewered on the stakes, the Ylissean spearmen finishing the riders as they were thrown from their steeds. Some ended impaled on the stakes, the soldiers putting them out of their misery. The remainder pulled back, clearly reconsidering their options.
Stahl wouldn't let them think, a sword wrapped in healing wood drawn forth. "Charge!"

He spurred his steed forward, the soldiers roaring their challenge as they charged. The spears led the wave, even as several were picked off by the horse archers, but the narrow confines of the street let only the rearmost cavalry pull-back before the Ylisseans slammed into them.

The momentum of the charge crushed the first line of cavalry and most of the second, but the close-quarters were ill-suited to both armies. The remaining Valmese began to hack away at Stahl's footmen.

Stahl slew a paladin in two strokes before taking his lance and skewering a distracted archer, the man thudding on the ground while his horse panicked and bolted. As he watched, almost a dozen men took brutal slashes, dropping to the ground as the spearmen retreated for swordsmen to take their place.

*Thank Naga for the armor. These Valmese are no joke, that line could've destroyed half the unit before they retreated.*

A blow came for his head, but Stahl caught it with his shield and bashed his attacker with the edge, stunning the great knight and allowing Stahl to stab the horse. As the knight fell, swordsmen fell upon and slew him, but not before the knight broke a few bones.

The screech of arrows made Stahl look further down the road, a line of foot-archers and horse-archers peppering the exposed soldiers. As before, the armor blunted most of the attacks, but a few were lucky and found vulnerable joints.

"Shields in front!"

Knights marched forward and planted their shields into the earth, the swordsmen adding their kite shields on top at an angle, stopping the archers cold. The roar of steel boots hitting cobble-stones and calls of panic showed that another unit had flanked the Valmese archers, cheers of victory soon following.

Stahl ordered the shields to break and surveyed the damage. They'd taken down many Valmese by the looks of it, but they'd done so at a cost as well. The invaders were skilled, that was clear, and it was only preparation, surprise, and superior armor that kept casualties so light.

Stahl sighed and ordered his men to make for the next district. They didn't have time to mourn the dead, but they could take solace in the knowledge that the wounded would be tended to swiftly.

Future battles would likely be less fortunate.

*-Cherche-

"Dive on those ships, don't let them reach the harbor!"

A squad of wyverns dove for one of the rear ships, flipping and swerving around the arrows that sought to shoot them down. Bags filled with explosive stones fell and several balls of fire ignited them, turning the deck of the ship into burning scraps.

"They don't seem to have as many archers as usual." Cherche muttered. "When did that change? There were plenty of archers when they invaded Roseanne."

She felt Minerva roll as a boulder flew by, the stone slamming into another ship. Ignoring the sinking vessel, Cherche surveyed the sea below. Now that they had some light from the burning vessels, she
was able to make out most of the vanguard's fleet.

The two ships at the front were the largest of them all, which explained why they went first as they held the most troops. Those behind them were smaller and of varying shapes, about ten or twelve in total. Of those, six had been sunk, and the rest were being harassed by pegasi, wyverns, and boulders.

The success wasn't without cost though. Several wyverns and pegasi had been shot out of the sky, their riders either perishing with the mounts or drowning under the weight of their armor. Sad, but no one had factored in sea water during training, so it wasn't surprising they would fail to remove their armor and swim to safety.

*We need to address that. Cold water too*

Cherche's thoughts were put on hold as another wyvern knight flew up to her. "Commander! The main bulk of the enemy in the port has taken over two districts! In addition to the docks, our soldiers are spread thin while our main body hasn't arrived yet!"

"Tell Tharja to focus on the districts!" Cherche ordered, turning Minerva towards the port. "I'll meet up with whoever's leading the assault on the docks. Keep harassing those boats in the meantime, don't let anything on those docks!"

The knight yelled his recognition and dove into the fray, Minerva already gliding for the docks. From what Cherche could see, the Valmese were leveraging their more experienced troops for all they were worth, even as the superior armor and weaponry of the Ylisseans helped make up the difference.

There were more bodies on their side though, Cherche watched most of them get pulled from the fighting and replaced. She could only hope they were merely wounded, but there'd be time to mourn later.

Spotting a familiar blonde head breaking three men in half with a mighty swing, Cherche went into a steep dive that ended with an archer getting shredded by Minerva and a knight getting Helswath planted in his head.

"Vaike!" Cherche shouted as Vaike punched a paladin hard enough to snap his neck. "Where's Tharja? She was supposed to keep the districts around the docks safe!"

Vaike turned his shoulder into an arrow, the metal plate deflecting it. "She went off to blow up an incursion on the south side, we weren't expecting the big charge they sent to the east and north! Stahl's cleaning up the east, but we're stuck here!"

Cherche growled and used Minerva's armor to block a cavalier's charge, the attacker swiftly liberated of their arm. "How many went to the south?"

"At least two dozen!" Vaike shouted as the Valmese fell back into a defensive line. "I don't think Gaius has enough agents to deal with all that. I've been seeing them pop up here and there to the north and east, but nothing south."

Cherche bit her lip as the Valmese formed a shield wall, cavalry behind with lances placed over shields. Then, as one, they began to advance.

"It's time."

Cherche nearly screeched at the low mumble, Tharja appearing out of thin air.
"Where'd you come from?" Cherche panted, adrenaline fading.

"I came from the back," Tharja answered as if it was obvious. "The healers have most of the wounded, but if this is going to be a shoving contest, the troops need a better leader than I."

Vaike panted, a wave from Cherche's emergency staff staunching rivulets of blood. "I ain't good with keeping folks disciplined, but I can rile them up for sure."

"A shield wall's all about who breaks first." Cherche mumbled, proud to see the Ylisseans already set in a barricade of their own. "And if the mages aren't here to break it, then we'll have to see whose will is greater."

Tharja licked her lips before sighing. "I'll have to leave it to you two. I must get back to my unit, see if they've finished cleaning out the stragglers. We'll join as soon as we can, hold out."

Cherche couldn't respond before Tharja was gone. "Damn it. At least we can say for certain their archers are gone, I haven't seen an arrow in a while. Vaike, are you up for an inspirational speech?"

Vaike grinned and hauled himself onto Minerva's back. "Am I ever!"

"If you give a good one," Cherche whispered as she guided Minerva into the air and behind the front line, the soldiers solid as rocks. "I'll give you something… nice."

Vaike's grin widened. Cherche almost never wore lace, so here was his chance!

"Alright guys, this is it!" Vaike roared, his voice making the Valmese pause. "Before you stand a bunch of lily-livered Valmese that can't handle the namby pambies back home, so they ran to us looking for a fight! Well, they bit off more than they could chew against this wall of steel and courage! Any one of you is worth ten of them, and I see no worthy challenge in the whole toss pot! Let's drive them back into the sea like the dogs they are, and I'll see you at the tables for the victory feast!"

The soldiers roared their approval, the shield wall advancing in a steady cadence. The battle cry did little to move the Valmese, though they advanced just a little slower.

Vaike hopped from Minerva and grinned at Cherche. "How was that?"

"It was… ok." Cherche quipped, giggling at Vaike's crestfallen face. "But good enough. Keep an eye out, I'll be surprising you soon."

Vaike whooped and joined the soldiers, Cherche taking to the air once more. With her vantage, she could see a paladin with golden armor directing the Valmese, marking him as the commander. While she could go in and take him out, no one in Valm got promoted without some skill, and she didn't fancy throwing Helswath at him.

While she deliberated, the shield walls crashed into each other, shouts and clashing steel filling the air. Unfortunately for the Valmese, barricades like this depended on two things: weight, and how well trained individual units were.

The Ylisseans had both.

While the initial split up gave the Valmese some control of the port, that advantage soon turned against them as soldiers in the street were cut off by Ylissean resistance. Gaius's assassins intercepted stragglers while Gaius himself took on whole squads, softening Stahl and Tharja's exertion.
When the first crack was formed in the Valmese wall, their formation quickly broke, and their soldiers scattered. The Ylisseans took advantage and surrounded the scattered Valmese, most fighting to the death, but others dropped their arms and surrendered.

Only one pocket remained after the hours of fighting, though it felt like thirty minutes at most. A ring of Valmese soldiers surrounded three horsemen. The captain was among them, shouting orders to hold steady and fight to the last breath.

The Ylisseans formed ranks and prepared to crush them. Cherche was more than willing to watch from the air, but she spotted something very important marching down the main street. She landed in front of the Ylissean line, Minerva growling at the last invaders.

"I speak for Exalt Chrom Falke de Ylisse and his wife Queen Sumia Falk de Ylisse!" Cherche bellowed, authority ironclad in her words. "I bid thee soldiers of Valm to step forth and surrender to our leaders, for your lives shall be spared and comfort assured! No more need die this day, but should you continue to fight, your lives shall be forfeit!"

The commander spat: "I am Dalton, I speak for these men. We shall not surrender to your pitiful forces, no matter the defenses or preparations you make! The glory of Valm shall be made clear upon this land, and you are but specks upon its boot!"

Cherche sighed, letting the soldiers part in perfect unison to allow Chrom and Sumia forward. The royal pair were outfitted for war and the host of Ylisse's army railed behind them, shining silver in the night air.

"Who are you to make so bold a claim?" Chrom demanded, steel hardening his voice. "I believe these specks have quite soundly defeated you, even after your early arrival. Are your lives truly worth such useless words?"

The commander straightened in his saddle, pride radiating from him. "I am Dalton, leader of every vanguard since the Unification began! I have brought entire kingdoms to their knees in the name of Emperor Walhart, and yours will be no different!"

Chrom shook his head. "Then face me in combat. I win, your men surrender. You win, then we surrender. Are these terms fair?"

Sumia gave Chrom one hell of a stink-eye, but Chrom was cool and collected, even as Dalton rushed to take advantage of this chivalry. "Gladly! I shall enjoy seeing your blood stain the ground!"

Chrom rolled his eyes and drew Falchion, Dalton riding forward to face him. All was silent for a moment before Dalton charged with a roar, intent on rending Chrom's head from his shoulder.

Chrom sidestepped the charge and grabbed hold of Dalton's leg, somehow remaining in place as Dalton was torn from his saddle. Dalton had barely a moment to process what happened before Chrom stomped on his shoulder and Falchion bit into the other.

"I win," Chrom said simply leaning down to look Dalton in the eye. "I'll say this much. No matter the reason you came here, be it land, glory, or the Fire Emblem, Ylisse shall not fall. We have made ourselves ready for this war for four years. Can you say the same?"

Dalton spat blood, eyes widening as steel coated the left side of Chrom's face. "What... are you?"

"I am someone who's paid the price for power." Chrom whispered, eyes narrowing. "And I will use it in defense of my home."
"D-demon…" Dalton stuttered before going limp, the Valmese soldiers immediately surrendering.

Chrom sighed and cleaned Falchion. It would take a few days to get this mess sorted out, let alone get Flavia up to date. Things tended to happen when she wasn't around for some reason, Chrom was considering keeping her close to ward off any further surprises.

Regardless, their soldiers had faced real combat for the first time and come out well. Most were merely wounded, Robin's reforms paying dividends, but there were still many dead.

If this vanguard was but a small taste of Valm, they could not hope to face its full might upon the land.

Looked like Robin's crazy idea would have to happen after all… Which meant a journey to Plegia.

Wonders never cease, do they?
Rewards

Robin arrived with the rest of Ylisse's military the day after the vanguard's defeat.

The town around the port was partly ransacked and the bay was still full of wrecked hulls, prisoners gathered in the center of town. His escorts said little of the battle, but he could infer plenty just by looking around.

All in all, a good first engagement.

Robin's thoughts were confirmed when he met up with the Shepherds, everyone who participated giving him a brief overview as he walked to the command center. Opening the doors, he strode inside to find Chrom and Sumia poring over maps. Morgan and Cynthia stood to the side.

"Are you sure those reports are accurate?" Chrom asked Morgan, not noticing Robin enter. "Gaius's sources put the fleet at much larger than that."

Morgan nodded, smiling when she noticed her father. "They are, milord. The storm that formed over the sea looks to have sunk several of their vessels and damaged many more. My scouts have them holding three days flight from Origin Peak, so we have some time."

Sumia glanced up and grinned in relief. "Well, look who showed up. Chrom, Robin's here."

"About time." Chrom laughed tiredly as he found his friend, moving around the table to trade grips with Robin. "Your ideas paid dividends friend, our casualties would have been far worse without them."

Robin shook his head and gestured to the room around him. "I left these people in the care of those that can lead, that's what made the difference. The others briefed me on the way here, what are we looking at now?"

Chrom looked to Sumia, who signaled they were clear. "Well, our daughters here got word back from their squads. The Valmese fleet has stalled its journey due to a great storm and are making repairs as we speak. Your... idea will need to be put into action."

Robin crossed his arms and raised a brow, the girls snickering at his incredulous look. "You're telling me it took an invasion and an act of nature to convince you diplomacy with Plegia needed to happen?"

Chrom scowled at him. "You and I both know the country was in a state of near anarchy while the ruling class sorted itself out. We didn't hear about the new king until three months ago, not exactly the best window to request a summit."

Robin rolled his eyes. "Then send the messenger. We'll need every ship Plegia can give us if we're to meet the Valmese at sea."

That was the crux of the next stage in Robin's grand plan. On land, the Valmese could simply drown them in bodies, which meant they had to neutralize that advantage. The only way, frankly, was to meet them ship-to-ship.

Problem was, Ylisse and Ferox alone could not supply the ships needed to follow this plan on short notice. Warships took a long time to make, and they'd only constructed enough ships between the two nations to transport a third of their armies.
Plegia, on the other hand, had a massive maritime economy. Their fleets were thrice the combined Ylisse-Ferox ships and, so long as talks were accepted and went well, they’d be able to spare more than enough to see the plan through.

"I'll get on it." Sumia said, waving for Cynthia to follow. "In the meantime, why don't you and Morgan go check in on the rest of your family? These maps will be waiting for us when we come back, and I recall Chrom promised Lucy a sparring match."

Robin laughed as Chrom slumped in defeat. It was always amusing to see the pair act in concert publicly, only for all the power to swing back to Sumia when they were amongst friends. "That sounds like a great idea. Morgan, do you know where they are?"

Morgan giggled and skipped over to him, waving to the royals as they left. "Yep! Last I saw, they were heading to the staging grounds to look over the new supplies."

Robin felt a thrill of alarm run through him, Morgan noticed immediately. "What, did something happen?"

Robin scratched his head, dodging a hurried Olivia as he pondered what to say. "Well… it's more like I have a surprise waiting in those supplies, and I didn't want anyone to see them until I could give them out."

Morgan tilted her head, very curious, but they were interrupted before she could ask.

"Robin, glad to see you." Nowi said as she was carried past them on Frederick's back. "You wouldn't happen to have seen a girl resembling my child form wandering around, have you?"

Robin blinked a couple times before shaking his head. "Uh… no. I just got into town about an hour ago, haven't seen much of the camp. Why do you ask?"

"One of the regiment commanders notified her of such an individual." Frederick said, not a mote of exhaustion from the march in his face. "Nowi insisted we start searching the moment I got into camp."

Robin glanced around, but none of the other Shepherds were in ear-shot. "You don't think… it's another child, do you?"

Nowi pursed her lips, expression mirrored on her husband. "We… we just don't know. Could be a coincidence, just a local kid that wandered in, but… it could be Nah too."

Robin sucked in a breath. He could sympathize with them, especially since Severa and Lucina had mentioned 'Cousin Nah' several times in their stories. It was only natural Nowi and Frederick would worry if their daughter were here. "I wish you luck on your search. If you do find her, and it's who you think… we'll be glad to welcome her back."

Nowi and Frederick gave him grateful smiles before excusing themselves. Robin and Morgan continued on their way, silent at the thought of the other Shepherd children out there.

"We ran into Kjelle, actually." Morgan muttered as they exited the Shepherd's section of town, path taking them to the outskirts where the city of tents awaited. "She tried to demand command of a regiment, but Uncle Ricken knocked her to the dirt. Aunt Sully's been… taking care of her, but she doesn't know it's Kjelle yet."

Robin shuddered, already knowing what that entailed. "Have you guys decided it's time?"
Morgan nodded, a clenched jaw the sign of her unease. "Mostly… we thought it would be best to explain over dinner, but then the vanguard landed and we didn't get the chance. I was thinking we could try again tonight, or maybe after the messenger gets back from Plegia."

Robin shook his head, morose. "It will happen when it happens, just know that we'll be beside you no matter what. Now, to happier things, did anything good happen while I was away?"

Morgan grinned widely. "You bet! So, you know how you always asked about Sev being real nervous around Lucy?"

Robin nodded, rueful how he stumbled upon that bit of knowledge. The one time she forgot to lock her room and it ended with poor Robin having to explain he was just fine with his daughter loving another woman. She just had to spit it out and remember to lock the door if she wanted private time.

"Well they finally pulled their heads out of the sand!" Morgan almost cheered, making Robin sigh with relief. "It's weird, they said 'I love you' almost four years ago, but they never really got together after that. Maybe they were just awkward, but something changed, and here we are."

Robin was glad to hear it. After he'd found out about Severa's preferences, it was painfully obvious that she was deeply in love with Lucina. He'd dare call her actions around Lucina similar to his around Cordelia before they'd started dating.

"We also got to try a bunch of new strategies." Morgan continued unabated. "Sev already fixed most of the flaws, but she wants to go over them with you to be sure."

Robin chuckled and mussed her hair, ignoring the protests that arose. "I'm proud of you, Cherry Head. Keep it up and I'll let you take me on one of those stunt shows you love doing with Cynthia."

Morgan's mismatched eyes lit up like fire. "I'm holding you to that! Oh, maybe we can get Mom to do it with Sev too!"

Robin silently hoped that wouldn't happen. He could at least keep his lunch down during maneuvers like what Morgan was envisioning, but he knew for fact Severa wouldn't make it past the third spin.

"Oh, we're here!"

Robin blinked and glanced around. Indeed, they'd made great time through the rest of the town and maze of tents. Before them stood great stacks of equipment, soldiers going from the newly arrived wagons to the piles before more soldiers retrieved the supplies and took them away.

Next to one pile of supplies sat a figure in a large cloak with a head of purple, parchment in head. A figure with blazing red hair stood beside them.

"Cordelia, Kat!" Morgan called, remembering to use her sister's alias with the other soldiers around. "Guess who's here!"

Cordelia turned around, face blooming with joy at the sight of Robin. She dropped her own parchment, which Severa scrambled to catch, and jogged to them, enveloping Robin in a warm embrace.

"It's good to see you." She whispered, kissing his cheek. "I needed to see you… so badly."

Robin kissed her deeply, pouring his love into the contact. Once she was satisfied, he pulled away. "And I you. Worry does not describe how I felt when news reached us of the attack."
Cordelia kissed him back, the sappy sight making their daughters gag. Once they were done, Robin pulled back to grin at Severa. "Hey, I heard your ideas for the defense unfolded beautifully. Trying to one up me, are ya?"

Severa smirked and shrugged, delight twinkling in her mismatched eyes. "Well of course the defenses worked, the best minds in the world worked on them. Well, the best mind and her assistant."

Robin glared at her, playing along. "I believe it is you who's the tactician's assistant young lady. You still haven't beaten me in best of three chess yet."

Severa glowered at him, the staring contest continuing until they burst into giggles. Once her mirth was expended, Severa glided forth and hugged her father, her voice a whisper. "I missed you, Daddy."

Robin patted her back, eyes warm. "You too, pup. Come on, let's get this pile sorted. I have a surprise for you at dinner."

Severa looked at him curiously, but Morgan dragged her away to the pile. Robin and Cordelia stood alone for a time, watching their daughters work, hand entwined.

"So they finished on time." Cordelia whispered, leaning into Robin's shoulder. "I guess that means I need to steal her coat."

Robin nuzzled her hair, reveling in the red silk. "I'll see to that. In the meantime, we'll need to keep the girls away from their mounts, it'll ruin the surprise otherwise."

Cordelia nodded and started to pull him towards the pile. "Let's join them for now, such things can come later."

Robin shook his head and took her hand. "Would the work ever be finished, but you're right. Hopefully, everything will work out."

Cordelia kissed him again and they joined their daughters, the day wiled away sorting the many supplies Robin had brought with the bulk of their forces.

Eventually, when the girls went back to their tents, Robin enacted the first part of his surprise. He knew Severa almost never let her coat out of sight, but today was one of the few exceptions where she hid it in her tent while bathing.

Robin, channeling his inner thief, snuck into the tent and grabbed the coat before fleeing the area with all possible haste. Once he'd given the coat to Cordelia, he returned to the supply wagons and gathered four crates with the help of a few off-duty soldiers. The crates were left with Kellam and Stahl, who were more than happy to prepare the surprise.

Next, he snuck into Lucina's tent and took her cape. Then he led Cynthia's Selene and Morgan's Theresa out of the corral and to a forge where an eager set of armorers and a few in-the-know Shepherds set about getting the mounts ready.

Once he'd delivered the cape to Sumia, who started squealing when he told her what this was about, his next set of steps centered around getting the mess hall ready for the night and finishing his debriefs on the tactics the Valmese had used in the battle.

Essentially, he was killing time.
It was during this time, where he almost couldn't sit still, that Miriel came to visit. "Robin, I have something I must discuss with you."

Robin glanced up from the map he'd been marking with the assistance of a few soldiers that had been in the battle. "What about?"

Miriel dismissed the soldiers, Robin not willing to counteract the order with the look Miriel was giving him. Once they were gone, Miriel made damn sure they were alone before taking a seat across from Robin. "I wish to discuss your children."

Robin felt a thrill of alarm run through him, but suppressed it. There was no way she meant the time-walkers. "What about them? They're back in Grevis with their grandparents, I fail to see what anything here has to do with them."

"Playing dumb are we?" Miriel muttered before looking Robin in the eye. "I mean the ones who walk amongst us at this moment, preparing for a war they walked through time in hopes to prevent. The ones that, despite being almost the same age as us, are perfect matches for the little ones we left behind."

She leaned forward, eyes set in a glare. "Ring any bells?"

Robin gulped and looked away. There was no reason not to spill to Miriel, considering she'd figured it out on her own, and the secret was going to come out that night anyway…

"…How'd you figure it out?"

Miriel relaxed and opened the journal she'd brought. "I have been observing them for the last four years, but the idea came to me when I saw Severa for the first time. Holding that babe made me recall Katarina, and less than a year after the time-walkers joined us, I found the same brand on Katarina that marked Severa as your kin."

Robin was nodding, but that didn't explain it. "Let me guess, you read about the Rite of Time? Then all the otherwise coincidental matches lined up."

Miriel scanned through her journal as she talked. "Indeed, I found the Rite. It was the only explanation for the identical features on the elder and younger girls. Add on the royals, you, and your wife welcoming these girls like family and it sealed the deal."

Robin sighed and cradled his head in his hands. "…I really shouldn't have doubted anyone from figuring it out, least of all someone of your intellect. Still, what brought this on? The girls were going to inform the Shepherds of their true identities tonight."

Miriel stopped on a page in her journal and showed it to Robin, the page holding a sketch of a young girl with pointed ears. "There have been sightings in the army of… unique individuals. This girl is but one of several I've recorded, and… I heard of a young mage that greatly resembles Laurent."

Robin hummed as the answer came forth. "I see… what would you like me to do?"

"Call them to the Shepherd compound for this announcement." Miriel said after composing herself, several names getting scribbled on Robin's map. "They answered the call to arms when it was given, so I know who their squad leaders are. On your word, these individuals will be brought forth, and… hopefully we can sort it out from there."

Robin was surprised at the laissez-faire answer. Miriel wasn't one for leaving things up to fate or the whims of the chance, but… this was her child they were talking about. And she'd likely realized why
he was here in the first place.

"…Very well, I'll see it done. Looks like more than just my surprise will be revealed tonight."

Miriel smiled and bowed. "Thank you, my friend. If it's any consolation, I believe the messenger to Plegia set out not ten minutes ago. Should all go well, we'll have a place and time within a few days."

Robin chuckled, but grabbed her arm as she made to leave. "I can't speak for Laurent, but please, don't assume he hates you. If anything, apologies will not be appreciated… so just be welcoming."

Miriel showed no outward reaction, but she reached around and squeezed Robin's hand. "I know… but it's still something I must own up to. We may not be our future selves, but I still feel that whatever suffering led them here must be repaid. I will welcome him, should he wish it… but I simply don't know what to do beyond that."

"I didn't know either." Robin agreed. "But that will come with time. Just go to Gregor and discuss this with him, I'll make sure they're there."

Miriel nodded and left, Robin gathering his maps and leaving the tent he'd commandeered. "Soldier, come here!"

A swordswoman ran up to him, expression stoic. "What can I do for you, Lord Robin?"

Robin opened his map and looked at the names Miriel had left him. "I need you to inform the commanders of the first, third, and eighth regiments along with the third mage company to send me these people. Instruct them to meet at the Shepherd compound at sundown."

The swordswoman saluted and set off after receiving the names, Robin looked to the sky. "I… need to go blow off some steam."

He hummed a tune and made for the training fields where, for the next few hours, he rained destruction upon hapless training dummies while awing the regular soldiers.

By the time he was done, Cordelia was waiting for him at the edge of the fields with an exasperated smile. "I knew not being here was frustrating, but sheesh. What, did someone make a crack about your coat?"

Robin shrugged as he took the waterskin she offered. "Nah, just killing time. Everything's still a mess and we can't make any decisions until Plegia gets back to us, so I must do something. Would've asked for a duet, but you were busy."

"Speaking of, it's done." Cordelia whispered, a grin bursting to life. "It's all waiting in the dining hall, just out of sight. I wanted you to look before everyone arrived."

Robin grinned back, and they hurried away, dodging through the ruckus of soldiers with practiced ease. They arrived at the Shepherd's section of the town to find no one else had arrived quite yet, but they didn't stop to look.

Instead, Robin ran into the dining hall and peeked behind the curtain that had been drawn across the stage. What he saw made him grin excitedly. "Great, it's just like I hoped! Let's get this place ready!"

Cordelia was way ahead of him, organizing the tables and utensils with all the speed she could muster. Robin dived in with similar energy, the pair getting the hall presentable in barely thirty minutes.
"Mom, Dad... are you in?"

They finished just in time as Severa pushed the door in with an uneasy look around. It was odd to
see her bare of the tactician's cloak, but Robin always thought she looked fine without it. Even in the
tan work shirt she'd taken to wearing.

"What's up, Sev?" Cordelia asked, though she already knew the answer. "Where's your coat?"

Severa looked around wearily, rubbing her bare shoulders like she was freezing. "That's just it, I
don't know. I've been all over this place and haven't seen it, it's... really not good."

Robin could only hope the surprise would make up for the brief turmoil this was inflicting on her.
"Well maybe your sister sent it to the laundry, you know how she is."

"I asked her," Severa said, shivering. "Lucy's cape is gone too, and so are Theresa and Selene.
We've been going mad trying to find them."

Robin shared a concerned frown with Cordelia before taking off his coat and wrapping Severa in it.
"Here, use mine. We'll find yours after we get everyone together, they'll be sure to help."

Severa relaxed immediately, only furthering Robin's concern. "Thanks... um, where is everyone?"

"Soon to arrive." Cordelia said as she glanced out the window. "And they have tonight's meal too."

The family was inundated with the chatter of the Shepherds shortly thereafter, food and drink
distributed amongst the tables. Worries were, for a time, lost to the revelry of friends coming together
once more. Everyone that had arrived with Robin was caught up on the various happenings of the
port attack. The harmless chatter stalled as a knock sounded on the dining hall door.

Robin, who was closest to the door, was expecting the knock. "Who is it?"

"My name is Laurent, good sir. Myself and my compatriots were instructed to arrive here at dusk."

Robin took a deep breath and opened the door, a tall young man with auburn hair and a set of
spectacles stood on the other side. "Then come in. Go to the stage, I'll be making an announcement
shortly."

Laurent, for this had to be him, nodded and strode into the hall. Behind him followed a woman in
heavy plate with dark hair that Robin recognized as Kjelle, who was in turn closely followed by a
trembling young woman in green clothes with blonde hair and a strange charm clasped in her hands.

Behind them came a short girl in a white dress and red cape. Her hair was tied into a bob with twin
braids, a male taguel with a tuft of blue hair entered only a step behind her.

A quick glance to Robin's daughters showed their jaws slamming into the floor, Lucina and Cynthia
in a similar state. Before anything could be said, Robin bounded to the stage and gave his best call to
arms. "Atten-hut!"

The room went silent, everyone staring at him in confusion.

"Thank you for your attention." Robin drawled. "My Frederick impersonation aside, there's an
important announcement we need to make. Katarina, Marth, if you would join me."

Severa and Lucina stood with grimaces, refusing to meet the gazes of their shocked comrades. Once
they were on the stage, Robin heard Lucina whisper something to the others. "I'm sorry, they already
The other children looked alarmed, but Robin cleared his throat and gestured to them. "Tell me, how many of you suspect that Marth, Katarina, Caeda, and Tethys are more than they appear?"

Every hand went up.

"Who here noticed they look eerily similar to four little girls we all know and love?"

Every hand remained up.

Robin heaved a sigh of exasperation. "How many of you already know what I'm about to say?"

Every hand was up... except for Vaike's.

"What?" Vaike demanded when everyone turned to glare at him. "I don't read that magic mumbo-jumbo stuff all that often, give me a break!"

Robin chuckled as he shook his head. "Well, for the sake of formality, here goes. Marth and Caeda are little Lucina and Cynthia, all grown up."

Lucina bowed and Cynthia waved nervously, no one looked all that impressed.

Robin scratched the back of his head, disappointed by the lack of reaction. "Katarina and Tethys are Severa and Morgan all grown up, so congratulations, you've all been hanging out with them the last four years."

Sully connected the dots first. "Holy shit! That means... Kjelle, you got your ass whooped by Ricken!"

She leapt out of her seat and jumped onto the stage, scooping the sputtering Kjelle into her arms and lifting her off the ground. "Geez, what the hell girl? Didn't anyone teach you ramming things doesn't always work?"

Sully was laughing and crying as she said that, Kjelle trying to free herself when a heavy hand landed on her arm. "Kjelle... thank you for answering the call. We're proud of you, my girl."

Kjelle continued to sputter, mind in such a scramble she couldn't speak. Having her parents so welcoming, even after she'd flat out demanded to take her mother's job, was just too much.

The girl that was hiding behind her tried to take shelter behind Kellam's great form, but she squeaked as hands closed over hers. "Oh, Noire... I'm so happy to see you."

Noire turned her eyes to the ground, but she could still see the boots Libra wore. "...Hi, D-daddy..."

Libra wore the gentlest smile anyone had ever seen as he pulled Noire into his arms, humming a lullaby he knew she knew. "Sweet child, I know not what brought you here, but I know this. You are home, and that is all that matters."

Noire choked on something thick, tears gathering in her eyes, when she felt another pair of arms encircle her, the rasp of Tharja's voice setting her on edge. "I should've expected as much when someone mentioned the charm... it's good work, I like it..."

"...It kept you safe, where I could not."

Noire clearly couldn't believe her ears. The other Shepherds though, knew that Tharja loved her
daughter beyond most anything, so the otherwise strange tone she took was expected Noire only remembered the mother whom had drowned in grief though, her mind scrambling to make sense of this warmth.

The taguel jumped as Panne appeared before him, her arms crossed and eyes scanning him. "Uh, hello, mother…"

Panne shook her head and patted his shoulder. "I pushed the last of our kind talk too hard, didn't I?"

"Why, that's no fault of yours!" Virion said as he joined his wife, hand clapping his son's shoulder. "Yarne needed to know his heritage, and it kept him alive to come see us. Though I do admit, he jumps at his own shadow, but was he not brave enough to journey to this place?"

Panne hummed before reaching out and pinching the tuft of blue fur on Yarne's head, the boy flinching. "I guess… we'll just need to get him into shape and all will be well."

"Your warren welcomes you, Yarne de Roseanne. Just know we'll be putting you through your paces with everyone else… and we're glad to see you."

Virion gave Yarne a hand, his son shaking it strongly despite his apparent nerves. "Overjoyed in fact. I'm beyond proud to know my son could make it where no one else could. That's a badge of pride I shall wear unto my last day."

Yarne sniffed and rubbed his eyes, the family exiting the stage with Noire and Kjelle's family.

Laurent stood tall as Miriel picked her way to the stage, an emotional Gregor next to her. "Mother, Father, it's… good to see you."

"My boy!" Gregor cried, rushing forward and crushing Laurent in a hug. "Gregor thought day he see son as grown man far in future. Yet here he stand, making Gregor proud with just presence! Oh, Gregor must make schnitzel to celebrate!

