**Whatever It Takes**

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**Whatever It Takes**

by **doctortrekkie**

**Summary**

There is no time to dwell on the fact that all seems lost when Lucina meets her demise before she can perform the ancient Awakening ritual, the last hope to defeat Grima. All that can be done is to act—and that is what her brother Inigo does, taking on the mantle of Exalt and the wielding of the legendary blade Falchion along with it. Ten others stand behind him, but he is not the figurehead his sister was, and he is not so blind as to miss their faith wavering. Only Owain, his cousin and the final remaining member of the Exalted bloodline, is with him all the way.

Owain's melodrama is more likely to inspire snickering than awe and devotion, and behind Inigo's flirtatious charm lies shyness and insecurity more deep-rooted than he cares to
admit. Sword and title or no, he is not Lucina, and without her presence their little group is quickly beginning to fragment. Only a last-ditch, harebrained idea holds the potential to keep them together and save their future from utter ruin. But Grima has taken everything from Inigo—his father, his mother, his home, and now his sister. The Fell Dragon will be stopped.

Whatever it takes.

(Begins in October 1032, bad timeline, and returns to cover April 1011 - April 1016)
Falling Too Fast (Part 1) Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

Falling too fast to prepare for this, tripping in the world could be dangerous, everybody circling, it's vulturous, negative, nepotist...

There was no way, Inigo thought, that this day could possibly get any worse.

And then, like someone had cast a particularly nasty hex in his direction, it promptly got worse.

Getting woken out of a sound sleep by a downpour of “epic” proportions (so called by Owain) hadn’t been bad enough. They no sooner had time to complain of their rude awakening before they were attacked by an admittedly small pack of Risen. The undead creatures were no match for their little band of four, but in the chaos their food, already running low, had been trampled and destroyed.

And, five hours later, it was still raining.

Inigo was tired, hungry, cold, and wet, and Ylisstol was still maddeningly far away. So surely, aside from perhaps the sudden appearance of Grima himself, he could only go uphill from here.

The boy let out a sigh, sending a wisp of blue-black fringe fluttering out of his face. In another world, he thought, the forest they trudged through might have been beautiful, but his keen eyes only saw death, destruction, and hazards. Winter would be setting in soon, and a thick carpet of wet brown leaves slipped under foot. The trees were not yet bare enough, though, to allow any good visibility, making another ambush all too likely.

The scent of decay hung thick in the air, but Inigo was far too used to filtering that out. He didn’t think the stink of death had ever left his nostrils since the Fell Dragon had risen from his thousand-year sleep. One by one, every authority figure in his life had fallen before Grima’s might. His parents, his aunt and uncle, friends’ parents that might as well have been aunts and uncles... until, eventually, there was no one left but a scared band of a dozen teenagers fighting against impossible odds for the fate of the very world.

He sighed again, earning a side-eye from the boy beside him. “Quit the sighin’, will ya? Yer making me depressed,” Brady said, stepping over a puddle.

“Oh, Naga forbid that,” Inigo muttered in reply, rolling his eyes before he returned to scanning the trees. Ahead, the broadsword strapped to Owain’s back glinted dully silver in the stormy light. Inigo shot a glance over his shoulder, double-checking that the final member of their group was still behind him. Indeed, the last Taguel in the world treaded almost noiselessly over the ground,
his rabbit-like ears twitching at every sound. Inigo met Yarne’s eyes and gave a short nod.

When he looked back, Owain had stopped, one hand held up for silence. His other went to the hilt of his sword, not yet drawing it but still making Inigo’s drop to the grip of his own katana.

After a moment’s pause, Owain turned back to the rest. “Yarne?” he murmured, nodding to the north. “You hear anything?”

The Taguel perked up, sniffing and looking in the direction Owain had gestured. Yarne’s superior senses had gotten them out of more than their share of sticky situations in the past, and even if the Taguel could probably catch wind of an enemy before the three humans, Inigo still found himself straining to hear some sign of Risen.

A high pitched squeak from Yarne broke the tense silence. “Yes,” he breathed. “L-lots of them.”

Inigo cursed under his breath. “Risen, I’m sure.”

“It does seem we are having such accursed luck that Risen would be our most likely opponents,” Owain said, drawing his sword with a theatrical flourish. “In days to come, the bards shall tell of Owain Dark’s Most Terrible Day. Nay, ‘terrible’ does not do justice to the suffering we have endured so far. Owain Dark’s Most Abhorrent Day? Owain Dark’s Most Ghastly Day? Owain Dark’s—”

“Owain,” Inigo snapped. “Shut up and move.”

Seeming to flush a little bit through the rain, Owain shot him a glare, cleared his throat, and said, “Right.”

Gradually, the shuffling moans of Grima’s undead servants grew loud enough for their entire party to hear, and no matter which direction they took nothing made the sound dissipate. The trees, on the other hand, were beginning to thin, to Inigo’s chagrin. Open ground might make it easier to see the Risen and get an estimate of their numbers, but it would also make it easier for the Risen to see them.

Despite his reservations, the woods cleared, a long plain stretching out ahead of the group. Inigo looked over the open ground in an instant, eyes widening as his grip on his sword tightened. “Knights!” he called, all pretense of stealth abandoned. “Risen knights!” A dozen of them fanned out across the field, all mounted on sickly looking, Risen horses. This wasn’t the group of stragglers they’d met earlier—this was a group that outmatched them in every way.

Owain, too, had sized up the situation as quickly as Inigo, and though it seemed to pain him to say it, he let out a cry of, “Run for it!”

Their one and only saving grace was the fact that Risen horses, like their human-esque counterparts, were not as quick as their living cousins. As Inigo’s lungs began to burn, he could only think that if they had been fighting flesh and blood they would have all been skewered by now.

Not that the alternative of being run down by dead people really held that much more appeal.

It felt like a small eternity passed before they came across a great chasm, spanned only by a flimsy wood-and-rope bridge. They were forced to pull up, and Owain, huffing, was the first to speak.

“Infernal Risen!” he cried. “Have we lost them yet?”
Inigo shot a glance backward. “I hate to tell you, but they’re right on our tail...”

“What?” Yarne cried. “Y-you’re kidding! I can’t run another step... Ahh, it’s all over... I guess this is extinction.”

Brady rolled his eyes. “Would you can it already? We need to keep movin’! If we don’t deliver Argent and Sable to Ylisse, this entire world’s hosed!”

Automatically, Inigo reached for his pocket where the two gemstones they had risked so much for had spent the last several days, even though he knew he had passed them off to Brady. Two little stones that would help save the world. If they could get them to Ylissol, if their friends succeeded in getting the other three and the legendary Fire Emblem, if they all managed to make it to Mount Prism to perform the Awakening...

If anyone could pull it off, he told himself firmly, it was Lucina. The Princess—Exalt, technically, although she refused to officially take up the title—was the glue that held their entire group together. Without her, their world would have been long lost.

Irritating as her perfectionism might be at times, Inigo thought, there was no woman he would have been prouder to call his sister.

“Blast!” Owain said, abruptly jerking Inigo from his introspection. “More Risen up ahead!” His voice dropped. “Heh, a pincer attack. Clever.”

“Here,” Inigo said. “The bridge up ahead.” He paused. “But if the Risen box us in...”

“Never mind that,” Owain interrupted. “Brady, Yarne, go! Inigo and I will hold this side of the bridge while you secure the other!”

“You got it!” Brady said, already heading for the flimsy bridge at a jog.

“B-but I’m afraid of heights,” they heard Yarne say as he followed.

Inigo drew his katana, reveling in the lightweight sword as he made for the near side of the bridge. Unlike Owain, who fought like an overly loud tornado with a heavy, double-bladed broadsword, Inigo favored a weapon that was as quick and nimble as himself. He had occasionally dwelled on the fact that they had ended up as the mirror images of their fathers—while Inigo’s father Chrom had used the legendary sword Falchion, a weapon even larger and more unwieldy than Owain’s sword, Owain’s father had fought in the blindingly fast offensive style Inigo used. Inigo wished he could have learned more from Lon’qu before he had passed.

Yet again, Owain pulled him back to the present. “They’re here, Inigo. Stay vigilant!”

“Don’t worry,” Inigo assured him with a grim smile. “I’m not letting a single one of those Risen get across.” Not while I still draw breath, he added silently, before wondering just how much longer that would be.

It was then he fully realized that the Risen that had been chasing them had paused their advance, not encroaching on the chokepoint Owain and Inigo held. Inigo risked a glance backward and felt his stomach drop.

“Hey!” Brady yelled just as he did. “Owain! Inigo! You need to get down here, now! We got a whole army of dead flesh marchin’ in from the west!”

That would be what the Risen were waiting for.
“We’d better cross the bridge,” he told Owain absently, trying to recalculate their plans on the fly. He was no tactician, though, and everything was coming up empty. He glanced over at the other boy when the only response he got was an uncharacteristic quiet. “Owain?”

“If we cross the bridge now, those Risen are gonna follow us,” Owain said. “Right?”

“Right. Almost definitely.”

“That’s if we’re lucky. If we’re unlucky, they’ll rip us to shreds the second we turn around.”

“True,” Inigo said. “We’ll have to back our way across.”

“But that’ll take too long, especially if we have to hold them off as we go,” Owain pointed out. “Brady doesn’t even have a weapon. How are you, me, and Yarne going to protect him once we’re surrounded?”

“The odds are not good, I agree, but...” Inigo swallowed hard and looked out at the Risen again. “We have to try.”

“No,” Owain said. “I’ve got a better idea.”

The other boy’s voice was tight in a way that instantly put Inigo on guard. “Uh... okay?”

“I’ll hold off the Risen while you cross. Once you make it to the other side, cut down the bridge.”

“And strand you here?” Inigo cried. “Are you crazy? No, never mind, I know the answer to that, but what are you thinking?”

“Just shut up and go!” Owain yelled, his voice betraying him with a crack. “We don’t have time to argue about this! Do you want me to die, or do you want all of us to die?”

Inigo’s throat worked wordlessly, and Owain continued with a sigh.

“Ugh, I’m sorry. I don’t mean to shout. But you know what’s at stake here!”

“You’re serious.”

“Yes.”

Inigo glanced over again. “And you’re sure there’s no way we can fight and survive this together?”

After a heavy pause, Owain answered, “I’m sure.”

Looking out at the still unmoving Risen, Inigo let out a sigh and made up his mind. “All right.”

“I’m sorry to make you do this, Inigo,” Owain continued, oblivious. “But... I’m glad I got to spend my last moments with you. Now cross that bridge and go! The fate of the world is in your hands!”

Inigo only cracked another grim smile.

“Um. Inigo. This is the part where you go.”

“Sorry, Owain. I can’t do it.”

For a moment, Owain’s serious expression cracked into offense. “What? But my epic speech!”

Ignoring him, Inigo turned back to look over the bridge. “Brady! Yarne!” he bellowed. “Go on
With two quick, sharp motions, his katana sliced through the ropes holding the bridge.

“Inigo, you idiot!” Owain cried, covering over the confused words of Yarne and Brady from the other side. “We didn’t both have to die!”

“I’m not the one being an idiot!” Inigo shouting, rounding on him. Owain blinked. “Maybe your plan is the best way to get the Gemstones back to Ylisse, but what am I supposed to tell Lucina and the others? ‘Oops, sorry! Owain sacrificed himself!’ Your parents died for you, Owain! They died for all of us! We’re two of the last three people in the entire world that still carry the Mark of Naga, in case you’ve forgotten! So I don’t care how smart you think it sounds, you’re not throwing your life away!”

Inigo’s chest heaved with his outburst, while Owain shot an automatic glance down at his arm, where he bore the royal Brand of the Exalt. Inigo had no such luxury, with his own Brand gracing his right eye, opposite where his sister had hers.

“But if I don’t do this, the world is gonna...” Owain started softly, before trailing off.

“Stop,” Inigo said. “We can save the world together. Don’t you want to be there to see it? I’m not leaving the Gemstones or my friends behind, Owain. You want to fight? We’ll fight. Both of us. And in case you hadn’t noticed, I’m not taking no for an answer.”

After a moment, Owain chuckled. “Heh. All right, fine. I suppose I was too legendary to die anyway. Very well, then. Let’s crush these Risen and head home to Ylisse!”

“Now you’re talking!”

He didn’t stop to look back at Yarne and Brady, just pushed forward.

If he was going to die, he was going out in a blaze of glory. Too bad there weren’t any girls around to appreciate it.

As you may have noticed, this story begins in a modified version of the Future Past timeline, but it will gradually begin to branch closer to the main storyline. Basically, this story is what happens when Owain and Inigo begin vying for my affections and take over my life.
Years of fighting together had left their mark. Inigo knew Owain tore through enemy lines like a man possessed, and Owain knew Inigo fought with the same grace and poise that his mother had danced with. Together, they had always been a force to be reckoned with. More often than not, one would start a move just to have the other automatically finish it and fill in a gap in their defense that had been left open.

Risen fell before them, bursting into purple smoke and dissolving as if they had never been. For every one they felled, two more seemed to take their place. Sweat dripped into Inigo’s eyes and a glance at Owain revealed his cousin’s blond hair was plastered to his forehead. Before long, they were both sporting a myriad of cuts and scratches. Just when they began to break ground against the Risen paladins, an almost-metallic screech rent the air.

Owain didn’t even bother to glance up, slashing through his current opponent’s neck and rolling his shoulders in the brief respite as it showered him with dust. “Wyverns,” he said flatly, his normally over-the-top speech falling to the wayside in the heat of battle.


“Fantastic,” Owain said, grunting as their tiny break ended and a sword clashed with his. He nearly buckled under the weight as the Risen bore down on him, using the height advantage of its mount to the full extent. Inigo pivoted, his strike almost delicate as he pierced directly into the creature’s heart. The rider exploded in a puff of smoke as Owain quickly finished off its mount.

“Think that’s the end of the cavalry,” Inigo bit out, trying to force some positivity into his tone. “We’re down to the footmen now.”

“And those cursed wyverns.”

“Don’t let Gerome hear you call them that.”

“Gerome can—” Owain started, before stopping abruptly as an arrow whizzed past, missing his head by mere inches.

Inigo’s eyes zeroed in on the newly-appeared archer, a sudden dark grin breaking out on his face. “Say, Owain?”

Catching his hint without words being said, a fire came to Owain’s eyes. “Oh yes, Inigo?”

“Let’s get that bow.”

Inigo was no Noire, who had been known to hit bull’s eyes he could barely see, but he was passable with a bow, and wyverns were big targets. If he could get his hands on one, the tide of battle might have just changed in their favor. Maybe this wouldn’t be the last stand he thought it was.

It wasn’t easy to gain ground, especially with archer they were so set on sniping at them the entire time. Inigo could only hope Brady and Yarne were running for their lives toward Ylisstol, because
the wyvern riders would likely be after them once they got an inkling they were gone. All the more important Inigo got his hands on that bow, and quick.

Owain was the one to fell the archer, in the end, and Inigo scrambled to grab the bow, sheath his katana, and nock an arrow all at once. Once again, they communicated without words, Owain stepping forward and swinging his sword in a broad arc as Inigo dropped back and aimed at the nearest wyvern.

His arms trembled with exertion and his form faltered, leaving him hissing as the bowstring smacked him soundly on the arm when he let the first arrow fly, but it found its target and the wyvern fell with a terrible screech. Automatically, he corrected his posture and drew again.

All conscious thought abandoned him, replaced by muscle memory and long-ingrained strategies. He missed far more shots than he made, but one by one the wyverns were dropping. In his peripherals, Owain fought on, covered in sweat, blood, and Risen-dust.

Inigo didn’t even notice the quiet until his own ragged breathing threatened to deafen him. Only one wyvern remained, giving him a tiny window to look around the battlefield. All that was left to meet his eyes were dust, discarded weapons, and a bent-over, panting, but mostly-uninjured Owain.

“...Did we do it?” he ventured, only to see his cousin’s eyes go wide.

“**Inigo!**”

*The last wyvern.*

He had no time to get his bow up, no time to drop it and draw his katana again. Inigo couldn’t even shut his eyes and wait for the white-hot pain. He started to spin toward what would certainly be his demise, for what reason he couldn’t say, only to find a flash of silver blur past him.

The wyvern let out an unholy screech that nearly deafened him as Owain’s sword embedded itself in the creature’s head. The wyvern twisted up, dropping its rider a good twenty feet to the ground before the mount shuddered and fell itself, landing with a mighty crash and finally falling still.

Inigo turned back, watching as the now-weaponless Owain straightened up fully and spat blood from his mouth. “You owe me for that one, my dear prince.”

The only thing Inigo managed was a strangled, “Yeah.” A moment later, a hysterical laugh bubbled past his lips. “Oh, gods, we did it.”

Owain smirked. “Of course we did! The great Owain Dark and his gallivanting sidekick, Prince Inigo, surely could not be defeated by such a ragtag band of sad swamp monsters that call themselves an army! Why, I don’t even know why you stayed behind! I could have taken them on blindfolded and with that ridiculous breadknife you call a sword!”

Inigo opened his mouth, unsure if he was first going to protest the title of sidekick or the insult to his weapon. Before he could do either, all levity drained away as with a sickening sound, a silver-tipped lance sprouted from Owain’s side.

Spinning around again, Inigo saw, to his horror, the mangled body of the last wyvern rider, arm still raised from where it had thrown the lance. Broken and disfigured the Risen might be from its fall, but it lived just long enough for Inigo to see the terrible, almost-smirk on its face before it melted into a puddle of smoke.

Owain choked, knees buckling, and Inigo leapt across the remaining distance between them,
throwing his arms around his cousin’s shoulders and lowering him to the ground. “I... knew it,” Owain got out. “Destiny... had planned... a most epic and heroic death for me... at this cursed place.”

“Forget destiny!” Inigo barked. “Stay with me, Owain! We’ve got to catch up with Brady and Yarne and get those Gemstones back to Ylisse, remember? I’m not doing that without you!”

Owain scrabbled weakly at the lance in his side, his hand quickly being stained crimson. “Yeah... all right. Good plan. You got a... a miracle in your back pocket?”

Oh, he wished. “BRADY! YARNE!” Inigo screamed, though he knew it would be in vain. Their two companions would be long gone by now, but it didn’t stop him. “BRADY! WE NEED YOU!”

“On the other... other hand, if I survive this, I may end up deaf anyways,” Owain grumbled.

“Oh, he wished. “BRADY! YARNE!” Inigo screamed, though he knew it would be in vain. Their two companions would be long gone by now, but it didn’t stop him. “BRADY! WE NEED YOU!”

“S-shut up.” Inigo’s throat and eyes ached and his vision was beginning to blur. “Dammit, Owain, c’mon. I need you.”

“Yeah... right. You’re the great... crown prince. I’m just the s-spare everyone puts up with. They’ll probably appreciate that c-camp’s quieter without me.”

“Don’t say that,” Inigo said viciously. “You’re a warrior, maybe as much of one as Lucina. That’s who we need right now. What do I do? I dance and fight with... with a ridiculous breadknife.”

Owain managed a smile, though his eyes were fluttering. “Your sword does suck, man.”

“Thanks.”

A shadow graced the horizon and Inigo cursed it silently. He wasn’t sure he could take on another Risen, not even the solitary one that seemed to be coming up on them. He was physically and emotionally spent, and that was without the weight of Owain dying in his arms.

“So I guess I need... some truly inspiring last words...”

“Owain, hush.”

“Aw, c’mon, Inigo, don’t... deny me that—”

“No, seriously, hush,” Inigo said, eyes narrowing. That wasn’t a Risen on the horizon. It was... something not horse-like, the gait similar but more ground-covering, the build sturdier and stockier.

A rabbit.

A harsh cheer came from Inigo’s throat, before he let out another ragged yell of “YARNE! BRADY! OVER HERE!”

Yarne’s shapeshifted form ate up the ground in loping strides, covering the field in moments. Brady jumped from his shoulders before the Taguel had come to a full stop, already hefting his healing staff.

“Has... has salvation truly come?” Owain asked as Yarne shifted back into a human, breathing hard and trembling.

“Be quiet and let me look at ya,” Brady snapped. “By Naga, what happened?”
“What do you mean, what happened?” Inigo cried, voice rising. “You were supposed to go on to Ylisstol—”

“Yeah, and good thing we didn’t, right?” Brady asked, running his healing staff over Owain.

“We couldn’t just leave you behind,” Yarne said breathily. “We found another bridge, about a mile down, and doubled back.”

Owain had started up another steady stream of heroic sounding nonsense as Brady worked over him. “I need ya t’ move,” the healer told Inigo. “And for cryin’ out loud, Owain, I don’t care how epic ya think ya looked, quit squirmin’.”

Inigo carefully scrambled out from under his cousin, getting shakily to his feet. Naga, that had been too close. If there was anyone besides Lucina he couldn’t stand to lose...

He shook his head to rid it of the thought, feeling guilty. He didn’t think he could stand to lose any of his friends. They had been through thick and thin, the death of their kin one by one and the fall of their world into what could only be described as the slow end of humanity. Losing even one would be more than he could stomach.

“Inigo, please don’t cry,” Yarne whimpered. “I’ll start too.”

He was crying, wasn’t he? He hurriedly swiped at his eyes with his sleeve, likely only succeeding in smearing his face with blood and dirt. Clearing his throat once, twice, he fought with everything he had to keep his voice level. “Brady, will he be all right?”

“Owain Dark cannot be felled by such a measly semblance of a weapon!”

“So much for ‘a most epic and heroic death,’ Inigo thought dryly.

“His mouth still works,” Brady drawled. “He’ll be up’n about soon enough.”

“And sending Risen to their graves crying for their mothers, don’t forget that part!” Owain butted in.

“Do Risen have mothers?” Inigo mused. With another shaky breath, he firmly told himself to pull it together, and shot a glance at the sky. “We need to get out of the open before sundown. Yarne, can you carry Owain?”

“I don’t need to be carried!”

“Yes, ya do,” Brady said firmly, dropping back on his heels. “Unless ya fancy passin’ out before ya make it ten feet. Wounds like that don’t come cheap t’ fix.”

Owain continued grumbling even as Brady helped him to his feet and over to a wordlessly shapeshifted Yarne. True to the healer’s words, however, he was soon slumped over the Taguel’s shoulders, out cold. Inigo let out a soft sigh of relief and, quietly, took up the mantle of leadership that had been thrust upon him once more.

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Dinner was uncomfortably lean that night, just a pair of squirrels Inigo and Yarne had managed to
catch. Owain, pale from blood loss, had only woken up for a few minutes when they made camp and hauled him off the exhausted Taguel’s shoulders. Brady, equally drained from healing the blond boy, had retired immediately after they ate, and when Inigo saw Yarne barely containing his yawns, he told the Taguel to call it a night as well. The prince himself was far too wired to come anywhere near sleep, anyway, so he took first watch.

Inigo had plenty of aches and pains from the day’s battle, but Brady was so spent from saving Owain he bore them in silence. For the moment, just being off his feet was relief enough.

He fiddled with a twig, snapping it into progressively smaller pieces as night settled in around him. The rain had thankfully let up, but the ground he sat on and the tree he was leaning on were still uncomfortably damp.

Just a little longer, he told himself. In a few days they would be back in Ylisstol, ready to meet up with the other eight of their group, who had hopefully acquired the other three Gemstones and the Fire Emblem. Then, they made for Mount Prism in the east, the holy site of the goddess Naga. There, they would appeal to her and, with the power of the Fire Emblem and all five Gemstones, perform the Awakening and give Lucina and her sword, Falchion, the power to finally defeat Grima.

Easy peasy, right?

Inigo wanted to laugh at the absurdity of it. They were planning the entire future of the world on a wing and a prayer. But, in this world, what was left but wings and prayers?

Lucina, he told himself. Lucina could do it. She had held them together for this long, and for all he knew her sheer force of will would bend the world to her bidding.

It was a risk, to bet the whole world on one woman, but she was all they had left.

Chapter End Notes

What better way to start a story than with my greatest love affair? Yup, angst.
Chapter Summary

A certain wyvern rider enters stage left with another dose of angst and salt.

‘Gloomy’ was not a word Gerome heard directly applied to him often. ‘Stoic,’ ‘stand-offish,’ ‘prickly,’ he heard those plenty, though not usually to his face.

But now... now he was definitely gloomy.

He sat on the roof of once was the Exalt’s palace in the heart of Ylisstol, but the city below was little more than a smoking wreckage, the palace a scorched mockery of what it had once been. His great wyvern Minerva was stretched out beside him, breathing shallowly in half-slumber. Across the flat rooftop, six of his friends had splintered into small groups. Cynthia, Noire, and Nah were the closest, gathered in a tight circle, practically knee-to-knee as they spoke in hushed, broken tones. Kjelle and Severa stood side by side on the far end of the roof from Gerome, likely in unbroken silence if he knew them at all. Laurent sat by himself about halfway between the two gatherings, glasses pulled down his nose as he leafed through his spellbook.

Gerome, meanwhile, fully embraced the title of gloomy, one hand stroking Minerva as the other rested on the rough-hewn cloth covering the sword in his lap.

Four days had passed like this as they waited, unbearably, for the last four members of their party to return. The sword had not left his side for more than five minutes in those four days, nor had the brassy shield that lay against the wall a few feet away. He had his duty.

As he stared out over the ruins of Ylisstol and the hours stretched on, he couldn’t stop the scene that had embedded itself in his mind from playing over and over, word-for-word and in perfect, horrendous detail. Why couldn’t he have changed it? Surely there must have been something, some tiny detail that would have prevented everything.

But if there had been, what good did it do him now?

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“I’m so glad to see you all safe,” Lucina had said, her gaze darting from Severa to Laurent and landing, finally, on Gerome. His lips had quirked only the tiniest bit as their eyes met, but he had known she would notice and know what it meant. Months it had been since he had last seen her, but that little movement was the only thing he could give her.

The months, perhaps, had been kinder to her than they had to him. While he and Minerva sported a dozen new scars between them, she seemed unchanged. The only thing that gave him pause was the heavy traveling cloak Lucina wore, too warm still for the ambient temperature. She must have been sweltering and he had to wonder why.
“It’s good to see you, too,” Severa had replied, hefting the shield from her arm and retrieving a round gem from her pocket. “Here you go. One Gemstone and one Fire Emblem! I hope you’re happy. These were not easy to get.”

“Severa, would it hurt you to just hand them over without being condescending?” Laurent chastised.

“I can hand them over any way I like!” the redhead fired back. “You’re the one being obnoxious.”

Another minuscule exchange of glances between Gerome and Lucina. She, though, gave in to the urge to smile fully. “Heh. You haven’t changed a bit. That comes as a relief. I cannot thank you enough for retrieving these.”

“Keep them close,” Gerome told her brusquely. “We need to be ready to start the rite the moment we have all the Gemstones.”

“I know,” Lucina said quietly, her gaze going far off for a moment.

“How are things in Ylisstol?” Severa asked. “Are the people safe?”

“We’ve managed to keep casualties to a minimum,” Lucina informed them. “It... has not been an easy few months. I had to believe you would all come back... and now three of you stand here before me.” Another dart of her eyes toward Gerome. “The others are safe, too. I just know it.”

“I believe it, too,” Gerome said. “Once they have returned safely, we’ll need to depart for Mount Prism at once.”

“No doubt the mount is already teeming with Risen,” Laurent said thoughtfully. “If we come to blows, run to the altar as fast as you can. We’ll hold off the Risen.”

“Let’s see how those dastards like it once the Awakening is complete,” Severa said, grinning. “We’ll destroy them and Grima alike and restore peace to the world!”

“...Doesn’t that sound like a daring little scheme?”

The voice was like death, raspy and metallic and carrying the scent of decay on the breeze. A moment later, shimmering like mist, a hooded figure appeared not ten feet away, black smoke curling around it like a second cloak.

“Who are you?” Lucina demanded, unsheathing Falchion and leveling it at the stranger.

“I am the wings of despair and the breath of ruin. I am the fell dragon, Grima.”

Gerome drew his axe, Severa and Laurent doing the same with sword and spellbook, but Grima only let out a ringing laugh. The dragon and Lucina started a back-and-forth that was difficult to keep up with—death threats and demands for the Emblem and the Gemstone, met only by staunch refusal.

As soon as it started, it stopped. “Very well. I was hoping not to have to flex any... muscle.”

With a ringing bang, a blast of dark energy slammed into the four, leaving them doubled over. Severa retched and Gerome violently shook his head in an attempt to clear it.

“Is... is everyone all right?” Lucina finally called.

“With the next blow, I will kill you,” Grima taunted. “The Gemstone and the Emblem. NOW.”
“Never!”

“Still you resist me? Very well. Die, if you wish.”

With a cry of effort, Severa hurled herself in front of Lucina. “You’ll have to go through me!”

“Severa, what are you—?” the princess cried.

“What stupidity is this?”

“Lucina, I’ll stop Grima’s attacks. Even if it kills me. Now run, while you’ve still got the chance!”

“No! Severa, I can’t!”

“You have to, you idiot! If you die, we all die! The world will come to an end!”

“Impertinent little brat,” Grima taunted. “I’ll have no trouble breaking you.”

“You do not give the lady nearly enough credit,” Laurent said, striding forward to stand at Severa’s side.

“Laurent!” the redhead cried.

“Severa deduced this would be our best chance and acted swiftly. She will not stand alone. You, Grima, will have to go through me as well. Can you defeat us both before Lucina escapes? Or are you all sardonic quips?”

“Laurent, you fool!” Severa snapped. “We don’t both have to die!”

“What, you think this is some noble gesture?” the mage asked. “I’m simply following the wisest course. A shield twice as thick serves twice as well.”

“Uh-huh. It’s a noble gesture. But still... thanks.”

“Certainly,” he returned. “Your life is worth the effort, Severa.”

“Yeah, I know.” Severa shook her head, her hair swaying a little as she chuckled.

With the slightest nudge of his legs, Gerome urged Minerva forward. “I’m staying too.” He ignored Lucina’s gasp and Severa’s murmur of his name. “By Laurent’s logic, a shield thrice as thick would be an improvement. But I can make it four times as strong.”

“Gerome, no,” Laurent said. “We cannot lose you and Minerva too.”

“Minerva wishes to fight for Lucina,” Gerome said simply. “She told me as much before. And more importantly, she insists we meet our destinies together. If death is to come for us, it must take us both.”

“...All right, then,” Laurent relented.

“Forgive us, Lucina,” Gerome said, his voice taking on a more formal tone. “But we must leave the hardest task to you. Find the rest of our friends, and put this wyrm out of its misery.”

“No... Gerome, no! You can’t do this!”

“There’s no time to debate it!” Severa yelled. “Go, Lucina! Go!”
“Now!” Laurent urged.

This time, as he twisted in the saddle to take one final look at her, Gerome allowed the rarest of true smiles to grace his features. “Please.”

Grima interjected with a rumbling laugh. “Isn’t this precious? What will it be, child of Naga? Will you buy a few more minutes of life by watching your friends get butchered? Or will you stay behind and render their sacrifice meaningless? I must say I shall enjoy this either way!” Lucina only answered in a wordless cry of frustration. “Don’t you see? Humanity is finished. You have no future. Your father and mother are dead. And now... it... ENDS!”

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Gerome was snapped back to the present by a croon from Minerva, one he easily interpreted as Look. He scanned the city, eyes drawn to the wide path that led toward the palace. Four figures made their way down it, the largest being the unmistakable silhouette of Yarne.

The last of their party had returned.

The masked boy twisted, looking over the rooftop. None of his friends had noticed the others’ incoming arrival yet, giving him a precious few moments to steel himself. Not for the first time he gave a silent thank you to his mask. Inigo, Owain, and the others would not be privy to the impossibly dark circles under Gerome’s eyes, though nothing could be done for his eyes themselves, bloodshot from grief and lack of sleep.

Minerva raised her head as he got to his feet, but lowered it again as he murmured, “Stay, dearest.” Hefting the shield onto his arm, he adjusted the sword and started for the roof’s staircase.

Unfortunately, to do that he had to go past Kjelle and Severa. “Gerome?” the former asked, squaring her broad shoulders as he neared.

“The others have arrived,” he said flatly. “Allow me to meet them alone, if you would.”

“Are you—” Kjelle started.

“Yes, I am sure,” Gerome interrupted, starting down the stairs without another backward glance.

His heart ached as he made it to the ground and saw the four boys laughing to themselves, unaware of the news he was about to drop on them. Yarne had changed back into his human form, looking affronted by some teasing that had surely passed between them. All four had had their skin darkened and weathered by the Plegian deserts and Owain walked with a slight limp, but it didn’t seem to slow him down as he gave Inigo a jovial shove, giving a shout that held too much joy to sound as offended as he surely intended.

Yarne was the first to spot Gerome, giving a slight wave. Owain zeroed in on him next, throwing his arms out in greeting. “Gerome, my masked compatriot! We have returned from a quest of most epic proportions with our sought Gemstones in hand! How have you fared?” His eyes lit up as they latched onto the shield. “You got the Fire Emblem! Clearly you have been as fortunate as we!”

Gerome ignored him, not breaking stride until he stood a few paces from Inigo. “Milord,” he said quietly, though the title burned his throat. He thought for a moment he sounded terribly like
Cynthia’s father. And here he had dared hope he would meet a kinder end than the great knight Frederick had. With every formality, he bowed low, setting first sword and then shield at Inigo’s feet.

Even Owain’s smile faded as the seriousness of Gerome’s manner set in. “What’s happened?” Inigo asked sharply. “Gerome?” When the wyvern rider didn’t answer, the prince bent down himself, drawing back the cloth that covered the sword and revealing the distinctive hilt.

Falchion.

“No,” Inigo whispered hoarsely, eyes going wide with disbelief. “Oh, gods, no.”

“I’m afraid I must report,” Gerome started as Inigo ripped the cloth away fully and began to inspect Falchion, as if this was some sort of cruel trick. With the barest care for the ancient weapon, he dropped it and turned his attention to the Fire Emblem and its five empty slots, each intended for a Gemstone they had fought so hard for. “The Exalt is dead.”

Yarne held a fist to his mouth, barely choking back a sob. Brady ducked his head and fared no better. Owain only stared at Gerome, eyes wide and mouth hanging open.

“She can’t be dead!”

The Fire Emblem hit the ground with a clatter, Inigo’s chest heaving and hands trembling. Gerome shot him a glare. “I understand you’re upset, but perhaps don’t treat one of Ylisse’s national treasures like your personal whipping boy?”

With a glint in his eyes that almost made Gerome take a step back, Inigo rounded on him. “Upset? Do I look upset? You’ve just told me my sister is dead and you lecture me about a stupid shield? You have that audacity?” With a dark laugh, Inigo took another step closer. “No, I know you have that, but what of a heart? Is there any soul left behind that mask?”

“Do not presume to know my heart, Inigo,” Gerome snarled.

“How can I know what doesn’t exist?” Inigo shot back.

“With Lucina gone, at least one of us of noble blood needs to have some damn sense left.” Gerome nodded to Brady. “My apologies, Brady, but it seems the remnant of the Exalted bloodline leaves much to be desired.”

“Gerome, I’d watch your mouth if I were you,” Owain said lowly, taking a step closer. “Heroes of legend do not take such insults lightly.”

“Remind me of that when you get around to leaving your little fantasy world long enough to do anything about it.”

“Enough, all of you!” interrupted the cool voice of Kjelle. “The last thing we need right now is to be at each other’s throats!”

“I thought I told you to stay behind,” Gerome said over his shoulder, not turning to look.

“I didn’t listen,” the lady knight said flatly.

Silence stretched out, finally broken by Yarne. “W-what happened? Kjelle, did you see?”

She shook her head. “Cynthia, Nah, Noire, and I succeeded in retrieving Gules and Azure, but by
the time we arrived… it was too late. Gerome’s group were the only ones there.”

All eyes turned to the masked boy, who stood so stiffly he looked as if he might shatter. “Severa, Laurent and myself brought Vert and the Emblem itself to Lucina, four mornings ago. We had scarce but arrived when Grima himself deigned join us.”

“G-Grima?” Yarne stuttered. “The dragon was here?”

“His avatar,” Gerome explained. “We attempted to give the Exalt time to escape, but he still managed to strike her. They both vanished, with only Falchion and the Emblem remaining where she had stood.” And one more thing, but with deliberation he chose not to mention that. “With her death, I believe our last hope has been snuffed out.”

“No…” Owain said. “No, I will not believe it! There must always be hope!” He paused, eyes widening. “We all got our Gemstones, right? And the Fire Emblem’s right here! Inigo or I could be Awakened in her place!”

Gerome cut him off with a raised hand. “As I said, we had given Lucina both the Emblem and Vert, but only the Emblem remained. Vert disappeared with her. With only four Gemstones, there can be no Awakening.”

Finally seeming to come back to his senses, Inigo pointed out, “You said she vanished. Doesn’t that mean she could still be alive? Some sort of transport, or something?”

“While your optimism is truly inspiring,” Gerome said dryly, “we must be practical about this.”

“So by practical you mean you’re going to give up,” Inigo said. “No, I will not, and Lucina would say the same if she were here. Gather the others and tell them we make for Mount Prism at first light.”

“An Awakening cannot be performed—” Gerome started.

“—without all five Gemstones. Yes, I heard you the first time,” Inigo interrupted. “Nevertheless, if Lucina is still alive, she will be headed there as well, and have Vert in hand if we have any luck. If not… we still have the Emblem and four Gemstones. Perhaps Lady Naga will have mercy on us.”

“I do not think that would be the wisest course of action,” Gerome said stubbornly.

“And I really don’t care,” Inigo told him. “Listen, if you’re going to insist that Lucina’s dead, must I really remind you that I would be your new Exalt?” As if to drive the point home, he reached for Falchion, keeping a grip on the hilt and driving the point into the ground.

“And may Naga help us all if that is truly the case.” Once more, Gerome squared his shoulders, looking down on Inigo with the extra few inches he had. “If— if I chose to follow an insolent whelp who has just decided he has weight to throw around, who thinks he can hold this last remnant of humanity together, who is more interested in chasing skirts than slaying Grima… Then know now, Inigo, it will be for your sister’s sake I follow you, not yours.”

An intense moment passed as the two stared each other down. At last, Inigo drew Falchion from the dirt, sliding it into his belt in the absence of a proper scabbard. “So be it.”
“Go back to bed, Owain.”

Letting out an irritated huff, Owain found himself speaking to his cousin’s back. “Have my skills truly grown so rusty that I cannot even sneak up on you, Inigo?”

“You’re still limping from our skirmish at the border,” Inigo answered, still not turning around but gazing out over the ruins of Ylisstol. “Your gait’s different.”

“Pshh,” Owain answered, keeping his voice deliberately light as he moved to sit on the edge beside Inigo. “Details, details. Besides, tried taking your own advice? I mean, if all goes well, this time tomorrow you’ll be the Awakened Super Inigo and you probably won’t need sleep, but at this moment you’re still Regular, Less Super, Sleep-Needing Inigo.”

“If all goes well, I won’t have to be Awakened at all…” Inigo murmured.

“Although, if we could get our hands on some more of that fantastic coffee stuff Anna brought back that one time…” Owain continued. “Hold, what now?”

“Owain, you are never allowed to drink coffee again. We practically had to pry you off the ceiling! Not to mention I don’t think it should be humanly possible to string sentences together that fast.”

Inigo still hadn’t made eye contact, so with a slight sigh Owain changed tactics. “Here. I got you an actual sheath for Falchion from what was left of the armory.” As if taunting him, he dangled it in front of his cousin, before saying deadpan, “Look, it’s black like your soul.”

Glancing at him and give two short blinks, Inigo let out a short bark of laughter. “What?”

“Aha! I have discovered the secret to lifting your gloom and coaxed a laugh from your sorrowful lips!”

“How are my lips any more sorrowful than the rest of me?”

“Shush! Stop ruining my poetry with your logic!” Owain complained. “Anyways, what’s this whole ‘not being Awakened’ thing?” When a moment passed without an answer, he let out another sigh. “You’re still hoping Lucina’s out there, aren’t you?”

“I must.” Inigo shook his head. “She was not just the Exalt, not just our leader. She was the tie that bound us together, and I cannot possibly hope to fill those shoes.”

“Listen, if this is about Gerome, you know he's just upset, right? He was closer to Lucina than he was to anybody. You, on the other hand… Not so much. I mean, of course he took it out on you.”

“I'm aware of the emotional state of our resident wyvern rider… If you could ever put ‘Gerome’ in the same sentence as ‘emotional.’ However, I'm more concerned about the fact that everything he
said was true.”

“That's not…” Owain started, then trailed off.

Inigo let out another derisive chuckle. “Even you can't deny it, can you?”

“I…”

“It's okay, Owain. Naga, sometimes I wonder how we ever ended up here.” Silently, he drew Falchion, eyeing the sword in the dim moonlight.

A long silence stretched out, finally broken by a blurted, “Falchion.” Owain cleared his throat. “Can you even wield it?” The sword was notoriously picky about who it allowed to use it--only the Exalted bloodline, and not even all of them could.

Inigo gave a stiff nod. “Lucina and I tested it, several years ago. I am one of Falchon’s chosen. She never told me if you were, though.”

Owain shrugged. “Never tried it.”

“Oh? She said she would give you the chance…” Inigo trailed off. “Though… on further thought, I seem to remember that was right before Aunt Lissa…” He shook his head. “No wonder it fell through the cracks.”

Owain glanced away, trying to push back the thoughts of his late mother's passing. “Well, problem for another day, right? You’re the one with the epic sword of legend. Maybe a great miracle will happen and it’ll even help you pull a girl or two.”

“Are you kidding? I’m not going to use it. I’d rather fight with a log. This thing’s worse than your sword.”

“Oh, that’s right. I forgot you were emotionally attached to your breadknife.”

“You’re one to talk! You’re the one that gives all your weapons ridiculous names! And calls my perfectly balanced, extremely deadly katana a breadknife.”

Owain snorted. “Well, I doubt you could come up with a better name than Kinda Balanced Somewhat Deadly Breadknife.”

Gasping, Inigo demanded, “You take that back!”

“Well, can you?”

Inigo seemed to wrack his brain for a second, before blurting, “Lilith!”

Owain let out a sigh. “Wasn’t that the girl that predictably turned you down just before the Plegian border?”

“...Maybe?” Inigo said, voice rising at the end. “Does it matter? It’s got a name to suit your fantastical tastes, so will you stop calling it ‘breadknife’ now?”

“Nope!”

“Owain, I am going to shove you off this roof.”

“Nah. Use a real sword for a while and try again when your arms aren’t too wimpy to budge me.”
Inigo did indeed shove him at that point, thankfully sidewise instead of the threatened ‘off the roof.’ Bursting into a fit of giggles, Owain returned the favor.

“Maybe you… and Sword-Lilith…” he gasped out, “will get married and have lots of beautiful silverware children.”

“So you admit it’s a sword!”

“I admit nothing, except how difficult it will be to explain to my own children why their second cousins are named ‘Fork’ and ‘Spoon’!”

For the first time in a long time, laughter filled the sour, dying air of Ylisstol. Inigo was the first to sober, wiping tears from the corners of his eyes. Owain followed suit, still letting out an occasional chuckle.

“Feels good to laugh, doesn’t it?” the blond boy asked.

“Yeah,” Inigo said softly. “Except… none of that will ever happen, will it?”

“Who knows? Lilith the Breadknife is the only woman you’ll ever be happy with. Or, more accurately, the only woman who will ever put up with you.”

“Stop,” Inigo said, with a hint of good-natured teasing still in his voice. “I meant… what are the odds any of us will live long enough to have kids?” He held up a hand. “Before you go on one of your heroic motivational speeches, look around you. The world’s dying, Owain. I don’t think the question is ‘how do we win?’ anymore. I think it’s just ‘how long can we last?’”

“Didn’t think we could last long at the border, did we?” Owain pointed out. “Those were pretty damn long odds, too, and we still pulled through. We’re not without hope. We’ve got the Fire Emblem, four Gemstones, Falchion… and most importantly, we’ve still got an Exalt. That’d be you, if you were wondering. Even better, we’ve got a spare. A back-up Exalt, if you will. That’d be me, if you were wondering.”

“You really are annoyingly encouraging sometimes,” Inigo sighed. “And no, I wasn’t wondering.”

“Good. I was hoping I wouldn’t have to explain the whole ‘line-of-succession’ thing.” He gave a dramatic sniff. “Not that there’s really much of a ‘line’ left with just the two of us. Best get working on those kids. Human in my case, silverware in yours.”

“I really don’t know why I keep you around,” Inigo complained.

“My unparalleled entertainment factor!”

“Your unparalleled annoyance factor is the correct pronunciation.”

“Yes, yes, same difference. And I’m going to annoy you about going to sleep again, Not Yet Super Inigo.”

“Sigh.”

“Okay, just stop,” Owain said. “You're not even sighing. You're just saying the word 'sigh.'”

“You know what? Fine. I'll go to sleep if it'll get you to shut up.” Inigo hooked his newly acquired sheath to his back before sliding Falchion into place. With a stretch and a sigh, he got to his feet. “Good night, Owain. May tomorrow bring better news than today has.”
Nodding, Owain watched the darker haired boy until he disappeared inside the remains of the palace. “Somehow I doubt that, Inigo,” he murmured, and took up the silent vigil over Ylisstol.

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For what they had expected, a mere few dozen Risen guarding the base of Mount Prism really wasn’t that bad.

“Pah,” Owain said, sheathing his sword and rolling his shoulders. “Our foes call that measly imitation of a force an advance guard?”

“I agree it was less than we expected,” Gerome said from atop Minerva’s shoulders. “A worrying situation, if you ask me.”

“I hate to say it, but you’re both right,” Inigo said, Falchion’s hilt catching the light as he scanned the hillside of Mount Prism. “Cynthia, scout on ahead and let us know what we’ve got. If you see so much as a hint of an archer I want you back here immediately.”

“You got it,” the cheery girl said, her pegasus zooming into the sky without preamble.

Inigo watched her go for a moment, then said, “Yarne, head south. I want you listening with everything you’ve got. We cannot afford an ambush. Noire, Nah, stick with him. Gerome—”

Without a word, Gerome and Minerva took to the sky with a great flap of her wings, heading toward the horizon.

Inigo let out a huff of frustration. “Yeah. Do whatever you want, Gerome. That’s fine.”

“He’s probably going to check on the nearby villages,” Kjelle said. “I’ll go after on foot.”

Nodding, Inigo said, “Take Brady and Laurent with you. Severa, Owain, with me. We’ll meet back here by nightfall.”

With nods and murmurs of agreement, the group splintered.

“Soos…” Severa said after several minutes of silent walking. “Are we just going to wander around until we find this stupid temple?”

Inigo lifted one shoulder in a shrug. “Pretty much, yeah.”

“Surely there’s a better way to do this?” the redhead asked.

“With any luck, Cynthia will find it for us and report back. Till then, not much use in standing around, is there?” Inigo smirked. “Worry not your pretty head, lovely Severa.”

Ignoring Severa’s curled lip, Owain swung an arm over her shoulders. “Have a little faith in our Exalted companion!”

Severa shrugged out of his grasp. “Watch your hands if you wish to keep them,” she snapped, hand dropping to her sword. “And you can watch your perverted mouth, Inigo!”

“Ouch,” Inigo said. “Honestly, I prefer the term ‘flattery’ to ‘perversion.’”
“Well, if we’re speaking honestly, I think you’re both blithering idiots!” Severa shot back. “Have either of you an ounce of respect for the dead?”

Owain watched as the entire line of Inigo’s posture stiffened.

Oblivious, Severa continued, “You’re acting like… like… like Lucina’s gone on vacation!”

“Believe me,” Inigo said flatly. “I am the last person you need to remind of my sister’s death.”

“Could’ve fooled me!”

“Severa…” Owain started softly, looking between the two.

“I’m sorry my grief takes the form of action instead of weeping, Severa,” Inigo snapped. “Does that make you feel any better?”

“Inigo…”

“Oh, that’s rich coming from you!” Severa huffed. “Have fun wandering in circles!” With that, she stalked off over the rolling hills.

Owain shot another glance at Inigo before beginning to start after the redhead. “Hold, Owain,” Inigo told him quietly. “She’ll stay close. She’s not that stupid.”

Torn between the two, Owain finally sighed. “All right, all right.”

Still, as they continued on and he kept glancing back in Severa’s direction, he couldn’t help thinking that Inigo had only been Exalt for a day, and his grip on them was already starting to slip.

Maybe Lucina really had been the last tie binding them together.
Falling Too Fast (Part 1) Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Naga gives Inigo another option, and reveals Lucina's fate.

Chapter Notes

We've moved beyond Future Past, and into the CD: Recollections of a Future Requiem. I've gotten the translations from the Tumblr fe-according-to-japan. Hence, not all the dialogue from this and the next several chapters is mine.

Their suspicious good luck seemed to hold. Within an hour, Cynthia and her pegasus went soaring overhead, landing gracefully in front of Inigo and Owain. “Found it!”

“Excellent,” Inigo said, doing his best to sound cheerier than he felt. “Lead the way.”

With every step they took closer to Naga’s temple, though, the urge to turn on his heel and run away grew stronger. You’re the Exalt. Be strong.

But how much strength did he have? Was it enough to keep a grip on this broken world he had been forced into ruling?

Much more pressingly, was it enough to brave Naga’s fire and come out on the other side?

He was drawn from his dangerously distracting introspection by Owain’s murmured, “Wow.” Inigo’s gaze snapped up, nearly stopping in his tracks at the sight before him.

He wasn’t quite sure what he had expected Naga’s temple to look like—perhaps a small, open-air altar sequestered away on the side of Mount Prism? What really greeted him, though, was a cathedral as grand as some that had once graced the streets of Ylisstol, dark marble rising toward the ashy skies.

No wonder Cynthia had found it so quickly.

“Now that is what I call a temple of legend,” Owain said.

Severa, having rejoined them at some point of their walk, cuffed him upside the head. “Show a little respect, you dolt.”

Cynthia glanced over at both of them, a slightly pained expression on her face as she dismounted her pegasus. “Should we wait for the others?”

“No,” Inigo said after a moment of thought. “Time may well be of essence. The… the Awakening should be performed as soon as possible.” He strode toward the temple, the first sound of his boot hitting the marble stairs bringing another wave of Run. Turn and flee, as fast as you can. Grinding his teeth together so hard his jaw immediately began to ache, he ignored it.
A moment later, though, there was not just one set of boots on marble, but two, three, and four. “Wait outside,” he told the others, not turning around. He couldn’t make them watch—not if he failed.

“Yeah, I don’t think so,” Severa said.

“We’re with you, Inigo!” cheered Cynthia.

“Did you really think Owain Dark would leave you in your darkest hour of need?”

Briefly, he thought to protest, to order them to bend to his will like he had with Gerome the night before, but the compulsion quickly faded. For a moment, that unity they had always had under Lucina had shown itself again, and he couldn’t bring himself to shatter it.

It took his eyes a moment to adjust the dimness of the temple’s interior. Firelight flickered against the walls and Inigo took a second to wonder who tended the candles. Perhaps they were magic.

Finally, he glimpsed the altar at the far end of the massive room and swallowed hard. “At least stay here,” he said to the others, swinging his pack from his shoulders.

His hands were trembling so much he couldn’t even get the Fire Emblem free. Owain had to help him fumble with the pack and release the shield, both of them seeming to pointedly ignore the gaping hole where Vert should have been. At least he could pull Falchion from its sheath by himself, though the point of the divine sword shook slightly.

The walk to the altar itself took an eternity, and still he stood in front of it, unable to speak, for a full minute. He felt like an ant before a wyvern—would Naga even show herself, or would he be left standing at the altar until the world finally finished crumbling around him?

“Hear me, Naga,” he finally managed, voice barely above a whisper as he began to recite the words. “I bear proof of our sacred covenant. In the name… of the exalted blood…” Gods, why wasn’t Lucina here to do this?

Inigo hadn’t realized he’d trailed off until another voice, melodic and female, broke the sudden silence. “Proof you do bear, young Exalt, but I am afraid it is not proof enough.”

Without warning, she was there—Lady Naga, in all her beauty. Inigo had seen plenty of beautiful women in his sixteen years, but none quite like this. He was aware he was staring, mouth agape, but he couldn’t seem to do anything about it.

The divine dragon chuckled lightly, then sobered. “How I wish I could test your heart and deem you worthy, but a task not finished is worse than a task never started.”

“It’s because we don’t have Vert, Inigo realized, heart sinking. His hope for leniency had been in vain. “Lady Naga, could you not have mercy? We had Vert, until Grima… and Lucina…” He tried to speak past the lump in his throat, but it was quickly growing impossible.

“I am aware of the final Gemstone’s loss. Unfortunately, a partial Awakening would do you no more good than none at all.”

“But you could do it?” Inigo prodded, feeling a flicker of hope rise in him once more.

“It would be possible,” Naga said. “But your sword would be no more able to defeat Grima than it is now.”
And the hope died. “Then… there is nothing we can do?”

“I did not say that.” For a moment, it seemed like the ghost a smile touched Naga’s lips. “A dragon that never rises has no need to be defeated.”

Inigo had never had much appreciation for riddles, and this one made him furrow his brow. “The Fell Dragon awakened when I was just a child,” he pointed out. “I think it’s a little late to stop it now.”

“Correct. Now, it would be too late. Then, it would not be.”

“You’re giving me a headache,” Inigo complained, before clamping a hand over his mouth when he realized he had spoken out loud. He cleared his throat. “Pardon me, my lady. But how could we prevent something that’s already happened?”

“Simple. By returning to the past and stopping it.” Naga spoke plainly, as if her words didn’t defy all logic.

Inigo blinked. “How… what?”

“The four Gemstones have more power than you realize, young Exalt. With them, I could return you to the years before Grima’s return, to the days of your father. In the time before your birth, or your sister’s birth, you could alter the steps that led to his resurrection.”

Inigo wondered for a moment if he was still back in Ylisstol, dreaming in his bedroll. He had never heard of such a thing. Time passed from one day unto the next, as it had since time began. To swim against that flow, to jump back to suns that had long since set… It couldn’t be possible.

Yet he could sense no falsehood in Naga’s words. She would not have given him a vain hope to placate him, that much he knew. But to leave behind this world, even for a time…

“You realize I speak truth,” Naga continued when he didn’t speak. “But something holds you back.”

“What of Lucina?” he blurted.

There was no misreading the sorrow in the goddess’s expression. “Your sister walks this world no more.”

The finality of her words hit him like a physical blow. “So Grima has killed her.” His stomach twisted. “That’s why you keep calling me Exalt.”

“You wish also to forswear the title?” Naga inquired.

“I don’t… I don’t know.” It was a decision Inigo had hoped he would never have to make. “I really just don’t know. About anything.”

“I understand,” Naga said kindly. “It will take me three days to gather the power to send you back to your father’s day. You will have that long to decide.” Then, as suddenly as she had appeared, she vanished.

“Wait! Lady Naga!” Inigo called, but the words echoed around the room in vain. With a sigh, he glanced back to see his three friends staring at him curiously.

Ridiculous… he thought. Going back in time…
But did they have any other option?

~~~

“I venture to make the guess this is not what an Awakened Super Inigo looks like.”

Given the fact that Inigo couldn’t seem to make it more than two strides without having to swipe at his eyes, he didn’t have to wonder where Owain got that impression. He might as well have **Failure** stamped across his forehead. Not trusting his voice, he merely shook his head and thought, **Some Exalt you’re making.**

“Oh, Inigo,” Cynthia said with sympathy, while Severa only stood motionless, arms crossed.

“Gerome was right,” Inigo finally said, though it pained him to admit it. “No Vert, no Awakening.”

Silence dragged out. “So,” Severa said flatly. “This is the end of the line, then.”

Though he wished he had a better hope to give them than what he had, Inigo told them, “Not exactly.”

All their faces lit up, though Severa’s was the hardest to notice. “What gallant, daring plan has Lady Naga proposed to you?” Owain asked.

Inigo shook his head. “It’s a long story. I’m not sure I can tell it twice. Let’s find the others.”

~~~

Yarne, Nah, and Noire had already returned to the foot of Mount Prism and began setting up camp when Inigo’s group returned. Those that had gone to the villages were not yet back, and Inigo wasted no time in sending Cynthia ahead to retrieve them. A few inquiring glances were shot his way, but no one seemed willing to be the first to speak up.

Inigo felt a wave of emotion that he couldn’t decide was apprehension or relief as the unmistakable silhouette of Minerva appeared on the horizon, followed shortly by Cynthia’s pegasus. The latter bore a skinny mage in addition to her rider, while the former carried Kjelle and Brady as well as Gerome.

Kjelle wasted no time getting to the point as she clumsily scrambled from Minerva’s shoulders, even if she looked a little green from the flight. “Well? Was there an Awakening or not?”

Inigo shook his head.

“It was not possible without Vert, was it?” Laurent asked, giving Cynthia’s pegasus an absent pat as he adjusted his robes. “As I theorized.”

Gerome grunted something that sounded remarkably like “Told you so.” Inigo, valiantly, chose to take the high road and ignore him.
“So?” Brady asked. “What’n the heck are we supposed to do now?”

“Yes, tell us what divine wisdom Naga has given you to save our world from certain demise!” Owain said, discreetly trying to take a taste of Noire’s cooking.

“K-knock it off,” the archer started, before she reached into her pocket. Like a switch being flipped, her expression shifted. “BLOOD AND THUNDER, OWAIN! Get your hands out of my dinner before I put them in it!”

“That’s disgusting, Noire,” Nah chided.

“Heh,” Owain said, stepping back. “What’s with all the women threatening to take my hands off today?”

“It is likely because your obnoxious persona does not well lend itself to receiving flattery from the fairer sex,” Laurent sniffed.

“Not like you have any better luck,” Owain shot back.

“Yes, but those among our company do not habitually threaten to maim me,” Laurent said.

“Much,” Gerome muttered under his breath as he passed.

“I heard that,” Laurent said with a quirk of his brow.

“Enough,” Inigo said, but his voice was so soft no one seemed to hear him. “Enough,” he tried again. “I bear news from Naga herself.” As one, all eyes turned on him. “She has… unfortunately confirmed… that Lucina was indeed slain by Grima. We can no longer base our plans on the hope she may return.”

Surprisingly enough for being a man of silence himself, it was Gerome who broke the sudden quiet that fell over the camp. “Some of us were not under that illusion in the first place.” For the tiniest of moments, Inigo could swear he heard something like sorrow in his voice, but the wyvern rider’s masked face was expressionless as ever as he quickly dismissed the idea.

“I’m aware of that,” Inigo said. “I’m also aware that some of you were correct in the assumption that an Awakening could not performed without Vert. However, since we are in possession of the other four Gemstones, Naga has given us another option.”

“What is…?” Kjelle prodded.

Inigo let out a sigh, unsure how the others would take the news when he could scarcely believe it himself. “Naga has offered to give us the chance to prevent Grima’s resurrection in the first place, by sending us back in time to before it happened. There was a chain of events that, unbroken, led to his return. From what I can guess, it started around half a decade or so before the majority of us were—or will be—born, back when the Risen first started appearing in the land. If we go back, we may be able to break that chain and keep the Fell Dragon from rising in the first place.”

Had he put that anywhere near understandable? From the dead silence that rang through the camp, Inigo wasn’t sure.

“The world of the past…” Laurent said. “It’s difficult to accept immediately, but it is deeply fascinating…”

“D-deeply fascinating?” Noire said incredulously, back to her usual shy persona. “Laurent, aren’t
“Are you scared, Noire?” the mage asked.

“W-well… I’m… um…”

“Well of course we’re scared about that!” Yarne interjected. “First off, if we go the past or whatever, aren’t I going to go extinct?”

“I don’t know about you personally, Yarne, but the Taguel will surely be gone from this era,” Kjelle said. Yarne let out an unhappy screech.

“Oh, Kjelle, don’t scare him,” Cynthia chided. “Going to the past sounds awesome! We’d be heroes!” Her excitement was cut off by a soft scoff from Gerome, and she turned her attention to him. “What?”

“Stupid,” he said flatly.

“Huh?” the pegasus rider asked.

“After we go back to the past, do you think we can return to the future?” Gerome pointed out. “This plan doesn’t seem like it would go well. Gambling on that chance is too dangerous.”

“But…” Cynthia said, her face falling.

“I…” Brady said, his cheeks slightly pink. “I agree with ya, Gerome. If all of us go, what happens t’ the folks left in this world? We should think this through carefully.”

“I don’t need to think about it,” Gerome insisted. “I’m staying here. If we fight and lose in this world, that is our fate. Altering history is something that should not be done. Nor should this ridiculous idea be considered, Inigo.”

“That is my decision to make, not yours,” Inigo said. “However, if any of you wish to stay, I will not force you.”

“You speak as if your mind is made up,” Gerome said.

“It is not. However, with Lucina gone, to me this seems the most logical choice.”

“I did not realize you could make decisions based on logic and rationality.”

“Um… can I say something?” Nah put in, forcing Inigo to swallow his barbed retort.

“Nah, you aren’t coming either?” Cynthia cried.

“I’m not saying I’m not coming!” exclaimed the manakete. “Just that I’d like more time to think it through. Not everyone’s a ditz like you.”

“I gave it plenty of thought!” Cynthia said.

“If you gave it plenty of thought, you wouldn’t be treating it like a vacation,” Nah pointed out.

“Can we not turn this into a fight?” Kjelle groaned.

“I’m not fighting,” Nah said. “Cynthia’s just trying to pick one.”
“What did you say?” Cynthia demanded, stepping toward Nah.

“Stop it, both of you!” Inigo said, voice cracking. “We cannot afford to be torn apart right now!” he insisted, even knowing it was exactly what had been happening since the moment Lucina fell. “I understand it is not a decision to be made lightly. Lady Naga stated it will take three days before the ritual is possible. We have until then to make up our minds.”

“...Only three days?” Cynthia asked.

Inigo gave a grim nod. “Think it over.”
Chapter Summary

The children discuss the merits of their options. Alternatively and more accurately, the children pick fights about who’s right.

“You were… surprisingly quiet earlier.”

Severa dropped, unceremoniously, on the log beside Owain. He shot her a surprised glance over his bowl of stew, then said, “Even great heroes of legend need time to ponder over grand, life-changing, potentially history-altering decisions.”

“Does that mean you’re thinking of going?” she asked, but before he could answer, Cynthia’s stomping footsteps interrupted.

“Ugh!” she cried, dropping to the ground in a heap of gangly limbs, her dinner nearly splashing out of its container. “Use your head a little, Nah!”

“It seems your fury knows no bounds, Cynthia,” Owain said, catching a glimpse of Inigo headed their way as well.

“If you stay that mad, you’re going to get wrinkles,” Severa said airily.

“Me, I like it better when you smile,” Inigo interjected with a smirk. Judging by the return of his usual flirtatiousness, Owain decided, he was either coping with this mess better than he thought, or he wasn’t coping with it at all.

“Don’t you tease me too!” Cynthia said, pointing her spoon at Inigo. “It’s not like I’m really thinking of it as a vacation. And I do know maybe it’s not the best thing to do. But don’t we have to do it in order to save the world?”

Owain nodded. “I think you’re right,” he said, then announced, “So I’ve decided to go.” He shot a glance at the others. “Inigo, you feel the same, don’t you?”

His cousin gave the slightest of grimaces. “Yeah,” he finally admitted. “If there’s even a little hope, I’ll take a chance on our best option. Quite frankly, that’s what I’ve always done.”

“Well,” Severa said. “I think it’s better than being left over here, so if I had to pick, I’d rather go.”

“Right?” Cynthia said, enthusiasm returning to her voice. “And maybe if we could pull off a real victory, we could become true heroes! Besides, if we go to the past… maybe we could see them again.” At their blank expressions, she finished quietly, “Our parents.”

Three soft ‘oh’s came from Severa, Inigo, and Owain at once. “She’s right,” Inigo said, a renewed light shining in his eyes. “If we go to the past, they’re still there. Our parents are still alive back then.”

What Owain wouldn’t give for another hug from his mother… another spar with his father… to see them, touch them, talk to them again, even just once… “Yeah. I want to see them if I can.”
“As if I care,” Severa said. “I don’t need to them again.”

Inigo raised a brow. “No way. You’re kidding with us.”

“Excuse me?”

Interrupting them, Owain got to his feet. “All right! Let’s try to convince them one more time! More than saving the world, we could see our parents again! We’ll never get a chance like this again!”

“Yeah,” Inigo said, though his enthusiasm wasn’t quite back up to par yet. “Yeah, let’s try talking to them again.”

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“Wait!” Kjelle called. “Gerome, Brady!”

Gerome gave a slight incline of his head over his shoulder, the only indication that he had heard her. “Kjelle.”

“What’s up?” Brady asked, turning back toward the knight.

“About what you just said. You two are staying here, right?”

“Naturally,” Gerome said.

Brady nodded. “Yeah. What about it?”

“Me too. I think I want to stay.”

“For real?” Brady asked.

“Yes. I can’t think of going to the past as anything but running away. Besides, after I’ve watched over the militia through all of their training, I’m not going to just abandon them in the middle of everything.”

Finally turning the rest of the way around, Gerome said, “Indeed. With Lucina gone, our situation from now on will only become more grave. Training the remaining soldiers would be a wise decision.”

“I’m not strong like all o’you,” Brady admitted, “so it makes me rest easier knowing you’ll stay.”

Kjelle let out a sigh of relief. “Thanks, both of you.”