Miriel cleared her throat and Gregor let go of Laurent sheepishly. "It's good to see you well, Laurent. Finding an assistant amongst this sea of buffoons is no longer necessary."

Laurent coughed as he caught his breath, but he was smiling. "Straight to the point as ever, both of you. I would love to be your assistant, Mother. And Father, I have several techniques I've wished to test out with you… and now I have the chance."

Miriel chuckled and embraced him. "Later, Laurent. Tonight, simply be our son, that is all we ask."

Laurent nodded and returned the hug, Gregor picking them both up in a bear hug and carrying them off the stage to much laughter.

All that was left on the stage was the short girl, her eyes on the ground as the tap of a cane filled the air.

The rest of the Shepherds had been quiet after Robin's announcement, waiting to see what transpired. All of them held their breath as Frederick guided Nowi to the stage. "Nah… is that you?"

The girl looked up, purple eyes confirming her identity. Nowi though, saw something different. A doll of obsidian stone with veins of gems running against her body like rivers. The source of her aura was a shining heart of diamond, gleaming like dragon-fire.

"Hello, Mother." The girl said, the picture of politeness. "I… was not expecting to run into you or
Father when I came here."

Frederick smiled gently as they made the stage, towering over the girl. "Nor did we ever expect to see you. It is… heartening, to know you are ok."

Nowi kneeled and held open her arms, almost begging for a hug. "Sweet girl, I don't think Freddy can put that into the right words. We are beyond happy to see you, to know you're ok."

"Really?" Nah asked, the skepticism making Frederick and Nowi frown. "Because I was never under the impression you cared that much when you left me with one of Father's military friends."

Nowi and Frederick shared a wide-eyed look, the others muttering in concern. "Nah, what do you mean? We left you in the care of your aunt, and your grandparents were to take you in should Catherine no longer be able to. Why were you given to another family?"

Nah shook her head, reliving something bitter. "I was never told. It was all I could do to be a dutiful foster child, but no one in that family liked me. I was bitter about it, but I've let it go as I got older."

It sure didn't sound like it to anyone else.

"I've moved past it." Nah continued, still as polite as if she were addressing a stranger. "And so should you. I don't want the sappy stuff like what the others got, so just let me live my life and live yours. Really, that's all I want… oh, and for the little me not to be called Nah."

She laughed a bitter laugh as Nowi began to sniffle and Frederick's face hardened. "You have no idea how much grief such a strange name gives. Who in their right mind names a kid 'Nah' anyway?"

All was silent for a moment before Frederick spoke. "Your name's not Nah."

Everyone save Miriel and Lissa blinked at that. Nah gave voice to her doubt. "Of course it is, everyone calls me that, so it must be my name."

"It isn't…" Nowi whispered, tears streaming down her scars. "Why would we do that? Nah's a nickname, something we started to call you after you used it as your first word. It was only a joke between us, but… I guess no one ever got to tell you your actual name."

Nah heaved in a deep breath, voice raised in desperation. "Then what is it, damn it?! I thought I was cursed with a strange name that would always haunt me as surely as my heritage, but now you're telling me I'm mistaken?!"

"I have been called a mongrel and a monster, a mistake, and that name has been used as proof that I was unwanted! Yet here I stand being told that all of that is because you never bothered to tell me my real name?!"

"What is it?!!"

All were silent as Nah panted, cheeks red from yelling. Nowi in turn was sobbing at hearing her daughter use such words against herself. Frederick internally vowed to find out who this 'friend' was and teach him a lesson.

"…Natalie."

Nah gasped at the name, eyes going to Frederick. "…What?"
"Natalie." Nowi repeated, her sobs slowing to hiccups. "Your name… is Natalie Caomhnóir das Felds, known affectionately as Nah, or Nana, if it's your aunt. We… we named you after an old friend of mine from early in my life, the first person to have ever shown me kindness."

Frederick strode forward and placed a hand on Nah – Natalie's – head. "Your name and nicknames all come from love, my daughter. You may not know this, but when you were born, I retired as head of the royal guard. I'd worked to be worthy of the post almost all my life, yet as I held you in my arms, I found a greater purpose. Were it not for your mother's inability to hold down a job, I'd have stayed home full time."

That got laughs out of the anxious crowd, but Nowi was able to calm down with the levity and inch towards her daughter. "If you wish, we'll all call you Natalie from here on. I don't want the brave woman that came through time to have to suffer any further."

Nah… shook her head. "No… it's fine. I've been Nah for so long, being called Natalie would just be weird."

She giggled, but Nowi could see sparkling gems stream down her eyes. "And a woman? I… I don't know how you became blind, Mother, but I'm no woman. I look like a child, no two-ways about it."

Nowi thought otherwise. With a nod to Frederick, she guided herself to Nah and leaned down to look her in the eye, pristine and milky purple shades meeting in the middle. "I see more than you think, my dear girl, and you are a woman."

"I just need to show you."

Before Nah could say anything, Nowi reached out and tapped her chest, just above her heart. In Nowi's sight, emerald lines bloomed from where she'd touched and merged with the lines in Nah's body, the energy racing for her heart. A moment later, the energy met the heart and light erupted. The same occurred outside, the Shepherds covering their eyes as Nah was engulfed in energy. When it was gone, Frederick had already thrown a cloak over Nah.

Before their eyes, Nah had grown a foot and a half. With all the features of a woman in her early twenties.

Nah blinked rapidly before looking at herself, gob smacked. "…How…?"

"You are my daughter." Nowi said, Frederick making sure Nah was alright. "I had the ability to switch between a child and adult form, but I chose to remain an adult after I fell for your father. After much practice with the sight I have, I was able to recognize the signs and energies that allowed me to take those forms."

"You inherited them. Just needed a little push to get you there."

Nah was too shocked to speak, but her new legs gave out and Frederick had to catch her. "Come along, it's best we get you situated. Knowing what just happened, I bet your clothes don't fit anymore."

Nah nodded, cheeks red, but there were happy tears in her eyes. "I… think I need a haircut too."

Frederick chuckled and picked her up, careful of the brown hair that now scraped the ground. "Indeed. Forgive us, Robin, that took some time, but I'm glad the truth is out now."

Robin nodded and bowed. "I am as well. Please, go be with your daughter, we're almost done."
The Shepherds cheered as the last family left the stage, excited chatter filling the air again as they finished off the last of the food and drink.

Robin, though, had one more thing. "Thank you all for listening to our big reveal, such as it was. While I appreciate no one confronting us about this earlier, please for heaven's sake do so next time. Save us the grief."

The Shepherds laughed and cheered, the newest additions still not entirely sure what to do, though they were beginning to relax.

"Now I have a surprise to present to our first four time-travelers." Robin continued, waving for the younger siblings to join him on stage with their sisters. "After much deliberation, work, and negotiating, we've decided it's time for these girls to take the next step."

He grabbed the curtain and gestured to Cynthia. "Cynthia Falk, in recognition of your service to Ylisse in the past, present, and future, I'm proud to announce that you have been chosen as the first Pegasus Knight of the revived Order to become a Falcon Knight. Step forth and receive the seal of your station."

Cynthia beamed with pride as she stepped forth, but couldn't stop a squeal of excitement as Robin pulled the curtain back to show a pristine set of golden armor, the uniform of a Falcon Knight.

"Your mother provided the measurements, so we're sure it fits." Robin continued as he let Cynthia gush over her new armor. "We've also gotten Selene outfitted in her new armor as well. I look forward to seeing you make your first report in it."

Cynthia whipped around and hugged him before jumping off the stage and flying into the laughing arms of her parents, thanks filling the air as she almost cried in joy.

"Morgan Volk," Robin continued, pride radiating from both him and his daughter. "In recognition of your service to Ylisse in the past, present, and future, I'm proud to announce you are the first Pegasus Knight of the new Order to become a Dark Flier. Step forth and receive the seal of your station."

Morgan was almost bouncing out of her boots as Robin moved the curtain back again. She squealed in glee as the uniform of dark leather and steel came into the light, Morgan immediately began to gush over the pauldrons and leg shields.

"We've had Theresa outfitted for the task as well." Robin said, Morgan turning around and leaping into his arms. "Your mother and I designed this set too, so we know you'll love it. Go thank her, and I'll see you doing it proud tomorrow."

Morgan nodded against his chest and kissed his cheek before flying off the stage and into Cordelia's waiting arms. Mother and daughter laughed and cheered alongside the others, Robin watching the scene warmly.

But he didn't want to keep the elder daughters waiting. "Lucina Falk."

Lucina strode forward, her family cheering loudly at her proud stance.

"In recognition of your service to Ylisse in the past, present, and future…" Robin continued, voice loud enough to be heard over the excitement. "I'm proud to announce that you have earned the title of Morningstar, a title that has stood empty for centuries in respect to the brave princess that saved Ylisse from its greatest war following the fall of Grima. Step forth and claim that which was made for you."
Lucina strode forth with all the professional grace she held, but even she could not help the smile that broke through when Robin pulled the curtain back further still. The armor that awaited her was dark blue edged in gold, from the breastplate to her gauntlets, greaves, and boots. A new cape had been sewn using her old one as a base and a shield that resembled the mask she once wore hung next to the armor.

Lucina turned and bowed, no words able to express her gratitude.

"May it serve you well on the battlefield." Robin said with a smile. "Your father and mother designed it, but the shield was a true strike of inspiration from your aunt. You'll have to thank her later."

Lucina knew what he meant and smiled before returning to her family where she was enveloped in a proud embrace.

Finally, there was only Severa, and the crowd hushed as they awaited what Robin had in store for her. This was his eldest daughter after all, and everyone knew that Robin cared deeply for his daughters, so what special surprise had he saved for last?

"Severa Volk," Robin said, silencing the last whispers. "In recognition of your service to Ylisse in the past, present, and future I'm proud to announce that you have been granted the title Grandmaster. Only two have held this post before today, and now you join the ranks of the esteemed. Step forth and claim that which you have earned."

Severa strode up to the curtain as Robin pulled it back the rest of the way, tears gathering in her eyes. "So… that's where my coat went."

Robin almost laughed. The others had been too excited to make a quip, but that was Severa for ya. "Yeah, sorry about that. Had to steal it so your mother could make the changes."

Severa shook her head and inspected the armor. It was bright gold, just like Dad's but made for a woman. The workmanship was excellent though and she silently thrilled at the cowl that had been added and the new designs that her mother had sewn in. It was everything she could've asked for. And it was all on her own merit.

Robin grunted as Severa sprinted into him, nose digging into his chest as she started to cry. "Thank you… thank you… you have no idea… how much this means to me… to us…"

Robin embraced his daughter tenderly, cheers roaring around them. It was a good night, a time where rewards could be meted out to the worthy and families could be reunited. Now they had a few days to let the new situation sink in before going back to work.

Which likely involved a trip to the Isle of Crows.

-Plegia, Xaldornos-

Within the Plegian capital, the county's new king pondered the message he'd been given.

"Ylisse finally wants to meet. Master's plan is proceeding as expected."

Validar tapped the armrest of his throne, gazing around in thought. Obviously, they'd agree to give Ylisse the ships needed to fight Valm, let their enemies destroy themselves before getting crushed under the might of Grima. The question was if they should go ahead with the ambush on Carrion Isle.
"You might as well." A voice spoke from the doorway and a hooded figure entered the room. "It will test the meddlers and see if the Shepherds have the power to match the Valmese. The Old Gods have chosen them as their champions, but if they cannot stand before the newest batch, then everything is lost."

Validar waved his hand, a purple miasma raising a simple Risen. "I have a feeling they'll be just fine. I have already sent the time and place, they'll come to us, my master. All shall happen as foretold."

The hooded figure chuckled and looked up, six glowing red eyes shining from the shadows. "Indeed, it shall. I will take my leave… oh, before I go."

The figure snapped its fingers and Validar stiffened, his red eyes changing to familiar planes of frozen color. "What… is going on…?"

"Congratulations, Validar." The demon laughed, looking the stunned man in the eye. "You're a grandfather twice over! None alive can claim that now, can they?"

Validar blinked rapidly and snarled. "You… you bastard-!

The figure snapped his fingers and Validar stiffened again, red returning to his eyes. "…Forgive me, master. That was unbecoming."

"That's quite alright." The demon chuckled, turning and leaving the room.

"I'd be concerned if you weren't shocked, Father."
Isle of Crows

It took a week after repelling the vanguard to set up the meeting with Plegia.

In the interim, the time travelers began to acclimate. With their existence in the open amongst the Shepherds, it was at least somewhat relieving to not have to hide every time a Shepherd passed by.

Didn't make the transition easy though, as Nah was sure to point out.

"Why are we doing this?" Nah asked as she followed her father through the camp. Her week had been spent getting used to her older form and learning to switch between it and her dragon form. This meant learning how to walk with much longer legs, getting new clothes, and altogether learning to function.

"It's paramount you get used to walking around like this." Frederick answered, nodding to a passing patrol. "You will be amongst the soldiers, so overcoming your nerves of being seen is a necessary step."

Nah sighed and looked down. She was wearing white and red clothes that flowed over her body, but retained greater modesty than her mother who was unafraid to flaunt her legs. Nah preferred a longer skirt under the robes that fell to her knees and equally long boots. There were still some frills, she was fond of them, but they only appeared on the bodice.

It was just so damn weird being the center of attention. Most of the others, while respecting her age, found themselves flummoxed trying to speak with this new Nah. Sure, it was satisfying to get Laurent blushing, but it was still weird feeling the soldiers stare.

"Your nerves are understandable." Frederick said. "But please, know that I walk with pride knowing you're here. I simply wish you to be comfortable, but there's little time to prepare."

Nah sighed again and nodded. "Thanks, but it's just so weird. I had my mind made up I wouldn't be able to do this for a long time. Assuming of course everyone lived that long."

Frederick shook his head and flicked her ear, drawing an indignant yelp. "Your pessimism needs work as well. Keeping expectations realistic is the duty of any sensible knight, but losing yourself in it is as good as admitting defeat."

Frederick knew his daughter well, for an offended fire flared in her eyes. "Like hell I'll ever admit defeat! I wouldn't be here if I gave up, and you know it!"

Frederick smirked and started guiding her down a familiar path. "There's the fire. Now that we've taken your mind off things, it's time for everyone's favorite time of the day."

"Unless of course, you'd like to assist in the forge?"

Nah froze as she realized the ploy. It was either endure her father's Fanatical Fitness Hour™ and be subject to every wandering pair of eyes or become living bellows.

But let it never be said a dragon backed down from a challenge. "Fine, but don't be surprised when I leave you bruised."

Frederick chuckled. "Oh dear girl, you could only wish."
Nah began to protest as they made for the training field, milky purple eyes watching them go in amusement. "They're getting along better."

Severa glanced up from the report she'd been reading to Nowi. "Oh, you mean Uncle and… Nah? Damn it, I want to call her Natalie now, but I just can't."

Nowi giggled. "Well, it's hard for her too, and she insists we still call her Nah. It's enough to have her here though, and I'm glad the others have taken to your true identities so well. Surprised they had already figured it out, but glad nonetheless."

She winked at Severa, who felt the urge to rub at her new armor. "The promotion suits you, Sev. How is it being Robin's equal?"

"Exhausting." Severa groaned, the report forgotten. "It's like the gods saw fit to double his duties just so I could have an equal workload when I got the position. I can't tell you how many commanders have come knocking just to request a unit or two get shuffled around."

Nowi hummed and looked around, sharp ears, heh, picking up the numerous conversations going on around them. "The soldiers are getting antsy, same with the commanders. They all know we need Plegia's support in this but they're upset with how long it's taking."

"It's a week-long round trip." Severa groused. "Today's the earliest we'd get a message back. You'd think all the reforms and revised training would make them patient."

Nowi giggled, but Robin's arrival interrupted her answer. "We have the Valmese fleet stationed at Origin Peak, it's no surprise they're antsy with the enemy so close by while we wait. Their zeal from the first battle is making them desire a fight, but that's why cooler heads lead."

Severa grunted in agreement before nodding to the small stack of parchment Robin was carrying. "True enough, but what's all that? I thought we got the transfers and logistic reports done this morning."

Robin shrugged. "Oh, it's just a copy of the message from Plegia. The messenger got in about an hour ago, but I only got to start looking for you just now."

Severa stared at him, befuddled. "Wait, really? Why didn't you send a page or something, that's important!"

Robin held out the stack, which Severa took and started to look over. "It's because an argument started the minute the report was done. Plegia has set the meeting place as Carrion Isle, which is as ominous as it sounds, and we need to be there in four days."

Nowi gasped. "That soon? We can't send an appropriate set of representatives and an honor guard in so short a time. Unless… oh no."

Robin nodded as Nowi realized what the argument was about. "Yep, Chrom has decided he'll be heading up the representatives. The new Plegian King is supposed to be there, so it makes some sense, but he's insisting only myself and Sumia go with him."

"Like hell!" Severa shouted, dropping her volume when everyone stopped to stare at her. "There is no way whatsoever we're sending three people into the viper pit. I don't care if the new king is Naga incarnate, he goes with the Shepherds at least or not at all."

Nowi nodded. "Big time. Carrion Isle got the name because of Plegian clans betraying one another; the corpses outnumbered the people. Doesn't matter if it's a halfway point, the connotations are less
"Agreed." Robin said as Severa finished reading. "We've already informed the commanders to watch the camp while we're gone. They've finally started working on converting the two Valmese ships we captured. Hopefully, this goes well, we return, and off we go."

Severa sighed. "To fight the Valmese, great. Alright, lead the way, I know you need someone to help with getting our supplies in order. Auntie, you should probably go find your family. We'll probably announce our departure before long."

Robin shrugged and walked off, Severa jogging after him. Nowi gave them a wave goodbye before slipping into the crowd. Once she was gone, Robin tapped Severa's pauldron. "This stuff treating you well? I'm still damn proud to see you wear it, but I need your honest opinion."

"I always give it." Severa laughed. "But it's been good so far. Spars are good, I can still move really well, and the extra protection has saved me from some nasty welts. All-in-all, I love it, just need to put it through real combat now."

Robin shook his head, ruing the idea. "I'd always prefer it only see a test in spars, but this entire negotiation looks more like a trap every time I think about it. We'll need to be on top of our game, if only so we don't get caught with our trousers down."

Severa snorted, a memory rising to the surface. "That reminds me of the time Uncle Vaike got locked out of the barracks a couple years ago. Remember, during the winter Aunt Cherche came back?"

Robin blinked before laughing. "Yeah, I do. Poor guy got stuck out in his underclothes after the latch got stuck. Had to take shelter in the stables if memory serves, only for Cherche to find him when she came back that morning. Talk about a reunion."

Severa gave him a smile. "Did I ever tell you that Morgan didn't arrive in the same place after we went through the gate? Trust me, when we ran into each other again, there was a lot of crying."

Robin did remember that. For whatever reason, it seemed the Shepherds had a penchant for dramatic reunions. And considering the rest of the couples whose children had yet to appear, there were bound to be more.

"And we're here." Robin muttered as they arrived at the so called 'Big Tent'. Judging by the exasperated looks Kellam and Stahl had slapped across their faces as they stood guard, Chrom was still trying to convince the others his idea was the best.

Robin needed to put a stop to his friend's attempt at strategy, it never ended well.

"Alright, that's enough." Robin declared as he entered the tent.

As he expected, most of the Shepherds were crammed into the tent, everyone turned to look at him. Sumia and Lucina looked positively aggravated, while Cynthia was going for the full-frontal assault complete with tears.

How that hadn't swayed Chrom yet was baffling.

"Robin, back me up here." Chrom tried, hoping his old friend could help. "No one seems to realize that we need the Shepherds here in case the Valmese try something. You, me, and Sumia can take care of anything Plegia cooks up, there's no need to bring everyone."

Robin paused as if considering this, drawing many skeptical looks in the process. Then he shook his
head and crushed Chrom's hopes. "You aren't going anywhere without the Shepherds. Have some faith in your commanders, not to mention Flavia and Basilio. Those two can run this whole show like we're not here anyway, so your argument's moot. We're going with, if only to temper your impulses."

Chrom held onto the stubborn look for another moment before the weight of the Shepherd's broke even his steel will. "Alright, fine. But if something big happens, I get to gloat."

"As you have promised the last dozen times we've overruled you." Sumia sighed, making the others laugh. "Seriously Chrom, you're Exalt and a father twice over, how have you not suppressed the impulse to charge into danger?"

Chrom shrugged and smirked at her. "Would I be the man you love if I did?"

Sumia rolled her eyes but kissed his cheek. "There are days I wonder, but probably not. Alright people get started on packing. We'll send out departure times after a quick chat with our Grandmasters."

The Shepherds voiced their understanding before streaming out of the tent, conversation on the many needs of packing filling the air. Once they were gone, Robin strode to the table that dominated the center of the tent, Severa right beside him. "So, this is the map of Carrion Isle?"

Chrom grew serious and nodded. "It's a few years old, so you know. The messenger didn't get a detailed look, so this is the best we got."

This last part went to Severa, who was poring over the map with the same intensity as her father. "I see. I will say that this place has valleys galore, great for ambushes and traps. We'll need to be careful on the way in and out in case something nefarious is being brewed."

"I'll give it a good scouting." Cynthia assured them, standing proud in her armor with the crocodile tears nowhere to be seen. "Especially for Risen. After that stunt they pulled in Xaldornos with Aunty, we can't be too careful."

Sumia sighed in agreement. "At least she can come out of the gem once we're away from the main force. Heaven knows she must be bored cooped up in that thing all day."

"She takes the time to come spar with us, actually." Lucina informed them, making the others stare at her in shock. "What? She's not opposed to training, just unneeded bloodshed. Well, bloodshed in general, but she's more than willing to help with the Risen."

The very idea of Emmeryn raining a corona of destruction upon the undead sent Chrom into hysterics. Sumia wasn't far behind, nor was Cynthia, but even Severa had to cover her mouth and stifle giggles.

"That disturbing image aside," Robin drawled. "We all know what we'll be asking of Plegia, yes?"

He got nods all around. "Then to recap, we're requesting ships and extra funds in exchange for our manpower and protection. Assuming that doesn't go over well, we're willing to offer reparations for the Purge that occurred nearly twenty years ago and assistance in rebuilding the country should it be desired. Anything to add?"

"We're giving the reparations regardless." Sumia reminded. "It's been far too long as is. Beyond that, I can't think of anything."

Everyone voiced similar thoughts, so Severa began to mark the map. "Then let's start making a route.
The message only specified we get there in four days, not how we got there."

The royals and Grandmasters gathered around, chatter and suggestions filtering from the tent for several hours as the Shepherds, new additions and all, prepared to leave.

-Cordelia-

"Cordelia! We need you back at camp, it's important!"

Cordelia looked up from her current task of converting a warship into something the Shepherds could use. "Lissa? What's going on?"

"The messenger got back." Lissa panted as she jogged up. "I already signaled Morgan to join us as I was running over here, but you didn't respond when I tried to signal you too."

Cordelia blinked before calling over a sergeant. After passing her task to him, she turned on a dime and made for the Shepherd's camp, Lissa fell in step beside her. "Did we get that meeting?"

"Yeah, but it's taking place on Carrion Isle." Lissa sighed, Cordelia frowned in answer. "I've seen the map; the whole place is covered in valleys and cliffs. The entire company's coming with us while Flavia and Basilio keep things going here. Everything goes well, we're back here and on the water within a week."

Cordelia ran a hand through her hair. "And if it goes south, we're out of luck. Plegia has to see this is a matter of mutual annihilation, not even the most fanatic Grimleal would let such a thing occur."

"I'm not so sure." Lissa muttered. "Regardless, we need to pack in a hurry. Would you mind helping Miriel get the caravan set up? I need to help Maribelle and Libra get all our medicine in order."

Cordelia nodded and Lissa peeled off toward the medical tents. Once she was gone, Cordelia lengthened her stride and made the Shepherd's camp just in time to witness Morgan attempting to carry three barrels into a wagon.

"Woah there!" Cordelia called as Morgan stumbled, just barely righting the precarious stack. "You're carrying a bit much don't you think?"

Morgan giggled and started forward. "Nah, not really. This is nothing considering what Aunt Sully put me through back in Ferox during the rebellion. I just got lost in my thoughts."

Cordelia still took the topmost barrel as she followed her daughter. "You should still be able to see, no matter what. What's got you thinking so hard?"

"Just things." Morgan answered. "You know, now that the excitement's worn off, I kinda miss just being one of the Knights. Getting the promotion… everyone calls me 'ma'am' or 'commander' now. I mean, I thought I was done with that after finally breaking my squad in but…"

Cordelia smiled and laughed. "You'll just have to get used to it. Heaven knows I hated getting that treatment, but it faded after a while. Now I just ignore it for the important parts."

They deposited their loads, Morgan stared at the barrels while Cordelia focused on her. "I guess, but it'll be a while for sure. Oh right, Dad wants to talk with you later. I have a Pegasus that needs grooming first, but I'll see you later. I really want to see that maneuver you've been talking about."

Cordelia waved as Morgan wandered into the sea of tents, other Shepherds and supplies swiftly taking her attention away from her daughter. Morgan, for her part, made a beeline for the tent she
shared with Severa once Cordelia was out of sight.

Once there, she ducked inside to find her sister taking off her armor. "You ready?"

Severa nodded and finished removing her armor, coat and shirt joining the metal. Morgan hurried over to a small stack of bottles hidden in the corner of the tent and grabbed a bottle made of dark metal. Turning around, she found Severa had already lain across the cot, face down and back bare.

Morgan gulped as she looked over her sister's back. The mark had continued to grow in the years they'd been with their family, albeit much slower thanks to the joy they'd experienced, but it had now reached the middle of Severa's back.

It was starting to change too, the original six eyes and wings slowly twisting into a facsimile of a dragon that both knew all too well.

Taking a deep breath, Morgan opened the bottle and poured the concoction into her hands, the dark-blue sludge coating her skin. Once she had enough, she began to spread the sludge over Severa's mark and knead it into her skin.

After several minutes, the sludge began to change until it matched Severa's skin tone, the mark disappearing. With that done, Morgan sighed and helped her sister sit up. "We need to find more of this, we're running out. I'd say one more coating for both of us after I'm done and that's it."

Severa shook her head. "We'd need to go to Anna again, and she's bound to be suspicious. I was told that bottle would last a year, but it's only been four months."

"I didn't think my mark would start growing too." Morgan mumbled as she started to remove her armor. "But we're going to be on a ship for at least two months soon, there won't be time to get another bottle. We don't know how this… cover is going to work with sea water either."

"Can't we at least tell Dad about this? I know I'm scared and you're scared but…"

Severa glared at her sister, the heat in her gaze making Morgan squeak. "Fear has nothing to do with it, this is about survival. If this gets out, anyone with any sense will want us dead. Our friends will want us dead, the Shepherds will want us dead. To them, it may be a mercy, or even revenge."

Morgan wilted, mind casting back to the time they'd fled from. Everyone had sworn to defeat Grima and his agents, no matter what they must do or who they must fight.

…Even those whose only crime was being born, lest they be waiting for a chance to strike.

"Morgan, I wish we could tell them." Severa soothed, regretting her anger. "I wish there was some way to be free of this, to know that we wouldn't harm those we care for and have them know it too. But you've seen their conviction first hand. No one will stand for a threat to Ylisse or the world…"

"…Not even if it's us."

Morgan nodded, a resigned air settling over her. Severa pulled her into a hug, ruing that this argument had taken place once again. "Come on, let's get you covered. We still have work to do."

Morgan clenched her fists behind Severa's back before pulling away and finishing her disrobement. Severa stared tiredly at the mark that now snaked around the sides of her sister's breasts, but poured the sludge onto her hands anyway. Once Morgan's mark was gone, they got dressed again.
"We'll be fine, ok Morgan?" Severa tried to make her voice optimistic as they prepared to leave. "I've always made sure we made it through, and I don't plan on failing this time."

Morgan sighed through her nose. "I know sis… and I trust you. Let's go whip some tail."

Severa would normally roll her eyes in amusement, but there was no humor to be found as Morgan left. All that remained was uncertainty and the fear that all their work and loyalty to the cause would mean nothing before the blood that flowed through them.

The world was cruel.

Severa shook her head and started to pack, neither of the sisters noticing a grim Gaius skulking in the shadows outside their tent.

He clutched a notepad in his hand, exact sketches of their marks painting the paper.

_I can't go to anyone but Sunshine with this. I can at least play it off as finding the marks during the trek to Carrion Isle, but now I'm scared to know what they mean. Bubbles comes from Grimleal nobility, that's what his mark means, and their marks are different from Bubbles, if they're changing._

If it was what he suspected, based on the idea that the head-over-heels Lucina would _kill_ her girlfriend and hopeful sister-in-law over it…

This trip to Plegia suddenly bore a much more sinister air.

As for how he knew about all this, especially when Severa and Lucina had yet to publicize their relationship…

Well, no one was kidding when they called him the Exalted Shadow.

_Four Days Later, Outside Plegia Castle_

Gaius didn't always like when his intuition was right.

Sunshine had gotten a look at his sketches after they'd entered Plegian territory yesterday, only to immediately start questioning where Gaius had seen the symbols.

He was able to show her the markings on a cliffside, the carvings his work after sneaking off the previous night. It had calmed Tharja down at least, but her explanation wasn't what he was hoping for.

Basically, the marks were signs of advancement towards what the Grimleal called 'Grima's Enlightenment'. The marks showed just how much of Grima's power was flowing through the individual's blood, the more elaborate the marks the greater the power. The vessel with which the Grimleal hoped to contain Grima's power would not experience a change in their mark; those who did would become increasingly susceptible to the Fell Dragon's influence.

And madness.

Tharja called them prophets according to Grimleal teachings, the most advanced and complicated markings supposedly allowing Grima to speak and act through the marked. Thus the prophet part, but Gaius knew Tharja grew more suspicious the paler he got during the explanation.

Morgan wasn't terribly far along, being at least another few years out from reaching the middle stage. Severa, on the other hand… she was starting to approach the advanced stage. In other words, they
had a year at best to try and find a solution before Severa might lose her mind and become a Grimleal prophet.

...Damn, that was a scary thought. He'd seen her turn an entire battalion of training dummies into ash with one spell and Robin was starting to teach her how to channel lightning to go with it.

Regardless, he'd been sitting on the information for the entire trip, trying to figure out how he was going to break this to Robin and Cordelia. The only thing that kept his mind off the trouble was scouting and keeping himself busy.

Not even the revelation that Robin had what appeared to be a twin working as the Plegian Hierophant had done much to shock him. That was revealed after their meeting with the Plegian King, Validar, which otherwise ended in stunning success. They were given all the funding and ships they could need, Validar even graciously accepting the reparations Blue and Stumbles had come up with over the Purge.

Stumbles, Blue, Mother, and Bubbles were all beyond unnerved though. Even Freddykins had been on edge since the meeting ended, describing an aura of general despair and malice that had hung over an otherwise genial meeting.

Validar had even brought in Aversa, who many had thought died in the turmoil since she'd fallen off the map. They were certainly relaxed, if what Gaius heard was correct, even graciously offering several gifts of friendship between the nations. So, the question everyone was asking after all that…?

Why did Validar and Aversa sound so wooden and rehearsed with the Hierophant in the room? It was like they'd done this meeting a dozen times.

Gaius really couldn't think on that though. The Shepherds had, after much deliberation, chosen a valley to settle for the night. While it was easy to get trapped in, they'd set up a number of fortifications to hold off any surprise attacks while everyone got organized.

As the moon rose, so did Gaius. He knew sitting on the information about Severa and Morgan could wait no longer, so he needed to find Bubbles. The problem was, even with a full moon, it would take time for Gaius to find him.

At least until he felt a twinge in his mind that erupted into a full-fledged migraine. It wasn't his though, as he had to remind himself, it was coming from the mark he'd placed on Robin. The mark in question was a talisman that allowed Gaius to track whatever it was attached to, but only if he focused.

With his destination in mind, Gaius melted into the shifting shadows and raced toward Robin. Barely a second passed before he rose out of Robin's shadow, his friend panting heavily as if he'd been winded. "Bubbles, what the hell happened?"

"Validar..." Robin gasped, breath coming in gulps. "He... called me his son... did something that... made my mind scream, like... he was trying to invade..."

Gaius frowned as the news from the meeting popped to the front of his mind. "The hierophant, you said they were identical to you. If he's also Validar's son, you could be twins."

"Loathe... as I am to say it..." Robin panted, breath slowly steadying. "I did feel... a strange connection... to him. It would... explain a lot."

Gaius hummed and looked back to see Chrom thundering towards them. "Blue, he's fine. Said something about Validar calling him son and it explaining a lot. Said he felt a connection and that
Validar tried to get in his head."

Chrom growled before going to his friend's side. "Robin, can you walk? We need you back at camp, there's an ambush underway like we suspected."