“I plan to help too, at the clinic in the village. So I feel you. Ya just can’t leave all the folks who’re in yer care.”

“If they’d just use their heads they’d understand,” Kjelle said. “Staying in this time to fight is the right thing to do.”
“That talk we just had… it was horrible…” Yarne murmured. “I thought I’d go extinct…”

“M-my stomach… kinda hurts,” Noire admitted.

Yarne glanced at her with concern. “Hey, Noire, are you okay?”

“Yes,” the archer said. “Thank you, Yarne. I’m sure it’ll clear up in a moment.”

“In any event, Nah’s request for more time to think has helped us tremendously,” Laurent said.

“I knew everyone be feeling lost, so I went ahead and said it,” said Nah.

“As one would expect of you,” Laurent said. “Just as you say, I wished to have a bit more time to reassess our options before giving an answer. Yarne and Noire, how about you?”

“Oh, I… uh… just… wanted time to think, too?” the Taguel stuttered out. “Actually, the truth is… I’m not sure if I want to go over to where there are more people, or if I should stay where I have a better chance of making it through… and, um, you know I’m scared…”

“Yarne,” Noire said softly.

“Eek! Sorry! I’m so pathetic…”

“I feel the same way,” Noire admitted.

“Huh?”

“I’m scared too. I’m scared of going to the past, and of staying here. If everyone agreed on something, I’d follow along, but… I shouldn’t think like that.”

“That’s not true,” Nah told her. “I feel like that sometimes too.”

“But no matter how lost we may be, the decision has been postponed,” Laurent pointed out. “Judging from the state of affairs during our last meeting, it is apparent that it will not be unanimous. We must give careful thought to what we will do.”

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The camp had split, very neatly, into three. Inigo, Owain, Severa, and Cynthia were determined to go—Gerome, Brady, and Kjelle were equally determined to not go. With Laurent, Noire, Nah, and Yarne undecided, Owain had thought their best chance was to win over their opposition in hopes the last four would fall in line with the decision as well.

It was not going as well as he had hoped.

“Why can’t you get it through your heads?” Severa demanded. “Haven’t I said that we should definitely go?”
“We’re definitely not going,” Kjelle said with equal tenacity.

“Hey, guys, quit gettin’ so fired up about it,” Brady put in. “Can’t you just leave it? Inigo, you said you’d respect our opinions, but all I see is ya tryin’ to change ‘em. You’re going. We’re not. Ain’t that good enough?”

“No, we can’t do that!” Kjelle said. “For the people of this world, every one of us ought to stay!”

“What?” Brady asked. “When did we decide that?”

Gerome made a ‘hmph’ sound, while Owain inserted himself into the conversation again. “I get that you guys can’t just leave the people in this world behind. But if we go back in time and change the past, we’ll change this to a peaceful future and save them all!”

“That’s only if all goes well,” Brady pointed out. “What happens to ‘em if we fail? In a world without Lucina, without us, they’d just wind up dyin’...”

“Well, what are you planning to do in this world?” Severa asked. “Try to find Vert, that’s most certainly vanished? There won’t be any of the Exalted bloodline left to Awaken!”

“Hence we will not,” Gerome said. “We will pass our days protecting the people in the villages, as we have been.”

“Which will resolve what, exactly?” Inigo asked. “It is what we have been doing for years, and all we have managed to do is lose ground and lose lives. How much longer do you think you can last?”

“Besides, if we go over, we might be able to meet our parents!” Cynthia pointed out eagerly.

“Mere foolishness,” Gerome scoffed. “The dead do not return. Even if we meet the same beings in another world, those people are not our true parents.”

“That’s...” Severa said. “I guess that’s true, but...”

“Oh, I get it,” Kjelle said with a roll of her eyes. “In the end, the bunch of you want to go play at being a family with your parents’ imposter.”

“You’re wrong,” Severa said, leaping to her feet. “That’s not what we’re planning to—”

“How am I wrong?” Kjelle demanded, mirroring her. “Aren’t you just children pining after Mom and Dad?”

“I dare you to say that again!”

“Pointless,” Gerome interjected. “If you’re just going to fight, then do as you please.” With a swish of his cape, he moved to leave.

“Gerome!” Brady called after him.

“This talk has been a waste of time,” the wyvern rider stated.

“So you’re running away,” Inigo said.

“Running away?” Gerome asked, turning back. “You’re the ones running away.”

“What did you say?” Inigo said lowly.
“You’d abandon this world, the people, your allies, and go to your false parents’ side. You are the same as soldiers who flee from a hopeless battle. I had thought that you could be unusually soft… but I did not think you would sink this low. Maybe it is best you and your little band go, Inigo. I’d feel better with you gone.”

Shocked silence echoed through the camp. “Do you really think that?” Owain asked, unable to keep the edge of hurt out of his tone. Sure, he and the wyvern rider had never been the closest of friends, but still…

“Hmph,” was Gerome’s only response, turning to leave again.

Inigo, however, was at his side in a flash, gripping his arm. “I have a problem with that.”

“So what will you do?” Gerome challenged. “Bully me into submission? Will you strike me?”

“If that’s what it would take to open your eyes, I would.”

“Then do as you please. You are the Exalt, are you not? After all, if you return to the past then this future will never happen, and your actions have no consequence. Isn’t that right?”

Owain watched his cousin snap and was too far away to stop it. A sound of pure frustration ripped from Inigo’s throat as he put his hands to Gerome’s shoulders and pushed. Either the Exalt hadn’t shoved as hard as it looked or the wyvern rider had been prepared for the onslaught, for he stumbled back barely half a step before regaining his balance.

Frozen in shock for a moment, it took Owain a moment to find his voice. “Hey! Knock it off, Inigo!”

“You both need to calm down!” Brady put in, stepping toward the quarreling pair.

“What’s the matter?” Gerome asked, dusting a gloved hand over his shoulders as if to rid them of the imprint of Inigo. “Aren’t you going to hit me properly? Or are you too afraid of losing a friend?”

“What friend?” Inigo cried. “Since when have you ever been my friend? When have you ever done anything other than barely tolerate me?”

A chant, the voice sharp and clear, sounded through the clearing. A gust of wind followed, forcing Gerome and Inigo to part several strides or fall to their knees. “What are you doing?” Laurent asked, striding into the group with his spellbook still open and in hand.

“Laurent…” Inigo started, glancing down.

“Do you not see that you must cool your heads?” the mage continued. “What would Lucina think of the two of you squabbling like children?”

“Do not bring her into this,” Gerome spat.

“It seems I have no choice. If neither of you will listen to reason, I am not above employing shame.”

“Laurent!” Noire cried, slowing from her run as she neared the rest of the group. “Hitting your ally with magic…!”

“It is not a problem, Noire,” Laurent said coolly, snapping his spellbook closed. “I weakened its
power considerably. If I had not done it, they likely would have continued to fight forever.”

Yarne and Nah appeared, hot on the archer’s heels. “Hey, why are you fighting?” the Taguel asked. “Quit it, you guys…”

“You should apologize right away!” said the manakete.

“Sheesh,” Kjelle said. “None of you know what’s going on, so stay out of this and shut up!”

“T-that’s no way to talk to us…” Noire whimpered.

“Kjelle,” Laurent said with a quirk of his brow. “Please revise what you have just said.”

Kjelle shrugged. “If Severa and the rest apologize for earlier, I’m fine with doing that.”

Laurent turned to a stone-faced Severa. “Is that so. You were both involved in the argument, weren’t you? In that case! Everyone here, please apologize to each other. Then it is fair for everyone.”

Quiet breathing and the rustle of cloth were the only sounds that answered him.

The mage sighed. “What’s the matter? Does no one intend to apologize?” He shook his head. “More than this world’s existence, more than your allies’ intentions, do you value your trivial stances so?” Still no answer was given him. “I understand. Then this is as far as we go.”

Cynthia made a soft sound of question.

“I said that this is as far as our fellowship goes,” Laurent said flatly. “Whether we go to the past, or stay here, I would never fight alongside people like you. From now on, those of like minds may do as they please!”

“Um, hey, Laurent… isn’t that a bit much?” Yarne asked. Noire let out a sob and he glanced at her. “Noire?”

“It’s… awful!” she cried. “If we scatter apart under this, what’s going to become of us? Aren’t we here because we’ve always worked together until now? But… we’d break apart over this?”

“There’s no helping it,” Nah said. “I don’t want to admit it, but it turns out that this is as deep as our ties run.”

No one wanted to protest the truth of her words. “Be that as it may,” Inigo said heavily, “if we are going to go our separate ways, I think there is something we should do first.”

“And that would be?” Gerome asked.

“We all… we all swore our fealty to Lucina, as our Exalt and as our friend. We have time to return to Ylisstol to honor her properly before those of us who are planning to go must go.”

“I agree,” Owain said.

“We have no body to bury,” Gerome pointed out.

“We’ll make do,” Brady said. “Inigo’s right. It’d be good for all o’ us.”

“…Very well,” Gerome relented. “Minerva needs to hunt before we depart. We shall return later.”
And, with a final swish of his cape, this time he did leave.
Chapter Summary

Gerome reflects on the past.

Chapter Notes

Featuring an embellished version of one of my all-time favorite S supports... and oh look, more angst!

Minerva’s hunts had once been nigh sacred. Though they fought and killed on the daily, the wyvern’s kills had a gore factor that was not possessed by the disintegrating Risen, and as such the rest of the Shepard’s children found her eating generally distasteful. It was perfectly fine to Gerome that they left him in peace when his partner needed to feed, offering an often much-needed excuse to be bereft of human company for a short time.

Except the one time, Gerome thought, he simultaneously wished he could forget and live in forever. He slid from Minerva’s shoulders, giving her the hand signal that she was free to hunt. With a twitch of her tail she leapt into the dying sunlight.

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It had been nearly half a year ago now, nearing the end of spring. Ylisstol still stood relatively intact, though the Risen had been growing bolder, poking at the city’s borders, testing them. A particularly devastating attack on the eastern edge of the city had led to a war council that Gerome had, he thought, rather neatly dodged. He’d given Lucina some excuse about being a lone wolf, not much of one for plans of speeches, about using the right tool for the right job. She had sounded almost disappointed, but had let him be with a quiet, “Farewell, Gerome. I shall look for you on the battlefield.”

“You needn’t look far,” he’d said. “I will stand beside you, as always.”

She hadn’t known what he’d meant by that.

The council ended up decreeing that no one was to leave the city alone, a fact which did not personally affect Gerome until two days later, when Minerva told him in no uncertain terms she needed to hunt, immediately. He was not one to argue with a hungry wyvern.

He had nearly escaped unnoticed, Minerva strapped and ready when Lucina found him. “Gerome, you know as well as I no one is to leave the city alone.”

“I am not alone,” he pointed out, gesturing to Minerva.
Surprisingly enough, she let out a light chuckle. “You follow the letter of the law, but not the spirit of it. I didn’t think you had it in you.”

“War often brings out the unexpected in people.”

“All the same, I would feel better if you had accompaniment.”

“Do you think Minerva and I are incapable of defending ourselves?” Gerome asked.

“I suggest no such thing,” Lucina answered, producing a small handkerchief from her pocket and beginning to tie her hair back. “Still, there is something to be said for maintaining appearances.”

“Lucina, what are you doing?”

“Accompanying you,” she replied.

“Under no circumstances—”

She cut him off with a raise of her brow. “You and Minerva can defend yourselves. I can defend myself. I see no liability here, despite your inevitable protests.”

Maddening, Gerome thought, managing to suppress a sigh. “Very well, then.” In a smooth movement, he mounted Minerva, bending down to offer Lucina a hand. She settled behind him and he tried to ignore how tightly she gripped his waist.

They flew in silence, just the steady flap of Minerva’s wings breaking the cool air. There was no need to break the quiet, though. They had spent over a decade as friends, from the tender ages of seven and eight, leaving their comfort in each other’s presence so absolute there was no need for idle chatter. Not that either of them were one for idle chatter with anyone in the first place.

So Gerome let the silence wash over him, watching the ground blur beneath them. For just a moment, the world was at peace. There was no Fell Dragon to defeat, no Risen to fight. Just him, his wyvern, his Exalt, and the open sky.

Lucina’s chin brushed his shoulder, but Gerome’s steely gaze forward did not waver. She had implicitly trusted him with her safety and her life—no matter how many times the position fell to him, he took it with the same utmost solemnity. He had to stay aware.

“How far out do you go?” she asked, the words nearly snatched away by the wind.

“As far as Minerva likes,” he said, clapping the wyvern’s neck. “This is her time, not mine.”

Right on cue, Minerva dropped, her wings narrowing as she lost altitude. Lucina let out a sound that was half scream, half laugh, and all surprise. Gerome, much more used to wyvern-riding, had felt the shift of sinew that preceded such a move and would have followed it perfectly had the woman behind him not redoubled her hold on him. As it was, his balance only faltered for a moment before he recentered himself.

“Sorry,” Lucina said as Minerva touched down.

“It’s perfectly all right. I believe she forgot it was not just me up here. Usually she is more reserved when we have passengers.”

Minerva gave an indignant screech, telling him in no uncertain terms she had not forgotten about Lucina, which only succeeded in puzzling Gerome. Then what was that all about? he wondered,
but kept the thought to himself, instead focusing on scanning their surroundings. The wyvern had landed on a small plateau, overlooking a valley. The drop-off behind them was too steep for Risen to climb, at least not with anything resembling speed or stealth, leaving Gerome comfortable to turn his back on it.

Eyeing them expectantly as they dismounted, Minerva shifted her weight until Gerome signaled her free. With a sharp beat of her wings she was in the air again, soaring toward the valley.

“And you will just… wait for her?”

“Indeed,” he replied.

“Then, perhaps it was a good thing I decided to join you.”

“Indeed,” he repeated, and for the barest moment he was tempted to actually smile. His lips even twitched before he wrangled them back into submission with a frown.

“Are you quite all right?” Lucina asked, her tone turning concerned. “You seem… not yourself.”

“I am fine,” he said, giving a little sigh as he settled himself, cross-legged, onto the ground. “There is something, however, I wish to speak to you about.”

“What is it?” she asked, mirroring his motion to sit next to him.

For a moment, he was caught off guard by how terribly romantic this moment could have been, in another life that he would never be destined to lead. War left no time for courtship; attachment only meant the pain was worse when the loss inevitably came.

Gerome had told himself this a thousand times, and it never diminished how he felt about a certain Princess who refused to take up the title of Exalt. Being here, alone, in the rapidly diminishing dusk was not helping matters much.

However, he forcibly turned his thoughts in another direction with a grimace. “I… regret refusing your invitation to the war council. I am sorry.”

Lucina shifted a little, her knee bumping his for a moment. “You owe me no apologies, Gerome. I understand your thinking. ‘The right tool for the right job.’ We must all strive to perform our roles as best we can.”

“I know I said that, but I was mistaken.”

She blinked. “…You were?”

Surprising himself with how softly he spoke, he said, “I want to help you in any way I can, Lucina.”

And that might just mean doing something that scared him more than Grima.

“I… thank you, Gerome.”

Ignoring the fact it seemed all the moisture had vacated his mouth and found its way to his hands, he pushed on. “I have admired you for many long years. I would gladly die for you. But when you asked me to help in an unfamiliar way, I chose the craven’s path. I hope you can forgive me.”

“Fine, you are forgiven!” Lucina said sharply. “Then can we now please stop with this absurd apology? You have been my most stalwart companion since childhood, Gerome. And if anyone
else named you craven, I would cut them down on the spot!”

**Most stalwart companion.** He couldn’t decide if that boded well for where this conversation seemed to be heading with all the grace of a careening pegasus. “Thank you, Lucina.”

“Lone wolf you may be,” she continued, “but there is no one I rely upon more in battle. Besides, what you’ve shown here is as inspiring as any speech or grand tact—”

“Lucina, enough!”

His outburst surprised both of them. “I beg your pardon?” she asked, her eyebrows practically disappearing into her hairline while he tried to figure out what in the world was compelling him to do this.

It was only when he started speaking again he figured that out. “I know what you plan next. We are in our world’s final days. Your being Awakened is our last hope, and for that you need the Gemstones. Which means… very soon, we shall either emerge victorious or die trying.” He sucked in a breath. “It also means that any moment we spend together may well be our last.”

“What are you saying, Gerome?” she murmured.

“I’m saying I…” He broke off, then with the utmost care, touched his thumb to her chin. For all his resistance, all these years, he was crumbling and fast. He cleared his throat, his voice rough when he finally continued. “I am no poet, Lucina, to woo you with honeyed words. I am a blunt measure of a man, so I know no other way to say this… I love you.”

He heard her breath hitch in the deafening silence that followed. “Oh, Gerome…”

“If truth be told, I’ve felt this way since I first laid my eyes on you, when we were but children. But only after all these years have I finally found the courage to tell you.” His thumb strayed half an inch closer to her mouth. “You know I will stand by you till the end of my days, Lucina, though I have no illusion you feel the same for me. I just wish…”

What did he wish? That they didn’t live in a world they could hardly take a breath without having to fight for their lives? That she was not a Princess or an Exalt he could never hope to attain, but merely Lucina?

That he had spoken up sooner?

Unfortunately, she seemed to take his pause for hesitancy. “If you’re going to ask if you might kiss me, I suggest you don’t.”

It hadn’t been Gerome’s plan, but the moment shattered nonetheless. He withdrew his hand from her face as if she had burned him, getting to his feet with as much speed and grace as he could manage with his perpetual burden of armor. “My apologies, Princess.” His back resolutely turned from Lucina, he willed Minerva to reappear, though he knew not nearly enough time had passed. “Perhaps I have been spending too much time with your brother, to be so overcome by such wanton desires of the heart.”

Gods, what had he just ruined with one touch and a few utterly devastating sentences?

“Let us pretend this conversation never occurred,” he muttered.

“Gerome, be silent!”
Lucina’s words packed the full brunt of Exalted authority, leaving him with no choice but to slam his lips shut.

“That… is not an order I thought I would ever have to give,” she continued, her voice softening. “Look at me.”

Once again, he had to comply. She stood just a few feet away from him, arms crossed and chin jutting up. With deliberate grace, she closed the remaining distance.

“Perhaps,” she murmured, lifting a hand to trace a finger over his mask. “Perhaps this has blinded you to the world as much as it blinds the world to you.” Unexpectedly, she let out a soft chuckle. “I have felt the same, Gerome, for so long. Did you never sense it?”

It took a long moment for her words to process. “You mean… we’ve both had this feeling? And since long ago?”

“I guess neither of us is regarded as one to display our emotions.” She took another step closer. “I only rebuked you just now because I know you. You are… so aware of who I am, of the rank I am forced to carry. You love me, yes, this I see. But you would have kissed me as the Exalt.”

She was right, Gerome was forced to admit, as startling as it was to hear the title she had forswned escape her. “Yes. I would have.”

Lucina shook her head, hand sliding to take a true grip on his mask. He stood stock-still, offering no protest, and let her remove it.

“Kiss me as a woman, Gerome,” she whispered, now mere inches from his bared face. “Nothing more and nothing less.”

He had.

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Now, he almost wished he hadn’t.

Had it been worth it? Had those few weeks with her before he had left to find Vert been worth the months of longing on said mission? Had their stolen moments been worth the secrecy? They had told no one of what transpired that night. No one knew the true depths of his grief.

Had it been worth letting her in when it just made it hurt all the worse to have her torn away?

That, Gerome knew now, was the real reason he had waited so long to reveal his love for her. It was not fear of rejection—it was fear of acceptance.

Love had made him weak. It had slipped through the cracks in his armor, grabbing hold of his heart and tearing it out the moment he let his guard down. He should have learned this when his father died. If not then, his mother. But he had not. He had loved Lucina, and she had died, and he lived on with the pain and the memories and the grief.

Maybe she had gotten the better end of the deal.

A ring hung on a chain rested against his chest, the weight familiar for all the months it had been
missing. Years ago, it had belonged to his paternal grandmother, once a grand duchess of Rosanne. More recently, it had graced the finger of Cherche, returned then to Gerome after the battle that had claimed his mother’s life.

Lucina had worn it last, keeping it on a chain of her own mother’s to disguise her true relationship to the man who had given it to her. No one had seen or known.

It had landed underneath the Fire Emblem when Grima took her life, and so its ownership returned once more to Gerome.

He had had many titles over the years. The heir to Rosanne, son of war heroes, squire to the knight commander, Minerva’s rider, orphan, secret prince consort to what remained of the halidom of Ylisse.

Of those titles, only ‘orphan’ rivaled the pain of ‘widower.’
Chapter Summary

Lucina's funeral has an unexpected party crasher.

Why?

It was the only thought Inigo could consciously hold in his head as Brady managed to choke his way through the ceremony. Why did the world have to come to this, why had this been thrust upon him, why did he have to lose everyone that mattered to him?

Why Lucina?

Hadn’t he suffered enough, to lose his father and mother before his age was even in the double digits? Must he have his sister stolen from him too?

You’ll see them all again if you go back to the past.

The thought warred with Gerome’s insistence that those people in their past weren’t really their parents, tangling every one of Inigo’s thoughts. Lucina wouldn’t even be alive yet at the point they went back to, according to Naga. From what he remembered of the tales of his parents’ whirlwind romance, they might not even have met. Would it be a second chance to see them again or merely another cruel torment to pile on him?

A particularly loud sniff from Brady drew Inigo’s attention back. The priest was bathed in the soft, multicolored light of what remained of the royal chapel, but the fact he couldn’t make it more than two sentences without a tear shattered the ethereal look somewhat.

“And so… we pay our last respects to a friend, a sister, an Exalt.” Brady wiped his eyes. “We love ya, Lucina. May Naga guide ya to a place better’n this one.”

In the silence that followed, Inigo held back a scoff but couldn’t bring himself to dwell on why.

“If anyone else wants t’ say something?” Brady offered as a long moment stretched out.

Before any of them could answer, the ground shook. A few shouts of dismay sounded from all of them, anxious glances cast about as the world below quaked.

Laurent was the first to speak when it stopped. “I wonder why that earthquake happened…”

Yarne let out a shuddering breath, his ears twitching every which way. “No… that was no ordinary earthquake.”

“Yarne?” Laurent asked in the wake of the Taguel’s ominous words.

“After the shaking settled down, the Risen cried out… so many of them… there are dozens, no, even more!”

“What did you say?” Severa demanded. “You mean, that earthquake was a bunch of Risen coming
to life?”

The screaming started outside, followed by the unmistakable crackle of flames. The ground shook again. “Outside, everyone, now!” Inigo bellowed, leaping to his feet and drawing his katana in a single motion. “We have people to protect out there!”

For the first time, no one questioned him.

When he stepped outside, he wished they had.

“Gods,” Kjelle murmured.

“By everything holy,” said Brady.

Owain let out something far less eloquent.

Inigo stood frozen in a ready pose, katana pointed at an enemy he would have had an equal chance defeating with an actual breadknife. “Grima. Grima’s here.”

Six red eyes, each perhaps the size of Cynthia’s pegasus, stared unblinkingly down at them. Two great wings spread out over the city, blotting out the watery sun. An uncountable number of teeth gleamed in the Fell Dragon’s mouth.

This was not the human-esque avatar that had slain Lucina with the barest lifting a finger. This was the true Grima.

“Well,” Yarne said after a terrible moment. “This is extinction, everybody.”

“Not on my watch,” Gerome said, and let out an impossibly sharp whistle. A not-so-distant cry from Minerva answered him. “Cynthia, where is your pegasus? We mount a distraction, now. Inigo, we’ll cover while you evacuate who you can.”

“She should follow Minerva!” Cynthia answered immediately.

Inigo didn’t argue, for once. “Noire, go with them. See if you can get some shots in. Everyone else, with me.”

“...The clinic!” Brady cried. “There are a lotta folk in there who can’t move!”

“Nah, can you help us evacuate?” Inigo asked, only to be met with the girl transforming into her dragon form.

“Don’t wait for us, Gerome!” Cynthia said as Minerva reached them. “Go! We’ll catch up!”

“None of you better die, you hear?” Brady shouted as the wyvern leapt into the air with a screech. Any response of Gerome’s was drowned out by an ear-shattering roar from Grima.

Shuffling footsteps that could only belong to an army of Risen began to draw closer. “Let’s move!” Owain yelled. “Dammit, Inigo, put your breadknife away! You might need Falchion!”

“I can’t kill him, what good will it do?” Inigo demanded as they ran for the clinic.

“Perhaps you can rouse his anger to burn against you!”

“Yeah, let’s make the dragon bigger than the entire city mad, that sounds like a fantastic plan!”
“Do you two ever shut up?” Severa put in.

“I shall only be silent when my last shuddering breath escapes my lips!” Owain shot back, then lunged sideways as a burning wall gave way, blocking off the street ahead. “Which might actually be very soon!”

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“Mankind… has fallen. The past cannot be undone!”

With an almighty crash, a single swipe of Grima’s tail wiped out an uncountable number of buildings. Minerva swerved to dodge the flying shrapnel, leaving Gerome clinging to her neck for dear life. At least, he thought grimly, it was not the part of the city his friends were headed for.

The thought pulled him up short. Why hadn’t it been? Grima had seen where they were going, and the wyvern rider didn’t really think a city-sized dragon bent on the destruction of humanity would really prolong things for the drama of it. He could have taken out Inigo, Owain, and the others with a modicum of effort, so why hadn’t he?

A spark of intelligence glinted in Grima’s gaze as he stayed focused on Minerva; below, Cynthia and Noire were completely ignored, even with the latter peppering the dragon’s hide with arrows.

It all felt very wrong.

Gerome dared take Minerva closer to the beast, and found himself surprisingly not dead. Grima reared back, head swinging back and forth but not drawing nearer, as if he was trying to bring the wyvern-pair into focus. Another roar seemed almost to carry frustration, and another tail swipe took out another few blocks of Ylisstol.

It clicked.

Grima had no avatar.

The hooded figure that had slain Lucina had vanished when she had—maybe dead, maybe injured, maybe just out of commission. Without the avatar, the creature they faced did not seem quite whole.

Maybe they stood a chance—or at least as much of a chance as they could against a god.

“Oh, Lucina… thank you.”

Gerome charged.

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“No,” Brady said. “No, no, no…”

Inigo’s group stared, eyes wide, at the ruin’s of Brady’s beloved clinic.
“How could… how could this happen?” the priest asked, lip trembling. “We were too late… everyone, I…” He cut himself off with a sob.

“It’s too soon to give up!” Owain said, clapping Brady on the shoulder. “Some of them might’ve survived! C’mon, we’ll work through the rubble!”

“You two go,” Laurent agreed. “The rest of us shall engage the Risen in the area.”

“Yes, sir!” Nah cried, and with a rush of power, changed to her dragon form. She surged toward the approaching army, laying down a cover of her fiery breath. Laurent followed, sending out a sizeable wind spell.

The Risen, which had been mulling about in fairly mindless destruction, turned toward them as one, and battle began in earnest.

Endless eternity passed by; sword, spell, and claw fought as an unbroken machine. At some point, Inigo let out a frustrated cry. “At this rate, we won’t be able to rescue anyone!”

“They just keep coming!” Yarne agreed, his voice slightly distorted in his Taguel form. “There’s no end to them!”

“Kjelle!” Severa shouted. “Behind you!”

The bulkier woman turned, sword already slashing as she brought down a Risen that had nearly taken her from behind. “Severa!” she returned.

The redhead was a fraction too slow, her guard up just a moment too late. She deflected the blow, but not enough—it caught her square in the chest, not piercing her armor but sending her staggering back several steps, her ribs cracking from the force of the blow. A moment later, the offending Risen exploded into dust, impaled on Kjelle’s sword.

Panting and visibly wincing, Severa managed. “Well? Bet a child… can’t move like that.”

“Severa…” Kjelle started. “Heh, guess not. I’m sorry. All that stuff I said earlier…” She broke off, taking down another Risen. “I take it back!”

“Thanks,” Severa said with a small laugh. “I’m sorry about earlier, too. So… that makes us even!”

“Yeah!” said the knight, then let out a groan. “They’re still coming?” Her brow furrowed at the familiar attack—too familiar. “Where have I seen…” A surprisingly shrill sound escaped her throat. “No way. You’re not…”

“Kjelle?” Inigo asked.

“No…” she said. “This can’t be… the Risen here, they’re my…”

It took a moment for her words to sink in. “You don’t mean,” Severa started. “They’re the soldiers you were training?”

Inigo winced, the pieces falling into place. “Looks like it. Well, this isn’t good.”

“You don’t say,” Severa drawled.

“How did you fall?” Kjelle demanded, still refusing to accept it. “You were so strong! You were incredible fighting together! Despite that… you still… How?”
Her only answer was a roar.

“Whoa!” Yarne cried from a small distance, voice going up an entire octave. “Why’re you coming over here?” Something cracked; the Taguel screamed and, in a blink, turned human again.

“Yarne!” Laurent and Inigo both cried, their words overlapping. The former shot out a spell, taking out the Risen before it could do their friend anymore harm.

“Ow ow ow!” Yarne said. “Huh… why did I revert…?” He gasped. “My beaststone is broken!”

“No…” Kjelle said. “You’re saying they went for your beaststone?”

“Kjelle!” Inigo said. “Did you ever teach them something like that?”

“I told them about the stone that the manakete and Taguel need for transformation… but I never thought it’d turn out this way!”

“This is bad!” Severa pointed out needlessly. “They’ve got Yarne surrounded!”

“Move!” Inigo bellowed, as if it would help. “Get out of the way, Risen!”

“Stop it!” Kjelle cried, trying in vain to control the army that had once been hers. “Just stop!”

It did no good. Yarne was too far away. He winced, but stood up straight. “Dammit… they’ve got me cornered…” He took a shuddering breath. “If you’re going to kill me, just kill me! I’m not going to beg for my life! By the pride of the last Taguel, I’d never grovel before the likes of you!”

“YARNE!” Kjelle screamed.

“Yarne, duck!” Nah cried, before a blast of her breath turned the Risen around him into dust. She shuddered, losing altitude but trying valiantly to stay aloft. Laurent shot another blast of magic, clearing a spot for her to land. She did so, reverting back to her human form with a soft gasp.

“Are you all right?” the mage asked as he and the rest managed to reach her.

Panting, the manakete managed, “I’m… fine. Just… overextended. More importantly, I’m worried about the people at the clinic.”

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“Found one!” Owain yelled. “She’s alive!”

“Really?” Brady gasped. Jogging over, he asked, “Is she all right?” Lowering his voice so only Owain could hear, he whispered, “Can we save her?”

A small girl, no more than ten, was half buried in rubble. “The staff man… came?” she whispered.

“Yeah,” Brady said with a reassuring smile. “Keep hanging in there.”

“All right, Brady, you tend her,” Owain said. “I’ll get her free.”

The girl gave a labored breath. “It’s the hero… of legend.”

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Owain blinked. “Huh? Me?”

“Yeah…” she said. “We always… hear tales about you…”

“Brady, what have you been telling them?” Owain demanded, starting to blush.

The priest chuckled. “The stories you make up are pretty popular with the kids.”

Owain sighed. “Guess it can’t be helped.” He turned back to the girl. “Yeah, that’s right! I’m the hero of legend, the great Owain Dark! And I’m gonna save you now, so rest easy!”

“Uh… huh… thanks…”

“Just hold on a little longer…” He got a grip on the beam that kept her pinned, giving a grunt of effort. “One… two… three!” The rubble clattered and creaked ominously, but the girl was free. “There, that’ll do it! Now, Brady, if you’ll do the honors…?”

“Just don’t get carried away,” Brady teased. “Now hold tight, and I’ll just—” He cut himself off with a gasp.

“What’s the matter, Brady—” Owain, too, quieted with a gasp. “No… did she just… did she really…”

“No… why isn’t she breathing? Wasn’t she just smiling and talking a moment ago? Hey… get better! Come back to us! Dammit… Dammit!”

“Some hero of legend,” Owain lamented, choking back a sob. “I couldn’t do anything! I couldn’t save anyone! Not one child, not anyone…”

He gave up on holding it in, and cried.

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“Are the two of you… all right?”

“Laurent…” Brady sniffed out, “I couldn’t… save her…”

“I’m sorry,” the mage said with an air of genuine sympathy. “It’s rude of me to interrupt, but Nah collapsed. Would you have a look at her?”

“No!” Brady exclaimed, then managed to scramble to his feet. “Understood. I’m on it.”

“I see,” Laurent said, his voice turning hoarse. “Good. Then I’ll fight… once more…” Without warning other than his slowing voice, the mage’s knees buckled.

“Laurent! Hey, hang in there!” As Brady quickly changed patients, Owain got to his feet, making his way over to Inigo.

His cousin’s face was as grimy and tear-streaked as his own, and with only a glance they made a silent pact not to mention the fact. “We had to retreat,” Inigo said hoarsely. “There were too many… all Kjelle’s old forces. She’s injured, so’s Severa. Nah’s overtaxed, Yarne’s lost his beaststone, and Laurent, evidently, used too much mana.” He let out a humorless laugh. “No idea
what’s happened to Gerome and the others. Might be dead.”

Lips thinning into a line, Owain looked out over the temporarily empty streets. Likely, they wouldn’t stay that way for long. “We couldn’t save anyone,” he offered up softly.

“Neither could we,” Inigo returned. With that, he spun on his heel and returned to the rest.

“I’m sorry, all of you…” Kjelle was whispering. “With my very own hands… I…”

“Kjelle, you couldn’t help it,” Nah reassured her. “After they became Risen, that’s all you can do.”

The silence as Brady worked was quickly broken by the sound of more Risen, and the priest cursed. “They’ve roused again? While we’re like this?”

Kjelle leaned her head back against the wall she sat at, looking as if it would expend all the strength she had left just to stand. “There are still so many of them. We’ve no hope… not like this.”

“It’ll be all right,” Owain said, a sudden lightness to his tone. “I’ll go.” He turned to the noise of the incoming army, eager to get away before his true actions sank in.

“Wait.”

No such luck.

“I’m going too,” Inigo said.

“You shouldn’t,” Owain replied, not looking over his shoulder.

“I shouldn’t what?” Inigo shot back. He lowered his voice. “You can’t possibly win by yourself. Do you mean to die, Owain?”

“I don’t mean to die,” Owain insisted. “But… if I can’t protect anyone anymore… then what the hell am I still doing here?” He took a shuddering breath. “I’d rather be dead.”

He finally looked over his shoulder to meet Inigo’s grim gaze. “I feel the same.”

“Inigo…” Owain said thickly.

They’d taken too long. “You guys… aren’t going to…?” Severa started, her voice filled with horror.

Once again, Owain did his best to inject some levity in his tone, a terrible counterpoint to his actual words. “Huh. Looks like we’re the only ones who can stand.” He pointed his sword toward the Risen. “By the covenant of blood, I’ll annihilate them all!”

Inigo, too, quietly attempted to lift their spirits. “If you’re worried about us, support us from back here. I do my best when I’ve got a girl behind me!” He shot Severa a wink, one she was too shocked to protest.

“You’re… you’re joking,” Kjelle breathed. “There are so many… you can’t…”

Owain shook his head. “Let’s go, Inigo.”

One step. Two.

“You and me, Owain,” Inigo said, matching his strides. “Just like always.”
“About to make legend.” Three steps, and four. He clapped his cousin on the shoulder.

“Please wait!” Kjelle cried after them. “Wait! You can’t! Don’t go!”

“Do you think they’d be proud?” Owain asked, trying to ignore her. “Our parents?”

Inigo didn’t have to speak—Owain knew exactly what he was thinking. Would Olivia be proud to see her son’s agile footwork only used to battle? Would Chrom be happy to see his beloved Ylisstol on fire, filled with dead and undead alike?

Did it matter when they would surely be dead within the hour?

Five steps, six, seven. Eight.

“STAND DOWN!”

Gerome’s booming voice turned the ninth step into a pause for Inigo and a downright stumble for Owain. They both glanced back, caught in the wind of Minerva’s landing.

“You go no further!” Gerome said, and neither of them bothered to argue he technically had no authority for such an order. His voice softened slightly. “There is no need to throw your lives away. The battle is over.”

“Over?” Inigo demanded. “What do you mean, over?”

“Ylisstol… has fallen. It’s time for us to stop fighting and flee this place.”

“Yer telling us to run away?” Brady asked. “But the people here!”

“There’s no one left alive!” Gerome shouted. “No one! We’re the only ones left!”

The streets echoed his words, and no one dared speak for a terrible moment. “Oh, dear Naga,” Inigo finally got out.

“We’ve lost,” Cynthia sobbed. “We couldn’t protect anything.”

“I’m sorry…” Kjelle sobbed. “All of you… I’m so sorry!”

“Save the apologies for later,” Gerome said flatly. “We need to withdraw, immediately.” He glanced around at the sad state of their group. “Cynthia, you and I will need to take those too injured to move. Who of you can walk?” A show of hands gave him his answer. With a surprising lack of begrudgement, he asked, “Inigo?”

No answer.

“Inigo, have you any plan?” Gerome repeated, his voice growing more clipped. “We managed to lead Grima a short distance from the city, but he may return any time now.”

Inigo finally nodded. “We head east,” he said. “Back to Mount Prism.”
Chapter Summary

The final decision is made.

Chapter Notes

Personally, I love Lucina's sibling supports, especially B/A, but I've always felt that all her siblings (barring perhaps Morgan) seem uncharacteristically immature in them. So, simply put, I just backdated them a few years and voila! They make sense!

Also, who wants to play 'Spot the Hamilton Reference?'

It took them until dawn to make it back to Mount Prism. Inigo let them rest.

Gerome and Cynthia had scouted ahead of them, for a while checking every village and town they passed, and always returning with nothing but shakes of their heads. Eventually, with their mounts exhausted, they gave up on looking for survivors. It wasn’t like they were finding any anyways.

Brady was working as quickly as he could to get their little group back into fighting shape, Owain helping with the non-magical side of things. Inigo, wearily, had trudged up the mountain to speak with Naga again, Gerome accompanying him as silent bodyguard. Minerva was too tired for another flight yet, but her rider was one of the few left still capable of wielding his weapon.

It didn’t matter in the end. The mountain was completely quiet, the only words ever exchanged between the two when Inigo exited the temple. “We have until dusk.”

Less than a day to decide. Less than a day left in their world.

Gerome nodded stiffly, and that was the end of the conversation.

Now, several hours later, Inigo sat against a tree with his knees tucked up to his chin, over a day without sleep yet nowhere near rest. The others were gathered not far away, the camp quiet as they rested or whispered quietly among themselves. For a moment he felt like a little boy again, slipping away into some neglected corner of the castle gardens to escape an unwanted bath or etiquette lesson.

Just like as a child, though, he was eventually discovered.

“Ah. Here you are.” Owain had dropped his theatrics, settling to the ground with the clumsiness of utter exhaustion. “Ah, gods, it feels good to sit down. No wonder you’re hiding out here.”

Inigo lifted one shoulder in a shrug.

“Hey, if I wanted to talk to a brick wall, I’d hit up Gerome. Work with me, cousin of mine.”
“What is it, Owain?” Inigo asked with a soft sigh.

The lighter-haired boy sobered. “I’ve spoken to almost everyone,” he said. “They’re all coming back with us. Back to the past.”

Inigo quirked an eyebrow, raising his head from his knees. “Really? Everyone?”

Nodding, Owain said, “Kjelle wants to protect everyone that died. Cynthia convinced Noire and Nah. Laurent and Yarne are in, and with the clinic destroyed Brady’s got nothing to keep him here. Severa was with us from the beginning so you know she’s coming.”

“And… you told them there might not be any coming back to the present?” Inigo ventured, unhappy with the tidbit Naga had dropped when he met with the goddess again.

Owain nodded. “It didn’t… go over very well, but they’ve decided the benefits outweigh the risks.” His lips thinned. “The only one I haven’t talked to yet is Gerome.”

“What about me?”

They both glanced up as Gerome’s dark form strode closer. “Oh, let’s just have a party out here, shall we?” Inigo drawled.

Gerome’s lips twitched, but he didn’t rise to the bait. “I only wished to give you this,” he said, handing over a small piece of black metal.

Inigo took it, turning it over in his hands, brow furrowing. “...A mask?”

“One of my spares. Owain’s Brand will be easy enough to disguise once you return to the past, but yours may prove rather more problematic.”

Unthinkingly, Inigo lifted a hand toward his right eye. The Mark of Naga might be a point of pride, proof of his heritage, but Gerome was right. Random Ylissean royalty coming out of the woodwork would raise far too many questions. “Thank you,” he said softly.

“If you were to ask me, an alias might be wise as well. The less of an impression you leave in the past, the less damage you might potentially do.”

Right again, Inigo was pained to admit. “Good point.” Could he do it? Float through the past as nothing more than a hero, practically myth? Flitting into and out of his parents’ lives whenever the timeline needed a little nudge?

Gerome shifted slightly, seeming slightly uncomfortable through his own mask. “I believe that… Lucina would be rather cross with me for how I’ve treated you the past few days, Inigo.” He nodded to the mask. “I hope this serves as an acceptable peace offering.”

Flabbergasted, it took Inigo a moment to compose himself, a moment Gerome took to full advantage as he spun on his heel and marched away. “Owain, I’ll be right back,” Inigo said, scrambling to his feet. “Gerome, wait!”

For a second, he was afraid the wyvern rider wouldn’t, but Gerome pulled up short. “If you wish for more heartfelt words of contrition, you will be waiting a while.”

Inigo shook his head. “No. I… I need to apologize as well.”

“Very well,” Gerome said with a nod. After a long pause, he asked, “Is that all?”
“No. Well… you’re not going, are you?” Inigo asked. When he got no response, he chuckled softly. “Guess I shouldn’t have to ask. You always hated the idea.”

“You’re going,” Gerome said flatly, no question in his words.

“It’s just that… Everyone says they’re going to the past. Even the ones who said they weren’t going, or that they needed more time. Everyone. The only one who’s staying behind is you. It doesn’t matter how strong you are, staying behind by yourself is ridiculous.” He held up a hand. “I’m not trying to convince you to come. I’m saying… I’ll stay too.”

Unexpectedly, Gerome scoffed. “How pointless.”

“Oh, don’t give me that,” Inigo muttered. “I’m trying to be magnanimous here.”

“I don’t need you to be magnanimous, and I don’t need your pity,” Gerome said flatly. “You’ve already decided to go.” He nodded toward the rest of the camp. “Moreover, if you have forgotten your duty, you are their Exalt. They need you.”

“They don’t!” Inigo cried. “They need Lucina and I’m not her!”

Gerome, of course, remained stoic in the wake of his outburst, leaving Inigo to scrub a hand over his face and let out shuddering sigh.

“Sorry… I’m sorry. I just think it’d be better this way. Then, at least, no one’s left alone.”

Gerome crossed his arms over his chest and let out an exasperated sigh. “Inigo.”

“What?”

“If everyone were going to the past, you’d go?”

“Um, yes…” Inigo said, blinking. “But… since you’re…”

“Then go make your preparations,” Gerome said. “I’m not going to be responsible for keeping you here.”

Inigo sucked in a breath. “You mean… you’re…?”

“As you said, it would be cruel for anyone to be left alone.” He nodded toward where Minerva slept at the fringes of camp. “There are so few wyverns left now. I shall return with you not to play hero or change the fate that has already been written, but simply to set Minerva free among her own kind. Expect nothing more from me.”

With that, he turned and strode away once more.

“All… all right then,” Inigo managed to murmur into empty air.

They were really doing this.

~~~

Maybe it was the memories of being a little boy in the castle that brought it on; maybe it was the
realization that they were really leaving this world behind, for good. Whatever it was, as the sun crept closer to the horizon and Inigo and the others finished up their final preparations, he found himself lost in the past.

He’d been ten, Lucina thirteen. Olivia was too-freshly buried, just a few short months behind her husband, and war was creeping ever-closer to their doorsteps. More and more Shepherds were falling in the fight; more and more of their children were left parentless, fending for themselves. Even then, Lucina refused to take up the title of Exalt, leaving her and Lissa princesses both, struggling to keep Ylisse afloat.

In hindsight, Inigo could see how much they’d shielded him from the worst of it. He’d been kept away from the politics and the bloodshed, a vain attempt to give him just a little more childhood. It hadn’t lasted long, but he appreciated the fact that they’d tried.

“...Inigo.”

Lucina was still the awkward growing stage—part gangly pre-teen, part burgeoning young woman, part athletic soldier. Honed arms were crossed over a mostly still flat chest, but it was the stern expression on her face the ten-year-old was worried about.

“Mmm?” Inigo asked.

“You know what I’m about to say, don’t you?”

“...Be sure to wash Falchion after I’m finished cutting this apple?”

“Don’t use Falchion to cut apples in the first place, you dolt!”

He couldn’t help but flinch at her tone. “S-sorry! I’m sorry!”

“You had best be more than just sorry!” she exclaimed. “Falchion is a national treasure of Ylisse, not to mention a final memento of Father! And you’re using it to cut fruit? You’ve shamed the weapon that built your very homeland!”

Inigo felt tears prickling in the back of his eyes and sniffed them back. “Well... you’ve seen for yourself how big the apple is. And there were no other knives around.” He turned baleful eyes up to her. “B-mesides, I’ve never really touched Falchion before. I was just curious.” A beat passed. “So, are you...? Yes, you’re angry.”

A bit of the tension dropped from Lucina’s posture. “You’ve never held Falchion before?” she asked softly.

“Well, no,” Inigo admitted. “I mean, Father always kept it by his side. And so do you, now...”

“Then we don’t know if you have the potential to wield it.”

Setting down the sword, the apple forgotten, Inigo leaned forward eagerly. “Wait, it takes a special person to use it?”

“I see there is much you do not know,” Lucina said with a sigh, and settled down beside him. “This blade was forged with Naga’s power and steeped in the exalt’s bloodline. Only a select few are able to wield it, even among the Ylissean royal house.”
“Huh,” Inigo said, staring at Falchion with newfound interest. “So you’re particular? Not surprised you picked Lucina as one of your special… er, people.”

“You may well be another, Inigo,” Lucina said softly. “I’m mortified we’ve come this far without ever putting it to the test.”

Newfound tales of the epic variety started floating around in his mind. “Can you imagine it? A powerful warrior with a mystical sword… it’s the stuff dreams are made of!”

“Mostly I’m ashamed I never stopped to consider it,” Lucina said. “If you are, in fact, among Falchion’s chosen, that is knowledge we need. There may come a time when it proves necessary for you to take it up.”

“Like… if you’re too busy?” Inigo asked, his face scrunching up.

“Like if I’m dead, Inigo.”

He paled.

“Having someone able to wield it even after I’m gone would be a considerable asset. We must use any means at our disposal to win this war.” She gestured to Falchion. “Now, let’s go put it to the test.”

Inigo shook his head vehemently. “Forget it,” he said past the lump in his throat. “There’s no way Falchion would ever choose someone like me.”

“You don’t know that until you try. You yourself just said you wished you were able to wield it. So let’s—”

“I said no!” Inigo said with all the petulant force a ten-year-old could possibly muster. “I’m not doing it!”

“Inigo—”

“Don’t make me!” Inigo said, scrambling to his feet as tears began coursing down his face. “Don’t make me practice for your death, Lucina!”

Lucina, on the other hand, only seemed to harden further. “Inigo, you’re being childish,” she chastised with all the authority of her three extra years.

“I don’t care!” he cried. “Are you planning on leaving me, too? First Father, then Mother, now you too?”

Awkwardly, she reached a hand toward him, seeming to realize her strictness was going nowhere. “Not by choice, Inigo,” she said. “Never by choice.”

He flinched away from her touch. “Do you think I’m stupid? Do you think I believe Mom and Dad died by choice? Is that supposed to make me feel better? If it means you dying, I don’t want anything to do with Falchion! And if you make me try, I’ll… I’ll just use it to chop up more apples, so there!” He threw the sword to the ground with a clatter, ignoring Lucina’s gasp of horror and fleeing the room.

He’d hidden himself away in the fashion only a child could, ignoring shouts of his name from his sister and servants alike until they faded away into silence. They probably assumed he’d show himself for supper, but he refused to give them the satisfaction, ignoring his parched throat and his
grumbling stomach.

In all honesty, he was surprised Lucina hadn’t thought to look for him in their parents’ old room. It had remained quietly locked up since Olivia’s death, but a few unapproved lessons from Uncle Gaius meant Inigo could slip in and out as often as he wanted.

He curled up in the center of the massive four-poster bed, drawing a pillow to his chest after he pulled the curtains nearly closed. He left them open a tiny crack, staring at the painting on the wall that was nearly as tall as he was.

It had been a personal favorite of his since he could remember, especially since it had been commissioned to commemorate his own birth. In it, Olivia sat resplendent in a royal blue gown that beautifully reflected the hair of the rest of her family. A faint blush graced her cheeks as she held Inigo’s infant self in her arms, a lock of her long pink hair caught between his chubby fingers. Chrom stood behind her in full military dress, Falchion on one hip and Lucina held tight to the other. Her tiny face was twisted up with laughter, her adoring eyes were turned to her father, and her dress—a miniature version of Olivia’s—was twisted and tangled around her legs from her childhood exuberance.

They were a family—a family torn apart by the horrors of war, leaving behind two orphaned children with the weight of an entire country on their fragile shoulders.


No one ever said life was fair, but why couldn’t it be, just once?

~~~

“Inigo?”

He startled awake, nearly bonking his head into Cynthia’s. The pegasus knight scrambled back with with a yelp, then let out a quiet laugh. “Sorry, sorry! I didn’t mean to scare you!”

“Well, normally I wouldn’t complain about a beautiful woman in such close proximity…” Inigo said, falling back on his usual charm with a smirk, “but perhaps a little more distance the next time you need to wake me?” He stretched his arms overhead, then continued, “You’re plenty welcome nearer once I’m roused. Then again, there are plenty of more pleasant ways to wake up that involve… closeness.”

Blushing heavily, Cynthia thwacked his arm. “Be serious, will you? It’s nearly dusk.”

Immediately, Inigo sobered. “Right. Is everyone ready?”

“We’re all waiting on you.”

He got to his feet, ignoring the fear that made his breath come short and his hands tingle. “Let’s go, then.”

The somber air discouraged small talk on a walk that didn’t last long anyway. With exquisite timing, the sun sank below the horizon as Naga’s temple came into view. The goddess was nowhere in sight, but Inigo hadn’t really expected her to be. Instead, the doorway into the temple
shimmered, showing a slightly distorted reflection of the hillside around them.

It was now or never.

“Well…” Inigo said. “I feel like I should have some inspiring speech here, but I’m coming up short.”

“Do you require my most verbose and soul-stirring services?” Owain asked eagerly.

“No,” Inigo said, managing to crack a smile.

“Dang it.”

“But if anyone wants to back out, now’s your last chance.” When no one did, his smile grew. “Then I hope to Naga I can say from now on, we stand as one.”

“Hear, hear!” Owain said, lifting his sword.

“Till the very end!” Cynthia cried.

The others were not so outspoken, but Inigo caught at least a nod from every one of them, even Gerome. He took a deep breath. “In that case…”

He was caught off guard by an ominous rumble. “N-not again!” Noire cried.

“Is Grima invading?” Laurent inquired, craning his neck.

“I don’t think so,” said Severa. “But there’s definitely Risen, again.”

“All right, all right, we’re fighting!” Kjelle said.

“No,” Inigo said. “There’s no need.”

“Huh?” Nah asked, hand already on her dragonstone.

“He’s right,” Gerome admitted. “It is time we leave this place, once and for all.”

Yarne sniffed. “I suppose, if there was ever a timeline that could stand to go extinct, it’s this one.”

Nodding, Brady said, “May the past be kinder t’ us than the present.”

“All of you, go,” Inigo said, drawing his katana as the army came into view. “I’ll serve as the rearguard.” Carefully, he slipped on his borrowed mask, then double-checked Falchion was still hidden away in the folds of his cloak. It was.

“Not alone, you won’t,” Owain said, striding toward him. “All right, Risen! Who’s first?”

Inigo just had time to mouth a thank you before the army was upon them.

By the time he had enough break to glance back, Yarne, Brady, and Laurent were already gone. Kjelle nodded to Severa, the two of them striding into the portal side-by-side. The clash of steel against steel forced him to focus on the battle once more, missing Noire, Nah, and Cynthia’s exits, along with the pegasus of the latter. Minerva let out a screech that cut off abruptly as she and her rider vanished from their reality.

“Just us, then,” Inigo said, impaling a Risen. “Naga said the portal would collapse behind us. The
Risen won’t be able to follow.”

“Ready when you are,” Owain said with a dodge and a parry.

“Go. I’ll cover.” Inigo shot his cousin a glance when he hesitated. “Go, Owain. I’ll see you on the other side.”

Owain took a deep breath, grinning, and lifted one hand in salute. “Till we meet again!”

With a shout, he turned and ran.

Inigo’s light steps continued to take him backwards toward the portal, growing quicker with every stride as the Risen moved in. Lucina… I’m sorry. I’m sorry I failed you and I failed Ylisse. But this time… this time I’ll fix it.

“This is not how it ends!” he shouted, though there was not a living soul left to hear him. “Because I am Inigo, the last Exalt of Ylisse, and I challenge my fate!”

He took two more steps, spun, and charged into the past.

End of Part 1
Chapter Summary

Inigo arrives in the past and sees a few familiar faces.

}* Everybody waiting for the fall of man, everybody praying for the end of times, everybody hoping they could be the one, I was born to run, I was born for this...*

Inigo fell.

The drop from portal to ground was an unexpected one, and he only had years of training and conditioning to thank for the fact he didn’t completely bumble the landing and severely injure himself. He still staggered several steps, making his appearance in the past about as far from epic as he could’ve gotten.

For a moment, he wasn’t even sure he had made it to the past—all he could hear was the sound of steel on steel and the moans of Risen, just like the future. It was a high-pitched scream that tipped him off, one he didn’t recognize—since, sadly, he knew every scream of all his companions. Instinct took him toward it, another man mirroring him but at a distance too far to intercept.

Inigo threw himself under the Risen’s axe, in front of a blonde girl who couldn’t be any older than himself. Katana met axe with an echoing clang, not quite drowning out the girl’s gasp. Instinct took over, but tired and battle-weary muscles screamed in protest. “A little help?” he shouted to the other man, once a glint of silver revealed he was armed as well.

“...Right!” the man said apologetically, then roared as he charged.

The Risen let up on Inigo at the sound, allowing him enough leverage to free himself. He struck the same instant the other man did and the Risen exploded into dust.

Struggling to control his breathing, Inigo sheathed his katana and did a quick once-over of his possessions. Mask, check. Pack, check. Falchion, check.

Meanwhile, he could practically feel the other man’s gaze on him. “Quite an entrance,” he commented.

“Well, surely there’s no better way to make an impression on a beautiful woman than falling from the sky to save her life?” Inigo said with a smirk, gaze falling to the girl.

His jaw nearly dropped when he got a good look at her. *Nope, nope, ABORT! That’s Aunt Lissa! Do not flirt with Aunt Lissa! Repeat, do NOT flirt with Owain’s mom!*

“Careful,” the man said, but with a hint of amusement in his tone. “That’s my sister.”

*Oh gods.* That meant… Inigo swallowed hard, allowing himself to look back at the man.
Exalt—no, Prince Chrom stood with the same regality that Inigo always remembered, but no wrinkles lined his face, no limp marred his gait, and no fatherly fondness could be found in his gaze. Instead, Chrom stared at Inigo like he was a puzzle, sharp eyes narrowed and one hand still resting on the hilt of his past version of Falchion.

Evidently, Chrom didn’t have the patience to wait for Inigo’s tumultuous thoughts to catch up with the situation. “What’s your name?” he asked flatly.

*Good question,* Inigo thought to himself, but was saved from having to answer by a timely interjection of, “Milord! Milady! Are you hurt?”

A horse, burdened by two riders, burst into the clearing. “Frederick! Robin!” Lissa cried.

Inigo blinked. *Robin.* He’d almost forgotten about the mysterious lady tactician, for all he’d heard that she and his father had been nigh-inseparable in the wars before his birth. By the time he’d come along, she’d been a mysterious figure, always caught up in planning some battle or another, rarely in the palace at all except to sequester herself away in the library or the war room. She’d never married nor had children, which meant a young Inigo had little reason to interact with her, especially when she’d disappeared in the same battle that claimed Chrom’s life and, presumably, her own as well.

“Are such horrific creatures commonplace in these lands?” she asked now, her voice surprisingly smooth as she jumped from Frederick’s horse.

“They’re not from Ylisse, I promise you that,” Chrom said. From the growls of more incoming Risen, Inigo wasn’t sure that statement would stay true very long. Carefully, he slipped back into the woods, prepared to serve as an advance guard as the undead approached once more.

*Where were the others?* he thought. They had all come through first, so shouldn’t they be there already?

“No one is injured, then?” he heard Frederick say. “Thank the gods.”

“Thank the masked man who saved me!” Lissa piped up. “If it wasn’t for him, I’d be… hey, where did he go?”

Inigo shut his eyes and gave a pained breath. He’d been in the past for a whole five minutes and it was already taking its mental toll on him.

Time to dwell on that later.

As if echoing his thoughts, Frederick said, “We can worry about him later, *after* we put these… things… to the blade. Eyes open, now. We know nothing about this enemy.”

“Right,” Chrom said, and for a moment Inigo envied their naivety about what awaited them.

No time to worry about that now, though, as a Risen spotted him and charged.

Compared to the world he’d left behind, this was child’s play. Inigo wanted to laugh at these Risen, mere shadows of the enemies he’d fight in the future. They were disorganized, their weapons pitted and rusted, armor tattered in their best cases and nonexistent in their worst. Grima’s undead had always been scavengers, but it seemed they hadn’t yet had time to scavenge anything good.

To the side, he heard the others sounding like they were fighting for their lives—which he
supposed they were, no matter how casual this fight seemed to Inigo. A shout echoed through the woods, making him actually stop and laugh.

“All right, you ash-faced freaks! Which one of ya wants to try my lance on for size first? I know just the spot for it: shoved right up your —”

Inigo couldn’t help but snort. Gods, was that Sully? Kjelle’s mother had been one of the last remaining Shepherds to fall, meaning he remembered her clearer than most of the rest of his parents’ generation.

A genuine smile was cracking his face now, to his shock. This was like some sort of demented family reunion! His katana caught a Risen’s axe, the rotted wood snapping just beneath the axehead and leaving his foe practically unarmed. Inigo smirked, waiting for Owain to surely finish with the killing blow—

But Owain wasn’t there, leaving Inigo to get soundly smacked in the ribs by the Risen’s remaining axehandle. He coughed, struggling to regain his breath as the creature moved in.

An arrow sprouted from its neck. The Risen exploded to the sound of cultured, triumphant laughter.

“What did I say?” cried a man dressed in… some sort of ridiculous finery that had no place on the battlefield. “Truly, am I not the archest of archers?”

“Pipe down, Ruffles, we ain’t done here yet!” yelled Sully.

The phrase tickled at Inigo’s memory, but he couldn’t quite manage to place it. Surely this proud, prissy archer was a Shepherd, but likely he’d died too early on for Inigo to remember his name.

While he pondered, the battle around him slowed to a stop. Chrom finished off the last Risen, the creature growling in defiance until its last breath.

A few glances were exchanged around the group, Inigo belatedly realizing he’d ended up in the thick of them despite his attempts to remain on the sidelines. “It seems all the creatures are vanquished,” Frederick said, swinging down from his horse to eye Inigo. “This young man took care of the others.”

“Well… the least I could do, I guess,” Inigo said. “Since I was… ya know… passing through…” He cleared his throat and rubbed at the back of his neck, suddenly understanding why Gerome was so fond of his mask. At least this company couldn’t see his burning cheeks.

“Um,” Lissa interjected. “I never got to thank you. For before. So… thank you. You were very brave.”

“You saved my sister’s life,” Chrom said, his voice firm. “My name is Chrom. Might I ask yours?”

Inigo bit his lip to keep from stammering, searching his head for a moment and latching onto the first thing that popped out. “Laslow,” he said. “Call me Laslow.”

“Very well then, Laslow. Tell me, where did you come from to learn such a way with a sword?”

*I came from the finest dancer who ever lived and a warrior king who took a god to slay. “I’m not here to speak of times past,”* Inigo said, his voice growing firmer. *What would Lucina say? “It is the times ahead you should beware. Tonight was just the opening act of a play that ends in tragedy.” Owain would be proud.*
The less of an impression you leave in the past, the less damage you might potentially do. Gerome’s words echoed in his mind, followed by a firm Time to go. Inigo sucked in a breath, ignored the urge to pull his father aside and bawl out everything, and turned to leave.

“Tragedy what now?” Lissa’s alarmed voice called after him. “Hey, wait!”

He didn’t wait; he couldn’t.

After all, he would see them again before long.

But now what?

~~~

“Owain?”

Silence.

“Yarne? Laurent? Gerome? Severa?”

The sun was up; Inigo had been wandering the woods for hours, and not a single of his calls had been answered. Though the thought nearly made him physically sick, he finally had to admit it to himself.

They weren’t there.

But if so, where were they? He’d seen most of them go through the portal personally, and he’d known they’d all gone. Surely they couldn’t have all been killed before he got there? He would have found bodies. Besides, the force he’d met last night would have been barely enough to take out a single one of his friends, no less their whole company.

Settling down on a fallen log, Inigo pulled a hard loaf of bread from his pack and started to gnaw at it. If he couldn’t find his friends, then what? He had to find them, but even more importantly he had a future to avert.

Chewing uneasily, he turned his knowledge of history over in his head. After the Risen appeared, then what? Judging by his father’s stunned reaction to their battle, he had never fought Risen before, which meant Inigo could roughly place himself in the timeline. Grima’s resurrection was still over a decade hence—an extremely sobering thought about just what he’d gotten himself into—but there was plenty left to go wrong in the meantime. There was the war with Valm looming, a few years down the line perhaps, but with a loss of life unparalleled until the Fell Dragon’s awakening. Closer to home and a more pressing worry was Emmeryn’s assassination, something Inigo was determined to prevent. Maybe she could find a way to end the Valmese War before it started, giving them more hands to fight against Grima. Not that Chrom had made a bad Exalt by any stretch of the imagination, but he was a warrior at heart, compared to his older sister’s peacemaking ways.

Not that those peacemaking ways had been able to prevent the much nearer Ylisse-Plegia war. Inigo scratched his chin. That had to be almost at his doorstep, didn’t it? Should he got to Ylisstol and warn Emmeryn about Mad King Gangrel? No, surely she already knew of his warmongering, and Inigo’s own appearance would raise too many questions. Besides, it might jeopardize the
upcoming alliance between Ylisse and Regna Ferox, an alliance of the utmost importance for both Valm and Grima.

Maybe that was his better option. He had heard plenty about Khan Basilio. The Feroxi wouldn’t turn down a warrior, no matter how mysterious his origins or partial his backstory. Inigo could nudge the alliance along, encourage the khan to fall in with Ylisse. The Feroxi border had to be a long hike from here, but if Ylisse and Plegia hadn’t formally declared war yet, he still had some time to spare before the assassination.

A good plan, Inigo decided, stuffing the last of his snack into his mouth. Although, he thought to himself, he could probably wait to enact it until he’d gotten a little sleep.
I Was Born For This (Part 2) Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Friends reunite with the usual shenanigans.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He should have gone to Ylisstol.

It was a mantra Inigo had been repeating to himself since before he’d slipped past the Longfort. In the week it had taken him to get to Ferox, he’d seemingly run afoul of every Risen between the start of the Northroad and the Ylissean border, as if the creatures could smell every brethren of theirs he’d ever killed. They had, blessedly, stopped coming once he crossed into Ferox, but he’d traded their heckling for unfathomable, unredeemable cold, and one encounter with a very cross mother bear.

He was starting to understand the great beast’s fury, he thought to himself as he trudged through the gates of the Feroxi capital. Anyone, man or beast, would be irritable after being trapped out in all this cold.

As soon as he could, he decided, he was going to find an inn and draw himself the hottest bath he could find, cost be damned. He’d make ends meet somehow.

Alas, he would have no such luck.

Tired and half-frozen, his sense were dulled, and it took him a minute to recognize the uncomfortable prickling on the back of his neck. Wrong, wrong, something was wrong. The streets around him were too quiet, while the beginnings of a hubbub were drifting through the frosty air. Risen? Inigo wondered, but doubted the creatures would be bold enough to attack such a large city yet, not to mention it didn’t seem they’d spread this far north.

On alert once more, he pulled the hood of his cloak back and ignored the fact it felt like his ears were about to fall off. He followed the crowd, slipping down side streets and dodging into alleyways.

Not Risen, he decided. The crowd was moving toward the commotion, for one, and the murmuring around was more like curious spectators than hapless victims. No, whatever threat he was about to face was positively human.

As an unmistakable shout sounded about the babbling, Inigo almost wished it was Risen.

“You try my patience, nefarious fiend! See how my sword hand twitches, hungering for the justice you deny it! Take back your words of grievous insult, or I cannot guarantee your continued existence!”

Oh for Naga’s sake.

Inigo pushed further into the crowd, finally reaching the interior fringes. Despite his irritation, a
weight lifted off his shoulders as he gazed out over the small town square.

“What’s wrong with you, man?” a broad Feroxi man asked, arms crossed over his chest as he glared at the sword tip pointing at him.

“Man? I am no mere man! I am Odin Dark, vanquisher of nightmares, destroyer of evil, right hand of all that is… er, right!”

You’re an idiot is what you are, Inigo thought with a sigh. Still, a smile started to tug on his lips. He wasn’t alone in this anymore. The others were still alive… somewhere. After a week of no contact with his comrades whatsoever, doubt had grabbed hold of his heart.

Still, his relief didn’t quite outweigh the fact that his cousin’s big mouth had gotten him into trouble, again. Inigo crossed his arms, watching the theatrical back and forth. As far as he was concerned, Owain could get himself out of this one.

That determination lasted a whole minute, until three men pushed their way through the crowd. All three were at least a head taller than either Inigo or Owain, two of them bearing ludicrously oversized axes and the last a short, stubby broadsword.

Inigo wouldn’t want to face any single one of them in a fight—he’d defeated Risen less imposing—but all three of them were headed for Owain’s stupidly exposed back.

He’d taken two steps and pulled his katana a third of the way out of its sheath when the biggest of the men, the one with the sword, clapped Owain so hard on the shoulder his cousin’s knees actually seemed to buckle a little bit. A grin came to the giant’s face, revealing several of his yellowed teeth were missing. “Have you got a problem with my friend over there?”

“Indeed I do!” Owain exclaimed. “For against all odds and any better judgement, he has insulted my name and my sacred honor!” He turned to face his new opponent, then took a step back and visibly paled.

“You’re not from around here, are you?”

“I… uh… am not, it is true!” Owain said. “I hail from a distant realm, a strange land where nothing is more prized than… our… uh… lives?”

The man smirked. “Well then, let me welcome you to Regna Ferox. The Feroxi way.”

Owain straightened his shoulders, doing his best not to look intimidated. “Pray tell me, then, as a humble stranger, what is ‘the Feroxi way’?”

“Shut your gob and fight,” the man said, swinging his sword in a massive arc that Owain barely dodged. “You want honor, boy? Earn it in battle, if you can live that long.”

“That seems… marginally extreme,” Owain said, bringing his own sword up to parry the next blow. “But if you wish to face the awesome might of Odin Dark, then I accept!”

Inigo watched, eyes narrowed and katana still partly drawn. The massive man truly was an incredible fighter, for how quickly Owain was losing ground. His typical flash was fading quickly, footsteps growing heavy and unsure as the man kept forcing him on the defensive. The other man looked like he had barely broken a sweat, and if weren’t for the very sharp, very deadly weapons they wielded Inigo could’ve have thought this was nothing more than a practice spar.
First blood was drawn, and the illusion shattered. Owain winced, red beginning to drip down his arm. “Fool!” he cried, eyes lighting up. “You have only ignited the rage in my aching blood! I do not wish to kill such a formidable foe as yourself, but nay! I may not be able to stay to my sword hand’s battle lust!”

As suddenly as the fight had started, the tables turned, Owain pushing back with all that overbearing force Inigo knew him for.

“Sacreeeed… STOOOONES!”

Inigo managed to let out a laugh at that. He trusted this ridiculous boy with his life, and suddenly the concept of changing fate seemed a whole lot more achievable. He even let himself relax, prepared to be more entertained by this fight than anything else when caught sight of one of the axe-bearing men.

Heading straight for his cousin.

There was no time to think, no time to ponder a grand entrance or a snarky greeting. He wasn’t sure what bee this guy had up his bonnet, but he was not going to take it out on Owain.

Clang!

“I don’t know about here,” Inigo said, blocking the shocked axeman’s strike with practiced ease, “but where I’m from we fight our duels fairly.”

The main fight paused, both Owain and his opponent looking shocked at Inigo’s sudden appearance. The former’s face quickly lit up. “Hah! You thought to even your odds by skewing the fight with your bumbling henchmen? An insult! A mockery! Luckily for our dashing hero, fate herself has smiled upon him, pulling his dearest cousin across space and time itself to aid him!”

“Yeah, and you’re gonna owe me for it big time,” Inigo grumbled. “Also, I’m your only cousin.”

“This does not negate my affection for you!”

Owain’s opponent grunted, thrusting hard. “Great, neither of you know how to shut up.”

“Yeah, and your brutes don’t know how to fight, your point was?” Inigo shot back, thinking himself incredibly witty. In fact, there was a lovely little blonde girl on the sidelines who seemed to agree, judging by the stars in her eyes. He smirked and shot her a wink.

It was then, and only then, he remembered the second axeman. Slightly too late.

Inigo saw stars and the world went black.

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He woke on top of the thinnest mattress he’d ever had the displeasure of sleeping on and with a splitting headache. Letting out a pitiful groan, he rubbed at his eyes but refused to open them yet.

“Well, it seems your idiocy has not yet robbed you from the land of the living.”

“Shut up, Owain,” Inigo grumbled, rolling over and flinging his arm over his face.
“Odin.”

“Whatever.”

“It is not a matter of ‘whatever!’ I spent many deep, dark nights pondering over an alias that could truly encompass my very soul—”

“And then decided ‘nah, I’ll just change a couple letters.’” Inigo cracked open one eye just enough to see Owain glaring at him through his fingers. “Oh, stop that. You don’t look epic, you just look like you’re about to sneeze.”

Owain’s hand dropped, as did his jaw. “Our time apart has rendered you rude, Inigo—er, is it Inigo?”

“Oh, I’m still plenty charming, I’m just choosing not to be right now.” Knowing any attempt at sleep now would be completely in vain, Inigo sat up slowly, wincing all the way. “And no, it’s Laslow. Where are we?” The room they were in was tiny, having barely enough room for the beds the two of them occupied. A single small window gave them some light, but it was too far above their heads to see out of.

“Laslow? I pick Odin Dark, Hero of Legend and Vanquisher of Nightmares, and you go with Laslow?”

“You forgot ‘right hand of all that’s right,’” Inigo said. “And I was on the spot, okay? I forgot how intimidating my father could be when he wanted to.”

“You’ve met Uncle Chrom?” Owain asked eagerly, leaning forward.

“And saved your mother, to boot. You’re welcome for that, by the way, and you’re welcome for saving your skinny butt just now, too. Also, you still haven’t answered my question. Where are we?”

Owain flushed a little bit, then muttered something that sounded remarkably like “In jail.”

“Sorry, did you just say in jail? Did you get us arrested?”

“Well…”

“For what?” Inigo cried. His coveted hot bath was slipping further out of reach with every passing moment, along with his freedom. His checked his belt, finding with panic both his katana and Falchion were gone. “Where are my swords?”

“No weapons in prison, great genius,” interrupted another voice, and Inigo spun around, cursing his migraine every inch. He noticed, dully, that the fourth wall of the room—cell, he supposed—was open but for metal bars. Yup, definitely in jail. “You’re both in here for the night for disturbin’ the peace.”

“Peace? I didn’t know Ferox knew the meaning of the word,” Inigo drawled. They did, evidently, know beautiful women, though. The newly appeared guard had to have at least five years on him, but that was plenty fine by him. Her red hair reminded him of Severa’s, but she bore a smile he’d never see grace his friend’s features.

He was smitten instantly.

“Oh, newcomers,” the guard said. “You’re always adorable.”
Adorable? Inigo found his cheeks heating up. “Well, as much as I’d love to share some of that adorableness with you, it appears I’m… barred.” Girls love puns. It’s a proven fact.

“Indeed it does,” she said with a wink and a click of her teeth as she resumed her patrol.

“Wait! Fair lady, will you not at least share your name?”

She smirked, chuckled, and continued on.

“Stop snickering, Owain, I can hear you,” Inigo sighed.

“That’s the point, Laslow,” Owain said, shoulders still shaking and still infuriatingly in character.

“Shut up.”

And he did, for a while. Inigo made another pass at the guard every time she went by and was shot down every time. Eventually, his cousin grew bored.

“Shadow DAAAAAAGON!”

In the absence of any weapons, Owain got to his feet and began an increasingly ridiculous series of hand-to-hand movements. Inigo, sitting cross-legged on his pallet, shot him a glare.

“Radiant DAAAAAAAAAWN!”

“Quite the feisty one you got there, eh?” the guard asked.

“I don’t know him,” Inigo sighed.

“What!” Owain cried, breaking off his routine. “My own cousin, my veritable brother, denying the blood-bond that has brought us through so much? Truly, what has this world come to?”

Once more, the guard moved on with a laugh and Inigo shot Owain a glare. “What is your problem? And for Naga’s sake, what are you even doing?”

“I’m busy,” Owain sniffed, resuming his erratic patterns. “Which I would have thought was obvious.”

“Not too busy to interrupt me, evidently,” Inigo said. “So sorry, should I come back when you’re done playing? Oh wait, I can’t, because we’re stuck in a cell together since you got us arrested.”

“Hey!” Owain said, gesturing to himself. “This is serious!”

“Seriously… childish? Seriously… embarrassing?”

“Seriously none of your business! Now leave me alone. …Seriously.”


“Okay, so figuratively leave me alone.”

Inigo sighed.

“Well, at least you’re making progress. You’re actually sighing now instead of just saying the word. I’m not really sure that’s enough to impress your lady friend out there, but baby steps, right?”
“You’re guaranteed to lose one hundred percent of the jousts you never attend, my friend. Perhaps you should name your next move ‘Eternal Chastity.’”

“Sure, why not?” Owain asked. “I’ve got the perfect teacher for it right in front of me!”

“Why, you little—”

“What, you want to go?” Owain put his arms out to the side. “Come on, have at me! My Shinon Strike will wipe the floor with you!”

“Few things in life would give me greater satisfaction than to knock you on your rear, especially after the mess you’ve gotten us into today.” Inigo said. “But one of us has to be the adult here, and it’s obviously not going to be you.” With that, he crossed his arms over his chest, leaned back against the wall, and closed his eyes.

“Yeah, that’s right,” Owain said. “Ignore me. Just pretend I’m not here.”

Inigo did.

After a moment, though, Owain let out a deep sigh, shuffling over to his own bed and plopping down. It was a full fifteen seconds—Inigo counted—before he spoke again. “I thought you’d died.”

Inigo cracked an eye open again.

“I thought… well, I assumed we’d all just pop out together, right? Trade some high-fives, yell some battle cries, tell fate to take its best shot. Then one minute I’m saying goodbye to you and the next I’m in the middle of the Feroxi wilderness with not another soul in sight.”

“Well, at least you were alone,” Inigo drawled. “I literally fell into a battle. I’d have taken ‘not another soul in sight.’” Who knew a week on his own could make Owain even more melodramatic than he already was?

“Well, next time we travel back to the past to change history I’ll be sure to trade you,” Owain said, voice surprisingly sharp. “Can we be serious for two seconds?”

“I don’t know, can you?”

“Stop it, Inigo!” Owain cried, his voice rough. “Stop treating me like a child, for once in your life! I thought you were dead! I thought everyone was dead! I almost died!” With a rough jerk, he lifted his shirt up, revealing on his side one of my most horrific scars Inigo had ever seen on someone still alive. It was healing, sure, but still pink and shiny in the way only a recent wound was. Inigo sucked in a breath.

“Dear gods Owain, what happened?”

Owain shook his head and dropped his shirt back down. “Bandits,” he said thickly. “I didn’t think… I forgot… in this time, without Risen to worry about… people still fight people.” He took a shuddering breath. “They didn’t even bother to take anything. Guess I didn’t have anything good enough for them. They just left me for dead, and by all rights it should have worked. Someone found me, I guess, I really don’t remember any of it. But yeah, someone found me and brought me to the capitol. It took almost a month to get back on my feet.”

“A month?” Inigo whispered with alarm. “How long have you been here?”
“Um… I think about two? A lot of it’s really fuzzy with the whole ‘almost dying’ thing. I couldn’t
tell you for sure, but two months sounds about right.”

“I’ve only been here a week.”

“Lucky.”

“Yeah,” Inigo murmured. “Maybe in this case I am.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm pretty sure my roommate thought I was legitimately dying the first time I read
Inigo and Owain's C support. Couldn't resist throwing it in there.
Chapter Summary

Owain lets on what he's been up to in the past.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Owain’s talk seemed to have sobered Inigo, and they sat in silence as the room gradually grew darker. Just before the sun set fully, though, there was a clink of keys in a lock and their door swung open, Inigo’s favorite guard in the entrance. “You’re both free to go,” she told them.

“We’re… what?” Inigo asked. “I thought we were in here for the night?”

“A little birdy put a good word in,” the guard said, and shot him a wink. Owain thought his cousin might just keel over right then and there. The guard stepped aside and gestured them through.

“Owain,” Inigo said seriously once she was out of earshot. “I am in love. Deeply, passionately in love.”

“Yes, yes, I’m sure,” Owain replied absently. More importantly, who had gotten them out? “Do you even know her name?”

“That’s not important! When a man is in love, the pesky details fall aside.”

“Pesky details like knowing her name, right. Good to know. For future reference.”

Before Inigo could come up with a snarky reply, a booming voice reached them. “Odin, m’boy! Hah! I told you we’d make a true Feroxi out of you yet! Basilio, I said, the boy needs work, but surely by the tournament he’d be able to take on Flavia’s goof of a champion. And look at you, starting a week early!”

Pushing his earlier melancholy aside, Owain slipped back into character. “Truly, ‘twas a fight for the ages, Khan Basilio! He fought dirty, attempting to catch me grievously unawares, but my battle sense was too fine-tuned for such underhanded trickery! Oh, and Laslow helped too.”

Inigo stared back and forth between Owain and the giant of a man who was moving to clap him on the shoulder. “Khan… Basilio?”

“In the living, stinking flesh!” Basilio said, then guffawed. “Laslow, did you say? Tell me, how was it? Did you slip up behind Gravis and make him beg for mercy, or was it a little more direct?”

“Laslow insulted his henchmen and then was promptly brained by one,” Owain informed Basilio primly. “It was not his finest moment.” At Inigo’s death-glare, he added, “But ne’er fear, for despite this slip, truly he is a hero of the ages as myself! As comrades, we have slain our thousands! While by blood we are but cousins, by the bonds of battle we are nothing short of brothers!”

“Yeah,” Inigo muttered. “Something like that.”
“Cousins?” Basilio asked. “There are more of you? Brilliant!” He nodded to Inigo. “Then accept my invitation, on behalf of my champion, to join us in our accommodations in the capitol.”

Inigo seemed to mull over that for a second, so Owain decided to accept on his behalf. “Truly, your hospitality will be known for ages to come!”

“I’d prefer to be known for my battle prowess, but I suppose that’ll do,” Basilio said, then produced Owain’s beloved broadsword, which he gleefully accepted. “I believe you’ll be needing this.” Next was Inigo’s katana, which he also handed over. “Nice sword, by the way.”

Inigo let up, preening and shooting Owain a smirk. “Thank you.”

“I mean this one,” Basilio said, chortling as he brought out Falchion.

Inigo’s face fell. Owain didn’t bother to stifle a giggle.

Weapons tucked away on their persons once more, the two followed as Basilio led them out into the bustling dusk of Ferox. “Owain—er, Odin,” Inigo whispered. “Am I missing something, or did he say you’re his champion?”

Owain gave an overly flourished bow that almost ended up with him face-first on the cobbled street. “As of two weeks ago, when I challenged the famed former champion Lon’qu for his title.”

“You beat your own—” Inigo clipped off the word father as Basilio glanced back at them. “Never mind. We can talk about this later.”

“My lips are sealed and the conversation is temporarily shelved,” Owain vowed.

And shelved it was, at least until they had a proper meal in their stomachs and they’d retreated up to the top floor of the inn Basilio had rented out in preparation for the upcoming tournament. Later on, the khan had said, more permanent accommodations would be arranged, but with a potential change of leadership incoming everything was still a bit up in the air.

Owain didn’t mind—his rented room now was ten times nicer than any living space he’d had in the future for a good long time. “My humble abode,” he said as he opened the door, Inigo on his heels.

His cousin didn’t waste time, jumping straight to the point the moment they had privacy. “Okay, so let me get this straight,” he said, leaning against the bed’s footboard and crossing one leg over the other. “You’ve been here for two months, give or take, and in that time you’ve been attacked, almost killed, miraculously saved, then decided to challenge your father for the title of the West Khan’s champion, won, and have since worked your way so far into Basilio’s good graces he bailed you out of prison, and me by extension?”

Owain put a hand to his chin, as if pondering, then said, “Mm, that about sums it up.”

“Okay, one more thing then. Why?” Inigo raised a brow. “And don’t say you got bored. Actually, no, let me start smaller than that, because knowing you if I give you that broad of a topic we’ll be here until next year. How’d you beat Lon’qu?”

“With a sword…?”

“No, really?” Inigo drawled.

“You sound surprised that I did,” Owain said, sniffing haughtily.
“Yeah, actually, I am. He was—is—a damn good swordsman.”

“So am I!” Owain said. After a moment, he admitted, “Well… to be fair, I did have some future knowledge of a specific weakness of his I may have… exploited.”

“What did you do, pay a woman to stand next to him for the day before you fought?”

“Now that you mention it, that wouldn’t have been a bad idea…” Owain said thoughtfully. “Might’ve been less painful.” He shrugged. “No, actually. There’s currently a small flaw, a hole if you will, in one of his techniques. I used to have it, too, till he trained it out of me, but at this point he hasn’t fixed it yet. Anyways, point is, I did win, and that gave me an in to Basilio.”

“An in we can use,” Inigo said, his voice starting to grow excited. “Maybe we can forge the Ylisse-Ferox alliance sooner with you pushing for it—he likes you for some strange reason, after all—”

“My thoughts exactly! And if the alliance starts sooner, maybe Plegia will think twice about launching an attack—”

—or assassinating Emmeryn—"

—and then we stand a real shot against Valm and maybe against Grima,” Owain finished with a grin that Inigo mirrored. “Huh, you’d think we practiced this or something.”

“You’d think…” Inigo murmured. “If only Basilio was as open to the alliance as Flavia was originally…” He trailed off. “Wait wait wait.”

“What?”

“Chrom fought as Flavia’s champion, didn’t he? Because she guaranteed his alliance if she became reigning khan?”

Owain furrowed his brow. “I think… maybe?”

“But he lost to Lon’qu, because… because why?” Inigo straightened up, starting to pace the room. “Why? I know there was a reason, they were on even footing as swordsmen, there was a reason he lost…”

“He was injured at the Longfort!” Owain exclaimed.

Inigo spun toward him and pointed. “Right!” After a beat, he cursed under his breath. “Has that happened yet? Might be good to go poke around there, it’d be nice to keep my father in one piece for a little longer.” He shrugged. “My point is, Flavia was already convinced that the alliance would be beneficial, except Basilio won so they had to wear him down for a while which postponed the entire thing. But…”

“But what?” Owain asked, practically bouncing.

Inigo smiled again, the look almost feral. “Owain. Throw the match.”

Owain straightened up, affronted. “Owain Dark does not throw matches!”

“I’m serious! Let Chrom win, let Flavia become reigning Khan, and the Ylisse-Ferox alliance is in the bag!”

“You impugn my honor!” Owain cried. “Whilst I see the wisdom in your plan, it comes at the cost of my dignity, a cost most unacceptable!”
“What dignity?” Inigo asked snidely.

“I shall pretend for your sake I didn't hear that. If Chrom wishes to beat me, he must do it fairly and handily!”

“You're being ridiculous,” Inigo said. “This is our future at stake!”

“And what if word got out that I lost on purpose? My swordsman’s honor could never be trusted again!”

Inigo let out an irritated huff. “All right then, fine. You know what? If you're going to be like this, I challenge you.”

Owain blinked. “You what now?”

“You and me, for the title of Basilio’s champion,” Inigo said. “Winner fights Chrom how they see fit. Loser goes to the Longfort and aids our Ylissean allies.”

Smirking, Owain said, “Oh, you are so on.”

There was just under a week left until the tournament, which meant they likely only had a few days before Chrom and company reached the Longfort. Owain was a little surprised Inigo had gained so much time on them, but he supposed his cousin hadn’t had to deal with a large company of Shepherds and their supplies nor the political bureaucracy that Chrom surely had.

Now, the tournament hall was mostly empty, but still filled with the hushed whispers of a few. Some khans’ champions lasted years, while others had a high turn-over rate, but either way there were always a few folk who were interested to see the matches. Flavia would almost certainly be there, watching Inigo and Owain to see who of her own people would fare best against them. He’d heard a rumor her current champion, the one who’d challenged him the day before, had been deposed.

For the moment, though, that mattered not. Owain stood in one corner of the arena, stretching and limbering up with a few practice strikes while Inigo did the same opposite him. Gods, it had been a while since they’d had the time to spar each other, and even if the stakes were significantly higher than usual he couldn’t deny that he was looking forward to it.

While their fighting styles differed, techniques varying wildly, all-in-all they were startlingly evenly matched. Inigo was faster—Owain had more brute strength to pull into play. Often, as children their matches had only been decided by circumstance and/or trickery.

“Very well!” boomed a voice. “The match is set! Victory will be decided by death or until one yields!”

Owain stepped toward the center, Inigo mirroring him. They weren’t stupid enough to kill each other, but along with circumstance and trickery, pride was going to play a very big part in who came out of this as the West Khan’s champion.

They stood, breath bated and swords raised.
“Begin!”

Blows and parries started in quick succession, both of them starting with quite a bit of flash and only a little substance. Owain thought to keep the true depths of his skill under wraps—let Odin Dark’s real talent remain a mystery—and Inigo seemed to have thought the same. A more accurate blow by broadsword was quickly blocked by katana, Inigo dancing just out of reach.

“Dastard,” Owain muttered.

“Exalt, actually,” Inigo shot back with a smirk. It faded as Owain took a hard strike, sending painful vibrations down both their arms.

“What, you wanna go?”

“I’m just amazed you know how to fight this quietly,” Inigo said, missing Owain’s shoulder by mere inches and almost too slow to block the return.

“But see, if I call out all my moves you’ll know what I’m—” he grunted, “—doing.”

Inigo said, “Really? Really, are you sure about that?”

“Can’t take the risk!”

They fought on, one of them momentarily gaining ground only to immediately lose it again. Sweat started to trickle down their necks, tiny wounds started to appear on both of them, and still neither had pulled much of an advantage.

“We should… do this… more often,” Inigo got out.

“Indeed! As… champion… I’ll need… to keep my skills sharp.” Owain was too slow to block and earned himself another nick.

“Getting cocky.”

“Confidence is a virtue.”

“Is it?”

Owain pulled back, readying himself for another mighty blow. He spun, connected, and was immediately thrown off balance by a shattering crack.

For a moment, they parted a few steps, both breathing hard. Inigo stared, with horror, at the broken-off hilt of his weapon. “You—you broke my katana!” he cried.

Owain let out a breathy laugh, glancing down at the blade laying on the ground. “How’s your breadknife now?” he taunted.

And immediately regretted it.

His moment of distraction had cost him—in that second of taking his eyes off Inigo, he’d missed his cousin drawing Falchion.

Too shocked to do anything but draw air into his lungs and stare at the divine sword now at his throat, all Owain could manage was, “Damn.” With that, he dropped his own sword and lifted both hands.
“Match!”

The title of Basilio’s champion had changed hands once more.

Chapter End Notes

I'm on break from college this week! Will hopefully be getting a lot of writing done. Also, I'm (hopefully) getting my own DS (so I don't have to borrow my roommate's to play Fire Emblem hah) and Fates (Conquest because I need more Owain and Inigo in my life yes)!
I Was Born For This (Part 2) Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

With the devastating loss of his beloved katana, Inigo reflects on how he started with it.

“Was that even legal?” Inigo asked. “What I did?”

“Everything’s legal in a Feroxi match, boy,” Basilio said. “Everything. Why, one time I—”

“I think I’d rather not know,” Inigo cut in. From the time he’d spent in the Khan’s company at dinner the night before, one thing he’d learned was that sentences that started with ‘one time I...’ never ended well.

Basilio shrugged. “If you insist. Point is, Laslow, I’d best see you fight like that against whoever Flavia picks for a new champion. And you’d best not bust up anymore swords, unless you want that taken out of your champion’s paycheck!”

Inigo’s face fell. “I loved that sword,” he muttered, gazing mournfully at the hilt. He’d slipped the broken blade back into its sheath, until he figured out what on earth he was going to do with it.

“Like a wife,” Owain whispered, elbowing him. Inigo shot him a glare. Raising his voice, his cousin continued, “I’m not going to have to talk you out of having a funeral for dear old Lilith, am I?”

“Lilith?” Basilio said, then guffawed. “What, you named the thing?”

“He did!” Owain crowed.

“Pot. Kettle,” Inigo snarked back, but his heart wasn’t in it. Truthfully, he was already wondering if his beloved sword was repairable or not.

Despite Owain’s teasing, he felt no shame over his attachment to the weapon. He’d had it since he was eleven, after all—his first real sword, when he’d started taking the art seriously instead of a duty to be learned by a proper prince. He had not been, as a child, enamored with swordsmanship as Lucina and Owain were, but the mandatory lessons he’d had since he was small meant he’d caught up quickly when he’d started in earnest.

A few weeks after the Falchion/apple incident, he shyly gone to his sister and asked to try the sword for real. Though surprised he’d turned his attitude around, she’d been proud of his resolve to shoulder his duty—and prouder still when he’d cleaved his test log cleanly in half.

Inigo was content to leave the divine sword to Lucina, but he hadn’t been able to deny the odd hunger wielding the too-heavy weapon had ignited in him. He’d spent the next few months learning from any Shepherd that would teach him, though their duties meant lessons were usually few and far between. He’d tried what felt like dozens of weapons, including Vaike’s axe—but ‘Teach’ hadn’t actually been a very good teacher.

Finally, it had been Lon’qu—back in Ylisstol on a leave of absence due to an injury—that had
showed him the wonders of the Chon’sinian katana. They weren’t a terribly common weapon on this side of the sea, but the young Inigo had immediately taken a shine to its lighter weight and killing edge. He’d soaked up every technique and fact about the blade like a sponge, until he’d found equal footing with most of the other Shepherd’s children. Lucina could still easily best him, her style a perfect mimic of their father’s; Gerome would never accept his challenge; and Kjelle fought like a wild animal, her sheer brute strength always winning in the end; but by the time he was thirteen, he’d manage to defeat the rest of his comrades at least once.

By then, war was well and truly upon them. Lissa had gone out into a battle when the army was short on healers and had never returned, leaving the entire country resting on Lucina’s shoulders. Gerome, now fifteen going on sixteen and with no family left but Minerva, had officially joined the army. Kjelle was planning on doing the same as soon as her own fifteenth passed, despite Sully’s protests, and Laurent was helping alongside his own mother in research capacity. Brady, only twelve, had been apprenticed into healership as their numbers dwindled. Everyone else was helping the war effort in some sort of relief capacity, from repairing weapons to keeping track of supplies. War was hell and it had no regard for age.

And Inigo, crown prince of Ylisse, sat on his rump and did nothing.

It wasn’t for lack of trying, but he and Owain had too many eyes being kept on them to get away with anything. The latter, half-mad with grief after losing both his parents in less than a year, had had a terrifying dabble into dark magic of the combat kind that ended up with Lucina expressly forbidding him to ever so much as touch a tome again. Inigo, quite frankly, had been too scared to even talk to him after for almost an entire week. After that, it was deemed too risky for any of the three remaining members of the Exalted bloodline to leave the castle.

And Inigo was losing his mind.

Out in the castle grounds, he took a wide swing at the training dummy, arms protesting the heavier-than-usual blade he wielded. The blow glanced off, leaving him growling in frustration. “Stupid thing,” he muttered, glaring at the broadsword in his hand. With a huff, he shoved the point into the ground and wiped off his brow with the back of his hand, then shot a glare at the sun as if it had personally offended him. It was too hot for this, but retreating inside now would be admitting that his new weapon had defeated him, and he refused to accept such a fate. So, despite the ache, he lifted the sword again, swung… and missed completely this time.

“Rough day, Inigo?”

He muttered a word that would have had Brady’s mother washing out his mouth and turned to look at his sister. The last thing he wanted was Lucina showing off with Falchion, a blade even bigger than the one he was currently struggling with. To his slight relief, the divine sword was still at her hip, and she brandished only a wooden practice sword. “You could say.”

Striding to his side with all that royal grace Inigo had never quite mastered, Lucina shot him an odd look. “That’s not your sword,” she said, the sentence not an actual question but her tone still querying.

“Yeah,” he replied. “I thought it was time for a change.” He left out the real reason his katana was currently laying neglected up in his room, and tamped down the longing for it.

“Looks like it’s not going so well.”

“It’s going fine,” he insisted, squaring his shoulders and lining up for another hit. Other than spinning the dummy about a third of a turn, the strike did exactly nothing and he let out another
irritated sigh. Lucina raised a brow at him, and he admitted, “Okay, so it’s going awful.”

She stayed quiet, then moved toward the equipment shed, likely in search of her own dummy. Inigo shook his head and returned to his training.

Neither spoke as she set up, and it was only a few minutes after Lucina started her routines that she opened her mouth again. “Far be it from me to curb you from expanding your horizons, but is there a reason you’ve taken up a new weapon?”

Inigo blushed. “Well. Um… Severa told me… never mind, it’s nothing.”

Lucina finished her swing and lowered her sword, then turned to face him. “Clearly it wasn’t nothing if it’s bothering you this much.”

He let out a sigh and stared at his toes. “She told me we were at war and I needed to put the toys away and start using a real weapon. I think she was kinda mad because I had just won a match with my katana but she’s right, isn’t she? I mean, no one else in the army uses katanas. I’d be… I’d be more effective with a broadsword.” Unhappily, he lifted his gaze to stare at the sword. “If I can just figure out how to use it.”

Unexpectedly, a sad smile came to Lucina’s face as she stepped toward him. “Oh, Inigo…” she murmured. “Sometimes you remind me so much of Mother.” When he didn’t respond, she put her hands on his shoulders and he noted, startled, that suddenly she only had an inch in height on him. “Did Lon’qu use a broadsword?” she asked, finally.

“No…”

“And do you remember Father’s tales of Princess Say’ri? She was Chon’inian, do you suppose she used a broadsword?”

“No…”

“Then do you think perhaps it is not the weapon who makes the warrior, but the warrior who makes the weapon?”

Inigo scuffed his toe in the dirt instead of answering.

“Listen, Inigo. If you really want to learn the broadsword, I’ll help you. But I don’t want you to think you have to shove yourself in a box just to match up with everyone else. You are fearsome with that katana, for all you got a late start with it.” Her voice lowered. “Besides, if I had my way I’d never have to see you use it other than to spar with your friends.”

“But Lucina, the war! I’ll have fight someday—”

“Don’t say such things,” she murmured. “It’s bad enough to think of Gerome out there.” She glanced up at the sky, as if the mention of his name would summon him. “And Kjelle soon enough.”

“They’re doing the right thing, and so will I as soon as I’m old enough!” Inigo insisted. “You can’t lock me up in the castle forever!”

“I wish I didn’t have to chain you so,” Lucina admitted. “But I also wish I didn’t have to worry about sending you away to have you never come home.”

He surprised himself by throwing his arms around her, burying his head against her shoulder.
“Lucina, I… I just want everything to be okay!”

“So do I, Inigo,” she whispered.

He clung to her for a moment more before pulling away. “But… more than that, I want every one to be okay. And I guess that means doing stuff neither of us want to.”

“Like using a broadsword?” she asked wryly.

“You know what, I think I’m gonna pass on that,” Inigo said. “I’ll stick with the katana.” He straightened up and ran a hand over his chin. “I will say that being royalty really sucks sometimes, though.”

Surprisingly enough, Lucina let out a laugh. “And other times, you are the spitting image of Father.”

He grinned and waggled his brows. “Well, Father always was a hit with the ladies, wasn’t he?”

“Oh, you are far too young to be going there,” she sighed. “Why on earth did Mother ever tell you to start talking to girls?”

“Because she was a sage woman and wise queen who was far ahead of her time!”

“And now you sound like Owain.”

Inigo made a face at that, leaving Lucina to chuckle again.

“Go get your katana,” she said. “We have time for a spar before dinner.”

Eagerly, he ran for his room.

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Now, Inigo sat in the rented room he shared with Owain, mournfully staring at the hilt of the weapon he’d had for years. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to do now.”

“Use Falchion,” his cousin said nonchalantly.

“I told you I’d rather fight with a tree branch. Or a log. Maybe a ladle.” Inigo shuddered. “Ugh, can you imagine me fighting my father with his own sword? He’d wipe the floor with me.”

“Well, you’re supposed to throw the match anyway, aren’t you?” Owain asked, glancing up from polishing his own sword.

“Well, yeah, but I have to make it somewhat believable, don’t I? Elsewise he’ll get suspicious.”

Owain shook his head. “I still don’t understand why you were so insistent on fighting him. My sword hand twitches at the mere prospect of facing so worthy an opponent as the great Exalt Chrom in his magnificent prime!”

“For one, he’s still Prince Chrom in this timeline, remember?” Inigo pointed out. “For another, I’m the Exalt and you fight me all the time.”
“You speak truth, my dear Inigo,” Owain said, shrugging, “but far be it from me to imply that you are in your prime.”

“Thank you—wait, hey!” Owain burst into laughter as Inigo let out an exaggerated sigh. “Gerome was right. We shouldn’t mess with fate.”

“Oh, stop being melodramatic,” Owain said, setting down his sword. “I’ll give you lessons on the great art of the broadsword.”

“That is quite possibly the most ironic sentence I’ve ever heard come out of your mouth,” Inigo said. “The melodramatic part, not the lesson part. Besides, you have to go to the Longfort now, remember? Loser’s penalty.”

“Then they’ll be quick lessons,” Owain said. “Come on, on your feet.”

“I feel like duels might be against our lease agreement,” Inigo said.

“Well, not like we have to worry about that! We are simply good friends having an informative, hands-on lesson about the prestigious wielding of the sword. It’s definitely not a duel or anything like that.”

Inigo had a feeling their landlord might beg to differ, but stood nonetheless.
I Was Born For This (Part 2) Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Owain heads down to the Longfort.

Chapter Notes

Yes, I did totally lift Owain's entrance from Warriors, because I am in love with it and it gave me a huge laugh the first time I saw it. (Notes on my forays into Fates are at the bottom.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

If Owain could say so himself, his brief lessons *had* helped, though Inigo still looked distinctly uncomfortable with Falchion and had lost a significant amount of his signature speed. There was only so much that could be done, though, before Owain had to leave for the Longfort as per their agreement.

And not a moment too soon, it seemed. Owain pulled his cloak closer to him, huddling down on the Feroxi side of the wall. He was about to pull a *Now what?* when a bellowing voice reached him from above.

“Halt! Who goes there?”

Owain perked up, looking for the access stairways that would give him a better view of the Ylissean side. Checking for guards, he scrambled for the nearest one.

“In the name of House Ylisse, I seek audience with the khans!”

Owain held his breath. “Could it really be?” he murmured.

He reached the top with surprisingly few second glances. He was far enough away to escape notice of most of the guards as well as the approaching company, but he could still hear the negotiations—or lack thereof—relatively clearly.

“Not another step, my bold lad!” called the Feroxi guard on the top of the wall. “I’ve lancers at the ready!”

“Hold, milady!” came another voice.


“We are not your enemy!” Frederick continued. “Exalt Emmeryn herself sent us to discuss matters of mutual interest.”
“My only interest is keeping you out of Regna Ferox, brigand!” cried the Feroxi guard.

“Brigand!” Frederick exclaimed. “Now see here—”

“You think you are the first ‘Ylisseans’ to try and cross our border? I have the authority to fell such imposters where they stand!”

Owain thought to interject, to tell this upstart guard the company had Basilio’s permission to pass, but he had no such actual orders nor any authority to go along with them. “Heh. Looks like I’m going to have to help sort this out the old fashioned way.” There had to be a secret, hidden way down to the Ylissean side of the wall—or at least there would be if he had designed the Longfort. With a dramatic sweep of his coat, he set about finding it.

“How dare you!” Frederick’s voice followed him. “You are in the presence of Prince Chrom, the Exalt’s own blood!”

“Ha! Yes, indeed—and I’m the queen of Valm! You do realize impersonating royalty is a capital offense, yes? Mmm… then perhaps we should settle this the Feroxi way. You claim to be the prince of Ylisse? Then prove it on the battlefield!”

Chrom’s voice joined Frederick’s after a moment. “Please, good lady! If you’d just listen—”

“I’ve heard quite enough! Attack!”

Owain’s heart jumped into his throat as he found what he hoped was the exit he was looking for. Was he too late? He pounded down the staircase, thanking Naga as he stepped out on Ylissean soil. Instead of the grisly scene he’d feared, though, he saw half a dozen lances impaled into empty ground, and Chrom’s company gazing skywards.

He, too, looked up, and felt a surge of surprise at the sight of a familiar pegasus. “Cynthia?” he murmured, pinpointing Chrom on the equine’s back, behind another woman. No, he realized. Sumia.

The pegasus swung around, depositing her riders with the rest of their company. Owain, still slightly slack-jawed, missed the majority of their conversation, until Chrom drew his version of Falchion. “All right,” the prince said. “The Feroxi way it is!”

The Feroxi guard was mobilizing, the Ylisseans surging forward to match them. Owain drew his own sword and dropped back his hood. He would have to be very careful about his entrance here, forgoing his usual theatrics for fear of Chrom presuming him an enemy.

That is, until battle was met and he saw the lines split. Somewhere, somehow, Lissa was pushed aside with no guard and no weapon. Cursing both Chrom and Robin, Owain rushed forward, making for the three Feroxis that were closing in on his mother.

“All right,” the prince said. “The Feroxi way it is!”

“Halt, O villains!”

All four turned to him as one, but the rest of the battle raged on around them. Over the chaos, Lissa cried, “Who’re you?”

“I’m your—” Owain started, then broke off as he realized what he’d almost just admitted. As much as he wanted to cry I’m your loving son from a far-flung future! that really wasn’t something he could just go shouting around. “Uhh… it doesn’t matter who I am! My origin story’s kind of a mess… Y’know what, I’m just gonna take it again from the top.” He put a fist to his chest. “I am Odin Dark! And though I must remain a mystery, know that I am sworn to defend you, no matter
how dire the odds!”

“Uhh,” Lissa said, while the three Feroxi were staring at him completely confounded.

“Now, villains! Face my wrath! Radiant Daaaaaaawn!” He jumped into the fray, sword lashing, and shot a glance over at Lissa. “My sword hand! Heh! It’s got a mind of its own!”

“What the heck is up with this guy?” she asked herself.

Before Owain could engage, one of the Feroxis dropped, Falchion embedded in the back of their armor. Owain swallowed hard, still unused to how casually people still fought each other, and faced his uncle.

Chrom retrieved his sword as Robin, with an effortless Elthunder spell, took out the other two Feroxis. She stayed slightly to the left and half a step behind the prince as they both eyed Owain.

“His accent isn’t Feroxi,” the tactician pointed out, electricity still sparking in her fingers in a way that was both terrifying and slightly attractive. Owain resisted the urge to shake his head—he was starting to sound like Inigo!

“And he appears to stand with us,” Chrom said.

“The ‘he’ you speak so freely of stands before you, aware you are talking of him!” Owain pointed out.

Chrom ignored him. “Lissa, come here.” With a sigh of relief, the slight blonde girl darted to her brother’s side. “I thank you, stranger, for saving my sister.” He shot a glance at Robin. “That seems to be happening a lot lately.”

Owain gave a flourished bow. “Mayhaps the lady should learn a way of defending herself?” In his time, his mother had been an accomplished mage alongside her proficiency in the healing arts. Perhaps he could nudge that along?

“There’s no time to stand here talking,” Robin said, shooting a glance back at the fort. “Chrom, we need to go.”

“Wait, my lady!” Owain called after her. “As you have so effortlessly guessed, my blood runs thick and Ylissean! Pray tell, allow me to stand and fight at your side!”

Prince and tactician exchanged glances. “He could be lying,” Chrom pointed out.

“Hark! Odin Dark would allow no falsehood to spill past his lips!” Owain paused, reaching into his pocket. “If I could perhaps give you a symbol of my utmost loyalty to your cause?”

He tossed something at Chrom, that Robin stepped forward and intercept. “Keys,” she said.

“Indeed! I have graciously liberated the keys to the gate and given you a swift entrance to the lair of these Feroxi defenders.”

Chrom glanced between Robin and Owain for a moment. “Well then, Odin Dark,” he said. “Lead the way.”
That, Owain decided, was the most fun he’d had in ages. He would have to tell Inigo that while he might have lost the duel, he had definitely gotten the better end of the deal.

He had infiltrated the Longfort, fighting as comrades alongside the most famed heroes of his parents’ generation. He’d fought as one with Chrom, Robin’s magic covering them as they slipped up hidden staircases and popped out, to the Feroxi’s guard Raimi’s terrified surprise, right in front of her face. Moments later, Frederick and company had burst through the gate with all the impeccable timing of fiction. Owain had nearly swooned at the sheer perfection.

Raimi had yielded. “A thousand apologies, Prince Chrom. I truly took you for brigand impostors. But no frauds could ever wage a battle as you just have! I will send word of your arrival to the capital and escort you there personally.”

“That would be most appreciated, thank you,” Chrom said.

Raimi slipped away to make her preparations, leaving Owain alone with the Shepherds. “Amazing,” Robin said. “Her whole demeanor changed.”

“In Ferox, strength speaks louder than words,” Frederick said. “I should have known better than to overestimate the value of diplomacy here.” He quirked an eyebrow at Owain. “Milord, who is this?”

“I am the wolf who howls for justice! The eagle who cries for love! I am Odin Dark, Hero of Legend, Vanquisher of Nightmares, and Right Hand of All—no, wait, that last one still needs some work. Point is, I have crossed grand distances to aid you in your fight against the living dead!”

“He’s clearly crossed something,” Virion said with a sniff. Sully snickered.

“However,” Chrom interjected. “Odin did prove invaluable in this skirmish of ours. What say you then, Odin? Would you travel with us to the capital?”

For a moment, Owain’s mind went terrifyingly blank. “Well… surely… such a generous offer… could not be denied…” he finally managed to get out. After all, he would be heading back to the capital to meet up with Inigo again anyway, so what was the real harm of taking the trip in Chrom’s company? There was safety in numbers, after all. “Indeed, I would be a fool to refuse, and I am no fool!”

“He really could have fooled me,” he heard Frederick mutter.

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“Odin?”

Poking his head out of his borrowed tent, Owain called out, “Yes, my lord Chrom?” Upon spotting his uncle and the woman accompanying him, he added, “And my lady Robin! Pray, how may I help you on this fine, chilly evening?”

“I had a point of interest I wished to discuss with you,” Chrom said. “If I may?”
“Indeed! Truly, my vast knowledge of all things great and small is at your utter disposal.”

“And could we keep it brief, please?” Robin added.

Owain shot her a glare. “Well, I suppose if you’d prefer.”

“Well, simply put, I have a question about your stance,” Chrom said. “You’ve crafted your own style around it, but it’s clearly from the royal house of Ylisse.”

Owain panicked. This was not the question he’d been expected and he hadn’t a clue how to answer it. He couldn’t say the truth, but would Chrom believe any lie he could hope to fabricate in the next ten seconds? Truly, his battle prowess had betrayed him!

“Well, as you see, that is actually a question of the most interesting variety. As it was, I was taught by a traveler of mysterious origins! His name I never knew, but his words have brought me through many an insurmountable battle!”

“Well, they couldn't have really been insurmountable then, could they?” Robin asked dryly. “If you lived?”

“Hah! If you were speaking to a mere mortal, you would be correct, but I am far from being your regular, fallible man!”

Judging by Chrom’s ever narrowing eyes, Owain’s distractions hadn’t been sufficient. “A mysterious traveler, huh? What did he look like?”

Owain gave a vague gesture he couldn’t even interpret himself. “Well, see… he was a man… a very, er, manly man… with, um… hair.” Judging it was time for a tactical retreat, he brought a hand up to his face, seeming to examine it thoroughly as he exaggeratedly shook it. “Matter of fact, the mere mention of him has gotten my sword hand a’ twitching! No, down sword hand! My apologies, Lord Chrom and Lady Robin! Indeed, my sword hand has an uncontrollable thirst for battle! I cannot guarantee your very safety if I remain with you!”

Yeah, nailed it, he thought, retreating from the conversation and into the woods.

The two stared after him for a long moment. “He’s hiding something,” Robin said.

“Clearly,” said Chrom. “I swear though, the stance is unmistakable. He’s learned from Ylissean royalty, no doubt of it. I just don’t understand how. He looks, what, sixteen? Maybe eighteen at the very most? Far too young to have studied under my father.” He crossed his arms and blew a stray strand of hair out of his face.

Robin merely shrugged. “File Odin Dark under the mystery tab, along with our friend Laslow.”

“Gods, I’d almost forgotten about him.” Chrom let out a sigh. “We live in strange times, Robin.”

“I wouldn’t know,” she said, eyes dancing. The prince chuckled, staring for a moment more into the woods, and started back to the campfire.

Chapter End Notes

Okay so I got Conquest yesterday and ohmygosh. For one it's SO much harder than
Awakening, which is good and bad because Awakening was starting to get pretty easy. I like and dislike the lack of grinding because making Ludicrously Overpowered Characters (TM) is absolutely my jam (Inigo and Owain in my current Awakening playthrough can just take out entire maps singlehandedly, it's pretty great), but I appreciate the extra challenge. Anways, one of the BIG reasons I was so eagerly anticipating finally getting a copy of Fates is that when this story is through (someday, because... school consumes my life) I would really like to do an Owain-centric Fates sequel... But anyways if posting drops off it's because I've been sucked into the land of Nohr.
“You. Came back. With Chrom?”

“You. Came back. With Chrom?”

“You. Came back. With Chrom?”

“Safety in numbers!” Owain hissed back to Inigo. As soon as they’d arrived in the capital, he’d split from Chrom’s company, searching out his cousin once more and neatly avoiding a potentially disastrous meeting with Flavia. “Besides, I didn’t tell them who I was, or that I was from the future, or anything like that! Also, Chrom came out of the Longfort completely unscathed, thank you very much!”

“Yeah,” Inigo snapped back, staring out over the packed tournament hall. “I get to fight my father when he’s at the literal top of his game, brilliant.” As if responding to his words, Chrom himself appeared from Flavia’s side of the room, brandishing Falchion like it weighed mere ounces before sheathing it again. Inigo gulped, touching the hilt of his own Falchion.

“Owain, throw the match,” Owain said in a high, mocking voice.

“One, I do not sound like that. Two, don’t even start. You’re on thin ice right now.”

“You’re just nervous,” Owain replied flippanently. “Remember what I taught you and you’ll be fine.”

“Easy for you to say,” Inigo muttered, double checking his mask before stepping out into the ring.

Lissa’s high voice rose over the din, unmistakable. “Chrom, look!”

His father’s response was too low to make out, but from his lips it looked like he answered, “I see him.” After a second glance, Chrom’s eyes locked onto Owain. “Both of them.”

Inigo did his best to ignore their conversation, striding toward the center of the arena.

“Laslow,” Chrom greeted flatly, stopping a few paces away. “And Odin, it seems. I should have realized two such strange characters would be connected.”

“I’ll do my best not to be insulted by that,” Inigo responded coolly.

Chrom quirked a brow. “One question, before we begin?”

Inigo merely mirrored the raise of his brow.

“...Fine, then. Our swords can speak for us!”

Without further preamble, Chrom drew his Falchion, and Inigo did the same. The former’s eyes went wide, locking onto the twin swords.

“Where did you get that?” he demanded. “There’s no way…”

See, funny story that, Inigo was tempted to snark, but good sense kept his mouth firmly closed.
Chrom eyed him for half a second more before battle was met.

Inigo knew within the first two strikes this was a match he had no hope of winning. Chrom was marginally stronger than Owain, in a way that, alone, he might’ve been able to overcome. Unfortunately, his father was also quicker, lighter on his feet, and harder to predict than his cousin, and it was all Inigo could do just to parry the blows, no less strike his own.

Still, Inigo was holding his own, though he was silently cursing Falchion with every blow. He blocked out the sound of the crowd, focusing on the quick shift of boots on stone and the clash of metal.

*There.* The tiniest opening was revealed and Inigo went for it, instinct taking over and overruling the fact he had to lose this fight anyways. This was a move he could do in his sleep, taught by Lucina to favor with his katana, though Owain had helped him modify it to better suit the double-edged Falchion.

He hadn’t expected Chrom’s perfect, simultaneous mirror of it.

Father and son both paused for half a second in shock. “Tell me,” Chrom said, barely even short of breath. “Who taught you to fight like that?”

“You’d be surprised,” Inigo responded. “But mainly my sister.” The words sent a pang through his chest, one he had to ignore as battle resumed.

Inigo put up a valiant effort, but really it was only a matter of time. “Who is your sister, then?”

“Again, you’d be surprised. But I think I’ve said plenty for one day.”

“Hmph,” Chrom said, giving a particularly heavy blow. “Is that how it is? Lissa owes you—and Odin—her life, and for that you both have my gratitude. But within these walls, I represent the East Khan and the interests of Ylisse. I can’t promise to stay my blade, but I vow not shame you.”

“Well, suppose that’s really the best I can hope for,” Inigo said.

It wasn’t long before he raised his hands in defeat.

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“We did it.”

Inigo managed to crack a smile. The defeat still stung a little, even if it had been his plan all along. “We’ve changed history,” he agreed. “Made Flavia the reigning khan, allied Ylisse and Ferox early, and managed to keep Chrom in fighting shape along the way.” His smile faded. “Seems like a lot when you put it that way.”

“And in the grand scheme of things it’s really not, is it?” Owain said softly. Inigo nodded. “So what’s next?”

Inigo blinked against the overly bright sunset as they slipped out a tiny, barely used side door of the tournament hall. “Next, we take advantage of what is sure to be a fine celebration, filled with beautiful women and likely a fair bit of alcohol.”
“...Is that wise?”

“My father and company will be returning to Ylisse posthaste, with your father in tow if I remember correctly, to inform Emmeryn of the alliance. It's not even May yet and her assassination isn't until August, so yes, I’m going to take advantage of the first halfway decent celebration I’ve had the chance to go to in a good half a decade.”

Lagging a few steps behind, Owain said, “If you say so.”

“Chin up. Just because we know the ladies won’t look your way doesn’t mean you won’t be able to find some way to keep yourself entertained. Perhaps there’ll be a corner for the children full of colorful toys?”

“I’ll be sure to let you know where it is, so you’ll have a place to cry in peace after your sixteenth rejection. I mean, if you can find a whole sixteen woman who don’t run screaming at your approach.”

“I’ll have you know they never run screaming at my mere approach. Usually it’s when I start speaking that my sheer charm overwhelms them and they must take their leave or permanently risk their sanity.”

Owain let out a bark of laughter. “Keep dreaming, cousin!”

The retorts continued as they walked, the back-and-forth as easy and familiar as breathing. It was a distraction, the needling almost settling in effect. In forcing his mind to respond to the half-joking insults, Inigo could forget about assassinations to prevent, friends to find, and futures to avert.

And it worked, for about two hours, until reality had the audacity to smack him in the face again.

Up till then, the extent of the attention he was paying to the celebration involved women and food. The latter he was having success with, the former not so much. Still, Inigo forced himself to maintain an air of cheerfulness, knowing the moment that faltered would be the moment a variety of unpleasant thoughts would start catching up with him.

He hadn’t noticed the hush at first—after all, he didn’t think Ferox was ever truly quiet, and he’d been distracted by a lovely brunette. After a moment, though, he realized the rowdy room had quieted at least a little, leaving him glancing out over the dim tavern towards the makeshift stage that had been constructed in the middle.

Why? he thought, cursing fate for the millionth time. *Wasn’t dueling my father enough for one day?*

Breathless, though, he found himself mesmerized by the swish of silky fabric, the effortless sway of hips and the flick of long pink braids. He knew that dance—not the one he treasured above all else, but one he recognized nonetheless. Swallowing hard, he tried to make himself look away and found himself unable.

“That’s Olivia,” the girl beside him said needlessly, side-eyeing him. “But as I was saying…”

Inigo didn’t answer.

“Well, fine. If I’m not worth your time, good luck with Pinky over there. You’re not her type, trust me.”

Considering Inigo had been told for basically his entire life he was the spitting image of his father,
he almost laughed at the irony of that. His companion turned on her heel and left, and for the first
time in his life he wasn’t bothered by that.

No, he was far too bothered by the sudden appearance of his mother to worry about the loss of yet
another girl.

Suddenly, the tavern air was too thick for him to breathe. Inigo glanced around the room wildly but
captured no sight of Owain. Hopefully his cousin would be smart enough to return to their inn
instead of turning the city upside down once he realized Inigo was gone.

He didn’t make it back to the room. In fact, he didn’t even make it outside. Half a dozen hallways
turned and confused him, trapping him in. Eventually, he had to lean back against the wall and
press his hands to his temples.

He’d forgotten Olivia had been in Basilio’s service before she joined the Shepherds. Now that he
remembered, he couldn’t believe he hadn’t seen her before now.

He scrubbed a hand through his hair, dropping the other to curl over his chest. How was he
supposed to save the future when he could barely make it through an encounter with anyone
important to him? A shuddering breath escaped him, leaving him questioning yet again if he’d
made the right choice.

A squeak of surprise caught him off guard, making Inigo look up sharply. An echoing shocked cry
came from his lips, rebounding yet again from the woman beside him.

“S-sorry!” he stuttered out, his cheeks on fire. “Sorry! You surprised me!”

“I’d say we’re even on that count!” Olivia cried, blushing furiously herself.

Neither spoke for a long moment. “I shouldn’t have shouted,” Inigo said, scratching the back of his
neck. Gods, he was taller than her now, and by quite a bit, he realized with a pang. To be expected,
he supposed—he’d grown quite a bit since he was nine. “Er… can we please start over?”

Olivia gave a shy nod.

Inigo cleared his throat. “It was your ravishing beauty that caught me so off guard, milady!” Surely
there were a thousand other things he could have said that would have worked better than that, but
currently they were escaping him.

“I don’t quite know how to reply to that.”

Great. Your own mother thinks you’re flirting with her. That’s a new low even for you, Inigo. He
could feel his blush redoubling. “Er… sorry. I’ll take my leave now.” Once again, he could all but
hear Gerome chastising him about keeping out of the way.

“What?” Olivia said, then cried after him. “W-wait! Don’t go!”

He couldn’t help himself. Like he wasn’t quite in control of his own body, against his better sense
he paused and turned back around.

“Sorry,” she whispered. “I’m just… terribly shy, you see… and it’s silly, but I… feel like I can talk
to you.”

A soft smile came to Inigo’s face and he took a step closer. “Perhaps my own shyness counters
yours,” he suggested. Or perhaps, in some grand cosmic scheme of things, you have some tiny
“Shyness?” she asked, eyes widening. “Aren’t you… Basilio’s new champion? Laslow?”

No. I’m your son, Inigo. “Indeed, I am.”

“You fought bravely. That Chrom fellow seemed awful intimidating.”

You’d be surprised. Actually, you will be surprised. Time travel gave him a headache. “All in a day’s work, milady. Your performance was lovely, by the way. I haven’t seen you dance like that in years.” Not since an injury she’d sustained in battle had hampered her flexibility, rendering some of the moves he’d seen tonight permanently impossible.

“I’m… sorry?”

Inigo’s jaw dropped as he realized what he’d just blurted. “Er, seen anyone dance like that, I mean! Obviously! Not you specifically!” Once more, he ran a hand through his hair. “Sorry, I’m really not myself tonight.”

“It’s all right,” she said softly, and for a moment she was so terribly his mother, the woman she had yet to be, he wanted to cry. Like when he’d first arrived in the past, the urge to fling his arms around her and spill every detail was almost painful in its urgency. He forced himself to resist, helped marginally by the knowledge she’d probably do something ridiculous like pass out right there if he dropped that sort of news on her. “I, um. Should be taking my leave.”

“Right,” Inigo said, clearing his throat and looking away. “Lovely meeting you, Olivia.” If it could be called ‘meeting.’

She merely blushed, slipping past him before disappearing into a doorway he hadn’t noticed.

Inigo, meanwhile, let out another shuddering breath and pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes.
Chapter Summary

An assassination attempt approaches, and new characters begin taking the stage.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Both Owain and Inigo feared Basilio would raise a protest if they told him they were leaving the capital. So, quite simply, they didn’t.

They didn’t have much of a plan, besides making it Ylisstol in time to prevent Emmeryn’s assassination. Until then, they both came to the conclusion that making some sort of living was the only course of action, and if in the process of keeping themselves warm and fed they could manage to stumble upon a few of their friends, all the better.

Their journeys took them out of Regna Ferox and back into Ylisse. The only art either of them were truly versed in was the art of war, and with the Risen truly starting to become a threat there was plenty of work for a pair of sellswords who knew how to vanquish them. While it pained Inigo to take money for what he had once done out of duty, they needed to eat one way or another.

After a month, they had squirreled enough away to acquire themselves a pair of horses, making their travels far easier. A large black gelding and a smaller chestnut mare joined their company and earned their keep that very night when their trumpeting whinnies alerted their sleeping riders to a band of encroaching Risen. The gelding even took one of the creatures out himself; Owain, insisting on giving him a name befitting his heroism, dubbed him Sir Scottsdale. Inigo, less imaginatively, named the mare Ada, after the pretty daughter of the man who had sold them the horses.

The names were perfectly apt and befitting of their owners, up until the point, a few days later, that Ada decided she really didn’t like Inigo and their mounts were swapped. Owain thought it quite hilarious—“It’s not just human females that can’t stand you!”—and, for some odd reason, nicknamed her ‘Potato.’ In retort, Inigo shortened his own horse’s mouthful of a name into ‘Scottie,’ to his cousin’s chagrin.

“Sir Scottsdale is a hero and you do him a great dishonor to neglect his full title!”

“You literally call your horse a potato!”

“Not a potato, the Potato! And she is the best Potato!”

“She’s the only potato!” Inigo groaned.

“Shh, you’ll hurt her feelings.”

“Gods, Owain, just call her Ada like a normal person.”

“Did you hear that, Ada Potato?” Owain asked, leaning toward his mount’s twitching ears. “He’s insinuating I’m normal! The abject horror!”
Inigo shook his head. “Be glad you escaped while you still could, Scottie.”

Scottie twitched an ear but made no other response.

There mounts weren’t the only things that had changed since they had left Ferox. Inigo had acquired himself a new sword, a rapier not as lovely as his katana but lighter and more suited to him than Falchion. He’d also, for the most part, stopped wearing his mask. Without having to worry about his future family, no one was really close enough to see the Mark of Naga in his eye, and if they were, they mainly took it as a blessed omen of a traveling stranger. When he returned to Ylissstol again, he’d put it back on, but for the moment he was enjoying being bare-faced.

Besides, a while the mask itself could prove alluring to the ladies (though so far it hadn’t), a mask-tan surely wouldn’t.

It was with regret he put it back on, the night they arrived in Ylissstol. The night he’d been dreading since he arrived back in the past.

The August heat still lingered sticky in the air as Inigo and Owain slipped through the hidden crack in the castle wall. The sweat trickling down the former’s neck, though, couldn’t completely be attributed to the weather.

Tonight, he had to change history again.

He and Owain split immediately, to better cover the castle grounds. One of them would surely find Chrom, or perhaps Emmeryn, leaving the other to join in the fray when it counted.

Inigo paused at the sound of a sigh, whirling around already on alert for an assassin with fears of being late. Instead, through the veil of leaves that was the castle garden, he spotted his father, and felt a familiar painful clench in his chest.

“Chrom?” The voice was Robin’s, and Inigo’s eyes locked on to the blonde tactician a moment later. “What are you doing out so late?”

I, for one, am rather regretting the fact we completely forgot about Maribelle’s kidnapping and didn’t go help, Inigo thought to himself. At least it had all worked out without any of the Shepherds losing their lives. He straightened up, about to go confront his father, but paused at the realization he wanted to hear this conversation.

“Oh, hi, Robin,” Chrom said quietly. “Just… dueling with some unpleasant thoughts.”

“I see,” Robin said.

“Tomorrow we march for Regna Ferox to request additional soldiers,” the prince continued. “But there’s something you should know first. Not everything Gangrel said was a lie. The last Exalt, my father, waged war on Plegia for many years. The violence… it was a brutal campaign, ending only with his death fifteen years ago. Plegia rightfully remembers their suffering, but his war was no kinder to his own people. As the fighting dragged on, our army became more and more diminished. Farmers who could barely wield a pitchfork were conscripted and sent to their deaths. Soon there was no food at all, and the kingdom began to collapse.”

Inigo winced. It sounded far too familiar, far too similar to the time he himself had come from.

Chrom sighed again. “I was young, but I remember those dark times… I know how they affected Emmeryn.”
“Such an experience would change anyone,” Robin sympathized.

“Indeed. When our father died before her tenth year, he left her quite the legacy.” A short, humorless laugh escaped Chrom. “Plegia’s desire for vengeance, our own people’s unbridled rage… My sister became a target for blame on all sides. Her own subjects began to hurl insults—and stones. She still bears the scar from one. But she never let them see her pain. Only Lissa and I understood.”

“It must have been so hard.”

“I cannot claim to know how she does it, Robin. I could not greet such hostility with warmth and patience. While our people mocked and vilified her, she reached out and healed them. She brought soldiers home to their families. She ended the war. And Ylisse’s spirit was mended and the people ‘forgave’ her? She never resented them for it. She represents the best part of the halidom—the part most worth protecting. She is peace. But some men would take advantage of that. Men like King Gangrel. The day he understands peace will be the day death gives it to him.” Chrom paused. “So perhaps I must be death’s agent. Emmeryn would never order him killed, nor would I wish her to.”

Inigo didn’t think he’d ever heard his father speak of Emmeryn so much in one sitting. In his time, he rarely got more than three sentences about the aunt he’d never met. Even after all that time, it seemed her death had been too painful. Though it pained him to interrupt, he straightened up, striding out of the foliage. “Well said, Chrom.”

“Laslow.” Though Chrom quirked a brow, his tone barely carried any surprise, as if he’d expected them to meet again one way or another.

“Where’s your other half?” Robin asked dryly.

“Off planning a dramatic entrance, I’m sure,” Inigo responded.

“How did you get in here?” Chrom cut in without preamble.

“The cleft in the castle wall, behind the maple grove.”

“There?” Chrom asked, eyes widening. “But how would you…?”

“You know the place, Chrom?” Robin asked.

“Yes. I bashed in part of the wall while training the Shepherds. It’s only a small hole, and I’d thought it well concealed, but…”

“Your secret it safe with us,” Inigo said. “We came here only to warn you.”

Alarmed, Chrom asked, “Warn us?”

Inigo gave a stiff nod. “The Exalt’s life is in danger.”

“What, Emmeryn?” Chrom scoffed. “That’s absurd. She’s guarded at all hours.”

For a moment, Inigo was brought up short. How was he supposed to convince his father just how important this was? “What if…” Can I risk it? “What if I told you I have seen the future? Would you believe me? A future where Emmeryn is killed. Here. Tonight.”

“Seen the future? Have you lost your wits?”

“No, you’re thinking of Odin.” The briefest smile cracked Inigo’s lips before he sobered again. “I
didn’t think you’d believe me. Allow me to prove it.”

He’d been on the alert for intruders in a way that Chrom, secure in his walls and his guards, wasn’t. He drew his new rapier, causing his father to tense and drop a hand to Falchion, but Inigo held up his free hand in a gesture of peace.

“Would saving your life be proof enough?” He nodded to the bush beside him. “From him?”

The assassin burst forth with little grace—his death throes, Inigo’s rapier in his back, held even less.

“Proof enough?” Inigo repeated, yanking his sword free to Chrom and Robin’s astonished looks.

“...Yeah,” Chrom said thickly.

Inigo had missed the second assassin, and it very nearly cost him his life. As usual, though, Owain had his back, literally and figuratively. In a rustle of foliage, two forms burst forth almost at once, one spasming in death only a moment later.

“Hah! You think to trifle with the friends of Odin Dark, fiend?”

Pulse racing at his brush with death, Inigo managed to laugh off the anxiety. “See? What did I say? Dramatic entrance.”

“Is there any other kind?” Owain asked with a jaunty bow.

They were all saved from having to answer by a distant rumble, one that sent all four running toward the castle proper with only the barest of exchanged glances.

Inigo glanced back, once, at the two fallen assassins. With a horrible twist in his gut, he realized he’d just killed someone.

He was saved from dwelling on that by the task of merely keeping up with Chrom as they darted through the palace, up unused corridors that Inigo knew like the back of his hand. “Emm!” his father cried as they reached the hallway of living quarters.

The Exalt appeared in one of the doorways, ethereal in appearance. Evidently, Emmeryn already knew of what was about to happen, for the first words she said where “Chrom! Take Lissa and flee while you still have time!”

“No! We’re not leaving you! Just stay where it’s safe!”

“Chrom, please! Flee while you still can! You have each but one life, and I do not wish it weighed against mine!”

Chrom gave a soft sound of frustration, looking between his sister and the as of yet still empty hallway. “Odin, Laslow, stay at Emmeryn’s door. We’ll handle the killers.” With that, he took off down the hallway, Robin hot on his heels.

Inigo, meanwhile, only stayed there for a moment before striding after them. “Odin, stay.”

“I’m not a dog!” his cousin shot back. “Where are you going?”

“To fight!” The dead assassin jumped into his mind’s eye again, threatening to overwhelm him. If he stayed here at Emmeryn’s door, doing nothing but thinking, he was going to lose his dinner.

“Gaius joins them this fight, remember? I’m pretty sure Severa will actually murder me if he dies!”
“But—”

“Panne, too!” Inigo cut him off. “Just… just stay here!”

Without waiting for a response, he followed the sound of fighting.

And not a moment too soon, it seemed. He found his father at Frederick’s side, about to engage with a familiar-but-not-quite rabbit-like form. “Hold!” Inigo cried. “Panne is not your enemy!”

“You know her?” Chrom asked.

“I know… of her. And I knew she would come here tonight.”

“Quite the prophet, aren’t you?”

“Yes, yes. Point is, I swear that Panne is an ally.”

After a moment, Chrom shrugged and lowered Falchion’s point. “Good enough for me. All right, Shepherds! For now, we leave this Panne character be!”

“Is that wise, milord?” Frederick asked, hefting an axe Inigo was sure he’d struggle to even lift.

“Laslow has earned our trust,” Chrom said. “He enjoys his secrets, I know… but he’s also saved our lives, and that’s enough for me.”

Inigo swallowed back the lump in his throat. “Thank you,” he squeaked out.

Chrom gave a short nod. “Now, to the matter at hand: driving these scoundrels from our castle!”

Battle was met; it was all Inigo could do to keep from getting skewered. The overdressed archer he remembered joined them—Virion, Owain had reminded him, though he had to wonder if his cousin was pulling his leg. This silver-haired noble bore almost no resemblance to his future son.

He would have missed the skinny, ginger thief shirking through the shadows, had Frederick not rounded on him. “Scoundrel!” the knight roared. “Begone!”

The half-hidden figure let out a very unmanly squeak, one that Inigo realized abruptly—though he would deny it under penalty of death—had definitely been passed down to Severa. “Wait!”

For a terrifying moment, he was afraid they were going to ignore him. “Drop your weapon, or die where you stand!” Chrom commanded.

“Easy there, blue blood!” Gaius cried, still barely visible. “I’m not here to hurt anyone!”

“Yet you run with a band of assassins?”

“Believe it or not, I’m just trying to make a living,” Gaius said. “I’m a thief, see? Bust open doors, crack into chests… that kind of thing. This lot said they wanted to break into some kind of vault. Nobody said anything about murder. I’d just as soon sit this one out.”

“Hmm… then perhaps you’d be willing to prove your good intentions?”

“Beg pardon?” Gaius asked, raising a narrow red brow.

“We need all the help we can get to save the Exalt’s life. You appear capable, and we could use any information you have about our foes.”
“Oh, right—those good intentions,” Gaius said thoughtfully.

“Do you know the meaning of the words, rogue?” Virion asked.

“Wow, okay, Your Lordship,” Gaius said, though his tone was so sarcastic he clearly meant no respect from the title. “Just ‘cause I’m not in the most savory of professions doesn’t mean I can’t be sweet when I want.” He looked back at Chrom. “Speaking of sweet... I’ll prove my sincerity if you sweeten the deal.”


“Is that wise, milord?” Frederick asked.

“Oh, go kill some people, Frederick,” Chrom said with exasperation. Looking affronted, the knight split away. Sighing, the prince turned back to Gaius. “Let me just— oops.”

Gaius perked up, emerging slightly from the shadows. “Looks like you dropped something. What’s in the satchel, mmm?”

“Nothing. Candies from my little sister. I’m sure you—”

“Candies? As in sugar candies?”

“Well... yes. I assume they’d be sweet? But—”

“IT’S A DEAL!”

Inigo couldn’t help it. He burst out laughing, trying in vain to smother it in his elbow.

“...You’ll risk your life if I give you... a bag of candy?” Chrom asked, looking completely lost.

“I said ‘sweeten the deal,’ didn’t I? Don’t get me wrong. I’ll take the gold, too. Later. Unless you’ve got more of these. Have you got more of these?”

“Um... I’ll ask Lissa.”

The Shepherds were a weird bunch, Inigo decided, returning to the fray.

Chapter End Notes

If anyone wants to know, Gaius's entrance is (loosely) based on my first playthrough of Awakening. My roommate (mostly correctly) told me all my future allies would be green, neglecting/forgetting those enemies like Gaius and Tharja that had to be recruited. I, eager to get on with saving Emmeryn, didn't quite pay attention to Gaius's monologue at the beginning of the chapter, and he ended up committing suicide-by-Frederick. The conversation after went something like this:

"Hey, this guy just had a death scene, that's kind of suspicious..."

"Wait, what was his name?"

"I think it started with G..."
"*screeching* YOU KILLED GAIUS???

(I restarted the chapter.)
I Was Born For This (Part 2) Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

The Plegian War picks up in the aftermath of the assassination, with an unavoidable casualty.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Inigo found Owain later, blood- and sweat-soaked but accompanied by an unharmed Emmeryn.

All at once, the adrenaline seemed to drain right of Inigo’s body, leaving his arms leaden as he practically swayed on his feet. Robin shot him a concerned glance, but Chrom had eyes only for his sister.

“Emmeryn! Thank the gods you’re safe!”

Owain gave Inigo a pointed raise of his brows, to which he responded with a mouthed Let’s get out of here. He didn’t have to say it twice.

Neither of them spoke until they had slipped out into the castle gardens. “So... history, nil; the great Exalt Inigo, two.”

“Don’t call me that,” Inigo whispered harshly, glancing around. “Someone might hear you.”

“Right. Sorry, Laslow.”

Inigo barely heard over the buzzing in his ears. Two fallen assassins laid still not far away, and the sight of them made bile rise in his throat. His first instinct was to run from the grisly scene, but battle weary limbs were barely managing to keep him upright.

Only a few moments passed before he quite literally couldn’t stomach it any more. He bent over, retching, tears blurring in his vision as he reached out blindly until his hand met rough bark. The scrape against his skin was almost steadying, grounding him firmly into painful reality as he bent double.

“Ini—Laslow? Are you all right? Are you hurt? Have you been cursed?”

Inigo shook his head, unable to form words yet. His first thought when he could breathe again was that his mask was stifling, and with a rough jerk he yanked it off his head and tossed it away. “I killed him, Owain. I didn’t even hesitate, I just did, and oh gods what if he had a family? What if he h-has kids that are waiting for him to come h-home and he won’t because I k-killed him just like our parents were killed—”

“Inigo, breathe!” Owain commanded sharply, grasping both his shoulders and forcing him to stand upright. “You’re about to start hyperventilating and I’m not dragging you out of here if you pass out.”

Startled at his cousin’s bluntness, Inigo complied with a hiccup.
With a small sigh, Owain loosened his grip. “There we go,” he murmured. “That’s better.” He shot a glance toward the two assassins and Inigo suppressed a shudder. “I forgot you weren’t here long before we met up. That was… your first?”

A miserable nod. “But not yours,” Inigo responded softly.

“Unfortunately, no.” Owain’s gaze dropped. “And I hate to say it gets easier, because taking a life is not something you really want to get easier, but… it does.” His hands fell from Inigo’s shoulders completely as he took a step back. “I hope you won’t think too ill of me for that.”

Should I? Inigo wondered, but didn’t say it out loud. For the moment, he thought quite ill of himself, but that was another matter entirely. “It’s just… there was nothing like this in our time. We only had to fight Risen. Not… real people.”

“And now there are real people who are really in our way,” Owain whispered back. “And it’s horrible. Really.”

“Really really,” Inigo said, half a broken laugh escaping him as he put his head in his hands.

Owain, meanwhile, tensed. “Shh. Someone’s coming.”

Jerking up, Inigo asked, “Who?” He looked downward, suddenly remembering he was bare-faced and casting about for his mask. Stupid, stupid, getting rid of it while you’re still in the castle.

“Chrom, I think,” Owain muttered back, adopting what he seemed to think was a casual pose. Inigo would have chastised the ridiculous ‘hand over face’ if he hadn’t been searching desperately for his mask.

“Going somewhere, you two?” came his father’s voice. Inigo silently cursed, turning so at least the right half of his face should be hidden in shadow. With any luck, his Brand would go unnoticed. “You have a bad habit of leaving without saying goodbye, you know.”

“Yes, I must admit we have a myriad of bad habits,” Owain said.

“Good ones as well,” Chrom answered, but his gaze was firmly on Inigo. Plainly, he’d noticed the lack of his mask, and Inigo felt his face heating up at the scrutiny. “You saved my life, as well as both of my sisters. Is there some way I can repay you? Some favor I can grant?”

“While truly your generosity is unmatched, we must refuse. Hearing you offer is reward enough!”

Inigo kicked Owain’s ankle as subtly as he possibly could. “Supplies,” he put in. “For traveling; as much as two mounted horses could carry?”

Chrom gave a short nod. “Consider it done.”

“That has always struck me as a strange phrase,” Owain said loftily. “We are to consider it done, but does that mean it will be done? I disagree with the phrasing. Wouldn’t it just be easier to say ‘I’ll do it’?”

“Like you ever go for the easy way of saying things,” Inigo shot back, then cleared his throat. “I believe what my companion was trying to imply earlier is that we already have what we came from: history has been rewritten.”

Chrom raised a brow. “And what future averted?”
The two future travelers exchanged glances, Inigo thinking that his father’s perceptiveness was going to get them in trouble. “After the Exalt’s untimely assassination, the Fire Emblem would be stolen,” Owain explained. “This, in turn, would lead to a great war, and soon to the end of mankind itself.”

“But I’m sure that sounds like madness to you,” Inigo finished.

“Strangely, no, it doesn’t. Somehow I know I can trust you,” Chrom said. “And I hope someday to repay your favors with more than a few packs of food.”

“Perhaps one day you will,” Inigo said. “But until then…” Finally having located his mask, he bent down to retrieve it and headed for their exit, Owain on his heels.

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Inigo had hoped that, after this, they could rest on their laurels for a while. Emmeryn was still alive, so surely the war with Plegia would be over soon with minimal loss of life. They’d planned on making their way around Ylisse, seeking out the rest of their friends now that they didn’t have a deadline hanging over their head.

He should have known Fate would not be deterred so easily.

He supposed it was lucky they had chanced to head west, toward Plegia. They heard the news of Emmeryn’s kidnapping almost immediately.

From that point on, Inigo decided without preamble to ignore the tiny voice in his head that sounded like Gerome and told him to stay on the sidelines.

They meet Chrom at an eerily familiar canyon on the Plegian border. Inigo tried not to dwell on the last time he’d been there, months ago and years in the future.

“You have our swords, Prince Chrom. Whatever may befall us.”

Later on, he would come to regret that phrasing.

Basilio had a few words to say to them when they joined the camp, but Flavia was remarkably jovial about the whole thing, considering the situation. Inigo, for the most part, tried to stay on the fringes of the rest of the group.

Even now he knew he didn’t quite belong.

That feeling lingered even as he stood crouched on the fringes of Plegia castle, looking at his aunt on a very tall executioner’s block with Owain on one side of him and Gaius, unexpectedly, on the other. The thief had a lollipop in his mouth that he smacked every few seconds; Inigo was seriously considering strangling him when Gangrel’s voice rang out over the courtyard.

“Good people! Warriors of Plegia!” the Mad King cried. “Welcome! Welcome, one and all! Your anticipation electrifies the air! We all remember the crimes of Ylisse… would you have their witch-queen answer for them? Here? Today? Now? Yessssss! Finally, we will have justice! Executioner! If you would be so kind…”
Without preamble, Flavia’s axe embedded itself in the barbarian creeping up behind Emmeryn. He fell without a scream, already dead.

“Everyone!” came Robin’s cry from the front of their company. “Now!”

Battle was met and time was a blur. Plegians fell beneath them with startling, cold efficiency. Inigo lost count of how many died under his blade, but there would be time for regret, trembling hands, and sleepless nights later.

Judging by the hard set of Owain’s face, he wasn’t taking this change any better than Inigo was, for all his talk of killing getting easier.

And, in the sudden way battle usually ended, it was over.

“Robin!” Chrom bellowed. “Their wyvern riders have fallen! The skies are clear! I’m giving the signal!”

Inigo paused, watching the company of pegasus knights soar overhead, and allowed himself a tiny sigh of relief. It was all right. They’d saved Emmeryn, again.

But Fate had not yet pulled its last card, and neither had Gangrel.

Inigo had only sheathed his rapier for half a minute when the Risen appeared, bows already drawn. He took a step back, a gasp of horror echoed by Owain—they had fought Risen for years, but never before had they appeared from thin air as if summoned.

Except the night Grima himself had appeared, and taken all of Ylisse down with him.

“Risen?” Robin cried. “Oh, gods, no! Chrom! There are Risen everywhere!”

“Damn! Not now!”

Gangrel let out a manic laugh. “Oh, did an army of living corpses just appear out of the blue? Truly, the heavens smile upon the mighty King Gangrel this day!”

The first pegasus knight fell, peppered with arrows.

“Exeunt one pegasus knight! Watch how they fall, one by one!”

“No,” Robin whispered. “No, no, no…”

“We’ve lost,” Chrom said thickly.

“I believe this is what they call a reversal of fortunes,” Gangrel said with another cackle. “Now… grovel before me. Plead! Beg for your worthless lives!”

“I’d give up my life before I beg it from you,” Chrom snarled.

“Oh, now that is a good line. A fitting epitaph for your tombstone, perhaps? But it’s not just your life in the balance. The Exalt still stands upon the block, and I have a dozen bows trained on her. All it would take is one word from me…”

“Emm! Hold on, I’m—”

“Archers! If this Ylissean pup so much as twitches, let fly your arrows!”
“I… I’ll kill you!”

“Go ahead! I welcome it. Just know you were responsible for Big Sister’s bloody demise!” Gangrel paused, looking out over the Ylissean army. “And what of the rest of you? Eh? Who wants the honor of killing the Exalt? No one? Bah! Your merry band isn’t quite so headstrong anymore, is it? Pathetic!”

“Damn you!”

“Now, now, my boy—no one needs to die today. Not you. Not the Exalt. Not your friends. Just lay down your sword and give me the Fire Emblem.”

“I…” Chrom started, looking torn.

“Chrom!” Robin interrupted. “You can’t trust him!”

“Of course I can’t trust him! I’m not an idiot!” the prince cried. “But if I just say no, he’ll kill her! The gods are cruel, damn them! My sister or my duty… a problem with no right answer, yet I must choose!”

“Inigo,” Owain whispered, shooting him a desperate glance. “What do we do?”

“I don’t know,” Inigo said hoarsely. “Oh, gods, I don’t know.”

He must have missed something, because the next thing he knew Robin was saying, “That’s right, don’t give up! There has to be a way!”

“If there is, I can’t see it… ah, gods!”

“I will count to three!” Gangrel called. “Throw down your weapons, or your Exalt becomes the world’s largest quiver. One! Two! Thr—”

“Gangrel, hold!” Chrom let out a heavy sigh. “You win. Everyone, lay down yo—”

“No, wait!”

“Silence!” Gangrel bellowed, even as everyone turned to look up at the Exalt.

“Emm…” Chrom whispered hoarsely.

“King Gangrel, is there no hope you will listen to reason?” Emmeryn continued, her voice startlingly level for her current position.

“You mean listen to more of your sanctimonious babble? I think not! No, all I want to hear is a thunk of arrows and a splat as you hit the ground. Take one long last look from your perch. You do so enjoy looking down on people… Then prepare to meet the ground, and your maker! That is, unless if someone were to give me the Emblem… now!”

For a horrible moment, as Inigo tried desperately to think of some way out of this, no one spoke.

“All right!” Chrom yelled. “All right. Emm, I know you won’t approve, but this is my final decision. Maybe someday we’ll face a crisis where maybe the Emblem would’ve helped. But I know for a fact that Ylisse needs you, today! The people need their Exalt… and we need our sister. If those dark days should come, we’ll face them together.”

“Chrom… you can’t…” Inigo said, looking wildly about. There was no maybe about it, not for
him. Someday they would need the Emblem, with or without Emmeryn. There had to be something left… if only he had a bow of his own…

“Chrom…” Emmeryn said. “Thank you. I know now what I must do.”

“Emm, what are you—” Chrom started, his eyes going wide.

“Plegians!” cried the Exalt. “I ask that you hear the truth of my words! War will win you nothing but sadness and pain, both inside your borders and out. Free yourselves from this hatred! From this cycle of pain and vengeance. Do what you must… as I will do. See now that one selfless act has the power to change the world!”

“Emm, no! NO!”

Chrom ran, alone, arm outstretched as if he could hope to catch his sister. Inigo realized with a stomach full of lead he would have done the same if he’d been there when Lucina died.

Just like Lucina, there was nothing to be done for Emmeryn as she plummeted to the earth.

Across the courtyard, Grima’s horrible, misshapen skull seemed to watch through six empty eye holes. Soon, it seemed to say.

Soon, I will rise again… and this world will fall just as yours did.

Chapter End Notes

Gosh, this chapter hurt to write. A lot of it was inspired by the Inigo/Owain Harvest Scramble convo, because it hits me right in the feels. My poor babies do not deserve this but here we are.
Chapter Summary

Robin discovers a secret she wasn't meant to know.

Chapter Notes

Buckle up tight, everyone. Things are about to get real.

“It’s as if Fate itself raised its mighty hand against us… there was nothing we could do.”

“There must have been something,” Inigo retorted, but there was no heart in his comeback. “I just didn’t see it.”

“Laslow—” Owain started.

“I’m not in the mood, Odin,” Inigo shot back. “Go bother someone else with your ruminations about Fate.”

Owain watched as his cousin stomped off, shortly disappearing into the ranks of the rest of the Shepherds. “We were just too late,” he murmured. “Our bleak future is written once more… and darkness awaits us all.”

No one answered his grim words, too focused on getting away from the horrors of Plegia Castle and the Mad King’s army. So far, they had only managed one.

“Ylisseans! I offer your mercy! Surrender to me now and live!”

“Surrender?” Even from the very front, Basilio’s booming voice reached everyone. “Sorry, I’m not familiar with the word.”

“Emmeryn would not have wished for this to come to bloodshed,” the Plegian general ahead of them pointed out.

“Don’t speak her name!”

“Your rage is justified, Prince Chrom,” said the Plegian. “But the meaning of your sister’s final sacrifice was not lost on me. I suspect many Plegians who heard her final words would say the same. If you lay down your weapons, I vow to protect you as best I can.”

“How can we trust you after what your barbarous king has done?” asked Frederick. “I think we shall take our chances with weapons in hand!”

“I suspected you would say as much. So be it, Prince Chrom. I shall endeavor to grant you a swift and dignified end.”
In some ways, Owain thought, this battle was easier than the one they’d just been through. Their numbers were more evenly matched, and many of their foes seemed reluctant to fight.

And in other ways, that made it harder.

He met the eyes of one terrified soldier, no older than himself, and swallowed hard. Neither of them had wish to kill each other, yet their causes had pitted them against each other.

The Plegian boy pretended he hadn’t seen Owain and slipped away.

“They don't wish to fight, any more than we do…” he whispered, glancing around for Inigo. His cousin was nowhere to be seen, but another face was.

The Plegian general.

“Cut off the head, and the body may scatter,” he said to himself, and surged forward.

Owain approached the small rise, planting his boots firmly and lifting his sword in a ready pose. The general looked up—there was no mistaking the challenge.

The general squared his shoulders, ignoring the rain pounding down as he lifted his own weapon. “I am General Mustafa of Plegia. If you wish to keep your lives, you must win them!”

“I am Odin Dark!” Owain shot back. “And I will win not just the lives of my comrades but the very future itself!”

“A bold claim, lad,” said Mustafa. “But may the best man win.”

The clash as they came together was drowned out by a clap of thunder, the battlefield eerily illuminated for a few seconds.

Owain could pretend the hot wetness on his cheeks was from the rain. “Rarely have I fought so mighty an opponent, General,” he said instead of dwelling on that.

Mustafa answered with only another swing of his axe. Owain blocked it expertly for a moment, until the muddy ground betrayed him. As his feet slipped, the axe slid free and the horrible bite of steel caught him in the ribs.

Ohgodsnotagain.

Owain Dark was losing his touch, he decided as he sank to the ground. That made three life-threatening injuries in the last half-year, a most shameful number.

Dammit Inigo, couldn’t you have picked a better time to sulk?

“For what it's worth, I would have let you pass if I could.”

Owain ignored Mustafa’s words, more focused on the annoyance of the rain dripping straight into his eyes. He squeezed them shut, trying to draw a breath that didn’t feel like it was going to ignite him from the inside out.

Lightning lit up the inside of his eyelids. He cursed it.

“Note to self for future strategies,” came a familiar, cool voice from not far away. “Odin is a wildcard and an idiot.”
But a… heroic… wildcard and… idiot.”

The world fell black.

When Owain woke, he was equally as horizontal as he had been, but in significantly less pain and significantly more shirtless.

It took him several moments to comprehend his surroundings. Rain pattering on canvas could be heard above his head, but it was the uneasy jostle beneath him that finally let comprehension dawn. Clearly, the battle was over if he’d been stowed away in a wagon to be healed.

“What… exactly happened?” he asked aloud, feeling like he still wasn’t quite in full possession of his senses.

“Oh, so you do know how to speak normally.”

Owain pushed himself until he was sitting upright, ignoring the sharp spasm in his side. “When I choose to, yes. It’s just not nearly as fun.”

“Or have you simply realized whatever little game you’re trying to play is up, Odin Dark?” Robin asked. “Since I have nothing better to call you?”

Owain blinked, eyes searching out the tactician in the dim light. It was her white-blond hair that he finally spotted, leading him to the rest of her form. She only sat a few feet away, on the other end of the wagon, eyes glinting and a book open in her lap. “Okay, I’ll be honest here. I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Please. Could you have picked a more obvious alias? At least ‘Laslow’ sounds normal enough.” Owain blinked rapidly as a tiny flame appeared on Robin’s fingertip, sending the back of the wagon into eerie relief. “I want to know who you are, and I want to know now.”

“I am but a humble servant of my lord Chrom, indebted to him and the rest of the royal family as any common man of patriotism ought be—”

“Cut the crap, Odin!”

Owain blinked again as Robin’s face started to blur in front of him. Where was Inigo? He was not in any shape to hold up to questioning like this! “Right. Um. Sorry. What exactly did you want to know again?”

“I want to know who in Naga’s name you think you are to be parading around with that Mark on your arm.”

Mark on his arm…

Shirtless…

Oh gods she’d seen his Brand.

“Oh,” Owain squeaked out, mind struggling to catch up with this turn of events as he glanced
down at the Mark of Naga. “Right. That.”

When a long silence dragged out, Robin set down her book and got to her feet. She closed the distance and, with a tenderness completely at odds with the situation, traced a finger over his birthmark. “This is the Brand of the Exalt,” she stated. “Borne only by the royal family of Ylisse, a blessing from Naga herself. So… either you’ve found yourself a very good tattoo artist and have plans to con your way into the palace, or you’re a dastard child come out of the woodwork. Neither of those look good for you, so tell me the truth before I get Chrom involved.”

Despite himself, Owain let out a tiny breath of relief. She hadn’t told his uncle yet. “Well… see… the thing is… I can’t.”

“You can and you will.” Something about her tone told him she wasn’t kidding.

“You don’t understand. If I tell you, everything we’ve both worked for might fall apart. You clearly don’t trust me right now, but we are on the same side. Uncle Chrom’s side.”

A beat passed before Owain cursed. Stupid healing magic, robbing his wits from him!

Robin quirked a pale brow. “Uncle Chrom, huh? Neither of Chrom’s sisters are old enough to have a child your age, you know.” Suddenly, her eyes went wide. “A future where Emmeryn is killed, here, tonight,” she murmured. “Except she wasn’t, because we stopped them then. Because of you and Laslow. Because you knew what would happen. Because you’re from the future.”

“Well… that’d be… preposterous,” Owain said, scrubbing at the back of his neck and ruminating about overly-perceptive tacticians.

“I’ve heard crazier,” Robin said, making for the back of the wagon. “All right, I’m getting Chrom.”

“No, you can’t!”

“And why not?” she shot over her shoulder, not even bothering to turn around.

“Because I don’t know what will happen if you do,” Owain said earnestly. “I fear discussing our fate would only seal it. We told you of Emmeryn’s death and all we could manage to do was stall it. If we reveal to you the true manner of our doomed future, we may annul our entire purpose of returning to prevent it.”

“But you may not,” Robin pointed out. “If you have future knowledge that may turn the tide of this war in our favor, I need to know it.”

“This war?” Owain couldn’t help but bark out. “This war? Inside half a decade you are going to be looking back to this moment with such nostalgia you will wonder why you even thought it earned the title of a war.”

“Ominous words, Odin,” Robin said. “Yet all your warnings do is cement the fact that I will need you.”

Owain bit back the sound of frustration building in his throat. What did he have to do to deter this mad tactician?

There was no deterring her, he realized at the glint in her eye. She would dog him until he broke, or turn on Inigo and use them against each other. He knew she loved Chrom—perhaps not romantically, but her bond with the future Exalt was not one to be trifled with.
If Inigo and Owain stood between Robin and Chrom, he realized abruptly, she would not hesitate to cut them down, however misguided her intentions. So if he could not dissuade her, that meant he had to find himself another option.

Though it pained him to double-cross a woman he’d idolized as a hero practically his entire life, it seemed he had no other choice.

“All right,” Owain finally let himself seemingly assent. “All right, I’ll tell you what you need to know, on two conditions.”

“Yes?”

“One, I want to speak to Laslow first, alone. Two, swear to me you will not tell Chrom of this until I say so.”

He feared the second condition might tip her off, but he let out a slight breath when she gave a sharp nod. “Very well. You have my word.”


“Blood?” she asked.

“I’ve seen your sorcery. A blood oath shouldn’t be a problem for you.”

Once again, he feared he might have pushed her too hard. The line he was treading was a treacherous one, and if he slipped they might just lose everything they had worked for.

“There is more to you than I thought,” Robin finally said. “Very well, if that’s what it takes to secure your cooperation, so be it.”

“Really?” Owain asked. “I mean, of course. A hero such as myself cannot give up all his secrets for free.”

I can’t believe that worked, he thought. I outsmarted the tactician. 

...Why do I get the feeling that’s only going to work once?