Robin groaned but straightened. "Yeah… yeah, I'm ok now. Sorry Chrom, Gaius, I don't know what that was about. Frankly… I really don't want to know anything further about my past now, especially since it looks like the Grimleal are more heavily involved than I thought."

Gaius grimaced, Robin was closer to the mark than he realized.

"Regardless, we have Risen on top of us." Chrom said, steel entering his voice. "Let's take care of them first. Be aware, they're far more organized than usual, so we can't have the mages line up and get some practice in."

Robin nodded and they dashed off, Gaius shaking his head as he melted into shadow again.

*I'll tell him after we're done here. He deserves to know, even if it comes on the heels of that mess.*

He thought no more as he rose from the shadows again, the Mani Katti slicing through a Risen's neck.

It was going to be a long night.

-Severa-

"Blow those suckers up!"

Morgan and Miriel heeded her command immediately, turning a group of Risen trying to flank Gregor into flaming chunks. The fight had started like a wildfire, quick and brutal, only the preparations they’d made beforehand kept the Shepherds from suffering unacceptable casualties.

Even still, the Risen were organized and surprisingly cunning, several of the Shepherds sustaining nasty wounds when the Risen used their lesser brethren to tunnel behind their lines and attack from below. That was solved when Kellam came forth, slammed his spear into the earth, and buried the tunnels with the Risen in them.

The drop-in numbers barely stopped the monster though, even as the wounded Shepherds fell back to heal. It left far too few to defend against the onslaught, but they were leveraging superior skill and equipment to the fullest while Severa earned her title once more.

"Lucy, gut that archer and move on!"

Lucina blurred forward and bisected an archer. She wielded a discarded lance to keep Risen knights and fliers at bay while she retreated to the body of the Shepherds again.

"Morgan, another dose to the right!" Severa shouted again, voice growing hoarse. "Vaike, rip that knight off his horse! Virion, Noire, cover fire!"

Arrows whistled through the air, sending Risen to the dirt in droves. Noire was no slouch, but Virion was capable of stringing three arrows at a time and hitting accurately despite the force required to draw his bow. Noire made up for it in range, sniping Risen far in the rear.

Vaike roared into what remained, Armads whipping around him in a twister of carnage. Everything it hit was crushed or sliced, rotten limbs and blood staining the ground. Vaike rushed through the
carnage, sustaining many a wound that only drove his fury, until he reached the knight Severa had designated.

It was quite a sight, Vaike ripping the thing off its horse and beating it to death with said mount.

Heat bloomed on the right, Morgan unleashing her personal tome on the Risen. She'd named it Immolate after the effect her unique enchantments wrought on the spell, burning the Risen from the inside out.

Another gout of flame joined a moment later, a huge murder of crows descending on the field. The feathers and birds were so thick in the air, it was amazing anyone could see past their nose.

"Nyahahaha!" A youthful voice laughed, fire consuming another pair of Risen. "You guys look like a lost cause! Need a hand against these bozos? I have to warn you, they're already dead!"

Severa knew that terrible humor anywhere, her thoughts confirmed when the crows dispersed to show a young man with white hair wearing dark mage robes.

"Who are you?" Frederick demanded as he thundered forward. "Begone from this place, the Risen shall show no mercy to you boy!"

The boy kept grinning, a snap of his fingers crushing the Risen that tried to attack him between purple spikes. "Oh, I'm here to help actually. The crows wanted to give a message, they said you're… what's the word…?"

He thought for a moment before seeming to remember. "Right, you're trapped!"

"I can see that!" Severa roared as she sent a spear of lighting into a group of Risen that were starting to overwhelm Donnel. "Now do you have a name, or are you going to stand there?!"

The man laughed again before bowing. "The name's Henry! Show me the enemy and I'll make a bloody mess of 'em. Nyahahaha… blood…"

Severa was somehow glad Henry retained his morbid sense of humor. "Well they ain't got much blood, but I'll take what I can get. Frederick, take this guy up the cliffs with Vaike and Nowi, clear them out! The others should be back before long."

Frederick nodded begrudgingly before riding up the cliff, Henry catching a ride while Vaike after them. Nowi's dragon form swooped in pursuit.

Once that was done, Severa ran to the top of their fortifications and gave the field a look. So far, they were pushing the Risen back, but the closer they got, the greater the Risen's skill and strength. That meant they were closing in on the chief, but just knowing it was on the bridge didn't help.

Sumia and Cynthia had reported archers with longbows set up on all sides, trying to approach by air was suicide.

"Severa, looks like you've got everything under control." Robin said as he bound up the flimsy wall. "And your mother already told me about the archers. I have an idea, but we'll need you and Ricken."

Severa glanced at him before nodding. "Alright, just don't take out the bridge. We need that to get out of here."

"What do you take me for?" Robin teased before pointing into the field. "Besides, the wounded have healed. I've given Chrom the orders and Gaius has started on the archers. Once the chief is gone, we
can get out of here."

Severa watched as the full might of the Shepherds charged forth, Risen falling like wheat before a scythe. Where they’d once been pushed thin, now they crushed the Risen underfoot.

Seeing Aunt Sumia impale one such Risen through the split in its pants though… even Severa felt sympathy for the monster.

Ricken chose then to ride up, wind twirling around him like a living creature. "Alright Robin, I'm here! What's the plan?"

Robin pointed towards the bridge, a shit-eating grin on his face. "I want you to use Forseti and create a tunnel over the bridge! Severa's going to send a fireball into the opening and you're going to feed it before sending the whole mess onto that bastard's head!"

Ricken blinked. "You mean what we did with Miriel all those years ago? Alright, I just hope that bridge isn't made of exploding rocks."

Robin gave him a blank look as an errant fireball from Cordelia splashed against the bridge. Which didn't explode.

"Point taken, stop giving me that look."

Robin nodded and raised his hand. "Let's get to it, Lon'qu's having way too much fun."

Severa snorted, spotting the sword-master turn five Risen into chunks in the blink of an eye. His wife was no slouch either, Tyrfing turning a further three Risen to smoke in one move.

Olivia made everything look graceful.

"Sev, we're ready."

Severa blinked and looked up, a spiraling tunnel of wind over her head. Damn, that was quick. "Ok, so do you need a large ball or small?"

"Small please." Ricken gritted out, eyes narrowed in concentration. "I can't control anything larger than that. On my mark… now!"

Severa sent the fire into the vortex, Ricken's hands swirling and twisting to guide the wind and flame through the sky. He had to move with the tunnel, which was made easier by his horse, but Robin and Severa jumped down to escort him.

"Protect Ricken!"

The order flew from father and daughter at the same time, the Shepherds heeding the call and forming an impassable blockade around the straining mage. Risen in numbers they never imagined charged from the woods and earth, eager to end the mage.

The Shepherds stopped them cold. Destruction of every stripe and name returned the corpses to the dead as the vortex advanced, the fire within growing with each passing second. It was a slog, and the Risen began to find gaps in their defenses, but Ricken brought it to an end.

With a roar and a great heave, the vortex slammed into the top of the valley-spanning bridge, hellfire consuming all in its path. A moment later, the Risen fell to smoke, even those that had yet to be smote by the Shepherds.
All held their guard for a moment before relaxing, the battle over.

A flash of light appeared amongst them, the glint of a dagger and glowing red eyes showed a Risen diving for Chrom's throat.

None could react fast enough to turn the blade aside, but they didn't need to. The assassin's dagger shattered against Chrom's skin, steel replacing flesh, and Cynthia carved out the assassin's spine.

This time everyone was on guard for several moment before relaxing, the Shepherds splitting into groups to take stock of the battle. If ever they were thankful for Chrom receiving that ability, it was times like this. Made him a lot easier to guard when he could turn himself into a living suit of armor.

Robin went to the new face first, Chrom right beside him. "Who are you?"

"The name's Henry!" He laughed, playing with a dismembered Risen hand. "I'm a mage, and I wanted to help out! Join up too if I can, there's a lot of things going on that I want to be part of. Easiest way is with you."

Chrom folded his arms. "I assume you're not some sort of spy then? We have quite the ability to get the truth out of someone, so lying isn't in your best interest."

"Spy?" Henry laughed, eyes never opening. "No-no, I'm not subtle enough to do that. In truth, I'm a crow in a human's body trying to get out... or is it the other way around? Bah, I don't know, I just want to come along."

Robin and Chrom shared very skeptical glances, but Chrom looked up to see Nowi staring at Henry. When she nodded, Chrom rubbed his head. "Alright, I won't turn down another pair of hands. You'll be working with the other mages, so report to Miriel. She's wearing spectacles, can't miss her."

Henry chuckled again before dashing off, Robin getting straight to the point. "This ambush has Validar written all over it. Why he'd do such a thing, I don't know, but we've got to do something."

"What can we do?" Chrom asked. "He's given us ships and funds, we can't go back on that. We'll have to leave it until the Valmese are defeated, but I fear we won't sleep peacefully with that in the back of our minds."

Robin sighed and looked to the moon. "Yeah... that's sounds right."

He spotted a shock of orange hair walking up to them. "Gaius, what's going on?"

Gaius shook his head grimly. "Bubbles, I need to talk with you privately. It's about your girls."

Robin felt a thrill of alarm run through him. Morgan wasn't injured, he'd seen her hold the line valiantly alongside Kjelle and Nah. Nor was Severa, who he could see discussing the battle with Laurent and Lucina.

It may have been off topic, but he had to admire the other children. Their first time alongside the Shepherds, and they'd done very well. Even Yarne, who acted like a craven, was a surprisingly good scout from what he'd overheard Panne saying.

"Robin." Gaius said, making Robin snap back to reality. "I mean it when I say this is serious. Blue, can we be alone for a bit?"

Chrom furrowed his brow but nodded. Gaius only dropped the nicknames when he was about to deliver bad news of the worst kind. "Very well. We'll get out of this valley before long though, so be
quick."

Gaius and Robin barely acknowledged him as he left. Instead, they went to a secluded spot away from the camp.

"What is this about?" Robin asked, serious as death. "What's going on with my daughters?"

Gaius shook his head and pulled out his notepad, flipping to the page with the marks before showing them to Robin. "This look familiar to you?"

Robin raised a brow before shaking his head. "Not really. They look kind of like my mark, but a lot more elaborate, especially the first one. What does this have to do with my daughters?"

Gaius sighed and told Robin about the marks, their history first, and Robin's face grew thoughtful then apprehensive at Giaus' reasons for telling him this – Severa and Morgan. Gaius mentioned the Grimleal and Robin's hand went unconsciously to his own mark.

Gaius didn't think he'd ever see Bubbles afraid, but he was now. Unfortuanetly, Gaius finally uttered the word Robin didn't want to hear, about the girls bearing the marks, their roles as vessels to the Grimleal and to Grima and every emotion building in Robin snapped.

"You lie!" Robin all but roared, lightning frying the ground around him. "This… this cannot be! My children do not carry such a curse, nothing is written of it!"

Gaius was unfazed by the crackling energy. "Do you really think I'd make such a claim if I hadn't gone straight to the source? Tharja herself recognized the marks and gave me the info, even tried to get me to spill on where I found them in her equivalent of a panic. I bull-shitted some cliff carvings, so she doesn't know. Calm down already."

Robin kept huffing in anger, but the light show died down. Once it was gone, Robin became desperate. "There has to be a way to reverse the progression, right? Like some kind of poultice or something? I'm sure if we tell the others-!"

Gaius slapped a hand over his mouth and retreated into the bush, Cordelia jogging up to their spot. "Robin, are you ok? We just saw you let loose!"

Gaius gave Robin a hard glare, sobering the hysterical man as the hand was removed. "Um, yes love! Gaius just told me something upsetting about the Risen strategies, I'm fine!"

Cordelia looked uncertain but smiled. "Alright… come talk to me later, I'll be glad to listen."

Robin returned the smile and Cordelia went back to the camp. Once she was gone, Gaius came out of the bush. "Robin, I wanted to tell the others too, so we could start working on this. The problem's the other kids."

Robin's glare demanded he explain, and fast.

"Look, it seems the other kids can't stand anything related to Grima." Gaius sighed. "I can't blame them either, considering what they came back from. Problem is, your girls are convinced that if word of this reaches their friends, they'll kill them. Just so they won't become agents to Grima. Hell, they'd think it a mercy before coming after you."

Robin began to crackle again. "They won't touch my family, damn what they believe! I will turn their entire cohort to ash myself, and I have no doubt Cordelia would join me."
"Whoa brother," Gaius sighed. "Calm down. This is why I'm telling you, so they don't find out. The girls already hide their marks as is, and it seems that they're okay with the Grimleal lineage considering Noire's with them. The problem is the fact the marks are growing, and I have little doubt the other kids will harden their hearts just to see a potential weapon for Grima destroyed."

"We'd all do the same for Ylisse."

Robin snarled and growled, starting to resemble his 'benefactor' in more than one way. "You may speak truth, but it doesn't mean I have to like it. I will carry this secret with me, but we will find a way to save my daughters."

Gaius nodded. "Agreed. I'll get Sunshine on it, see if that new guy can help too. The problem's the story I'm going to use."

"Validar." Robin snapped. "Tell them about seeing the marks upon him and several of his entourage in varying states of advancement. That should get the research started without making anyone suspicious. We find a way to reverse the effects that way, it should be viable on the girls."

Gaius rubbed his neck, not liking this at all. "I got ya, that should work. We'll need to tell them eventually, though. Most of the others should be ok, and we know Frederick's far too sweet on them. He's probably the least likely of the bunch to take the news well, and even then, it'll probably just be caution."

Robin shook his head and gazed forlornly at the camp, his family chatting with Chrom's and laughing. "I can only hope. My family deserves so much more than to be hunted for their blood, especially when no fault lies in any of them."

Gaius nodded in agreement. "We'll do all we can for them, Robin. Just go be a father for now, I'll keep you updated on any progress."

Robin was silent, mind wandering far away. Gaius saw he'd get no further answer and took his leave, thoughts of how fate seemed to play with Robin like a toy passing through his mind.

Robin in turn barely collected himself before joining the Shepherds, his silence and melancholic air worrying everyone. Yet, none were willing to attempt breaching the haze, not even Cordelia. She knew when Robin needed his space to think, and this was one of those times without doubt.

So, when the camp had been packed and they traveled until they could no more, most everyone fell asleep with only the tireless Frederick and his family to watch the camp.

Robin, still silent, went to sleep rueing that he'd brought another curse upon his family without realizing it. Just by loving and being loved in turn, he'd inadvertently sentenced five souls to torment. Truly, he was a pitiful man.

-Severa and Morgan's Tent-

The night was peaceful and silent, only the crackle of torches filling the air. The girls had gone to bed sure in the fact that their uncle, aunt, and friend could watch the camp. Unfortunately, even the ever diligent Caomh nóir family couldn't watch everything.

The stranger slipped into the camp easily, their cloak identical to Robin's. They ghosted through the alleys and tents until they arrived at their destination, the tarp parting silently to show the slumbering Severa and Morgan.
Another figure materialized from the cloaked being's shadow, taking the form of a woman with long hair.

"They're beautiful." The woman cooed, voice barely a whisper. "My little girls, all grown up."

The cloak's hood fell back to show the Hierophant, faded red marks like eyes stretching over his forehead while his normal eyes were rainbows with red showing brightest. "Indeed... and such deep sleepers..."

The woman giggled, the shadows falling away to show her faded crimson hair and eyes ringed with softly glowing red marks. "They always were... oh how I wish to hold them my Lord..."

The Hierophant shook his head. "Not yet, my Queen, not yet. We shall hold them once more when the time comes, but for now... we can simply watch them and give a gift."

The woman looked to him and smiled, already knowing what the gift would be. "Then let us give our loves their gift."

The Hierophant nodded and they took seats on each cot, the woman with Morgan and the hierophant with Severa. Somehow, no creak was made, no weight settled, as the phantoms recited their gift.

The one lullaby the girls remembered from both parents, even to this day.

The more I learn, the more I see. The less the world impassions me. The hungry heart, the roamin' eye. Have come to rest, to not apply.

Severa and Morgan began to squirm, dark-purple energy leaking onto their cots.

The frantic chase, the crazy ride. The thrill has gone, I step aside.

The energy slithered onto Severa's back, whimpers starting to rise as it invaded her mark. Morgan too began to grimace as energy traced her mark, following the contours perfectly.

I'd believe in anything, were it not for you. Showing me by just existing, only this is true... I love you, I love you.

The phantoms brushed each girl's cheek as their pain became more acute.

Without question...

The marks began to expand, three months of progress occurring in seconds.

I love you.

And damnation stepped ever closer.
Everything seemed normal when the Shepherds set out that morning. Their supplies were intact, bodies rested, and minds preoccupied with the upcoming war. All things that had every right to be normal considering what was going on.

Except for two sisters, their morning was anything but normal.

"What happened?" Severa hissed, feeling drastically more irritable than she should've been. Hell, just trying to think was giving her a pounding headache, like she'd downed a whole barrel of swill.

Morgan grimaced back, the sisters whispering next to the supply wagon. "I don't know, but maybe it has to do with what Dad told us this morning. If Validar popped up like that, maybe he caused this."

Severa scowled as her headache worsened. "How could he make these damn things grow? I don't care if he's actually our grandfather, that shouldn't happen. Not to mention how fast it happened, the things have barely changed over years."

Morgan groaned as a headache of her own pulsed with pain. "Like I said, it was just an idea. Just be glad we were able to get the new parts covered before anyone decided to come knocking."

Severa scratched her head irritably, the sight of Lucina walking towards them lessening her headache. "Gonna have to hold off on this, Morg. By the looks of it, we'll have to spill now, so go and use your way-with-words while I take care of Lucy."

Morgan sighed but spurred Theresa towards the familiar figures of their parents. Severa took a moment to compose herself before greeting Lucina. "Lucy, what brings you back here? Thought you were getting some scouting tips from Maribelle and Gaius."

Lucina gave Severa a concerned frown. "Are you ok, Sev? You and Morgan have been... off since this morning. You've both been really irritated ever since we left, I even saw Morgan snap at Noire."

Severa pinched her nose, trying to come up with a decent cover-story. "Honestly, we're tired. I used a lot of energy throwing around all that fire and lightning, not to mention having to slice a dozen Risen to pieces. Morgan's just as bad, but adrenaline kept us up well after we should've been asleep. Give us a nap or an actual bed, should be fine after that."

Lucina hummed before nodding. "Alright, if you say so. I took down my fair share and heaven knows Cynthy and I were out like candles in the wind. In fact, why not go ahead and take a nap in the wagon? I won't tell anyone, you can switch with Morgan after a couple hours."

Severa blinked. "Wait, what? Lucy, I'm tired but not enough to do that. Don't you think I can handle a little exhaustion considering some of the muck we've had to go through?"

Lucina glanced around before reaching out to stroke Severa's cheek. "Sev, please. I know you're plenty capable of continuing the march as is, but it will ease both my heart and yours. Think of it not as a sign of weakness, simply the need to be at your best."

Severa held back a wince as her back cramped, but she took Lucina's hand and squeezed it. "Alright, sheesh. You need to stop using that against me, it's not fair."

Lucina giggled. "I have to, you're too stubborn otherwise. Now go rest, we'll need everyone ready if
Valm is to be overcome.

Severa chuckled tiredly before hauling herself into the wagon, Lucina watching her go amusedly. "Silly Sev, everyone needs their rest. The only thing that should keep you up from here on is… well, me."

Lucina chuckled at her less than pure jest. She paused in confusion as the march started to slow to a halt, the Shepherds hurrying towards the front of the line.

Worried, Lucina sprinted after them, almost shoving her way to the front of the crowd as mutters reigned supreme. Once there, she found Gaius, Robin, and her father standing shoulder to shoulder with grim faces.

"We apologize for this." Chrom called over the noise, silencing everyone. "However, Gaius and Robin have come to me with… poor news. Please don't interrupt them."

Lucina frowned, not liking the stormy looks on Robin and Gaius's faces. Whatever this news was, it was bound to bring nothing but trouble.

"This has to do with our recent meeting," Robin began. "Shortly before we met King Validar, I noticed several of the attendants had markings like my own. While this would otherwise be nothing but a curiosity, Gaius noticed a few of the attendants' marks… changing."

Gaius took his turn. "I was following along in the shadows per usual when I saw it. Saw the same symbols I witnessed on the cliff face on our way here. Being my curious self, I asked Sunshine what the symbols meant."

Lucina glanced over to find Tharja scowling deeply, greatly disturbed by this news.

"To put it simply," Gaius continued, "we have a problem. Those guys have lots of dark magic flowing through them, specifically the Fell Dragon's power. Once those marks reach an end stage, they become super berserkers that can supposedly channel the Fell Dragon himself."

Everyone began to mutter, shock the most prevalent emotion, while Lucina's grip on Falchion tightened.

Robin took over. "Before anyone asks, Tharja called it 'Grima's Enlightenment'. I am in no danger of this fate, as we believe only the highest circles of the Grimleal can receive the power. My family, while Grimleal as you know, were not very high on the noble ladder. As such, you need not fear myself going the way of mad prophecy, though please inform me if you notice my mark change."

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief. At least they wouldn't have to worry about Robin turning on them.

"The Grimleal we saw are still a possible threat."

Robin called, grabbing their attention again. "As such, we need to find a way to neutralize if not reverse the progression of this condition. Doing so will render the future threat moot, but it needs to happen before the war ends lest someone reach the end stage. Especially King Validar."

Lucina felt a shudder pass down her spine. That wouldn't be good at all, especially if Grima's vessel was amongst those Gaius and Robin had seen. Getting to that point would spell doom all over again.

Chrom cleared his throat. "In light of this, I'm ordering anyone with arcane experience to start researching this condition effective immediately. Tharja and Henry, our newest member, are both well versed in the Grimleal culture, so please consult with them. That is all, continue the march."
He turned on his heel and started down the road. Sumia galloping up to him and starting a hurried discussion. The others descended on Tharja and Henry with rabid fury, demanding anything and everything the dark mages knew.

Lucina was more concerned about Morgan, the poor girl sitting stiffly on Theresa while Cynthia tried to comfort her. Deciding to help, Lucina walked over and patted Morgan's leg. "It's alright Morgan, we know you and Sev just have the normal marks. We went through those trust issues a long time ago."

Morgan grimaced. "Thanks for the reminder, Lucy. It's nice knowing we won't be watched at all hours lest we turn into psychopaths."

The biting comment made Lucina flinch. Those few months after they'd discovered Morgan and Severa's brands were not her proudest, even with the justification of knowing so little of Grima's abilities. It had taken a long time before Severa and Morgan were willing to trust anyone in their group after that.

Much to Lucina's eternal shame, she'd even tried to put the sisters out of their misery one night when she was at her lowest. Thank the gods for Cynthia and her eternal optimism, it had convinced the others Morgan and Severa were no threat. She'd even shielded Severa from Falchion's bite and silently dared Lucina to try again.

That was the last time Lucina ever let the idea of hurting them enter her mind.

"Sorry Lucy." Morgan sighed as Lucina got lost in her memories. "I'm just worried is all. Sure, we may not have that problem, but who's to say something else won't happen? I'm just… really uncertain."

Cynthia tried to comfort her again. "It's alright Morg, we're all worried. But, let's focus on getting back to the port first. I heard Noire has some obscure tomes that she thinks can help, and Laurent went to volunteer."

Morgan nodded meekly and spoke no more.

Lucina shook her head and bid the girls farewell, gazing back at the wagon where Severa still slept. I hope she'll be ok with this. Her brand, Morgan's, and Uncle's may have to be used for the research… no, Lucina, you can't think like that. We'll find a way to reverse that condition, if only to lay their minds at ease.

With her mind set, Lucina set off after her parents, the Shepherds speeding their pace to make Port Halzac with all possible haste. They owed it to the Volk family to find what could only be described as a cure. Every member had done so much for each Shepherd personally and the country at large, they didn't deserve suspicion.

Least of all from her.

-Cordelia-

"Robin, talk to me, what's going on?"

Cordelia was cantering next to her husband, Robin unusually moody. If Cordelia didn't know better, she'd call him brooding and angst-ridden.

"I'm just worried." Robin sighed, running a hand through his hair. "It's bad enough knowing we're
heading over the sea to another continent, but now we have the threat of high-ranking Plegians going berserk because of some Grimleal voodoo. It's all a lot to process."

Cordelia knew there was more to it than that. Robin had a bad habit of telling half-truths when he was worked up, but years of marriage and living together had clued Cordelia in. Robin would always glance at what was causing him the most stress, even if his words were on something entirely different.

Following his gaze, Cordelia's eyes landed on… Morgan, who'd tried to talk with them before the announcement.

…Oh gods…

Robin sensed her realization and fixed Cordelia with a glare that silenced her disbelief before it could be voiced. "Not. One. Damn. Word. I did indeed spot those marks on the attendants, as far as the others know, that's the extent of it."

His voice fell to a whisper, Cordelia straining to hear him. "The girls though… Gaius noticed them being sneaky and went to check on them only to stumble onto the marks. Severa's… it's a year at best from end stage while Morgan's starting to enter the early stages. Best I can guess, that's the cause of their pain."

Cordelia gulped, fear making her throat thick. "You… you mean the girls…?"

"Not if we have anything to say about it." Robin said. "Just please, for the love of Naga, keep this to yourself. The girls have gone to great lengths to hide this, for good reason. Should their friends find out, especially Lucina…"

Cordelia's breath hitched, visions of Lucina and the other children descending upon Severa and Morgan with weapons drawn crossing her eyes. Then came another, Severa covered in blood and impaled upon Gungnir, the remains of dark energy seeping into the earth. Morgan laid beside her, a gaping slash wound in her back, with sickly purple miasma crawling over her body.

Bile rose up, but she forced it down with a sick gulp. "…I will never allow such a thing to pass."

"Neither will I." Robin agreed. "But let's not allow such a situation to come about in the first place. Please, just be yourself around the girls, don't make them worry. Focus on the Valmese and ending this war swiftly, then we may devote our time to helping them."

Cordelia could only nod. The idea that their girls, the strong and brave women that they were, could fall to such madness… it was just so unfair. Why did every new event, every new revelation, heap further weight upon her family? Not only did war call them away from the children, but now they had to contend with the very blood in their veins?

It just wasn't right.

Sighing, Cordelia reached down to rub Robin's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Robin, but this isn't your fault. I can see you blaming yourself right now for what the girls are going through, but please stop. Not only will it tip them off, you bear no fault in this."

Robin took her hand and squeezed it, voice still quiet. "I know that, but the thought still plagues me. The more I discover of my past and what surrounds it, the greater a curse my presence seems. Just by loving, I have possibly sentenced our daughters to madness. Just by being me and finding happiness… I may have caused untold suffering."
Cordelia couldn't stand him like this. She reached down and hauled him into the saddle with one arm, ignoring his indignant squawks until he was settled. "Robin, how many times do I have to tell you you're not a burden? I remember Chrom telling you more than once that someone's blood does not define them, and here you are using your blood to define yourself."

She kept her gaze forward, but felt Robin wrap his arms around her waist. "I know that too, yet the idea plagues me still. I do not believe it, but my mind refuses to leave it behind. I will conquer it, as I did before we wed, but this will take time."

"Yes, I'd prefer not waking up to a hurried note." Cordelia bit, Robin's grip tightening at the reminder. "But Robin, remember that we love you. My heart and soul are yours, no matter the trial, and our girls need their father. They've lost us once already, do not let fear make them lose us again."

Robin chuckled morosely, his head coming to rest on her pauldron. "You nearly lost yourself to fear when I told you this, yet here you are telling me not to fall to it. Where oh where do you find that resilience?"

"I am a duchess and a mother." Cordelia said, fear fading from her mind. "As you are a duke and a father. We have faced many obstacles in our lives and overcome them, this is no different. In the name of a future where our children and their children may live peacefully, we shall overcome this as well. Am I wrong?"

Robin was silent for a moment before kissing her cheek. "Your wisdom continues to astound me, Cordy. You're correct, we shall overcome this. Our girls will have the future they so desire, no matter what we must face. Even if it should be Naga herself."

"Let's not speak blasphemy dear." Cordelia giggled before turning and kissing him deeply. When she pulled back, she spoke again. "I shall be by your side, always. Whether in person or spirit, remember my words should doubt cloud your mind. I will tell the girls the same."

Robin sighed in amusement. "Now I see why they say a happy wife is a happy life. Thank you, Cordy, I needed that more than I can ever say."

Cordelia smirked and looked at him with a coy gaze. "Well... I like to leave you speechless. Who knows, maybe I'll do one better if you actually come back to the tent tonight."

Robin blinked as she licked her lips, the offer clear.

"...Ok."

Cordelia threw her head back and laughed, long and heartily. She needed that just as bad as Robin needed the talk, so she'd do something special for him tonight.

Time to try that idea with a thunder tome Lissa had told her about.

-Severa-

"Mom, Dad, no, don't be kinky in front of me!"

Severa woke with a jolt, the remains of an extremely embarrassing dream leaving her panting and blushing. Based on the fading light outside, she'd been asleep much longer than planned.

After getting herself in order, Severa climbed out of the wagon to find the tents set up and the Shepherds gathered around their fires. The scent of sea-breeze was on the wind, so they were close to the coast, but Severa doubted they were near the port.
"Severa!" Severa turned to find Vaike jogging up to her. "Just the gal I wanted to see. Say, you up for eating with me and Cher tonight? I already got your sis and folks to agree."

Severa tilted her head in confusion. "Us? Why?"

"We haven't gotten to sit down and chat with you guys in forever!" Vaike laughed. "Heck, tryin' to get anyone to let off steam's a whole 'nother challenge. Everyone's all strung up, for good reasons admittedly, but at least let Cher's cooking'll do you all some good."

Severa stared at him for a time before nodding. "Alright Uncle V, if that's what you want. Honestly, I've kinda missed Aunt Cherche's cooking. Mom's is still the best in my book, but it's neck-and-neck."

Vaike laughed and slapped her back, the force nearly sending Severa to the ground. "That's the spirit! Come on, she's got a roast going. Last one there gets the hind!"

Severa blinked before sprinting after him, calling him unfair and other insults that held no weight. Vaike just laughed and laughed as he led her through the camp, dodging the others with hoots and hollers.

Severa started to laugh and holler back, a rush of joy and adrenaline pumping through her veins from the merry chase. It thrilled her mind and made her blood sing at the surge, almost purging her thoughts of embarrassing dreams and worries.

Sadly, it came to an end when Vaike skidded to a stop before a fire. It held a roasting boar that was already making Severa drool, her family and Cherche seated around the flame while Minerva snored a short ways off.

"Sev, glad you could join us." Cherche greeted warmly. "It's been some time since we've been together like this."

Cordelia nodded and patted the open spot next to her. "Indeed it has. I think we last got together like this… five months ago?"

"Somethin' like that." Vaike agreed as he sat next to Cherche. "None of you wanted to spar this last month either. Y'all gotta learn when to blow off steam."

Robin chuckled. "Vaike, we've been busy. Besides, it's not like you've been free either Mr. Master-at-Arms. You've been putting recruits in the ground every day."

"They got cocky thinking a blade would win against an axe." Morgan laughed, remembering one such incident. "It's something else to see them get beat into the dirt."

Vaike flexed cockily. "They can't handle these rocks, none save Cher can. It's always fun to show them the business end of a blunt chunk o' bronze, makes 'em humble."

"Frederick greatly appreciates your assistance." Cherche stated, idly turning the roast. "Though I feel the urge to remind you to never again attempt sparring with the Exalt or Robin in public. You may hold your own, but it only emboldens the fools."

Vaike gave her an amused smirk. "I believe you like using those fools as target practice with the Knights. Same with Cordelia over there. Think of me as a supplier."

Everyone started to laugh, Severa getting in on the tease. "Uncle V, you couldn't supply dirt to a farm. It amazes me to this day your house is still standing!"
Vaike gave her a playful scowl. "Hey, don't go dising my work! Cher and I built that with our own two hands!"

"Four hands dear." Cherche corrected with a giggle. "Unless you need to tell me something."

Vaike shrugged with a grin as everyone laughed. "Hey, I'll play the fool all day, it's just nice to hear something that isn't sullen mumbling."

That quieted the laughter, Vaike frowning as everyone started looking at the ground. "For the love of - guys, come on. Ya can't get so tied up in stuff like this, it ain't good for ya."

"We try, Vaike." Cordelia sighed, glancing to her family for a moment. "We just have so much to do, so much on our shoulders. We're determined to overcome these responsibilities, but that leaves little time for reveling."

Vaike took a breath and sighed. "That's why you hav'ta take what you can get. Bein' under stress like this for too long's going to make a dullard out of anyone. I've had to tell that to Cherche a lot when she was the palace matron, even more so after her order got started. Dear Naga, take tonight and relax, we don't know how many more we got."