~~~

“Odin?”

Owain let out a small breath at the sound of his cousin’s voice. “In here,” he called.

“Listen, I’m sorry I didn’t come sooner,” Inigo said, appearing through the curtains. “I just heard you got hurt.”

“It’s fine,” Owain said, waving a hand as Inigo hoisted himself up into the wagon. “Water under the bridge and all that. Were you with Chrom?”

“Yeah,” Inigo said, pinching the bridge of his nose. “He’s not in great shape. Lissa’s with him at the moment, and so’s Mom—er, Olivia.”
“Oh, is she here now?”

“She got us the wagons,” he explained. “We’re heading back to Regna Ferox.”

“Well, they’ll be,” Owain muttered.

“What do you mean? Also, are you okay? You’re talking like a normal person.”

Owain let out a sigh and rubbed the back of his neck. “Oh, you are so going to kill me for this.”

“...What did you do?” Inigo asked, and Owain didn’t have to see past his cousin’s mask to picture the concern written all over his face.

“I screwed up is what I did. I can’t say much more right now.” He dropped his voice. “You need to go get Ada and Scottie. We have to leave, now.”

“Leave?” Inigo asked, only for Owain to immediately shush him. “What do you mean, leave?” he said, quieter.

“I mean leave. We can’t stay with the Shepherds anymore.”

“Um, why not?”

Owain waved a hand. “Like I said, can’t tell you anything else yet. Oh, and I could do with a shirt, if you could find me one of those.”

“Find you a—no! Robin told me you took an axe, you can’t just tell me we’re swanning off with no other explanation—”

“Do you trust me, Inigo?” Owain whispered sharply.

“I… Well, I mean, yes?”

“Then trust me, and go get Ada and Scottie. I’ll find some vulneraries and I’ll be fine, okay? We don’t have much time.”

Inigo rubbed a hand over his chin. “Okay, okay. But I want a real explanation soon.”

“You’ll get one, I promise. Just, uh… please don’t actually kill me? Or, you know, maim me.”

~~~

They slipped away on Ada and Scottie under the cover of the rainy night. Inigo, needless to say, was furious at the full story, but there was nothing to be done for it. For now, they had to stay away from their past families—and, more pressingly, Robin. Perhaps when the Valm War was nearer, they could dare approach, but two long years stretched out before that, and they intended to find their friends.

A few weeks later, the Ylisse-Plegia war ended with the death of the Mad King Gangrel. Some mourned their dead, others celebrated their victory. Along with his Shepherds, Chrom returned to Ylisstol, his attentions suddenly drawn in the direction of their newest, pink-haired addition.
Some four thousand plus miles away from Ylisstol, though, was a quiet beach somewhere along the shores of Chon’sin. A handful of seabirds spiraled overhead, a few of the braver ones dipping down to investigate this odd new creature that had appeared in the middle of their home.

Waves lapped at the body of the young woman, tugging at the cloak she wore. They crept closer, but she moved not besides steady, even breathing.

A large rush of water finally reached up to her mouth, sending her sitting up with a sputter, blinking salt-encrusted lashes. When she caught her breath, she glanced around the unfamiliar territory, eyes narrowed.

*Where am I?*

After a beat, that question was replaced by *Who am I?*

Fate, so it seemed, had a sense of humor, for why else would it pull the same trick twice? One woman, waking up with no memory in the middle of the wilderness, was odd enough. Yet, mere months later, a second?

The woman pulled herself up fully, weighed down by her salt water soaked garments. A lock of tangled, stiff hair fell in front of her eyes, leaving her gazing at it as if it would tell her who she was. It told her nothing except that she had blue hair.

She flicked the lock away and started a self-inventory from the top down. A small gold circlet sat on her nest of hair—was she some sort of royalty? Another question she didn’t have an answer to.

Her cloak buttoned at her neck and she fumbled with it, overheated. The garment fell heavily to the ground, revealing worn and practical but very nice clothes.

Her wardrobe was not what gave her pause, though—that honor went to the still slight, not yet pronounced but definitely noticeable swell of her stomach.

The woman sucked in a breath. Alone in a strange place, unknowing of even her name, and she was with child? How had she gotten here? *Why was she here?*

*There must be some logical explanation for this!*

She glanced up at the sky, as if demanding it give her answers, but it did not. Instead, she resumed her self-check.

A sheath for what must have been a remarkably large sword hung at her side, but it was empty. She did find a small knife in each boot, though, and assumed she must be at least somewhat proficient with them. The thought of the missing sword startled her, though. Who was she to wield such a weapon?

“...we must leave the hardest task to you. Find the rest of our friends, and put this wyrm out of its misery.”

“Who’s there?” the woman called, but the voice had been but a breath on the wind.

“*Impertinent little brat. I’ll have no trouble breaking you.*”

“Show yourself!”

“A *shield twice as thick serves twice as well.*”
“...even if it kills me. Now run, while you’ve still got the chance!”

The woman spun, breathless, the words still echoing through her mind. These people—she had to protect them! But where were they?

The voices stopped as suddenly as they had started, but in their wake they left a single name—reverent, whispered, hopeful.

Lucina.

End of Part 2
Chapter Summary

With the Plegian War over, Owain and Inigo go in search of the rest of their time-traveling companions.

Chapter Notes

A bit of a delay on this one, because school has been kicking my butt. I'm going to try to get some more written soon, and I'm eager to hear what you guys think of these latest few plot twists!

"I'm an apostrophe, I'm just a symbol to remind you that there’s more to see..."

“The spy, with my little eye, something that starts with... S!”

“Let me guess,” Inigo said dryly. “Is it sand?”

Owain gasped. “However did you make such a brilliant deduction?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe it’s because we’re in the middle of the freaking desert and sand is literally the only thing we can see.”

“Huh. I guess that would be a giveaway.”

Inigo rolled his eyes. “You couldn’t have picked us a nicer vacation spot, could you?”

“C’mon, Inigo. Mirage village, magic goddess staff, heroic tales of daring-do... This is the best kind of vacation spot!”

“Owain. This is literally what we do for a living. It’s not a vacation. A vacation would be a trip to a hot spring.”

“We’d probably just run into Risen.”

“You’re probably right.”

The two months after the end of the Plegian War had passed much the same as their time after the Feroxi tournament had—killing Risen, scraping together whatever coin they could put by, and seeing Ylisse from the trusty backs of Ada and Scottie. Currently, they were far on the eastern end of Ylisse, practically to the coast and about as far away from Plegia as they could get while still staying in their home country.

That had been purposeful.
“Ooh! I dost see with mine eye something that begins with the letter V!”

Inigo blinked, biting back a retort with the utmost effort. “A village. Good job. Looks like a real
one, though, not a mirage.”

“Could be, could be,” Owain assented, urging Ada forward. “Only one way to find out!”

With a roll of his eyes, Inigo sent Scottie trotting after.

By the time he caught up, Owain had cornered an innocent village elder. “Hark, my friend! Tell
me, have you heard the fantastic legend of the disappearing village? We have come in search of its
hoard of treasures!”

The old man let out a sigh. “Aye, treasure hunters, are you? Your type comes around every so
often.”

“Yes, indeed, but could such a kind soul as yourself spare us perhaps a few details?”

He shook his head. “I know naught much more than you young things. People claim to have spied
a desert village that sometimes appears during sandstorms. Tales speak of a legendary Goddess
Staff that sleeps there, but who can really say?”

Owain visibly dropped with disappointment. “That’s… exactly what we already knew.”

“Chin up, my friend,” Inigo said, pulling up beside his cousin. “Or have you tired of our ‘vacation’
already?”

“Vacation?” the old man asked. “You’ve picked a strange place to take a break.”

Inigo shot Owain a pointed gaze that was soundly ignored.

The man shook his head again. “Just take care, boys. The sands are home to armed barbarians.
Every year sees a few villagers go chasing the myth and finding the grave instead. I’ll not stop
you, but be sure you’re well armed and fully prepared.”

“We know our way around a fight or two,” Inigo said casually. He turned in the saddle as a door
clicked open behind him.

A skinny form, half his face hidden by an overly-large mage hat and the other half buried in a
book, emerged. As soon as he opened his mouth, though, there was no doubting who it was.
“Fascinating—I had no idea such phenomena could be observed, and in such a curious location—”

Before either of them could warn him, the mage walked right into Scottie’s hip. He looked up,
blinking.

“...Inigo? Owain?”

“Laurent!” they both cried at once.

“Eureka!” he exclaimed, snapping his book closed and tipping his hat up to see them better. “What
methods did you employ to locate the site of my habitation? I have been working tirelessly on a
spell that would allow me track those of us displaced in hopes of reuniting!”

“Er, well, we weren’t,” Inigo admitted, rubbing the back of his neck.

“We were seeking out the mirage village and its glorious treasures!” Owain said.
Laurent paused before letting out a stiff, “I see.” He squared his shoulders. “No matter. The mirage village has been my cause as well, though I fear my efforts thus far yield precious little progress. Still, an excess of evidence exists for the village to be baseless rumor alone…”

“I thought you were looking for a way to find us,” Owain said with a tinge of disappointment.

“I am! I believe the rumored Goddess Staff may be the crux of my spell. See, while I have been able to acquire a litany of knowledge in my time here, the mana required for such a complex tracking of the tears in the fabric of the world that would have resulted from our journeys here—”

“Um, Laurent?” Inigo interrupted, casting a sideways glance at the now extremely puzzled old man. “Should we be discussing this here?”

“My sincerest apologies, you are correct! Such a sensitive subject should be deliberated in privacy. Come! I will arrange lodging and nourishment for your animals posthaste.”

The mage all but trotted down the dusty street without waiting for an answer, leaving Inigo and Owain hurrying to catch up. “One down, eight to go?” Owain offered.

“Something like that,” Inigo said.

~~~

Laurent, with his usual cool but enthused organization, had them and their horses a place to stay within the hour. Twenty minutes later, the three time travelers were gathered around a rickety wooden table in the mage’s rented home, a pot of tea being split between them. The house, though small, was a perfect representation of their friend—organized and decorated faultlessly, but Laurent had had to clear at least a half a dozen tomes off the kitchen table before they had room to sit.

“So you’re saying the Goddess Staff is more than just a mere keepsake of heroic but ordinary proportions, but perhaps the key to finding the rest of our lost company?” Owain asked, after having put so much sugar in his tea Laurent had chastised his waste. Just the sight of it made Inigo’s teeth ache—his cousin had clearly spent too much time with Gaius during the end of the Plegian War.

“Indeed! As I postulated earlier, I have theorized a way of tracking the locations our friends came through in this world. The sheer amount of energy required to send us nearly two decades back in time should be traceable. It was not straightforward task attempting to ascertain what exactly I should be looking for, but I believe I have. However, the sheer amount of mana it would require to even cast the tracing spell would likely put such a strain on my body as to vaporize me instantly.”

“That would be a bit of a downer, yeah,” Inigo cut in.

“A ‘downer,’ indeed. Even channeling it through a conventional tome, as per standard magical protocol, would likely not be protection enough. I believe, though, that such an arcane item as the Goddess Staff would be robust enough for our purposes. That is assuming, of course, that such a thing actually exists.”

“So you’ve based yourself here in the lands of the dry, swirling sands, forgoing the comforts of home on the off chance you might reunite with your dear lost companions!” Owain exclaimed,
jumping to his feet. “And as reward for your turmoil, the great Owain Dark and his trusty sidekick, Exalt Inigo of the Broken Breadknife, have come to rescue you from your solitude!”

“For one, can you leave the breadknife alone again? For two, by the way, we’re Laslow and Odin now, at least around our families. For three, am I the only one in this room who knows how to speak normally?”

Inigo was saved by Owain’s backlash on the third question by Laurent’s response to the second. “You’ve taken up pseudonyms? Whyever would you? Our younger selves have not yet been born—not even Lucina. There is no need to worry about rousing suspicion.”

“Oh,” Owain said, sinking back down into his seat. “I didn’t think of that.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Laurent asked, rolling his eyes.

“Actually, it was Gerome’s idea,” Inigo pointed out. “He probably was being overcautious, but I figured it couldn’t hurt.”

“Unless if you slip and rouse more suspicion by the fact you have taken up false titles at all,” Laurent said. “Nay, I shall stand by the name my mother granted me.”

“Fair enough,” Inigo said with a shrug. “One less thing for us to keep track up.”