Everyone stared at him, stunned by his words. Cherche chuckled and wrapped him in an embrace. "Look at you, being wise. Good thing Miriel's not here, she'd die of shock."

Vaike groaned in annoyance as the light atmosphere returned, everyone losing themselves to chatter and laughter as the roast finished cooking.

Once it was close to done, Severa grunted in curiosity as Cherche pulled out a bottle. "What's that?"

"A little oil." Cherche answered, a flick of her wrist sending a spray of light liquid over the roast, the oil swiftly catching and crisping the skin. "It's made out of olives which are common in Roseanne."

Severa nodded as Cherche began to carve the meat, Robin helping by turning the roast as directed. "Anything else out of Valm that flammable? Pretty sure only pitch lights that quick here."

Cherche hummed in thought before nodding. "There's several species of tree that are filled with sap that's prone to catching. They mostly use it in coastal towns due to the abundance of water to put it out, not to mention the sap itself is almost waterproof."

Severa nodded and took her share of the meat, an idea turning over in her head as they ate. It simmered and stewed as Vaike did a silly dance with Robin, it slowly began to boil as Morgan was utterly humiliated by Cherche in arm-wrestling, and it came to a nice finish when Cherche started to tell a story at Cordelia's insistence.

"So, girls, this is what happened when I came back to Ylisstol." Cherche began after everyone had their share of roast. "I'd been touring Ylisse for several months, but after a number of misadventures that saw me end my journey in Draconis, I was nervous."

She smiled at her audience, the girls leaning in with interest. "I'd been touring Ylisse for several months, but after a number of misadventures that saw me end my journey in Draconis, I was nervous."

"Eventually, 'Nerva over there convinced me to buck up and return to Ylisstol." Cherche continued, unknowingly using Vaike's nickname. "Oh, you should've seen me, shaking in my boots as we flew
towards the city. I was so nervous I almost dropped my peace offering."

Vaike chuckled and patted his belt, the buckle and leather shining. "It's this thing, so you know. I've
taken real good care of it."

Cherche nodded and started humming. "When we got there, it was just past sunrise. I was through
the gates since the guards recognized me, but I almost turned around when I reached the garrison."

"That's when you found Uncle V in the stable!" Morgan guffawed. "Tell me, is it true he was
wearing nothing but his smalls?"

Cherche got a silly smile on her face. "That's true, yes. Found him lying in a stable with nothing but
his shorts. Not exactly the greatest reunion, but he tried to cover himself with the straw! Screamed
like a scandalized maid too."

Vaike was scowling with a luminescent blush, the others howling with laughter.

"It was good to seem him though." Cherche chuckled fondly. "He was more than welcoming after
getting dressed, gladly listened to my every tale while we waited for the others to either wake or
arrive. We ate, had a couple competitions at Vaike's insistence, then... we reaffirmed our roles as
partners."

The way she said that caused amused smiles to rise on everyone's face, Morgan giving voice to the
obvious. "That's where you... confessed? After seeing him in his smalls?"

"Smacked one right on my cheek." Vaike chuckled, rubbing his arm when Cherche punched him
playfully. "Woo boy, never been that shocked in all my life. Well, twice after that, when she actually
said yes to marrying me and when we found out Gerome was on the way."

Cherche took his hand tenderly. "It's still one of my fondest memories. I swore we'd be partners
again when I came back, I just... stretched the definition a bit."

"Please, Cher." Vaike shot back. "You just wanted me for my muscles."

Cherche clicked her teeth at him, like she was biting something. "That's a side benefit dear, don't be
too proud of yourself. I always wanted a nibble, but someone needed to keep your ego in check."

"Would you stop?" Robin groaned, Cordelia nodding in agreement. "It's bad enough when
everyone's flirting as is, but you two act like you're going to do it right here."

Cherche shrugged and laughed. "Oh, you're so much fun to tease, your whole family in fact! We've
never gone further than the other was comfortable with, you know that."

Cordelia sighed. "Yeah, we know, doesn't make it any less awkward. It's getting late though, we
need to turn in if we'll make it to port tomorrow."

Vaike looked up to see stars twinkling overhead. "Oh no! I needed to get Maribelle a set of lavender
shoots, she's gonna kill me!"

Cherche chuckled and handed him a small sack. "Here you go, best get on your way. I'll get Minerva
her share and we'll get ready for bed."

She nodded to the Volk family. "Goodnight my friends, I hope you'll have pleasant dreams. Girls,
remember to come and chat with us every so often ok? We like seeing our nieces too."
Severa and Morgan nodded with smiles, Vaike giving everyone quick hugs before dashing into the camp. Cherche gave her own embraces before gathering a stack of roast she'd set aside and walking over to Minerva.

With the meal over, the family started back towards their tents, idle chatter about the stories Vaike and Cherche shared filling the air. Severa, though, was almost lost in her own mind. Her idea was looking more and more viable the longer she thought on it, but she felt now wasn't the best time to bring it up.

"What's on your mind Severa?" Cordelia asked when they came up to the girls' tent. "You've been distracted ever since we left Vaike and Cherche."

Severa played with her hair, still not entirely sure she should share. "Just… thinking on what Aunt Cherche said about those trees. If they're so sappy, do they just harvest the sap and use it as a sealant?"

"That would make the most sense." Morgan said, trying to see where Severa was going with this. "Who in their right mind would use sappy wood for building?"

Robin chuckled. "Theater masters."

His family guffawed at the idea, but Severa shook her head. "No, I was just thinking that if the ships of the Valmese fleet used that sap as well, we could use that as an advantage. It'll depend on what Plegia sends us, but… I may have an idea or two based on what happens."

"Catapults and fliers raining fire." Robin muttered, catching on instantly. "Or if we have more ships than we need, fire ships."

Cordelia caught on in concert with Morgan, the pair grinning. "That means we'll be doing some firebombing then. We'll need to tell Miriel, her blasts and the rocks should be able to destroy a ship by themselves."

Morgan started to cackle. "That'll be sure to scare them straight if nothing else! We may even drive the fleet off!"

Robin brought them back to reality. "Let's see how many ships we get first, yes? Remember, we want to keep casualties to a minimum on both sides, I refuse to break more families than absolutely necessary."

He looked to Severa and Morgan, eyes soft. "We're soldiers, yes, but we are not butchers. Let us not sink to the level of these would-be conquerors until we find no other alternative."

Severa nodded, an old creed entering her thoughts. Tacticians sought victory before battle was joined, and should the battle end before it began, then they'd done their job. Only fools sought to utterly destroy the enemy.

Morgan took a deep breath to calm down. "Right, sorry, got caught up in having an idea of what we could do. I'll be ready regardless of what you guys come up with. …Unless it involves horse plop, then I do not volunteer."

Cordelia ruffled her hair. "And here I thought you liked stable duty. Looks like we'll have to see it in person when we get back."

Morgan immediately started complaining, only for Robin to pat her shoulder. "Actually, I'll need you and your mother to help me out. I want to be part of the scout runs after we're on the water, and I
want Sev to join us. We'll be bringing Miriel and Basilio along too, so we'll need Cynthia and
Cherche while we're at it."

Severa paled at the thought, already knowing what would happen.

"Oh no."

-One Week Later-

"Morgan, stop doing rolls, I'm gonna be sick!"

Morgan just laughed and pulled up, Theresa's hooves skimming the water as they settled into a glide.
"Come on Sev, live a little! You're the one who wanted to know what it's like flying over the ocean."

"Not while you-urp-try and work on tricks!" Severa burped, face pale and clammy. "I'm having
enough trouble on the ship as is."

Morgan laughed again and they pulled up from the water, the fleet they currently called home
stretching out behind them.

It was quite the surprise when the Plegian ships arrived in Port Halzac, the vessels numbering over a
thousand, from merchantmen to war vessels. It was a sight grand enough to make the Shepherds
gape, especially when they learned the smallest vessel could hold almost two hundred men
comfortably.

Even after accounting for supplies, even those the ships came with, there were at least two hundred
vessels designated as 'rear support'. In other words, there was simply no other use for them besides
reserves.

Robin and Chrom got a kick out of the show. It looked like Plegia was really trying to endear itself
with the sheer amount of support granted, despite giving no troops for the coming battles.

It was still workable at least, considering they now had the ability to form a true presence on the sea.
It would doubtlessly help keep supplies flowing to the armies that now sailed for Valm.

The Shepherds, unsurprisingly, got a ship all their own. Positioned in the center of the fleet, the ship
was large enough to house the offices, stables, and laboratories that the Shepherds required to go
about their tasks and manage their forces.

It also granted them privacy, where the rank-and-file wouldn't see their otherwise confident
commanders getting terribly seasick.

Poor Severa had it worst of the bunch. She didn't do well with violent motions in general, such as
Pegasus rolls, but she thought a ship would be ok. Then they crested their first large wave and she
lost her lunch before Naga and country.

Even being below decks, where the motion of the sea was barely noticeable, Severa still felt queasy.
It had taken the combined expertise of Libra and Lissa to concoct a medicine that soothed the worse
of her seasickness, which in turn cured everyone else suffering from it.

Severa's troubles didn't stop there, though her most pressing issue was objectively rather silly. She
and Lucina had, during the wait in Port Halzac, gone on several dates in secret. At the end of one
such date, they'd come close to… consummating their desires.

Severa, though, had pulled out after going to the bathroom to cool off and discovered that her mark
had grown just past the covering again. In a panic, she'd run from the room Lucina had sequestered them in and raced to find Morgan.

Hers had grown too, though not to the same extent.

They couldn't do much about it except use the rest of their sludge to cover the new growth and pray something wouldn't happen to drive the marks to full size.

Severa then had to deal with a very upset girlfriend, who only calmed down after Severa explained she'd gotten cold feet and promised to make it up to her at the first possible chance. Lucina had agreed, they'd worked out the frustration of being interrupted by sparring intensely with their friends and family, then found they'd been assigned the same room on the ship.

The look Lucina had given Severa damn near made her knees turn to jelly.

Knowing Lucina would be waiting in the room on the first night, Severa had tried to psych herself up. She'd even, at great embarrassment, asked Robin how one could prepare an intimate night for their partner.

Robin had stared at her for a long time before sighing and giving oddly detailed advice. Severa knew he had experience with Mother, but she wasn't expecting him to be so accepting of her and Lucina taking the next step.

Those plans came to an end when Severa discovered her seasickness. Lucina was perfectly understanding at first, but as the days went by now that Severa had her medicine, Lucina was getting… anxious.

"Thinking about how Lucy tried to seduce you in the galley?" Morgan asked, breaking Severa from her recollections. "You really need to be with her, Sev. I understand being nervous about the first time, but we'll be meeting the Valmese before long. Best to get rid of the jitters so the rest of the trip is enjoyable, yeah?"

Severa grunted at the reminder. Lucina had forgotten their relationship was supposed to be a secret that morning at breakfast. Basically, Severa was eating after another dose of medicine to make sure it stayed down only for Lucina to tap her shoulder. When she'd turned to look, Lucina leaned down and proceeded to make out with her.

In plain view of everyone.

Chrom dropped his fork, if memory served.

When she was done, Lucina whispered something sinful in Severa's ear before sauntering off, Cynthia screeched in laughter a moment later followed by Morgan. Everyone else just looked at each other, fished out their purses, and many dozens of coins went flowing over to a smug Cordelia and Sumia.

Severa had slinked off on this patrol to get away from it all.

"I'm sure her parents are talking to her." Severa muttered as they reached the edge of their scouting range. "As I'm sure Mother will want to talk to me. I wasn't expecting everyone to have bets on me and her, but considering their gambling issues… yeah, it's not that surprising."

Morgan chuckled, eyes scanning the blue sea for any sign of the Valmese. "Yeah, they like to make bets on anything, we learned that a while ago. I've seen Gaius and Maribelle make bets on what color someone's going to wear on a given day."
Severa groaned and looked down, nothing else to see but sea and sky. "I know, I'm just annoyed… alright, how's this? If you promise to take us down gently so we can run our hands through the water, I'll sit Lucy down and get this sorted. Sound good?"

Morgan giggled and leaned back to look Severa in the eye. "Alright, if you say so. Should I tell everyone to stay away from that deck tonight too? You're really loud."

Severa smacked Morgan, her sister yelping in complaint. "Quiet you, at least I don't have to explain how stains get on the roof."

Morgan muttered a foul curse but guided Theresa towards the water. Once they were close enough, Severa pulled off her gloves and dipped her hands into the cool sea, marveling at the feeling of seawater rushing past her fingers and spraying her face.

Morgan was doing the same on the opposite side, though with a mischievous grin.

"Ya!"

Severa lurched as Theresa picked up speed and turned upside down, Morgan whooping in joy and dragging both hands through the water while holding on with her thighs. Once she had her fun, Morgan righted Theresa with a laugh. "That was fun, right Sev?"

Silence answered her.

Frowning, Morgan noticed a distinct lack of pressure around her wait where Severa normally hung on. Then she looked back and spotted a floundering speck of purple dozens of yards away in the water.

"Oh Naga, Severa!" Morgan screamed, yanking hard on the reins and directing Theresa back. She raced over the waves before coming to a stop over her panicking sister, the weight of her armor and coat seeking to drag her under.

Morgan sent Theresa into the water, the Pegasus strong enough to keep herself and Morgan afloat. A quick paddle later brought them alongside Severa, where Morgan grabbed her sister's arm and hauled her sopping wet body into the saddle. "Gods Sev, I'm so sorry! I didn't think you'd let go!"

Severa panted and spat, seawater splashing past her lips. "Never… do that again, you understand? I'll come back and haunt you for the rest of eternity."

Morgan nodded guiltily. "I'm really sorry Sev, I'll do something to make up for it."

"Good…” Severa sighed, a shaky hand pointing to something in the distance. "You can start by taking us back, we need to let everyone know about that."

Morgan followed the hand, gaze hardening at the dots on the horizon.

"Valm."

-Robin-

The last thing he expected from Morgan and Severa's patrol was to see his eldest daughter sopping wet. Nor was he expecting them to explain she'd fallen into the sea because of a dumb idea on Morgan's part, which in turn led them past their forward scouting lines.

Where they spotted the Valmese fleet coming towards them.
Thus he found himself directing a dozen boats to and fro, carrying much of the oil Plegia had given them to ships being vacated excepting a skeleton crew. He’d come up with a perfect solution to remove the Valmese navy from play, but it would require a sacrifice.

Namely, many of the ships they’d brought, the others still capable of holding the soldiers that the ones being sacrificed were carrying. He’d have to thank Flavia and Basilio for pointing out that there simply weren’t enough catapults or fliers for the original siege strategy to work.

He’d been informed a few hours later that the Valmese fleet was following the lead of a single ship, which Basilio pointed out as the coordinator vessel. If they could take it down, then most of the fleet would be stranded and open to a charge.

What better way to accomplish all this than say, by vessels filled to the brim with oil that would burn at the slightest spark?

Robin had to give the Khans credit. They’d taken Robin and Severa’s explanation about the Valmese wood that was likely used by the ships and the presence of Plegian pitch to draft such a nasty plan. Now they just needed to wait for the lead ship to enter visual range and they could enact the plan.

"Something eating at you?" Donnel asked as he walked by, Sol in hand. "You've been quiet since we ordered the boys out o’ the boats."

Robin sighed and scratched the scruff forming on his chin. "Just thinking is all. The Khans and Chrom helped me come up with this plan, but Severa's the one in charge of executing it. Even with Sumia assisting and the Shepherds leading the assault, she's never handled an operation of this scale before."

"Neither have you." Donnel reminded. "But we both know she's capable and Miriel's on standby if we need a trump-card, same with Olivia. You just need to focus on getting this battle over with before figuring out where everyone'll be staying on this ship."

He started to walk away. "We are going to give Lucina and Severa their space tonight, right?"

Robin shot him a rude salute but didn't answer otherwise. Once he was gone, Robin sighed and made for the lower decks, passing several soldiers and Shepherds hurrying to get the plan ready. Amongst this mess, he found Olivia directing several wyvern knights, their mounts nearby and loaded with oil barrels.

"Take those to the ship directly east, ask for the captain." Olivia said, wrapping up. "Remember, the barrels have to be somewhere they can spill the most pitch on collision, but not before. See to it!"

The knights saluted and left, Olivia turning to see Robin. "Oh, hello. Everything’s going as smoothly as can be expected considering the Valmese will be on us in a few hours."

Robin nodded in thanks. "That's not what I was going to ask, but that's good to hear. Do you mind doing a scry of the lead vessel? I know it takes it out of you, but we've got a few hours, as you've said."

Olivia frowned, but sighed with a nod. Robin patted her shoulder and led her to the aft of the ship. The ones the Shepherds were on was large enough to have its own wharf on the aft that was folded up when not in use, but now it served as a staging ground for the small boats and fliers transporting pitch and soldiers.

Olivia chose a spot at the edge of the main wharf, the hustle and bustle falling away as she placed her hand in the water. A moment later, her eyes shone blue and the water swirled before stilling into a
smooth surface at odds with the waves around it.

Then, it shifted once more to show the image of a sturdy vessel with red trimming, the flag of Valm raised high over the ship.

"They've spotted us." Olivia muttered, brow furrowed in concentration. "The soldiers speak of a man named Ignatius, the leader of the fleet. Apparently only him and his crew are veteran sailors, all others are green and know little of these waters."

Robin hummed in thought, playing with the information. "What can you find on Ignatius? Knowing even a small tendency is enough to tip the scales in our favor."

Olivia scowled, and the image changed, showing an older man in a suit of crimson plate. Based on the angle, she was using a washing basin. "He's… thinking that we're pups, don't know the sea as he does. Believes that we'll be crushed because he has the ships and the know-how to use them."

Robin scowled. "We'll see about that. Thank you, Olivia, go rest. We should be ready to go by the time you've recovered."

Olivia relaxed, the image fading and the water returning to normal. She staggered as she rose to her feet, but Robin steadied her and guided her inside. Once settled, Robin bid Olivia farewell and went to the top deck.

Sumia was the first one he recognized, her gaze set on the horizon while a circlet of gold marked her as the queen amongst the soldiers. It was a tad at odds with her armor and the purple-pink robes she favored, but she cut a regal figure regardless, especially with Gae-Bolg bared in her grip.

"Robin," she greeted, "what can I do for you?"

Robin took the spot next to her and followed her gaze, the horizon almost black with the clearing outlines of ships. "Just… wanting to ask that you keep an eye on Severa. I will be assaulting one of the side ships with Lucina and Cordelia as you know, and I have already asked Lissa to keep an eye on Morgan while they assault the other ship."

Sumia nodded, wind whipping her hair around them. "I will do so, my old friend, so long as you promise the same with Lucina. Cynthia shall be watched over by Cherche, so I hold no fear there, but I do wish our eldest girls to finally show their love."

She turned to Robin with a teasing smile. "I know Chrom and I always considered you family, but to think we may be in-laws one day… such a way life has of binding us together, no?"

Robin hummed in agreement, eyes tracking the crimson streak his wife made as she patrolled the skies above. "Indeed, Sumia, indeed. Let us see this business at its end first before we entertain such thoughts, for I will not rest easily until Valm's fleet rests upon the sea-floor."

Sumia sighed and fixed him with a look. "Were you not speaking of minimizing casualties this morning?"

"There's no other option." Robin countered, cold logic taking hold. "Olivia has shown me the commander to be an arrogant and dogmatic man who believes his experience alone shall win the day. I have little doubt defeating him shall send the other Valmese into a desperate panic that will claim many of our own before they are defeated."

"Sinking them is the only way to minimize casualties at this juncture."
Sumia held his gaze for several moments before looking away. "Very well, I simply wished to make sure. Be prepared my friend, for it is on Severa's word we send the ships forth. In many ways..."

"All that blood will be on her hands, and she knows it. It is your duty as a father to handle the aftermath."

Robin scowled but nodded. "I am aware, Your Highness. If I may have your leave, there are other matters I must attend to."

Sumia glared at him. "Robin, I am simply making you aware of what may happen, I wasn't insulting your ability to be a father. Even you must realize this."

Robin winced at the admonishment, his flight to Fenrir's Canyon coming to mind. "...You're right, Sumia, forgive my tone. I simply worry that Severa has inherited that same poor habit from myself and her mother. If she has, guilt will weigh heavily on her after this."

Sumia smiled in return. "The Shepherds are her family, Robin, we shall all stand beside and support her. We swore as much when little Lucy first entered the world, and it stands for all our children."

She looked to the horizon again, the lead Valmese ship nearly discernable. "We have little time left. Gather your family, Robin, hold them close. I will do the same with mine before we part."

Robin bowed and left, Sumia doing the same a moment later. Robin sent a signal skyward that was met with the sound of wingbeats as Cordelia and Morgan settled onto the deck, Severa chose that moment to come out from belowdecks with a spyglass in hand.

"Severa, come here!" Robin called, Morgan and Cordelia dismounting for what they thought was a family meeting. Severa rolled her eyes, but made her way over, arms crossed when she joined them.

Robin looked at each in turn before swooping forward and embracing them in a great hug. His girls squawked in alarm and indignation, but Robin's grip held firm. "Please, please be safe, all of you. I... I couldn't go on if I lost any of you."

Their struggles stopped, and Robin felt their arms circle him. He'd wanted to do this before the harbor had been attacked, but he'd been unable to. Now, he'd said at least a part of what he wanted to say.

"I love you all." Robin whispered, voice only for them. "I love you all so much. I am with you, no matter the trials we face in the fight ahead. Believe in those you hold dear as I believe in you, and no darkness shall harm you."

"Believe in the bonds we've made."

Robin soaked in the warmth of his family for a moment before he felt them shaking. "What's wrong?"

Snorts and giggles then met his ears, wife and daughters bursting into laughter. Robin felt his arms go limp, letting them go at the same time, while his face twisted in anger. "I just poured out my heart and soul to you! How dare you laugh at my worry!"

Severa shook her head and cleared tears from her eyes. "Daddy, we're laughing at how corny you are, not your worry. You're always such a dork, hearing something so heartfelt was just a little much... ya know?"

She hiccupped, something very unlike amusement thickening her voice. "I just, uh... don't remember
ever actually believing those words. Everyone always told us to believe, but… geez, this is the first time I actually do."

Morgan wrapped an arm around her sister, a wide grin showing pearly whites. "That's what Dad's for, right? To make us believe despite being a complete ham. Why, I've never felt more inspired than I do right now!"

Her cheery words were at odds with the tears in her eyes, Robin's words rekindling her belief in coming out alive once more. That belief, that desire… Robin could tell it had been missing in them, even after years of peace.

"I do love your corny words." Cordelia laughed as she hugged Robin this time. "Though I see why you leave improvising speeches up to Chrom, you're even worse than usual thinking it up on the spot."

Robin still had his frown, making Cordelia smile helplessly. "Yet, you wear your heart on your sleeve with those words, and I love that honesty so very much. I'd have you no other way my love, and I rise each morning simply to see you smile. I will not let something like a battle stand in the way of that."

She kissed him, their daughters playfully gagging before making themselves scarce. Robin kissed her back, the tender meeting unbroken for as long as the pair wished. When they finally parted, Robin and Cordelia smiled at each other, love shining in their eyes.

"I love you," Robin said. "I'll never say it enough, my angel. Will you fight beside me in this battle?"

Cordelia stroked his cheek. "You already assigned me to your squad, but since you asked…"

She kissed him again.

"I will follow you anywhere, my brave wolf."

-Severa, Four Hours Later-

Severa looked to her compatriots for the coming battle, the deck of the ship cleared of all save her team. "Everyone ready?"

They nodded and Severa took the time to look them over. Sumia and Chrom were coming with, the Exalt pulling rank to be allowed on board, which meant Frederick and Nowi were there as well. Her friends were still 'in training' according to the Shepherds, so she was the only time-walker here.

Beyond that, she had Lon'qu, Ricken, Vaike, and Sully. A decent mix all told, but Ricken was her only other source of magic. It wouldn't be fun staying back, but she had a feeling there'd be plenty of swordplay.

"The ship draws near, milady!" The captain roared from the wheel. "Be ready!"

Severa stopped thinking and focused on her target. The ship was large and imposing, its decks teeming with soldiers seeking to end them and the hope they represented.

Severa wouldn't give them a chance to use those numbers.

"Ragnarok!"

Her tome glowed violently, a pillar of flame birthed on the Valmese deck. The sudden flare turned a
dozen sailors to ash while scattering the others, a blast of crystal flame blowing a hole in the deck.

Nodding to Nowi's dragon form, Severa took her place next to the planks. "On my mark, board! Ricken, scatter them!"

Ricken raised his hand, wind flying forth to rip several Valmese Pegasus knights out of the sky as they tried to dive. The wind continued onto the Valmese ship, tossing the soldiers waiting for them like chaff, at least a dozen sent to watery graves while a few unlucky souls were torn to pieces.

"Brace!"

Severa did her best, but the groan of splintering and scraping wood still clawed at her ears as the ships collided. The force nearly wrenched her into the sea, but Chrom's firm hand kept her on deck. Nodding her thanks, Severa kicked down the plank. "Charge!"

The Shepherds did so, Sumia taking to the air where she skewered another Pegasus knight before swooping along the side of the boat, two men impaled on Gae-Bolg in one pass.

Lon'qu blurred forward, Balmung flashing in his lone hand as it sundered the chest of the first opponent he found. Nowi took to the air a moment later, jaws clamping on a cavalier. After breaking him, she sent flaming death onto a group of archers trying to shoot Sumia.

When she drew close to the deck on another pass, a knight with a wyrmslayer came riding forth, aiming to open her belly. Frederick thundered into his path and caught the man by his throat, his horse cantering past rider-less.

"Pick a god and pray." Frederick said coldly before snapping the knight's neck in his grip. Almost casually, his lance shot back to impale an ambusher before he dropped the corpse and drew a sword to block another attack. His shield slammed into his opponent, stunning them long enough for Frederick to open their throat.

Chrom was no slouch, taking down three cavaliers in two strikes. The first strike sundered one man at the waist, the follow-through burying Falchion in the next man's spine. Gradivus ended a spearman that tried to poke him to death, the legendary blade breaking the spear and man who held it.

Sully, to round out the initial charge, trampled everything in her path. Her blade hacked apart limbs and weapons alike, not one to stand before her charge escaping with their lives. It was… disturbing to see her relish so much in the fight, but she always was hot-blooded.

Severa was just glad they'd cleared the deck so quickly. Ricken had blown entire groups off the ship with Forseti, his blade sampling its fair share of blood when the Valmese tried to flank him. It was only Severa beside him that kept the Dark Knight aware of his surroundings.

A pillar of light to starboard told Severa that Lissa had unleashed Ivaldi, the other ship split in two amidships. While that wasn't part of the plan, Severa couldn't fault her aunt for wanting to end the fight quickly.

A similar wave of fire to port showed her mother getting frustrated, the ship turned to little more than flaming wreckage. Both sides showed the Shepherds abandoning ship, but Severa was more focused on the great figure of red steel that had somehow stalled Lon'qu and Sully's assault.

The man had an entire line of heavily armored knights formed around him, the sheer thickness of the metal stopping even Balmung cold. The knights were disciplined too, every strike that went against them met with a withering barrage of lance strikes and spears.
"Nowi, get behind them!" Severa shouted, tome glowing once more. "I'll blow a hole in their line!"

Chrom spotted something, but was too late to stop her spell. "Severa, wait!"

The script flowed and fire bloomed, but Severa saw the line still intact when the flames dissipated, only Chrom's speed saving her from a spear to the shoulder.

"The armor's enchanted!" Chrom shouted over the roars of battle and tide. "Magic fizzles before it even reaches them, we need to get in close!"

Severa nodded and turned to their last member, who was busy beating a man to death with another's severed arms. "Vaike, crush them! Sully, support him, the rest of us will take whatever opportunity we can find!"

Vaike roared in answer, his blood surging at the idea of more killing. With Armads whirling in his grip, Vaike leapt onto the line and smashed two knights aside, his axe crushing their armor and bodies like tin.

The opening shocked the others, but Vaike still earned several new wounds to his already scarred body as he crushed another knight into paste.

Sully took advantage of the hole and distraction to ram the general, the force sending the man back a dozen paces. Sully leapt off her horse and dropkicked him, sending him to the deck.

The action came with a price, as the general's lance impaled her through the gut.

"You've the ferocity of demons!" The general shouted as Sully stared at him blankly. "But even you cannot win against the tides that carry this fleet! It shall crush you as surely as waves upon the rocks!"

Sully tilted her head, ignoring Nowi crashing into the deck and flinging another knight into the sea. "You say that like you killed me."

The general scoffed, but noticed something sizzling. He strained his neck to look past Sully, expecting to see his lance coated with her blood.

Much to his shock and confusion, the lance wasn't there. All he could see were the remains of the once sturdy weapon, the wooden shaft aflame while the blade was pocked like it had chunks scooped out of it.

Then he craned further and watched in alarm as the blood dripping onto his armor sizzled before burning a hole through the steel. Right as he saw that, the first drops met his skin.

Pain filled his mind and he screamed, Sully smiling grimly. "My blood is magma, jackass. You've done nothing but put holes in your armor like this."

She proved it by jamming her blade through one such hole, blood cooling Sully's own. Three more stabs left the general too weak to do anything but spit at her in defiance.

Sully glared at him. "You know what, you talked an awful lot about the sea."

She stood and grabbed his arm, trailing burning blood all the way to the ship's railing. The others just watched, the rest of the Valmese on board slain.

Sully stared out at the rolling waves before glaring back at the general. "If you love the sea so much,
then you can be buried in it. Drown, you bastard."

With that, Sully threw him into the drink, the general sinking like a rock. Sully in turn collapsed, the force required to throw him dislocating her shoulder while the blood loss was starting to hit her.

"No time like the present!" Severa barked when no one moved. "Grab Sully and get the hell off this ship, I'll send the signal!"

Everyone burst into motion, Frederick retrieving Sully while everyone else either galloped back onto the ship or hitched a ride on Nowi's bulk. Sumia remained with Severa, a smug smile flashing at her goddaughter. "Honey, you can't tell me what I can and cannot do, you don't have the rank. Besides, I'm your ride."

Severa groaned before conjuring a ball of lightning in hand and pitching it straight up. A moment later, it exploded into a howling wolf, but none who knew the magic missed the tinge of purple on the margins.

Thankfully those who noticed were none of the time-walkers.

With the signal given, Severa clambered into Selene's saddle and they took to the air. Not a moment too soon either as Severa watched the plan she'd helped create take shape.

The Valmese were in utter confusion after watching two ships be struck down by divine wrath and the lead ship go silent. So confused in fact, the Ylissean fire ships were able to close distance with them easily, the wedge they formed driving into the heart of the Valmese fleet.

At first only wood, bodies, and steel filled the air. Then came the pitch, coating every inch of the Valmese fleet in the tar that stuck to everything it met, not one ship spared. It turned out sailing in a block was not the best idea when it came to naval warfare.

Severa gulped as she watched the pitch blacken the sea, a pool of ruthlessness she rarely tapped bearing the brunt of the final order. "…Set it aflame."

And it was so.

Sumia tapped Severa's tome and channeled enough power for a simple ball of fire. With a flick of her wrist, Sumia sent the fire tumbling into the pitch, flame consuming all in its path as it began to devour the Valmese fleet.

It was a sight that would haunt every survivor for the rest of their days. The sea itself burning, choking black smoke rolling through the air, the screams of the Valmese burning alive.

The acrid scent of scorched flesh.

No one took the sight well, at least those with a soul that witnessed the event, but Severa took it the worst. "Aunty… I don't… feel good…"

Sumia immediately dove back to the ship and helped Severa to the railing, just barely making it in time for Severa to empty her gut. She was weeping while she vomited, the sight of so much fresh death, at her hand, driving Severa to despair.

"Honey, please, breathe." Sumia pleaded as Severa began to choke on her own tears. "You are not a monster, child, this was the only way. The Valmese would see us all sink to the sea-floor and never lose sleep."
Severa gulped in a breath, her words mixed with sobs. "But… I killed them Aunty… Naga in heaven *I killed them all!* How does that not make me a monster?!"

Sumia rubbed her back, doing her best to soothe the distraught girl. "Monsters do not weep for the lost, nor do they mourn those that sought to kill them. This is a sign of your compassion and kind heart."

Severa continued to sob and hiccup, Sumia eventually being replaced by Cordelia. "Severa, my love, please come inside. You need to rest."

"And let the nightmares have me?" Severa bit out, anger mixing with her despair. "No matter the time, Mother, or what happens next… I am cursed now. Cursed to forever remember this… to remember the lives I ended."

Cordelia could do nothing more than offer sweet nothings and a gentle embrace, the other worried Shepherds parting silently as she guided her daughter into the ship and back to her room.

Once inside, Cordelia laid Severa to bed, the poor girl having cried herself into an exhausted sleep upon arrival. "Sweet child, what I would do to take these feelings upon myself. What your sister and your father would do to take them too."

She took Severa's hand and sent a prayer to Naga, asking for sweet dreams this time. "I can only hope you'll remember how much you're loved, Severa. They say it takes a village to raise a child, but it takes the same to support someone too. Please, remember we're here for you."

On instinct, she hummed her favorite lullaby. The notes likely didn't register in Severa's exhausted mind, but her furrowed brow relaxed, and her breathing evened.

Seeing this, Cordelia slowly pulled away until she was by the door, a quiet wish for a restful sleep whispered before she was gone.

The room was dark and silent for a time until a shadow danced across the ceiling, dozens of baleful red eyes gazing down at the sleeping girl.

"*The time comes...*" one whispered, its voice eerily familiar. "*And the future continues as foretold...*"

The shadow and eyes vanished, none the wiser of their presence.

-Night-

Severa woke to find her room utterly dark and silent, the very nature of it disquieting enough to make her get up and flee to the hallway.

The halls were similarly quiet, but torches gave a relieving glow that guided Severa out of the bowels of the ship and into the open night air.

"I was asleep that long…" She muttered, gazing at the stars above. "Gods, I must look a mess."

Her breath stank too, but that was no surprise. Thankfully, someone had left a chest of mint on the deck, probably for seasickness. With that taken care of, Severa made for the railing and looked to the water, watching the waves pass by silently.

"…Severa?"
The voice barely registered, Severa glancing over to see Lucina walking towards her in sleepwear. "Oh, hey Lucy. Just woke up…"

Lucina frowned and walked up, taking Severa's hand gently. "Severa, do you want to talk? I'm here for you if you want."

Severa kept her eyes on the water. "Lucy… not really, no. I just… don't feel like anyone's going to want to talk to me after what I did. Even if I talk to you, who's to say you'll let me talk about it again?"

Lucina's frown deepened, and her grip tightened. "Severa, I will always listen to you. Anyone in the Shepherds would, your family especially. Do you… feel like this makes you unloved?"

"Of course, no one loves monsters." Severa answered, voice stoic. "I've put more Risen in the ground than that entire fleet probably, but those were undead, it was a mercy to end them. This though… I broke families Lucy, thousands of them. I… I can't be loved after that."

Lucina sighed and kissed Severa's cheek, long and slow. Once sure she had Severa's attention, Lucina took her other hand. "Severa… you are loved, so very much. If you want me to, I can show you just how much you are loved. It'll just be me tonight, but… I'm sure the others will show you how much they care."

Severa looked down at their hands, uncertain. "Lucy… are you sure we should do this tonight? I'm… I'm not in my best mind."

"That's fine, Sev, I'll do whatever you want." Lucina answered, drawing closer. "The moment you want none of it, I will stop. The moment something's uncomfortable, I will stop. Whatever lets me show you just how much I love you."

Severa went silent, Lucina waiting patiently for her lover to come to a decision.

"…Please."

Lucina looked from their hands to find Severa gazing at her desperately. "I need you Lucy… so badly…"

"Show me you still love me. Please."

That was all the permission Lucina could ask for, her lips going to Severa's with a deep passion. They stood there and kissed tenderly for almost ten minutes before separating, their eyes half-lidded and clouded.

"We… should take this to the room."

Severa nodded before diving in, tongues getting involved this time. How they made it back to their room without trailing clothes behind was a matter of speculation, but they did so anyway. Once the door closed, a burning desire took hold and clothes were swiftly shed.

Dreams months-old came to fruition that night as the girls consummated their love. Light touches, passionate kisses, and more visceral acts filled the room. Lucina was gentle and took great pains to make Severa comfortable, even when they lost themselves half-way and their actions became fast, hurried, and intense.

Reminiscent of rabbits, if nothing else.
Oddly, their brands didn't react to their passion. One of Lucina's fears at advancing to this stage was the burning they'd experienced during their first kiss. If a simple press of lips was enough to cause that pain, what could less innocent actions do to them?

Those thoughts didn't enter their minds in the end, the glow of finally fulfilling their desires enough for the night. As they lay to sleep, bodies pressed together, Severa forgot her earlier sorrow.

If just for the night.
Landfall at Valm

When the morning came, it was Morgan who went to check on Severa.

Their parents had wanted to come, but the aftermath of sinking the Valmese fleet was taking a lot of time to sort out. Losing several dozen ships made it difficult to organize all the new guests on the remaining vessels, and it would be several days before the reserves caught up to replace the losses.

Then there were the prisoners they’d fished out of the sea. While Severa had been resting, the combined Ylisse-Ferox fleet had combed the smoking Valmese wrecks and surrounding waters for survivors. There weren’t many per ship, but that still meant a lot of prisoners to hold and feed.

Thus, Morgan was the only one available to head over and check on Severa, apprehension hanging around her as she dreaded what the trauma of the previous day had wrought.

_We saw a lot of bad things in the past, but this? At… at least we could always find comfort in the fact we were destroying the monsters that caused the horror and killed so many…_

_Sev… please, don't still think you're a monster for this. I can't stand the idea of you being like that, not when we've been through so much and kept who we are. We can't surrender to despair after everything… that'd just make Him win._

Shaking her head, Morgan dodged a hurried pair of knights before descending into the ship. Severa had been left to rest in one of the unused rooms for the night, but with the ships so crowded, they’d need those rooms.

Morgan sighed as she came upon the door Cordelia had marked with a red chord to insure privacy, not even bothering to knock as she opened it and went in. "Wakey-wakey, Sev, we need… to…"

Morgan blinked owlishly as she stood in the doorway, heavy pants and… moans filling the air as she watched Lucina and her sister slam their hips together for all they were worth.

Morgan mutely took a step back and shut the door before walking stiffly down the hall and back to the deck. She passed many a confused crewman on the way, but she ignored them in favor of reaching the railing.

Then, she took a deep breath and released her emotions.

"Oh, my gods, what the hell was that?!"

Her sudden shrill cry made the entire deck jump in surprise, everyone looking to her as Morgan panted. That was the last damn thing she expected to walk in on, and it had shocked her into a powerful stupor.

So powerful she didn't even notice Lissa jog over to her with concern clear on her face. "Morg, what was that? Did you find one of Tharja's… experiments?"

Morgan blinked several times, eyes locked on the ocean, before Lissa's presence and words registered. "Oh, hi, Aunt Lissa. No… not this time, anyway. I was just going to… wake up Sev… and…"

Lissa frowned before she groaned. "Cynthia told me Lucina wandered off sometime last night, said something about clearing her head. Wouldn't surprise me if she ran into Severa. Were they sharing a
Morgan nodded mutely, Lissa shaking her head. "Well, I applaud her for offering a comforting shoulder to your sister, but she really should've waited until today. Must not've been very comfortable hugging Severa when she was decked in full armor."

Morgan gulped and looked away. "…Naked."

Lissa blinked several times before her jaw dropped. "…Were they really?"

Morgan nodded, voice just above a whisper. "I… walked in while they were… busy…"

Lissa stared at the young girl in dumbfounded silence before she started to laugh. That laugh soon turned into full hysterics, Morgan having to reach over and support Lissa as she went weak at the knees.

After several moments of intense laughter, Lissa calmed down. "Sorry, sorry, that's just too funny. I always had Lucy pegged as too serious and upstanding to go and offer a body for comfort, but I guess she's just that in love. Hope she didn't force it on Severa though, using a fragile state of mind for gain like that is a big no-no."

Morgan noticed Lissa's hand glow slightly at that remark, but she shook her head. "We both know Lucy's not like that. It's just… kind of shocking is all. Sure, she's been kind of aggressive since we left, but I always thought they'd hold off on… sex until they were wed."

Lissa shrugged and patted Morgan's shoulder. "They'll do what feels right, I have no doubt. Let's just not mention it and move on, I'm sure Lucy can handle your sister until she's ready to see everyone."

Morgan sighed and pushed the sight to the back of her mind. "You're right, we should go help. Are Noire and Uncle Stahl still working on the landing ramps?"

"Eve joined them not long ago." Lissa informed as they started for the back of the ship. "Started smothering Noire in affection too. Ever since she found out about this whole-time travel thing, it's been non-stop Aunt mode for her."

Morgan cringed at Lissa's back, not sure if she should share a bit of information pertaining to that. "I'm… really surprised, actually. I didn't think she'd take such a story so well, let alone open her arms to all of us."

Lissa chuckled and gestured to the end of the boat, Nah and Evelyn having a discussion over a pile of scrap wood. "Well, why don't you go ask her why that is? It looks like she finished helping Noire and her hubby, so now's the time to ask."

Morgan gulped, but Lissa went off to take care of another matter. Taking a deep breath, Morgan put on her best smile and walked up to the chatting pair. "Hey there guys! What ya wokin' on?"

Evelyn paused as she held up one of the scraps, smile widening at the sight of Morgan. "Oh, hey there! We're talking about good ways to throw a punch and kick properly in case you lose your weapon. Natalie here wanted to ask about it in case we run across more wyrmshapers."

Morgan gulped, but Lissa went off to take care of another matter. Taking a deep breath, Morgan put on her best smile and walked up to the chatting pair. "Hey there guys! What ya wokin' on?"

Evelyn paused as she held up one of the scraps, smile widening at the sight of Morgan. "Oh, hey there! We're talking about good ways to throw a punch and kick properly in case you lose your weapon. Natalie here wanted to ask about it in case we run across more wyrmshapers."

Nah sighed as Evelyn looked to her. "Please, just call me Nah. Anyway, she's correct. Even when I'm not in my dragon form, wyrmshapers are incredibly dangerous to me because of the dragon's bane flower they use in its forging. Knowing how to fight and dodge without making myself into a bigger target is paramount."
Morgan had heard of that. Supposedly, the Valmese had discovered that quenching the heavy blades in the poisonous flower's resin gave the steel a toxic bite against anything of dragon blood, even their lesser relatives the wyverns. The process was difficult though, as the flowers were rare, and the resin had a bad habit of catching flame if the steel was too hot.

"Vaike was actually supposed to help, but he got called away for something." Evelyn continued, returning the scrap she held to the pile. "Frederick and Nowi were also preoccupied, so I volunteered to cover some basics. Nothing's too small for my family, even if you're all a little too old for me to call you my 'sweety cakes'.

The younger girls blushed at the embarrassing reminder, but Morgan let it go "Nah... can I ask you something really quick?"

Nah blinked at the serious tone but leaned in close when Morgan beckoned her near. Evelyn didn't hear what was whispered, but the girls separated with grim faces. "Something I should know?"

"Aunt Eve," Nah began, mature features sunken with sadness. "We... have something we need to tell you."

Evelyn felt a rock settle in her stomach, the weight doubling as Morgan started to explain. "We... we know you've been eager to get to know us, and we love it more than we can say, but we've also heard you asking... about Mark."

Evelyn felt her guts fall into her feet, Nah reaching out to steady her. "Aunt Evelyn, please listen. You must understand that where we came from, the flow of history was different. You... didn't meet Uncle Stahl until after Severa was born."

Evelyn looked to Nah with wide eyes, still finding it hard to believe the woman before her had entered the camp in the form of a child. "Are... you certain?"

"Yes," Morgan answered solemnly. "You... first met him when my parents were appointed to run Fields. By the time you were being courted, I'd already been born and Nah was soon to arrive. We loved you, so much, but you were wed to Uncle only days before Uncle Chrom died. A private ceremony from what we heard, everyone dressed for war."

Evelyn cradled her head, guessing where this was going but not daring to say it aloud.

Nah spoke it instead. "You and Uncle died together a month later, defending the border side by side. Mark... Mark didn't come back with us."

"He wasn't born in our time."

Evelyn choked on a sob, her worst fears confirmed. "I... I suspected something like that... when you never mentioned him. I heard of Owain, Gerome, Inigo, Brady... but never him. Now I know why."

"I won't get to see if I failed as a parent, I never got to try until now."

Nah and Morgan held back, unsure of what to say. They knew revealing the truth was bound to hurt their aunt but holding out on hope for something that couldn't happen was far crueler.

Evelyn took a deep breath, anguish buried in her voice if not her eyes. "Thank you... both of you, for telling me. I know Stahl will be disappointed, but it's better than always wondering. Um... do you mind if I go tell him privately?"

Morgan stepped forward and hugged Evelyn tightly, not willing to look her in the eye. "Of course,
please take your time. I... I'm so sorry."

Evelyn returned the embrace gently, no scorn in her voice. "There's nothing to apologize for, either of you," she looked to Nah as she said that. "What happened in your time is not your fault. All Stahl and I can do is deal with the disappointment, and I assure you it will pass soon enough."

She reached out and yanked Nah into the embrace. "We still have family here and a son to fight for. How could we ever let disappointment hold us in its grip with such warmth to comfort us?"

Morgan and Nah looked at each other in surprise, but gladly held the embrace until Evelyn laughed and pulled back. "Alright, enough being mush. I'll go talk to Stahl, but you girls are going to be busy. There's a whole 'nother month of travel on these waters, and that's before we even find a beach!"

Evelyn gave them a wink before striding away, the girls still able to see the stiffness in her shoulders.

"I hope that was the right decision." Nah sighed. "Such a distraction is bound to affect their capabilities."

Morgan gave her nominal cousin a flat stare. "Have a heart, there's a whole month on the sea to process the news. Besides, the truth is always better over a lie, no matter how comforting. It hurts less the earlier its confronted."

Nah stared at Morgan before picking up a piece of scrap. "To each their own. Regardless, are you up to help me? My instructor has gone to attend more personal matters."

Morgan smirked and took the scrap. "Sure, I'll help. Someone needs to teach you how to have fun again, even if I have to make your knuckles bleed."

Nah narrowed her eyes and put up her fists. "Bring it, Cherry Head."

Morgan shook her head and held up the scrap. "After you."

Nah swung at the wood, their little training session whiling away the hours. They'd get more news at lunch, but for now, they vented some stress.

-Severa-

Severa stared at the ceiling.
Lucina stared at the ceiling.

All was quiet in the room after their awakening and subsequent love-making, neither girl quite sure how to approach the topic of their now very physically intimate relationship.

Lucina, for her part, was rueing taking such a big step. All because she was being too forceful and selfish like a cock-teased horndog.

Severa was mostly trying to reconcile the immense euphoric heights she'd hit with the crushing guilt of the burning fleet. Complex didn't begin to describe it, but if nothing else, she did feel better than yesterday.

"So..." Lucina tried to begin. "That was... something."

Severa would gladly call that the understatement of the year, her need to snark outweighing her swirling thoughts. "I'd call some of the things we did a lot more than something."
Lucina looked over and pulled the sheets to her neck. "Yes… I feel I should apologize."

Severa sighed and sat up, not caring that it exposed her chest. "What for? I wasn't, nor am I, in my right mind. Doubt I'll ever be in my right mind to be perfectly honest, but it helped none the less. Nothing to be sorry for."

Lucina stared before remembering why there were so many hickeys on said chest. "Are… are you sure? I still feel like I took advantage of your need for comfort."

Severa shook her head, hair loose and mussed. "Trust me, I need the comfort, just needed to forget and lose myself in something too. If it wasn't this, it would've been plans or sparring. Honestly, if you ask the medics, they'd say this is a healthier option than most others we have."

Lucina had to agree, considering they'd brought an entire boat worth of Ylissean Wine for gifts. It wouldn't do anyone good if Severa turned to drink. "I guess… but you're sure you're ok with what happened?"

Severa smirked and grabbed the sheets from Lucina, tossing them back and exposing the princess. "Lucy, I knew this was going to happen on the ride to Valm, that was never a question. The circumstances just aren't… ideal is all."

She dragged a nail on a sensitive spot, but before they could go another round, a series of knocks came from the door. "Oi, Sev! It's been long enough, we need you out here!"

Severa and Lucina flailed in panic, Lucina rolling off the bed with a thud while Severa tried to gather the sheets and cover herself. "Hold on, Uncle V, just a second!"

"You alright in there?" Vaike called through the door. "I heard something hit the floor."

Severa heard Lucina scramble under the bed and she took the opportunity to right the sheets and cover herself. "Oh, that was just a bowl. I'm decent, you can come in."

Vaike took the permission and entered, though he was surprised by Severa sitting up with the blankets draped over her. "Oh, did you wake up and change into something else? I was expecting… to…"

His face twisted in confusion, Severa silently pleading it wasn't for the reason she thought. Then his eyes widened before he settled on a flat stare. "By the Gods, really Sev? Here I thought that was Cher's form of stress relief."

He sighed and shut the door before turning his back to the bed. "Alright Lucy, come on out. Get yourselves decent and we'll talk."

Severa threw the covers over her head in mortification, even as Lucina gingerly crawled out and awkwardly grabbed her discarded nightwear. Severa eventually got enough nerve to slink out of the bed and grab her casual garb, the couple dressing quickly.

Once they were set, Lucina gulped. "Uh… we're good."

Vaike huffed and turned to find them dressed. "That you are. Tell me, Lucy, did it ever occur to you that if this happened, you'd have to either send Sev to get your clothes or walk across the ship in a nightgown?"

Lucina flushed in embarrassment and shook her head.
"Thought as much." Vaike sighed. "As for you, Sev, I hope this came from a better place then simple stress relief. While it certainly works, I have it on good authority you're not one to turn to such things for no good reason, especially when your companion is a beloved."

Severa looked insulted, which was all the confirmation Vaike needed. "I like that look in your eye. Anyway, for how I figured you out, this room reeks. I may not have the best nose on this ship compared to our taguel friends, but I'm sharper than most. I suggest vinegar and lye for the stains, throw in something you like for the smell."

Lucina and Severa just stewed in embarrassment as Vaike of all people lectured them on how to clean up after an intimate night.

Vaike just laughed. "Well, anyway, let's get you all together and off to where we need to be. Well, Lucy anyway. Sev, you stay here until I come back."

Lucina shared a shy glance with Severa before dutifully following Vaike out of the room. Once they were out, Vaike led the way. "So, any questions? I can have Cher take over if you like."

Lucina looked down at the floor, voice a whisper. "No… I'm ok, thanks. Gods, can we not talk about this, it's mortifying enough as is."

Vaike chuckled and patted her shoulder. "It's fine, you never know when people are going to have questions, trust me. More than a few of these talks happened with the recruits, so I'm ready to answer whatever you have."

Lucina muttered a few things before taking a deep breath. "…I didn't see Severa's mark."

The swift one-eighty change in topic threw Vaike for a loop. "Say what now?"

"I didn't see her brand." Lucina repeated, eyes clouded. "It should've been on the small of her back like it always has, but while I was… exploring, I didn't see it."

She squeaked 'exploring' but Vaike was focused on the rest. "Well… makes some sense, I guess. From what the local candy thief says, Valm is a big believer in Naga, especially with the Voice herself there. Grimleal weren't terribly welcome even in Plegia, so who knows how a spy seeing the mark could be used?"

Lucina chewed on her lip. "I… just don't know why she wouldn't at least tell me. I agree that it is a wise precaution, but why should this be the first I've even seen or heard of it?"

Vaike huffed and smacked her upside the head. While Lucina rubbed the sore spot, Vaike gave her a displeased frown. "You don't need to know every bit and bob, Lucina. I may be thick headed, but I've been training recruits on how to be soldiers for years. If everyone knows everything, then it's too easy for spies to get info."

He gestured to the sea as they made the deck, the remaining fleet stretching out before them. "After all, do you really think Valm doesn't have at least one spy out there? Nowi and Gaius are good, but they can't be everywhere."

Lucina looked somewhat mollified by that, though Vaike could tell she wasn't satisfied quite yet. No further words could be given though, as another voice reached them. "Lucy! What in the name of heaven are you doing in your nightgown at this hour?!"

Sumia stormed up to them with a stern frown. "Follow me young lady, lest the soldiers see something they shouldn't."
Lucina muttered something about being only a few years younger than her mother, but followed dutifully. Vaike found it funny personally, since Lucina was generally regal and assured, so seeing her get scolded like an unruly schoolgirl was endlessly amusing.

Regardless, with one side of the situation taken care of, Vaike trekked back to the room and knocked. "Sev, you still there?"

He didn't get a response, but testing the door showed it unlocked. Opening the door slowly, Vaike peered in to find Severa sitting on the bed, legs drawn to her chest and head pressed against her knees. "Hey, Sev, what's wrong? You can tell me."

"It's nothing." Severa muttered, just loud enough for Vaike to hear. "Just give me a minute. Heck, you can tell Mom and Dad I'll be by soon enough."

Vaike refused to let this be, as proven when he shut the door and grabbed a chair. "Come on, Sev, spit it out. I won't even bother you about the nitty-gritty details of what I found here or tell your parents."

Severa looked up with a glare, but Vaike knew his offer was too tempting. "…Fine, but I'll get you for this Uncle V."

Vaike grinned but was silent. Severa, seeing he wanted her to start it off, sighed. "…I can't get yesterday out of my head. Even while Lucy and I were… engaged, the images still haunted me. How can I call myself anything more than a monster after causing so much death?"

Her eyes disappeared behind her knees again, not willing to look at Vaike. At least, until he sighed and scratched his head. "Sev, if anyone in this room is a monster, it's not you. I reserve the right to that level of self-loathing."

Severa was shocked by the unusual eloquence, to the point she looked up and stared at Vaike. Vaike, for his part, just looked sad. "Tell me, Sev, you ever wonder why I'm such a madman after I start fighting?"

Severa shook her head slowly. "No… I always thought it was because you were trained as a Berserker, so going into a blood rage is only natural."

"That ain't no blood rage." Vaike said, silencing Severa. "It's something else. It's like I can see and understand the most painful and brutal ways to kill someone. Like having a demonstration happen in my mind moments before I do it. I'm practically cursed to charge into the enemy and wreak nothing but pain and fear on them. The fleet may be a lot of death, but most died quick."

"Me? I tear them apart as painfully as possible. When the rush starts going, I relish the screams, and it takes more focus than you can imagine keeping that rush from consuming me."

Severa stared at him, wide-eyed. "…Really? I always thought you were just… using whatever you had at hand."

"Kid, I beat a Risen to death with its horse." Vaike snorted. "And I have a habit of carving up one poor sod with Armads only to bludgeon his buddy with his severed arms and legs. That's not battle, it's cruelty, and I can only keep it under control when focused. Lose that focus and… well."

He shifted his pauldrons aside and showed his back, Severa getting her first look at a sinister looking mark that resembled wicked brambles snacking over his shoulders. "Cherche or Tharja have to
Severa felt her own mark itch, but she showed no sign of it. "Is… that a binding spell?"

"And a real strong one at that." Vaike sighed as he replaced his armor. "Turn it on and I can't move at all. Well, I can, but not much and the spell is designed to cause as much pain as possible in order to discourage moving. It let's me cool off if I can't calm myself down."

Severa grimaced as she thought about the reasons he'd given for it. "I… assume you've lost control at least once, right?"

Vaike nodded, completely serious. "Twice in fact. The first time was when I was on patrol with Tharja, Kellam, Miriel, and Gregor. We were in an area where one of the rebellious barons had gone into hiding, but we didn't know that at the time. All we knew was that several villagers had gone missing and we were supposed to investigate."

Severa had a bad feeling about this. "Was it that baron?"

"It was, and a few of the others we'd had trouble tracking down." Vaike confirmed. "They'd hired some of the last bandits to kidnap the villagers so they'd have servants again. Real cruel state we found them in after capturing one of the rats, but the sheer… nonchalance of those bastards made me lose my head."

He gestured to the door. "They were trying to leg it out of that place, some small abandoned manor if memory serves, when I found them. The rage was something I'd never felt before, consuming me completely, because for all I knew that could've been me forced to serve them had Exalt Emmeryn never visited my village."

Severa stretched out and her feet settled on the floor. "What… what did you do to them."

"I broke them." Vaike stated flatly. "I ran at the first one and broke his legs, then tore off one leg and threw it at another. I think there were two others after that second one tripped on the leg, the third I remember punching their head into pulp while they screamed for me to stop. The last, well, they made their horse."

He chuckled grimly and tapped his arm. "Tried to ride off, but it's hard to do when someone grabs you by the arm and dislocates your shoulder. I'd prefer not to share what happened after that, if you don't mind."

Severa gulped and nodded, prompting Vaike to go on. "Tharja found me at that point and I tried to attack her, screaming like a lunatic. She hit me with a hex that froze me to the ground, then another to wrap me up and stop attacking the air. Got the binding you saw put on after I calmed down."

He could tell Severa was starting to pity him, so he went for the ending. "The second time was shortly after I started dating Cher. Me, being an honest sod, told her about the binding and why Tharja had put it there. She was accepting, as I'm sure you can guess, but I had her learn the activation chant since we're partners, and I should be able to count on her to stop me."

He scratched his head, not liking how somber and serious this whole thing was. "Thing is, the second time I lost it, was when some creep wouldn't leave Cher alone. She was the palace matron at that point, but some sleaze-ball kept coming by every other day to try and woo her. Didn't know where he was from, all I knew was that he ignored my existence and insisted that Cher wasn't actually seeing anyone, just indulging a curiosity."

Severa made a face that Vaike laughed at. "Exactly the face I made! I tried to be civil with the idiot at
Cher's insistence she handle it, but this guy apparently didn't fear death. She gave him the scary looks all the time and he never noticed, even when the rest of the staff went running. I could only take so much of it, but since he was a supplier, I couldn't touch him."

"Until?" Severa pressed, feeling a little sick at how Vaike's problems were assuaging her own. "I've never heard of this guy until now."

Vaike shrugged, unconcerned. "Well yeah, I almost killed him. The bastard tried to force himself on Cherche right as I was showing up for our date. Don't get me wrong, 'Nerva was nearby and about to make a roast of him, not to mention Cher just looked done, but I got there first."

The scene flashed in front of him. The pig leaning over Cherche, the way he tackled the pig into the dirt, the struggle that followed before Vaike pinned him. Then came the fists, and the broken bones, each done with full intent to maximize pain. First the digits, then the hands, then the arms, then shoulders, the ribs, the legs, the feet, and finally the toes. All that time the pig screamed bloody murder and begged to be saved, for the pain to stop.

And Vaike relished it.

Then pain invaded his mind and his body froze, Cherche having cast the binding in a panic. The binding was strong, but Vaike still had enough strength to bite into the pig hard enough to tear flesh before the pain of trying to move made him black-out.

"The bastard never showed up after that." Vaike sighed, noting the look of sympathy Severa gave him. "But it took months for Cher to trust me again. It wasn't that I didn't love her or vice versa, she just didn't know when another episode like that would hit me. Scared me shitless too, but I went into training to focus that rage I felt, which allowed me to control it. Or, that's the official story."

He leaned on his knees and smirked at Severa. "But you know already, right? About how everyone in the Shepherds got contacted by something claiming to be a deity since the war with Plegia ended?"

Severa knew alright, it was the first thing her father had explained after she received the Grandmaster title. Morgan, Lucina, and Cynthia had been informed as well, but they were forbidden from telling the other children. Only their parents could do that, it was their lone rule. "What did you meet?"

"Kali," Vaike said, Severa stiffening at the name. "High Goddess of Instinct. Apparently, she saw my rage as the basest instinct in all the world, her words not mine, to defend my 'pack' no matter the cost. She forced the ability to call upon and control that rage on me after I told her to shove it. Apparently, it impressed her."

Severa had to chuckle at that. Why didn't it surprise her that Uncle V would tell a High Goddess to stick her offer where the sun didn't shine?

"Problem was, I had no idea what the control she gave me was." Vaike continued, smiling at her chuckle. "So, I was basically dumped in the mountains and left to figure myself out. For the record, I was in a near permanent rage state after Kali was through with me, so I had to spend a whole month in the wilderness exhausting myself before I got it under control."

He pinched himself. "Turns out, the need to focus is because Kali took away my ability to feel pain. Like, I can still feel pressure and so on, but nothing hurts. As you might imagine, I have to go see the healers semi-regularly to make sure I'm not silently falling apart."

"Why pain though?" Severa had to ask. "Minus the obvious reasons, it still seems more a boon
compared to the stuff I've heard the others lose."

Vaike chuckled and scratched his cheek. "See… pain meant progress to me. You feel your body ache after a good day's work, or a good spar, or anything worth doing really. Having that taken away, I don't know if I'm progressing anymore. That, more than anything, hurts the most."

"Just the idea that I can't keep pushing because there's nothing to push against."

Severa was quiet before getting off the bed and hugging Vaike. "I'm… sorry to hear that. When you put it that way, I sound like a whiny child."

Vaike returned the hug with a laugh. "Kid, what happened is going to weigh on you, that's a problem your whole family has. Just remember to put it into perspective and always know that singular acts don't define you."

He pulled back and flicked her nose. "After all, Cher took me back despite spending a month in the mountains without bathing. If we have people like that as your role models, girl, there's nothing to fear."

Severa giggled, the sound music to Vaike's ears. "thanks, Uncle V. I… I feel a lot better now. I don't think the guilt I feel will ever go away, but… this helped."

"Well good!" Vaike hollered, making Severa jump back in surprise. "Now come on, your parents are dying to see you doing ok. Let's get you all into a big hug and head off for lunch!"

Severa shook her head in amusement but went towards her discarded armor. "I like the sound of that. Let me get ready and we'll go."

Vaike helped her gather the scattered armor and strap everything into place before they left the room behind. The talk had taken awhile, considering the sun was at its peak now, but Vaike was confident he'd at least made progress.

"Severa!"

Cordelia's shout was followed by the girl's parents flying into her, each of them hugging her tightly despite her protests and cries to breathe.

Vaike just laughed as the other Shepherds arrived on the deck, everyone checking in on Severa before heading off for lunch.

None missed how Severa and Lucina shared a few private words before following their friends and family, hand in hand.

Perhaps the rest of the trip wouldn't be that bad after all.

-One Month Later, Land Sighted-

The rest of the trip was bad.

One would think the Shepherds at large would be more careful about tempting fate, but no one ever quite learned that lesson.

As such, the rest of the crossing was fraught with rough weather, rougher seas, and more than a few of the smaller ships outright capsizing. It was sheer fortune they were able to evacuate the boats, but the remainder were incredibly crowded due to the constant storms forcing their relief fleet to turn
Not even Maribelle, who was contracted to Tlaloc the High God of Storms, could calm the raging winds and waters. The best she could do was direct the worst waves and squalls away from the fleet, but it strained her terribly to the point only an hour a day was permitted.

Everyone else just had to endure the other twenty-three.

Thankfully, land was sighted soon after the storms began to abate. They'd somehow made their landing site of Port Alsace Lor, but it was clear there was a Valmese force waiting for them.

"They burned the docks." Robin growled as he closed a spy-glass. "Only one of them is still useable, and they'll have every mage and archer standing by to either blow us up or fill us with holes."

Severa grunted in acknowledgment, the smoldering ruins of once grand docks and wharfs stretching into the sea. "They don't seem too focused if I'm seeing things right. You'd think having clear sight for the first time in a month would make them get ready for us."

She looked down the deck and sighed. Everyone had a spyglass of their own, surveying the situation before them with discerning eyes.

"They're searching for something." Ricken muttered as he put away his spyglass. "Something important enough to ignore us."

Virion agreed. "Running around in four-man teams, most efficient way to hunt a target. I've seen similar tactics whenever they were searching for targets of great importance, such as myself and other provincial leaders."

"Regardless, we have to take the port." Chrom sighed as everyone wrapped up their observations. "Landing on the dock is going to be nasty as is, but I'm pretty sure we have no boats that can get close enough to the beach and not run aground."

Libra pointed into the tide. "Milord, even if we did, it appears the Valmese capsized several vessels in the shallows. Our own would be torn to pieces on such wreckage."

Cordelia worked her jaw as similar obstacles were pointed out. "Cherche and I can do a ferry system. We'll have both our orders carry troops to the beach while Kellam and Frederick's divisions take the dock that remains."

"And put our most valuable assets at risk?" Miriel queried. "I'm sure they're watching the beach as surely as the docks. We'd need a severe and sudden shift in their focus for such a plan to be fruitful."

Gregor laughed. "Well, Shepherds have many things to get attention with. Lamps be useful, yes?"

Robin got a gleam in his eye and he looked to the dark sky, the storm clouds lesser but not quite broken. "Actually… Gregor just gave me an idea."

He looked to the Shepherds with a sinister smile, one that everyone soon shared as he described the plan.

What fun.

-Say'ri, Port Alsace Lor-

"Damn it all, where are the Alliance ships?"
The woman groaned as she ducked back into the alley she was hiding in. It was disgraceful enough to be hiding from the enemy as was, but even more so that she had to play cat-and-mouse with a bunch of greenhorns put here for no other reason than punishment!

The only blessing she had was feeding enough misinformation for that toad Excellus to post most of the coastal defense forces much further south near the island chains of Leane. There was nothing to stop the Alliance from landing in their actual destination now, except for a bunch of drunk training rejects that somehow managed to burn down the docks and the ships anchored there!