“Yes, yes,” Owain said, waving his hand. “More to the point, what about this mirage village?”

~~~

After spending the next half a day listening to Laurent’s theories about the location of the village, intense in every detail, Owain got bored and decided they should just go looking. Since Inigo had to check every few minutes to see if his brain had started dribbling out of his ears, he was inclined to agree with his cousin.

They set out with Ada, Scottie, and Laurent’s borrowed, elderly mare Sassafras. For all her age and the fact she was nearly blind in one eye, the chestnut was feisty, nearly taking off with the mage several times before he could rein her in. Owain was equally amused by this the sixth time as he was the first.

After a while, though, Sassafras calmed. By then, Inigo was so hopelessly lost in the swirling sands he could only hope Laurent’s tracking spell—“Rudimentary, really, even Owain could probably cast it…” “Hey!”—could succeed in leading them back to their current village.

They spent three incredibly boring days navigating the desert with nary another soul in sight. Laurent occupied himself with various mage-like activities, while Owain had taken to writing in a well-worn journal whilst in the saddle.

“What is that, your diary?” Inigo asked one morning, leaning over in his saddle to peer at the book and reaching to steady it to get a better look.

“H-hey!” Owain cried, attempting to snatch it to his chest, but Inigo was too quick. “Don’t read that!” he cried as Inigo deftly pried it from his hands.
“It is your diary!” Inigo crowed in triumph. “And it’s full of bad drawings of heroes and their weapons.”

“Don’t! The Manual of Justice is more than your mortal eyes can handle!”

Inigo cackled. Finally, something entertaining to do on this cursed trip! “Oh, that’s just adorable. You even named the book and everything. Now let’s see what we’ve got…” He flipped to the beginning. “Page One: Owain. When danger nears, his sword hand twitches and his eyes turn red.” Oh, come now. Really?”

“Give it baaaaaaaaack,” Owain whined, flailing desperately for the book. Inigo, meanwhile, used Scottie’s extra height on Ada to his full advantage, thinking how nice it was to be able to look down on his taller cousin.

“Every ally hurt within a hundred paces adds a power multiplier… at plus five, a special move is unlocked that can fell the enemy boss in one hit,” Inigo continued. “Well, that is impressive! I’m surprised you even need us around, frankly. Though I guess that special move didn’t work too well with General Mustafa, did it? Were there not enough of us sacrificially injured for you?”

“Why are you doing this?” Owain asked. “I thought we were friends!”

“Can you two keep it down?” Laurent asked with a sigh.

Inigo ignored both of them. “Let’s jump around here, shall we? Hm… how about… ‘Page Fifteen: The Awesome Catalogue of Ultimate Techniques.’ The Axe of Dorcas… the Laguz Leap… Oh, you drew flames around this name! Does that affect the pronunciation?”

Owain dramatically flung his arm over his eyes. “Either stop reading or just stick a sword in me and be done with it.”

“Oh, please. You’re overreacting. Besides, genius of this ilk must be shared, right Laurent?”

“I have more pressing concerns at the moment,” Laurent said in a clipped voice. “Namely, that sandstorm on the horizon you are both too self-absorbed to pay attention to.”

Inigo looked up, snapping Owain’s book closed. “Oh.”

Owain perked up. “Didn’t that guy say the village only appeared in sandstorms?” he asked.

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“He might have,” Inigo admitted, thinking back.

“More importantly, encountering that storm head-on would be detrimental to our chances of survival—Sassafras, no!”

The mare’s suddenly perked ears and Laurent’s cry of alarm were the only warning they had before Sassafras, catching half a glimpse of the storm through her bad eye, spun on her hindquarters and took off in the opposite direction.

“Laurent!” Owain called after the mage, reining Ada around to follow. Inigo shoved the ‘Manual of Justice’ into his saddlebag, following suit as whatever Laurent answered was swallowed by the wind.

“Don’t lose him!”

“A horse that old should not be that quick!” Owain shot back.
“I’m aware of that!”

Despite that fact, it wasn’t long before Laurent and his mount had been swallowed up by the horizon. Inigo pulled up short, cursing under his breath.

“That storm is moving in fast,” Owain said, casting a glance over his shoulder.

“I know,” Inigo replied. “Dammit, I had a feeling this was going to be a fool’s errand.” And now, worse yet, their waste of time had potentially just turned fatal.
A bright flare of red suddenly shot up over the dunes, drawing their attention immediately. “There he is,” Owain said with relief. That moment of relaxation faded, though, as sudden thunder rumbled and a bolt of lighting struck from the same place.

“That’s combat magic,” Inigo said, a pit forming in his stomach. “Let’s go!”

They charged up the next hill and the desert spread out below them, revealing a tree-lined spring. True to Inigo’s fears, Laurent was already completely surrounded by bandits. Sassafras reared and snorted like a horse fifteen years her junior and her rider held on for dear life, struggling to hold his tome steady enough to retaliate.

Inigo drew his sword as Scottie, without cue and with the fervor of a warhorse, charged into the fray with Ada galloping on his heels. The bandit closest to Laurent dove for cover, just barely avoiding losing his life under the horses’ hooves.

“What did you do, stop in Ylisstol for lunch?” Laurent cried as Sassafras finally dropped back down to earth.

“You’re welcome!” Inigo shot back.

“Inigo, the village!” Owain called, striking an axe-wielding barbarian with the blunt of his sword. The man crumpled into a heap, unconscious but alive. “We have to warn them!”

“Village?” Inigo asked, narrowing his eyes to see through the sand their battle had kicked up. True to his cousin’s words, though, slightly north of their position were a dozen low, squat buildings he hadn’t noticed before. Even calling it a village was being generous, but he had a feeling the residents would be woefully underprepared for a fight like this. “Right! Laurent, come on!”

Fortunately, no one of this ragtag bandit crew were mounted, meaning the three could charge ahead to the village and hold a defensive position. “Attack!” Owain bellowed in a battle voice Inigo knew all too well. “Bandits! You’re under attack!”

In a matter of moments, the sleepy little town came to life, residents flying out of their homes. Inigo pulled Scottie up short, one hand raised in a peace gesture as he looked back out over the desert from which they came.

Visibility was growing ever-worse as the sandstorm caught up with them. He couldn’t even make out the bandit crew, though they shouldn’t have been able to hide at this distance.

As a matter of fact, he couldn’t see anything. Or hear much, though the sounds of pursuit should have been unmistakable. It was like they’d stepped into a pocket of another world—like the tiny snowglobe Lucina had possessed as a child, except with falling sand instead of snow.

Slightly puzzled, Inigo looked back into the village. To his surprise, the residents weren’t
scrambling around arming themselves, as they should have been. Instead, they stood watching curiously, as if the three were a traveling theater troupe about to put on a show.

Owain and Laurent, too, looked as confused as he felt, the two of them lowering sword and spellbook as Ada tossed her head and Sassafras chomped at her bit.

An older man emerged from one of the buildings, dusting his hands on his thighs. “Well, well,” he said. “This village does not often play host to outsiders.”

Coming back to his senses, Inigo cleared his throat. “Yes, well, you’re about to host a lot of outsiders, and they’re not friendly ones either.” He shot another glance out into the desert and was immediately dizzied by the sands.

The man shook his head. “They will not find us here. Few hold faith in that which cannot be seen to exist, yet I sense such faith in you.”

Inigo, Laurent, and Owain exchanged glances, comprehension starting to dawn. “Are you saying this is the place we have sought?” asked Owain.

“Indeed. Here, then. Claim what you have come for,” the elder said. “I hold my own faith that you will use it with wisdom.”

“This was more straightforward than I had originally speculated,” Laurent said under his breath, patting his mount’s neck.

“Wait, Hilkiah,” rose a voice. A young woman stepped forward, her gazing switching between the elder and Inigo’s company. “How do we know we can trust their intentions?”

Inigo chuckled quietly. “And there’s the catch,” he whispered.

“They fought with skill, speed, and strength,” the elder, evidently named Hilkiah, said. “They are warriors of the like I have not seen in a long, long time.”

“Indeed!” Owain piped up. “We have honed our craft through many long—”

He quieted with a squeak as Inigo smacked his arm. “Do not blow this,” he hissed.

“But more importantly,” Hilkiah continued, ignoring them, “they fought with mercy. Their mage used stunning spells. Their swordsman disarmed and distracted, though killing would have been swifter and simpler.” He lifted his gaze to meet Inigo. “And their leader brought them here to warn us, though they had to turn their back to the enemy.”

Inigo straightened his shoulders, trying to speak with all the royal formality Lucina had been so good at but that he had never quite mastered. “We believe life is precious, sir. Killing should be a last resort, never the first option.”

“Speak to me face to face, Son of Naga,” Hilkiah said.

Inigo had to resist the urge to cover his right eye with his hand, but he swung off Scottie nonetheless.

“The road you walk is not the easy one,” Hilkiah said. “You stride in shadows, following footprints already taken. Your hands have been stained yet you still mourn every loss of life.”

Inigo swallowed hard, a dozen sets of eyes flashing through his mind. They were the Plegians that
had fallen, unavoidably, under his blade during the war. He could count every one of them. There was not a night that went by he didn’t see an unavoidable kaleidoscope of blue, brown, and hazel. “I walk the road I must,” he said thickly. “For those still living, for those who’ve gone, and for those yet to come.”

A beat passed before Hilkiah smiled. “That was the answer I hoped for. Your heart is true, Son of Naga.” He gestured to an older woman, bearing an ornate staff. “And I tell you now that you will never walk that road alone.”

As soon as the woman passed him the staff, she blurred in his vision. The rest of the crowd turned translucent, followed by the buildings and, lastly, Hilkiah. After only a moment, just Inigo, Laurent, and Owain remained. Not even the bandits were left, though a newly-cleared sky shone overhead.

For a long moment, the three did nothing but exchange glances.

“That. Was. Epic!” Owain finally cried.

“Yeah. Epic,” Inigo echoed, realizing with a sigh that the trip back was going to involve one very long Owain monologue about just how epic it had been.

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With the Goddess Staff in hand, once they arrived back in their base village it only took Laurent half a day to finalize his spell work. The very evening they returned, he was ready to test it.

“So, how do we know if it worked?” Inigo asked, peering over his friend’s shoulder at the papers spread across the table.

“The spell is linked to the map of Ylisse,” Laurent explained, pointing toward said map on one edge of the table. “Quite simply, a mark will appear anywhere one of us came through, anywhere on the continent.”

“Amazing,” Owain said—looking spellbound, for lack of a better term. “How long did it take you to work that out?”

Nonchalantly, not even looking up from where he was peering through his spectacles, Laurent replied, “About three years.”

The room went suddenly silent, as if all the air had been sucked out of it. “Laurent…” Inigo breathed.

“You’ve… been here… three years?” Owain finished.

“Closer to four at this moment, but yes.” At the sudden tension in the room, Laurent looked up. “Has it been significantly less for the two of you?”

It was a long moment before either of them answered. “I arrived in February, Inigo in April,” Owain said hesitantly.

Laurent blinked owlishly. “Less than a year for both of you? I see. That does explain why it has
taken this long for me to cross paths with any of you. It’s entirely possible our full company has not even arrived in the past yet.”

Inigo looked closer at his friend, seeing for the first time the true marks of aging. The mage’s face was sharper, more refined, his body both sturdier and more weathered.

“So you’re, like, twenty-one now?” Owain asked.

“Actually, calculating for the fact we left the future in the fall and I arrived in the spring, I am not even yet twenty-and-a-half.” He glanced up at Owain again with a look of disdain. “I see why you did not go into a scholarly field, my friend. Your arithmetic needs work.”

“Clearly the fact that we lived at the literal end of the world had no influence on Owain’s choice of employment,” Inigo said dryly.

“Clearly it is the fact that heroes of legend do not need math,” Owain sniffed.

“Clearly you are still atrocious at it, whatever your excuse.” Laurent dipped his quill and scribbled something in the margins of his tome. “And you are both still seventeen, correct?”

“Er, something like that,” Inigo said. “Neither of us really felt like working out the whole time difference. We both just celebrated the actual dates even if it hadn’t been a full year.”

Laurent sniffed, falling back into silence. Inigo watched him for a moment more, thinking how odd it was that the mage, once just a few months apart from Owain and himself, now was older than Lucina had been. Of course, the age gap between Owain and Inigo was larger now too, the mere three weeks that had once spanned between them extended by the extra two months the former had been in the past.

As always when he thought too hard about all their time travel business, he rubbed at his temples to ward off the incoming headache.

Thankfully, Laurent interrupted with a satisfied sigh. “The spell is complete.”

“...That’s it?” Owain asked, leaning forward eagerly.

“Not all magic is as flashy as the combat magic you are typically exposed to,” Laurent said. “Sometimes, three years of work simply comes down to a dot on a map.”

He turned the map toward them and, sure enough, a blue-green dot was coming into focus, about a hundred miles southwest of them at Inigo’s best guess. “Is that where you came through?”

“Irrefutably. If my calculations are accurate, the points we emerged should begin appearing in chronological order. My suspicions that I was the first to arrive were correct.”

“There’s me!” Owain exclaimed, nearly tipping his chair over as he lunged halfway across the table to point at the second dot. “Regna Ferox, that’s where I came out!”

A third dot began to focus in. “South of Ylisstol. That’d be me,” Inigo said. “Is that it? Just us three so far?”

“It’s possible,” Laurent said. “Unfortunately, since I do not have a map of the Valmese continent, if any of our friends appeared across the sea we do not yet have a way of locating them.”

Owain almost visibly deflated, meekly settling back into his seat. “Oh. I didn’t think about that.”
“Do you think they’d end up that far out?” Inigo asked.

“I would not have originally theorized I would end up so much further back in the past than the rest of you, so as of this moment I suggest we rule nothing out.” Laurent nodded back to the map. “Besides, it is not just the three of us.”

Sure enough, a fourth marker had lit up while they spoke. Inigo tried to keep his face from falling.

“Plegia,” he muttered. “I should have known.” He’d been hoping to avoid their western neighbor for a while longer.

Owain reinflated. “Who do you suppose it is?” he asked. “Perhaps the thunderous Noire? Stoic Gerome, creature of the night? Skittish but heroic Yarne? The one-woman mountain herself, Kjelle?”

Inigo leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms and eyeing the mystery dot on the map. “Well. Only one way to find out.” He glanced up at the other two. “To Plegia?”

After a beat, they both nodded. “To Plegia.”
As it turned out, all of Owain’s first guesses had been wrong.

“Well, look who the cat dragged in. Bookworm, Swordhand, and Prince Not-Charming.”

Inigo, crossing his arms over his chest, let out a sigh. “Hello, Severa. And here I thought Owain had spent too much time with Gaius.”

The redhead scowled and likely would have put her hands on her hips had she not been carrying a large basket, cloth covering the contents. Owain interjected before she could say a word.

“Our dearest adoptive uncle had much to teach me! Of course I spent many hours in his company soaking up his dark knowledge!”

“Now that is a terrifying concept,” Laurent muttered.

Severa’s eyes went wide, a bit of tension dropping from her posture. “You’ve met up with our parents?”

“Some of them,” Inigo explained. “We joined the Shepherds and fought in the Plegian War for a little while. Well, Owain and I did.”

“You may wish to keep that fact to yourselves,” Laurent pointed out under his breath. “Considering we are, in fact, in Plegia.”

“Well, at least one of you has some sense,” Severa said airily. “Whatever. I’m busy.” Without waiting for an answer, she strode off through the marketplace.

“Severa!” Inigo called, following after.

“Well, someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed this morning,” Owain said.

“Doesn’t she always?” Inigo shot back. As he caught up to their friend, falling in step beside her, he fell back on his usual tactics. “Severa, darling, at least tell us what you’ve been up to. We came a long way to find you!”

“Call me darling one more time and you won’t live long enough to hear it,” she shot back. “Like I said, I’m busy. Get lost.” She ducked into the crowd proper, red pigtails vanishing into the melting pot within seconds, leaving the three boys to exchange glances.

“That was cold, even for Severa,” Owain finally said.

“Indeed,” Laurent said, staring at the point she’d disappeared as if willing it to reveal her secrets.
No one spoke for a long moment. “I’d give up now, if I were you,” interjected an unfamiliar voice.

The three turned to find an older woman staring at them, a basket of laundry on her hip. “What do you mean?” Inigo asked.

The woman shook her head. “She’s one of Nelson’s dogs now. If there’s even a scrap of good in her, he’ll knock it out of her before long.”

“And who would this ‘Nelson’ be?” Laurent inquired.

“A former Valmese general with delusions of grandeur.” The woman shook her head. “We tried to fight back when he came in, but he’s a master of extortion. Now, he’s got the entire town under his thumb.” He face twisted. “He demands our food and taxes everything he can. I don’t think… many of us will last the winter. But he sits in luxury, so he doesn’t care.”

Owain’s shoulders, slumped from their friend’s dismissive behavior, rose again. “Hmm,” he said, casting sidelong glances at Inigo and Laurent. “Sounds like a job for some… heroes.”

“Owain, for Naga’s sake,” Inigo sighed, but with a tiny smile that betrayed he’d been thinking the exact same thing.

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While it took them all of an hour to locate Nelson’s hideout, a vastly defended mercenary fortress, actually getting inside—or getting any connection to Nelson at all, for that fact—was proving far more difficult.

They were scouting the fortress for the third night in a row, split up and left to their own devices, when Owain finally found Severa again. She was standing guard on the south side of the fortress, arms crossed and sword glinting at her side. Though he wasn’t close enough to hear, she seemed to let out a sigh as she leaned over the railing.

He stayed in the shadows, watching her for several minutes to ensure she was alone before daring to approach. “Hark!” he said under his breath. “A lone warrior stands watch over a land that is not hers, wondering why she has taken this post. Suddenly, like a bolt from the blue, Owain Dark nears! He, too, questions her motivations, knowing her honor would be wounded by working for such a fiend of a man as Nelson! The curiosity gnaws at him, but he has not yet discovered the answer.”

“Gods, and for a while I was actually almost missing you guys,” Severa muttered. “Almost.”

“Coming from you, I will accept that as the highest form of flattery, knowing that for you to admit such a thing you have sorely desired just a moment of my dark aura. Fear not! I am here, and we shall not be parted in such a manner again.”

Though Severa stayed facing resolutely forward as Owain stepped to her side, for a moment her breath hitched. “Oh, great,” she said dryly. “Just what I wanted, a perpetual shadow of a six-year-old trapped in a man’s body.”

“Shadow I am, indeed! Why, shortly after I arrived in this time, I single handedly defeated—”
“That’s not what I meant and you know it,” she snapped.

For a moment, they both fell silent. “Why are you here, Severa?” Owain finally asked. “What darkness could possess you to work for such a man? We’ve heard such horrible tales…”

“You have no idea,” Severa responded. “You really don’t. But he stole something from me, and I intend to get it back.” She took a shuddering breath. “And then I’ll kill him for what he’s put me and these people through.”

“Treasonous words.”

The two spun, Severa’s sword out of its sheath only a moment before Owain’s. “Nalia,” Severa whispered dangerously. “I’ll kill you where you stand. Don’t think I won’t.”

“Oh, Severa, I have no doubt,” the voice continued. The young woman it belonged to stepped out of the shadows, revealing a strong, battle-hardened form of around their age. “Luckily for you, I’m on your side.”

“Yeah, Nelson’s chief lieutenant is on my side, tell me another one,” Severa snapped, bringing her sword closer to Nalia.

Surprisingly enough, the other girl laughed. “If I weren’t, you would be dead by now. You and your lover.”

“He is not my lover,” Severa spat.

“And you severely underestimate the skills of Owain Dark,” Owain added.

A beat passed before Nalia laughed again. “Yes, you will make valuable allies. I’ve had my eye on you since you got here, Severa. I am not blind to Nelson’s cruelty, nor your vendetta against him. If I help you retrieve what is yours… perhaps you will help me?”

“I don’t need your help to find it,” said Severa.

“Then why have you not retrieved it in the five months you have been here?”

Severa didn’t have an answer for that.

“Er… what ‘it’ are we speaking of, exactly?” Owain interjected.

“My mother’s wedding ring,” Severa responded sourly. “Nelson took it from me. That’s why I’ve been working for him. I know, it’s stupid.”

Owain felt his heart clench. “Not at all,” he whispered, shooting her a reassuring glance. “But perhaps the fates have aligned to drop this unexpected ally in our laps? I fear the four of us alone would have a fearsome time engaging an enemy such as Nelson from the outside.”

“The four of you?” Nalia asked.

Severa glared at Owain. “All right, all right, I’ll consider it. But I don’t trust you as far as I can throw this fortress, Nalia.”

“Fair enough,” she answered. “I’ll give you time to speak with your other allies. If you agree to my plan, I’ll be at The Lonely Goat around eight tomorrow night.”

“The Lonely what now?” Owain asked.
Severa sighed. “It’s a tavern in town. Don’t ask, no one else knows why it’s called that either. All right. But if you double-cross us…” she left the threat hanging.

Nalia smirked. “See you tomorrow, Severa.” With that, she slipped back into the shadows.

“Ugh,” Severa said after several moments. “I can’t stand her.” She looked back at Owain and, for a moment, he could almost swear her gaze toward him softened. He decided it was a trick of the moonlight. “You should be going before anyone else catches you up here. I’ll find you guys in the morning.”

Owain gave a sharp nod. “Very well, O Scarlet Severa.”

With that, he, too, slipped away.

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Inigo was in love.

Again.

Owain could tell from the second his cousin laid eyes on Nalia that another infatuation had taken root, and prepared himself for a hundred tales of her beauty to haunt him for at least the next week.

“My lady!” Inigo exclaimed, scrambling out of his chair. “When my companions proposed our alliance, they did not tell me of your unrivaled beauty!” He bent down, caught her hand, then paused as if expecting her to yank away. When she didn’t, he lifted it to his lips and pressed a kiss to the back.

“And Severa neglected to inform me of your charm,” Nalia said with a coy smile, appearing dead serious. “Were you trying to keep this one to yourself, darling?”

Severa scowled.

Inigo straightened up, pulling out a chair. “There is room beside me if you wish.”

“I believe I would,” she answered, sitting primly.

Owain had to consciously keep his jaw from falling. Had Inigo really made it a whole thirty seconds with a woman and not been rejected?

Severa finally broke the silence caused by the moon-eyed Inigo. “Nalia,” she said flatly. “My allies, Laurent and Inigo; you’ve already met Owain.”

The three boys nodded. After their discussion with Laurent, the royal cousins had, at least temporarily, dropped their false names. Robin would be looking for Laslow and Odin, after all, and not Inigo and Owain. If the tactician was still searching for them, that was.

On the other hand, Inigo had resumed the permanent donning of his mask once they stepped foot onto Plegian soil. In Ylisse, the Mark of Naga would be seen as a blessing—in Plegia, it would have put a target square on his eye.

Maybe the mysterious mask of… mysteriousness was why Nalia hadn’t instantly shot him down?
Owain pondered this new enigma for a moment before his attention was drawn back to the present.

“Let me put it this way,” Nalia said flatly. “You’re never going to be able to come at… you-know-who from the outside. He’s too well prepared for that. The last ten people who tried ended up food for the wild dogs.”

“The last ten people were not Owain Dark and his daunting companions, bonded by the brotherhood of—” Owain only broke off when Severa cuffed him upside the head. “Hey.”

“I am not your brother, idiot!” She cleared her throat and looked back at Nalia. “You’ll have to excuse him. He was dropped on his head as an infant.”

“I was not!”

Naila brought a delicate hand to her face to hide a cough—or was it a laugh? Owain scowled.

“Pray, what category of weapon does he favor?” Laurent asked. “Such knowledge will be crucial in our planning to combat him.”

“He is a sage, and a gifted one at that,” Nalia replied. “On the other hand… so am I.”

Inigo seemed to swoon even more at that.

Laurent nodded. “I am a mage myself; we have a superlative mix of physical and magical fighters for this task.”

Nalia nodded sharply. “Good. Then our next job is getting you three into the ranks.”

“Getting us… what now?” Inigo asked, paling a little.

“I just told you weren’t going to bring him down from the outside,” Nalia said with a shrug. “You’re going to have to stab him in the back.”

“That seems… less than heroic,” Owain couldn’t help but point out.

“Sometimes heroism isn’t blood and glory,” she said. “Sometimes it’s bringing down the bad guy… whatever it takes.” She sent Inigo a sweet smile. “Right?”

For a long moment, he met her gaze, fingers kneading at his glass. Finally, Inigo cleared his throat. “Right.”

Chapter End Notes

I decided to, for lack of a better term, have some fun with the Nelson plotline. After all, without Chrom and the whole gang to take him out, the battle’s not going to be easy. Prepare yourselves for drama, character cameos, and a brand-new OC, and let me know what you think!
Inigo knew, immediately, that bringing Nelson down was the right thing. The longer he stayed in the town, the more he could see the effect of the sage’s iron fist. Though winters in Plegia couldn’t be compared to Regna Ferox or even most of Ylisse, cold was setting in hard and the people were hurting.

But was he going about it the right way?

Two weeks passed in which he saw very little of his friends, or Nalia. The latter was Nelson’s chief lieutenant, after all, while the former, along with Inigo himself, were nothing more than the rank-and-file grunts. He did little more than guard the fortress (which bored him) or go into the city proper for supply runs (which pained him; these people had done nothing to deserve having their livelihoods snatched out from under them). Nalia met with them at The Lonely Goat every Wednesday night, and that was the most interaction any of them had. If not for the fact he shared a room with Owain and Laurent, he would have barely spoken with any of them at all.

All in all, they were not one step closer to bringing down Nelson.

So, it was to Inigo’s immense surprise when Nalia passed him in the hallway and, giving him a curt nod, passed him a slip of paper. He blinked, watching her retreating form for longer than strictly necessary.

All it said was **Tonight, eight o’clock. Noslen’s Inn. Table for two.**

Noslen... He’d heard of a few places around town bearing that name. Inigo figured he must’ve been a fairly popular—and rich—fellow. That fact was quickly overshadowed, though, by **Table for two.**

He was not used to being on the receiving end of being asked out. But, thankfully, the way she’d asked was indirect, saving him the awkwardness of trying to blush and stutter his way through accepting. Had she really figured him out that well already? The thought made his heart skip more than one beat.

That was a feeling he was going to have to get used to, he realized about halfway across the inn’s dining room, three minutes past eight. That very moment would be ingrained in his mind for a long, long time, for it was the moment Nalia met his gaze from across the room, rouge-tinted lips quirking upwards.

Two weeks, he thought. Two weeks, and his attraction to her had moved beyond mere habit.

He was falling and he was falling hard.

“Hello, Inigo.”

“Good evening, my lady,” he replied, trying to project the same calm composure she exuded. It
was very difficult when even his nicest clothing was leagues below her own form-fitting dress and he had to resist the urge to tug at his stiff sleeves. Absently, he wished for some of the finery from his princely days that had long since been destroyed.

“Oh, none of that,” Nalia replied. “This is not a business dinner. Sit.”

Automatically, Inigo complied, wondering if he could have resisted if he’d tried. “Then what sort of dinner is it?” he asked boldly.

She smiled.

When holding her gaze became too much, Inigo cleared his throat and glanced out over the rest of the room. “Awful quiet in here for a Friday night,” he said.

“I know the owner,” Nalia replied, still with that demure, maddening smile.

“Really.” Inigo kept his tone flat, despite the spike in his pulse. “So you pulled in a favor?” She nodded. “Why, then?”

She crossed one ankle over the other, bumping his from their kitty-corner positioning. “The walls aren’t the only things that have ears,” she said. “And I wanted to talk to you.”

“I thought this wasn’t about business.”

“I was mostly telling the truth.” Nalia leaned back, folding her hands in her lap. “I’ve been discrete, but I’ve been watching you and your little band, Inigo. Clearly, you have quite the history together…and just as clearly, you are their leader. If I suggest something to you... your people will fall in line behind you the moment you give the word.”

Inigo rubbed at the back of his neck, the word Exalt weighing heavily on his shoulders for the first time in months. Back in the future past, before Lucina’s demise, his rank had technically put him below only his sister and just off of on par with Owain, with even the noble-blooded Gerome and Brady beneath him. But in Grima’s world, rank meant nothing. Nothing except the fact that Lucina was, unquestionably, their leader—though she had held that rank by just as much by merit as by title.

For a moment, he wanted to laugh at Nalia’s blunt faith in him, remembering the squabbling and in-fighting that had characterized his brief stint as the true Exalt. His friends had definitely not ‘fallen in line behind him’ without question.

Now that they were back in the past, his only real tie to the rank was the fact that Owain refused to quit calling him by it. Exalt Inigo this and that… He couldn’t quite help the sting every time he heard the title he’d never asked for and would never be worthy of.

“For one,” he finally said, realizing he’d been silent too long, “they’re not my people. They’re my friends.”

For a split second, Nalia’s composure faltered. “My apologies,” she said, recovering in an instant. “That was thoughtless of me to say.”

“It’s quite all right,” Inigo said, but it was a moment before he could meet her eyes again. “If you have a plan, I’d love to hear it.”

“Let’s save the details for another time, shall we?”
“Shouldn’t be trying to bring down Ne… uh… you-know-who as soon as possible?” Inigo said, catching himself at the last moment. Nalia had warned them about being too loose-tongued about their task in public, for fear of Nelson learning of it.

“What, are you trying to leave already?” Though her eyes danced with the teasing, he picked up an edge of hurt in her tone.

He paused. He had to leave when their task was done, yes. He had to keep looking for the rest of the friends, and keep fighting the future that would come to pass without their stopping it. But…

“You could always come with us.”

“A bold thing to say to a woman you’ve barely met.”

“I’ve said many bold things to women I’ve barely met.”

“I’ve noticed!” Nalia said with a cackle. “And how well does that usually go for you?”

“Er… well… actually…” He scratched at his surely-reddening cheek.

“Oh, you’re quite adorable when you’re flustered.” Nalia’s words only made Inigo flush even more. “All right, I’ll let you off the hook.” With that, she lifted her glass. “To the future.”

“To the future,” Inigo echoed, though the words sent a pang through him. He drank deeply to bury it.

Perhaps a bit too deeply. As the night wore on, some distant part of him realized he might be speaking a bit too freely with this girl, but he pushed the thought aside. He hadn’t given away anything too damning about his past, so couldn’t he just enjoy one single night of spending time with a beautiful woman who hadn’t rejected him at first glance?

Actually, by all accounts she was doing quite the opposite. Long after their plates had been cleared away, Nalia finally got to her feet, offering Inigo a hand. “Come join me upstairs, would you?”

“U-upstairs?” he stuttered out, casting a glance at the shadowed stairway across the room. Oh gods, she doesn’t mean… does she?

The smirk slowly curling her lips told him she had phrased it that way on purpose. “Oh, relax,” she all but purred, before her voice lost its seductive edge. “You’re not getting everything on the first date. Just come.”

Wordlessly, Inigo followed.

The top of the staircase split, one hall leading to the rented rooms of the inn proper and the other stepping out onto a dimly lit balcony above the dining area. A cozy seating area was gathered around a small fireplace, sectioned off to leave it in almost complete privacy. It was there Nalia led him, settling demurely on one of the couches before kicking off her heels. “I thought this would be more comfortable than downstairs,” she said.

Swallowing hard, Inigo nodded and sat beside her, barely managing to hold back an unflattering squeak of surprise when she tucked her knees up in his lap. He was going to have to get used to her being this forward, he realized. “I suppose it is,” he said, his voice higher than he would have liked.

For a long while, they both fell silent, content to enjoy each other’s company. Inigo wavered somewhere between awake and dozing, watching the flickering flames, only startling when he felt
the lightest of touches at his mask.

“I was hoping you wouldn’t wear this tonight,” Nalia murmured, running her fingertips over the metal ridges. “Why do you?”

His breath caught for a moment. He’d grown sadly used to wearing it, especially now they were in Plegia. Now, it was starting to turn into a defense mechanism, a retreat from reality.

The thought scared him.

“I suppose this world isn’t quite ready to see all of Inigo,” he finally answered.

Her words ghosted over his ear, leaving him shivering. “What if I am?”

Before he could fully comprehend that thought, her lips were brushing feather-light over his. Startled, he sucked in a gasp of her breath and felt a spike of alarm that she would yank away.

She didn’t, and he let himself settle into it, ignoring the slight tug on his mask. When they pulled away, both with eyes half-lidded, she had left him bare-faced.

“What’s this?” Nalia murmured, tracing a knuckle over the delicate skin below his right eye.

Inigo felt his lungs hitch for what felt like the millionth time that night. “Nothing. A birthmark.”

“A striking resemblance to Naga’s mark,” she commented. “I see why you would hide that, being here.”

“You understand now?”

Wordlessly, she handed him back his mask and withdrew any contact between them. “Why are you here, Inigo? Everything about you screams Ylissean through and through. So why come to the land your people have just so gleefully laid waste to?”

Inigo frowned, glancing away. “Because injustice is injustice, in whatever borders it resides in. Suffering is still suffering. Why should I abide it in Plegia any more than in Ylisse?”

She scoffed. “I thought you had more sense to you than that heroic idealism.”

“Isn’t it better than the alternative? Better than telling yourself the world is cruel and nothing you do will change it? I’d rather save one person than save no one.” For a long moment, Nalia didn’t answer, and Inigo pushed on. “How many people live here? A few thousand?” A beat. “That’s a few thousand who will be better off without Nelson. A few thousand I’ve helped. And gods I hope that offsets the lives I’ve had to take.”

They sat in silence for so long Inigo wondered if his date was simply going to up and leave without a word. “You fought in the war, didn’t you?” she finally asked.

“Yeah.”

She let out a sigh. “I’m sorry. I ruined the entire evening, didn’t I?”

He shook his head. “No. Perhaps dampened the mood for a few minutes, but no.”

Silently, she handed him back his mask. “Good. Because I hope you realize… I like you, very much.”
His heart fluttered, tentatively lifting a hand to her cheek. “I’d say that goes for both of us,” he whispered. Taking a deep breath, he continued, “However misguided you think my motivations… they did bring me here, now… to meet you. And I’m quite glad they did.”

“...So am I.”

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It was after midnight when Inigo made it back to the fortress, still starry-eyed and bearing a dorky smile as he let himself into his room.

Owain glanced up immediately from where he was scribbling in his Manual of Justice, gaze accusing. “Where’ve you been?” he demanded.

Inigo looked between him and Laurent—who, bent over the room’s lone desk, hadn’t even glanced up from his own book—and didn’t answer for a long moment. Instead, he moved to the closet, pulling out his nightclothes and ducking behind the changing screen.

Owain cleared his throat. “Dear cousin, has your mysterious disappearance rendered you deaf?”

Inigo couldn’t help but let out a laugh, poking his head out from behind the screen. “I had a date,” he announced.

Scoffing, Owain turned back to his writing. “And the sky is green,” he said, mockingly mimicking his cousin’s inflection.

Laurent let out an exaggerated sigh from across the room. “Actually, though exceedingly uncommon, there are certain patterns of weather phenomena that can, in fact, render the atmosphere a shade that distantly resembles viridian.”

“Okay, so I’m way too tipsy to make sense of that sentence right now, but I’m assuming you mean it can happen, just rarely,” Inigo said. “Like me, getting a date.”

A beat passed before Owain piped up, “Wait, were you actually serious?”

Letting out a sigh of relief at the looser attire, Inigo reemerged with a smirk.

“You were? Send my regards to the poor woman who pitied you enough to say yes.”

“She asked me, actually.”

Owain’s brows nearly disappeared into his hairline. “And who would this woman of very questionable judgement be?”

Instead of answering, Inigo crawled into bed and pulled the covers up to his chin, still smirking. He’d tell Owain… eventually.

When he’d gotten more of a rise out of him.

“Inigoooooo. You can’t just sit there and not tell me.”

“Sure I can. Watch me.”
Manual of Justice cast to the foot of his bed, Owain bounced hard enough to make the springs creak in protest. “Beloved cousin, companion in battle, fellow man displaced in time and space to save our dire future… you must tell me the juicy secrets of your scandalous evening!”

“It wasn’t very scandalous, actually.” Inigo closed his eyes, still cackling internally.

Owain let out a huff. “Oh, my fair brother… I’m afraid you leave me no choice.” He inhaled deeply, then cried, “Shadow Strike of Nightmare!”

With that as his only warning, he launched himself from one bed to the next, landing squarely on top of Inigo, who let out a shriek that could be heard several doors down. “Owain! What the actual —” He was cut off by a flailing elbow colliding with his jaw and let out another cry that was more surprise than pain. With absolutely no grace, he shoved hard, sending his cousin sprawling to the floor.

“Ow!” Owain exclaimed, rubbing at his backside. “What was that for?”

“For launching yourself at me like some kind of flipping animal!” Inigo shot back, rubbing at his jaw. “I was going to tell you in a minute!”

Owain huffed again, reaching for his journal. “Shadow… Strike… of Nightmare… less… than… effective,” he said, enunciating as he wrote.

“Did you draw flames around that one too?” Inigo asked snidely.

“Needs… revision,” Owain continued, roundly ignoring him.

“For Naga’s sake, it’s a wonder I ever get any sleep with you two around,” Laurent grumbled.

“You love us and you know it,” Owain shot back.

Readjusting his covers, Inigo let out a sigh. “Well, if certain people can be civilized members of society for a few minutes, then yes, I will tell you about my evening.”

“Please do before he spontaneously combusts,” Laurent sighed.
“From the screaming I heard from your room the other night, I thought maybe a girl had snuck in or something,” Severa said dryly. “Then I remembered whose room it was and realized that would never happen.”

Blushing furiously, Inigo muttered, “Owain decided to jump on me! You would scream too!”

“Inigo wouldn’t tell me about his date!” Owain shot back.

“Try again, boys. I’m more likely to believe there was a girl in your rooms than Inigo having a date.”

“Well I did!” Inigo said petulantly.

“Just realize they were both being equally childish and move on, Severa,” Laurent put in.

With a huff, Severa tossed one of her pigtails over her shoulder, catching Inigo in the mouth. He made a face, scrubbing at his lips. She ignored him. “Wait. You weren’t with who I think you were with, were you?”

He smirked.

“Every time I think I’ve gotten to the bottom of your stupidity, you astound me again.” She rolled her eyes. “Nalia? Really?”

“Don’t really me,” he shot back. “What’s not to like?”

“Uh, everything?”

“What, are you jealous, Severa?”

“Don’t insult me, Inigo.” She leaned back in her chair, crossing her arms even tighter. “You’ve known her, like, a whole three weeks.”

“An astonishingly long time for Inigo to know a girl that he didn’t grow up with,” Owain put in.

“You’re not helping,” Inigo told him. “Look. I like her, she likes me, we’ve got a bit of a thing going on. You’re not my mother, Severa, and I don’t need your approval on the matter.”

Surprisingly enough, the words stung. “Well, excuse me for caring,” she said, doing her best to bury that fact. “Where is Little Miss Perfect, anyways?”

“Right here,” Nalia said smoothly, and a lesser woman than Severa would have flinched. Instead,
the redhead merely rolled her eyes again. “Anyways, as Inigo should have already told you, I have a plan.”

“About time,” Severa muttered.

“Indeed! How shall we bring the fiend to justice?”

Having settled on the other side of Inigo, Nalia tapped her index finger against the table. “No justice, Owain. Blackmail.”

Their table went silent, like the air had been sucked away. “What exactly do you mean?” Laurent inquired.

“The three of you break into a records room that contains some sensitive information. You deliver it to me, and I deliver it to some enemies of our target. They tear him apart and this place never need fear his wrath again. It’s not that hard.”

Several more moments of silence greeted Nalia.

“Oh, come on now. I know you Ylisseans have your high and noble ideas of justice, but let’s be real. Plegia’s in ruins right now. The crown is still being squabbled over by a bunch of whining infants, do you think they’re going to care about our little city? No. Justice must come by our hands or none at all. Are you with me or not?”

Inigo glanced away for a moment, then back at her. “We’re with you.”

Severa wasn’t quite so sure.

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In the silence of the darkened hall, every footstep rang out like a Thunder spell.

“I’m… actually not sure this is a good idea,” Owain muttered.

“You know, the purpose of a mission such as this is to remain quiet,” Laurent shot back through the corner of his mouth.

“We should have definitely left Owain behind then,” Inigo whispered from where he was fiddling with the lock on the door to Nelson’s records room.

“Hey!”

Inigo rolled his eyes.

“All of you, shut up,” Severa hissed.

After a long moment, though, Inigo sighed and straightened up. “It’s no good. I can’t get the lock anyway. We’ll have to—”

With an echoing sigh, Laurent flipped open his spellbook and shot a tiny lightning spell at the lock, which sparked and fell open without preamble.
“...or that,” Inigo finished. He glanced back out into the hallway to ensure they weren’t being followed, then slipped inside.

The room was small, cramped, and dusty, looking as if it rarely saw visitors. Cabinets lined three of the four walls and a large desk graced the middle of the room.

“All right, let’s split up and see if we can find anything... incriminating,” Inigo said, heading for the desk.

For a while, they actually did manage to work in silence. Eventually, though, Owain let out a sigh, running a hand through his hair and spiking it up. “I don’t get it. For someone as sketchy as Nelson, we should be veritably drowning in blackmail material... but there’s nothing besides perfectly reasonable ledgers.”

“Owain’s right,” Laurent admitted.

“It’s like someone’s been here already,” Severa said.

Inigo scratched at his chin for a moment, then said, “All right, let’s get out of here and regroup. We’ll tell Nalia that—”

The door swung open, hitting the bookshelf behind it with an echoing bang. A burly man stood in the opening, sword already drawn. Several others stood behind him.

“There they are,” he said, lips widening in a grin to reveal several missing teeth. “All right, boys. Bring ‘em to Nelson.”

“Oh, for crying out loud,” Severa said.

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Nelson was not a pretty man, and the sickly candlelight of his study didn’t help him out any. His hair hung limp and greasy around his face and his back had a permanent hunch to it, made worse by the fact he leaned on his staff like a cane. Eyeing him, Severa deduced that physically, he would make very little threat. For him to have done so much damage, he must have been a more than formidable magical foe.

For the moment, though, he still looked very much like a frail old man, especially with the burly guards flanking him. “So,” the sage said. “These are the stray mutts that refuse to stop yapping, eh?”

“We found them trying to infiltrate the records room, sir!” one of the guards said with a smart salute. Nelson didn’t even spare him a glance. “Just as the lieutenant said.”

Severa bristled and felt the lance at her ribs shift a fraction closer. There were far too many guards for the four of them to make any sort of dent, especially with all their weapons confiscated. Absently, she looked around at the others. Laurent stood stiff and unmoving, eyes half-lidded like he’d already made peace with their predicament, while by contrast Owain constantly shifted in his handler’s grasp until he was cuffed soundly upside the head. Severa felt her lip curl—only she was allowed to do that! Inigo, meanwhile, was giving Nelson an unrelenting glare, lips thinned into a hard line.
“And what did they take?” Nelson pressed.

“Nothing, sir! We checked them over thoroughly, sir!”

After a moment, Nelson finally acknowledged his henchmen with a brief nod. “Good dog.” Slowly, he made his way across the room, stopping just in front of Severa. “You, I know,” he said, his voice almost fond somehow. It hardened in an instant. “You little traitorous wench.”

“You’ve got to be loyal before you can be a traitor, you idiot,” she snarled, about to take a lunge at him when she felt another sharp poke in her side.

“Ah ah ah,” Nelson tutted, waving a finger at her like she was a child. “I wouldn’t if I were you.”


Nelson’s hawklike gaze narrowed in on him. “Ah, yes. The mask. Let’s see if my daughter had it right.”

His daughter? Severa thought, struggling to keep up with this turn of events. She was distracted by a soft cry of pain from Inigo as Nelson ripped away his mask.

“She was telling the truth!” Nelson said, jerking Inigo’s chin up roughly and staring into his eyes. “The Brand of the Exalt, right there for all to see!”

“Oh, gods, no,” Owain muttered, suddenly going deathly still.

“Inigo!” Laurent hissed. “Who did you tell?”

“I didn’t… I didn’t tell….” Inigo said, his words slightly distorted by Nelson’s grip. Suddenly, his face went white. “No…”

“What the hell did you do?” Severa demanded.

“He made the rookie mistake,” Nelson said, finally stepping backward. “He got involved. Isn’t that right, darling?”

The cooing voice reached them from the shadows. “I told you I could play him right into my hands, Father.”

She stepped forward and Severa just about heard Inigo’s heart shatter.

“Nalia…”

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“Keep our new royal pet. Kill the rest.”

Nalia’s words echoed through the room, Inigo’s pleas falling on deaf ears. The other three had been dragged away, leaving him to face whatever fate Nalia and Nelson had planned for him. Owain had nearly gotten himself killed right there in his struggle to stay, until a well-placed blow had knocked him firmly unconscious. Severa’s heart had jumped in her throat until she saw he was
still breathing.

Now, with the three of them locked in some desolate cell in the bottom of the fortress, he came to
with a groan. “Well… that went well.”

“Honestly, we should have known the moment she took an interest in Inigo,” Severa muttered,
arms crossed over her chest. “C’mon, now. What woman in her right mind would think that was a
good idea?”

“Severa, is this really the time?” Laurent asked. “I believe we have more pressing matters to worry
about at this particular moment.” He bent down, peering into Owain’s eyes in the dim. “For
instance, the fact that Owain almost certainly has a concussion.”

“A hero of legend will not be slowed by a mere brain injury!”

“He’s right, Laurent, I mean he’s lived basically his entire life with one.”

“Severa!”

Owain sat up, slowly, muttering a long string of ‘ow’s under his breath. “Wait, was that an insult?”

“Yes, you dolt! You could have just showed them your Brand and then at least you’d have been on
the outside with Inigo instead of stuck in here with a head wound!”

Owain paused. “I… didn’t think of that.”

“Of course you didn’t, because you were too busy trying to look epic instead of bothering to think
at all!”

“Severa, enough!” Laurent snapped, his voice echoing through the cell. “None of us were thinking
clearly, all right? Stop antagonizing him.”

A loud bang rattled on the door. “Keep it down in there, ya l’il whining pups!”

“I’ll tell you where to keep it down!” Severa yelled back.

“If you remember, Nelson ordered us killed,” Laurent pointed out. “However, at this moment we
are still alive, so kindly do not provoke the guard into changing that matter any time soon, would
you?”

“All right, all right!” Severa snapped. “Gosh, Dad.”

Laurent seemed to have more than tired of her snark, because he didn’t even bother to rise to a
retort to that.

“Okay, but what about Inigo?” Owain pointed out. “If they find out we’re from… you know,
where we’re from, that’s not gonna end well.”

“Worse, they may end up getting word back to Chrom,” Laurent said. “They may think Inigo is
Chrom, or at least some other unknown relative of the royal line, and attempt to hold him for
ransom.”

“Not good,” Owain said.

“Very not good,” Laurent agreed. “We need to work out a plan, and quickly.”
Immediately after he spoke, the distinct *thud* of a body hitting the floor sounded from outside. The three exchanged wary glances.

A moment later, though, a voice reached them. “C’mon out, kids. Door’s open.”

Several beats passed before Severa nudged at the door. It swung open without resistance, revealing a cloaked figure standing in shadow outside.

The figure reached into a pocket, popping something small and round into his mouth. “An easy job, they said,” he muttered. “Won’t take long at all. Didn’t tell me there’d be *amateurs* in the mix.”

Another very long moment went by before Owain piped up with an incredulous “*Gaius*?”

The redheaded thief, still chewing, smirked. “Hey, sweethearts.”

**Chapter End Notes**

My roommate, upon catching up with this fic and realizing that I while I had written this chapter, I had not yet posted it:

*internally cries* #SugarCat has yet to appear again in the updated chapters because SOMEBODY IS BEING A PERFECTIONIST (cough-im-a-hypocrite-and-not-sorry-cough) RELEASE THE SUGARCAT!!!(Can you guess that Gaius aka #SugarCat is her favorite?)
Chapter Summary

A certain thief saves the day, and won't let anyone forget it.

Chapter Notes

Astute readers may notice that Gaius was formerly Noire's father. However, it was kind of a 'throwaway' pairing and, as I got writing this chapter, I decided it liked it much better if he instead sired Severa, so all such former references to him marrying Tharja instead have been removed. (At least, I think they have. If anyone finds one that I missed please let me know!)

The last time Inigo had felt his world shatter so fast, Falchion had been lying at his feet in the midst of their broken future. “Leave them alone!” he cried yet again, voice hoarse from how many times the plea had fallen past his lips. “Do whatever you want to me, just let them go!”

Nalia and Nelson exchanged a long glance. “Noble,” the former said with a raised brow. “Annoying,” the latter spat. He let out a sigh that slumped his shoulders. “I will send off a letter to Ylisse in the morning. Have your fun with him, darling.”

With that, the aging sage left the room. The rest of the guards had taken Owain, Laurent, and Severa.

Inigo was alone with Nalia.

His hands weren’t bound, but she had a spellbook in hand while he was weaponless. He’d not seen her fight, but judging by her previous bragging, those weren’t odds he wanted to take.

She flipped through her tome, leaving his standing aching and motionless. “Why?” he finally managed, the word harsh over his chapped lips.

Nalia clapped her spellbook closed, fixing her gaze on him. “It wasn’t going to be like this,” she whispered. “You were going to help me take down Nelson, and then we would go our separate ways. You back to your precious Ylisse… and me to take my father’s place.”

Inigo’s mind was still reeling. “Nelson is your father,” he managed.

“Mm. And an embarrassment to the family name, at this point.” She stepped closer, gesturing to the door the sage had disappeared from. “I mean, look at him. It’s ridiculous.”

“You never wanted to help this city,” Inigo spat, a bit of vitriol returning to his voice. “You just wanted to trade one dictator for another. For yourself.”
“Well, I mean, alternatively you could have ruled by my side, but we’d have to get around all your precious ideals first and that would have taken far too long.” Nalia tapped a fingernail on the spine of her tome.

“Try never,” Inigo shot back.

“I do admire your optimism. I’d have given it a few months at most. Think hard… I was already starting to twist you around, wasn’t I? Sway you to my side of things?”

With a sour feeling in his throat, he realized she was right. All those little things that he’d done that hadn’t quite agreed with him, that Severa and Owain and Laurent had subtly and not-so-subtly protested but he had gone along with because Nalia had said so…

“You manipulative little…” he started, then trailed off. “I can’t believe I…”

“Fell for it?” she finished with a dark chuckle. “Fell for me? Oh, Inigo, why do you think I chose you? Don’t flatter yourself and think you were the strongest. It’s because you were the weakest.”

“Give me my sword and try calling me weak.”

“Idle threats and shows of force,” Nalia said boredly, flicking through her book once more. “I would expect nothing less from Ylissan royalty.” She glanced up at him again. “But that’s what changed everything, wasn’t it? I realized you’d be far more useful as a bargaining chip than just my dirty worker.” She stepped closer once more and looked him up and down, tome folded to her chest. “If Chrom’s kept you secret this long, then I’m sure he’d give quite a bit for you to remain that way. Maybe even… the Fire Emblem?”

Inigo shuddered at the conclusions she’d jumped to.

“I can see it, can’t you? Me, with the Fire Emblem, Queen of Ylisse myself? Father thinks he’d get it, of course, but it’s not like he’s long for this world now…” She shrugged. “I must admit, I am curious. What are you? Secret twin or just a dastard? For a while I wondered if you were actually Chrom himself, but his Brand’s on his arm, isn’t it? Not that it matters, though. There’s no faking this.” She tapped under her eye in reference.

As if everything else she’d done wasn’t enough, those words made white-hot anger flare in his chest. “If you think even the Fire Emblem would ever give you a claim to my throne…”

“Your throne?” Nalia asked with a surprised laugh. “Just who do you think you are?”

Oh, what did it matter? He stepped toward her, eyes narrowed. “I am the son of the man who just tore your country down into ruins. My name is Inigo, and I am the last Exalt of Ylisse. I come from a world twenty years hence, where the hideous dragon you worship destroyed everything I ever held dear, so if you think you can try to break me you have another damn thing coming.”

From the doorway, a long, slow clap sounded.

Inigo spun, jaw dropping. “G-Gaius?”

“Hey, Pretty Boy,” the former Shepherd said nonchalantly. “Nice speech. We’re a bit busy right now, something about blackmail not being heroic enough or something. Just thought you might want these.”

Inigo’s rapier soared through the air, landing in his hand as if called. Falchion’s flight was a little less graceful, slowed by its own bulk, but Inigo found he couldn’t really care as the divine sword
clattered to the ground a few feet away. With the same suddenness that he’d appeared with, Gaius proceeded to vanish once more.

As soon as Inigo molded his hand to the grip of the rapier, however, he hesitated. Up until a few minutes ago, he’d thought himself quite in love with this girl… and now he was about to raise arms against her?

His hesitation nearly killed him, because Nalia took full advantage of it. Her spellbook flew back open as if of its own accord, pages fluttering as her lips moved silently, all taking place in the split second before a bolt of lighting cracked over Inigo’s head. He barely dodged it, hair standing up on the back of his neck from the proximity.

“Do not test me,” she hissed, already readying another spell. “You are a convenience, yes, but don’t think I need you alive. I’ve waited this long and I’ll wait a little longer if I have to.”

Whatever sliver of affection he had left for her shattered as a blast of wind nearly knocked him off his feet. Fighting mages was not a specialty of his—they were rare among Risen and he’d only come across a handful of them during the Plegian War. What little he knew about countering them mainly came from watching Laurent, and it had been a rare occasion indeed to see the mage go down.

Nalia shot out another spell that had Inigo ducking down behind Nelson’s desk to avoid it. The problem with mages was that they could attack at a distance, he thought bitterly. On the other hand, he’d seen Laurent when he’d overextended himself, and it wasn’t a pretty sight. If he could just outlast Nalia…

Inigo yelped as the desk lit on fire.

“Just lay down your sword, child,” Nalia cooed as Inigo dove for another corner of the room. “I don’t really want to hurt you.” In stark contrast to her words, he heard another riffle of pages and a murmured “Thoron.”

Once again, every hair on his body stood up. There was a split second of delay as she cast the spell, but he was still left cornered.

On instinct, he threw his rapier as hard as he could, hoping the metal would divert the strike away from him.

The spell finalized with a crack that shook the room and left his ears ringing. No surge of electricity tingled down his spine, though, and when his eyes cleared he found his sword had, indeed, drawn the spell away from him—at the cost of itself. The rapier laid several feet away from where he’d thrown it, the metal twisted, half-melted, and utterly useless.

“Oh, that was actually clever,” Nalia said. “Well done.” She stepped toward him, still as collected as ever and not even having broken a sweat. “You realize you’re unarmed now, right?”

As one, both their gazes fell on Falchion.

Nalia was closer, he realized with a sinking feeling in his stomach—there was no way he could reach it before she could either snatch it from him or just straight up electrocute him as he tried to cross the room.

Instead of that, though, she merely shot another lightning spell at the divine blade—a weaker one this time, Elthunder if Inigo had to guess. Unlike the rapier, though, Falchion neither crumpled nor moved, simply absorbed the hit without reaction.
Nalia was brought up short, her smirk fading. “What...?” Once more, she flipped through her book, this time casting a murmured “Mjolnir.” The air boomed, then turned acrid in the aftermath of the spell, but again Falchion remained unmoved. “Fascinating.”

She stepped toward the sword and Inigo caught the tell-tale glassy glint in her eyes, leaving his heart pounding even harder. There was a reason, Laurent had once explained, he almost never went higher than an El-level spell in combat—even a handful of Arc-spells would creep up on a mage used in short succession, dangerously draining them if they weren’t careful.

Nalia was powerful, yes, but Thoron and Mjolnir used so close together...

“What manner of weapon is this?” she asked, almost accusingly as she grasped Falchion.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” Inigo asked, stepping toward her.

Mistake.

She whirled on him, the distance between them somehow closing to nothing as the point of his own sword was suddenly at his neck.

“Don’t move,” Nalia said lowly. “I don’t really want to kill you, but if my hand slips...”

She dropped her spellbook to grip the divine blade in both hands, and in that very moment Inigo had never been more grateful for Falchion’s bulk. “That wasn’t wise,” he got out against the sword’s edge.

Her eyes went wide and he thought, briefly, This is going to hurt.

It did, as she shoved Falchion into him—but as he expected, the sword was dull, feeling more like a practice blade than the most treasured weapon in Ylisse, bruising him but not cutting. She let out a cry of surprise as he twisted, leveraging the sword out of her grasp and into his own. He could almost feel the blade hum as it fell into his hand, the edges sharpening into the deadly weapon he knew so well.

“I believe you’ll find,” he got out, breathlessly, “that Falchion only works for me.”

With that, the overextension he’d seen coming finally manifested. Nalia’s eyes rolled back, her knees buckled, and she fainted dead away.

Gently, Inigo lowered her to the ground, and set about finding something to bind her with.

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“...and then—ka-blam! Gaius drops from the chandelier, silent as death itself! Nelson begs for mercy, but is given none but his life! ‘Truly, you have beaten me!’ he cried. ‘I could have never hoped to hold a candle to your awesome might!’”

“That’s not quite how it happened, kid, but whatever helps you sleep at night,” Gaius told Owain. The thief stood just out of direct light, as usual, sucking on a lollipop. “Also, is ‘ka-blam’ really the best sound effect you could come up with?”

Inigo found he honestly didn’t really care how the rest of his companions had found Gaius, nor
how they’d captured Nelson while he’d been busy with Nalia. Thanks to the thief, both their opponents were currently locked up in their own cells. In addition, Severa had her ring back. By everyone else’s standards, they had won the day.

To Inigo, the victory was impossibly hollow.

“What exactly are we doing with those two sad excuses for human beings, then?” Severa asked, interrupting Owain’s continued tale.

Gaius’s expression turned grim. “Almost exactly what Nalia planned originally. I deliver the information I gained tonight to my employers—before you disgraces to the trade stumbled in—which they turn over to the new king regent. I get a sweet paycheck and beat feet out of Plegia.”

Inigo felt his stomach drop somewhere between his knees. “King.. regent?”

Gaius shrugged. “Nothin’ formal, yet, but they’re pretty sure he’s gonna take the throne. Some slimy little fellow named Validar.” Misinterpreting Inigo’s silence, he continued, “If you’re worried about your girlfriend, they’re likely to end up slave labor in the navy, since we so thoroughly walloped their army in the war. They won’t kill good labor… probably.” He shrugged. “Honest work’ll be good for those two.”

“Coming from you, I find that statement extremely ironic,” Laurent said.

“She’s not my girlfriend,” Inigo mumbled at the same moment.

Gaius ignored the latter, replying snidely to the former, “Just because it ain’t legal doesn’t mean it ain’t hard work.” Turning, he continued, “Speaking of work, I’d like to speak to you, Laslow.”

Great, Inigo thought, while Laurent said, “I think it best if we cut short our reminiscing and gather our belongings before we run into any more unwelcome company.”

“Finally, a good idea,” Severa muttered. “Come on, you idiots.”

When they had left, Gaius fixed his gaze on Inigo. “I saved your sorry little butts in there,” he pointed out.

“I’m aware,” Inigo got out, his voice sounding lifeless to his own ears. He had a feeling he knew where this was going.

“I’d like something for my time.”

And there it was. “Sorry, Gaius, fresh out of lollipops over here.”

“One: dang. Two: it doesn’t have to be lollipops, I’m not going to discriminate against any form of sugar you might have at your disposal. Three: that wasn’t actually what I had in mind.”

“It… wasn’t?” Inigo asked, suddenly even more wary.

“Nope. Got a job lined up that I could use a few extra hands on. You four help me out there, we call this all even.”

“I thought we were… ‘disgraces to the trade’?”

“Oh, don’t get me wrong, you still totally are. But this isn’t a sneaky job; I almost didn’t take it, but I felt I had a bit of a duty, ya know?”
Inigo sighed. “What is it?”

“Assassinating some assassins.” Gaius paused, then said, “You are good at fighting, kid. Stick with me and you might even fill in a few of those gaps in your education. Besides… if you’re Chrom’s kid, I should probably keep an eye on you.”

Inigo cursed under his breath. He’d hoped Gaius hadn’t heard his stupid reveal to Nalia. “I was bluffing—”

“Nah, you weren’t. I know what a bluff looks like.”

Inigo sighed, pressing his palms to his eyes. “It’s long story.”

“Figured so. Look. Honestly? I don’t really care if you’re Laslow or Inigo or the latest reincarnation of Naga herself. Much as I hate to admit it, I am gonna need help with this, and there aren’t many people I’d trust with it. But you’re a Shepherd, or close enough to one, and you’ve got a good heart.”

Running a hand through his hair, Inigo ventured, “Where is this job of yours, then? And who are these assassins we’re assassinating supposed to be assassinating?”

“It’s in Ylisstol. Their target is Princess Lissa.”

Chapter End Notes

#NoRegrets on that hyperlink
Just a Symbol (Part 3) Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Whilst trying to find Lissa's would-be assassins, Gaius learns some more about the future kids.

“What do you mean someone’s trying to assassinate my mom?”

“From what Gaius said, it’s a lot of someones,” Inigo pointed out.

“She never told me about this!” Owain cried.

“Perhaps the attempt never gets far enough along to actually pose a threat to her,” Laurent pointed out.

“That’s just rude of them! My mom is great!”

“She’s royalty, Owain. That’s enough to put a price on the most sainted of heads,” Inigo said flatly. “Point is, we’ve gotta make up our minds and get out of here. I’m not the biggest fan of going back to Ylisstol at the moment, since Robin is rather out for our heads, but… I fear what will happen if we don’t.”

“Ylisstol is a city of colossal proportions,” Laurent pointed out. “Provided you are careful, and steer clear of using your Laslow and Odin aliases, you will likely be fine.”

“Who cares about Robin?” Owain asked. “This is my mom we’re talking about!”

“Yes, Owain, we know,” Inigo said. “Gaius is going to leave without us if we don’t decide now, though.”

“Oh, obviously we must go forth! We can’t risk the erasing of my very existence!” Owain exclaimed.

“The world would be a far quieter place, that’s for sure,” Inigo said dryly. “Severa? You haven’t said a word yet.”

“Haven’t had anything to say yet,” she muttered in reply.

“...Do you have a problem working with your father like this?” Inigo asked, deciding to cut straight to the heart of the issue.

“No!” she exclaimed, a little too quickly. “Besides, he’s not my father yet.”

Inigo decided not to push. “I hate to ask for an answer so quickly, but... all in favor?”

“Aye!” Owain immediately piped up.

“Loath as I am to admit it, I agree with Owain,” Laurent said. “His own existence not withstanding, Lissa will play much too great a part in the days to come to risk it.”
“I’m both flattered and offended,” Owain told him.

A beat passed before Severa shrugged. “Yeah, whatever, let’s go. I don’t care.”

“As ringing of an endorsement as I’ve come to expect from you,” Inigo told her. “Right then. Ylisstol, here we come.”

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They were scarcely out of the Plegian deserts a few days later when Inigo swung Falchion into a hearty tree, feeling the bite of the blade reverberate up his arms. Wrenching it loose, he swung again, knowing he’d likely take the entire tree down if he wasn’t careful. With a bitter sigh, he paused and stuck the point of the sword into the ground, wiping his face on his collar before pushing his sleeves up over his shoulders.

“What, did you get bored of mercenary work and decide to go into logging?”

“Not now Severa,” he muttered, not bothering to look at her.

He could still sense her cross her arms. “Look, just because you got your poor little heart broken doesn’t mean you get to act like a jerk to the rest of us.”

“Don’t.”

“Don’t what? Call you out on your crap?”

He yanked Falchion out of the tree again and spun to face her. “Don’t rub my face in it is what!” he snapped. “I was a fool, I was stupid, and I almost got us all killed for it. I’m well aware of that and nothing you say can make me kick myself any more for it.”

Severa scoffed. “Of course you were stupid. You’re a hormonal teenage boy, I wouldn’t expect anything less from you.”

“Thanks, Severa, that definitely helps.”

“What I’m trying to say, Inigo,” she continued with a huff, “is get over yourself. None of us blame you for what happened with Nalia.” He flinched at her name. She glanced away, then finished in a softer tone. “We all do stupid things for… love.”

“You sound like you speak from experience,” Inigo said flatly, hardly believing her for a second.

She wouldn’t meet his gaze.

“...Severa?”

Her eyes snapped back to his. “We’re all here, aren’t we? We all came back to the past out of duty… but out of love too, right?”

“I… suppose,” Inigo said, glancing down.

“If it’s over and done with,” she said flatly. “Move on.”
“Easy for you to say,” he muttered in response.

“No. It’s not.”

She stalked away, back toward Owain, Laurent and Gaius, before Inigo had the chance to answer.

He watched her for a moment, then shook his head and returned to taking out his frustrations on the tree.

Somewhere along the line, he realized, he’d stopped hating Falchion quite so much.

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The next few weeks as they crossed Ylisse would have been remarkably similar to what had come before—but for the addition of an ever-watchful Gaius, an even pricklier than usual Severa, an Owain constantly fretting over his future self’s possible nonexistence, and an Inigo stuck still stinging from Nalia’s betrayal. In other words, only Laurent, with his nose perpetually buried in a book, remained unchanged.

They spent a large chunk of the journey in relative quiet, but Inigo was all-too-aware of Gaius mentally cataloguing every odd thing about them. With the thief privy to Inigo’s heritage, it was only a matter of time before he came prying.

And, sure enough, he did. “Hey, Pretty Boy. Can you even see out of that eye?”

Inigo shot the ginger a sharp glance. “What?”

Atop his chubby chestnut mount, imaginatively named ‘3-Socks’ for her three white feet, Gaius returned his gaze. “That Brand you’ve got doesn’t blind you, does it? That’d be a nasty liability.”

“Oh course it doesn’t,” Inigo said, a little too testily. “Why would it?”

“Dunno. I ain’t got no royal birthmarks to worry about.” A beat. “So who’d Blue marry, then? Bubbles?”

Inigo blinked. “...Huh?”

“I’m asking who your mom is, kid, try to keep up. You’re the spitting image of your dad and that’s not helping me out any.” When he got no response, Gaius sighed. “Oh, stop it. It’s not like you can get me to un-know who you are, so what’s the harm?”

“Potential destruction of reality?” Inigo said snidely.

“Wow, dramatic much? Must be nice to think you’re that important.”

“I kind of am, yeah,” Inigo shot back.

Gaius scoffed and Owain interjected, “Don’t get him started, he really does think so.”

“Shut up, ‘Hero of Legend,’” Inigo said. “Or should I say ‘Right Hand of All That’s Right’?”

“I thought we agreed never to discuss that!”
“I agreed to nothing.”

“You haven’t answered my question,” Gaius pointed out.

Gritting his teeth, Inigo finally answered, “Olivia.”

Another beat passed. “Huh. Didn’t think Blue liked the dancer type. To each their own, I guess.”

“Oh, that explains why Bubbles was so mad after you guys left. So? Did you end up in some parallel realm where time passes differently or something?”

It was a long moment before anyone answered. “We came back from the future,” Inigo finally said, “in hopes of preventing it.”

Seeming nonplussed, Gaius shrugged. “Well, whatever floats your boat. So who’s who? Smarty-Pants is clearly Specs’ kid, but you two—” he pointed between Owain and Severa, “I’m not so sure about.” He paused. “I don’t have a future munchkin around here, do I?”

No one answered.

“Oh, stop being so tight-lipped. I promise I’m not going to throw you in the nuthouse, if that’s what you’re worried about. ...You are, aren’t you?”

“It’s not that, Gaius,” Inigo said. “We were never supposed to meet up or get involved with any of our parents, for fear of damaging the timeline.”

The thief scoffed. “Well, that’s the stupidest thing I’ve heard in a while. Wasn’t that the entire point of coming back? To ‘prevent the future’? That’d be easier if the rest of us knew what to prevent, wouldn’t it?”

“That’s… a fair point,” Owain said.

“You four really are useless at this,” Gaius said.

“Gee, thanks, Dad,” Severa muttered.

“What?”
Ylisstol, life-filled and bustling city that it was, held nothing but shadows of ghosts for Inigo. It reminded him of Emmeryn’s death that had only been postponed; of the moment he’d returned with the Gemstones only for Gerome to lay Falchion at his feet; of the days he’d seen so many lives lost and the night he’d taken his first.

“So… are we going to hook up with the rest of the Shepherds, or…?” Inigo ventured to Gaius as they rode through the city.

The thief shook his head. “Nah. Most of ‘em went their separate ways after the war, anyways. Not many of ‘em are left here, though there’s a few. Point is, I sent word ahead to Chrom; Lissa’s under guard until we ferret out the rats.”

“Under guard by who?” Owain asked. “Because whilst the Shepherds are surely the most heroic of, uh, heroes, there are a few who I would not trust to guard the princess’s life—”

“Lon’qu.”

Owain made a soft sound in the back of throat that no one but Inigo seemed to notice. “What, no nickname for him?” the latter asked to distract from the former’s moment.

Gaius shrugged. “Hasn’t earned one yet, Pretty Boy.”

“Well, I guess I’m just flattered that I have,” Inigo shot back.

“Take the snark down a notch, kid,” Gaius said.

“No.”

Somewhere along the line, the ginger had turned into the same eccentric uncle figure that he’d been for their younger selves in the future. He’d taken the reveal of their true identities in stride, even his own daughter’s, and had taken it even more upon himself to keep them out of trouble. Well, at least his definition of trouble, because by Inigo’s definition they were in trouble practically every hour of the day. But Gaius had a knack for turning into a learning experience, bestowing on them the skillset they would need when their enemies weren’t mindless Risen but real people with real agendas. In addition, it was a weight off Inigo’s shoulders to not be the be-all end-all decision maker for the first time since Lucina’s death. He knew it couldn’t last, but he enjoyed it while it did.

“So what’s the lesson of the day, O thief of sweet darkness?” Owain asked, seeming to snap out of his fog.

“Information gathering. More importantly, quiet and subtle information gathering. Swordhand, I will put a gag on you if I have to.”

Severa laughed so hard she choked. Owain spluttered for several minutes about how he could be quiet when he wanted to, thank you very much, while Inigo’s hand seemed to have permanently plastered itself to his forehead.

“Why do I even bother?” Gaius asked himself.
His mother’s potential assassins were sneaky, Owain was forced to admit. Even with Gaius’s expertise, it took them two full months to stumble upon their lair.

The thief had told them to be thorough, and not to rush. In a way, it went against every instinct in Owain’s body—these fiends were after his mother, and the faster they were dead the safer she’d be.

He realized, belatedly, why Gaius had given them that advice.

Owain hadn’t quite realized how calloused he’d grown in this time until a roomful of dead potential assassins incited nothing but grim satisfaction in him. Though his own blade was stained red, his mother was safe. Did anything else matter?

Inigo looked slightly green as Gaius moved through the room, stepping carefully over a dozen bodies, his lips moving silently. “Pop quiz,” he said sharply, drawn everyone’s attention. “What’s wrong with this picture?” Several beats passed, during which no one answered. “Swordhand?” he prompted.

Owain blinked, scratching at the back of his neck, his usual verbosity abandoning him. “Uh…?”

“Pretty Boy? Anyone?” Gaius asked again. “Pity. Thought you kids were making progress.” He crossed his arms. “I’ll give you a hint: count.”

Owain did, his eyes going wide and his face paling as he did. “We’re… missing… three of them.”

“Four,” Laurent corrected.

“I thought heroes of legend didn’t need math,” Inigo said, shooting a glance at Owain.

He sucked in a breath, whispering, “But what if they’re—” He broke off, a horrible sinking feeling in his stomach, and charged for the door.

“He! Swordhand! Get back—”

Gaius’s shout faded into the distance, because if there was one thing Owain had learned, it was that if there was a worst possible option in his life, that was probably what would happen. And the worst possible option right now was that their missing assassins were in the castle already.

It was irrational, maybe, to abandon the scene and throw himself into Ada’s saddle, but he was past caring. He’d spent the last two months on a knife’s edge, so close to everything he’d come back to save and unable to reach out and grasp it. He’d finally toppled off the edge.

The assassin’s lair was terrifyingly close to the palace, which meant it didn’t take long for him to close the distance and slip inside the same cleft they entered by the night of Emmeryn’s near demise. He didn’t even quite know what he planned to do when he got inside, but he was there and by Naga he was going to do something.

Surprisingly enough, he found his parents in just a few short minutes, the two of them a very respectable distance apart as they wandered through the castle gardens. Owain crouched down on a ridge a fair ways above them, feeling his heart hammer in his chest.

They’re fine, he thought to himself. They’re… fine.
Of course they’re fine, he retorted to himself. We’ve been here two months, what’re the odds they’d strike today?

“Gaius is going to have your head.”

Letting out an irritated sigh, Owain muttered, “I know.”

Inigo picked his way over to Owain and dropped down beside him. “What were you thinking?”

“A dark vision clouded my gaze, manifesting imagery of evil, ill luck, and the worst possible timing.”

“In other words, you had a bad feeling.”

“Something like that.”

Inigo sighed. “Look, Owain, they’re fine. See for yourself. Nothing to worry—”

He broke off as they watched Lon’qu tense down below, moments before the first arrow flew and buried itself in the swordsman’s shoulder.

“Oh, you’re bloody joking,” Inigo muttered as Owain jumped to his feet. “Get down!”

“I will not!”

“They have bows and it’s open ground! You’ll be shot down before you make it ten strides!”

“But my—” Owain started desperately.

“I know.” Inigo cast about, cursing under his breath.

“The others?”

“Not here,” Inigo answered. “Still with Gaius. Gods, Lon’qu, there’s only four of them, you can hold them off.”

Owain let out a whimper. How could he just sit there and watch?

Below, Lissa sent a stream of purple sparks shooting up, evidently having started some sort of magical training since the end of the war. Lon’qu kept her behind him, fighting off their foes and trying to move nearer the palace proper.

It was the longest and shortest period of Owain’s life, but mere moments later all four of the remaining assassins were down. He nearly charged down the hill then and there, but something kept his feet firmly stuck in place.

He could see his parents conversing, though he was much too far away to hear their words. Lissa had her healing staff out, already working on the arrow that had hit home.

“Owain,” Inigo whispered. “If you want to tell them… you can go.”

Oh, he did. He wanted to fling his arms around his mother and tell her who he really was. Gaius was right—what good had keeping their identities secret done them?

But he saw, for the first time in this timeline, something akin to softness in his father’s eyes. Lissa wasn’t meeting his gaze, but her cheeks were faintly pink, and Owain didn’t think it had anything
to do with her near death encounter.

“No,” he finally murmured. “No… let them be happy for a little while longer.”

Their gazes were drawn to the sudden charging company emerging from the main palace—Frederick’s distinctive armor and Robin’s whipping blonde hair were easy to pick out, though the rest of the group was harder to identify. “Too late now, I guess,” Inigo said.

“We should go,” Owain said.

“Are you sure?”

“...Yeah.”

For a moment, he swore Robin’s gaze landed on them, but it was too great a distance to know for certain.
Chapter Summary

In Ylisse, Gaius and Severa have some father-daughter time. In Chon’sin, dark forces are at work.

“Severa… you never told me who your mother is.”

Reining her stallion around, Severa shot a look back along the path she and Gaius rode. Her mount tossed his head, jigging in place while 3-Socks managed an ungainly canter to catch up.

When her father reached her, she rolled her eyes and started forward at a slower pace. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Uh, I beg to differ, sweetheart. I would really like to know who I ended up producing such a salty kid with.”

“Don’t try to guilt it out of me just because we’re about to part ways.” Beneath her, Studlee nickered in agreement. With Lissa’s assassins stopped, their ‘debt’ to Gaius was paid. He’d offered her one last father-daughter ride outside of Ylisstol before he left for his next job and the future children were back to their old traveling ways.

“That’s not my intention,” Gaius insisted. “I’m just curious. On that note, I’m also very curious as to where the hell Owain came from.”

“Wait, have you not noticed his Brand?” Severa asked, shooting him a look. “Shame, Daddy, shame.”

A beat passed as Gaius put the pieces together. “Lissa? Well, that explains the half of it, but what about the other half?”

“What, Lon’qu’s half?”

“Now, Severa, I would think I raised you better than to tell lies to your father.” A beat passed. “Okay, probably not, but I should have at least taught you how to tell a believable lie.”

“I’m not lying,” Severa snapped.

“Honeybunches, you do realize that Lon’qu is all but terrified of just about anything female right? As in, he’s the polar opposite of your blue-haired traveling companion, here.”

“Well, yeah, I’m not an idiot, Dad. Gawds, I knew him in the future, you know. At least… for a little while.”

Several moments passed. “Sweetcakes, I have a distinct feeling that I skipped over more than just infiltration-techniques when giving you an education…” He sighed. “Dang, I really didn’t wanna have to have this talk right now. Okay, see, in order to create munchkins, sweetheart, you have to actually make contact with—”
“Dad, stop talking right now!” Severa screeched, her face turning a shade that could rival her hair. “I’m perfectly educated in that area!”

A very long silence stretched out. “…Wait. How educated?”

“No! Nope! Shut up!”

“Is one of these boys going to have to end up belly up in a river somewhere?”

“No! Definitely no!” Severa exclaimed. “I have better taste than that!” …Liar.

“…If you insist,” Gaius said, sounding unconvinced. “But you still haven’t answered my question.”

“I did! I swear to Naga, Lissa married Lon’qu!”

Gaius stared at her intently for a moment, as if attempting to ascertain her truthfulness, before he doubled over laughing, clutching at his stomach. “Oh dear gods,” he got out. “Not only did Lon’qu manage to sire a child, he made… that!”

Severa narrowed her eyes, feeling her exasperation grow as the thief continued to descend dangerously close to hysteria. “Ha, ha, very funny.”

“That’s the most amusing thing I’ve heard all week!” Gaius got out. “No, all year!”

“Clearly you need to find a better source of entertainment.”

“I tagged along with you guys, didn’t I?”

3-Socks stopped abruptly, evidently tiring of her rider making such a fuss on her back. Unprepared, Gaius plummeted over her shoulder, still laughing when he hit the ground.

“Dad? You all right?” With a huff, Severa hopped off Studlee. “For crying out loud, it’s not that funny.”

“It is!” Gaius insisted, starting to wheeze. Finally, he caught several deep breaths and managed to return to a normal tone of voice. “Really, though. I know you’re quite fond of that boy.”

Severa balked. “Who, Owain? I don’t know what you’re talking about. He’s obnoxious. I can’t stand him.”

“Mmhmm. You know, that’s what I thought about your mother, too, but look how that turned out.”

She crossed her arms, still staring down at Gaius, who hadn’t moved to get to his feet yet. “I thought you hadn’t figured out who my mother was!”

“Please. You’re basically a mini-Cordelia with more snark. It wasn’t that hard to guess. I just wanted to see if you’d tell me or not.”

“I am not a mini-Cordelia!” she snapped.

“And you don’t have feelings for Owain either, right,” Gaius drawled.

“No!” She ignored the prickling in her eyes, striding back toward Studlee. “I’m going to leave you down there if you don’t get up,” she muttered.

“Severa.” Gaius’s voice was flat as he pulled himself up into a seated position, then hopped to his
feet. Socks had moved to the side of the road and started munching grass, oblivious to the drama. “I’ve taught you and those boys a lot of lessons over the past few months, but I’ve got another one for you. You can lie to the world as much as you want—kinda comes with the profession, Naga knows I do it every day. But it does no good to lie to yourself.”

Severa didn’t make eye contact as she swung back into the saddle. “Whatever you say, Dad.”

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On another continent entirely, Lucina woke, as she often did, to the sound of crying.

“Shh,” she whispered, arms reaching blindly as her eyes stung with sleep. “Shh, little one. I’m right here.”

Her fingertips brushed over silvery hair that surprised her daily with its thickness. Another wail sounded, dying into a whimper as she shifted to pull the child to her bosom.

It was in these moments that she knew who she was. There were so few clues to her past that sometimes she wondered if she was mad, if she even had a past at all. She had her name, a sheath empty of a sword, and a mark in her eye that drew strange looks wherever she went. She’d started styling her hair to cover the left side of her face just to avoid the gazes of strangers. But in the dark hours of the night—or not-so-dark hours of the morning, she realized as her eyes adjusted—when she could cradle her son in her arms, she found it didn’t matter quite so much.

The months since she’d woken on the beach had not been easy. She’d had no choice but to walk until she found civilization, and thankfully she had. She learned she was in a small seaside town in the country known as Chon’sin—which rang no bells for her—and, with nothing better to do, she’d stayed. An older woman by the name of Shai’si, mother of seven herself, had taken pity on her and offered her work in her tavern and the use of the small living quarters above it. She hadn’t minded that Lucina hadn’t a clue who she really was, and gave no judgement that she carried a child and yet wore no wedding ring. Lucina dreaded to think of what would have happened had their paths not crossed.

So her life went, monotonous and simple. She had waited tables in the evening until the very night her son was born, and had gone back to it the moment she recovered from his birth. When she had free time, she went to the market or the beach. She never set about finding a replacement for the sword that she had evidently once possessed—the quiet town rarely saw violence, and with a tiny little life solely in her hands she had no desire to go seeking it out.

Lucina would have thought her life idyllic, if not for the dreams.

They were of her past—they had to be, but they were so blurry and indistinct they offered her nothing of value. She dreamed of a palace, but didn’t have a clue as to where it was located. She dreamed of a man with hair the same blue-black hair as her own and a sword that could have fit in her sheath, but she didn’t know his name or how she knew him. Another man—a boy, even—was too strikingly similar to not be related to the first, bearing the same hair but a thinner sword more like the type she saw here in Chon’sin. Once, she’d thought she glimpsed the same mark in his eye that she bore in hers, but the dream had faded before she could get a better look. There was a woman with flowing pink braids, a girl with long red pigtails, an obnoxiously loud blond boy… but they could have all been figments of her subconscious for everything she had to go on.
All but one.

His was the only voice she’d heard, and the only name she knew. It was her own voice she’d heard murmur it, in the fuzzy indistinctness of sleep— “What are you saying, Gerome?”

“I’m saying I…” she’d heard him reply, and even in her slumber she’d thought she’d held her breath. “I am no poet, Lucina, to woo you with honeyed words. I am a blunt measure of a man, so I know no other way to say this… I love you.”

She’d woken gasping, cursing her wakefulness and wondering, wishing it was his child she carried. The depths of her own emotions scared her when she hadn’t any real idea who he was.

She wondered, in the candle-lit darkness when her son’s wailing had first pierced the world, if Gerome would like the name she had picked for him.

“Lysander,” she murmured now, stroking a hand through the silver hair that told her above all else he’d been sired by the man in her dreams.

If only she had a clue who he really was, or where to find him.

When Lysander quieted, she settled him back into the bassinet at her bedside, and, peering out her window, decided it was too late for her to go back to sleep. She slipped out of bed and padded into the kitchen, setting about making a cup of tea.

As a day, it had started like any. It would not end like most others.

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She hadn’t paid much mind to the couple seated in her section beyond what they wanted to eat, and the fact that they looked so similar they likely weren’t a couple at all, but actually related. Beyond that, she took their orders and fetched their drinks, punctual and polite as always. There was a reason she was always one of Shai’si’s highest tipped employees by the end of every night.

“I do not trust him,” the man murmured to the woman, just loud enough for Lucina to hear as she passed their table.

“Indeed,” the woman replied. “His lips claim diplomacy, but his eyes reveal otherwise.”

“Validar may indeed intend to help our cause against Walhart,” said the man. “But he has his own reasons to, and I fear what they are.”

Lucina suppressed a shudder. ‘Validar’ rang unfamiliar, but ‘Walhart’ was terrifyingly so. The so-called Conqueror was laying waste to much of the Valmese continent, though blessedly he had not yet set his sights on Chon’sin. Lucina could only pray he never would.

She pushed those thoughts away, stopping at the two’s table. “Is everything all…” She paused, brow furrowing as she caught a glimpse out the window. “...right?”

“Fie, ‘tis indeed quite lovely,” the woman said, but the man followed Lucina’s gaze.

“Say’ri!” he said sharply. “Prithee, what are those creatures outside?”
The woman’s head turned sharply to look, while Lucina drew in a breath. “Risen,” she whispered, though she had no clue why the word had fallen off the tip of her tongue so quickly. “Oh, gods, there’s Risen here.”

Terrifying moaning reached them, followed by a clear scream of terror. The woman called Say’ri, along with her companion, both shot out of their chairs. “You know of these things?” she demanded of Lucina.

“I don’t… exactly,” she stuttered back, before the same instinct of words took over. “They are creatures of the night, seeking nothing but the destruction of humanity.” She paused, wondering where that knowledge had come from. “Needless to say, they are extremely lethal.”

“Brother, that is all we need to know,” Say’ri said, drawing one of the two swords at her hip. “Aye! Those of courage, to me!” she cried.

Lucina hadn’t even quite realized she was following.

Say’ri, her brother, and half a dozen others charged outside, immediately drawing the attention of the Risen. “Bwargh…” one of them growled, the words so startling human it made bile rise in Lucina’s throat. “Kill… prince… kill… princess…”

It was cut down by Say’ri’s brother before it could speak again. “Bring thine orders to the grave, vile creature,” he snarled, but his eyes went wide as the creature began to dissipate into curling purple smoke. “Fie, but what are these things?”

Say’ri answered with uncertainty, but Lucina couldn’t quite make out the words, too busy reaching for the fallen Risen’s sword to listen closely.

Her hands curled around the handle, muscle memory taking over despite the unfamiliarity of the katana. A flash of her own voice hit her for a moment— “You are fearsome with that katana”— but she was swinging the sword in a broad arc before she could dwell on it.

Like she’d done it a thousand times before, she felled the nearest Risen in the blink of an eye. A growl sounded to her left and she pivoted on one foot, blocking and then striking with liquid precision. “Say’ri, to your right!” she called as another creature headed for the other woman’s blind spot.

Slowly, as they fought off wave after wave, she realized that surely she had done this a thousand times before. There was no other way she could have known their name, nor known how to fight them with such startling efficiency. For every two Risen Say’ri took down, Lucina felled five.

She didn’t want to think about what that realization meant.

She must have cut down a hundred of the creatures when she automatically spun toward movement in the corner of her eye. “Peace!” Say’ri cried, holding up her hand. “That was the last of them. Pray tell, are you hurt?”

Slowly lowering the point of her sword, Lucina shook her head mutely. Her arms trembled and her breath came in short pants, but she was unharmed. More importantly, none of these Risen had gotten into the tavern… which meant none of them had reached Lysander, asleep upstairs with Shai’si’s youngest daughter watching.

Satisfied, Say’ri turned her attentions to her brother. “Yen’fay!”

A beat passed before Lucina blurted, “Oh, gods!” Her sword clattered the ground as she pressed
her hands together and bent forward in respect. “You are not… *Prince* Yen’fay?”

Closing the last distance to the two woman, Yen’fay nodded before cocking his head slightly. “I am Yen’fay of Chon’in,” he confirmed.

“And Lady— *Princess* Say’ri,” Lucina said, not looking up and feeling as though her tongue was tripping over her words. “M-my apologies for my familiarity and lack of respect, I was not informed—”

“Peace,” Say’ri said again. “There is no offense taken, especially not with how you have fought just now. What is your name?”

Finally looking up, she answered, “Lucina.”

“Chon’in owes you a great debt of gratitude tonight, Lucina,” Say’ri continued. “You say you have fought these… Risen before?”

“I… not exactly.” Lucina felt her face begin to flush. “I am not truly sure, but I believe so, yes. It’s a very long story.” *One that I can’t remember most of.*

Yen’fay’s eyes narrowed. “What do you mean?”

Say’ri touched a hand to his arm. “It matters not, Brother. Lucina, a warrior of your like should not spend her life rotting away serving tables. I am honor-bound to offer you a position more suited to your talents.”

“Sister, is that wise?”

“You have often praised my judge of character, Brother,” she shot back with the smallest of grins tugging on her lips.

“I’m… sorry, what exactly are you offering?” Lucina asked, feeling lost.

“The Chon’inian royal guard is always in need of warriors of your caliber,” Say’ri explained.

Lucina felt her mouth fly open yet seemed unable to close it. “My lady, I…” she started. “I am… flattered by your offer, but… you see, I have a son, less than a year of age. I have no other family that could raise him, and I cannot simply leave.”

“…I see,” Say’ri said after a moment. “Very well, if that is your choice.”

Lucina had expected a bit more backlash than that, and found herself swallowing hard when she received none. “I must ask,” she said. “Those Risen… one of them said to kill the prince and princess. Did they mean you?”

Yen’fay’s lips thinned into a grim line. “I say we must assume so,” he said. “Though as to who sent them, or even what they truly are, I am unsure.”

Say’ri shot a glance toward the horizon. “We must be returning home, Yen’fay. Mother and Father will need to hear of this.” She looked back to Lucina, and give a crisp bow. “My thanks again to you, Lady Lucina. I must hope we meet again.”

With that, both she and Yen’fay strode back to the tavern. Lucina was left gaping, wondering if this was some elaborate dream she couldn’t quite wake up from.
Unfortunately, just a few short months later, when Walhart invaded Chon’sin, when Say’ri’s parents fell defending their homeland only for their son to turn traitor, the remaining princess had far more on her mind than Risen or the woman she had once fought them with.

End of Part 3
With the Valm War imminent, Inigo must decide whether to remain the anonymous hero Laslow or reveal his true identity as the future Exalt.

Been waiting so long to write this scene... and it was glorious.

Whatever it takes, ‘cause I love the adrenaline in my veins, I do whatever it takes, ‘cause I love how it feels when I break the chains, whatever it takes, you take me to the top, I’m ready for whatever it takes...

Inigo hated mornings.

He had always been a night owl, as a child sneaking out of his room all-too-often to visit his cousin or his sister when sleep evaded him. Staying up, of course, made waking up even more of a burden than usual, but he’d never quite seemed to figure out the art of going to sleep at a reasonable hour. How could he, when the quiet hours of the night beckoned him so?

Back in the future past, when the war had started in earnest, waking up usually turned into get up, move, NOW, or get killed. He’d found since then there were two things that could make mornings even worse.

One: Someone had given Owain coffee. Gaius had made that mistake when they were camped out in Ylisstol, which meant when the caffeine kicked in about ten minutes later Inigo’s cousin had come bounding in, flinging open the curtains and saying wasn’t this a beautiful day, Inigo? I’m pretty sure I’ve discovered six new colors with my espresso-enhanced powers! Inigo hadn’t been sure whether it would be more satisfying to kill Owain or Gaius first.

Two: He ended up in battle within moments of waking up. It was not an uncommon occurrence, unlike Option One, and it occasionally led to rather unfortunate circumstances, such as only grabbing one weapon and managing to get himself disarmed within two minutes.

So that was how he stood on the dock of a port town just south of the Feroxi border, staring down a Valmese knight with naught but his hands to defend him, as his sword was now laying at the bottom of the harbor.

“So, uh… don’t suppose we could maybe talk this out?” Inigo ventured, shifting his weight backwards and finding he had but an inch left of the dock left behind him.

“I’ll not discuss terms with a peasant!” the paladin snarled, leveling his spear at Inigo’s chest. “I
will issue demands to all! Citizens! Soldiers! Hear my words! The Conqueror himself, Emperor Walhart, claims dominion over these lands! You will grant your new emperor your ships! You will grant him all your provender! You will grant him your loyalty and your every possession! And you will surrender this land’s greatest treasure, the Fire Emblem! Do this, and your lives will be spared! Resist, and your lives are forfeit!” He turned back on Inigo, lips curling into a sneer. “Now, kneel! And swear fealty to the mighty Valmese Empire!”

Inigo’s only thought was Damn. We really did lose track of time.

In the months since they’d parted ways with Gaius—no, it had been over a year now—the Valm War had been a niggling, unpleasant thought in the back of his mind, but he’d never quite bothered to figure out the math of just how close it was. We have time. We have plenty of time, he’d always told himself whenever the thought crossed his mind.

He supposed, dryly, that time had run out.

“Have I not made myself clear, insolent whelp?” the Valmese paladin demanded.

“No, no, you’re perfectly clear. Crystal, even. I’m just over here thinking that I really regret waking up this morning.”

“Pah! Well then let me put you back to sleep! Permanently!”

“Thanks but no thaaaa—” Inigo tried to shift and felt his feet slip, sending him tumbling down into the harbor himself. He let out half a shriek that did little more than bubble the very cold water around him as he flailed for the surface.

When his head broke the waves, he was greeted by the sight of Owain standing over the now-dead paladin. “Inigo! I didn’t think you had such an epic escape in you! We will have to exchange notes at a more opportune time!”

“Yeah, definitely gonna pretend I did that on purpose,” Inigo muttered, not loud enough for his cousin to hear. Treading water, he swiped his hair back from his eyes, then blinked twice as his gaze locked in on Owain’s blade. “Uh, Owain?”

“Yes, oh great Exalt of the Watery Retreats?”

“Look at your sword for me.”

Owain lifted a brow, eyes shifting from Inigo, to his sword, then back to Inigo. “What about it?”

Inigo let out a huff. “Keep looking, it’ll dawn on you.”

Several more beats passed before Owain let out a delighted scream that echoed off every building in the surrounding area. “INIGO! I CAN USE FALCHION!”

“Did you seriously not notice that you managed to grab my sword somehow?”

“You’ve got the one that Gaius gave you,” Owain said flippantly.

“Not anymore I don’t,” Inigo grumbled, ears still ringing from his cousin’s shout.

“My sword hand must have thirsted for the divine blade of legend, the only mate that could stave its bloodthirsty desires! Without my conscious attention, Falchion called to me, leaving me no choice but to retrieve it in the chaos of this morning’s ghastly invasion!” A beat passed. “Wait,
what happened to your sword?”

Inigo gave a wide, irritated gesture to the rest of the harbor.

“Ah. Sleeping with the fishes now, is it?” Owain gasped. “Could it be? No! It must be true!”

“What?” Inigo groaned.

“I believe Falchion itself has placed a curse on you! Now that I hold it in my hand, I can see into this great weapon’s soul. So long as you are the rightful wielder of the sword of legend, you must take no other to heart and hand! This must be why you can retain no weapon besides the divine blade! While you spurn Falchion at every turn, it has taken upon itself to break, melt, or otherwise render inaccessible every other weapon you try to replace it with! The truth of your broken breadknife is revealed!”

“Okay, yeah, whatever you say,” Inigo replied. “Can you help me out of here? This water’s filthy. And, since this curse of yours has cost me another sword, I kind of need Falchion back right now.”

“Separate my blighted sword hand from its newfound mate, the blade of deity?” Owain put a hand on its chest. “For you, the ungrateful recipient of its might?” A devious grin settled onto his features. “Nope!”

With that, he spun on his heel and ran back into the fighting, Falchion still in hand.

“Owain, how old are you?”

“Inigo shouted after him.

“Eighteen, actually!”

“Going on six,” Inigo muttered, kicking toward the dock and attempting to haul himself up out of the harbor.

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When the fighting was done, Inigo did manage to reclaim Falchion from his cousin, though it involved taking extra cooking duty for the next month and threatening to burn the Manual of Justice if Owain didn’t cooperate. Though it involved much pouting and repeated insistence that he was actually saving Inigo from the ‘curse,’ Owain finally handed it back over.

Thankfully, despite the invaders, the inn the four had been staying in had been left relatively intact. Several hours later, with the fires put out and the worst of the injuries tended, they gathered back around the table in their rented room.

“It appears Valm’s aggression is arriving sooner than we speculated,” Laurent said, pushing his specs up his nose before folding his hands in his lap.

“I mean, not that we didn’t know it was coming,” Inigo said. “But…” He trailed off, tracing the map that was spread over the table, fingertip lingering on the fifth dot that had appeared just over a month ago. It was still several weeks north of them, and the only reason they’d been in this town to witness the invasion today.

“We can’t leave whoever it is to fend for themselves, Inigo,” Owain said softly. “Doesn’t matter
which one of our friends it is."

“I know,” he replied quietly. “But there’s no guarantee that we could get there and back in time to catch up with the Shepherds.”

“Who says we have to go fight in the war?” Severa asked.

“We don’t have to,” Owain admitted.

“But there’s so much that could go wrong,” Inigo finished. “If someone dies that shouldn’t, or Walhart manages to gain the upper hand and conquer Valm…”

“Oh, fine. The solution’s simple,” Severa said flatly. “Two of us go to Valm, two of us stay behind and find whoever’s just come through.”

A beat passed. “You know the Valm War lasts something like two years, right?” Owain prodded. “And once it starts in earnest, there’s no guarantee any ships will be crossing the sea. Whoever stays in Ylisse might well end up stranded for the next two years.”

“And whoever goes to Valm might well end up dead, your point was?” Severa shot back.

Several moments passed in silence. “It might be our only valid option, though,” Inigo said, leaning back in his chair. “All right. If we do, who’s staying and who’s going?”

“I’ll go to Valm,” Owain said immediately.

“So will I,” Severa added, hot on his heels.

“…Oh,” Inigo said. “Um. Right then. I guess that works.” He wondered if he managed to keep the disappointment out of his voice and was sure he didn’t.

Laurent sighed. “Ridiculous,” he muttered. “All three of you wish to go, do you not?”

“I…” Inigo said, scratching on the back of his neck. “Well, if Owain and Severa do, I can stay…”

Laurent shook his head. “Do not be noble, Inigo. Follow the path you believe is right. You three go to Valm. I will remain in Ylisse, and search for our newly arrived companion.”

“Laurent, are you sure?” Severa asked, implications hanging unspoken in her words. Are you okay with being alone?

“No patronize me, Severa,” the mage said flatly. “I was alone for nearly four years here in the past before Inigo and Owain found me. I can manage well enough by myself. Besides, it should not take me long to locate whoever has just come through.” He got to his feet. “The plan is logical and sound. Every one of us knows it. Chrom’s Shepherds will need as many extra hands as they can get and it will do no good here for one of you to stay behind against your will. And unlike the three of you, I have no special desire to journey to Valm.” When no one answered, he gave a sharp nod. “I will pack my belongings and leave with Sassafras posthaste. I imagine the rest of you will want to do the same.”

With a quiet click of the door behind him, he left.

“I guess he’s set on that,” Inigo said after a long moment.

Severa leaned back and crossed her arms. “Looks like our four is down to three.”
Carrion Isle.

A more ominous name Inigo had rarely heard, and that was coming from a future where humanity itself had been destroyed.

It had been a hard, grueling ride from the Feroxi border, and Inigo had wondered if they would make it in time at all. After all, if rumors of negotiations between Chrom and Validar were already reaching them…

Now, Inigo, Owain, and Severa stared out over the bowl that was the center of the island, the landscape showing all the tell-tales signs of battle but revealing no bodies. Risen, he thought dully, a pit forming in his stomach.

“Split up and look for survivors,” he told his friends, reining Scottie around to head down into the valley. Once Owain and Severa were out of sight, he stood in his stirrups, surveying the landscape.

There. A glimpse of battle still raging reached him and he urged his dark mount forward.

The Shepherds!

His heart leapt as he almost threw himself off Scottie, wary of the terrain being too steep for him. His father’s army was up ahead, fighting off the last remnants of Risen, and Inigo didn’t think twice about charging in.

The battle was won by the time he reached it, though. Chrom and Robin both stood on a bridge surveying the valley, the rest of the Shepherds spread out below. Inigo paused, still in the shadows of dusk, and contemplated his next move.

Laslow, he thought to himself. He had to be Laslow again, had to wear the mask once more, and the thought irked him. If only—

“Chrom, look out!”

The Risen blinked into existence with the same terrifying abruptness of Emmeryn’s death and Grima’s arrival. It was only one—thank the gods it was only one—but the creature’s sword was already drawn and it closed the distance to Chrom faster than even Robin could cross it.

“Father, no!”

Inigo’s Falchion was slashing through the creature’s neck before Chrom could even draw his own version of the blade. He wasn’t sure if he’d ever moved faster in his life than to shove his father out of the way.

Several moments of deafening silence passed as the Risen showered all three of them with dust.

“Thank the gods you’re safe!” Inigo said, scrubbing a hand through his hair. When neither Chrom nor Robin answered him immediately, he felt his face flush several shades of burgundy. “Um. Hi. Long time no see.” He cleared his throat. “If you’re worried, it takes more than that to wound a rogue this charming.”
“...You called me ‘Father,’” Chrom finally ventured.

Inigo blinked, his lips moving in a silent curse that didn’t quite make it out his throat. “...Did I?” He shot a glance at Robin, who had taken a wide-legged stance and crossed her arms. He was abruptly reminded why he’d spent the last two years fleeing her potential wrath. Swallowing the nerves down, he turned back to Chrom. “Perhaps we might speak privately?”

“Perhaps we should, yes,” Chrom said flatly.

“Chrom?” Robin asked, but he made a gesture that cut her short. “Very well.” With that, she started down the ridge toward the rest of the army.

Chrom, meanwhile, strode toward a river not far away, a sharp quirk of his head leaving Inigo no choice but to follow despite the sudden sick feeling in his stomach.

“I don’t even know where to start,” the younger royal finally said, shoving his hands in his pockets.

Chrom turned back toward him, arms crossed. “Robin informed me long ago that you’re not ‘Laslow,’ though I’ve nothing better to call you. But I’ll ask nothing of you that you don’t wish to reveal. Whoever you are, Ylisse owes you a debt beyond repaying.”

“Thank you, but...” Inigo shook his head and thought of what Gaius had said. “I think it’s time you learned the truth.”

“As you wish,” Chrom replied.

The decision was made sharply and without regrets. Laslow was gone. From now on, he fought as himself and nothing less. “The name my mother gave me is Inigo,” he said, searching Chrom’s gaze to see if that elicited any sort of reaction. Surely his parents had discussed names for their children, but had his own been brought up yet?

No such luck, as Chrom continued staring patiently.

Inigo took a steadying breath, turning so he wasn’t quite facing his father head-on. “Your daughter bears the Brand in her left eye, does she not?” He felt a pang knowing this timeline’s Lucina, though recently born, was still alive and well, while the sister he knew was long dead and gone.

Chrom’s brow furrowed as he followed what seemed to be an abrupt change of subject. “She does.”

“A good omen, they said,” Inigo whispered, fumbling for the ties of his mask, “for her brother to have so similar a Mark.”

With that, finally, he cast off that cursed mask for good.

Chrom’s gaze searched his, shortly locking onto the holy Brand in Inigo’s right eye. “Inigo...” he murmured, as if he was testing the way the syllables rolled off his tongue.

Inigo looked toward the ground, breaking that heavy look and trying to find the words to make his father stop staring. His throat was thick, though, and his eyes burning. He still caught his father’s gaze drop to where the future version of Falchion was strapped to his hip.

“You deserved better from me than one sword and a world of troubles,” Chrom said softly. “I’m sorry.”
The tears spilled over and nothing Inigo did could stop them, the entire weight of every moment he’d spent in the past falling on his shoulders and threatening to crush him. “Father,” he got out, voice breaking halfway through.

Chrom was there in an instant, a slightly awkward pause before he wrapped Inigo in the kind of fatherly embrace he hadn’t felt in half a lifetime. Inigo clung to him like he was still nine, still waiting for his father to come home from that cursed battle that had started the slow tearing apart of his entire world. His father’s death, followed so very closely by his mother’s… And Lucina, his sister, his Exalt, and his rock that had gotten him through both, only for her to leave him too when it counted most.

“Better, Inigo?” Chrom asked, pulling away when his son finally quieted.

“I’m sorry,” Inigo mumbled, looking at the ground. “A lot hit me all at once, just now.” A beat passed. “Um, could I ask you to stop staring now? I get a bit… bashful.”

“Ah. Right. Sorry.” A tiny smile quirked Chrom’s lips. “I suppose you really are your mother’s son, then.”

Inigo let out a laugh bereft of humor. “Funny, usually I hear the opposite… When it comes to my devilish good looks, at least. The rest of your shoes are ones much too large for me to fill, Father.”

Chrom’s gaze flicked to his again. “Father…”

“Should I call you something else?” Inigo asked, immediately jumping to the defensive.

“No, it’s just strange to my ear,” Chrom admitted, then added, “I like it.”

Inigo let out another still-watery bark of laughter. “I should rather hope so. Lucina will be calling you that soon enough.”

He regretted the words immediately, feeling the unspoken question rise in the air. “You mentioned, back in the Plegian War, that Odin was your cousin…” Chrom ventured.

“His real name is Owain, but yes, that much was true. Lissa’s son, I’m sure you’ve guessed.”

“Then Lucina… your Lucina… is she with you as well?”

There it was. Inigo felt another wave of tears threaten to escape again. “Lucina was thrice the Exalt I could ever hope to be,” he answered softly. “But you and I, Father… must walk the same path. That of an Exalthood left to us by far more capable older sisters who believed in peace above all else.” He paused, lump in his throat. “Enough to die for it.”

And in a single moment, Inigo watched his father’s heart break.
“Chrom? I know you asked to be left alone, but I feel this warrants your attention.”

Hot on the heels of Robin’s voice, an indignant screech that was definitely Owain reached them. “Ow! I’m coming, I’m coming!” When the two arrived in the clearing opposite Chrom and Inigo, the blond boy was rubbing at his ear with an irritated expression on his face. “Dear gods woman, but you’ve got a grip.”

“Robin?” Chrom asked sharply. “What is it?”

Before the tactician could answer, two more forms emerged from the woods as well. Olivia’s long pink braids and Lissa’s blond pigtails were unmistakable. “Oh, let’s just get the whole family here,” Inigo said, just loud enough from Chrom to hear.

“Robin, is this really necessary?” Olivia asked softly.

“Has Odin done something wrong?” Lissa asked, her words overlapping with the dancer’s.

“Well, that’s up for you to decide,” Robin said flatly. “Once he releases me from my oath.”

“...What oath?” several voices asked at once.

“The oath I made her swear the night of our beloved Exalt’s demise,” Owain said with a heavy sigh. “The secret of my true identity, a story too powerful to be entrusted to every passing mortal —”

“I already know who you are, Owain, if that’s what this is about,” Chrom interrupted.

“—and so I had our great tactician swear me an oath of magical binding, so that—wait, what?”

“I told him who we really are, Owain,” Inigo admitted quietly.

A beat passed before the swordsman went on another spiel. “Hah! The heroes’ origin, unveiled at last! Hark! The blood of the virtuous few enriches my veins as well. Blood that I share with another! A gentle soul, set adrift on the—”

“Let’s get to the point,” Chrom interjected again.

“Namely, releasing me from that nasty little blood oath you managed to trick me into?” Robin pointed out irritably.

“Oh. Right. That,” Owain said. “Behold! I release thee, Lady Robin, from the oath bound to the river of red running through your very heart! Speak freely of that which we discussed so long ago —namely, long story short: Lissa’s gonna be my mom.”

“...Wait, what?”
“Slow freaking clap, Owain,” Inigo muttered.

“That’s right, Mother!” Owain exclaimed, striding toward her. “I’m your loving son from a far-flung future! ...But how to prove the truth of my words? Of course! I’ll share a secret that only your child would know!”

“No, stop right there—” Lissa started, backing up several steps.

“Owain, enough!” Inigo finally interjected.

“But Inigo, she needs to know in her soul that I’m her flesh and blood—”

Inigo let out a soft growl of frustration as his cousin continued to chatter at his defenseless mother, and only just noticed then that his own mother had crept up beside him when he wasn’t looking. He nearly jumped when she realized she was only a few feet away.

“...You bear the Brand!” Olivia exclaimed.

“The same Brand carried by all House Ylisse’s bloodline,” Chrom told her quietly. “Olivia, I know this is going to come as a shock, but... I’ll just say it, then: This is our son.”

Olivia blinked and Inigo found himself blushing for what felt like the dozenth time that night. “No, I... I don’t understand any of this. We have a daughter, Chrom, and she’s only a few months old!”

“Lucina is my elder sister by three years,” Inigo explained. “Owain and I come from a time that is yet to be. The future, as he said.”

The clearing had suddenly fallen silent. “The future?” Olivia questioned.

“Indeed!” Owain put in again. “A time still nearly twenty years hence! History took a dark and most destructive turn. The Fell Dragon, Grima, is resurrected, and his roar is a death knell for man—a scream that silences all hope, and brings down those worthy, heroic few that would stop him...”

Robin interjected for the first time in several minutes. “Chrom? Our whole company? All of us? Dead?”

“Yes,” Inigo said quietly. “By the time Owain and I were fifteen—over three years ago, for us—all that remained were our generation.”

“I... I don’t know what to say,” Robin said, her earlier fiery attitude toward them fading.

“A tale that beggars belief, and yet the truth of it stands before us,” Chrom said. “Inigo carries Falchion, my same sword. And the same sword the first Exalt used to defeat Grima long ago.”

“Your blade and mine are one, Father,” Inigo said. “I have often wished I did not bear it, but Lucina—” He shut his jaw with a click, shooting a glance at his mother.

Sensing his hesitation, Chrom cut in, “There is only one Falchion. I believe him.”

“Yeah, and so do I!” Lissa put in. “Heck, I saw him come from the future! He fell right out of the sky! I’ve never seen anything like it!”

“Falling being the operative word,” Inigo said dryly, “But thank you, Aunt Lissa. Eventually, we got to the point where we could no longer even hold our own against Grima, so we sought out Naga’s wisdom. She managed to return us to the past so we could alter the events that led to his
rise in the first place. We made the journey with others, but… we became separated. Owain and I found each other relatively quickly and have been seeking out the rest of our company since.”

“We’ve managed two others so far,” Owain added. “One of them is with us, while the other journeys to find more.”

“If they’re out there, we’ll find ‘em!” Lissa exclaimed.

“Hah!” Owain exclaimed. “Truly the world stands no chance against your sheer determination, Mother!” He gestured widely. “Behold this grouping! The Fair Queen Olivia and the Hero-King Chrom, joined forces with the Grandmaster Tactician of Legend and my own most beautiful mother! Owain Dark and the great Exalt Inigo could hope for no better allies!”

“Well, I’m not really sure I qualify as a ‘Hero-King,’” Chrom said.

“And I’m not the Exalt in this timeline,” Inigo added.

“Like father, like son!” Owain said with a dismissive wave of his hand. “You are both worthy of your titles in mine own dark heart!”

“Speaking of dark,” Robin interjected. “It’s getting late. We need to get a move on, Chrom.”

“Good point,” Chrom said. “Inigo, Owain, you said you had a third in your company?”

“Yes,” Inigo replied. “Severa. Long red hair. She’s around here somewhere.”

Chrom nodded. “Robin, have Sumia and Cordelia ride a sweep for her.”

“Sumia took an arrow early in the fight,” Robin said. “Libra is tending her now.”

“Cherche, then.”

“On it,” Robin said, and took her leave.

“Lissa—” Chrom started.

“Get tending the wounded, got it!” she exclaimed, looking none the worse for wear for the news that had just been dropped on her.

“I shall assist you, Mother!” Owain exclaimed, hurrying after her.

“Do you heal?” the princess asked, face lighting up.

“Um… well, no, but I’ve been told by many a physician that I am the best bandage-hander they have ever worked with!”

Lissa giggled. “Good enough for me!” With that, she strode off with Owain on her heels, the two chattering away.

A few moments passed where Inigo deliberately did not make eye contact with either of his parents. “Well, I’m sure you both have more important things to do than stand in the woods—”

“Inigo.”

“Yes?” he replied, gaze flicking to his father.
It was Olivia who spoke next, though, and he took a moment to marvel at his parents’ synergy. “You’re really… our son?”

“Indeed,” Inigo said softly. “And a finer mother I could have never asked for.”

“But you’re so…” She stepped toward him, pausing just within arm’s reach. “Strong, and handsome, and brave… You must’ve made a fine Exalt in your future.”

So she hadn’t put the pieces together yet, Inigo thought with a pang. Hadn’t thought of the only reason why her second child would rule. “Hah. Mother, I make a far better dancer than I do an Exalt, and that’s not saying very much.”

“Oh!” she exclaimed, her face lighting up. “You dance?”

“Er…” he got out, rubbing the back of his neck. “Sort of, yes. That is to say, I try my best. Some people don’t appreciate male dancers.” He paused, then added hurriedly, “Not that I care! I’m content to just shake my hips for the ladies.”

“Oh, don’t listen to them! I think it’s wonderful.” Olivia’s cheeks began to stain pink. “I’d… love to watch you dance sometime.”

Inigo balked, his first thought being Gods no. It wasn’t like he’d really had time to practice lately, with the whole ‘saving the world’ thing. “N-no! Impossible! I’d be far too embarrassed for that! Besides, I’d rather watch you dance!”

“What? N-no! I couldn’t possibly!”

“I’m shyer than you are, Mother!”

“You are not!”

Several moments passed as mother and son, equally flustered, stared wordlessly at each other. “Would you two stop it already?” Chrom finally interjected. “Now I’m the one who’s getting embarrassed.”

Inigo cleared his throat and looked away.

“Heh,” Chrom said after a few more moments. “A dancing Exalt. Who knew?”

“I should think that’s on your head, considering who you married,” Inigo pointed out.

“Fair enough,” Chrom replied, casting a fond look at his wife.

Finally, Inigo let out a breath. “I should go make sure Owain doesn’t burn anything down.”

“Is that something that needs to be worried about?” Chrom asked with alarm.

“With Owain around, everything needs to be worried about,” Inigo replied. “If you value your lives, never give him anything that has any trace of caffeine or alcohol in it. That is, unless you need him to start phasing through walls.”

“Duly noted,” Chrom said, then added, “Sounds like Lissa’s kid, all right.”
“Mother,” Owain said seriously, standing behind his mother with his arms crossed as she bent over a wounded Vaike, the axeman unconscious as she ran her healing staff over him. “There is something I need to know.”

“And what’s that?” she asked, glancing back with her eyes full of concern.

“The name of your weapon,” he said, staring at her earnestly.

“...My weapon? Why?”

“What manner of son would I be not to know the name which guards my mother? Teach me so I may whisper is sobriquet in prayer and keep you ever safe.”

“Oh, you mean *that* sort of name,” Lissa said, rolling her eyes.

Owain blinked. “Hmm? Whatever do you mean by that?”

“That Holy Slayer, Saintly Dragon blah-blah stuff you were always talking about during the war,” she said. “Here I was wondering if you really didn’t know the word ‘staff!’” She giggled.

“I’m pretty sure I should be offended by both those statements,” he said. “But yes, that sort of name! What is it?”

“It doesn’t have one,” she said flatly.

“You’ve granted it no name?” he responded with abject horror.

“Right. I mean, why bother!”

“*Mother!*” Owain cried. “A name confers a soul unto an inanimate object and grants it power! It transforms a mere tool into a divine instrument possessed of limitless potential!”

“See?” Lissa responded. “There’s the blah-blah stuff I was talking about…” She sighed. “I’ll give it some thought, all right?”

“I’d braced for an insufficiently astonishing name, but this is worse than I’d feared…” Owain said under his breath.

Before he could lament any further on Lissa’s staff’s nameless state of being, the tent flap pushed open. “Hi, Robin!” Lissa chirped.

Robin’s only proper greeting was a short tip of her head. “How fares our army, Lissa?” she asked flatly, all business.

“Mostly minor injuries,” the princess reported. “Vaike and Sumia are our only severe cases. They’ll both be stable enough to be moved in the morning.”

“Excellent. We’ll need to be moving on as soon as possible.” The tactician shot a glance at Owain. “I need to speak with you.”

Reflexively, he rubbed at his ear. “You won’t drag me out again, will you? My dignity quivers at the idea… it has suffered enough for one day…”

“Oh, my poor baby boy!” Lissa cooed. “I just want to *squish* you! Why is your cute little face so
The diminutive princess stuck her lower lip out in a pout as she stared up at the much taller Owain.

“Coming right now Robin!” Owain said, practically skittering out of the tent.

“What were you saying about your dignity?” Robin asked dryly, following at a much more reasonable pace as Lissa’s calls trailed off. Owain let out a sigh of relief that she hadn’t followed them.

“I do not believe it has survived today’s encounters,” Owain replied forlornly. Forgetting for a moment he was talking to a woman who was likely still very, very cross with him, he continued quietly, “Still. ‘Tis good to see her hale and whole again.”

“So why did you not stay?” Robin asked. “Why did you swear me to secrecy only to reveal yourselves so easily now? Did you not think Chrom would have aided you as soon as he learned?”

Owain glanced away, running a hand through the hair on the back of his head and spiking it up. “A much nobler cause to disguise ourselves in the shadows, never revealing our true intent, leaving you wondering for decades to come about our real—”

“Speak like a normal person,” Robin said flatly. After a beat, she added, “Please.”

He shot her an offended glare and cleared his throat. “One: We never intended to get directly involved with anything except the events that directly led to Grima’s return. An alliance with Regna Ferox was going to be necessary later—namely, now—so we ensured that happened. Emmeryn… should be self-explanatory. Two: C’mon, the obscurity was epic, don’t even lie. Three: Well… we wished to spare you the knowledge of our most doomed future.”

“Again I ask, since you haven’t answered,” Robin said, her voice growing sharper, “Why tell us now?”

“That, you would have to ask my most beloved cousin. His decision on that part was rather unilateral.” A moment passed. “Actually, probably just because we were honestly getting really bad at keeping it a secret. I say we, I mean Inigo.”

“Funny, I would’ve thought it was you.”

Her sarcasm flew several feet above his head. “I’ll have you know I am fantastic at keeping secrets. Owain Dark, the Greatest Secret-Keeper in all of Ylisse, they used to call me!”

“Uh-huh.”

Before the conversation continued, a cry of Robin’s name drew both their attentions to a wildly-waving Ricken not far away. “Robin!” the young mage cried again. “Need you!”

Robin quirked a brow at Owain, then said, “We’ll talk more later.”

“Yes ma’am!” he said quickly, then practically wilted as she shot him a withering glare. “Milady?” he tried. “Tactician? Grandmaster? Er, just Robin?”

She walked off, shaking her head and muttering something about ‘no rest for the weary,’ and he wondered why his heart lifted at the thought of their discussion continuing.
Chapter Summary

The Ylisseans cross paths with a new and famous ally.

There was only so far to wander on the decks of a Plegian warship, but Inigo did his best, already stir-crazy and not even a quarter of the way across the sea. It would take them six weeks to reach the shores of Valm, and that was if the weather favored them. For him, six weeks of travel had meant journeying on his own two feet or just as physically taxing mounted trek—being cooped up on a ship with nowhere to go and nothing to do was beyond odd.

He had fared better than some, at least—Severa had been horribly seasick for the first three days, as had several of the older-but-not Shepherds. Not to mention the fact that news of the three time travelers’ identities had spread like wildfire, leading to many an odd question thrown their way in the past few weeks.

There was one coming, Inigo was sure of, that he really didn’t want to answer.

“I should be grateful the Plegians delivered us this fleet, as promised…” came his father’s voice. “But it’s still my first time on a vessel, and my legs… I never fancied myself a sea captain.”

*I never fancied myself an Exalt, yet here we are,* Inigo thought, but kept that thought to himself as he hung over the railing, staring resolutely out to the unending horizon. “This is my first voyage as well,” he answered Chrom instead. “In my time, all ships were destroyed. Not that it mattered—there was nothing left in Valm but ruins anyway. We had no need of them.”

Chrom mirrored Inigo, taking up place beside him and resting his forearms on the ship’s railing. “I… cannot imagine this future you came from,” he said after a long moment.

“Inigo, that… what happened to Lucina?” he finally whispered. “A stupid mistake?”

Chrom visibly swallowed, then ventured, “Is that… what happened to Lucina?” he finally whispered. “A stupid mistake?”

Inigo sighed, his posture sinking as he leaned a little heavier on the railing. “Do you really want to know?” As horrible as he felt, he’d been ready for that question. He’d seen the morbid curiosity bubbling up in his father and had known it was coming, sooner or later.

“I…” his father started. “Yes.”

Bowing his head even further, Inigo blew out another breath through pursed lips.

“If you don’t want to—” Chrom started hurriedly.

“No…” Inigo said, and wasn’t quite sure how he even meant that negative. “I wasn’t there,” he
finally said. “I should’ve been.” He nodded his head toward the door that lead down into the belly of the ship, where most of the other inhabitants were. “Severa was. Laurent was—er, you haven’t met him yet. And Gerome… he’s probably not even in the past yet.” He let his thoughts slide to the wyvern rider he hadn’t seen in years for a long moment before he continued. “But my crew was still four days off from Ylisstol. Four days. After all the months we’d been gone, four days.”

Chrom looked as if he wanted to interrupt for a great deal of clarification, but kept his mouth shut.

“There’s… two halves to Grima, so to speak,” Inigo explained. “The dragon, the legend you’ve heard, the most damn terrifying…” He trailed off. “But he took an avatar, a mouthpiece so to speak. Some poor Plegian soul, I suppose. Point is, it was he she faced… unwilling to let the other three die in her place.” He shook his head. “She might’ve had a better chance against the dragon.”

Chrom stayed staring resolutely forward, letting his son’s words process. “Grima… gods,” he finally muttered. “What hope have we against a god?”

“We often asked ourselves the same thing,” Inigo replied. “But Lucina always used to tell us… ‘Hope will never die.’” He ran a hand through his breeze-ruffled hair. “Suppose that hope got me here.”

“Tell me about her,” Chrom said, finally turning his gaze toward Inigo with earnestness in his eyes. “And the others that came back with you.”

“We’re an odd bunch,” Inigo warned, then sighed. “But there’s not a day that goes by when I don’t miss them.” He made a face. “Well. Most of them. Gerome and I never got on that well. He and Lucina were always quite close…”

Chrom quirked a brow. “Close, huh?”

Inigo shot him a confused look before comprehension dawned and he nearly choked on the salty air. “Dear gods Father, don’t put thoughts like that in my head.” He rubbed his chin, then said, “I rather doubt it, though. Gerome would probably brood so hard he self-combusted before he ever touched a woman. Dunno what was wrong with him. Maybe someone dropped him off Minerva as a baby.”

Chrom chuckled, leaving Inigo to crack a smile.

“Lucina idolized you. Followed you at every opportunity, tried to sneak Falchion away as soon as she could wrap her hands around it… A complete prodigy with the sword once she got a little older. Honestly, she might’ve been able to best you if she were here now.”

“I would’ve liked to see her try,” Chrom shot back.

“I certainly never could beat her,” Inigo said with a laugh.

And for those few moments as they talked, his sister was alive and vibrant in his memories again.

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“Inigoooooo. I’m bored.”
“It’s the middle of the night, Owain,” Inigo replied without missing a beat. “Go to sleep.”

Several moments passed before Owain pointed out, “You’re not asleep.” The bunk above Inigo’s head creaked, and suddenly Owain’s upside down head was mere inches away from him as he leaned over the edge. “What’cha doing?”

Resisting the urge to squeak at his cousin’s sudden proximity, Inigo shot him a momentary glare before returning to the papers in his lap. “Writing opening lines to use on all these lovely ladies in our army.” In reality, that was a lie. Recent talk of dancing with his mother had re-lit the fire in his heart—but in the cramped quarters of the ship, it was a rare thing indeed to find both the space and the privacy he required, so he was currently contenting himself with sketching out a new choreography.

“You’re not really going to flirt with the past versions of our company’s mothers, are you?” Owain asked with a raise of his brow, clearly unimpressed.

Inigo mirrored the expression. “Really, what sort of man do you take me for? Don’t answer that, it’s rhetorical.” Ignoring Owain’s scoff, he continued, “While those ladies in the Shepherds are quite fetching, there are plenty of other women in the army who aren’t related to our friends. Not that I’d expect you to notice.”

“Hey, I’ve noticed,” Owain said, sounding affronted.

“You? Have any inclination toward anything female whatsoever? Owain, I can’t believe it. You’ve finally hit puberty. I’m so proud of you. I’d offer to let you be my wingman, but I’m afraid all of your Eliwood’s rage or whatever will scare off every woman in the vicinity, so you’ll just have to make it on your own.”

“Oh, I should have known. You didn’t care about the poor maiden, just the weapon attached to her. Pity.” Inigo glanced up from his papers again. “Also, all that aching blood of yours is going to get stuck in your head if you keep leaning over the edge like that.”

Owain huffed, disappearing back into his own bunk with such force the boards above Inigo’s head visibly shifted.

“I swear to Naga if you break that bunk while I’m underneath you then Falchion will be the last thing you ever see,” Inigo warned.

“I’m pretty sure if I break this bunk while you’re underneath me then my royal derriere will be the last thing you ever see,” Owain pointed out.

Inigo did let out a squeak this time, clutching his papers to his chest before tucking and rolling out of his own bunk. “No! No! I will sleep on the floor before I let that be the last thing burned into my poor innocent eyes!”

“Innocent being the key word, oh cousin of chastity!” Owain cackled for several moments until five loud bangs sounded against their wall.

“Both of you, go to sleep!” came Severa’s hissed voice from the other side.

“Okay, Mom,” Owain shot back. She snapped something about ending him slowly and painfully
that Inigo didn’t quite catch all of.

“I’ll tell your real mother if you don’t quit it,” Inigo muttered, pulling himself into a sitting position and regretting his impulsive dive out of bed. Owain’s voice turned suitably horrified at that threat. “Now go to sleep or at least shut up.”

“Fiiiiiine,” Owain said, as if that was the greatest imposition he’d ever heard in his life. Inigo shook his head and crawled back into bed.

Two whole minutes passed before Owain spoke again.

“The sight of Robin with a tome is enough to strike fear into the most stoic of hearts, as well…”

“Go to sleep!”

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But for a fiery and impressive display of pyrotechnics just over halfway through their voyage when they encountered an enemy fleet, their journey to the shores of Valm was, in a word, boring. Owain complained—loudly—of his twitching swordhand when the continent became visible on the horizon, and he was far from the only one ready for some action.

The Shepherds had scarcely begun unloading—no less the rest of the army—when Chrom, speaking at the front with Frederick and Robin, shielded his eyes against the sun. “We’ll—huh? What’s that?”

“An altercation?” Frederick said, peering across the harbor as well. “That woman—the Valmese dogs are running her down.”

“Any enemy of theirs is a friend of ours,” Chrom said. “Robin?”

The tactician was evidently already flying through ideas, because she immediately answered, “By the time everyone else gets off the ship, it might be too late for her. I need an advance force, swift and small.” She craned her neck back toward the ship, then barked, “Inigo! Owain! Severa!”

Three heads popped up over the edge of the ship as one. “You called, oh brilliant tactician?” said Owain.

“That woman,” Robin said shortly, pointing. “Can you reach her before the Valmese corner her?”

A feral grin came to Owain’s face. “A daring mission for us? Truly, you have—”

Severa grabbed his arm, nails digging into his skin as he yelped. “Let’s go, you idiot,” she said, dragging him toward the gangplank. Inigo sent his father an eye roll before he trotted after them.

“Milady, are you sure they would be your wisest picks?” Frederick asked, raising a brow.

Robin shrugged. “A little trial by fire never hurt anyone.” When Chrom shot her a glare, she added, “Much.”
“Over ‘ere! We have ‘er cornered!”

Inigo cursed under his breath, thankful that this mysterious woman they sought was not weighed down by the same heavy armor as the Valmese, because otherwise they never would have managed to reach her in time. Though she was fleet-footed, they’d clearly been running her for long enough that her stamina was flagging.

“Don’t let ‘er get away—”

The knight’s words were cut off as Falchion sliced through his heavy armor, hardly slowing. The knight dropped as Owain and Severa caught up, falling into automatic formation without a word being said.

“Prince Chrom of the Ylissean League! You have my gratitude!”

Several beats passed before the woman’s voice registered, and when it did Inigo shot her a long look and gave a very eloquent, “Huh?”

“You know of our cause?” Owain interjected before Inigo could make any bigger of a fool out of himself.

“Of course!” the woman exclaimed. “I would speak with you more—but first, perhaps…”

“I think she means shut up and fight,” Severa said. “Inigo!” she cried, giving him just enough time to spin and cover his undefended flank from yet another knight.

The woman was already there, though, moving in a blur and armed with a sword that seemed to be little more than an extension of her arm. Inigo almost let out a whimper of envy when she slowed enough for him to make out the distinctive outline of a katana. “Milady, rarely have I seen such a way with a blade!” he said when he had caught enough room to take in a breath.

“‘Tis an art you seem to know keenly, as well,” she replied as he parried a blow meant for her.

“Well, if I should be so modest—”

“Robin should have known better than to send Inigo on a mission after a female,” Severa grumbled, purposefully striding just close enough to bump Inigo off balance.

“Hey.”

Owain snickered. “Hey, uh—whatever your name is! To your left!”

She pivoted with liquid grace that shouldn’t be as beautiful as Inigo immediately thought it was, narrowly dodging a blast of fire from a nearby mage. “Fie and vexations, confound these wretched imperials!” she cried. “Pray thank you, my friend!”

“Look, Inigo, I’m her friend,” Owain said smugly.

“Shut up, Owain.”

Surprisingly enough, the woman let out a short laugh at their bickering. “Naga has smiled upon me to bring you to me now,” she said. “I am called Say’ri, and I fight with the Resistance.”
Inigo choked so hard Severa had to cover him for a full thirty seconds.
Inigo and Owain proceed to fangirl over meeting one of their childhood heroes.

"Owain."

"I know!"

The worst of the fighting was over, the older Shepherds clearing out the last pockets of Valmese as the four picked their way across the bloody harbor. Say’ri led the way with Severa just behind her, leaving Owain and Inigo side-by-side several strides behind both of them with matching lights in their eyes.

“That’s Say’ri,” Inigo whispered, shooting an awed look at Chon’sinian princess’s back.

"I know!” Owain said again, his expression nothing short of hero-worship. His voice still hushed, he continued, “I would say the tales did her justice, but nay! She rises above the legends!”

“Not even your father can fight like that,” Inigo said.

“Normally I’d be offended by you saying that, but… gods, you’re right. That thing she did with the dark knight…” Owain said, twirling his hands by way of explanation.

“Nor did the stories our parents told us mention that she’s freaking gorgeous…” Inigo murmured.

Severa must have caught the end of that sentence, because she turned back and glared at both of them. “Pick your chins up and wipe the drool off them,” she hissed.

“Don’t act like you’re not impressed,” Owain told her.

She shrugged in response, leaving both boys shaking their heads. “Hey! Robin, Chrom!” she yelled instead. “Yoo-hoo! Got your girl over here!”

Say’ri balked, stopping in her tracks and shooting a Severa what seemed to be a dirty look for her informality. After a moment, though, her expression turned to confusion. “Beg pardon my assumptions, but are you not Prince Chrom?” she asked Inigo.

He shook his head and tried to tamp down the pink tinge that was surely rising to his cheeks. “My name is Inigo,” he corrected gently, then nodded toward where his father was approaching at a swift pace. “That’s Chrom.”

Say’ri pressed her hands together and dipped at the waist. “I apologize for my mistake, friend.” She straightened and glanced between the two. “You do… bear a striking resemblance to him.”

“Nothing to apologize for,” Inigo said. “I know Chon’sin and Ylisse have no official alliances—court descriptions of their respective royalty cannot be that much to go on.”

Say’ri shot him a shocked look. “If that is indeed the case, then I am quite impressed you seem to
Inigo glanced over at Owain, mouthing, *Was I not supposed to?* His cousin shrugged. “Well… how many Say’ris can there be in the world?” he finally asked.

“You might be surprised,” she demurred.

“Don’t mind them, they’re both hopeless,” Severa told her flatly.

By then, Chrom was within speaking distance. “Mercy, friends! The tales of your strength were no exaggeration,” Say’ri said, then repeated her greeting from earlier. “My name is Say’ri, and I fight with the Resistance.”

“Well met, Say’ri,” Chrom said. “I am Prince Chrom of Ylisse. If you would come with me, there are others who wish to meet you.” He gave a short nod of acknowledgment to Inigo, Owain, and Severa. “Good job, you three.”

“Good job?” Severa muttered as soon as Chrom and Say’ri were out of hearing distance. “That’s all? ‘Good job’?”

“Take the compliment, Severa, if you know how to do that,” Inigo told her. “You never can accept them from me.”

“Because you compliment literally every woman on the planet and it means less than nothing,” the redhead shot back.

“Just because he’s useless with woman doesn’t mean he doesn’t mean well—oof.” Owain had slung his arm over Severa’s shoulders but dropped it hurriedly when she elbowed him in the ribs. “Rude.”

“Don’t act like you’ve got the high ground on interacting with girls, Owain, because you’re just as bad in a different way.”

“From you, that’s almost a compliment!” Owain called as Severa split away. She sent him a rude gesture over her shoulder—much to Inigo’s amusement.

“How in the world is that a compliment?” Inigo asked, chuckling.

“I don’t know, but it’s not important,” Owain replied flippantly. “C’mon. Maybe Say’ri will appreciate us more than our fiery friend.”

When they caught up with Chrom and Say’ri, the latter were speaking to Frederick, Robin, Lissa, Basilio, and Flavia. “So there is an organized resistance?” Chrom was asking.

“Aye, of sorts,” Say’ri replied. “Several groups formed to seek liberty for the states of Valm.”

“I thought the emperor had stamped out all dissenters,” Chrom pointed out.

“He tries, but we Resistance are a slippery lot. We strike hard and then vanish again into the dark of night. Even now rebels ride to the banner of dynasts across the continent. United, we could pose a veritable threat to Walhart. And so, for some time I have struggled to bring us together.”

“What’s stopping you?” Flavia asked.

Say’ri made a noise of disgust. “Greed. Jealousy. Sloth. All the old weaknesses of man. The dynasts all would have freedom, but on their own terms. Some refuse to take up arms unless their
territory is threatened. Others thrive under the Conqueror’s heel and will not join unless there is profit in it. Liberty is a fine word, aye, but not always enough to rouse men from foolishness.”

“I take it you’re looking for a more convincing argument, then?”

“Just so,” Say’ri replied. “Although my efforts thus far have met with meager success. I fear many distrust me because my brother fights for Walhart.”

Inigo shot Owain a glance, questions in his eyes as he tried to remember that part of their history. His cousin shrugged, evidently drawing a blank as well.

“Why does he support the empire?” Basilio inquired.

“Would that I know, good sir,” Say’ri answered. “Yen’fay was a good man once, but he is my brother no more! If we meet on the battlefield, I would cut him down, same as any other imperial.”

Inigo felt a pang at that and wondered, quietly, if there was anything Lucina could have done that would have made him say the same. What if she had joined Grima? It never would have happened, but what if she had? He had to shake his head to dispel the thought as a queasy feeling rose in his stomach.

“Walhart is said to command a million men now,” Say’ri continued. “Sooner or later he will stamp out the Resistance entirely, if we do not unite.”

“Um, Chrom?” Lissa interjected. “Did she just say he has a million soldiers?”

“Ha!” Say’ri barked. “And what are one million men against the Ylissean dogs of war? You stopped a thousand of their ships, did you not? Your daring strategy has awoken and inspired people across all of Valm. Together I know we can yet unite the Resistance and break Walhart’s grip! Help me, Prince Chrom! I beg of you!”

“Milord?” Frederick interjected, raising a brow in Chrom’s direction.

“This is no easy thing you ask of me,” Chrom pointed out. “I have my own causes: a halidom to save and a future to win.” He shot a pointed glance at Inigo, then continued after a beat. “I know a great battle has been foretold, but is this it? How to know? Still, I admire your courage… Perhaps your mission is the best way to achieve mine. So yes, Say’ri. I will join your cause with my own. And if I’m wrong, it’s my life on the line… as it should be. Now. What will it take to unite your people?”

A sly grin came to Say’ri’s face. “Well, I do have one idea… Since ancient times, many of our people have worshipped Naga. More precisely, we worship the divine dragon’s oracle, Lady Tiki. Though most know her only as the Voice. The Voice is trapped in her temple as Walhart’s prisoner. But if she were freed…”

“The Resistance could unite around her,” Robin finished. “Where is the Voice being held?”

“There is a shrine built in the branches of the Mila Tree,” Say’ri said. “She is confined there. It is a perhaps a month’s journey from here.”

“Then we have our plan,” Chrom said firmly. “Let’s get to it!”
“Ah! If it isn’t the lovely lady Say’ri. Here I was beginning to wonder if you were avoiding me.”
Inigo gave his most charming smile, but the princess barely glanced up from where she sat on a
fallen log, sharpening her blade.

“I have heard tales of your charms, Inigo, though I was beginning to wonder if they were
exaggerated,” she replied.

“Tales of my charms, eh?” Inigo asked. “All good things, I hope?”

“On the contrary, I have been warned of the fact that you are a… how did Cherche put it? An
‘unabashed skirt-chaser.’ Maribelle also spoke of the fact that I should ‘ware your offers of
‘teatime’ for the… ‘defense of my purity,’ I believe she said. In addition, I have the inkling Miriel
endeavored to tell me similar, but I could not comprehend her words.”

“Ah,” Inigo said, tugging on his ear. “Not so good, then.”

“I would not say as such.” Say’ri actually did look up then, but only to fix him with a stony glare.
“We are at war. Prithee turn your attentions to more productive outlets than deflowering women.”

“I do not… ‘deflower’ women!” Inigo sputtered. “I… simply enjoy spending time in beautiful
company! Speaking of which, if you ever do wish to join me for tea…”

Say’ri made a soft sound in her throat and resumed her work on her blade. “I am busy, as you
should also be,” she said flatly. “If that is all you wished to say to me, then do be going.”

Inigo sighed and glanced upward. “It’s not, actually,” he said. He’d spent the last two weeks as
they journeyed across Valm trying to work himself up to this, and he wasn’t going to back out now.
“Was actually wondering if I could try your sword.”

Say’ri’s brows shot up as she met his eyes again. “A Chon’sinian katana is a very different kin than
the Ylissean broadsword,” she pointed out.

Inigo’s lips twitched with barely contained amusement. “I’m aware of that.”

“No,” she said without preamble.

“...I’m not aware of that?” Inigo ventured.

“No, you may not wield my blade,” Say’ri told him.

“...Why not?” Inigo asked, trying not to sound so petulant he only made her resolve firmer. In truth,
he just wanted to remember what his favored blade felt like in his hands again.

“You fight with plain knowledge of your weapon and clear skill… but with reserve and timidity.
Your own blade is not used to its full potential in your hands. You seem, in a word, afraid of it.” A
beat passed while Say’ri let that sink in. “Any man who fears his own weapon lets it master him.
Any man who lets his weapon master him cannot master his weapon. And any man who cannot
master his own weapon is not worthy of testing mine own.” She continued to fix her steely gaze on
him. “That is ‘why not.’”

Inigo scratched at the back of his neck. “Ah,” he managed. “Anything I could do to change your
mind on that?”
Say’ri paused, pursing her lips. “Best me in single combat, and I will consider it.”

He felt a smirk come to his lips. “Okay,” he said. “Now?”

“Now?” she repeated with a lift of her brow.

“No better time than the present, is there?”

“I would suppose not.”

Ever the gentleman, of course, Inigo waited for her to get to her feet before drawing Falchion. Say’ri, however, did not stand. Instead, in a single fluid motion, she gripped the handle of her katana and swung upwards.

Without so much as a nick to his skin, she rent Falchion’s sheath from Inigo’s belt, and the divine sword hit the ground without ever being drawn.

Several beats passed while Inigo, blinking, glanced between Say’ri and his sword. “I wasn’t ready yet!” he blurted out.

“This is war,” she said flatly, returning her sword to her lap and beginning to sharpen it again. “One must always be ready.” When he didn’t have a comeback to that, she continued, “That would be a loss for your first attempt. Speak to me another time if you wish to try again.”

“Oh, you will definitely be seeing me again,” Inigo muttered, snatching Falchion to his chest before turning on his heel in defeat.

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Inigo grumbled the entire way through their camp, right up until he pushed open the flap of the tent he shared with Owain and tossed Falchion on the floor.

“Who spit in your bear stew?” his cousin asked with a lift of his brow, glancing up from where he was working yet again on his Manual of Justice.

“Gods, that’s not really what we’re having tonight, is it?” Inigo asked with a groan. In response, Owain nodded toward where a half-eaten bowl of the offending substance sat at his feet. “Great. I needed my day to get worse.”

“What, did you get rejected again?”


“You mean you found a new way to get rejected? I’m impressed! I thought you had so far scouted out every possible avenue of being shot down in humiliation.”

“Shut up,” Inigo grumbled, collapsing onto his bedroll and flinging his arm over his face. “I’m not in the mood.”

“You’re never in the mood for my gentle words of sympathy and guidance,” Owain said, managing to sound suitably dejected.
“More like your biting teasing designed to pierce directly into my wounded soul. Damn it, I’m starting to sound like you now.”

“You say that as if it’s a bad thing… one should only be so lucky as to be able to spout fountains of creative imagery to enhance what would otherwise be a rather dull conversation. What’s wrong with that?”

“Literally everything,” Inigo groaned.

Owain sighed and set his book aside. “Okay, seriously. Who was it this time, then?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

Owain looked at him for a moment more, shrugged, and went back to his writing. “If you say so.”

A few more moments passed before Inigo took in a deep breath, swallowed his pride, and asked, “Can you teach me how to use Falchion?”

Startled, Owain glanced up and blinked owlishly at him. “Falchion has taken its residence by your side and answered most potently to you for years now. Why would you need me? Though your own preferences oft lead you to stray from it, you certainly can use it.”

Say’ri’s voice echoing in his head, Inigo admitted, “Yeah, I can use it. But I haven’t mastered it. Not like my father has… or how Lucina did.”

“Ah!” Owain said, holding up his index finger as comprehension dawned. “Mastery of a blade is something else entirely, Inigo! You should have said so in the first place. If that is your true cause, then of course I shall endeavor to aid you wholeheartedly!”

“Really?” Inigo asked, about to mention that had been easier than he thought when his cousin spoke again.

“Provided, of course, you allow me to test it out firsthand so as to fine-tune my own teaching. For science.”

Inigo groaned again.
Two familiar faces join the Shepherds at the Mila Tree.

A journey that should have taken a month ended up lasting nearly twice that. There was no helping it—Walhart’s forces were everywhere, goading and provoking them at every turn. It was rare for the Shepherds to go more than a few days without combat.

That streak remained unfortunately unbroken even when they did reach the roots of the Mila Tree. They had no sooner marveled at the sight of the tree when they met up with Valmese guard at the base.

As per usual, Severa, Inigo, and Owain fought as a unit, Robin having recognized their cohesion and taken to stationing them together. As per *un* usual, though, Severa now served as their ranged fighter, armed with a bow with Robin wishing them to diversify their strengths. In the future past, she had been roughly on par with Inigo, being at least capable as an archer for necessity’s sake—with strict training supervised by Virion she was starting to become more than just capable.

Severa’s new skillset was a more than welcome addition this fight—the air was thick with pegasus knights that poked and prodded at Inigo and Owain faster than she could shoot them down. With that plus the infantry and cavalry heckling them as well, it was almost a surprise one of them didn’t go down sooner.

It was, in the end, not even a pegasus knight, but the pegasus itself. The usually graceful creature’s rider was gone, straps hanging haphazardly from its side; one of Severa’s arrows was impaled in its left wing, leaving it anything *but* elegant as it dropped from the sky at an alarming pace.

“Sev—” was the only thing Inigo managed to get out in time, yanking the redhead’s shoulders and ignoring her yelp of protest. She quieted, though, as the pegasus hit the dirt with a mighty crash, a flailing hoof missing her by mere inches.

Owain was not so lucky.

In the chaos of thrashing white wings, Inigo couldn’t make out what actually happened. What he couldn’t ignore was a scream that rent the air and pierced straight through his heart.

“Owain!” Standing there and yelling was the only thing Inigo could do for the eternity it took for the pegasus to coordinate itself enough to get to its shaking feet—a move that was followed by another, much softer cry of pain from Owain. “Cover me,” Inigo barked to Severa, not waiting for a reply.

With unfortunate practiced ease, Inigo took in the entire scene at once. His cousin was flat on his back, spread-eagled and heaving for breath, his sword thrown clear several feet away and deep boot marks marring the muddy ground from where the pegasus had caught him and dragged him down. There was no blood, Inigo noted with relief, only to take in the horribly unnatural angle Owain’s right arm sat at.
“Owain?” He didn’t bother to ask if he was all right. There wasn’t a point.

“Hurts.” Compared to the usual verbose monologuing Owain kept up even on the brink of death, that breathy, monosyllabic reply was more than worrying. “Oh gods it hurts.”

“Where?” Inigo asked sharply, dropping to his knees. He wondered for half a second just how many places Owain’s arm had to be broken and gave up trying to guess before he even started. He could only think they were lucky that the pegasus hadn’t landed two feet further over and crushed his cousin’s torso instead of his limb.

“Arm. Head.” Owain took another shuddering gasp, tears starting to gather in the corners of his eyes. “Nigo—”

“Severa, is there a healer near—”

“No!” she called back before he even finished the sentence.

Inigo cursed. “Did it hit your chest? Stomach?” There was no point fumbling for a vulnerary if it had—the healing potion was meant for superficial wounds, and though it might dull the pain it would do far more harm than good if there was any risk of internal bleeding.

Owain shook his head. “Don’t know.”

“Can’t risk it, then.”

“Inigo!”

Severa’s warning came the exact moment Inigo registered the other presence behind him. In the same motion he drew Falchion and pivoted, using the force of the spin to push him up off his knees and onto his leading foot.

His blow would have torn his opponent in half had it not been perfectly parried with such force Falchion was jarred from his grip and sent flying. He drew in a gasp and, in a heartbeat, came to terms with the fact that with him unarmed, the next strike would certainly kill him.