How she'd been spotted, Say'ri didn't know, but the Chon'sin princess would not allow a bunch of refuse to catch her. She'd outrun and outwitted even the Valmese elite, she'd be damned if this lot did her in.

"There, it's the wench!"

Say'ri groaned and sprinted away from the voices, keeping to the shadows as best she could. At least the stormy weather was lightening up, but the clouds were still thick enough to make the entire port steeped in dusk.

Unfortunately for her, the drunks were starting to get smart. The packs were linking up and cordonning off alleys and streets, even doorways and windows getting blocked. At this rate, it was only a matter of time before they found her, and she'd rather die than be captured.

Then day bloomed from the sea, blinding anything and everything as the sudden invasion of light in the dim port burned retinas and sent everyone scrambling for cover.

Say'ri adapted to the change quickly, but she looked to the sea and beheld a grand fleet, their decks blazing with light that even a fort of torches could not hope to match. Whatever the Alliance was doing, it had every Valmese soldier ducking into cover, even the mages and archers that had been posted to watch the docks.

"Amazing," she muttered as pinpricks of shadow appeared in the light, a shadow appearing in the sea as well. "To think they had something so grand as to blind an entire port."

Maybe there was hope for removing Valmese rule after all.

Maybe there was hope of defeating her brother.

-Olivia-

"I feel like I've been getting a lot of work recently."

Her companions said nothing, all focused on keeping up with her as Olivia slowly but surely made a tunnel out of the water around them.

"I'm amazed you've reached this level of control." Kellam muttered as he walked beside her, staring at the wrecked ships as they passed. "Wasn't too long ago you could barely make a swirl in a puddle."

Olivia grunted as she had to dig through a troublesome current. "Trying to calm the waters with Maribelle gave me a lot of practice. Let's just get to the top so I can drop this, I'd prefer a swim before anyone on land sees how much I'm sweating."

"You look good wet." Lon'qu said, damn near embarrassing Olivia enough to make the tunnel collapse.
Tharja smacked Lon'qu over the head. "Don't say such things, I care not she's your wife. All of you, be ready, we're bound to have a welcome ready for us on the beach."

"Minimize collateral damage." Libra sighed, the great axe Garm dripping with pale blue energy. "The less I have to lay to rest today, the better."

Frederick, the lone rider, did not speak. He was unhappy to be separated from his family, but someone had to lead the charge up the beach, and he was well suited for that task.

-Sky Above Port-

"Ma'am, we'll be at the center of the plaza shortly!

Cordelia signaled an affirmative and the knight pulled away. Robin's idea to use the much brighter lamps they'd developed out of the exploding rocks was strange, even for him, but it appeared to work. Not one arrow was able to fly with the lamps glaring hard into the port, but this first wave would be on their own until the archers were cleared out.

That's why only Shepherds were flying this sortie, the beach team coming in by sea. Olivia being Tiamat's Chosen really worked wonders on the coast, but would she be able to have that same versatility once they were further inland?

"Everything ok, Cordy?"

Cordelia blinked and looked back, Robin staring at her in concern. "No, I'm fine. Just worried that I have to leave you alone until the archers are gone."

Robin smirked and pecked her cheek. "We'll be fine, none of those guys down there will be a threat. They'll be disorganized and unprepared, especially for Olivia's group."

Cordelia had to agree with that. "If you say so. Just be safe, ok? No insane plans."

"Won't make a promise I can't keep." Robin chuckled. "But we'll do our best. Hopefully, we'll be able to get some information out of the locals too. I've heard tell of a resistance through Gaius's network, so maybe there's a contact here."

Cordelia huffed in playful annoyance. "True enough, but I prefer to be your only damsel should it come to such a thing."

Robin smiled helplessly and kissed her again. "Ready?"

Cordelia kissed him and nodded. "Let's do this. Knights, dive!"

Her command was met with roars and battle cries, the knights diving right as the lamps on the ships went out. The change in light did little to them, but disoriented the Valmese further. Almost a dozen were slain by the knights before their passengers were deposited and they took to the skies again.

The Shepherds gave the Valmese no quarter, the confused soldiers falling before blade and arrow. No magic was used, as the Shepherds wished to limit collateral damage, but the Valmese were swiftly routed.

Even the calmest among them, a Dark Knight by the looks of his armor, had barely moments to try and rally his routing forces before the very sea burst open and Olivia's group surged forth, Frederick crushing three men with his charge before he brought weapons to bare.
Libra slew the rest on the beach, Garm carving through the light armor of the swordsmen and archers while the energy it held withered those it did not slay into not but husks.

A short-lived countercharge was stopped cold by Kellam, the stone of the plaza rising to block them before Kellam thrust his lance into the wall. A dozen earthen lances were birthed from the wall instantly, impaling the soldiers that had rammed into it, the rear ranks trying to retreat as best they could.

Water rose from the plaza's fountain and held them there alongside tendrils of darkness, a flash of steel the last thing they saw as Lon'qu cut them down.

By the time the hiding civilians could see again, the battle was over. What was originally going to be a difficult and arduous fight for the bay was turned into a one-sided slaughter, all with the use of lamps and misinformation.

Something the Shepherds knew was bound to work maybe one or two more times. There was no way they'd gotten all the Valmese in the port, but the sheer shock-and-awe of their arrival was at least bound to send them running.

Now came the fun part of fortifying their new base of operations.

At least, that's what Robin was thinking until a woman in white armor and purple robes strode up to him, escorted by Stahl and Evelyn. "Who's this?"

"My name is Say'ri Byakko, good sir. I am a princess of Chon'sin who traces her line back to the ancient kingdom of Hoshido." The woman said with a deep bow. "Specifically, I am a descendant of King Ryoma and his wife Queen Kagero."

Robin scratched his neck, not sure what to do here. "Well, my name is Robin Marcellus Folk das Felds, being formal and all. I'm Grandmaster of the Ylisse-Ferox Alliance that the Valmese deigned to attack."

Say'ri straightened. "Indeed, we've heard many stories of your kingdoms and the strength they hold. As you have ably demonstrated this day, but I must warn you."

She gestured to the bodies that were being gathered so that Libra could give them their rights. "These were rejects sent here to be beat into shape, not even fit to be regulars. Walhart considered your continent weak enough he sent nothing but greenhorns and incompetent officers."

Robin snarled alongside everyone that heard that. "Well, his hubris will be his undoing. Trust me, we have more than enough strength to challenge this would-be conqueror."

Say'ri looked to the fleet that was now on course for the docks. "Indeed… I look forward to seeing you in action, Wardogs of Ylisse. As a representative of the Valm Resistance, I pledge support to your cause."

"Good." Gaius sighed as he rose out of Robin's shadow, scaring the daylights out of Say'ri. "And I'm glad we found you first, Lady Byakko. You're known to be trustworthy and daring enough to get info my informants couldn't."

Say'ri seemed to recognize him at that last line. "Shade, so we meet at last. I believe I've been sending requests for a meeting through your agents for some time."

Gaius shrugged while the others gave him stink eyes. "Never thought the Conqueror guy would have the cajones big enough to invade, let alone send such awful troops. Yet, here we are, and it's
time to get some information."

He looked to Libra. "Padre, if you would?"

Libra sighed and moved to the corpse of the Valmese leader, Say'ri watching suspiciously while the others kept working.

Libra kneeled beside the corpse and waved his hand over it in an arcane sign, pale blue energy invading the body. "Rise… and walk once more."

The energy suffused the corpse before it gasped and rose, the same energy rising from its eyes before it looked at Libra and bowed. "Orders… master…"

"By the Gods…" Say'ri gasped in revulsion. "Necromancy!"

Stahl held her back from drawing her blade. "Not quite, milady. Libra has power over the dead, but only because he can briefly draw the soul back into its body and question it. Even then, it is brief, and he cannot raise old corpses. They've long moved on to hear his call."

Say'ri looked to protest that, but the corpse soon lost its animation and fell back, Libra standing with a sigh. "We're actually in luck. According to the commander, most of the Valmese defenses were clustered near the southern islands, which is why we found such a short battle. There's bound to be much stiffer opposition as we move inland."

"Then we shall fortify and expand while we have the chance." Robin declared. "Lady Say'ri please bring all the resources you have to bear as soon as possible."

He looked to the first ship as it docked, the shining silver of Chrom's armor leading the way.

"We have plans to make."
Say'ri had only witnessed the scene before her once in all her life.

It was shortly before her brother had betrayed their country, the whole host of Chon'sin and its allies mustered to stymie the Valmese advance. Soldiers of many kinds and ranks had swarmed the capital city, seeking to fortify it and deny the Valmese the open field.

It had truly been a grand sight, and one that had given Say'ri hope.

Then her brother had surrendered without a fight and joined the enemy.

Now though, as Say'ri watched the Alliance forces disembark into the port of Alsace Lor, that old hope was rekindled. The first ship to dock had disgorged hundreds of soldiers in gleaming silver armor with blue trim, various regalia on certain groups marking the famous Ylissean Orders. Those soldiers swiftly set to work rebuilding the destroyed docks, creating functional anchorage for the other vessels within a few hours.

Then the true marvel began as literal thousands spilled into the port, each in immaculate uniform and marching with discipline only hard training could grant. Orders were followed without question and with utmost efficiency, the port square turning into a staging ground. Civilians were gathered and asked to point out the residential buildings, the soldiers marched right past them to begin pitching tents on the outskirts, so as not to disturb the people.

Even the mass of supplies and pack-animals was handled with care and efficiency in mind, the various crates and barrels split uniformly amongst the various divisions as the Shepherds designated abandoned buildings as supply depots and bunkhouses.

She was watching all this from the largest of the port's inns, the owners having fled shortly before the Valmese arrived in force. Now it acted as the central command center of the Alliance, its leaders discussed their logistics and plans behind her.

"We're unloading on schedule." Frederick said as they wrapped up their tallies. "The locals have been quite generous in providing shelter for the troops. But even with the buildings the Valmese were using for housing, the vast majority of our force will need to camp."

Sumia nodded. "That's still well within our expectations. So long as everything continues apace, Evelyn should be able to sortie into the countryside with Stahl before long. Once we have her report, we'll be able to start fortifying."

"I've already got the engineers laying the groundwork." Basilio rumbled, throwing a set of schematics onto the large table dominating the center of the room. "Preliminary surveys aren't good though, the soil's soft. Good for farming, but they'll need to put in a lot of foundation before any walls or towers can be placed."

Chrom sighed at that news. "I've seen the roads during the initial patrols, they're in desperate need of repair. Efficient movement is going to require a complete overhaul, and that's without any raiding parties or sappers slowing the work."

"This'll take months." Robin groaned, eyes scanning the map of Valm. "Traps and outposts, we can do shortly, but making the roads serviceable should be our first objective. With that done, our forces can engage in raids and other sabotage, delay any major offensive against us."
He moved several wooden pieces on the map, arraying them to the south and west. "If there's one saving grace, the woods and mountains to the north will keep any significant force out. As such, we can place the majority of our forces here and here," Robin gestured as he spoke, "that will give us optimal coverage."

Virion shook his head and shifted the southern piece further north. "There's a series of hills in this region, it's far more defensible. I think it a fair trade-off for slightly less visibility."

Say'ri scoffed inwardly, wondering why the Alliance would listen to the cowardly former duke. "Let's get to the point here." Sumia said, silencing any further talk. "At this point, all we can do is establish outposts and set traps. More permanent fortifications will take time, but we need to keep at least some momentum going if we're to keep the Valmese off balance."

Their attention turned to Say'ri, Robin calling for her attention. "Lady Say'ri, would you mind joining us? We need to hear a more up-to-date version of what's going on in the continent at large."

Say'ri turned and nodded before joining the small congregation. "Of course, I'll do my best to give you the most accurate version I can. First, as I'm sure you already know, Valm was splintered into seventeen different duchies and six countries prior to Walhart's conquest. Chon'sin and Roseanne were two such places, my home a country and Roseanne a duchy."

She started making marks on the map, starting on the western coast of Valm. "This is the center of the Empire, where Walhart first rose to power. The duchies around it are utterly loyal to Walhart, they'd rather die than anything. The same is true for the subjugated countries in the north."

She made several marks through the northern part of the map.

"The southern lands are also loyal, but that's mostly because of… my brother." Say'ri ground out, pointing to a region on the southeastern corner of the continent. "This is Chon'sin, my home. We were the most influential of the southern countries, and as such held the majority of the southern continent as vassal states. Their loyalties switched to Walhart after my brother's betrayal, though many citizens are less than enthused by it."

More marks were made and Say'ri pointed to the central lands. "This is the best place to look for allies at this juncture. The central lands of Valm are home to its richest farms, creating a full third of the continent's food by themselves. As you might imagine, they are fiercely independent people and powerful at that. Even Walhart knows that attempting to make them capitulate by force would only cripple his ambitions, and even then, I know most of the lords are allies by convenience alone. Were another power to come by and promise a return to independence like they've always known…"

Robin smirked and circled the largest regions Say'ri marked, two in total. "Then if we can bring these two to our side, we cut off a large portion of Walhart's ration supply. That'll weaken his military capabilities immensely, especially when winter sets in."

"It'll also up his raids." Basilio pointed out. "We'll need a steadier supply than just those two, especially if Walhart's agents get some leverage on them to force compliance. Anyone we can convince on the coast, Little Miss?"

Say'ri cupped her chin in thought, running through the various lords and ladies on the eastern coast while the others debated the merits of advancing their lines as far as they could before settling down to defend.

Eventually, she came up with two names. "Just to the south of us is the realm of Lady Montmorency
and her husband Lord Gramont. It's a matriarchal inheritance system, but they hold the largest and third largest ports within their lands. The good lady is not a fan of Walhart for his policies and violent ways, but her people are ill-equipped to fight. Instead, their strength lies in their merchants and guilds, all sworn to serve the lady."

Sumia grinned mischievously. "That would kill two birds if we got her to our side. Losing a major player in trade would not only make them lose a large supply provider, but also a significant portion of their revenue. We'd have to convince her we could hold back the onslaught from her lands though, should she throw her lot in with us."

"The same could be said of Lord Arsene and Lord Sigmus." Say'ri replied, gesturing to the large central countries Robin had marked. "The former is a devious man that was able to swindle a great deal of independence from Walhart's authority while only paying lip-service, he'll be difficult to convince. The latter takes his oaths very seriously, and Walhart's made him swear one of utmost loyalty. We'd need to find a serious breach of that oath for Sigmus to declare it broken."

She pointed to a small duchy to the north, where something called the Great Gate guarded the lone entrance. "This, however, would make our lives much easier. This is the abode of Lady Ymir, whose wisdom and patience are respected across the continent. Only the Voice of Naga holds more sway than her and even Walhart is loath to try and subjugate her lands."

"That's a hard sell." Chrom said. "Isolationists are loath to leave their lands for any reason, only direct threats get them anywhere. We'd have to convince her that Walhart is a direct threat to her people, in addition to making sure she's not convinced we're the enemy."

Say'ri smiled and tapped a spot on the map just outside their current location. "Then we free the Voice. Her word is held sacred by all in the lands, and Walhart keeps her imprisoned in the Mila Tree so that she can't countermand his agenda. Should we free her and bring her to our side, it will constitute a major defeat for Walhart and make all the leaders I mentioned far more… willing to listen."

"We'll need to show them we can actually fight." Basilio said. "Flavia's bound to love hearing it at least, but the good news in that is we have the advantage. We get to choose our battlefield this time, so we better make it count."

All looked to Robin, who held up his hands in surrender. "I'll speak with the scouts when they return and then start working on an outline of a plan with my fellows. While defeating them on their most advantageous turf would win us significant clout, that would just make the Valmese cautious. We'll need to save that for a more critical juncture."

"I'd call our current circumstances pretty critical." Chrom sighed while pushing off from the table. "In any case, we need to learn more from scouting missions. Make sure all the Valmese who escaped aren't sticking around."

Sumia stepped toward the door, marking the meeting's end. "I'll have Cordelia and Cherche get their Orders in the air. They can give us an overview of this land before the far-riders head out tomorrow. Virion, can you see to working with Flavia on possibly taking Roseanne?"

Virion bowed in answer, humbled the liberation of his homeland would be made an early objective. With that, Chrom joined Sumia and the royal pair left, Basilio following soon after to help Flavia get the troops organized.

Robin gestured for Virion to leave before he turned to Say'ri. "It still surprises me that you're so forthcoming about the Valmese tactics and politics. Even in the direst of straights, I've never heard of
a rebel leader so readily divulging what they know to a new player."

"Holding out on you would be of little help." Say'ri answered. "And even then, my word is that of a rebel, so all I can do is share what I've heard. Not to mention my brother being on Walhart's side and as one of his best commanders makes me… a poor liaison to the others who share my views. It was why I was attempting to contact Shade."

Robin frowned and shook his head, remembering the tongue-lashing Maribelle had given Gaius for neglecting that avenue of action. "Be that as it may, it's still very much welcome. I have no doubt your knowledge of backroads and other trails will be invaluable, but if I may ask, why is the Voice so sacred here?"

Say'ri tilted her head in thought before nodding. "The Voice is the oracle of Naga herself, Lady Tiki. Much like your land, faith in Naga is strong here, Walhart himself is counted amongst the believers. As such, Lady Tiki is considered a light to the people and her word has ended many possible conflicts peacefully. The only problem is she sleeps for years at a time, so we often have to rely on the clerics that tend to her."

Robin could tell by her sour tone that the authority those clerics held had been abused in the past. "I see. Regardless, we've been fortunate to have you. For now, go rest, we're bound to be on the move again before long."

Say'ri bowed and strode from the room, Robin walked to the balcony and stared out at the town. A moment later, the door opened and admitted Morgan. "Um… sir? We've seen to the camps for the infantry, but we've found a problem."

Robin sighed and gestured for her to stand next to him. "What happened? Did the Valmese set fire to the fields too?"

Morgan groaned as she took her spot. "If only. No, it's a bit of ill-timed sabotage on the parts of the locals. The rains were being collected in a natural reservoir, but some of the miners decided to weaken the tunnels next to it. All of the iron mines are completely flooded."

Robin bit back a curse. They'd chosen this place as their landing spot not only for the port size, but also because no lords owned the surrounding lands and there were rich iron mines therein. While it was only a drop in the bucket compared to the total mineral wealth of the northern mountains, it would still drastically reduce their need to import in supplies.

"It'll be a week before we can drain them." Morgan continued, leaning on the balcony railing. "And even then, the miners aren't happy that we'll be taking the metal. Minus the saboteurs, Valm at least paid them for the work, the problem was how their soldiers acted."

Robin rolled his eyes at that tidbit. "It always comes back to money. Can't just promise safety and meals, no sir."

He sighed as Morgan gave him a teasing smile. "Just point Cherche at the problem, or Miriel if they're really stubborn. In the meantime, mind walking with me? I need to talk to you and your sister about our next move."

Morgan nodded, and they gathered the maps and left. Robin gave her a quick summary while they made their way through the port's hectic crowds. Soldiers weaved around them trying to get various supplies set up alongside command areas and other essential parts of an army base.

"So, we're trying to court nobles?" Morgan asked after Robin finished his rundown. "And here I
thought the hard part would be getting this place set up. Not to mention getting Roseanne under our banner so we have a steady food supply."

Robin ruffled her hair. "The wonders of counter-invasion. It'll be a hard few weeks, and that's just securing all the land. After that, we'll have our first real fight on our hands."

"I'll be ready." Morgan promised as she pushed his hand away. "I've faced the hordes before, the only difference is these guys are organized. I'll do my part, same with my squad, so you better have a good plan for us."

Robin smirked at her. "When have I not, Cherry Head? Just be careful out there, I want to win back my gold."

"We'll see if you ever learn to bluff first."

Robin responded with a truly disgusted face, making Morgan break into giggles. "That was my face, and Sev's when I told her about it. I mean, the very idea you'd ever cheat on Mom is ridiculous enough as is, but that's just… bleh."

Robin gagged for a moment before spitting, as if ridding his being of such terrible thoughts. "Born of ignorance it may be, I like to think people have more respect for me. That disturbing thought aside, where the hell is your sister? We should've run into her by now."

Morgan shrugged and gestured to the edge of the town, a familiar mane of red hair directing several Pegasus knights. "Let's ask Mom, she saw Sev last."

Robin hummed in answer, the pair walking up to Cordelia as she finished her orders and the knights took to the air. A cleared throat grabbed her attention. "Oh, hello you two. I assume we have at least an idea of our next move?"

Robin sighed. "Mostly, though I still need to talk with everyone and get the full reports in."

Cordelia nodded in understanding. "Well, if you're looking for Sev, she's helping Maribelle and Libra direct the medical personnel to their new work areas. I need to speak with Cherche about setting up a new estuary in a canyon to the south, but I'll help you find her first."

Robin responded by wrapping an arm around her waist and pulling her in for a kiss to much whistling and hollers. Cordelia pulled back from the contact a moment later and smacked his shoulder. "What have I told you about doing that when we're on duty?"

"To do it more often." Robin replied as he kissed her again, deeper.

Cordelia was more than willing to indulge in Robin's affections, but Morgan's cleared throat made her pull back with a giggle. "Let's… save this for later. So much to do without giving the poets among us ideas."

"More than you've already given anyway." Morgan laughed as she followed her parents through the city of tents that had popped up. "You should hear some of the shanties and songs they came up with on the voyage, it's a riot to listen to."

Robin took Cordelia's hand unconsciously. "I bet they're full of ribald descriptions too, along with less than flattering titles. Maybe we should send Sev in to copy it all down, so we can come up with our own songs?"
"Not without starting a war over the silliest lyrics." Cordelia laughed, squeezing his hand. "Frankly, I'm just glad there's been no retaliatory strikes yet. Lady Say'ri's efforts in misleading the Valmese have been more complete than I thought."

Morgan pointed to a spot beyond the tents, several riders in Ylissean colors cresting a hill. "It's let us scout without issue, yeah. If what she says is right, then we'll have a few weeks free before any counter-attack can be made."

"An advantage we must use." Frederick said as he fell in line with them, a roll of spears under his arm. "This is our first true war where the enemy is as set in their belief of righteousness as we are, there's simply no possibility we'll always win. As such, we must strike while we can."

Robin sighed, knowing Frederick was coming from the right place. "It's as you say, but we still know precious little of the terrain. Not to mention the iron mines are flooded and Nowi's still screening the civilians and captives."

Frederick's frown became more pronounced at the mention of his wife. "I know of this, but that's why Evelyn and her cohort have already set out alongside another dozen scouting parties. The Exalt and Queen have also authorized the repair and overhaul of this land's roads, while the Khans have set out to find spots for outposts and forts."

Robin internally groaned, knowing that there'd be more work when they all returned. "Have Miriel get her fortification designs ready for review and get Kellam to help her. Make sure Sully and her Order keep any enemy scouts away, then I want Gregor to meet with me and Sev about the local mercenaries."

Frederick nodded his understanding and split off down another avenue, the Volk family entering a section of the tent-city where plate and spears gave way to chain and staffs, marking the medical section.

Severa was easy to spot from there, her coat and golden armor at great odds with the blue and yellow robes of the priests and clerics. She was speaking with Libra when she noticed her family. "Oh, what brings you guys here? I'm guessing the meeting ended."

"That it did." Morgan answered, greeting Libra before continuing. "Sad thing is, we have to draw in some allies alongside our original plans. Iron mines got flooded too."

Libra frowned, not remembering any casualties related to a mine collapse. "Then are we to be delayed in occupying Roseanne? Our rations and medicine won't last more than four months unless we halve consumption."

"Thankfully not." Robin answered, nodding to Cordelia to make his point. "Her knights have already returned from initial flyovers of Roseanne's borders, the Valmese have only a single fort across its expanse. Flavia will see to getting the place surrounded while the rest of the excursion deals with Roseanne proper."

Severa crossed her arms in thought. "That's… not a surprise, to me at least. Roseanne may be very fertile and have the herbs we use in our medicines in abundance, but it's still only a small territory to Valm."

Everyone knew Virion and Cherche would be less than enthused to hear that brutal description of their homeland, but it was true.

"Regardless, we'll be sure to have our own production before long." Robin promised Libra. "How's
it going getting this place set up? I haven't heard from Lissa or Maribelle since we started unloading."

Libra smiled and gestured to the tents around him. "We've been settling in just fine. The locals Nowi pointed our way have been quite helpful identifying poisonous insects and plants, and we've been able to get the general clinics up and running. As of right now, Lissa is looking into uses for a few plants we found promising while Maribelle's seeing to the surgery centers."

Cordelia sighed in relief. "That's good, I have no doubt we'll have soldiers out of commission before long from eating something or getting bitten. Speaking of, I really need to find Cherche and get that estuary sorted out lest our mounts not have a place to rest."

"She was speaking with Sully and Miriel last I saw her." Severa informed her mother. "That was a couple hours ago though, so you should probably go to the current staging grounds for the Wyvern Knights."

Cordelia thanked her and bid them goodbye, though not before giving Robin a customary kiss that practically steamed.

While her father was dazed by the promise that act held, Severa looked to her sister. "Honestly, I'm kind of surprised you're not with Cynthia. Weren't you two assigned to the northern scout groups?"

"Skies over there are still way too rough." Morgan said with a shrug. "Cynthia's using the time to familiarize herself and the off-duty knights with the local air-currents. Had quite a crowd gathering before I went to find Dad."

Severa grunted, continuing when she saw Libra trying to snap Robin out of his daze. "I was talking with Lucy and Nah before I came here, getting some stuff about a command center set up. But, once Dad's back with us, my original plan of checking in on Kjelle and Noire will have to wait."

"They're not puppies." Morgan muttered. "At the very least, Noire's keeping herself calm. Kjelle got most of her, shall we say, less than sensible arrogance knocked out of her via Sully too."

Severa sighed and patted Morgan's arm. "They're still the babies of our group, same with Inigo. I can't help but worry after them."

"I took care of them too, and I say they're fine." Morgan countered. "But that's that and this is this. You ready to start going over fort locations and logistics?"

Severa looked to the camp then her sister. After a moment, she pinched her nose. "Ready as I'll ever be, I guess. Maybe we can do more important stuff like organizing the Roseanne excursion when all this is over."

"Don't get too excited, Sev." Robin said, finally free of his own mind. "We've got a week's worth of work ahead of us, and that's before we so much as move beyond this region's borders."

Severa and Morgan looked at each other and shared a mutual groan.

This was going to be a long week.

-One Week Later-

They were wrong, it wasn't a long week.

It was a very long week.
The initial settling in and organization of the forces went about as smoothly as could be asked for. Smithies were set up, leathersmakers followed, along with a variety of other specialists. They took residence in the town proper, since it already had most of the space and specialized equipment needed.

The soldiers all camped outside of town, Shepherds included. They were all used to camping anyway and it wouldn't do them any good if the soldiers felt they weren't worth a warm bed and the commanders were.

Chrom and Sumia choosing to ruff it with Lissa actually made the soldiers upset though, saying that the Exalt and Queen deserved the comfort for all their work. Chrom and Sumia politely declined.

Beyond that initial set-up, problems swiftly mounted. The flooded iron mines meant a number of parts for the siege weapons they'd brought couldn't be replaced any time soon, the originals lost at sea. Heavy rains set in shortly after, turning the fields to mud and bringing the road project to a halt before it even began.

With the mud came bugs and with bugs came disease. Despite the best efforts of Olivia and Kellam to keep the camp clear of fetid water, and the soldiers keeping latrines well away from both the town and camp, a full third of the camp came down with some sort of ailment that slowed the work.

The harsh weather slowed the scouting parties as well, Evelyn herself ending up delayed for an entire two days. The lack of reports and the ever-roaring rain made the entire camp paranoid that the Valmese may be coming for them.

Thankfully, the Wyvern Knights could still fly despite the weather and Cynthia's squad was used to rough air currents after training under their boisterous captain. Based on their reports, no Valmese were moving amongst the lashing rains and roaring thunder, so at the very least they were safe.

Keeping gear clean and rations dry was another big issue. While various texts and other delicate items had been stored in town, rust cleaning was a constant activity whenever the rain took a break. Rations grew moldy as well and had to be thrown out, to the tune of several tons worth.

Much to Severa and Robin's alarm, the locals informed them storms like this were fairly common.

As such, they had to piece together the Roseanne excursion far sooner than they'd originally thought. Evelyn hadn't even gotten her first trap corridor set-up before a force numbering just north of five-thousand set out, using a break in the weather to leave.

At the head of the excursion were Virion and Cherche, Vaike and Panne following them. The excursion's job was to run the Valmese out of Roseanne and establish a perimeter before linking up with the main force. This would form a solid base for the Alliance to work from and retreat to, but they'd need to do it fast.

"I don't like the quiet." Virion mumbled as he scoped out the fields before them, the clear sky a welcome sight compared to the rains they'd left behind. "One doesn't move this many men and beasts without someone noticing."

Panne scanned the horison, eyes narrowed in concentration. "Someone's heard of us, we know that. Unless Gaius decided to be sloppy at a truly terrible time, we should expect whatever Valmese forces govern your home to meet us before long."

The flap of wings marked Cherche's arrival, Vaike hopped out of Minerva's saddle with a grim frown. "More like within the hour. We spotted six units of cavalry marching for these fields, a dozen
infantry units behind them. Three of the cavalries are heavy riders while two are regular cavaliers. The other unit looks like archers."

"A full-scale version of what Stahl anticipated." Cherche mused, eyes fixed on the horizon. "We'll need to see how they work, I don't recall such a unit being in use when we were forced out of Roseanne."

Virion sighed and looked back down the hill, taking in the sight of the troops at his command.

How things had changed.

"Call them to battle." Virion ordered, Vaike set off for the camp. "Cherche, take your unit and hide amongst the clouds. Once the Valmese are committed, dive on their rear and drop your bags. The ignition and blast should cause a panic."

Cherche hummed in thought. "We'll need to make sure those mounted archers aren't watching the air. If they are, they'll notice our approach and break off."

Virion spotted a dark line growing on the horizon, his sharp eyes catching the minute change in light. "Again, wait until they're committed. The archers won't be watching for an ambush at that point, then you can strike. Tell the Pegasus Knights to stay well outside of range until the battle is joined, follow hit and run pattern four."

Cherche nodded and took to the air once more, the clash of steel and thunderous voices rising from the army. Virion took a deep breath before feeling Panne reach over and cup his cheek. "You've been paying attention in those sessions with Robin and Evelyn."

"I have to be a better man than when I left." Virion sighed, steadying himself with Panne's touch. "My people deserve it, Yarne deserves it, and so do you. He may not have been able to join us this time, but..."

Panne shook her head and nuzzled his nose. "Virion, I need no proof you're a better man than when we first met, and Yarne knows you only as a good and just man. If anyone needs proof you are no longer a coward... it's you."

Virion smirked tiredly, used to this argument. "As always, you cut straight to the marrow. Worry not for me, I will stand with these soldiers who so valiantly left their homes a world away. Their enthusiasm to free my homeland, even if in the service of protecting theirs..."

He looked into her eyes, something he'd once been unable to do. "It makes me want to do something brave, and this will be my first true step in repaying the debts I've incurred. Now then, you know what to do?"

Panne pulled away, a scary smirk on her lips. "Of course, see you on the field."

Virion smiled and shrugged helplessly before descending into the mass of soldiers, guiding them into battle-formations with the Valmese still growing on the horizon. In terms of numbers, the Valmese had them beat by about five-hundred.

However, the difference in quality was clear. While the Valmese riders were clearly trained and able alongside quality equipment, their infantry supporters looked like little more than men-at-arms and levies. Most had probably only received the most cursory training, and even then, their inexperience with the weapons they held was obvious.

"Hold the line!" Virion bellowed as the Valmese came close enough for their banners to stand clear
in the daylight, the blood-red cloth bearing the glaring image of a lion. "You are soldiers of Ylisse and warriors against those who would conquer and pillage for its own sake! Do not let these mongrels intimidate you!"

He was met with cheers, the Valmese continuing to advance. Virion recognized a familiar face at the back of the riders.

It was the general that had led the invasion of Roseanne all those years ago.

Virion had never learned his name, Walhart considering him too minor to ever make him worth rumors, but Virion knew that face like the back of his hand.

He bit back the desire to string his bow and plant an arrow in the man's black heart. Showing his maximum range this early would only make important targets hide from his sight, no matter the personal satisfaction it would bring.

Virion frowned as the thunder of hooves met his ears, the Valmese apparently secure in their numbers to be going for a frontal charge. "Halberds, to the front!"

The earth shook as the knights marched forward, great tower shields nailed to their gauntlets while long halberds were attached to their other arm with a chain. As they settled, their shields were planted into the earth and their blades came up to form a wall of metal.