It never came. He finally glanced up, blinking, at the point of a katana wielded by Say’ri.

“Ah,” he managed, trying to keep his voice from shaking. “That’s another point for you, then?”

“Fie, pick up your sword,” she snapped. “I feared that pegasus may have caught you unawares.”

Automatically, he scrambled to obey her and retrieve Falchion. The battle was starting to move past them, closer to the trunk of the tree as Chrom’s forces continued to push back against the Valmese, but they were far from safe yet.

Say’ri shielded her eyes, scouting the field, before her gaze landed back on Owain. “We’re going to have to move him,” she said. “’Tis too risky to attempt to bring a healer in.”

“I know,” Inigo replied, throat tightening at the sheer amount of pain he was going to have to put his cousin through to get out of this. “I think I can carry him if you two lovely ladies can clear me a path?”

An arrow whistled past, clipping Severa’s shoulder and leaving a trail of blood in its wake. “Just get it done, Inigo,” she got out through gritted teeth.

“My strength is yours,” Say’ri said.
“Right.” Inigo sucked in a breath. “Sorry, Owain.”

He had scarcely gotten his cousin upright—leaning heavily on Inigo’s shoulders and still whimpering—when Say’ri held up a hand. “Another pegasus knight incoming, Severa.”

The redhead drew her bow once more and Inigo squinted. “Hold, Severa!” he blurted. “They bear Ylissean colors!”

Severa dropped her weapon, peering through the battle herself. “Who is that?”

Inigo drew in another sharp breath. “No… it’s not…”

Her pegasus zipping through the carnage, a girl with cocoa-brown pigtails leaned over her mount’s side. “What ho, my friends!” she cried. “Cynthia the True arrives on Wings of Justice!”

Behind her, a young man buried his scarred face in one hand, the other still clutching tightly to her waist. “Wings o’ something, maybe… Can ya slow down, Cyn? I think I’m gonna be sick…”

“…Could it be?” Owain asked, perking up slightly. “The other half of the Justice Cabal has finally returned from our grim future to draw alongside in our hour of need?”

Inigo, meanwhile, found himself cracking a smile. “Cynthia! Brady! You’re here!”

“Hail, companions!” Cynthia said, matching Inigo’s grin as her pegasus zipped in circles around them. “Need a hand? A wing, perhaps?”

“Zounds, but what frivoliy is this?” Say’ri asked, looking baffled. “You do draw attention to an injured company in the midst of battle! Prithee show some discretion, stranger!”

“Oh, come on,” Cynthia replied, rolling her eyes. “Like these dumb Valmese would dare ruin our epic reunion!”

“No, really, she’s gotta point, Cyn,” Brady pointed out. “I think that archer’s lookin’ at us—yipes!”

Severa took down the offending archer with a sneer before he could do anymore damage. “Gawds, Cynthia, I hate to agree with you, but these Valmese are super dumb.”

“Cynthia, can you get Owain to Maribelle or Lissa?” Inigo interjected, thinking quickly. “No offense, Brady, but I think he might be beyond a field healing right now.”

“Count on it! Hop off, Brady!” Cynthia said, reining her pegasus to a landing.

“I’m not, uh, armed,” the priest pointed out with alarm.

“We’ve got you, Brady,” Inigo reassured. “We’re still heading that way ourselves. Just stick close.”

“Speak for yourself, Inigo,” Say’ri said. “I shall not retreat when there is still fighting to be done.”

Severa, in the respite, had popped the cork on one of her vulneraries and downed it, and was currently tearing a strip from her shirt to tie around her injured arm. “Gotta agree. Get Brady to safety and join up with us when you can.” With that, both she and Say’ri returned to the fray.

“Right then,” Inigo said, once they’d gotten Owain aboard Cynthia’s pegasus. “Let’s move!”

They had almost disappeared over the horizon when Brady spoke again. “Sorry t’ slow ya down
“No worries,” he replied, brandishing Falchion once more. “Sully, Stahl, and Gregor should be stationed around here, if I remember correctly. We can hook up with them until the end of the fight.” He started pushing forward, Brady hot on his heels.

“Ya’ve changed,” the priest said, again after several minutes of silence. “Ya look older.”

“I am older.” Inigo dared glance back. “How long ago did you come through?”

“Bout a year. Same for Cyn, giver take.”

“It’s nearing three for Owain and myself. Not quite as long for Severa.” Brady whistled.

“Forgive me,” Inigo said, “but perhaps fight now, catch up later?”

“Er, yeah! ‘Course.” Brady cleared his throat and glanced away, face turning pink.

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“Owain Dark’s mighty swordhand cannot be contained by this… this fiendish device of torture!”

“It's called a sling, honey,” came Lissa's voice, “and you're going to wear it if you ever want to use that swordhand again.”

“Well, he ain't changed a wink,” Brady drawled.

“If anything he's gotten worse,” Inigo replied, deadpan. “Remind me to tell you about his ‘Shadow Strike of Nightmare.’”

“Sounds terrifyin’.”

“It really was.”

Even with the fighting done, there was still always enough work left that it was well into the night when Inigo was finally able to slip away and check on his cousin. Brady stuck to him like a burr on a lamb’s tail, but he couldn’t really blame him—Cynthia, upon Inigo giving her the go ahead to reveal her true identity, had immediately sought out Sumia and was still with her mother now. Brady, meanwhile, hadn’t yet gone looking for Maribelle but clearly still didn’t want to be alone in a camp full of strangers.

Inigo pushed the flap of the large tent set aside for healing the injured in the same way he wanted to push aside just about everything else that had happened that day. In a few hours, when the adrenaline finally, finally wore off with a crash, he’d be left with nothing but the same shame and regrets he found in the wake of every battle, but for now, if he kept busy, he could keep them at bay.

Inside were several figures Inigo expected to see—Lissa, Maribelle, and Libra—all of whom were, rather worryingly, still working over Owain. Much more alarming, however, was the presence of Tharja.
“Um… everything all right?” Inigo ventured, with the sinking feeling it was very much not. The uncomfortable prickling on the back of his neck from Tharja’s sudden gaze wasn’t helping matters any.

“No, everything is not all right!” Owain cried. “They want me to wear this—this thing, this entrapment, this crime against humanity —”

“It’s. A. Sling,” Maribelle said flatly. “And if you do not stop whining like a baby and use it, you will almost certainly lose partial to full use of that arm.”

Owain shot her a glare as if this entire situation were her fault alone, but didn’t have a chance to prepare a comeback before Brady piped up. “Um. Why haven’t ya just—ya know—healed him?”

“Hmph,” Maribelle said. “As if a mannerless thug would know enough to question me about healing.”

“I’m a priest,” Brady said flatly. “A healer m’self. So a pegasus fell on ‘im, yeah? What’s so gods-dang awful ‘bout that that ya can’t fix with yer standard Mend stave? Might take all three o’ ya, but I’ve fixed worse without help.”

“Ah,” came Tharja’s voice. “That would be why I am here.”

That is not a good sign, Inigo thought.

The dark mage fixed her eyes on him again and he swallowed hard. “You should’ve told me you were playing around with dark mages.”

Still disconcerted, all Inigo could manage was, “...What?”

Maribelle let out an exasperated sigh. “At some unknown point in the last few months, Owain was hit by some sort of anti-healing hex.”

“A rather nasty one at that,” Tharja cooed. “Oh, I would’ve loved to meet the sorcerer who cast that...”

“Point is,” Maribelle continued—shooting Tharja a glare that would have made most others cower, though the dark mage didn’t seem to even notice—“While Tharja was able to reverse the worst of the effects, for the moment we’ve had to resort to more... traditional healing methods.”

“They want me to rest and recuperate and let my body heal itself!” Owain burst out. “For two months, Inigo! My swordhand’s battle lust cannot be sated with relaxation for two months!”

Under any other circumstances, Inigo might have burst out laughing at his cousin’s melodrama, but he thought in this case it was actually probably justified.

“At least two months,” Maribelle added, as if that was going to help matters. “And should you decide to stray from that advice, the bones in your arm will set incorrectly and lead to such crippling pain you will be unlikely to be able to lift a sword again. And, as you may have noticed, we cannot afford to lose even a fighter as... foolhardy as yourself.”

Owain stared at her with even more horror in his gaze than before, as if her words were finally sinking in. “Never... use a sword... again?”

Lissa sniffed and wiped at her eyes.
Maribelle sighed and said, “Lissa.”

“You don’t understand!” the princess exclaimed. “Owain, baby, I’m sorry we can’t do anything else! You’re just going to have to bear with it, my dear little boy…” With that, she burst into tears properly, flinging her arms around his shoulders.

“Gah! Mother! C-can’t breathe!”

“Lissa, pull yourself together before you suffocate him,” Maribelle said flatly. “This is embarrassing for everyone involved.”

“You don’t know what it’s like, Maribelle!” Lissa sobbed out, only clinging tighter to the still-protesting Owain. “You don’t have a son!”

Brady coughed and rubbed at the back of his neck. “‘Bout that… actually… funny story…”
Silence hung thick over the camp, like a heavy blanket that left Inigo tossing and turning. He wanted something besides quiet—murmurs of conversation outside, a breeze to rustle the leaves of the great Mila Tree above his head, or even just the steady lull of Owain’s breathing from across the tent. Alas, it seemed no one else was awake to whisper indiscernible words, the night around was still, and Owain was still under watch by the healers.

It was clearly some ungodly hour of the night—perhaps even technically morning—when Inigo gave up on sleep and crawled out of his bedroll, wincing as battle-weary muscles protested the movement. His body might be exhausted, but his mind refused to do anything but spin in circles, so he slipped out of the tent and toward the fringes of camp.

Fog blurred and chilled the October air, leaving him wishing he’d grabbed a coat before he left. Instead of going back, though, he found a seat on one of the massive tree roots about a hundred feet from the outermost tents and curled up in on himself.

Though he’d washed his hands half a dozen times since the fighting ended, his nails still stubbornly held on to the grit of battle. The shudder that went through him had nothing to do with the temperature. He realized, abruptly, he hadn’t even noticed how many Valmese had fallen under his blade that day—it could have been two, twenty, or two hundred. When had he lost count of the lives he’d taken? When had glassy, dying eyes stopped being the last thing he thought of when he slept and the first thing he saw when he woke up?

When had he come to terms with killing?

His own blood was what started to color his nails then, the skin of his palms giving way under the pressure of his clenched fingers. *Your hands have been stained yet you still mourn every loss of life,* the elder at the mirage village had told him, but how could those words possibly still be right? How could Inigo mourn lives he didn’t even register ending? How could he justify mourning them when it was he who was the invader? While there were sure to be exceptions, an army of a million or more had to be comprised mostly of those stolen from their families, conscripted, and forced to fight—however charismatic the so-called Conqueror was.

“This is absurd,” came a flat voice. “Our healers are overextended enough as it is without you trying to catch your death in the middle of the night.”

“I don’t see you in your tent,” Inigo shot back.

“I am on watch duty,” Say’ri replied coolly, crossing her arms. “And rather more sensibly dressed, I would think.”

“So?” Inigo asked, suppressing a shiver. Now sheer mulishness was going to keep him from going back to get a coat. Say’ri might have been a childhood hero—but she was not his mother, and besides, he already had one of those.
“‘So?’” she repeated incredulously.

“Save it,” he cut in before she could continue. “I’m not a child, I don’t have a curfew, and if Chrom ever tries to tell you otherwise you’d better tell him to take it up with me. If you don’t mind, I’m not out here to make small talk about the weather.”

Say’ri blinked, taken back by his snappishness, and after a moment Inigo felt a pang of regret. “Very well,” she said, and moved on before he could try to soften his words.

Inigo blew his hair back from his forehead and wondered what else he could get around to ruining tonight.

Surprisingly enough, it was only perhaps half an hour later when he heard footsteps approaching yet again. Who is it now? he wondered, seriously considering changing the location of his brooding.

“I had hoped you had gathered enough sense to leave this place by now,” Say’ri said flatly. “Aren’t you on patrol?”

“Lon’qu relieved me.” Without warning, a heavy blanket hit the ground beside him. “If you cannot be bothered to clothe yourself reasonably, at least take this.”

Startled, Inigo glanced up at her. “I didn’t know you cared,” he blurted, then thought, Real smooth, Inigo.

“I care to see the Ylissean army remain in peak condition, which ‘twill not be if you are confined to your tent with a raging fever,” she said, and handed him one of the two mugs in her hand. “Take this, as well. ‘Tis a tea from my homeland that boosts the body’s defenses against illness.”

“Huh,” Inigo said, settling the blanket around his shoulders and finding it warm, like she’d set it by the fire before bringing it. “Having tea with the princess of Chon’sin. After our last conversation, I never thought I’d see the day.”

“Actually, I had intended to leave you be. ‘Twould not do to encourage rumors.”

Inigo gave a dry chuckle, inhaling the scent of orange rising off his drink. It certainly smelled good... “Please. I have about a thousand rumors constantly surrounding— dear Naga woman, what is in this?” He choked, spluttering on the unexpectedly bitter drink without regard for whatever remained of his dignity.

“A selection of herbs, a pinch of—” Say’ri replied, dropping down beside him with a puzzled expression.

“No, you know what, I don’t want to know,” Inigo cut her off, clearing his throat. “Gods, if I wasn’t awake before…”

Say’ri’s confusion turned to chagrin. “My apologies, Inigo. I didn’t consider that an Ylissean’s palate would be different from mine own.”

“Just... don’t try to poison me again and we’ll call it even,” Inigo replied weakly, setting the cup on the ground.

To his immense surprise, Say’ri let out a laugh—soft, melodic, and completely at odds with every other moment he’d spent in her presence. He couldn’t help but stare, feeling a warmth spread over
him that had nothing to do with the blanket or the tea. A smile tugged on his own lips—getting the ever-stern princess to laugh felt about on par with achieving the same with Gerome.

“Ah. Here I was wondering if you had any sense of humor at all.”

“Watch yourself,” she warned, but she seemed to pick up on the good-naturedness of his teasing, and a tenderness remained in her features. “You are a strange fellow, Inigo.”

“I’ve heard that before, and I always wonder, ‘have you met the rest of my family?’”

Say’ri didn’t answer him for a moment, maintaining eye contact for so long that Inigo could only guess she’d caught sight of the Brand he no longer bothered to hide. “Speaking of rumors… I have heard the strangest one regarding that sort, of late.”

“You mean that I’m Chrom’s son?” Inigo asked bluntly.

“Indeed. ‘Tis a tale that makes little sense, yet I oft hear it spoken as fact. I simply wondered if you were aware.”

“Aware?” Inigo chuckled. “I’m the one who started it. Well… if one can start a rumor that’s actually true.”

Say’ri’s eyes narrowed. “Fie, but I do not ken it,” she finally said. “Chrom is but in the early years of his second score, no? You could pass as his brother, surely, but his child? Nay.”

“…Score?” Inigo asked, searching his mind for a moment, before remembering the old term for ‘twenty.’ “Oh, that score. Yes, I think he’s… twenty-three at this point? We’re only a handful of years apart in this timeline.” At Say’ri’s blank look, he let out a sigh. “Gods, you really haven’t heard anything else, have you? Okay, let me start over. I’m from the future.”

He laid it all out for her—Grima’s rise and the fall of mankind, the choice Naga had offered they’d been all but forced to take. He told the brief overview of finding Owain by chance in Regna Ferox, and how it seemed Brady and Cynthia had done the same here in Valm. He wondered, briefly, how Laurent was doing with whoever else had come through in Ylisse. By the time he’d finished, the sun was starting to creep over the horizon.

Say’ri folded her hands in her lap when he’d finished, her tea long gone and his long cold. “If it were anyone else, I do not think I would believe you,” she finally said. “But I cannot see your grief as anything but genuine.” She paused, then ventured, “In your world… what became of us? Of Valm, of Chon’sin, of mine own people?”

“Gone,” Inigo told her softly. “Gone, like everything else.”

After a beat, she sighed, then got to her feet. “Then pray tell thank you.”

“…For what?”

“For reminding me what I fight for.”

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Inigo discovered, within a few days, that a bored Owain was just as dangerous as a caffeinated
Owain.

“... Rescue!”

Inigo landed in an unceremonious heap on the floor of the tent the two shared, barely managing to avoid taking his own eye out with the fork that had been raised to his lips. “For goodness’ sake Owain, for the tenth time I do not need to be ‘rescued’ from the mess tent!”

“...Are you sure?”

“Yes!” Inigo scrambled upright, staring mournfully at his fork. “I was just about to start on dessert too… No point going back for it now, I’m sure Gaius has snatched it already…” He quickly looked up, eyes narrowing. “How did you get your hands on another rescue staff, anyway?”

“Hand, Inigo,” Owain corrected, gesturing to his immobile arm. “The correct phrasing would be ‘how did I get my hand on another rescue staff?’”

Inigo glared at him.

“Well… I may have procured it from Mother.”

“Stole it, you mean.”

“That sounds very unheroic, Inigo. I would do no such thing. I merely borrowed it for an indefinite period of time without her knowledge.”

“That’s it, you’re not allowed to spend any more time with Gaius. Ever.” Inigo sighed, flopping down on top of his bedroll. “Also, I would think you of all people would know there’s a word for ‘borrowing for unspecified period of time without the person’s knowledge.’”

“There is?”

“Yeah. Stealing.”

Owain huffed, moving to cross his arms out of automatic habit before wincing at the movement. “I’m just… antsy, all right? Heroes of legend are meant to be out on the front lines, not in the back holding bandages and watching you get all the action.” He, too, stretched out flat on the floor, muttering in the direction of the canvas ceiling. “I can’t even work on my list of weapon names and attack moves for more than a few minutes because I’m not left handed and it starts cramping up.”

Inigo held his breath and counted to ten. “And let me guess, Aunt Lissa is as… overbearing as usual when you are helping with the healers?”

“Gods, yes!” Owain blurted. “I can barely turn around without another saccharine agnomen rising to my ears! Don’t get me wrong, it’s not that I’m not glad we’re here with our parents and such, but I’m nineteen, not five!”

Inigo sighed, trying to sort out a solution to this problem both out of empathy for his cousin and for the sake of his own ebbing sanity. “Try talking to Robin, maybe? She might be able to assign you somewhere else where you can still be useful and not working so closely with your mother.”

A beat passed. “Inigo, that is so brilliant I could kiss you.”

“Please don’t,” Inigo begged, watching as Owain threw himself to his feet. “What are you
“Doing?”

“Going to talk to Robin!” Owain exclaimed, darting out of the tent.

“I didn’t necessarily mean now…!” He doubted Owain even heard him, and Inigo sighed yet again. “Well, at least he didn’t ‘rescue’ me from the bath again…”
Take Me to the Top (Part 4) Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Owain explores new career opportunities.

Chapter Notes

Fair warning... This story is divided into parts based on the 'arcs' of the story, not necessarily of equal length--Part 1 being pre-return, Part 2 the Plegian War, Part 3 the two-year timeskip in Chapter 11, with the current part being the Valm War and the last to be Validar/Grima. As I write this out, I can tell you right now that with everything I have planned for Valm, it's going to be FAR longer than the previous three (we're maybe about halfway through right now ). So don't be too surprised when we start hitting the double-digit chapters in Part 4.

[Author's Note from several months later: lol, 'halfway.' Try like a fifth.]

“Milady Robin! It is the one and only Owain Dark, Hero of Legend! Pray tell, might I enter you sacred abode and discuss a matter of grave importance?”

Robin’s response from inside her tent was a flat, “Yeah. Come.”

Owain pushed open the tent flap and found the room in disarray. Maps, tomes, and papers were cast about without any semblance of organization he could comprehend, one frazzled tactician at the center of it all.

“What is it?” Robin asked, hardly looking up as she carded a hand through her hair.

“Er…” Owain started, momentarily distracted before his thoughts caught up with him. “I wished to discuss reassignments with you. Namely, my own. I am not well-suited to the distinguished healing trade, but until my blighted swordhand heals I cannot return to the fray. I dearly hoped you could shed some light on another vocation I could make myself useful in.”

Robin blew out a breath through pursed lips and finally looked up. “I’ll think about it and let you know. Is that all?”

Owain blinked. “Erm… well, yes?” He cleared his throat and looked away. “I rather wished the essence of my soul would connect so deeply with your own you would immediately have a bright solution to my troubles.”

“Listen… it’s nothing against your essence. I’m just busy.” She pushed a tome aside, knocking into a pile of papers that went flying off her desk. She growled out a curse of dismay.

“Allow me!” Owain exclaimed, scrambling to pick them up and catching sight of the scribbled writings within. “Ah! Are we to siege Fort Steiger next?”
“That was the original plan,” Robin admitted. “It holds the third division of the Valmese army, and if we could defeat them it would be a key victory for us. Unfortunately, our only chance to capture it would be to send the bulk of our army to the north and south to mask our intentions.”

“Which has already been done, no?” Owain asked. “What then is the problem?” He glanced over the papers that detailed the defenses of the fort. “What remains are the Shepherds and the personal forces of Khans Basilio and Flavia. Surely you do not doubt our ability to defeat General Pheros?”

“I do not,” Robin told him. “Especially with Say’ri’s Resistance rallying around us in the wake of our most recent victories. No, Owain, the issue is far simpler than that.” A beat passed before she let out a bark of humorless laughter. “It’s nearly winter.”

Owain scratched at his chin, realization dawning. “So if we captured Fort Steiger now, we would not have the chance to secure a supply train before the weather turned against us, but without the rest of the army we have not the manpower nor the resources for a proper siege.”

“Exactly.” Robin sighed. “There’s nothing for it—Fort Steiger will have to wait until spring, but that begs the question of where the Shepherds will sit out the winter.”

“Walhart’s forces will likely be on their last campaigns of the season, at least this far north,” Owain pointed out. “And with our army already split as it is, provided we maintain a low profile he may not even realize we are separated in more than twain.” He shuffled over to Robin’s desk, peering over her map of Valm. “So we need to stay north of Fort Steiger, so that our enemies will be as hindered by the frost as we, but close enough that we may launch our attack as soon as spring falls upon us.”

Robin’s eyes narrowed—surely she’d already thought all those angles through already, but she seemed to be evaluating how Owain himself processed them. He stared at the map, lips moving silently as he tried to connect all the pieces together. “And so you see my problem,” she said dryly as several moments passed.

“...Could we not winter at the Mila Tree?”

“The Mila Tree is far too close to Valm Castle itself for comfort,” Robin replied immediately. “If Walhart learned we were there, he would be upon us in a moment.”

Owain tapped the map. “There is this fiefdom to its east that would serve our purposes, though? You have marked it as unoccupied despite its vicinity to the Conqueror. What keeps it so?”

“Storash?” Robin inquired, her expression turning from annoyed to thoughtful. “I suppose there was no reward to it. It’s not so much unoccupied as ignored. They surrendered without picking up arms very early on in the war. They pay their lip service to Walhart but have so few resources to offer him he’s all but left them alone.” She shrugged. “It’s not a bad idea—I actually considered it myself—but I doubt they would have the food to garrison an army.”

“We’re not asking them to garrison an army,” Owain pointed out. “Our army is elsewhere.”

A beat passed before Robin’s eyes lit up. “It’s just the Shepherds,” she said aloud.

“My point exactly. Besides, if they are indeed in Walhart’s service, likely many of their young men and women have been drafted. They might even have food to spare.” He traced his finger along the map once more. “In addition, look at their vicinity to the highroad. Even if Walhart did learn of our occupying there, we could be at Fort Steiger before he even learned we left Storash.” He looked back at Robin, feeling a grin spread over his feature at his own cleverness.
She let out a laugh that held far more amusement than the last. “That’s the second time I’ve underestimated you, Owain.”

Owain gave a flourished bow that was slightly diminished by the fact he could only move one arm. “Such a grand hero as myself cannot let just anyone know the true depths of his skill and mind.”

“So you play the buffoon in hopes that people will underestimate you,” Robin said. “Quite the strategy, if I do say so myself.”

“I do?” Owain asked, pausing. “Er, I mean, yeah, I do!”

Robin rolled her eyes, but there was a grin curling her lips. “Since you’ve solved that problem for me… I suppose I can try to solve yours.”

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Inigo should have realized it as soon as Owain had come back and declared himself ‘Robin’s Dark Personal Assistant’ before admitting he’d added ‘dark’ mainly for flair and ‘personal assistant’ was probably stretching things a bit. In fact, if it had been anyone but Owain, Inigo thought he would have understood immediately.

Since it was Owain, though, it was not until they made it to the stark and cold but undeniably beautiful mountains of Storash that Inigo actually noticed his cousin had a crush. He’d laughed himself nearly sick at the thought— Owain with a crush on a woman —but there was no denying it. Suddenly his cousin’s vocabulary no longer consisted of Radiant this and Fell that but Robin this and Robin that. Of course Owain himself was completely oblivious to his own burgeoning feelings which honestly only made it all the more hilarious. The only downside was that it was now almost impossible to get him to focus on anything else.

“Owaaaaain. Are you still in there?” Inigo had long since stripped off his jacket, and now that he’d paused in his training he shivered. Despite it only being mid-afternoon, the skies were starting to darken already—Storash was surrounded by high, snowy cliffs, which meant sunrise came late and sunset started early. The high castle walls—if it could be called a castle compared to where Inigo grew up—only made the matters worse.

“Huh? What?”

“I asked you how I looked.” He sheathed Falchion, missing the hands-on training with the divine sword Owain had used to give him. Until his cousin finished healing, though, that was out of the question, which meant ‘training’ consisted of running through solitary routines Inigo already knew by heart.

“Oh. You looked fine.”

“Fine is not good enough to beat Say’ri, Owain,” Inigo said with a sigh. “I am never going to get to touch that katana.”

“Inigo, I have never seen you work so hard to impress a lady before.”

Inigo let out a huff and rolled his eyes, dropping to the bench beside Owain. “I’m not trying to
impress her. Well, I am, but I’m not.” He smirked. “She did make me tea the one time… I nearly
died but that’s beside the point.”

“Mmhm. And you spend half your time with her because…?”

“Because at some point I’m going to win, dang it! And also you’re off spending half your time
with Robin.”

“I’m her fell personal assistant!”

“I thought it was dark?”

“That too!” Owain scratched his injured arm and made a face. “Look. Inigo. I know… you’re
really not learning from this whole arrangement we have right now.”

Inigo shook his head even if there was no point denying it. “It’s fine, Owain. It’s not like you can
spare me right now. I’m making do.”

“I think you should start training with Uncle Chrom,” Owain blurted.

“I… what?”

“You heard me.”

Inigo closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I don’t think I’ll learn any more from my
father repeatedly wiping the floor with me than I will from your decidedly unhelpful commentary.”

“I doubt he’ll wipe the floor with you.”

“Uh, need I remind you of the tournament?”

“Considering the circumstances, you did pretty good in the tournament,” Owain pointed out. “And
you’ve got almost three years of wielding Falchion under your belt since then. I think it’ll be good
for you.”

Inigo chewed on his lip for a moment before saying, “If you say so.”

“Just promise you’ll ask him?” Owain asked. “I mean, there’s nothing we really have better to do
than train until spring.”

“…I guess,” Inigo admitted.

“Wondrous!” Owain jumped to his feet and gestured with his good hand. “Now, let us go see if
there is sustenance prepared for our continued existence.”

“It’s called food, Owain,” Inigo said, getting up with a groan.

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“There’s nothing we really have better to do than train until spring.”

For everyone except Owain, that was.
He paced the narrow halls of Castle Storash after dinner, glad for the solitude they offered. His reasoning for staying in the fiefdom over winter had all proved true, which meant they could take the next few months in respite from the war, but that didn’t mean he had to like it. The southern half of their army, at least, would not get such a break, and he felt guilty for indulging in one of his own. Not to mention the months he spent unable to use his arm meant it was going to take just as many months—if not more—to return to the fine form he’d been in before his injury.

“Stupid Grimleal and their stupid hexes,” he muttered to himself.

For all he kept up a cheery facade, he felt useless. He had never been dead weight before and he hated every moment.

The hallway widened into a nook and Owain found his feet carrying him automatically into a training formation he’d known since he was small. His right arm was pinned to his chest still, leaving him unable to carry out the most important part of the routine, but even just the familiar footsteps soothed him.

“...I leap into the center of the enemy formation, blade drawn, and spin!” he started muttering, mind working on the story coming to him as he pivoted on one foot. “I’m no longer a man, but a whirling dervish of death and steel!”

At least he could pretend he was doing something productive.

“What are you doing, Owain?”

Robin’s words made him pause, though he did his best to hide his surprise as the blonde appeared in the connecting hallway. “Oh, greetings, Robin. I’m chronicling the saga of Owain Dark, Avenger of Righteous Justice. It’s a tale of blood and honor and me generally being amazing.”


“Cynthia does!” he defended himself.

“That’s… not saying much,” Robin pointed out. “Still, it’s good to dream big, I suppose.”

“Any man can dream,” Owain pointed out, “But only a legend can become a myth!”

“Only a… you know what? Good for you. But as a tactician, I must advise against jumping into the center of a pack of enemies. Now, if you don’t mind, you’re blocking the way to my—”

“Ha ha HA! Worry not, mortal!”

“I spy a pack ten men strong and charge into the fray! One swipe, and two fall!” Owain exclaimed, spinning and gesturing with his good hand. “I lock swords with the third… ching! His guts spill forth upon the earth! As the fifth falls, the sixth flees, driven mad.”

“You forgot the fourth,” Robin pointed out.

“A cut and a slash and three more are done!” Owain continued, ignoring her. “‘I bear you no ill will!’ I cry as I slay. ‘Rest in peace! Or rest in pieces!’ As the dust settles, only two men yet stand. My showdown with the evil general begins!”

“There’s an evil general…?”
“My sword flashes out, a flickering blur of cold blue steel. Ka-thwack! Schwing! ‘Ha ha ha! I’m impressed, General. No one has blocked that before.’ The general wobbles on unsteady feet and then drops to his knees in shame. ‘Mercy, Owain Dark! Have mercy on me! For I cannot abide another mighty blow!’”

“Owain, I did actually have a question for you, if you would indulge my curiosity for a moment,” Robin said, crossing her arms.

“Indeed, for you I can shelve my showdown for another instance more suitable,” Owain said, coming to a standstill. “What is your query?”

“Is there a reason you never took up magic?”

Owain blinked. “Whyever would you ask?”

“Usually a sage with such a gift as your mother has would pass down that talent to her children,” Robin said. “Not always, of course, but Lissa has also told me about some… recent incidents involving rescue staves, so clearly you have a proclivity for it. I was curious why you took to the sword instead.”

“In our world, Chrom deemed the blade an art form to be learned by any self-respecting member of the royal family,” Owain pointed out. “Inigo, Lucina, and I were all taught as soon as we were big enough to wrap our hands around the hilt of a training blade.” He tilted his head. “On the other hand, I was the only one of the three of us to display any magical leanings, but by that point we were so deep into the war… Mother and Maribelle were always in the thick of the healing and the political, Miriel already had her hands too full apprenticing Laurent to take on another student… Henry was usually on the front lines and Chrom and Mother both forbade my learning from Tharja.” He shrugged. “Magic is not an art to be learned without instruction… so I discovered.”

Robin quirked a brow. “That sounds awful ominous, Owain.”

“To be fair, I did take out all the Risen,” he said defensively. A beat passed. “Also several buildings.” Another beat. “I don’t think Inigo would talk to me for… oh… eight or nine days?”

“Dear Naga, what sort of spell did you use? And how old were you?”

“Thirteen,” he replied. “And… honestly I don’t remember what it was called at this point. Some obscure spell I lifted from a tome of Tharja’s… Go something or other.”

The blood almost instantly drained from Robin’s face. “You harnessed a Goetia spell at thirteen without any prior magical training?” she demanded. “And you didn’t blow up the entirety of Ylisstol?”

“I didn’t say I never had any magical training,” Owain pointed out. “Mother taught me the very basics, at least. I was just never skilled or practiced enough to use it in combat. The sword, on the other hand—”

“Which mages of our generation were left by that point?” Robin cut him off. “When you used that spell?”

Owain’s brow furrowed. “None,” he said. “My mother was the last, and she passed just beforehand. Miriel was presumed dead shortly before that, though we never found her body. The only mage we had left by then was Laurent.”

“Who must not have realized the true implications of what you did…”
“Lucina told me I was never allowed to touch a tome again…” Owain admitted, rubbing the back of his neck.

“You’re joking,” Robin muttered.

“I wish I was. She was very cross with me.”

The tactician shook her head. “You don’t understand. That spell should have killed you, at the very least. The fact that it didn’t…”

“Means I’m either very lucky or blessed by the gods?” Owain offered.

“It means that in another time you would’ve had every mage in the realm fighting to apprentice you,” Robin replied flatly. “Gods, if you’d had someone to train you… with a raw talent like that you’d probably outclass every other mage in the Shepherds by now, myself included.”

Owain scoffed. “Heroes of legend do not require idle flattery to stroke their egos—”

“Hush and listen to me,” Robin interrupted. “I’m dead serious. You’re learning magic this winter. I’m not having talent like that go unused.” She blew out a breath. “I was already going to offer to teach you a few simple spells just to keep you occupied while your arm healed, but… damn.”

“…You’re saying that the sword shines too brightly for my dark soul, and that I am destined to become Owain Dark, Sorcerer of Legend?” Owain asked, speaking slower than usual. “And it is written as such that you yourself, the famed Grandmaster Tactician of Ylisse, is to be my fell teacher?”

Robin paused before a grin started to spread over her face. “I think that’s what I’m saying.”

“YES!”
Take Me to the Top (Part 4) Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Owain begins his magical training, Inigo learns good news, and Robin comes to a conclusion.

Owain practically quivered with excitement the day Robin had agreed to start training him. Inigo had been significantly less thrilled with the idea—“She’s going to teach you to blow things up? From a distance? Where we won’t be able to hear you coming?” he’d said with a shudder—but that hadn’t dampened Owain’s own enthusiasm in the slightest.

He had stopped vibrating after a solid hour of Robin’s debating the very basics of magical theory, knowledge he had long since learned. He was a novice, yes, but not completely clueless.

“...so we’re going to start small and simple,” Robin said. “Definitely not Goetia.”

Owain tried to come up with a verbose comeback for that, but found he was too excited actually thumbing through the tome she had lent him to form the words. “What do you wish me to use?”

“Wind,” she replied. “Not Elwind, not Arcwind, and certainly nothing crazy like Rexcaliber. Just a very basic Wind spell.” She got up from her seat, making her way around the empty conference room they occupied as Owain started flipping for the relevant page in his tome. When he looked up again, she’d set a small, flickering candle on the center of the table. “To begin with, all I want you to do is try to blow out the candle.”

Owain nodded, tracing his finger over the spell and feeling the long-forgotten tingle of old magic creep up his arm and down his spine.

“It’s all right if you can’t get it right away. This takes practice—”

With a boom more akin to Thoron than Wind, his spell split the room, sending the candle flying off the table, across the room, and into the opposite wall. The once-shut door blew practically off its hinges, sending it banging into the stone behind it. A beat later, as if in climax, a tapestry fell off the wall.

Robin froze, mouth ajar as she gaped at Owain.

He blinked sheepishly. “I would like to point out that the candle is no longer on fire,” he offered.

“...Maybe we should take this outside.”

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“You’ve improved since we fought last.”
“To be fair, before the point we fought last Falchion had done little more than look pretty on my hip,” Inigo pointed out, slightly more breathless than Chrom as he heaved against the weight of his father’s thrust.

“I have seen you with quite the collection of swords over the years,” Chrom replied, readjusting for Inigo’s counter as the twin swords clashed together again.

“The first fell to Owain, the second ended up fried, and the third now lives somewhere at the bottom of the sea. I suppose it’s a good thing Falchion’s blade is unbreakable or I’d probably have wrecked it by now too.” Inigo was starting to become familiar enough with his father’s style to predict his moves, and saw the next coming in time to pirouette out of the way with signature lightness.

“Fancy,” Chrom complimented, pausing briefly. “Who taught you that?”

Inigo grinned. “That would be Mother.” His smile slipped. “It was the one thing that never failed to catch Lucina off guard… not that I ever did beat her in a fair fight.”

His second of distraction cost him—half a moment later Falchion was flying from his grasp. “You’ll have to say the same of me… for now, at least,” Chrom said with a slight smirk.

“So it seems,” Inigo replied, unbothered by the outcome of the fight. “Well fought, Father.” With a half-mocking bow, he moved to retrieve his blade. “It’s not a matter to me. A divine sword is always intriguing to the ladies whether I’m any good with it or not.”

Chrom didn’t answer for several moments.

“...You’re staring, Father,” Inigo pointed out, sheathing Falchion. “Is there something on my face?”

“No. I just… I was wondering if you were like this in the future, as well.”

“Depends on what you mean by ‘like this,’ I suppose.”

“One moment you act like you have the weight of the world on your shoulders, and the next it seems like you haven’t a care in the world past whose bed you’ll be sharing tonight.”

_Huh. I must be a better actor than I thought if I’ve convinced him I’ve ever managed to get that far._ “Perhaps the weight you sense I carry is merely that of all the ladies in the world who I’ve yet to woo?”

“...Nothing to do with the apocalyptic hellscape you came from?”

“Hah! All in the past, Father. Well, the future. The future-past, you could say,” Inigo replied, feeling his walls begin to snap into place. Why burden either of them by dwelling on the minutia? “No point thinking of all the poor girls I missed in the future when there are so many here in the past to grace with my presence!”

Slowly, Chrom started to shake his head. “I don’t… even know what to say. Or where to begin.” He pinched the bridge of his nose and blew out a breath. “Let’s call that session for today, Inigo.”

... _Not a care in the world, huh_? Inigo thought, watching his father’s retreating form. Not _a thought in my head, he means. I can hear it now… ‘Some Exalt my son made. His only skill is flirting and he’s not even good at that.’
“Um… Say’ri?” Inigo ventured. “What… exactly are you doing in my room?”

“My apologies, Inigo. ‘Twas not my intent to pry,” the princess answered. “I am to inform you of the war council after dinner tonight. I told Owain the same, though he spake that he was uncertain if he would meet you beforehand as he was to be engaged with Robin for the rest of the afternoon. He did tell me you would likely return soon and we thought it prudent for me to remain to ensure you were aware.”

“That’s… odd,” Inigo replied. “What’s going on that’s so urgent you’ve got to wait around to make sure I know? And for that matter, since when are Owain and I invited to war councils?”

“Of that, you would have to ask Lord Chrom,” said Say’ri. “He was quite insistent on your presence.”

“Foreboding…” Inigo muttered. “But thank you.” He expected her to leave then—since that odd, mockingly intimate night they’d spent under the Mila Tree, she had nothing but formal and cordial with him. They had, as Owain pointed out, spent a fair amount of time together in performance of their duties, but contrary to his cousin’s implications there wasn’t exactly anything scandalous going on. For all Inigo knew, Say’ri’s crisp, cool demeanor was just her way of hiding the fact she hated his guts.

Contrary to his expectations, though, she paused just in front of his door. “As I said, I did not mean to snoop,” she said. “But… ‘twas rather difficult to not notice you have the hilt of a katana sitting on your nightstand.”

“Oh,” Inigo blurted, eyes darting toward the broken handle. “Right. Lilith.” His sentimentality had been endlessly mocked, but he’d kept the now long-broken sword with him even after he and Owain left Regna Ferox. He must have forgotten to put the hilt away when he’d reorganized his half of the room the night before.

Say’ri’s brows rose. “Pardon?”

“Oh,” Inigo blurted, eyes darting toward the broken handle. “Right. Lilith.” His sentimentality had been endlessly mocked, but he’d kept the now long-broken sword with him even after he and Owain left Regna Ferox. He must have forgotten to put the hilt away when he’d reorganized his half of the room the night before.

“Inigo nodded, rummaging for where he kept the other half. Gingerly, accounting for the still-sharp edge, he slipped the severed blade out of its old sheath and set it on his bedspread.

Gods, what he’d done with that blade, he thought as Say’ri inspected it. He’d probably slain a thousand Risen with it and brought down many a training dummy; he could still almost feel the
bite of the rope bridge he’d cut down when they returned to Ylisse with Argent and Sable.

It was the one sword he’d had, he realized, that had never claimed a human life whilst in his hand.

“‘Tis far from irreparable,” Say’ri announced. “Though ‘tis likely a good thing you did not allow someone unfamiliar to attempt to salvage it. When this war is won, I should have Chon’sin’s finest see to it if you would wish.”

“...Wait, really?” Inigo asked, blinking. “I’d all but given up hope on it.” Sure, he fought just fine with Falchion now, even enjoyed it, but he did miss the weapon that had once been his signature. “I mean, not that I want you to feel obligated—”

“Nonsense. You’ve traveled through time itself to be here; ‘twould be the least I could do to repay you.” A beat passed. “If you’d but said that day you used to wield a Chon’sinian blade yourself I would not have shamed you the way I did.”

“But you were right, though,” Inigo pointed out. “About Falchion. Compared to my father and Lucina, I might as well be carrying a toy.”

Say’ri’s brow furrowed. “Lucina...”

“My elder sister—or Chrom’s baby daughter, by the other way of looking at it.”

After a moment, she shook her head. “Fie, the name rings familiar, but I cannot place where or why.” Her expression pulled together even more. “She returned to the past with you?”

“No,” Inigo murmured. “She... she died before we left our future.” For a moment, his breath caught. “Why do you ask?”

For a second, she merely stared at him, then shook her head again. “Nothing. An errant curiosity.” With that, she made her way to the door. “I shall see you at the council tonight, Inigo.”

He stared at the door long after it clicked shut, and wondered a great many things.

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Winter blew past faster than Robin knew what to do with. War councils grew more frequent as the colder months began to fade, with Chrom having deemed it was high time that Inigo and Owain, as the future of the Ylissean royal family, were to be privy to them. Both boys had looked significantly out of their depth for the first few weeks, but as time passed their input grew more measured and valuable.

The tactician would be lying to say she hadn’t been surprised to discover the more hidden aspects of the latter. She’d spent two years after the Plegian War all but seething, her pride stinging at the fact ‘Odin’ had managed to outsmart her and disappear with the same suddenness he’d appeared with, only for him to pop up again in the moment she least expected him to. Learning that night of Owain’s true story, she hadn’t been able to help herself softening to him, however irritating he might be.

And now... having spent time with him, over this war and the winter, she didn’t know how she felt about him. He maddened her, astounded her, amused her... and usually more, within the course of
about two minutes.

Now, she let out a huff, shuffling through an assortment of reports. With March now upon them, it wouldn’t be long before they were back on the front lines, and several divisions of the Ylissean army already were.

“...Has Henry cast some sort of ill sighing hex upon you, Robin?” Owain inquired, fixing earnest eyes on her.

She shook her head, knowing anything resembling quiet wouldn’t last long in her protege’s presence. Every so often she would, as she had now, lend him one of her books on magical theory. He seemed to soak them up, though she hadn’t a clue how as he would always be chattering at her about one thing or another as he read. His skill was improving, though his control of even basic spells was often terrifyingly lacking. Robin still didn’t let him practice inside. Her best theory—though without being there herself, it was just a theory—was that that long-ago Goetia spell had indeed gotten away from him, because even that spell shouldn’t have caused the kind of destruction he described. Still, the fact that he had been able to cast it at all without his being destroyed completely was a testament in and of itself.

“It’s not that,” she said, letting out another breath through pursed lips. “Just sorting through these reports.”

“Word from the lines casts an ominous shadow over your brow?”

“Something like that.”

Owain set his book down, leaning forward with his elbows on the table. “Perhaps the next episode in the ongoing saga of Owain Dark would provide a lift to your heavy spirit?”

Robin bit her lip, trying to ignore the puppy-dog gaze pointed directly at her. “Perhaps...” she admitted, even knowing he would take the murkiest of agreements as an enthusiastic ‘yes.’

“Right then!” he said, grin lighting up his face. “This time we finish it, for once and for good! It’s time to wrest peace from the clutches of evil!” He looked up, evidently trying to remember where they had left off the last time. “Where were we? Ooh, yes! We left off at the big showdown between me and the legendary knight!”

“I believe we did,” Robin said, and found a smile tugging on her own lips.

“Oh, so I beat her.”

“...That’s it? You beat her?” she demanded. “Isn’t that a bit... I don’t know, anticlimatic?”

“She was good. No, great! But even she was no match for the fearsome Owain Dark! And yet! Our tortured hero now finds himself in a shocking crisis!”

“That’s more like it,” Robin said, leaning back in her seat.

“It seems the cowardly lord of Castle Doom is even stronger than his shapely knight! My allies drop their weapons and flee for their lives, leaving me as the only hope! We circle each other for what seems an eternity, then begin a clash for the ages! He raises his blade and brings it down with earth-shattering force! SCHWOO! But I leap to the side with feline grace, and his sword finds only air! He changes his grip and slashes upward, but is speared by my blinding thrust!”

“...Oh,” Robin said after a beat of silence filled only with a very pleased grin from Owain. “That
wasn’t so tough, was it?”

“Well, I read his intent by watching his right shoulder and leading foot,” Owain explained. “The speed of my thrust came from shifting my weight to the back leg.”

Robin blinked. “I’m surprised you put that much thought into the details.”

“You wound me, my lady! The saga of Owain Dark has always been a simulated training exercise. Every prudent warrior envisions possible scenarios and crafts tactics to best them. Especially with mine own swordhand gravely wounded, it was even more important to keep my mind sharp.” He glanced away, a faint dusting of pink coming to his cheeks. “And… you seemed to enjoy them.”

Her breath caught for a moment. “I did…” she admitted. “And if this… method is so effective for you, maybe we should work on adapting it for your magical training.”

Owain grinned again, leaving Robin with a swoop in her stomach. “Hah! Indeed, we shall begin the next thrilling installment—Owain Dark, newly anointed dark knight, faces off the mad sorcerer-king of the Country of Calamity!”

“Strange name for a country…” Robin said, but Owain ignored her and launched fully into his next tale.

No, she realized as he gestured wildly. She knew how she felt about him.
Take Me to the Top (Part 4) Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Idle bliss is shattered.

Chapter Notes

A day early, because I’m at home on break from college and I had the time.

Inigo tried not to think about how soon the Shepherds were due back into the war, because he knew the answer was ‘too soon.’ Part of him wanted to remain holed up in this fiefdom forever, despite the boredom and war councils. Boredom and war councils were decidedly better than death and war proper.

Long after the council was adjourned and the others began to get to their feet and file out, Inigo stayed quietly in his seat, chin in his palm with his fingers absently tapping the side of his jaw. Scratch that—it wasn’t part of him that wanted to stay here, at peace, with his family. After all, that was exactly the future he’d come back to fight for, wasn’t it? Being here felt like having everything he wanted dangled in front of him when he couldn’t have it yet, hadn’t earned it yet.

A touch on his shoulder jerked him unceremoniously from his thoughts. “Aye, but you were quiet today.”

Inigo tilted his head slightly, mustering a semblance of a smile. “Dueling some unpleasant thoughts,” he told Say’ri, an unwitting echo of words his father had spoken years ago. “I promise I was paying attention.”

“‘Twas not my concern, actually.” She paused, then continued, “You seem ill of heart, of late.”

“Ah, worrying about my health again, eh?” he asked, leaning back and stretching. “You should speak to my mother about that, it would save you both time.”

Say’ri did not rise to the bait. “Do you fear our return to this war?” she asked bluntly.

Inigo’s smile slipped. “Perhaps… fear is not quite the right word,” he managed. “Dread, maybe.” He folded his hands, resting them on the table. “But there’s no avoiding it, now is there?”

“Nay, it seems not.” She straightened. “Would you walk with me, perchance? ‘Tis the first nice weather we’ve had in a stretch.”

“I…” Inigo started, taken aback. “Of course.”

Say’ri did not speak again until they had made it to the courtyard outside, where an assortment of Shepherds trained with a variety of weapons. “Your foreknowledge troubles you,” she said softly. “How many of our people will fall in this war?”
Inigo shook his head. “Too many,” he murmured. “And several of them Shepherds.” Ricken, Kellam, Basilio… if he could not distract Fate, they would all be dead by year’s end. He caught sight of the mage, younger even than he was in this timeline, and turned away, heading for the castle gate. Maybe a few hours out in the town proper would clear his head.

He hadn’t quite realized Say’ri was following right on his heels until he’d left the castle. “And is there nothing that can be done?” she asked. “If you would but share your burden, know that I would give mine own life if I could prevent—”

“No.” The word wrenched itself from deep inside him, his stomach dropping somewhere into the ground below. He spun back, so quickly Say’ri nearly ran right into him, and reached out to gently clasp her shoulders. “Don’t… don’t say such things. It’s my future to fight.”

“Fie, and do you truly think a single man can battle that alone?” she shot back. “Do you quite believe the handful of you who returned from the future can slay Grima solitary?”

“If we have to, we will.” He sucked in a breath. “We came back to save our families. What good will it do if they all lay down their lives a second time?”

“My family is dead already,” she replied. “My brother as good as, swayed to Walhart as he is. Unless I have some future child in your company you’ve neglected to inform me of—”

“No,” Inigo cut her off, wondering why the thought made him want to punch a wall. “No, you don’t,” he repeated, quieter. A bitter taste rose in his throat as he remembered exactly why that was. He took a shuddering breath and ducked his head. “I’ve lost too many people I hold dear already. I’ll not lose any more.”

He hadn’t quite realized he still had his hands on her arms until she reached up, catching a lock of blue-black hair in her fingertips. With dizzying suddenness, their proximity turned into the only thing he could register. The moment stretched out and gods one of them needed to say something, needed to move, yet neither of them had —

Someone screamed.

Reality snapped back into place, Inigo’s hands sliding from Say’ri’s arms to Falchion’s hilt in an instant. He’d let himself stay blissfully unaware of their surroundings for far too long, he realized as he ducked down a side street toward the chaos. The sight still pulled him up short.

“Since when are there Risen in Valm?” he cried, voice rising—a mistake he quickly realized as it drew one of the creatures’ attention. He barely dodged the javelin headed straight for his chest.

“Since a fair while, now!” Say’ri called back, her voice nearly drowned out as half a dozen Risen upended a market stall. More of the creatures seemed to pour out of every alleyway by the moment, all wearing the distinctive armor of the Valmese Imperial Guard.

“But they’re… Walhart’s men,” Inigo said, flabbergasted.

“Zounds, but does it matter who they were?” Say’ri demanded. “Fall back, Inigo! We’re sore outnumbered!”

“The people need us—”

“And we’ll do them no service to lay dead on the ground with them! Fall back!”

Say’ri was right, though it went against every instinct in Inigo’s body—Naga knew if it had been
Owain with him they would have both charged in without a second thought—and he hesitated, torn between self-preservation and self-sacrifice.

That hesitation was all it took for an arrow to catch Say’ri in the ribs.

To her credit, she did not scream, but even a pained whimper was enough to draw in the Risen with the promise of easy prey. Within moments, they’d formed an undulating wall of gray, rotting flesh.

“Say’ri!”

He could hear her fighting back as he broke through the line, saw the occasional puff of Risen-smoke that couldn’t be attributed to Falchion. He still almost recoiled when he clashed against her katana, both swords holding the block for several moments.

“Hey. Hey, it’s me,” he whispered when she didn’t let up, eyes wild with pain and battle. “Say’ri.”

With a gasp and a shudder, she dropped her blade, giving him just enough room to pivot and take out yet another encroaching Risen. In the brief gap it gave him, he shot a look back.

The Chon’sinian princess leaned heavily back against the wall of the alleyway, eyes fluttering and chest heaving in protest of the arrow still sticking out of her. She wasn’t wearing armor—of course she wasn’t, she had no reason to in the safety of Castle Storash that she’d only left because Inigo had—and he shuddered to realize that had the arrow caught her only a few inches over it would have killed her instantly. Even now…

“Can you stand?” he asked, looking back out to the square with Falchion still held in a ready pose. The Risen had grown distracted with less dangerous targets, but he doubted that would last long.

Several beats passed before she answered. “I… I fear not.”

“Okay.” Inigo blew out a breath, shifted Falchion to a single-handed grip, and stepped backward, reaching blindly with his other arm. “Grab on to me. We’re not terribly far from home; we can double back and get reinforcements.”

“You’d… be faster… alone.”

“What, and leave you here to fend for yourself?” he asked, trying to inject some levity in his tone for her sake. “Weren’t we just talking about me not doing that?”

He worried for a moment that she was going to oh so selflessly insist before he felt her grasp the back of his jacket. Relief washing over him, he gripped her shoulders and pulled her in as tight to his side as he dared.

“Can I have your second katana?”

“...Aye?” Say’ri answered, her tone turning up at the end.

“It’s lighter than Falchion,” Inigo explained, watching as the Risen caught sight of them again. “And I’ve got the feeling this is about to be one hell of a fight.”

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“Open the gate!”

Inigo’s voice rose with panic to a note higher than he ever thought he’d be able to hit. They’d escaped the worst of the Risen, but Say’ri’s grip on consciousness was growing more tenuous by the second, and if he didn’t get her to a healer soon he was about to end up facing exactly what he’d been so afraid of.

With agonizing slowness, the wide gate of Storash swung open, revealing a suspicious Frederick. After only an instant, though, the knight’s eyes went wide. “Lord Inigo!”

Inigo didn’t have the wherewithal to object to the title. “Risen,” he got out. “There’s Risen in the city.”

Urgently, Frederick ushered him inside, bellowing for a healer. Someone—Inigo couldn’t tell who—took off at a run for the castle proper, while everyone else dropped whatever they had been doing and burst into a flurry of more pointed activity.

“Inigo…” Say’ri’s voice was so breathy he doubted he would’ve heard her if she hadn’t been right by his ear, his arm still clutching at her waist in a monumental effort to keep her upright. “Your sister… Lucina… the Risen…”

Though the words sent a jolt through him, he forced himself to push out a sound that was half hum and half hush. “Just a little longer, love. Help’s on the way.”

“Inigo.” Owain’s tone, though gentle, revealed it wasn’t the first time he’d said his name. Inigo half-jumped at the realization his cousin was just on the other side of Say’ri. “Inigo, I’ve got her, but you’re going to have to let go, my friend.”

Reluctantly, Inigo relinquished his grip on Say’ri, trying to ignore the murmur of pain she gave as Owain shifted to accommodate her.

“Mom’s coming,” he continued with a startling lack of verbosity. “You’re covered in blood, are you okay?”

Inigo shook his head, paused as the actual question sunk in, then changed to a nod. “Hers,” he managed to get out. “I’m fine.” In all actuality, he was not fine in the slightest, but besides the ache of exhaustion in his limbs he was physically unharmed.

So when Lissa came running out at full tilt and the rest of the Shepherds began rallying around Chrom, Inigo forced himself to turn away from Say’ri and rejoin the fight.

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When all was said and done, Inigo sank down to the ground in some nondescript alley, still bearing Say’ri’s second katana—which, at the moment, felt about a dozen times heavier than Falchion. The Risen they’d fought had comprised an entire company of Walhart’s men, leaving the Shepherds all wondering where they came from and how they’d turned into the undead.

For the moment, though, none of that mattered. Inigo leaned his head back against the gritty wall, trying to ignore the gash in his thigh that was pulsing in time with his still-pounding heart. If a straggling Risen found him now, he’d be as good as dead, but he found he couldn’t quite care.
Instead, he let out a groan and wondered how the hell he was going to make it back to the castle. If he could just close his eyes for a moment…

“Something wrong, Inigo? Everyone else has already headed back.”

Inigo’s eyes snapped open, feeling his face flush at the undeniably imposing sight of Chrom, still outfitted for war. “Father?” he blurted. “Er, I just… thought I saw a cute milkmaid down this alleyway!”

Chrom’s face was set without a hint of amusement. “You’re a worse liar than your mother,” he said flatly, crouching down. “It’s obvious you’re wounded.”

“It’s fine, it’s—” He cut himself off with a sound that might have been a yelp if it hadn’t so closely bordered on a scream. “Ow! Can you not?”

“This is a serious injury, Inigo! Why didn’t you say something?”

With effort, Inigo fell back on his trademark grin. “What, and ruin my reputation? The ladies want Inigo the Invincible.”

“Gods, enough, Inigo!”

The smile slipped. “…Father?”

“You can barely walk, and you’re still thinking about girls?” Chrom demanded, disgust thick on his tone. “Be serious for once!”

“I am being serious—”

“I said that’s enough.”

Inigo clicked his jaw shut a little too tightly, chin lifting defiantly. “I’m not in the mood for a lecture, Father.”

“Then perhaps you should have thought of that before you snuck out into the city with Say’ri—”

“We did not sneak out —”

“—because I fear one is long overdue,” Chrom finished over top of his son. “You’re an adult, Inigo, and while I would normally keep my mouth shut about your… dalliances… I cannot have you risking one of our greatest allies in Valm because you lose all ability to use your head the moment you’re confronted with a woman.” Ignoring Inigo’s stunned expression, he continued, “Whatever liaison you have going on with her, it ends.”

Inigo practically choked, shock momentarily overriding his rebelliousness. “What sort of liaison do you think is going on?”

“I’m not so blind as to miss what’s happening directly under my nose, so don’t insult me, Inigo.”

“I think Say’ri would sooner gut me than sleep with me, if that’s what you’re dancing around,” Inigo shot back. “And what’s it matter to you even if that weren’t true?”

“It matters because we’re at war,” Chrom said. “A fact I convinced myself you realized, but to my disappointment I’ve only discovered you haven’t a clue what it means to be at war.”

A long moment passed before Inigo muttered through clenched teeth, “You don’t know a damned
thing.”

“...I’m sorry?”

He looked back up, eyes flashing, continuing, “You’re the one who’s clueless! Do you think I’d be out here if I were only after girls? Out here fighting every day, wondering if this is the time I don’t make it home?”

“...Inigo, I didn’t—” Chrom started, clearly not having expected an outburst in return.

“You may think me a dandy and a fool,” Inigo kept on, ignoring his father’s interjection, “but a lot of people depended on me in the future. Every day, I was out there fighting Risen and risking my life. With everyone looking at me to be strong, I had no choice. I had to be invincible. I couldn’t complain or show any weakness. I was their prince, one of the only figureheads they had left to look to, and I had to be perfect for the sake of my people. Even with you and Mother gone, I had to pretend I was fine… and Lucina died and I became the Exalt and I was as good as the only one left holding the line between life and death. So no, to everyone else, I wasn’t hurting, because I couldn’t afford to be. I had to fight every day of my sorry life and wear a smile while I did it!”

Inigo paused for a breath, while Chrom continued to stare, wide-eyed and speechless.

“You said I looked like I didn’t have a care in the world?” the younger royal finally asked. “Well, I’m sorry to tell you, but that’s not the case at all. My world left no room for weakness. I smile and joke around so that I didn’t show it any. If that disappoints you… then I guess you just have to be disappointed.”

“...Inigo, listen…”

“And for the record? The simpering buffoon you take me to be would have walked out of that forest outside Ylisstol and never looked back,” Inigo continued. Biting back a pained groan, he got to his feet. “That said, I do appreciate the concern. I’ll get the leg looked at.”

He didn’t look back to see Chrom’s reaction.
Chapter Summary

Olivia meddles and Inigo comes to a rather startling realization.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Mother?” Inigo straightened up so quickly the latent healing magic still swirling in his system made his head spin. “You’re not hurt, are you?”

“No, darling,” Olivia assured him, pausing in front of her son. “Just checking on you.”

“Ah, I’m just fine,” Inigo said with lightness. “All healed up. Just waiting for Brady to let me go.”

The priest looked up from across the room at the sound of his name. “Aw, shucks, Inigo, I didn't know ya were still here,” he said. “You shoulda spoke up! Yer plenty good by now.”

“Thanks, Brady,” Inigo replied, getting to his feet with a slight wince, his newly restored skin protesting. His thigh might ache for a day or so, but he'd fared better than some.

As if she’d read his thoughts, Olivia asked softly, “How’s Say’ri?”

Inigo winced again for an entirely different reason as he started for the door. “Touch and go for a while, but they think she’ll be all right.” They hadn’t let him see her—she had been asleep by the time he had come in, and likely would be quite a bit for the next few days.

Olivia followed as he made his way down the winding hallways toward the room he shared with Owain. “I spoke with your father.”

“...Ah,” Inigo said after a beat, his voice guarded. “Then I’m sure he’s informed you what a disappointment I am.”

“You’re no such thing!” Olivia said, her normally soft voice rising sharply. He couldn’t help but shoot her a startled glance. “Inigo, Chrom is... frazzled right now. He regrets what he said to you.”

“Perhaps he shouldn’t have said it, then,” Inigo replied, unexpectedly bitter.

“Darling, you’ve been through more than I could ever dream of,” Olivia said, stepping across his path and forcing him to pull up. “And your father and I are both very, very proud of you.”

Inigo’s lips thinned into a line, trying to reconcile Olivia’s ‘proud’ with Chrom’s ‘disappointed.’ She spoke again before he could that far.

“We do wish you had told us about Say’ri.”

...*Told you what, exactly?* Inigo thought, wondering why his face bloomed six different shades of red at his mother’s words. He rubbed at the back of his suddenly itchy neck.

He’d unfortunately managed to tune her out for a moment, and regretted it immediately when he
finally caught up with her again. “...but I did manage to speak some sense into him,” Olivia was saying. “He’s going to give you permission to court her properly.”

Had Inigo been drinking something in that moment, it surely would have ended up sprayed in his mother’s face. “Courting...!” He managed to squeak out. “Mother, I don’t know what kind of rumors you’ve been listening to, but Say’ri and I are not courting!”

“Well, clearly not,” Olivia said with a light laugh. “There are protocols that must be observed first in a marriage of your and her station.” She paused. “Though Chrom wasn’t much for them himself...”

Inigo ignored that, wondering for a moment if he actually might just faint in the hallway as he made a floundering gesture of complete mortification. Another whined “Mother!” was the only thing that managed to make it past his lips.

Olivia paused, gently patting his shoulder. “I’m just glad you found someone who makes you happy, Ini darling.”

He did his best to swallow back the sheer panic clawing at his throat. “It’s not like that,” he got out. “I’m not in...” In love with her. “...Intent on pursuing a relationship.”

“I know,” she said softly. “War surely doesn’t make those things easy on us.” She gave him a small smile. “But we won’t be at war forever.”

Inigo gave another hard, painful swallow. “I’m going to go take a nap,” he said, voice higher than he intended.

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Sleep, however, did not come easily to him. Had his thigh not still been aching, Inigo would have paced the room enough to wear the stain off the floor by now. As it was, he sat in bed and watched the sunset light up the stone wall as he fidgeted anxiously.

Why had his mother’s words gotten him so bent out of shape? He should have been able to laugh the assumptions away without a second thought—him, Inigo, worlds-renowned philanderer, intending to wed and settle down? He thought he’d sooner see Validar invite them all over for dinner to have a heart-to-heart about their differences.

And Say’ri, of all people? Sure, he’d idolized her when she arrived, but that was more due to the tales of her he’d been raised on. And sure, she was beautiful... and maddening... and she’d challenged him in ways he hadn’t thought possible. And he still thought fondly back to the night at the Mila Tree, tea notwithstanding, and he appreciated that she was hoping to get his old katana repaired. And he enjoyed the tales of Chon’sin she told him, of the palace she grew up in and the cherry blossoms she’d spoken of so reverently, and he couldn’t help but hope he could go see them in person with her, and...

“Oh, gods, no,” he blurted aloud, flopping back so quickly he nearly slammed his head right into the stone behind him. “Inigo, you freaking idiot.”

He should’ve hit his head, he thought ruefully. Maybe it would have knocked some sense into him, because he’d never felt more foolish in his life.
Before he could lament his own stupidity any more, the door clicked open. “Are you asleep, my comrade?” Owain whispered.

“No,” Inigo replied, both his hands still plastered to his forehead. “I wish I were.”

“Rough day for you, too?” Owain asked, though it was a question that shouldn’t need asking. Instead of reprimanding him, though, Inigo merely said, “Owain, I think I’m in love.”

A beat passed. “You speak as if this is something new.”

Inigo ran a hand through his fringe. “You don’t understand. Not in love like ‘oh, you’re hot, I think I’d like to have tea with you.’ In love like ‘oh, you’re beautiful, I think I’d like to wake up next to you and have tea together every morning for the rest of our lives.’”

Another beat. “That is a serious affliction, Inigo.” Owain arched his brow. “And again I say, you speak as if this is something new.”

“It is new!” Inigo cried. “And I don’t appreciate it—hey.” He shot Owain a glare as his cousin plopped down on the mattress next to him. “You’ve got your own bed, quit invading mine.”

“You’re closer,” Owain insisted, even though both beds were the exact same distance from the door.

Inigo huffed, tempted for a moment to shove the other boy off before a pang of nostalgia hit him and he gave in, pressing his back against the wall to make room. “It’s like we’re kids again,” he said, tone not as sharp as he’d originally intended.

“Sneaking out at night only for someone to inevitably find us passed out in the same room by morning,” Owain agreed, having made the same connection. “Oh, the mighty tongue-lashings we received…”

“Never stopped us, though,” Inigo said with a smirk. “Gods, how old were we, do you think, the last time we did that? Eight?”

“Nine,” Owain replied, a steady certainty in his eyes that made Inigo’s breath catch.

“How can you be so sure—oh.” Inigo sent a glance toward the ceiling. “Mom.”

“Yeah.”

Now that he thought about it, he could remember it as clear as day—the night Olivia died Inigo had ended up in Owain’s room in completely justified hysterics. Lucina had found them in the morning, both red-eyed and exhausted, two gangly frames curled up in the same canopied bed. Just one more reason, he thought, they’d always been closer to brothers than cousins.

“Anymore,” Owain said presently, poking Inigo’s shoulder. “You’ve changed the subject.”

Inigo swallowed, wishing he could suck his earlier words back into his mouth.

“You know half the camp thinks you’re courting her already?” Owain pointed out.

He spluttered in response. “No, I did not know that!” he exclaimed. “Why does everyone think that?” His eyes narrowed. “And I don’t remember naming any names.”

“Please,” Owain scoffed. “Need I follow you around with a mirror, my friend, so you can see the
comically infatuated expression on your face whenever you so much as catch a glimpse of the fair Say’ri?” He gave a sigh. “It’s quite pathetic, actually, even for you.”

Inigo thought to retort that his cousin looked about the same regarding Robin, then thought better of it. Owain would probably do something ridiculous like climb to the highest point of Castle Storash and recite a three-hour speech declaring his undying love for the tactician, and Inigo wished to save everyone’s sanity from that. “Apparently my parents are going to give me formal permission to court her,” he mumbled, feeling his face start to flush again.

“That’s good, then,” Owain said with a sage nod.

“No, it’s not!”

“...It isn’t?” Owain asked, face furrowing in confusion. “What happened to ‘wake up and have tea together’?”

“A great many things,” Inigo said with a sigh. “The chief of them being ‘reality.’”

“What, is the great Exalt Inigo not yet ready to settle down with the queen of his heart?”

“Your nauseating poetry aside, I rather doubt she’ll be any more keen on the idea than I am,” Inigo pointed out. “Although for entirely different reasons.”

“You fear the longing in your soul is unrequited?”

“On the off chance it isn’t,” Inigo said past the lump in his throat, “surely you remember what happened to her in our timeline.”

Comprehension dawned on Owain’s face. “Ah, and so we reach the root of the issue.” His lips thinned as he nodded. “You don’t believe you can save her.”

Inigo rolled onto his back to face the ceiling, thoughts swirling—the reason why Say’ri didn’t have a son or daughter in their company, why he’d never heard anything but tales about her until he’d returned to the past. “I couldn’t save Emmeryn,” he whispered. “What if I can’t save her?”

“You won’t if you don’t try,” Owain pointed out. “Fate will march on undeterred and this war will claim her life as before if we make no attempt to stop it.”

Inigo shuddered. “And if I try, and fail?” he asked. “I can’t lose someone else. I can’t.”

“Then we shall work doubly hard,” Owain said, as if it was as simple as that. “And I will have your back every step of the way.”

“And you think it will be that easy?”

“I think Fate should tremble at the idea of raising its hand against the great Exalt Inigo and the mighty Owain Dark, Burgeoning Sorcerer of Legend!” Owain said with a grin.

Inigo rolled his eyes. “‘Burgeoning’ being the key word, because you’re not there yet.” He turned his head to better face his cousin. “Speaking of, why’d it take you so long to get here?”

Owain looked innocently toward the ceiling. “I might’ve experimented with the likes of a very minor and not at all destructive spell during our quarrel with the Risen.”

“‘Very minor and not at all destructive’ sounds like you probably blew something up,” Inigo replied with a sigh. “How right am I?”
“Erm… eighty percent?” Owain ventured. “…Ninety?”

“A hundred?” Inigo shot back, then sighed again. “I shudder to think that Robin has cleared you for combat magic already.”

“Oh, no, she hasn’t.”

“Well, now I’m even more terrified. How long did she chew you out for?”

“I think I was still unconscious for at least the first two thirds,” Owain answered.

“You passed out?” Inigo said with a cackle. “Oh, gods, I wish Laurent was still with us, he’d have eaten you alive for that. Which would probably be more hilarious for me if I didn’t know I’d only be able to understand about a quarter of what he was saying. Oh, stop pouting.”

“I’m not pouting!” Owain shot back, despite the very pouty protrusion of his lower lip.

“I’ll admit, the thought of you as a full-fledged mage in a few years is significantly less alarming if you can’t cast a spell without fainting after,” Inigo continued to goad.

“Maybe you’ll just end up the Emperor of Chon’sin and not have to worry about me,” Owain shot back, then laughed as Inigo turned scarlet. “Kidding, my friend. Mostly.”

“Thanks, that’s not reassuring at all,” Inigo muttered.

Owain waved his hand, then sobered. “You’ll do the right thing, Inigo,” he said quietly. “Whatever the right thing ends up being.”

Inigo didn’t find that particularly reassuring either.

Chapter End Notes

bring on the rarepairs

In all seriousness... I know it's a WEIRD ONE. But please bear with me, because I have plans...
Chapter Summary

In which Inigo regrets a great many things and Owain remains painfully oblivious.

Chapter Notes

my update schedule has gone to hell in a handbasket but I swear I’m trying

For the next week, Inigo managed to neatly avoid Say’ri and ignore the voice in his head that told him he was being a coward. She was still recovering, after all, and he’d asked his mother not to speak of the courting issue until further notice. As spring drew near and the Shepherds prepared to leave Storash and launch their assault on Fort Steiger, things were almost simple.

Of course, simple never lasted.

“Inigo?”

His name shouldn’t have the ability to make hot and cold both wash over him, he lamented. He took the moment setting his plate in the washing line gave him to compose himself before he turned around. “Ah, Say’ri. Feeling better, I hope?” He winced at the way his voice cracked—he’d be in his twentieth year by the end of summer, surely he should have left such things behind by now!

“Aye, indeed, thanks to you.” She had her hair tied up today, he noted briefly, changing the way her face was framed in a way he couldn’t convince himself wasn’t alluring.

Thanks to you was his next bitter thought. If it weren’t for him she wouldn’t have been out in the city to get shot in the first place.

“Though I do believe you still have something of mine, if you ever plan on returning it?” Say’ri continued.

Inigo blinked, momentarily puzzled. “Oh! Oh, your sword!” He cleared his throat and forced himself to look away. “Right, let me go get that.”

“If ‘tis in your room, I’ll simply join you,” she said, a slight smile tugging her lips at the sharp look he shot her. “I should be about retiring for the night.”

“Ah,” Inigo managed. “Well, in that case.”

They slipped out of the dining hall without much notice—it might have been slightly less rowdy than a typical evening, but where the Shepherds were concerned that wasn’t saying all that much. He was fairly sure there was some sort of drinking contest going on in the corner that he didn’t care to pay too much attention to. As long as Owain wasn’t among them and he didn’t have to worry about dealing with an inebriated roommate, it wasn’t his concern.