Virion knew the Valmese had seen this formation before, it was obvious as they continued forward, lighter cavalry breaking off with the intent to flank. "Archers, pepper them! Take down as many as you can!"

Arrows rained on the cavaliers who broke off, their desire to go around the wall taking them away from the heavy cavalry's armor. Several dozen were felled in the first volley, another three forcing the remainder back into the main body.

The heavy cavalry continued their charge unabated, likely believing they had the momentum to smash through the knights and the rest of the Ylissean infantry.

A massive blast sent the whole of both forces into a brief panic, the Alliance forces recovered quickly. The levies of the Valmese swiftly bolted though, the sight of Wyverns diving on them making the skittish men and women break formation. Then came the Pegasus Knights, mounts and riders slamming into the disoriented flanks and causing further confusion.

Virion smiled as this occurred, the heavy Valmese cavalry far too committed to pull off from their charge now. "Brace!"

The Valmese slammed into them with the crash of steel and the screams of horses, steel biting into flesh as the first line of cavalry was summarily slaughtered. The momentum carried through though, and the knights found themselves bowled over by the Valmese.

Virion rolled away from the charge and came up shooting, his preternatural draw-speed sending a stream of arrows through the Valmese armor and felling twenty men as they passed. The riders were panicking at this point. Rather than scatter from the charge, the back ranks of infantry fell back in an organized retreat, creating kill-zones with lances constantly seeking flesh.

Their doom was sealed when Virion sent up a signal spell, his own cavalry streaming over the hills and completely encircling the heavy riders. They were slaughtered to a man thereafter, with only the archers and remaining light cavalry left of the formerly proud Valmese force.
Those archers were proving to be an annoyance though. Three dozen of the Wyvern and Pegasus Knights had been forced to pull out by their constant fire, and they were staying mobile to avoid retaliatory spells, hand axes, and javelins.

The general of this erstwhile force was following them, no doubt wanting to inflict as much damage on Virion's forces as he could.

Seeing this apparently rallied the men-at-arms, the better trained soldiers reforming their battle-lines and forming a refuge for the remaining cavalry behind their spears. With a melee no longer in doubt, Virion raised his bow. "Swordsmen and archers, advance! Knights and spearmen, hold this position in case they have a surprise for us, don't give them an inch!"

He was met with roars of approval, most of the army marching forth in unison. Virion followed them proudly, his silver armor shining in the sun while his cloak billowed in the wind. As he passed a small stream that marked the border between Roseanne and the world, he took a breath.

*I'm home.*

A hand landed on his shoulder, making him jump until he turned to find Vaike grinning at him. "Come now, don't do that. I've shot people for less."

"No, you haven't." Vaike teased. "You just looked distracted and we all know that throws off your aim. So, where ya need me?"

Virion gestured to the center of the reformed Valmese lines, the men speeding their steps at they got closer. "Why, where you always are. Make us a path, my friend."

Vaike smirked, a lucky arrow finding his shoulder. Virion watched as Vaike's eyes went wild and he sprinted towards the Valmese line with a hellish war-cry, the soldiers behind him following with a great roar of their own.

Then the lines met.

For several minutes it was nothing but sound and sparks, and shouts, and bangs, and blood, and cries, and bile. Men and women fell upon each other with the intent to kill, life spilling into the earth that had sustained it. Guts were spilled, heads cleaved, shields splintered, swords broken, and lives shattered.

Pandemonium.

And Virion was in the thick of it, bow eternally strung and arrows seeking prey. He alone slew two dozen enemies, rolling and weaving amongst the struggling bodies like a panther in the jungle. But even with his arrows claiming their fellows with ease, the Valmese did not break.

Virion knew why too, as an arrow fletched in red skewered the arm of the swordswoman he'd come to aid. The horse archers were circling the melee and putting potshots into anyone not wearing Valmese colors. Even those soldiers caked in mud with no way to show their loyalty were shot.

The other light cavalry and the general did their parts by nipping at Virion's men, distracting them long enough for men-at-arms to land fatal blows.

Virion's own cavalry did its best to drive them off, but the Valmese simply wouldn't break.

Buy, it was concentrating solely on the melee that sealed the Valmese's doom.
With the whisper of a shadow across grass, Panne appeared behind the Valmese general in her great form, the huge hare looming over the rider with glowing red eyes. The man didn't notice the demon before Panne reared her paw back and rent him in two, her claws stained with blood and bile.

She didn't rest or allow anyone to take in the sight, her claws tearing the mounted archers from their horses or breaking them with a kick from her mighty hind legs. The sudden appearance and immediate slaughter of half their only effective unit finally broke the Valmese completely, their forces swiftly abandoning the field if Virion's forces didn't capture them first.

Except for Vaike though, anyone he caught died painfully, the man caught once more in the throes of a blood-rage. It was understandable considering he had a spear stuck in his arm and a nasty gash on his side, but Virion would need Cherche to come down and calm him.

Regardless, they had their victory, and the men had tasted their first true test. Unlike the Risen, the Valmese could think and had the ability to hold despite losses incurred, as shown. Only levies used to bolster smaller professional forces could be counted on to flee in such cases.

Sadly, some had learned that lesson with their lives.

"Virion." Panne called to him, shifting to her normal form as the soldiers celebrated. "I apologize for taking so long, having so many of them break so early forced me to hide."

Virion strode to her and pulled her into an embrace, Panne protesting the action. "Shush, we're both caked in the aftermath of battle, but I wish to hold you close. Thank heaven you weren't hurt."

Panne growled but eventually returned the hug. "...I am glad you are unhurt as well My Fool. I hope this at last brings you some peace."

Virion buried his nose in her hair, taking in her scent. "It does, if only just. Peace... peace will come when I've paid my debts to this land."

He pulled away and turned Panne to face the pristine land that stretched away from them, showing her the rolling fields unsullied by the battle. "This is my warren, My Love. I welcome you to it and hope it shall treat you as you have treated me."

Panne chuckled, the sounds of nature telling her it certainly would. "And a good warren it is, I will be glad to see to its defense alongside you."

Virion smiled at her before looking to the soldiers, Vaike standing among them and far calmer. "It appears our friend has returned to his senses without Cherche's aid. We'll have to see to securing the borders now, but I have a feeling it won't be too difficult."

Panne rolled her eyes, a very different feeling sitting in her gut. "We'll see, we'll see. Let's gather everyone together and send a message back to Chrom and Flavia, they'll want to know how we did."

Virion nodded and they went amongst the soldiers, organizing them back into units in case the Valmese had reinforcements en route. After that, scouts were dispatched to Roseanne's borders and along the route to its capital. Much to Virion's chagrin, the people they passed were less than happy to see him, but that was only right considering he'd run away.

They didn't know that he'd done so to spare them the axe.

It wouldn't be for long though. While the Shepherds and Alliance at large would operate out of Alsace Lor and its surrounding lands, Roseanne would be administrated by someone Miriel would appoint for their agricultural and logistic expertise. Virion himself wouldn't be there much longer
than a few days.

It didn't make the vitriol sting any less.

*-Alsace Lor, Three Days Later-

The success of the excursion into Roseanne was a needed rush of good news after the series of problems they'd been beset with.

It showed that Valm relied on levies for the bulk of their provincial forces, the professional military constantly on the move to deal with a variety of issues all their own. With that in mind, the Alliance could theoretically take and secure the entire northeastern part of Valm before facing a determined threat.

The advantage would not last long though, as despite his tactical ineptness, the Valmese held a brilliant strategist in a man named Excellus. He couldn't direct battles worth anything, but he held great skill in logistics and organization that made it so he was always where he needed to be. Combined with the competence of the Valmese generals they were sure to face, any territorial gains would need to be made quickly.

Then came the test of holding them.

Nowi knew this all too well, though she knew not why she'd been asked to accompany Robin and Chrom on a tour of the outer defenses. With the rains finally at an end, the soldiers had gone to work at long last getting the roads set up.

The method of their construction was lost on Nowi, but they were designed to drain water and hold up against all kinds of weather. The widest of the roads would connect the port straight to the borders, with smaller roads connecting the outposts and other bases getting set up. Problem was this required lots of manual labor and the mud only made things more difficult.

"At least we've got wooden walls set up." Chrom sighed from his horse, the trio cantered alongside the soldiers working on the road. "Once the mud dries and the roads settle, we can start on actual walls."

Robin grunted, his horse leading Nowi's. "If we have enough time to get them set up. We're lucky Roseanne and Alsace Lor only cover a few hundred leagues along the borders or we'd have to abandon this idea."

"I'm well aware setting up permanent walls along borders larger than this is impractical." Chrom reminded him. "But as I told you on the sea, the borders can be covered by walls the same length as those that surround Ylisstol and Denaris. With that permanent line, we have something to work with."

Robin shook his head. "And a lot of ground to cover. At least Sumia convinced you that most of the walls would be little more than warning stations or we'd be spread too thin."

"This fascinating conversation aside, what are we doing out here?" Nowi asked. While she'd agreed to accompany them for possible use of her semi-sight, their bickering had taken precedence over telling her the main reason for this trip. "I mean, you denied an escort despite your family's pleas."

Chrom looked back before gesturing to the growing sight of walls in the distance. "We need you to look on the fields beyond the walls and tell us if you can see the Voice's aura. From here, we can see the outline of the Mila Tree, but we need to confirm Lady Say'ri's report."
Nowi frowned in thought, wondering if she'd be able to from such a distance. "I'll give it a shot at least, but what about those reports I've been hearing? It sounds like we have a bunch of Valmese heading our way."

Robin bit his lip. "It's... preliminary, but Gaius has heard whispers that a portion of the forces sent south have been directed to us. Rumor has it that Walhart has summoned his generals and strategists to the capital, which to me means this is a test."

Chrom nodded, their destination becoming clear enough to see the forms of soldiers pounding logs into the earth. "We've heard tell of spies and informants from all over the continent following the Valmese, so we need to choose a battlefield and get ready. Having the Voice beside us before that happens would be a major blow to their morale."

"Assuming they don't make it look like we kidnapped her." Nowi drawled, making her friends laugh. "Anyway, so long as we don't try and beat them head to head, we can keep some trump cards in reserve. Last thing we want to do is show everything in our hand."

Robin gave her a playful glare. "Excuse me, do you want to be the tactician?"

Nowi flashed a cheeky grin, but they grew serious as the walls loomed closer. At the foot of the gatehouse, the first structure to be erected, stood Flavia herself. "Well, look who came to visit! I'd get out the fine silver, but it's occupied digging a moat!"

Chrom shook his head and dismounted when they were close. "I didn't think you had fine silver besides your sword. Learn something new every day."

"Write that down, you're being wise for once." Robin cracked. "How goes the first set, Flavia? Last I saw, our own supply of logs has been holding up."

Flavia grunted and pointed to a tall stack of logs. "I still think you're mad for bringing all this wood with us, but it's kept the locals happy. Shoulda seen their faces when I told them we might need to do some logging. Thought they'd come at me with pitchforks."

Nowi giggled at the image of Flavia fending off incensed villagers with a large stick. "Well, at least that won't be something to worry about for a while. I also wanted to congratulate you, that idea to dig into the fort's well was brilliant."

Flavia shrugged with a smug smile. While the excursion had gone around the fort, Flavia had taken one look at the thing and told her men to start digging. It wasn't a big hold but tearing it down or going over the walls was too much a hazard. However, she'd noticed a bit of civilization at the fort in the shape of a sewage pipe.

Strange to see in a fort, but it let one of Gaius's agents slip in. From there, they mapped the interior and found that the fort's well was fed by an underground spring.

Then, it was just the matter of digging into the flow tunnels, sending in a team of saboteurs, and opening the door. Right in the middle of the night.

The fort surrendered after waking up to Feroxi staring at them, weapons bared and ready to go.

"Anyway, we're here for a look at the fields." Chrom coughed, not wanting Flavia to preen too much. "I'm sure you've read the most recent reports, so we'll be surveying possible sites."

Flavia grunted and pointed to a set of rough-hewn stairs. "Use those, nothing else is stable enough to walk on yet. Let me know if you see something interesting."
Chrom agreed and they made their way to the top of the gatehouse, Robin pulling out a spy-glass while Chrom positioned Nowi where she could face the Mila Tree. "Alright, ready when you are."

Nowi looked at him before facing forward, nothing standing out in the foggy outlines she could see. "Chrom I can see, that's it. There's no special word or anything, if I see something, I'll tell you."

Chrom looked sheepish. Or, the steel-figure Nowi saw looked sheepish. Ignoring any apologies, Nowi scanned the horizon, milky purple eyes taking in the fields and trees. Nothing special from what she could…

Wait.

In the distance, something was growing. It looked like a font of light, though nowhere near as powerful as Lissa or even Robin. Then, before her eyes, the light mixed into… an effigy, green light forming the hair while the body was formed of blues and yellows.

The form of Naga, standing in the sky, lay in the distance. Nowi watched as it faced her, piercing eyes of white light staring at her, before the purpose of its existence stood clear.

Tiki, the Voice, was no mere oracle. She was the very blood of Naga herself, and her mother's power stood guard over her even now.

A voice spoke to Nowi. "Child of Mila… you will find the answers of your form upon this tree, and the secrets of thy sight as well. Bring the Chosen to the Tree, free my daughter, and all will be known to you that she knows."

The voice faded, Nowi placing it as the one that had taken her other eye in exchange for Frederick all those years ago. She'd bargained with Naga, it seemed, and now had been ordered to go to the Mila Tree.

"Guys…" She started, an audible gulp drawing Chrom and Robin's attention. "I can see Tiki… and, well, she's Naga's blood daughter. I just got told by the Lady herself we have to free Tiki."

Robin threw his head back and laughed. "Of course she is! I'm sure glad we got divine permission too, because we'll need her help!"

He pointed to the horizon, Nowi just catching a glimpse of a shadow disappearing over the hill. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Scout." Robin confirmed. "Based on the equipment I saw, it's a far-rider like Evelyn. Probably sent from one of the closer bases so that the force on its way can have as accurate a picture of our progress as possible."

Chrom turned from the fields and strode down the stairs, his companions barely a step behind. "Then we must gather the Shepherds and rally the soldiers. At best, we have a week to free Lady Tiki, at worst three days. Robin, see to getting our forces sent to the southern bottleneck."

Robin nodded, silently agreeing that would be the best first battlefield. "Let us hope the storms stay away, I don't fancy trying to fight when lashed by water on all sides."

"When is that ever ideal?" Flavia asked as they made the ground. "I'll help get our soldiers on the march alongside the oaf, don't worry about us."

Nowi raised a brow at her, Flavia grinning. "Please, you lot have the look of those about to take part in an important mission. Leave the busy work to us and we'll see you on the eve of battle if not
Chrom held out a hand, Flavia shaking it strongly. "We'll leave it to you then, Khan Flavia. Tell everyone to do all they can to prepare, and to fall back to these walls should another force of Valmese join the ones we go to face."

Flavia nodded and peeled off, already hollering orders while the others mounted up and set off for the port. After a time, Nowi told the last part of Naga's message. "Before I forget, I was told to bring all of the 'Chosen' to the tree. I'm assuming that means the Shepherds, all of them."

Robin snorted, not liking that. "Far be it from me to question the good Lady. Severa and Morgan aren't going to be happy though, they've been losing sleep getting prepped for this. Now they have to run off with us on a rescue mission."

"Lady Tiki was of great aid in their time." Chrom reminded him. "While I'm irked they failed to mention she was Naga's daughter, now's not the time to worry about it. We placed competent people in our ranks for this reason, so they shouldn't be upset. If anything, I'm sure they'll be eager to help her."

Nowi frowned as they continued to discuss the upcoming mission, her gaze turning back the way they came.

It was a small, almost unnoticeable amongst the wispy outlines, but she saw something watching them from far in the distance.

A thick miasma choked its outline, to the point the fog and eyes were all Nowi could see. It held evil, clear as day, but recognition as well.

The figure was strange and unsettling enough just by the fog, but what scared Nowi the most were its eyes.

Four perched atop the forehead, glowing a sickening red, while the two in their normal place looked very familiar. Add on what she believed was a horse and, well…

It looked like Frederick as a Risen.

The figure was gone as soon as it arrived, Nowi feeling a shiver travel down her spine. She needed to see Frederick now, whole and breathing, before she'd be able to process that evil vision.

And the shadow it cast over this whole conflict.

-A Hill Beyond The Walls-

"My love, what is it you see?"

A shadow astride a dead horse stared at the incomplete walls, its figure hidden save for the slight glow of the markings around its eyes. "I see… promise, more vigor than our lord could dream of. There will be much to reap in the months to come."

Another figure melted out of the shadows, this one on foot and far more feminine. "And our dear? Did you see her?"

The first shook their head, voice heavy with lament. "Nay, she was not here. I feel her far away from us, and I yearn."
"As do I, my love, as do I." The second cooed. "All of us miss our blood, most grievously. Even though they do not understand our work, or what we have wrought in this land's shadow, time will bring them to our side again."

The first sighed and stared longingly at the walls. "May the time be soon. Ours will help lead this world into a new age of wonder, but only if they see that which we work towards. I simply fear that their time under the thumb of the lesser will render them unable to do so."

The second laid her hand upon the first's thigh, a smile on her lips. "Have faith, love, have faith. Our Lord will see her returned to us."

"And we can be family again, right Frederick?"

A gauntlet of cursed armor caressed her hand, husband and wife looking to the walls. "Of course…"

"Natalie will be home soon."

The pair disappeared into the shadows, the breeze blowing in an effort to banish their presence.

It would not be enough though, as the sound of marching and clanking metal soon descended on the land.

All would watch the coming battle, for it would shape the fate of the world, for good or ill.

The plans of gods demanded no less.
The War Begins

It took three days to organize and march the chosen Alliance forces to the battlefield.

With no storms on the horizon, Flavia and Basilio were able to round everyone up and outline the positions they'd be taking, alongside points of attack and retreat should they be needed. The goal of this battle wasn't to die after all, it was to show that the Valmese could be defeated.

The Shepherds left the organization and marshalling to the Khans, rumors abounding amongst the rank-and-file that the leaders had a secret mission. Flavia stamped that out wherever she could, but there was only so much she could do.

If there was any consolation though, the field of battle they'd chosen was close. Standing in between a long line of sheer cliffs that dropped into the sea and woods thick enough to block sunlight, the stretch of hilly land was the perfect spot to engage in their first real battle.

Basilio knew it too, but that's where their ideas on the matter stopped coming together.

"Why not just shoot them to death, you daft woman?!

The Khans were arguing once more, the many candle stubs around them exhibiting how long they'd been at it. While the camp and patrols were easy to figure out after they arrived, scouts had reported that the Valmese force was at best a day away from intercepting them.

Which threw the original plans of setting up defensive positions out the window.

"They won't expect us to fall back, oaf!" Flavia shot back at Basilio, wanting to punch him. "Think about it! They rely on cavalry as their best fighters, the dandy and the wyvern lover said as much! They won't suspect a line of pikes waiting for them behind a hill!"

Basilio slammed his fist into the table they'd set up, the commanders in attendance jumping. "They can just go around, damned fool! The only way that would work is if we had lines set up and ready to fall back the moment the Valmese charged, and any decent captain would pull back to avoid the trap! Use the trees, our dandy's rangers and the sugar addict's disciples can wreck the rear lines!"

"And they'll expect that too!" Flavia roared hoarsely. "Naga in heaven, just listen! They're expecting us to fight them in open field, they know we want to prove we can best them on their turf! Traps are expected, yes, but subtle ones! Not brazenly obvious snipers around every corner!"

Basilio looked to break apart that line of thought when a cleared throat pierced the haze of frustration. "Sorry to interrupt, but I've got news."

The tarp moved aside and Captain Eris walked into the command tent, her recently awarded Falcon Knight armor gleaming in the low candlelight. "General Evelyn sent a messenger with orders to dig various pitfalls in front of the hills. High General Robin and Exalt Chrom signed off on it."

Flavia blinked before whooping in victory. "Yes, that's a great idea! Send the men to begin immediately and tell the riders to double patrols! I don't want a single Valmese scout catching wind of this."

Eris saluted and left the tent as quickly as she came. With that decided, Flavia smirked smugly at Basilio. "Looks like even the big brains agree with me this time."
"The pitfalls are a damn sight better than your mad ideas, woman," Basilio grunted. "I'm still going to take the rangers and a band of Shades. Remind me again why they call themselves that?"

Flavia kept her smug smirk. "Because our friend who formed them is called Shade among the Chain. No one ever said the name was creative."

Basilio sighed and ran a hand over his head. "True enough, but there's one more thing we need to do. Are we going to set up stakes for the inevitable charge or do you think them clever enough to try and attack from behind?"

"It'd be a surprise, but I'd prefer safe over sorry." Flavia said with a shrug. "I'm sure Stahl's guy can keep the back safe while we deal with the main force. 'Sides, you and your posse of sneaks should catch any flanks before they reach us."

Basilio rolled his eye. "Sure, if you'll actually look at the sky. And while you're getting use out of that shield, I'll be doing something important."

"Bastard," Flavia snarled as she slugged his arm. "Just take care of yourself in those woods tomorrow. I'll be in the thick of it sure, but there's a lot of metal-heads around to watch my ass. Not you."

Basilio let out a hearty laugh and the whole room relaxed. "I didn't get to this age by not being cautious. Trust me, this big brown arse is nothing more than a tempting target so my posse can drop on their heads."

"Well, two people think it's tempting." Flavia grunted, much to Basilio's confusion. "Oh, don't give me that. Do you really think no one noticed the venerable Lieutenant Dalila of the Pegasus Knight Order coming and going from your tent these last few days?"

Basilio's face was stone. "I don't have a damn clue what you're talking about woman, now can we get to business? You have traps and lines to see to while I have to round up my lot of half-assed spies and assassins."

Flavia crossed her arms and shook her head. "You do what you want, oaf. I plan to add a lot more notches to my belt, that way no one will ever want you as Khan ever again."

"Says the one that always calls in little Lucy and Sev as champions." Basilio grumbled, Flavia had the decency to look sheepish. "But whatever, I've seen enough direct combat to know you'll smash the bastards to pieces. Let's get to work."

Flavia nodded and they started barking orders to the various captains and messengers that had borne witness to their argument. The camp came to life after that, the soldiers rushing to the base of the hills they'd set up camp on to start digging. In total, they had a full fifth of the Alliance with them for this fight, units representing every Order and division with them. After all, despite the importance of this first battle, committing all their resources to this one place was a recipe for disaster.

It would probably be enough. Scouting flocks had spotted the Valmese force, the sight of mostly cavalry with about half that in infantry confirming Virion's report. Most were heavily armored and armed, analogous to the Paladin Order and Steel Riders that the Alliance employed.

All told, the enemy were marching forth with about seven thousand soldiers. The heavy reliance on cavalry granted them greater mobility than the more balanced Alliance forces, but that's why they went with the choke-point in the first place.

With the numbers in mind, Flavia had ordered an entire army's worth of her troops to stay back, only
to move up and join the fight should something go disastrously wrong. Making sure they weren't needed was the whole point of these preparations.

"I don't like how quick we're having to make this." Flavia heard one of her captains mutter, the name Gloria matching itself to her face. "The general would have had the entire approach littered with the pitfalls, make sure the first charge is utterly destroyed."

She was referring to Evelyn, whose command Gloria had been under if Flavia remembered correctly. Best to nip that thinking. "Time and the enemy don't give us much to work with. We'll do our damage, but it'll be up to you and your knights to hold that line. Our archers and javelins will cut them down as they come."

"Were the whole of our lines not green as grass." Gloria shot back, knowing Flavia preferred honesty. "Training and Risen can only prepare you for so much. They won't buckle at a charge, but they fight true veterans and it will show."

"Humble," Gloria snorted. "Very well, Great Khan, we will do all we can before the battle on the morrow. If possible, I'd prefer you place my knights in the second line."

Flavia gave her a strange look, which Gloria shrugged off. "The first line's not going to take much of a charge with the pitfalls in place. With us in the second line, the first can move about and react to any surprises, like a flank from the woods."

"I highly doubt that'll happen, but I like the idea." Flavia grunted, waving for Gloria to return to her duties. "Now get on with your jobs, I need to find a shovel."

-Morning-

The sun rose to flags flapping in the wind, a sea breeze blowing gently across the hills and forest as waves crashed against the cliffs. Light glinted off silver armor and weapons, the forces of the Alliance arrayed in their battle lines and ready to meet the Valmese.

On the opposite end of the field stood a spectacle no less grand. The crimson host of Valm marched forth in a cacophony of metal and hooves, its great divisions of cavalry rattling the earth with each step. Before them marched lines and lines of spears, their wielders eyeing the Alliance lines with carefully veiled surprise.

Unknown to both forces, the woods thought too thick to move in had representatives from both sides coming through. The Valmese wished to drive the Alliance into the sea, so almost a thousand cavaliers had split from the main force the previous day and began making their way to the battlefield.

A far smaller contingent numbering barely a hundred left the Alliance camp in the dead of night, Basilio and his cohort using almost invisible animal trails to guide themselves through the thick trees. Torches went unused, as any light in the darkness of the forest would be seen.

The battle unofficially began in those woods, the various units of cavaliers set upon by the far more mobile Alliance force. The rangers weren't able to do much in the thick woods besides take their best shot and duck amongst the roots, the sheer darkness giving them mere outlines as targets.

The assassins had little better luck. For all their skill and ability to move amongst the dark, the forest
The floor was a tangle of roots that twisted more than one ankle. A particularly unlucky woman fled from killing an isolated cavalier only to get trampled by another unit coming to investigate.

Basilio, at this point, knew he had to do something. The cavaliers would roll right past them at the rate they were going, and any flanking attack would be bad, no matter how they weakened it.

As the sounds of metal clashing and horses screaming filled his mind, Basilio grabbed an arrow and scratched it against his armor, sparks dancing across the ground before catching on an oil-soaked rag. The flame instantly dispelled the darkness, glinting eyes showing the Khan and his small circle of followers hopelessly outnumbered.

"I've faced worse odds." Basilio laughed as he threw the torch down and readied his axe, the sound of hooves falling like thunder over him. "Now let's show them why you don't fight a Feroxi in the forest."

Flavia

A glint in the forest caught her eye, a glance showing the glow of a torch in the deep woods. "Is that…"

The meaning behind the light came to her a moment later, Flavia rounding on the closest Paladin. "Ride to the reserves, tell them to enter the forest! The Valmese seek to flank us and Basilio won't hold against them for long!"

The Paladin saluted and galloped off, Flavia snarling at the advancing Valmese. Now this fight would be even longer without the oaf and his posse attacking the rear, especially if the reserves didn't get there fast enough.

"They'll charge soon." Gloria noted, Flavia stood just behind the knight. "They're setting up their lines."

Flavia forced her attention back to the field, lines of cavalry slowly advancing towards them. The lighter riders were on the flanks with the heaviest in the center, as expected. It also appeared they'd be attacking in waves, four by the looks of it.

"Clever use of numbers and sheer mass." Flavia muttered as she looked to her lines. They had five lines set up on the hills with several mounds to protect the archers, all mages kept in reserve. The question was if the lines could survive constant cavalry charges until the ranged units could whittle away the enemy enough to force the infantry into the fray.

"This will be a long, hard fight!" Flavia called to her troops. "But know that you will not break before this onslaught! They will seek to break us, but the first two waves will be naught but glory seekers! Send them to Yorick and Karma for judgement, then we'll see to the pansies they call veterans!"

Her troops responded with cheers and the clanging of shields, war-cries rising from them as the first of the Valmese charges began to speed their trot into a canter.

"Hold these lines for the homes you hold dear and the people you love!" Flavia roared again, her great blade scraping out of its sheathe. "And if you must fall, sell your lives dearly! For our homes, for Ferox, for Ylisse!"

Her final roar was met with a wall of sound flying in all directions, her soldiers clamoring for the fight as the Valmese charge broke into a full gallop. The unseen spectators watched this duel of sound from hidden vantages.
One of them watched from the sky.

Magic kept the observer concealed, high enough in the sky to observe the battle at large while close enough to make out individuals. Perhaps not the safest spot, but the spectator was confident they'd be safe.

"Oh… pitfalls." They muttered as the front of the Valmese charge disappeared in plumes of dirt, the second wave breaking off with cries of alarm. "Clever, most of the other challengers were either too dogmatic or honorable to use such tactics."

No counter-charge came, the dust clearing to reveal why. The pitfalls pock-marked the ground but gave little ability for the front ranks of the Alliance to march forth. Instead, the twang of wire filled the air as archers high upon the hills began to rain death.

The second-wave retreated under the black rain, dozens and dozens falling as twisted tapestries of torn flesh and oozing blood. Eventually, the second wave reached the safety of their support infantry, the men-at-arms and other footmen advancing with shields raised.

"Aha, engage and have the cavalry harass." The spectator giggled merrily, unmoved by the dead and wounded below. "Those pitfalls are going to make a straight engagement impossible. What will the Valmese do?"

The answer came when the Valmese line met the first of the dead, the shields going down to push the bodies before them, some even hoisting the still wounded up and in front.

"Oh…" the spectator muttered, lips twisting in revulsion.

-Flavia-

"Meat shields!" The Khan roared in horror, archers pausing their barrage in similar disbelief. "Those dastards would use their own dead as a defense!?"

Gloria remained stoic, rage in her eyes. "Practical it may be, but that's disgusting. Here I heard they claim themselves followers of Naga."

Flavia didn't answer, instead rounding on the archers. "Keep firing! Put as many of those sacrilegious dastards in the dirt as you can! See if they like getting used as shields!"

She was answered by a wall of arrows flying forth to lay waste to swathes of the Valmese infantry, but every body was picked up or pushed forward by the tide of infantry, the cavalry following just behind. Why were they doing that? The arrows were taking down cavalry too and they had more than enough ammo to turn the field into a quiver.

"Spears, brace!" Flavia roared as the Valmese came close, still a sea of bodies despite entire hurricanes of arrows littering their shields and armor. "Swords, axes, halberds, prepare to engage!"

The Alliance braced for the oncoming tide, most expecting the Valmese to engage in the small avenues the pitfalls created. Numbers wouldn't matter at that point, the Alliance could just grind them down until the Valmese general decided to give up.

They were not expecting the meat shields to be thrown into the pitfalls, swiftly filling them. Makeshift-mass graves and earth filling all at once.

The Valmese surged forth with hellish cries, the front-line not entirely braced in the face of the bodies thrown before them. It cost dozens their lives as lances and swords sought vulnerable
openings while axes crushed the unprepared.

"Fight you fools!" Flavia roared as the first line was pushed back. "Fight for your lives and country!"

Her rally was met with the remainder digging in their heels and returning the favor, halberds and lances of their own sweeping out to rend and tear any that met their blades. Hundreds of Valmese were pressed into the line and hundreds died, but for every ten they took down, twelve came forth and another Alliance soldier fell.

"Fall back to the second line!" Flavia roared, voice hoarse from shouting orders to hold or fire. "Gloria, with me! We'll smash these dastards and open a hole!"

The knight answered by marching forth with her fellows and planting their great shields into the earth, the remnants of the first line retreating behind them. Flavia held in a growl as she saw them, the poor sods stumbling away from the sheer ferocity they'd just been in. "Get them to the healers. Archers, did I tell you to stop firing?!"

"Supreme Khan, we have no more arrows!" A plumed archer cried from his position, Flavia staring at him in open shock. "While we were shooting into the main mass, a small force of maybe a dozen enemy cavaliers broke the tree line, a dark knight among them! He torched most of our supplies before a ranger killed him!"

Flavia spat a foul curse. "We can't keep holding these lines like this, and the damn oaf had to miss the most important freaking detail. Where's Basilio?!"

The archer pointed to the rear Valmese lines, a dozen of their paladins falling over dead. "He appears to have infiltrated the rear lines, Supreme Khan! I doubt he can do much before they react, but it gives us time!"

"Then attrition it is." Flavia snarled as arrows began to fall amongst them. "Everyone, hold your shields and positions to the death, don't let their fletchers have a smidge of pride!"

She turned to a young page, the girl barely old enough to have joined the military. "You, go and inform Branden to send his cavalry into the forest, have him slam into their flanks. I'll signal our little surprise after we draw them in a bit and he hits."

The page saluted and sprinted away, Flavia taking a place in the line with her sword at her side and shield in front. "So, you ever fought with a Khan?"

"No, but I've heard you're a lioness." Gloria muttered as the Valmese stormed their line. "Let's see you prove it."

Flavia just smiled, the first dastard to charge her getting a throat-full of silver.

"Like you need to encourage me."

-Branden-

"Hurry, all of you! The fight requires us, and we cannot fail!"

The young paladin and former captain of Felds rode his steed hard through the brush of the forest, following the paths blazed by the forces that had gone to aid Khan Basilio. The order to enter the forest had been given by a desperate page, and as he rode, he could hear the roars of combat through the thick vegetation.
Light amongst the silent titans of nature drew his eye, a cavalier riding up beside him in Alliance colors. "Captain Branden! The reserve forces were ordered to withdraw after destroying the Valmese incursion, Khan Basilio's orders!"

"The Great Khan countermanded it herself!" Branden shot back. "My cavalry are to slam into their flanks and relieve the pressure on our lines!"

His words were belted with molten frustration, the smoldering ruins that Dark Knight had made of their arrows and other supplies having to be removed before they could leave. It had taken them far longer than he wanted, and news had reached them that the lines had been pushed back to the fourth of five.

Praise be to Naga Gloria and the Great Khan were still alive alongside most of their troops, but casualties were starting to mount as the archers had used most every arrow they had, even the ones they scavenged from the enemy archers.

It was only a matter of time before the Valmese reached their bastion of stakes and forced the archers into combat.

"Khan Basilio has wreaked havoc sir!" The cavalier informed as Branden neared his destination. "Many of the commanding Valmese have been picked off, but it appears the remainder have blended into the mob to avoid assassination. The Khan has pulled back as well and goes to reinforce the lines."

Branden nodded and sent the cavalier away, his gallop slowing to a trot as he reached the clearing at the end of the cleared trail. Shortly after, hundreds of cavaliers, paladins, and steel riders joined him.

Branden looked to the edge of the forest, the sight of mounted archers firing at his countrymen boiling his blood. Raising his spear high, the heraldry of Ylisse caught the low light and shone as a beacon for his soldiers. "Now we crush those who've stolen the lives of our comrades and dared attack our homes! To war men, and to a valiant day!"

His call was met with roars, the trees muffling the sound as the wave of cavalry turned and galloped forward. A hundred yards from the tree line, weapons were drawn.

At fifty yards, spears were lowered.

At twenty, prayers were whispered.

At five, barding and plate caught the light of a setting sun.

Then the trees burst with light, a tide of shining steel and thunderous hooves breaking free of the dark sentinels that masked them and slamming into the utterly surprised Valmese.

At that moment, a gout of flame shot into the air before bursting into a stylized wyvern. Then, the sun was blocked from the world as great wings unfurled and devils shot over the cliffside. The Valmese never noticed the four hundred wyverns lining the sheer rocks.

The army that had once been pushing inexorably forward upon the bodies of their own dead now found itself thrown into blind panic. Alliance cavalry and wyvern knights slaughtered the flanks while a counter charge sent companies rolling back on themselves.

The rear ranks attempted to flee when a golden figure leapt from the tree line with dozens of hooded allies, arrows and blades tearing apart those that attempted to retreat.
And so, the spectators and observers, just moments ago assured that the Alliance would fall like all the others, watched as the Valmese army was massacred. Only those that obviously surrendered were spared, all others joined the fellows they'd used as shields.

All told, the final act took thirty minutes. In a battle that had ground on for hours from morning into the afternoon, thirty minutes was all it took to end it.

As the Alliance forces stood clad in victory's glow, none felt it. All they could feel was the mud, gore, and wounds of the fighting, their once pristine armor soiled. Many knew, somewhere in their minds, that those stains would never truly leave.

Flavia was one of the few that had expected the mess, her own armor covered in the remains of friend and foe alike. Many a new wound now crisscrossed her skin, armor dented and sword soaked in gore.

Gloria looked no better as she lay on the ground. The earth beneath her had broken before she had, shield little more than twisted metal and spear slick with the guts of the last poor sod she'd run through. Even her helmet had been knocked off, her short dark hair crusted with mud and sweat.

"Think your leg's broken." Flavia informed the knight as the Alliance started the post-battle tally and clean-up. "Last I checked, feet don't point that way."

Gloria glowered at the Khan and put her head down, the broken appendage forcing her to lay on her back. "How many... do you think we lost?"

Flavia grunted and surveyed the aftermath. Branden and his cavalry were rounding up the prisoners while the one and only Basilio started to wade through the carnage. "Can't say until we start counting, but I'd say almost four-hundred dead and thrice that wounded. Wish we could've had Eris and her knights join us, but those damn archers wouldn't let up."

Gloria groaned in agreement. "That many arrows and the supplies we lost made things a lot harder. We'll need to keep a much better eye on the supplies so we don't have to send back two thirds of our soldiers because we can't feed them."

Flavia barked a laugh and nodded to the field of dead, carrion birds long descended. "Well, if nothing else, we proved that we can hold out against the Valmese and win despite the fact we're going to be chronically outnumbered. We were lucky this was just a test. For a first real battle, we did well."

Gloria huffed and didn't speak as a team of healers came to retrieve her and a number of other wounded. The priests and clerics began to deliver rights as well, both to the dead and those too far gone to save.

Flavia had a feeling she'd struck up a new friendship as she watched the knight get carted off, only to growl as a big hand landed on her shoulder. "Oaf, unhand me lest I shove this sword right up the arse you're so proud of."

Basilio didn't laugh, an unsettling action in and of itself. "We managed to capture the Valmese general. I had a talk with him about why they disrespected their comrades like that."

His tone told Flavia he didn't like the answer. "Alright, let's hear it."

"Most of the soldiers are volunteers." Basilio started, Flavia looking at him warily. "Walhart apparently has a policy in place that, live or die, the families of soldiers will be taken care of. Those that die for the sake of a plan or strategy are venerated and their children are allowed access to high-
born schools and may have a future in knighthood."

The sheer amount of bureaucracy required to do that boggled the mind. Flavia though, now saw why the infantry and cavalry had faced death so resolutely. "Talk about a motivator. Live or die, your children can become great and live far better lives, and those that live can become heroes. Woo boy, that'll be tough to beat."

Basilio nodded and hefted his axe onto his shoulder, Flavia noting the fresh blood. "He try to run?"

"That he did." Basilio confirmed. "Said something about my eye and tried to run before I put this ol' boy in his back. Don't know what he thought would happen, I had most of my posse with me. Won't be fun to tell the pansy and sugar-addict that I lost some of their own."

Flavia sighed and turned her gaze towards the Mila Tree, hoping the Shepherds had completed their mission. "That, we'll do later. For now, we do what we always do."

"Count the dead and hope."

-Robin, Earlier That Morning-

"Naga in heaven, it's even bigger up close!"

Robin smacked Cynthia, rendering the exuberant girl quiet. They'd flown ahead of the group to get a feel for the challenge before them, Cynthia his escort on account of her raw speed. Didn't mean Robin couldn't wish for Cherche and her ability to at least keep comments to herself.

In any case, the Mila Tree lived up to both its reputation and profile. Stretching high into the sky with a trunk thick enough to house a city, the tree casted shadows miles long and had an entire temple carved into its grand edifice.

A temple that was under appropriately paranoid guard, the lone path ascending the tree blocked by dozens upon dozens of heavily armed soldiers while the base of the tree and stairs to the temple hosted thrice that.

"We'll need a big distraction." Robin muttered as he took careful mental marks of the various patrol routes and command posts. "Preferably on the opposite side of the tree. No flying though, there are enough archers to make a fletcher's guild weep in joy."

Cynthia giggled, this time remembering to stay quiet. "Not to mention a smith and candle maker's guilds at that. I'd bet they're a bunch of real zealots that pray whenever they're not on duty."

"It'd be the easiest way to ensure Lady Tiki stays where she is." Robin agreed. "Especially if the clerics in that temple are under Walhart's thumb as we suspect. Getting them to abandon their posts en-masse is impossible, but I think we can make it so enough leave for us to manage."

Cynthia scanned the air thoughtfully as Robin continued to mutter about different strategies. "You know… I'm seeing some fliers about, but nothing like I expected. I spotted the estuary Lady Say'ri mentioned, but it looks… empty."

Robin glanced at his niece before nodding. "True, I've seen only a few pegasi in the air. We don't have enough fliers of our own to have true air superiority, but we can make it work after those archers are taken care of."

Cynthia shared a look with him, a sardonic grin on her lips. "This is all probably a trap. You know that, right?"
"More than likely." Robin agreed as he put away his spyglass. "But we're here to get Lady Tiki out, not fight the garrison. If nothing else, those roots they use for the paths are going to be hard for us to fight on, but if we make it up, we'll have the momentum."

Cynthia giggled again and they began the trek back to Selene. "Why not just have my mother fly up as high as she can and drop Uncle Kellam? That worked once before didn't it?"

"It was Stahl who did that, and Sully would kill me." Robin shot back, shuddering at the memory of an early and desperate plan. "Besides, we don't have the materials for a siege like that. Instead, I have a better idea."

He flashed a roguish grin at Cynthia, the girl feeling a pall of dread settle over her. "Uncle Rob… I don't like that look in your eye."

"You shouldn't!" Robin agreed as they reached Selene. "I'm going to unleash the demon amongst us!"

Cynthia blinked and hung her head, voice heaving with despair. "You're… letting her loose?"

Robin's grin grew wider and slightly unhinged. "I will not have her boredom cause us suffering any longer! A stage of this magnitude would free us for the whole campaign!"

"She hasn't been that bad." Cynthia muttered, resigned to the coming spectacle. "It's just no one expected her to start making illusions."

Robin snorted as they mounted and took off, his opinion clear.

"The day Lissa figured out how to do that, was the day our peace of mind came to an end."

-Cordelia-

Cordelia stared at the tree in open awe, the rest of the camp concealed amongst the thick woods that they'd spent three days traveling through. At first, it had seemed the tree was closer to them than the battlefield, based on its appearance at the border. Then they started to realize just how large the tree was, after the thing barely grew after a full day's travel.

Cordelia, though, just knew that something important was going to happen at the tree. Its very stature and presence seemed to speak to all who gazed upon it, and Panne seemed especially drawn to the aura.

"Lost in thought?" Sumia asked as she joined her oldest friend. "It's a wonderous sight, and we've still yet to see its full magnificence. I'm sure Robin's going to find a way for us to get to the top, then we can really enjoy the view."

Cordelia shook her head of wandering thoughts. "Yes, that will be grand. I just… don't know, it feels like something's going to happen up there, I just don't know what."

Sumia placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. "I feel it too. This sense of foreboding and anxiety, subtle as it is, hasn't been with me since Artezza took away my warmth. Perhaps we may find answers to our trials upon the boughs of the ancient tree."

"That be nice." Gregor agreed as he joined the women, sword over his shoulder. "Gregor have many questions for Oracle lady. Good stew to warm body and loosen tongue is plan."
Cordelia socked his arm, a warm grin rising. "You and your silly plans. Anyway, how're we looking? I haven't seen Selene approach yet."

"Good-good." Gregor laughed, rubbing his arm lightly. "Wife create scenario for little Severa and Evelyn to play with, all else in spar or eat fresh pie. Henry boy helping Maribelle with food."

Cordelia and Sumia laughed, the group leaving their spot for the camp. Comfortable silence filled the air between them until they arrived at the center, a wide clearing the Shepherds were using for spars.

"Lady Say'ri is quite the fighter." Sumia noted as she spotted the exiled princess dueling with Donnel. "I've been taking notes of her style, and it'd be very effective against cavalry."

Cordelia hummed in agreement, watching as Donnel slid through several blurred strikes before sweeping Say'ri off her feet and laying his blade at her throat. "It doesn't surprise me considering most of the enemies she's faced. Her strikes are incredibly accurate to deal with thick armor too, but I guess Valm doesn't use swordsmen on foot terribly often."

"You are correct." Say'ri called to them after Donnel helped her up. "Most forces I've seen only have footmen with swords, if they're mercenaries like Sir Gregor. The official forces reserve such training to riders, infantry receive spears or bows."

Sumia agreed with her fellow royal. "As you say, it is a much longer process to make proficient swordsmen compared to a spearman or archer. Though, if I might ask, how are you so sure that Lady Tiki is a prisoner?"

Say'ri sighed, growing sick of hearing that question. "As I told Exalt Chrom, the Oracle is a peaceful woman and hates conflict with a passion. The very idea that she would ever be in favor of Walhart's warmongering is ludicrous."

"There more than that, noble lady." Gregor stated, drawing Say'ri's glare. "Gregor know much of Valm nobility. Tradition for royal daughters to travel for pilgrimage."

Say'ri growled at him, but Donnel stepped in to stop any hot-headed action. "Gregor, we know that already. It's not like Lady Say'ri has met the Voice, she hasn't been awake in decades from what we know."

Say'ri huffed and looked away, preferring to stride off and take care of other matters. Once she was gone, Cordelia looked to the trees. "Panne, did you notice anything?"

The taguel melted from the brush, vines and branches retreating from her flesh. "I did, recognition of the tradition. The good lady's zeal is appropriate, she has met this Oracle."

"Then we have greater reason to save her." Cordelia answered, eyes catching the glint of armor in the air. "Having Lady Say'ri further in our corner will be a boon no doubt. I spot Selene coming in, let's go see what my madman husband came up with."

Sumia giggled as they made for another clearing, Gregor and Donnel walking ahead of them. "Assuming of course my dear girl hasn't driven him batty. She's been a great deal more excitable ever since we set out on this mission."

"And Yarne has grown braver, if just." Panne added, eyes landing on her son as they joined the growing congregation heading for the clearing. "One wonders just how much an impact the Oracle had on them in their time, to act like this."

Cordelia nodded to the small group of time-walkers, all save Cynthia chatting with one another.
"Based on how quickly they agreed to come along, I'd say Lady Tiki did a great deal and more for them. You should've seen the meeting they set up after Chrom informed us of our objective."

Sumia didn't get to add her thoughts before Selene's shadow passed over the clearing, the Pegasus circling the open ground several times before diving and alighting upon the ground. Robin hopped off the moment Selene came to a stop, eyes set in determination. "Camp meeting, now!"

His tone was hard and unyielding, making worry sprout amongst the Shepherds like weeds. Muttered speculation flowed amongst them as they closed in on Robin, his face impassive. "There's a small army guarding the tree and its temple in addition to the honor guard Lady Say'ri mentioned. If we're going to get the Oracle off that tree, we'll need to cause a distraction."

"How could any distraction work?" Evelyn asked, a deep well of anxiety digging into her mind. "If they've enough soldiers to form a small army, then anything we do would draw scouts at best."

Robin's continued somber air spread that anxiety around, only intensifying when Cynthia dismounted with a similar expression.

"We have the ability to do what we need." Robin answered, eyes locking on Severa. "I simply hope you can all forgive me for what I'm about to order."

He took a deep breath and sighed before looking a grimacing Chrom in the eye. "I need Sully, Panne, Miriel, Gregor, Kjelle, Noire, Virion, and Severa to run this distraction. In addition… we'll be using Lissa."

Eyes widened and cries of alarm were given, only Lissa herself unmoved. If anything, her face gave rise to a truly insidious grin, cackles of distilled evil dancing under her breath. "So… Rob, my friend… how big can I go?"

All was silent as the people Robin chose looked to him with pleading eyes, silently begging him to not do what they thought he would.

Robin ignored their pleas for mercy and spoke the forbidden words.

"Have fun."

-Mila Tree, Four Hours Later-

While the first true clash of the Valmese War began to the south, a General Cervantes was looking over documents in his office. The general was a large and boisterous man that, while slightly hard of hearing, was considered an able commander and expert defensive fighter. He also boasted a grand mustache that he was quite proud of, to the point his troops praised the lip-slug to get out of menial chores.

Today though, Cervantes was looking over the various requests made by the clerics and troops. The women of the temple, for all their supposed piety, were fond of their wine.

Cervantes sighed and put down the third such request, wondering when he'd become a vintner. While the post was incredibly important due to their divine guest, none of the remaining resistance factions could hope to sneak through. That so-called Alliance was bound to get crushed soon too, so the general found himself victim of a soldier's worst enemy.

Boredom.

"Wish that troupe had stuck around." He muttered after throwing another request into a pile. "It's
been a week of nothing but paperwork. Need some spice for myself and the men, though I doubt those drunkard clerics would be up for parties and sport."

He turned over several ideas in his head before the door burst open, a harried messenger panting in the opening. "General Cervantes! We're being assaulted from the north, the army's massive!"

Cervantes flailed and fell out of his chair with an undignified thud. He swiftly righted himself and almost charged the flustered soldier. "We're being assaulted?! What the hell are the lookouts doing, screwing the clerics?!!"

The messenger audibly gulped. "I... don't know, sir, but there's easily thousands upon thousands marching towards us. Many of our walls and checkpoints have been destroyed as well, and we've been attacked by both animals and.... Well, strange things."

"Define strange!" Cervantes barked as he marched into the hall, noticing the pandemonium of surprised soldiers trying to organize. "And get me today's patrol captain, I demand an explanation!"

The messenger kept pace with the enraged general, knowing this was bound to make him explode. "Sir, the uh... strange things include large bunnies of incredible cuteness, boulder-sized cheese wheels, flaming horse plop, toads of all kinds, and someone running around on a boulder claiming to be the Trickster God Apophis. There's also gouts of flames going off to music and what appears to be two golems dancing a jig through the front checkpoints."

Cervantes stopped cold, the messenger walking three paces further before stopping. Looking back, he saw the general staring at him in open disbelief. "Soldier, you realize what you just said, correct? I don't need to send you to the healers?"

The messenger shook his head with weary resignation. "I know what I said sir, and I wish it was only heat-exhaustion. No, what's happening is very real, and the men have described witnessing illusions of forces wielding flotsam as weapons along with giant toads made of candies and spheres of light."

Cervantes shook his head and stormed forth with thrice the speed. "Everyone, and I mean everyone, is to make for the north edifice immediately! Only the honor guard is to remain, the rest of us are going to make sense of this damnable farce!"

The messenger nodded and followed, every soldier not part of the honor guard storming from their barracks and halls to meet the strange monstrosities attacking them. All was quiet for a time, the honor guard watching the trees vigilantly.

Then a small unit charged from under the roots, Frederick in the lead. The Shepherds not part of the distraction had used the chaos to sneak into the Mila Tree's roots and wait for the majority to leave.

The honor guard charged to meet them, but the surprise and distraction were so complete that Frederick and Stahl were able to bowl over the majority of the guards in the initial charge. It was a bad habit to bunch up when panicked, but it worked to their advantage this time.

The rest of the Shepherds rendered the other guards unconscious with their various weapons, everyone storming up the path worked into the tree as fast as they could go. Eventually, when they reached half-way up the tree, they had to stop.

"Sweet Naga this thing's tall!" Vaike coughed as the Shepherds tried to catch their breath. Even Frederick and Stahl's steeds were heaving, the speed of the climb draining their stamina like a pierced bottle.
"Panne… should get the others here soon." Olivia panted, falling to her hands and knees. "Good graciousness… how do the clerics climb this thing?"

Say'ri appeared to be the only one not catching her breath. "A lot slower, that's for sure. We must make haste though, who knows how long the distraction will keep them before they notice us."

Everyone gave her flat looks before pointing down the tree where the vague shapes of golems were indeed dancing about the various Valmese buildings.

Say'ri had the dignity to keep her face straight. "Point taken, but the sooner we leave, the better."

"On that, we can agree!" Chrom seconded, already recovered. "Panne will be here with the others before long, get ready to move!"

On command, a hole opened in the tree's bark, parting for those within like water before a rock. After the party was through, the passage closed as if it had never been. Panne wobbled faintly before Virion steadied her. "Love, are you ok?"

"The… tree was less than cooperative." Panne mumbled, clearly unable to make the trek. "It took everything I had to make the passage and keep the animals from harm."

Virion nodded and hoisted her onto his back, the rest of the distraction party staying as far from Lissa as possible.

None could blame them, for Lissa looked extraordinarily satisfied and yet raring for more at the same time.

Severa even ran over and hid behind Theresa, eying Lissa with thinly veiled terror. "Daddy… never let her loose again. I don't even want to think about some of the things she tried to make before Uncle Donnel stopped her."

Robin nodded solemnly and looked down again, committing what he saw to memory. Unless it was a last resort, he would not subject the poor people of this earth to Lissa's expertly suppressed streak of sheer mania.

Chrom bounding up the path again reminded everyone of their objective, the Shepherds hurrying after him. As they climbed, the branches came closer and closer to them, eventually forming into walls. It was like being underground the wood was so thick, with only the light at the top to guide them.

Many an ankle were twisted and shoulders bruised on that leg of the climb.

It was to cries of joy and relief that the Shepherds made the top, a sprawling meadow with a pristine temple stretched before them. Apparently, the topmost branches were so thick and interconnected, they could hold soil. There was even an orchid just outside the temple.

"Lady Tiki!" Say'ri called as she sprinted for the temple, leaving the Shepherds to gaze around and take in the atmosphere. To them, it felt invigorating and gentle, like a cool drink after a long day's work.

Except for Robin and his daughters, who didn't see what was so special about the meadow aside from it being on top of a giant tree!

"Are you sure there's something to this place?" Severa muttered, her question going to Noire. "I mean, it's incredible it exists, but I don't feel a special atmosphere."
Noire shrugged, nerves soothed by the calming aura. "I don't know, it just… feels nice is all. I don't feel like we just ran up the entire tree."

Severa felt a surge of irrational jealousy as her knees quivered at the reminder. Even listening to the others comment on it was making the feeling stronger, though she was able to squash it before anyone noticed. "Whatever you say. Question is, where's our special guest?"

Nowi's head locking onto the temple answered that question, Say'ri exited the stone structure with another woman that appeared similar in age though in a red dress with a short skirt that split at the hips. She had long boots of the same color and a bountiful bosom visible from the low cut of her blouse, a pink cape and ribbon adding to the vibrant display.

Most notable, though, was her emerald green hair tied in a ponytail and her ears. They were long and sharp, just a bit longer than Nowi's own.

As she'd told the others, Tiki was not only a manakete but Naga's blood daughter. They were standing in the presence of a demi-god.

Who proceeded to yawn and lean into Say'ri tiredly.

…A very sleepy demi-god, apparently.

"Lady Tiki, please rouse yourself." Say'ri said gently, holding the manakete reverently. "I've brought friends to take us from this prison, you need only wake and you'll be free."

Tiki muttered something again before her eyes opened blearily, gazing around before spotting Lucina and Nowi's outlines. "Mar-Mar, Mother!"

The two in question rocked back in surprise, looking to their respective families before Lucina tried to answer. "Um… Lady Tiki, I'm not this 'Mar-Mar' you think I am. My name is Lucina, and the one beside me is my Aunt Nowi."

Tiki's face twisted in confusion before the mist in her eyes cleared and she blinked a few times. Realizing her mistake, she righted herself and let go of Say'ri. "Oh… I'm sorry, my slumber brings memories to the fore. You just look so much like my friend Marth, and your aunt resembles my mother when she was younger."

Lucina and the Shepherds at large bowed to her, Chrom taking over as spokesman. "Lady Tiki, it is an honor to meet Naga's own blood. I am Exalt Chrom, current ruler of Ylisse, and I bring to you my friends and family. We were told by your mother to bring those she called 'Chosen'."

Tiki's eyes sharpened considerably, the rest of her mind's haze burned away. "I see. First though, have you brought the Fire Emblem? It was given to your family for safe keeping."

Chrom nodded and held out the Emblem, Tiki striding forth to examine it carefully. She sighed. "Only Argent remains then. The Awakening cannot be performed."

"The Awakening?" Lissa queried, her hobby of mythology identifying the phrase. "You mean the ceremony the first Exalt used to call upon Naga and slay the Fell Dragon? What does the Emblem have to do with that?"

Tiki hummed and nodded to the white gem in the Emblem. "The Emblem is a vessel, meant to hold five gems of power that when used unlocks the true power of Falchion. Only one, Argent, now rests in it, however I have kept another with me for safety."
She reached into a pouch at her side and produced a shining blue jewel, the crystal glowing before flying out of Tiki's hand and slamming into one of the Emblem's open slots. The silver gem seemed to resonate with it before the glow faded and the Emblem became inert.

"There, now we require Vert, Gules, and Sable." Tiki said without pause. "Say'ri has told me that her family has guarded Vert for many years, but Gules and Sable are lost to me. All I know is that they were scattered in a schism long ago."

Robin sighed, not liking this. "The Khans would know more then, Regna Ferox was founded during the Schism. I'd put my money on Plegia having one of the jewels too."

"That's all well and good, but why do we need them?" Sully asked brusquely, having noticed the sounds below coming to an end. "Answer quick, I think our distraction ran its course."

Tiki shook her head, serene despite the danger. "I am more attuned to the land and its flows of power than almost anyone, I can feel the shadows of the Fell Dragon growing long once more. Indeed, his power is far greater than I've felt before, and it is likely due to the presence of 'Chosen'."

She sighed and closed her eyes, feeling the eyes of everyone on her. "That is why we require the Awakening. Walhart seeks the Emblem as most do, but Falchion will not answer to him, so should he succeed in this war then the world is doomed. The gems must be found, and the Awakening performed, if we are to see an end to the coming darkness."

The tale would have been met with open suspicion were the Shepherds not watching Nowi closely. Her face had gone ashen, lips twisted in silent horror.

Every word was true, Nowi could spot any lie with her vision.

"As if we needed any more motivation." Sumia muttered, the first to collect herself. "But we should really get going. I don't fancy our chances if we don't move now."

Her words spurred everyone to action, Maribelle and Ricken taking up position by the edge of the meadow. Maribelle cleared her throat as everyone grabbed designated partners. "Alright everyone, this is an emergency and should be treated as such. Does everyone have their flight partner?"

Nods all around.

"Remember that free-fall will only be temporary." Ricken informed as he pulled out his tome, Forseti starting to glow. "However, once we're settled, we make for the ground as fast as we can while still keeping limbs intact. At worst, we've got thirty seconds of stability, so fliers need to be ready to take off again the moment they land."

The fliers nodded and took to the air with their charges, Tiki and Say'ri rode with Cherche as Minerva could hold all three without issue.

Maribelle looked to the grounded with exasperated eyes. "Good, now then."

"You're all the ones who wanted to experience sky-diving, correct?"

-Robin-

"Oh Naga, they're falling!"

Robin's cry wasn't all that surprising. The remaining Shepherds had charged the edge of the meadow and dove off the edge with what were originally cries of exultation and bravery. That swiftly
changed to cries of terror and screams for mothers as they continued to fall, Maribelle and Ricken's wind raft was only able to catch them after several seconds in the air.

Cordelia, who was busy racing for the ground, didn't look back. "They'll keep falling, it's just controlled at this point! Are you ready to jump, I'll need to get up there and lighten the damn load!"

Robin called an affirmative and leapt from Theresa when he was sure there'd be no broken bones. Severa and Lucina joined him shortly thereafter, Say'ri and Tiki already on the ground with Chrom.

"While we wait for the others, care to explain the 'Chosen' bit?" Chrom asked once his daughter, friend, and niece joined them. "Nowi was told she'd get answers about her ability to see despite her injuries, and the reason Frederick was allowed to live. I'd like answers too."

Tiki silenced Say'ri with a look, the princess's mouth opened in attempted rebuke. "Of course, Exalt Chrom. You and your fellows are Chosen of the High Gods, the personal champions of the very rulers of existence. The title comes with cost, as I'm sure you know."

Robin and Chrom shared looks, one rubbing his nose while the other grabbed at his shoulder.

"As for Lady Nowi, she is one of my tribe." Tiki continued, Severa and Lucina leaning forward in interest. "In fact, I had a dream of communion with my mother just yesterday. She spoke of my cousin coming to visit after being lost amongst the world many centuries ago, but I thought little of it. Now I know better, but as to why she can take the shape of one many millennia older than she is now, that is something only heard in rumor and legend."

Everyone was listening to Tiki with undivided attention now, barely noticing the shadows of the others approaching. Tiki herself was unbothered by the attention. "Based on what you said about a Frederick still living, it is my belief that Lady Nowi has bound her eternal soul to him. I've heard tell of this happening only once before, and the member of my tribe to do so found their body march in step with their bound mate."

She looked behind them to see Nowi staring at her agape, eyes welling with tears. "Congratulations, dear cousin. You have escaped the curse of our blood and will not outlive those you love."

Nowi fell to her knees and started to weep, Severa and Lucina running to her and hugging her tightly, Nah joined them as soon as she reached the earth. By that point, most everyone was there with only a few stragglers flying in.

"Now then, to continue." Tiki said after clearing her throat. "The Chosen are granted powers well beyond mortal ken in exchange for each god's stated price. They vary, as you well know, but each is precious to the one they choose. The gods themselves are very fickle but once they have a Chosen in sight, they will do all they can to keep them. It would not surprise me if Hrothgar beseeched Yorick alongside my mother to keep Sir Frederick amongst the living."

Frederick nodded in understanding, his place by his wife's side as she continued to weep.

Tiki closed her eyes and bowed lightly. "At the moment, that is all I can provide. More answers could be given as I hear your stories, but I believe we have somewhere else to be, yes?"

The sounds of horns coming from the tree broke the mood of relief and congratulations, Robin having taken the time to explain why Nowi was crying to everyone as they landed. With their need to flee taking precedence, no one noticed Tiki stride over to Robin and whisper to him:

"You are like me, Sir Robin." She whispered, voice sending shivers down his spine. "The power of another sleeps within you, yearning to be whole. Your daughters hold it too, I can sense it, and the
shadows of the Fell shroud your eldest. There are agents at work here who seek the end of this world through you and them, be on your guard."

Tiki didn't wait for a response and joined Say'ri again, the pair mounting up with Cherche while everyone else squeezed onto mounts or into the lone wagon they'd brought for their escape.

Robin went through the motions with little regard for what was happening, mind churning at Tiki's words. While he knew that Severa was further along than Morgan, would Tiki spill the truth if they couldn't find some way to help? Sure, the other Shepherds would just give him a hard time for not sharing, but what of the children?

That still scared him witless.

"Hey, Chrom!" Vaike called, breaking Robin from his stupor. Apparently, they'd gotten far enough away to set camp and get dinner ready, a look to his right showed Cordelia watching him with a frown.

Robin smiled helplessly at her, silently promising to explain later, before Chrom answered. "What is it Vaike? Did that fall get you scared of heights?"

Laughter abounded, but Vaike ignored it. "Ain't that, dingus. You got another crystal on you, right? Could it be one of the gems for the Emblem, or is it something else?"

Chrom gave a wan smile and pulled out the blue gem, everyone able to tell it was far too small to fit in the Emblem. "No… this is something Emmeryn left us. I retrieved it after she fell, and an entry in her journal revealed it as a gift from our mother. It's about the only thing Lissa and I have left of her."

The Shepherds grew quiet, all paying their respects to the late Exalt. Chrom was about to put the crystal away when it started to glow, Argent and Azure blazing to life alongside it.

The clearing was swiftly drowned in a flood of light, everyone howling and yelling as they were blinded. After several moments of burning light, the blaze faded, and everyone took a few minutes to collect themselves.

Once they did, a sight none expected stood before them.

Jennifer Daly stood there, the kind and thoughtful aide Chrom and Sumia had taken on shortly after the queen discovered she was pregnant. Except, while her clothes were the usual maroon and white robes…

She now had blonde hair, blue eyes and the brand of the Exalt printed prominently on her forehead. Oh, and the hair was styled just like Emmeryn's old style.

Jennifer, who was reading a tome, sensed the eyes on her and looked up. "Oh… um, this is awkward."

This didn't make sense if you asked everyone not in the know! Emmeryn was dead and buried, they had the body to prove it!

"Wait a minute…" Sully breathed, making the connection. "That's why Jen knew so damn much about the different nobles and trading houses… oh shit."

Maribelle spoke next, a scowl twisting her face in indignation, though hope warred with it. "This explains why a no-name was so quickly accepted. Yet, the body was buried, and now she stands before us! Chrom, I demand an explanation!"
Oh, she was mad, dropping Chrom's title like that. Everyone was starting to grow upset, either believing they had an imposter before them or Emmeryn had abandoned her duties.

Emmeryn closed her tome and held up her hands. "I assure you all, that I am quite dead. Why I was pulled out of my current home, I do not know, but what you see is naught but a construct."

She beckoned for Chrom to hand her the crystal, which he did. "I died in Plegia, that is true, but this crystal now houses my soul. Only when near the Emblem can I manifest, and even then, I can muster little aside from make illusions and change appearance."

She turned and retrieved a small knife from a nearby sack, holding the blade to her finger. "I do not bleed, do not feel, and cannot access magic. All I can do is advise and listen, as I have done these last years. Please, do not think ill of those who already knew, I asked them to keep this secret for the good of all."

To prove it, she pressed the blade into her finger, not expecting anything per usual.

Much to her shock, a lance of pain sprouted from her finger and she winced, the knife clattering to the ground as she beheld her now bloody finger.

Staring at it in open shock, she turned to Chrom and Lissa, who shared her ashen face, voice a mouse's squeak.

"Um… oh…"

"That's… new."

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