Although, maybe he should have grabbed a drink himself, he thought as Say’ri’s arm brushed against his in a particularly narrow corner of the hallway.

He cleared his throat again. “The other day, ah… before you lost consciousness, you mentioned something about my sister.”

“Did I?” she replied, her tone carefully neutral and her gaze resolutely forward. Her gait was still on the ginger side, and for a moment he wondered if he should offer an arm before he realized he doubted she’d accept it.

“You wouldn’t happen to remember what you were going to say, do you?”

“…I cannot recall,” she replied in the same voice.

*She’s hiding something*, a sinister little voice whispered to Inigo. He dismissed it—what could she have to hide? Lucina was dead and gone four years in the past and still nearly twenty in the future. Besides, the human mind did strange things under stress. Say’ri had probably just jumped to an odd connection.

Inigo paused at his doorway, wishing fervently that Owain was with Robin and not in the room already to tease him with pointed glances and none-too-subtle snickering. He breathed a sigh of relief that he’d actually lucked out for once and the small room was blessedly empty.

“My thanks,” Say’ri said as he handed her back her sword. She had only sheathed it halfway when an over-loud whistle reached them from the hallway—outside, Vaike gave Inigo an exaggerated wink, pointing with both index fingers. His lopsided grin faded into alarm as he tripped over his own feet, skidding several steps before regaining his footing and continuing past.

Inigo felt a flash of heat, some combination of anger and embarrassment that he didn’t want to analyze. He slipped one hand to Say’ri’s waist, nudging her out of view of the hallway while he pushed the door closed with the other. “Some people,” he muttered.

“I see what you meant,” Say’ri said. “About having rumors surrounding you.” She gave a dry chuckle. “And so it seems myself by extension.”

“I…” Awareness coming back to him, he dropped his hand from her like she had burned him. “If anyone’s badmouthing you, you need only tell me—”

“Nay, nothing of the sort. Merely the usual whispers when certain things begin to bloom.”

His heart stuttered, certain he’d heard that wrong, but the painfully demure smile on her face was implying things that gave him a hideous urge to hide in the closet. “W-what do you mean?”

Still without a hint of the anxiety clawing at his own lungs, Say’ri replied, “The rumors of our courting.”

...*There is no god left in this universe that has an ounce of pity on me*, Inigo thought. “I told Mother not to say anything,” he groaned.

“Ah, then your family has begun the planning already.” She nodded. “‘Twasn’t my first choice, of course, but upon pondering I can see the sense in it. ‘Twouldn’t be an ill thing to have a husband at my side when I return to Chon’sin—”

“Wait,” Inigo breathed out, the word barely discernible as it hung in the air. “Wait, no, back up a second.” The room, usually perfectly adequate for two people, suddenly felt suffocatingly small.
“You’re… okay… with this?”

“Are you not? Fie, but Chon’sin will need all the help she can get at the end of this war,” Say’ri replied. “Such a close tie to your people will do us good. You are still Chrom’s son, albeit not under the most conventional of circumstances.”

Inigo glanced away, swallowing back the disappointment. For a moment, he’d almost thought… Suddenly his mother’s meddling was even more unwelcome. Sure, she’d recognized his feelings on the matter, as mothers were usually wont to do, but it seemed arranging a match had less to do with love and more to do with politics.

“I’ve no interest in tying myself into a political marriage,” he said flatly. For a great many reasons. The thought of trapping himself in a loveless wedlock—or, perhaps more accurately, one of love unrequited—was enough to send his palms sweating, and that was without the looming knowledge of the very real potential of Say’ri’s death. If anything, he should be cutting ties between them, not strengthening them.

Not to mention the fact that Say’ri and Yen’fay were the last remaining heirs of Chon’sin. If Inigo were to marry her, that would put him alarmingly high up in the line of succession for a country he’d never even set foot in.

None of those were risks he was remotely willing to take.

“Forgive me, but as the second son of the Exalt of Ylisse, surely you could have expected nothing less,” Say’ri said, interrupting his anxious thoughts with a raise of her brow.

“My parents were both dead and gone long before I was old enough to consider the prospect of marriage,” Inigo replied shortly. “By the time I was, I had bigger things to worry about.” He set his jaw for a moment, then continued, “Bigger things that must concern me still. In a world that does not know me as Chrom’s son, I should think to wed for nothing less than love… when Grima is no more threat.”

“I see,” Say’ri answered quietly. “A pretty fantasy in a world that has no room for them.” She shook her head. “I have grown quite fond of you, Inigo, these past few months.”

“And I, you,” he managed softly.

“I wonder now if it was perhaps misplaced.”

“Perhaps so,” Inigo replied. “Though the last time I let myself grow truly fond —” he nearly spat the word, “of a woman she quite cleanly stabbed me in the back.” His idiocy with Nalia still occasionally left him with the strong desire to hack down a tree. “Besides, you may have noticed I’m not really the one-woman type.” So why did those words just taste so bitter?

Say’ri didn’t answer.

“I’ll speak with my parents,” he finally said after a long pause. “I apologize if they led you on.”

“Fie, if you’d rather chase every skirt you come across, I’ll not stop you,” she replied shortly. “My thanks again for saving my life the other day. I do wish you the best.”

With that, she ducked around him and slipped out the door.

“Say—” Her name died on his throat, shocked away by the all-too-clear image in his mind of her blood staining the ground, Walhart’s form towering above.
“I can’t lose someone else. I can’t.”

Better to turn her away now, Inigo thought, before she became a part of his life that he truly couldn’t let go of. Where would he be a year from now if Walhart claimed her life, or she walked the path of Emmeryn and lost it in a different manner just when he thought she was safe?

Better to break his heart now than run the risk of shattering it later.

So he told himself as he shut the door and leaned against it, feeling the first fat tear roll down his cheek.

*Gods, but am I a fool.*

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Their last week at Storash passed in the blink of an eye. With grateful farewells, they departed, and a fortnight later they were camped within striking distance of Fort Steiger. They would rise in the predawn darkness the following morning, launching their attack before the defenders knew they were even there.

A quieter, more withdrawn Inigo pushed open the tent flap, where he expected to find an Owain who had gladly taken up making enough noise for the both of them. Instead, he found his cousin sitting cross-legged in front of a large map spread over his bedroll, two books balanced on his knees and another stack of papers to his left.

“I didn’t see you at dinner,” Inigo said when he got no acknowledgement, holding up the small plate of leftovers he’d managed to scrounge up when he finished his own meal.

“’M not hungry,” Owain replied, lifting a hand to wave him away. In the process, however, he bumped one of the tomes off his lap, sending it colliding with an inkwell on the floor. “Ah, damn it,” he muttered, hurrying both to snatch it up and to save his papers and his pants from the growing stain.

“You sure?”

When Owain mumbled another affirmative, Inigo shrugged and popped one of the rolls he had brought into his mouth. No sense wasting it.

Several minutes passed, silent but the shuffling of papers as Owain tried to reconstruct his setup again. “I can’t remember the last time you were this quiet,” Inigo finally said. Owain merely shrugged, leaving him to continue, “Are you ill?”

“Maybe…” Owain said, running his hand through his hair so it stuck up toward the canvas ceiling. “Maybe that’s it…” He groaned. “I can’t think straight. Every time I try I just end up back in the same place. Maybe I am sick.”

Inigo scooted closer, glancing over at the laid-out papers. On further inspection, the largest one wasn’t actually a map, but a series of hand drawn battle formations. “Are these our plans for tomorrow?” he asked, scanning over the scribbled names at the top of the sketched fortress. *Chrom, Robin, Say’ri, Frederick…* He located his own beside Owain’s, far toward the bottom. “Rearguard?” he asked, slightly surprised. Usually Robin had them fighting at the front—either
that or one flank or the other.

“Mm,” Owain affirmed.

“Odd.”

“I don’t like it!” Owain blurted. “How am I supposed to learn from my fell teacher when there is an entire battlefield separating us?”

Inigo barely resisted the urge to slam his palm into his face. “Naga, but you’ve got it bad,” he muttered instead.

“Huh?”

“You like her quite a bit, don’t you?” Inigo prodded.

“Indeed, she is a most formidable mage and tactician, and my knowledge has grown greatly in her service.”

_How dense can you really be?_ “And she seems quite taken with you. For… some reason.”

“How! Clearly she knows she could have no better student than I.”

With a sigh, Inigo gave up on subtlety. “So? When are you going to man up and kiss her?”

Owain merely snorted. “Heroes of legend do not have time for such mundane things as _kissing_, Inigo.”

“…You’ve clearly never kissed anyone.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?” Owain asked. “I knew being stabbed would be unpleasant before I ever got stabbed.”

“Did you really just liken _kissing someone_ to _getting stabbed_?” Inigo asked, pinching the bridge of his nose. “You’re completely hopeless. Forget I asked.”

“I’m just saying it’s a weird concept!” Owain exclaimed. “‘Fair companion, your beauty is truly second to none, and your elegance consumes my every waking thought! Here, let me _mush my face into you._’”

“If there’s mushing going on you’re definitely doing it wrong,” Inigo said. “I would just like to point that out in the case someone ever does kiss you. You know, maybe thirty or forty years from now.”

Owain snorted again.

“I’m actually kind of surprised that isn’t the ending to at least _one_ of your fantastic little tales,” Inigo continued. “You know, save the fair maiden from the clutches of death and earn a sweet kiss in return…”

“That’s your fantasy, not mine.”

“…Touche.”

Owain rolled his eyes, but the hint of a smile returned to his features. “You should rest, my royal companion.” He laid a hand on the spellbook laying on the floor, face lighting up fully. “Would
you like to see me blow out the candle without touching it?”

“...How many have you exploded trying that lately?” Inigo asked.

“Only two!” Owain said defensively. “Okay, well, two and a half. But that one only counts as a half! And that’s way better than seventeen!”

“I think I’ll stick to my un-broiled state of being, thanks,” Inigo said, leaning over to blow out the candle with his far more reliable lips.

*If Owain doesn’t char me alive beforehand, I think I’m going to die of secondhand romantic embarrassment.*
Take Me to the Top (Part 4) Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

The Shepherds finally storm Fort Steiger.

Chapter Notes

I wrote like four thousand something words yesterday which was the most glorious feeling in the world so have an update to celebrate.

“Damn! Look at those walls… this isn’t going to be easy.”

Flavia’s sentiments seemed to be echoed by everyone, whether spoken or not. Owain stared up at the blockades around Fort Steiger—and up, and up.

Night still clung to the land, cloaking the Shepherds and the khans’ warriors as they moved into position around the fortress. When dawn first peeked over the horizon, they would strike all at once, with the element of surprise hopefully allowing them to take down the fort’s commander in the confusion. Robin had spent most of the winter working out the planning—it was as close to airtight as they were going to get.

Owain’s sword hung heavy at his hip—Risen skirmish notwithstanding, this would be his first fight since the Mila Tree, nearly half a year ago. Perhaps being positioned at the back wasn’t the insult he’d taken it for, but the energy and anticipation crackling through the air still made him twitch.

“It’s not the walls I’m worried about,” Basilio whispered, covering the sound of Owain’s soft sigh. “It’s the hordes of Valmese inside them.”

“Heh,” Inigo replied softly. “Nothing we’ve not faced before.” Owain couldn’t read his cousin’s facial expression, but Inigo’s teeth flashed white through the darkness in a grin. “We’ll be done in time for tea.”

For a moment, Owain felt the jittery energy in him subside, and knew that had been exactly Inigo’s intent. In those tense moments before battle, Chrom rallied his troops with stirring words of triumph, and Lucina had tended to follow a similar vein when her stalwart presence wasn’t quite enough comfort to those who followed her. But Inigo… unlike his Exalted predecessors, his encouragement was more underhanded, almost sly. To some, it might sound dismissive or even self-absorbed, but after all these years Owain knew to read deeper to catch the real meaning. Inigo’s faith in them was unshakeable and he spoke it as flat fact, in such a way that managed to avoid putting the spotlight on anyone.

Unfortunately, it seemed not everyone in their little group had cared to look that closely at Inigo’s words. “Now is not the time for jest,” Say’ri said tersely, accompanied by the dirtiest look Owain had ever seen cross her face.
“She’s right, Inigo,” Chrom said, not turning from where he was staring toward a copse of trees a few hundred feet away. It held another company of Shepherds, Owain knew, and he was fairly certain Robin was over there at the moment.

Inigo’s grin faded. “Apologies,” he said flatly.

There was a soft thump of flesh on flesh as Basilio clapped his hand to Inigo’s shoulder. “Ah, let the boy have his optimism,” he said with a soft guffaw. “Gods know we need some today.”

Under the meager moonlight, Owain caught a glimpse of two forms slipping out of the trees and towards them. He didn’t recognize them until they were almost upon their hideout, with the hood of Robin’s heavy cloak over her head and Frederick’s usually polished armor covered in charcoal to prevent it from glinting in the night.

“Division Two is ready,” the tactician said once the two were safely inside the woods’ boundaries. “Your people await your orders, Flavia. Inigo, Owain, I wouldn’t keep Sully waiting for you.”

“Understood, milady,” Inigo said with a wink, fiddling with his gloves for a moment before inclining his head toward Owain, ready to slip away toward the rest of the rearguard, led by Sully. Division One consisted only of Robin, Chrom, Frederick, and Say’ri, who would be spearheading straight to Commander Pheros in hopes to take her out of the fight as quickly as possible. Cordelia’s Division Two would be taking on the majority of the in-fortress fighting while Sully’s Division Three held the rear line just outside to keep back any forces Flavia’s men couldn’t handle.

“Then it’s settled,” Say’ri said. “Other Resistance forces are on the way. With luck, they’ll arrive in time to help. Let’s cleave them a proud trail of Imperial blood to find us by!”

“I said HOLD THE DAMN LINE! Did Robin give me a bunch of DEAF, WHINY BABIES? Owain, get your SKINNY LITTLE A —”

“Heh,” Owain managed to get out over the carnage. “I forgot how loud she was.”

“— BACK IN FORMATION!”

“You might want to listen to her, or the—” Inigo cut himself off to parry a blow, “—Valmese will be the least of your worries.” An arrow whizzed past their ears, leaving them both swiveling their heads to locate where it had come from. “Sniper east-southeast!” Inigo yelled back to Sully.

In response, a fireball shot over their heads, neatly setting the archer aflame.

“Thanks Mom!” Owain called, then winced as he just managed to block a particularly hard blow.

“You all right?”

“Fine,” Owain replied in a clipped voice.

Sully’s bellowing continued to sound over the clash of battle, until suddenly, both went quiet. Owain paused for a moment, bending over slightly until he could pull more precious air into his lungs. Even after his arm had finished healing, his time practicing magic with Robin had cut into
the time he usually spent training his swordplay, and he was sorely beginning to feel it.

“Oh, thank the gods,” Inigo murmured, not sounding all that much better than Owain felt. For all they had started before dawn, the sun was now high in the sky and beating down harder than it had any right to this early in the year. He felt a pang of envy for the divisions that had already made it inside the castle. “Say’ri’s forces are here.”

Owain gathered his breath, seeing his cousin was right—the legion approaching them bore neither Valmese armor nor Walhart’s banner. “Ho, Resistance!” he called, ignoring the little turn in his stomach that said something wasn’t quite right.

A moment later, he wished he hadn’t.

The woman at the front of the newly approached forces, astride a dappled gray warhorse that dwarfed her diminutive figure, held up a white-gloved hand. “Oh,” she cooed softly. “We’re not here for you.”

Before either Inigo or Owain could draw their swords again or even yell for Sully—who they had somehow gotten maddeningly far away from—a loud pop sounded and a small, round figure (man? Owain couldn’t help but question) appeared halfway between the two forces.

“Oh!” said the newest arrival, and their voice didn’t do much to help him ascertain their gender. “It appears I’m just on time for the Rebellion reunion! Delicious!”

“Excellus,” Owain realized, putting the warping together with the androgyny. “It’s Walhart’s tactician.”

“Oh!” Excellus cried. “Bingo! What a smart boy you are!” He ignored Owain’s scowl and turned to the newly-arrived lady commander, his voice hardening. “Just remember your promise… or you can be sure I will remember mine.” With that, he warped away again.

And, without warning, the valkyrie shot a fireball that Owain barely dodged.

_Barely_ ended up being the wrong word, as searing pain singed through his left sleeve and left him gasping and choking on superheated air.

“FORM UP!” Sully bellowed once more. “Come on, kiddos, playtime’s over!”

“We’re gonna get cut off,” Owain managed when he could breathe again.

“Good thing I’ve got your back, then,” Inigo said, pivoting so he was directly behind Owain, their shoulders pressing together in the tried and true maneuver when they were open to attacks from all sides.

Wave after wave fell over them, of swordsmen, axe-wielders, and archers alike, though blessedly the mounted sages were few and far between.

He nearly cleaved Sully in half when she reached them, her usual mount gone and her red hair sticking up every which way. “Go find Robin,” she said flatly. “Tell her I’ve no idea what the hell the Feroxis are doing but we can’t hold the outside of the fort anymore. We’re falling back to join up with Cordelia.” When they paused, she jabbed a finger in the direction of the castle. “Go!”

They went.
It took eons to reach make it to the center of the fort. The fighting grew thicker the farther in they went, and even trying to dodge through the worst of it they couldn’t avoid everything.

Owain tripped.

He just managed to keep himself upright and not end up sliding on his rear across the bloodstained tile floors, thanking Naga there wasn’t anyone around to conveniently impale him. That would have been embarrassing, to say the least. He shot the barest of glances over his shoulder and pulled up short.

“Owain, c’mon, we haven’t got time—”

“That’s Robin’s spellbook,” he whispered, voice still rough from the clamor of battle. Fight forgotten, he bent down and gingerly clasped the tome.

It couldn’t have been laying there long—despite laying open to the page marked Bolganone, the book was untouched and un torn. He swallowed hard, realizing that unless the pages had flipped when the book landed, Robin had had to start resorting to the truly devastating spells.

“Are you sure?” Inigo asked.

Owain merely shot him a withering look—how could he not recognize his mentor’s spellbook?—and said tightly, “Let’s go.”

Frederick’s bellowing was the first sound that reached them and his heavy armor was the first sight that greeted them as they burst into the center of the fort. The knight tangled with no less than three lightning fast warriors that were slowly but surely denting his armor despite Say’ri at his side whirling to match their foes. The tide of battle had pushed Chrom half a room away, where an axe-wielding fighter he should have been able to take down in an instant chipped at the Exalt’s defenses thanks to the sage behind him shooting out Arcthunder spells without a care for reserving mana.

And Robin, armed with nothing but an unbalanced bronze sword, fought off the other two mages, both of them mounted.

With the ease of far too much practice, Owain took in the entire scene in a split second. Inigo gave a strangled cry before bolting to his father’s side, Falchion already drawn. Frederick gave a mighty swing of his axe that cleaved one of the Valmese in half, leveling the playing field a bit. But Robin’s spellbook was still across the room from her, clutched tight in Owain’s hand, and while she was clearly trained with the blade she was not the swordswoman she was a sorceress, and her lousy weapon was not doing her any favors. Flames licked at her boots, forcing her to the defensive.

She had explained to him, once, how she saw the battlefield, a dozen scenarios playing out and overlapping each other in her mind’s eye, giving way to the strongest tactics to ensure their victory. For a moment, Owain understood that imagery—but every path mapped out the same way.

It wasn’t a fight she could win and no one, least of all him, could reach her in time.

Almost of its own accord, Robin’s spellbook snapped open once more in his hands, his fingers flying through the pages and dismissing each one in turn. Too slow, not strong enough, too
strong…

Breathe in.

His hands didn’t tremble—there wasn’t time for him to be slowed by common fear—but the pulse of magic racing up his arm made his heart beat staccato. He smoothed his hand down the page, pausing for what felt like eternity.

Breathe out.

He hadn’t cast a spell anywhere near this since that fateful day he was thirteen, and just like then it fought him. He shoved it down, bent it to his will with a desperation akin to the last days in their future, and poured every ounce of Robin’s training into keeping that magic under his control.

Breathe in.

He had one shot at this.

Breathe out.

Breathe in.

“Arcwind.”

Silvery air burst from Owain’s fingertips, frigid spikes keen on their target as they flew true. The spell slammed into the nearer of the two mages, knocking the blonde woman off her snow-white mount with barely even a moment to look surprised. The other mage froze with shock, a fire spell still crackling incomplete on her fingertips; with a shout Robin took advantage of her distraction and she was down too.

Black spots danced in his vision, but they didn’t block the astonished look on the tactician’s face as she caught sight of him. Owain heaved in a deep breath, the extra oxygen pressing back the threat of unconsciousness. The spell had stayed bent to his will, not spiraling out of control and sucking up every ounce of mana he had without him being able to regulate it, but he still wasn’t used to casting magic of that caliber. He shook his head, forcing himself to stride forward to keep his knees from locking and buckling.

Someday, he thought, he’d be able to fight at Robin’s side as her equal in sorcery as well as swordsmanship, but today was not that day.

“What the hell was that?” she demanded as he neared.

“Pretty epic?” Owain ventured, a tired smile coming to his lips.

“You’re a damnable fool,” Robin muttered.

“A wildcard and an idiot,” Owain agreed. His limbs felt like lead.

A sputtering cough from the ground drew their attention. The blonde mage he’d taken out laid still, not quite dead yet but not long for this world either. Owain realized, with a start, that her insignia declared her to be General Pheros.

“Well done…” the Valmese woman murmured. “I may not live… to see Walhart unify all mankind… with my own eyes… but I have seen it… in my dreams… and that is enough…”

With a shudder, she breathed her last, and Fort Steiger was theirs.
Take Me to the Top (Part 4) Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Basilio makes a choice that leaves Inigo fearing for their future.

The Shepherds had fallen back and gathered together inside the fortress. It was all they could do—surrounded on all sides, they couldn’t very well leave. A war council started by necessity in the center of the fortress, the dead taken away but blood still staining the floors that half their company sat on, too exhausted to stand. Only the two khans, Frederick, and Chrom remained upright, with Say’ri half leaning against one of the walls.

“And so Steiger has fallen,” Say’ri murmured. “But I’m afraid our new enemy has the fortress surrounded.”

“And by new enemy, you mean the rest of the former Resistance,” Chrom said heavily. It wasn’t a question.

“Aye, sir,” the princess replied with a grimace. “Words cannot express my shame. My regret… Finally, I succeeded in uniting them, but only against us.”

Had Inigo been nearer to her, he might’ve leaned over and squeezed her hand—a gesture that in itself would have been little comfort, but perhaps at least the sentiment would have meant something. As it was, he was half a room away, and he could picture her flinching away and shooting him a look that told him he wasn’t welcome to be so free with her anymore.

As it was, he almost missed the conscript entering the room, clothes torn and bedraggled, panting like he’d run the entire way from Valm Harbor in one stretch. “Milord! Dire news! Our forces to the north and south have been slaughtered by Walhart and Yen’fay! What’s worse, most of the survivors have turned their coats for the empire!”

Several beats of silence stretched out. “But our troops numbered in the tens of thousands!” Say’ri exclaimed, straightening up.

“The empire must have had more,” Basilio said flatly.

“Or perhaps have been better trained and equipped,” Flavia added.

“Blast!” Say’ri growled. “Walhart and my brother—where are their armies now?”

“Surely they will be marching toward this fortress, milady,” the conscript answered. “Even accounting for the travel time, it can’t be long before they’ll find out. It’s only a matter of time.”

“So much for fortune favoring the bold,” Basilio grumbled. “This war was lost before it even began.”

“All our struggles until now, and we’ve yet to so much as dent the empire…” Chrom said, dismissing the conscript with a wave of his hand.

“Chrom?” Robin said.
“Yes, Robin?”

“We need to leave here,” the tactician said. “Right away.”

“Have you lost your wits?” Flavia demanded. “We’re surrounded!”

Owain lifted his head from where it was bent toward his chest, and Inigo started—he’d almost convinced himself his cousin had fallen asleep. “She’s right,” the former mumbled, glancing toward Robin for affirmation. After a beat, she nodded and he continued. “If we linger here, we’ll be back in the same place we were last fall. The dynasts have more resources than we—they’ll starve us out sooner or later. Not to mention when Walhart and Yen’fay arrive we’ll be trapped for a certainty.”

Robin nodded. “Exactly. If we intend to escape, now is our best chance.”

“I must agree,” Say’ri said. “The dynasts outside betray us only out of fear for the empire. They’ll only put up a token resistance without their masters watching.”

“But we can’t keep running forever,” Chrom pointed out. “How do we hope to turn the tide?”

“By striking at either Walhart or Yen’fay before they join strength,” Robin said.

“Either one seems a death sentence,” said Chrom.

“One general would be upon us before we could finish with the other,” Say’ri added.

“I agree,” Robin said. “Which is why we attack both.”

“Our army lies in tatters, yet you would divide it by half?” Flavia exclaimed, brows rising toward her hairline.

“I didn’t say by half. Chrom would lead our strongest troops against Yen’fay. Meanwhile, a smaller force could attack Walhart.”

“A smaller force?” Basilio said incredulously. “We couldn’t defeat him with double our entire number.”

Robin shook her head. “I didn’t say we’d defeat him. We only need to distract him.”

“Hmm…” pondered Basilio. “Spend some lives to buy the other team time…”

“This smaller force would face our most dangerous mission yet,” Chrom said. “It would need a leader of unparalleled skill, reckless bravery…”

“All right, Chrom, please—you’re embarrassing me!” the west-khan interrupted. “I’ll do it already—just stop with the compliments!”

“This is no time for japes, Basilio,” Robin said. “The stakes could not be higher.”

“I am being serious,” Basilio replied, sobering. “I’ll lead the squad. Though I prefer my steaks well done…”

“That’s just his way, Robin,” Flavia said. “Bad jokes come with the bravado. But the oaf clearly has faith in your thinking, and I as well… All of us do, I’d wager. Somehow you always find a way to best the odds.”
“Then it’s settled,” said Basilio. “I’ll make preparations and be off. The rest of you stay with Chrom and keep him safe.”

Robin gave a somber nod. “Godspeed, Basilio.”

“Wait!”

“Inigo? What are you—”

Inigo jumped to his feet with as much speed as he could muster, ignoring his father’s query. “You cannot go on this mission, Khan Basilio,” he said, shooting a look at Owain. His cousin’s eyes went wide with realization. Inigo inhaled, then added, “You will die in this battle, and I know it for truth.”

A beat passed. “You know, boy, you have a strange way of saying goodbye,” Basilio said. “All right, then. Who is it? Who kills me? Is it Walhart himself? ...Please say yes. It’d make a poor song to die at the end of some farmer’s pitchfork.”

If we can save Basilio, maybe Say’ri…

Inigo cut off that line of thought and put as much graveness in his words as he could muster. “Yes, it was Walhart… or so goes the tales we heard, at least. We need a different plan.”

Instead of Robin dropping some other brilliant idea on them, though, all he got was a nod from Basilio. “All I needed to know. Thank you much, boy. I’ll be careful.”

“You’re still going?” Owain interjected. “But he just told you—”

“Aye, I heard him just fine. But someone still has to stall Walhart’s division from advancing. If he’s the one that kills me, well then, I’ll just avoid confronting him. You don’t grow this old and handsome without knowing how to avoid trouble.”

“It’s not that simple,” Inigo whispered. “It’s never that simple!”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Flavia interjected. “He’ll be fine. He’ll have me to keep an eye on him.”

“You aren’t coming, woman! You’re the reigning khan!”

“I thought you intended to survive this, oaf. Regna Ferox has two khans, and now you’re responsible for both. I dare you to die now!”

“Har!” Basilio said, then burst into laughter. “All right, all right! You can come. Hope that’s all right, Chrom.”

“Just look after each other,” Chrom told the khans.

“Ha!” said Flavia. “I’ll bring this big ox back on a leash if it comes to that.”

“Luck and more be with you all,” Basilio told the rest of the assembled Shepherds. “We’ll meet again.”

“Please,” Inigo murmured hoarsely. “Your future—”

“Please’ yourself, boy! Not another word! I fully intend to outlive all you sprogs—just see if I don’t! And as for your future, it can kiss my big brown Feroxi arse!” Basilio made a crude gesture toward the ceiling, grinning, then turned on his heel with Flavia following.
Inigo stood motionless, a sinking feeling in his stomach that said this would be the last time he saw the West-Khan of Regna Ferox.

“Gods damn it all!”

Inigo didn’t know why there was a small table with a vase on it in the middle of some back hallway of Steiger, just that the pottery lent itself to be convenient projectile. He snatched it up, intent on hearing it shatter against the stone wall ahead of him, only to find a large chip already missing on the back of it. The sharp edge caught his finger, leaving a neat red slice in its wake as he cursed again and dropped it to the floor. He found the destruction far less satisfying to behold than he’d hoped as he sucked on his bleeding finger.

If he could have, he would have gone to Mount Prism in an instant just then, storming that ancient temple and demanding of Naga why she’d forced him to walk this path when nothing he did changed a thing in the end. So what if he’d altered the manner of a few events? Regna Ferox and Ylisse had an alliance, under different circumstances but in the end just the same as before. Emmeryn was dead, just like before. Valm was in the middle of tearing itself apart from the inside out, just like before. Basilio was going toe to toe with Walhart in a fight he couldn't win, just like before.

What was the point of it all? What was the purpose of watching the world spiral back down the exact same path it had taken before his birth?

Inigo sank to the floor, leaning his head back against the wall as he thought back to that last horrid night in the future when Grima had finally turned his gaze on Ylisstol. “Do you mean to die, Owain?”

“I don’t mean to die. But… if I can’t protect anyone anymore… then what the hell am I still doing here? I’d rather be dead.”

It had been years since those words had rang so true. If Gerome hadn’t stopped them, he was sure he and Owain would have fallen in that final stand. Inigo would have died in his own time, his own homeland, the last Exalt of Ylisse making his final stand against odds he could have never beaten. He would have never stepped foot in the past, never been forced to watch a human life flicker away at the point of his blade.

“Inigo?”

His eyes cracked open, a forced grin coming to his face when he met Chrom’s gaze. “Ah. Evening, Father.”

The mirroring smile that came to the Exalt’s face also looked strained, not quite reaching his eyes. “Robin’s having us stay the night here,” Chrom said. “Give the Shepherds the chance to recover. The dynasts don’t look like they’re too keen on attacking us just yet, so we should be safe until morning. I just wanted to make sure you knew.”


Several beats of silence passed before Chrom opened his mouth, then closed it again. He cleared
his throat before he tried again. “Actually, I wanted to speak with you.”

“Yes?” Inigo said, too tired to protest. To his surprise, unlike the last time they’d met like this, Chrom lowered himself to sit cross-legged beside him.

Another few moments passed before Chrom spoke again. “I’m sorry. For what I said. It was… insensitive. You’ve been fighting with all you’ve got, and I had no right to criticize you.”

“Pfft, you still thinking about that?” Inigo replied lightly. “Ancient history.”

“Inigo,” Chrom said, in a tone that said he didn’t buy it.

Inigo looked away, his tone much more somber when he spoke again. “Well, you weren’t entirely in the wrong,” he finally said. “And I apologize for snapping like I did. I guess… you just hit a little too close to home.”

“Did I?”

Curling up tighter on himself, Inigo whispered, “I’m never going to be the Exalt that you are or that Lucina was. And in this time, I never will be, so it doesn’t matter so much. But the others… the rest of us that came back from the future, they still look to me like I am. In the end, it’s me that has to change fate and it always has been. But nothing I do ever changes anything, and I…” He trailed off. “How do you do it? How do you hold the weight of all those lives on your shoulders and know it’s your fault when you lose them?”

Chrom rubbed his chin, staring forward with a thoughtful expression. “Right out with the heavy-hitting questions, aren’t we?” he asked wryly. “Unfortunately, I haven’t really got an easy answer for you.”

“Forget I asked,” Inigo mumbled.

“No,” Chrom replied. “I won’t, because I’m your father, and while I think I’ve been doing a lousy job of that lately, you deserve that much from me.”

Inigo felt his lips quirk. “To be fair, leading an army doesn’t lend itself that much to having time to parent your already grown time-traveling child.”

“True enough,” Chrom said. “And as I said, there’s not a simple answer to that question. You cling to those you do have, grieve when you must, and hope it all makes a brighter future in the end.”

“Easier said than done.”

“Indeed,” Chrom replied.

Inigo took a shuddering breath. “And when I fail? When there is no one left to cling to and no point left in hoping, then what?”

“By every god I know, I won’t let that happen,” Chrom said. “This future of yours? We are going to win it and that is a promise.”

Inigo made himself paste on another smile. “You’re right. Sorry to be so down just then.”

Chrom hesitated, then put a hand on his son’s shoulder. “I’m… not very good at this parenting thing yet. But I want to say… You’re not invincible and you shouldn’t have to pretend to be. I may not agree with everything you do or every choice you make, but I’m not supposed to. If
something’s wrong, come to me. We’ll figure it out together.”

Blinking, Inigo said, “Father… I… thank you, but where is this coming from all of a sudden?”

Chrom sighed. “I hate to admit this was what it took to make me see the truth. Earlier today, when you and Owain came in, you jumped to my aid without a moment of hesitation.”

“Well, yeah,” Inigo said. “What was I supposed to do, let you get electrocuted? Been there, done that, trust me it wasn’t pretty. I do miss that rapier…”

Chrom chuckled. “Point is… it was at the moment that I came to a realization. You’re a strong man, Inigo, and I couldn’t be prouder of you.”

A lump came to Inigo’s throat—a moment later, he wordlessly flung his arms around his father’s shoulders.

“Neck!” Chrom cried. “Inigo, my neck! Too tight! Can’t breathe!”

“It’s your own fault!” Inigo choked out with a watery laugh. “You’ve never said anything like that to me before!” He pulled away, the smile on his face actually real this time. “You’re right, though. Surely we’ll win this sooner or later.” He lifted his chin decisively. “I’ll be damned if I’m going to lose you twice.”

“And I’ll be damned if I’m ever going to lose my favorite son.”

A beat passed. “…Dad?”

“Yes?”

“I’m your only son.”
“Owain.”

“Hoi there!” His entire body ached, and Owain thought that if he fell asleep now he might not wake up for a week, but he still forced a grin to come to his face as he turned to face Robin. “How fares my illustrious mentor after today’s protracted battle?”

She didn’t answer him, chin lifted and arms crossed.

He bit back a sigh. He had hoped he’d escaped this lecture when he slipped away from the impromptu war council after Basilio and Flavia left. “I suppose you want a word with me,” he said, dropping his usual theatrics.

“More than one, yes,” Robin said flatly.

Owain held his arms out—the empty hallway they were in was as good a place to get chewed out as any. “Have at it, then. Call me a ‘damnable fool’ again if it makes you feel better.”

“If it makes me feel better…!” Robin exclaimed. “You took a risk that could have gotten you or any one of us in that room killed!”

“But I didn’t,” Owain pointed out.

“You can’t keep doing this!” she exclaimed over top of him. “I thought you understood the gravity of what I was teaching you, but every time I turn around you’re flaunting it like a toddler who stole a toy! You might be talented but you’re not trained and you’re not ready to use magic in combat yet, especially not with the stakes as high as they were today! It’s powerful, it’s unpredictable, and with a spell as strong as Arcwind the potential backlash is lethal, can you not understand that? It’s sheer luck that you haven’t offed yourself at this point.”

“And the alternative?” Owain shot back. “Would you have preferred I sat there gaping and let you get hurt or killed? As far as I see it, I used a resource at my disposal to ensure the safety of one of my comrades. In other words, I made the most tactically sound decision.”

“Don’t talk ‘tactically sound’ to me,” Robin snapped, striding closer.

“Why not?” he shot back. “While we’re on the topic, why did you post me where I was in the first place? You and I both know damn well Inigo and I would have been more effective somewhere other than the rearguard. Had we been with you and Chrom, the situation wouldn’t have arose in the first place.”

“Had the dynasts not turned coat, my plans would have been perfectly adequate,” Robin said icily.
“But they did and they weren’t,” Owain replied. “So are you saying our presence would have been superfluous?”

“I’m saying I was trying to keep you safe!” she burst out.

For a moment, he was so caught off guard his brain had to work to come up with a reply. “Safe? If I wanted to be safe I wouldn’t be here,” he finally managed. “A hero forgoes his safety when he goes off to war, in the hopes those he loves will be able to enjoy what he has eschewed.” He stepped closer, nearly within arm’s reach when his voice dropped. “Don’t you dare try to keep me safe.”

“I don’t need heroes,” Robin snapped, having to tilt her head up slightly to meet his gaze now that they were so close. “Heroes do stupid, reckless, unpredictable things that might save the day or that might get him killed. I need soldiers, Owain. Soldiers who follow orders and do what they’re told.”

His voice lowered even further, sounding husky and foreign to his own ears. “And without those grand, daring heroes, who will the soldiers look to? Who inspires the common man to fight for his cause without the uncommon leader striding across the stage of battle, urging them to victory?”

Robin scoffed. “That must be the most conceited thing I’ve ever heard come out of your mouth, and that’s saying a lot.”

With a tenderness completely at odds with the argument they’d just been having, he touched a calloused hand to her chin, thumb brushing her cheek. “I was talking about you,” he murmured. Her breath hitched, while his own pulse thrummed in protest of their proximity.

Maybe not protest, he realized abruptly as his entire body suddenly warmed.

“You have never once backed down from an impossible fight,” Owain whispered. “And you have never once failed to snatch victory from the maw of defeat.” The hand not pressed to her cheek tingled, a sensation only satiated by bringing it to her face to mirror the other. “I would quake in fear at the very sight of you, and at one point I did, only to learn that behind that fearsome facade is a woman who would bend over backwards for one she calls ‘friend.’ You are the hero, Robin, and I am the mere mortal who is left standing in your shadow, gazing up at greatness I could never hope to attain—mmph!”

If there were warning signs he should have been paying attention to, he missed them. His guard was down, his mind too busy composing the exposition of her virtues to pay attention to such unspoken symbols of body language.

All Owain knew was moment he was whispering her praises, and the next her mouth had latched on to his.

It took an astonishingly long moment to actually register that the foreign pressure on his lips was Robin kissing him, and an even longer one to figure out what to do with that information. While he stood frozen, she curled her arms around his waist, one reaching up to grasp a fistful of his shirt over his shoulder blades, while he managed to do nothing but stand there awash in the sensation.

He only managed to dimly register the fact that he should probably be kissing her back by now a split second before she pulled away. He couldn’t breathe, and when he suddenly could the air came electrifyingly cold in his lungs. His eyes had fluttered shut at some point, and he only managed to force them open when her grip on him loosened completely.

“I…” Robin started as Owain’s hands fell back to his sides. “I shouldn’t—I’m sorry, I’ll… I’ll go
He still didn’t manage to move, his mouth hanging slightly open and his gaze distant as the scarlet-faced tactician spun on her heel and bolted down the hallway.

Owain remained a statue yet, struggling to wrap his mind around the events of the last thirty seconds.

“Dear Naga above, I have stumbled into another timeline where Owain knows how to interact with women.”

The retort sprang to his lips automatically. “And yet I’ve never managed to find one where I can say the same for you, dearest cousin.” A beat passed before he whirled to find a very smug looking Inigo. “Wait, how long have you been standing there?” he demanded.

“Long enough to catch the good part,” Inigo replied with a smirk. “And damn that was a fine speech, I didn’t have a clue you had it in you.”

Owain continued gaping, blinking rapidly. “But what did I—how did she—”

“Owain?” Inigo prodded. “Grill me about techniques later.” When he got no answer, he pointed down the hallway. “Go after her, you imbecile!”

Finally, his muscles started responding again, and Owain took off like an arrow from a bow.

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After getting turned around probably a dozen times in the massive fort, Owain dragged himself back into the center room where Pheros had breathed her last what felt like years ago. Not many of the Shepherds were too keen on sleeping in dead men’s rooms, so the majority of them were setting out bedrolls in the great hall.

He found Inigo had set out both their bedrolls in one corner, a place that probably offered as much privacy as they could possibly get that night, and dropped to the floor. He groaned as he dropped, already anticipating how sore he’d be in the morning after sleeping on nothing but cold tile.

Wordlessly, Inigo slid him a paper bag of cold rations that Owain gratefully took. He tore off a piece of bread that was a little too large to comfortably chew before he shot his cousin a look.

“You look suspiciously expectant,” he mumbled through his food.

“Well I am,” Inigo said, leaning back against the wall and crossing his arms. “You’ve been gone almost an hour, so what happened?”

Owain swallowed a little too quickly, nearly choked, and finally shrugged. “Couldn’t find her.”

Inigo groaned. “Oh, come on, really?” he said. “That’s how this is going to end? My baby cousin finally has his first kiss only for the maiden to disappear without a final word? This is starting to sound like one of my dates.”

Owain spluttered. “Can you be a little louder? I don’t think they heard you in freaking Ylisstol,” he hissed. “And ‘baby cousin’? I’m older than you!”
“Age? Yes. Maturity? No,” Inigo replied. He sighed. “All right, I suppose I’ll content myself with
the details of what actually did happen, then.”

“You’re not getting details,” Owain muttered around a mouthful of jerky. “Stalker.”

“Oh, so you can literally assault me when you want details, Mr. Shadow-Strike-of-Nightmare, but
when I ask politely after supplying you with food I’m repaid with wildly inaccurate insults?” Inigo
demanded.

“Yeah,” Owain replied.

Inigo shoved him.

“Oi! Hey, you saw the whole thing, pervert! What do you need details for anyway?”

“Oh, I’m the pervert? It’s not my fault I happened to be walking by when she decided to shove her
tongue down your throat in the middle of a public hallway!” Inigo broke off to cackle. “Oh, gods, I
have never seen you this red in my entire life. Where is a mirror, you have got to see this…” His
eyes glinted dangerously and he cupped a hand to his mouth. “MARIBELLE—”

Owain clapped a hand over his cousin’s lips, ignoring the glare the blonde healer shot them from
across the room. “Ignore him!” he shouted to her.

With another mischievous look, Inigo licked his palm.

“And you call me immature,” Owain grumbled disgustedly, wiping his hand on his pants.

“You are.”

Owain continued to scowl, but it couldn’t push away the bubbling warmth that prevailed his entire
body, and after a moment he was biting his lip in a vain attempt to keep from grinning.

“You look so giddy right now it’s nauseating,” Inigo complained, pulling his knees up to his chest
and resting his chin on top of them.

“And now you know how the rest of us feel around you every time you go fawning over the
nearest maiden,” Owain shot back. “Or, you know, Say’ri.”

Abruptly, Inigo’s superior smirk faded into a thin line, a carefully neutral facade coming over the
rest of his features. “That’s beside the point of this conversation.”

Owain blinked, searching his cousin’s face for a moment. Had something happened since Inigo
admitted to him he was in love with the aforementioned princess? Say’ri had seemed colder lately,
but he assumed if something actually drastic had changed between the two Owain himself would
have been the first to know.

He cleared his throat and decided to change the subject. “All right, all right, I know what you’re
waiting for. Enjoy it, because you’re not going to hear it again.” Bracing himself as if he were
about to reveal a secret of the darkest origins, he lowered his voice and whispered, “You were
right. I get it. I get the kissing thing now.”

Inigo grinned again. “I toooold you so,” he said in a sing-song voice.

“What are you two muttering about over here?” came Severa’s voice, the redhead’s arms crossed
tight over her chest as she glared down at them.
“Ah, Severa! For your information—” Inigo said, clapping a hand to his cousin’s shoulder, “—today Owain has become a man.”

“Inigoooooo,” Owain whined, feeling his face flush yet again.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Severa asked.

“Absolutely nothing!” he exclaimed over top of Inigo.

“Have you seen Robin anywhere, perchance?” Inigo managed to get out with an easy smirk.

Severa rolled her eyes and shook her head. “Not since the fighting stopped, no.”

“Dang it,” Inigo muttered. “Well, if you see her, please do let us know posthaste.”

“Okaaaaay,” the redhead said, drawing the word out like she thought they were both crazy.

Actually, she probably did.

Chapter End Notes

You guys, I LOVE this chapter. It makes my heart very happy. I wrote it in basically one sitting and I was grinning like a fool the entire time.

In other news, I recently discovered a plot hole I made in which I had Inigo mention that Ricken had died in the Valm War a couple chapters after Owain had mentioned him being alive at a much later point. I went back and fixed it, but my literal first thought when I realized this was "Aw, dang, I've made Schrodinger's Ricken..."
I've decided, since the Valm War has stretched out for so long now and I still have a lot more to cover before we move on, to split it into to parts, hence ending part 4 here. And you guys might know by now who we usually check in on at the end of a part...

As Say’ri had predicted, the dynasts outside Fort Steiger didn’t put up much of a fight. Unfortunately, in an effort to gain some distance, it was a solid three days of grueling travel and never resting for more than a few hours before Robin actually let the exhausted Shepherds stop and put up camp.

At least, that was what filtered down the chain. Owain himself hadn’t seen the tactician in person since she had, as Inigo so eloquently put it, had her tongue down his throat.

Which sounded remarkably more unpleasant than it actually was.

He bit back a sigh, jittery and uneasy despite his fatigue. He’d retired before supper, unwilling to eat thanks to the fact he’d been some combination of overheated and nauseated since they left Steiger. He’d even gone so far as to trudge up to his mother the previous day, asking to be examined, but though she’d fretted over him for an entire hour Lissa had been forced to admit she couldn’t actually find anything wrong with him.

Sleep only came to him in the form of short, unhelpful snatches that abandoned him at the slightest sound from outside. Though Owain stayed curled in a ball and feigned unconsciousness when Inigo came into their tent, he heard his cousin’s every footstep as he himself readied for slumber.

He also heard every muffled whimper an hour later, followed by a sharp, waking gasp and the shift of fabric as what had to be the climax of Inigo’s nightmare shot him back into reality bolt upright and panting.

From there, it was only ten minutes more before Inigo vacated the tent again. Owain decided he probably had the right idea.

The night he emerged into was dark, though still quite young in the scheme of things. Despite that fact, thanks to their march most of the Shepherds were asleep but those on watch.

Inigo, being the exception, sat on an overturned log, cradling a mug of tea made for the nightwatch in his hands. He hardly glanced over when Owain settled beside him. “Feeling any better?” he murmured.
“Not particularly,” Owain replied with a shrug. “What a lousy time to get sick.”

“Mm,” Inigo replied, still facing forward. “Indeed.”

Neither spoke for quite a while, but neither of them needed to. “Nightmares?” Owain finally whispered.

Inigo nodded.

“Of our world?” A beat. “Our real world?”

“Something like that.” Inigo took a long sip before he spoke again. “Lucina would have been better at this business than I am. And… gods, I miss her.”

“As do I,” Owain murmured.

“I wish she were here. If only for her to see Mother and Father again, even once.” He traced the rim of his mug with his fingertip. “We’re the same age she was, you realize. In a few months I’m going to be older than my older sister.” A soft huff escaped him. “Fancy that.”

With surprising perceptiveness, Owain realized his presence wasn’t helping. Right now, Inigo needed to be alone in a grief that three years hadn’t dampened and a lifetime probably never would. Instead of lingering, he gripped Inigo’s shoulder for a moment before getting to his feet.

“Get some sleep if you can, my friend.”

“You too,” Inigo murmured in reply.

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Business was not good.

It was nothing new. Since Chon’sin’s monarchs had fallen and Yen’fay ascended the throne only to bow before Walhart, plenty of people decided it was better to stay at home rather than risk the streets for a tavern dinner. A tiny beachside town had been spared the worst of the destruction that the capital had fared, but when the conscription started matters of profit only grew worse. Even this late on a quiet weeknight, what should have been a post-dinner rush of varying sobriety was only one table with but a single, hooded occupant.

Lucina scrubbed down a table that was already clean, just to keep herself busy. Shai’sì had been forced to let many of her former waitresses go, and Lucina had the feeling it was only due to pity she herself was still working there.

She had fared better than many. While the war raged on, she still had food to eat, a roof over her head, and clothes on her back. Lysander grew by leaps and bounds that astounded her daily, part of her eager to see what every new moment brought and part of her wishing he could forever stay the infant she clutched in her arms.

Rain pattered on the roof, lending a chill to the air even though they fast approached summer. Lucina had the overly poetic thought that it was as if the continent itself mourned the war, and scoffed to herself. For the most part, she had been spared the worst scars of the fighting, and though it might have been craven, for the sake of her son she intended to keep it that way for as
long as she could.

“Mama? Mamamamamama?”

Lysander’s babbling drew her attention in a half-hearted sort of way, catching her ears in the way it would any mother’s but not actually making her look up. “Hello, darling,” she murmured fondly, before reality sank in and she spun around with a gasp.

Her infant son, just barely upright and mobile on his feet, tottered at the edge of the staircase that led up to their apartment. How he’d slipped out of his room and made it this far she hadn’t a clue—all she knew was one wrong move and he was going to come tumbling down to the first storey.

“Lysander—” she gasped out, bolting for him just as he giggled and stretched his arms out toward her.

“Mama!” he cried again, before his chubby legs failed him and her worst nightmare came true.

Lucina screamed.

To her astonishment, though, before he could so much as bruise himself on the next stair, he floated upward, wide-eyed, his clothes flapping like an artificial breeze was carrying him safely down the staircase to hover in front of Lucina’s waiting arms.

Unquestioning, she snatched him out of midair, clutching him to her chest with a sob. “Oh dear Naga, oh gods—”

“Aga’n!” Lysander cried. “Aga’n!”

She buried her face in his silver hair and decided not to ponder what miracle had just happened.

A moment later, though the sound of a book snapping closed reached her ears followed by a smooth voice. “Goodness, but aren’t they trouble when they’re that age?”

Startled, Lucina glanced up to see her lone customer get to her feet, pulling back the hood of her cloak to reveal a woman not much younger than herself, bearing honey-blonde hair and startling green eyes. “I swear, I just put him down to sleep, I don’t even know how he—”

“Peace,” said the woman. “I might not have a child of my own, but I know how they can be.” She set the tome in her hand down on the table beside her meal, a thoughtful expression on her face. “I never did expect to use a Wind spell for that, though.”

“Naga bless you,” Lucina choked out, Lysander still tucked under her chin. Unexpectedly, though, the other woman’s face hardened.

“Save your goddess’s blessings, simple thanks will do,” she said brusquely.

“I… sorry.” Lucina cleared her throat, heart still hammering in her chest from the near miss. “Goodness. Well if that doesn’t wake one up.” She shifted her son in her grasp so she could eye him.

He gave another wet giggle. “Mama!”

She hadn’t quite noticed the other woman was still gazing at her until she spoke again. “Pardon me, but this is an odd question,” she said. “Do you, perchance, know a man by the name of Inigo?”

Lucina blinked, thinking hard for a moment. “Inigo, you say? I cannot say I do, though I suppose
it’s possible I’ve seen him. We do have a fair few tourists come through here—well, not as such with the war, now, but—"

“No, no, I don’t think he’d have been here,” the woman replied. “Though I suppose it’s not beyond the realm of possibility. An Ylissean man, quite a striking one, with a regal bearing—actually, the reason I ask is because he looks quite like you.”

Slowly, Lucina shook her head. “No, I’m afraid not. I believe the memory of someone like that would have stayed with me.” For a moment, her breath hitched, thinking of a young man in her dreams that did, indeed, look like her. She dismissed it.

The woman let out a breath. “Hmm. Suppose it was too good to be true. Anyways, I shall be taking my bill now, thank you.”

“R-right. Of course. And thank you, again, for what you did.” Still with Lysander on her hip, she moved behind the counter to scribble out a receipt for the woman.

“I would say any time, but I’m afraid I’m only passing through. War is a harsh mistress, and she beckons me to return soon.” She took the paper from Lucina, glanced over it briefly, and tossed over a handful of coins. Another hard look crossed her features. “Keep the change, in exchange for a favor.”

Lucina blinked, looking over the coins. Not only was it far more than needed to cover the bill, the currency was Plegian—an incredibly rarity on the shores of Chon’sin. “And what would that be?”

“If you do see this Inigo fellow, tell him I’m looking for him.”

“...All right,” Lucina said, furrowing her brow as she wondered what the odds were that this Ylissean man would ever cross her threshold.

The woman paused to collect her spellbook and made for the door.

“Wait!” Lucina called after her.

“Yes?” the mage asked, an irritated look crossing her features as she turned back again.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t even catch your name.”

The woman’s smile spread—red, cold, and calculating—and Lucina was suddenly very, very grateful they had not met under less peaceful circumstances.

“Nalia. My name is Nalia.”

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Long after Owain took his leave and long after his tea had gone cold, Inigo still sat with his cup clutched in his hands, staring silently out into the forests of Valm. One by one, he watched the Shepherds of the first watch make their way back into camp and those of the second replace them.

He didn’t want to go back to sleep. Sleep brought only dreams, nightmares of destruction and death or teasing torments of a life he didn’t live. His reality was bad enough without such things.
He wondered, quietly, what was going to become of his cousin and their tactician. He’d known for a while now that Owain truly, genuinely cared for Robin, but the fact that it seemed to be both mutual and coming to some sort of fruition gave him pause. After all, this timeline was not theirs—this world was not theirs. Had either of the two considered that? Either they were all going to go down fighting Grima, again, or they would win peace and the future children would be forced to make their own way in the world for the sake of their younger selves. How would a cross-generational fling survive that?

Inigo let out a sigh and shifted, trying to keep his legs from going numb. Maybe he should sit down and discuss the whole thing with Owain, man to man. Of course, Owain would probably laugh in his face until he broke down wheezing at Inigo advising him to not get involved with a woman.

An ugly, burning little feeling rose in his chest that made him shudder. It wasn’t that he wanted his cousin’s newfound lovelife to fail—he’d seen how happy Owain had been the other night, and while surely part of that was lust and hormones, a significant portion had seemed to be genuine joy. It was just…

It was just that he was jealous.

Why was it when they both found themselves in the same situation—in love with women from their past—that it was Owain who actually had his feelings returned, and by a woman who carried no baggage in a royal title or an imminent death sentence? Why was it that Inigo was stuck pining for a princess who held no love for him and was doomed to fall in less than a year? Which cruel god had decided he had to watch everything he ever wanted play out in front of him with someone else?

He blew out a breath just as a distinctive silhouette caught his eye, and he couldn’t quite stop himself from calling out, “Say’ri?”

“Fie?” came the answer a moment later.

His heart stuttered as she came close enough to the fire for him to see her face, and he leaned further back to try to hide the blush coming to his cheeks.

“Did you need something?” Say’ri asked after a beat.

Inigo thought of another world—a world where he could have crossed the distance between them and slipped his arms around her waist, where he could have called the woman before him his lover or even his wife. Where he carried not Falchion but a simple katana, a world where he never had to lead but still followed Lucina, striding into battle with her smiling back at him and whispering Have faith. I’m by your side, whatever it takes.

“No,” Inigo whispered. “Nothing.”

End of Part 4
Always had a fear of being typical, looking at my body feeling miserable, always hanging on to the visual, I wanna be invisible, looking at my years like a martyrdom, everybody needs to be a part of 'em, never be enough, I'm the prodigal son…

Instead of going to sleep like a reasonable person, Owain decided to single out pebbles that personally offended him by their existence and kick them. There were a great many offensive pebbles.

So intent on the dastardly rocks, in fact, he didn’t notice the figure swiftly approaching until they both went down in a tangle of flailing limbs and poorly muffled yelps.

“...Owain?”

Abruptly, his mouth turned into one of the Plegian deserts. His stomach suddenly twisted itself into having more knots than a warship’s rigging, and the only syllable that managed to escape him was, “Hi.”

Robin cleared her throat, getting to her feet in a careful manner that said she was trying to figure out if she’d actually hurt herself. “What are you doing up? I thought you’d gone to bed.”

“I did,” Owain said with a sigh, propping himself up but not standing just yet. “And then I didn’t. ‘Cause I just… I don’t…” He scrubbed both hands over his face as a massive, shuddering sigh wracked him.

“Hey now,” Robin said softly, her voice closer than before as she squatted down beside him again. “What’s wrong?”

He gave a helpless shrug, irritated at his inability to put his thoughts into words. “I guess I’ve just been out of sorts since we left Steiger,” he finally mumbled.

She blew out a breath, looking chagrined, and straightened back up. “Owain, if I ask you something, do you promise to answer me honestly?”

“Yes…?”
“Just… maybe not here,” Robin said after a beat, then nodded toward the tents around them.

“Right,” Owain said, scrambling to his feet, and tried to ignore the double-time beat of his heart as she wound her way through the sometimes neat, occasionally haphazard lines of the Shepherds’ tents.

When they reached her own, she ignited a candle with such a casual flick of her wrist he was temporarily distracted by a surge of jealousy. A lightweight desk, built for portability, was strewn with papers that had somehow managed to creep their way across the rest of the tent over to her bedroll.

“Your question?” he managed.

Instead of turning to face him, she angled the question over her shoulder. “Does your… out-of-sorts-ness have anything to do with what happened the other night?” she asked.

“Er… no?” Owain said, scratching the back of his neck as he drew a blank. “Not as far as I can see?”

The look she threw back held an edge of surprise that she quickly masked. “Right…” she said, drawing the word out. “Then… what’s really bothering you?”

Once again, he shrugged. “I dunno.”

“Whatever it is, it must be serious if you’ve stopped the lordly speechifying,” she said wryly, turning to face him again, her stiffness starting to fade.

“Yeah,” he answered. “I’ve given up on that. It was starting to irritate even me.”

“Say it isn’t so!” she teased, and he started wondering if he’d imagined her earlier unease.

He sighed. “Well… actually, lots of things are bothering me lately. Heck, I can barely eat! I’ve talked to the physicians, I’ve talked to the healers, and neither can help.” Forlornly, he crossed the room to prop up against her desk, testing it for a moment to make sure it would hold before he leaned on it fully. “They just said I must have picked up an infection or something. Hence why I attempted to go to sleep so early…”

A look of concern crossed over her face, leaving her stepping toward him. “That does sound quite serious…” she murmured. “It’s not to do with you arm, do you think?”

Owain’s eyes went wide. “I hadn’t thought of that… Perhaps I should speak to Tharja next…”

“Well, here. In the meantime, let me at least feel your forehead—”

He straightened up with a cry that came out sounding suspiciously like ‘wargh!’ and scooted down the desk away from her. “No! Please don’t touch me!”

He’d never seen Robin’s face fall like it did in that single moment. “Agh—gods, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have—I just wanted to see if you have a fever—”

Some buried instinct made him make up the distance he’d so suddenly put between them. “Er… yes, but you see, I worry that this illness somehow revolves around… you.”

Her gaze snapped up to his with a suddenness that set his cheeks ablaze. “Owain, I swear to Naga if you’re toying with me right now…”
“I’m not!” Owain insisted. “When I think of you, I find enough strength coursing through me to lift a wyvern! But at the same time, my chest tightens and I can barely breathe!”

Her breath caught, but he could swear he almost heard the clicking of puzzle pieces in her head. What she’d just figured out, he didn’t know. “That sounds… familiar,” she said after a long moment.

“You recognize the symptoms? Please, you have to tell me what disease I have!”

“Er, it’s not a disease, exactly. Although it is serious…” She broke off to cover her suddenly flaming cheeks in her hands. “Oh, this is embarrassing.”

“Embarrassing?” he replied with horror. “I have an embarrassing illness?”

“No, I don’t mean that.” Robin perched on the desk beside him, and Owain wondered if it was so she didn’t have to look him in the eye. “It’s just… not easy to talk about.”

“Robin, if you know something, you have to tell me,” he said gravely.

She glanced over at him again. “You spend a lot of time thinking about me, don’t you? I mean… inordinately.”

Owain blinked. “Yes…” he admitted, drawing out the word.

“And when you do think about me… you feel that tightening in the chest, don’t you? Doesn’t that sound familiar?” She paused to gaze at an expression that still remained painfully blank. “Isn’t that what… love feels like?”

A painfully long eternity passed.

“By the mullet of Ike, I think you’re right!” Owain exclaimed. “Somehow, some way, along the twisting path my fell teacher led me down, my heart became hopelessly ensnared…” A beat went by. “Oh, is that what Inigo kept trying to tell me?”

“And you’re just now figuring this out?” Robin demanded, her voice rising to a level just a little too high to be courteous at this hour of the night. “Not when I bloody kissed you the other night?”

“It was a very distracting kiss!” he defended himself.

She pressed her palms to her eyes. “Do me a favor and just shut up for a second so I can convince myself not to throw something at you because I like your face how it is and I don’t want to wreck it.”

“…You like my face?” he ventured, with a grin slowly creeping over said face.

“I. Kissed. You. Why is that not enough of a hint?” she asked. “By all the gods above…”

“I am a hero of legend, not a reader of minds.”

“This shouldn’t require mind reading!”

Owain bit his lip, pausing before saying, “Well, I can see why you were embarrassed to tell me…”

“Of course I’m embarrassed! Fancy having to tell a man that he’s in love with me. I mean, what if I’d been wrong and you just laughed in my face? I’d have never lived it down! It’s bad enough how it ended the other night—”
“Hey now,” he interrupted softly, touching a hand to her cheek. “While I admit I did put you on the spot there, now that this is all out in the open perhaps we can simply… move forward?”

He felt her cheeks flush a moment before he saw them, giving him a delicious swoop in his stomach. “You’re very lucky I’ve just remembered I find your youthful innocence to be one of your many charms.”

“...You think I’m charming?” he got out in the exact same tone as before, a quiver going through him. “Charming enough to… marry, maybe?”

“Okay, very keen on this ‘moving forward’ thing, are we?” Robin said with an incredulous laugh.

“Apparently I’ve been wasting a lot of time over here,” Owain replied with a grin. When she didn’t answer for a long moment, though, it slipped. “Er… you can say no.”

Robin glanced away, coughing lightly. “I wasn’t… going to say no,” she mumbled, then swiftly added, “More of a ‘maybe.’ It’s just that… goodness, this is all very quick.”

“Indeed,” Owain said, before taking on a lofty tone. “But ‘tis not uncommon for the fires of love to burn hot and swift on the fields of battle, stoked higher by the—”

“Owain.”

“—natural passion of fighting for one’s cause and one’s home—”

“Owaaaaaain.”

“—bringing out the true bonds of not just the kinship of brothers, but that of amorous fancyyyy...”

He trailed off as Robin closed the distance between them, pausing only the barest few inches from his face. Owain went slightly cross-eyed for a moment trying to meet her gaze, then decided it was probably better just to let his eyes fall shut.

At least this time he had enough consciousness left intact to kiss her back.

“Note to self,” she murmured. “When you go off on one of your speeches, this tactic is very effective.”

“I… uh… yeah.” Owain swallowed hard. “So… is that leaning toward a yes?”

She giggled, then repeated, “Maybe. Although if we’re to be wed, you might want to work on recognizing your own emotions.”

“That’s a low blow,” he complained. “But probably achievable.”

“And no more talking like a noble with a thesaurus!” she added sternly. “Got it?”

For a long moment, he gaped at her. “Robin! One cannot ask a hero of my stature to dismiss such a core aspect of his character! Would you ask the rivers to cease their flow? The sun to put aside its shine? The seasons to set away their perienneal turn?”

After a beat, though, the tactician burst out laughing again. “I’m kidding! I’d say sorry, but the look on your face!” When her mirth subsided, she added, “While there are a few times when I could do without the chatter, you wouldn’t be the Owain I know and love without it.”

He paused, then grinned again, his cheeks beginning to ache from the repeated expression.
“What?” Robin asked.

“You love me,” Owain whispered.

“Yeah, I thought I’d made that pretty clear, but apparently someone has a hard time realizing these things—”

“It’s not that,” he interrupted. “It’s that… well… I’ve never really been that close with anyone besides… well, Inigo, and maybe Severa on a good day. I’m weird, and I’m loud, and I never really act like I care what people think—”

“Owain, that’s not—” Robin started.

“It is true,” he interrupted, then reached over to clasp her hand, resting their tangled fingers on her knee. “Let me finish, please?” At her nod, he continued. “During the Plegian War, you… tolerated me, but you never outright dismissed me like some of the others did. Well… not until, you know, the night we left. And to be fair, that was a perfectly understandable reaction, considering how much we’d been hiding from you. But after we came here, it was more even than that. You encouraged stories that others would mock. You let me help with the army when I knew nothing of tactics, when another would have bid me to take my leave and never return. You offered to teach me magic, for Naga’s sake, and I’m pretty sure no one else in this army would touch that with a ten foot pole.” He paused for a moment, traced his thumb over hers, then finished, “Point is, Robin… while it’s only now I can put I name to it, I fell in love with you a long time ago.”

She gave a soft smile, then squeezed his hand. “You know, you’ve come a long way from the Odin Dark who made up stories about learning from ‘mysterious travelers’ to try and hide his origins.”

“Manly travelers,” Owain said with chuckle.

“With hair,” she added, grinning.

“I can’t believe you remember that,” he said with a shake of his head.

“Of course I did—that was quite the impression you made. Not really sure if it was a good one…”

“Oh, ouch, I see how it is.” Despite their teasing words, it seemed neither of them could dim their beaming faces.

“I’ll be honest,” Robin said after a beat. “When I met you, I thought you were a complete idiot.”

“You and the rest of the world. A genius is never appreciated in his own time—nor, it seems, when he returns to the past…”

“Oh, shush,” she said, elbowing him. “Where I’m going with this is that I completely and utterly underestimated you. And then you dared have the audacity to escape from right under my nose.”

“Yeah, I still can’t quite believe I pulled that off,” Owain admitted. “Gaius told us you were furious.”

“Justifiably!” she cried. “I didn’t know who you really were, what you wanted, how you were in the past… hell, I didn’t even know your real name. So yes, I spent two years of my life mad as a hornet trying to find you, only to have you drop back in when I finally stopped and you just… revealed everything. I… honestly didn’t really know how to take it. I channeled my desire to find Odin into proving to myself that Owain would never live up to who I’d built him to be in my head. When we made it here to Valm, I started putting you and Inigo in positions I would have normally
reserved for the most experienced of Shepherds, just to see how you’d handle it. And you never once failed to utterly surpass my expectations.” Robin glanced away, then finished, “Except one.”

Owain’s expression shifted from visibly flattered to quietly on-edge. “And what would that be?”

“Odin was a mystery,” she said softly. “Owain was a man.”

“Oh,” he breathed.

“And one quiet, winter’s afternoon… I realized he was a man who I wanted very much.” After a slight pause, she squeezed his hand again before letting go and getting to her feet. “Listen, Owain, before this goes any further, there’s some things you should know. About me, about my past… and about Validar.”

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The moon hung heavy and full in the sky as Owain finally left Robin’s tent, his thoughts swirling. The tactician had told him so many details he could hardly keep them straight—her doppleganger, a Plegian hierophant who also went by the name of Robin; Validar appearing in her dreams on Carrion Isle and claiming to be her father; Tiki’s warnings that Grima, in his slumber, was still growing stronger.

It had been a far cry from how the night had started, but it hadn’t quite dampened the bounce in his step. They could cross those metaphorical bridges and deal with secret twins and foreboding father figures later; for the moment he was light and happy and in love.

To Owain’s surprise, when he slipped back toward his own tent he found Inigo hadn’t yet gone back to sleep yet either, and worried for a moment about the potential amount of tea his cousin had consumed in that length of time. “Guess what Inigo?” he said, stopping in front of the log Inigo still occupied and barely keeping from vibrating.

Inigo merely lifted his gaze in a silent ‘go on,’ mug still held to his lips.

“I’m not sick!”

“That’s excellent, Owain,” Inigo replied in a monotone that bordered on disinterested.

“I’m engaged!”

Owain realized, belatedly, that he probably should have thought of a better, more delicate way to phrase that—unfortunately only after he had an entire mouthful of Inigo’s tea sprayed down the front of his shirt.

“YOU’RE WHAT?”
Inigo makes an educated guess that starts a new mission.

This was ridiculous.

No, Inigo thought, it was more than ridiculous. It was… ludicrous. Insane. Impossible. There was no possible timeline, dimension, or universe in which Owain should have gotten engaged to be married before Inigo did.

*I’m dreaming,* he told himself. *I dozed off and this is a tea-induced hallucination.*

Despite that desperate thought, Owain was still chattering on about the events of the past hour or so with words Inigo’s subconscious never could have come up with, though at that moment they meant little more than the babbling of the brook nearby. “I need some air,” he finally half-gasped, cutting his cousin off. Leaving Owain hanging mid-sentence, he pushed himself to his feet and did nothing short of flee.

Regret slithered over him a few minutes later, when he realized he’d gotten much too far from camp already. As far as they knew, Yen’fay’s army was still far ahead of them, but that didn’t mean there was no risk of ambush from another faction of the Imperial Army, or even Risen. With a shuddering breath, Inigo turned back on his heel.

*What was that all about?* he asked himself as his head started to clear. Owain had just dropped what was likely to amount to some of the happiest news of his life on him and Inigo had responded by turning tail and bolting.

*Jealous,* simpered the little voice from earlier.

*Shut up,* Inigo wanted to tell it, even knowing that telling his own brain to be quiet wouldn’t accomplish anything.

What did it matter, anyway? Just because Inigo had made the choice to sacrifice any chance with Say’ri for the sake of their cause didn’t mean Owain had to do the same with Robin. Every one of them that had returned to the past had done so of their own accord and for their own reasons; if Owain wanted to tie himself to this time in such an intimate way, that was his prerogative and his alone. Naga had even told them there would likely be no returning to their own time when their mission was done, and since their timeline’s Robin had never married anyway, it wasn’t like Owain was inserting himself into established events or undoing anyone’s existence.

No, Inigo thought. His protest of this was nothing but personal.

He blew out a breath as he plodded back toward the camp, wondering when he’d become so disgustingly selfish. An apology was the very least he owed his cousin.

With ‘sorry’ already bubbling on his lips, he nudged open their tent flap, only to find the space dark and silent. He blinked, willing his eyes to adjust to the lack of light—and found one bedroll where there should have been two.
He went back to Robin, Inigo realized, heart sinking down to his toes.

And entirely different kind of jealousy washed over him as he curled up in the too-quiet tent, waiting for exhaustion to claim him.

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Word spread fast, as it usually did whenever a pair of Shepherds decided their bonds surpassed those of comrades in arms. When Virion had proposed to Cherche last fall, the entire camp had known within the hour. Inigo was surprised it took almost two full days before he heard the news secondhand this time, especially considering one half of the current equation consisted of Owain. Doubly so with the fact he hadn’t seen either of the two without the other close at hand for the entirety of those two days.

For the first time in he couldn’t remember how many years, Inigo had sleeping quarters to himself. He hadn’t yet gotten over how odd it was.

Considering he hadn’t yet managed to see Owain alone yet, he hadn’t had the chance to apologize for his initial reaction. In fact, his cousin hadn’t even spoken to him directly outside of the previous day’s war council—where he’d taken the seat to Robin’s right instead of his usual place at Inigo’s left—and the fact left a sour feeling hanging over Inigo’s entire manner.

The sudden vacancy left in Owain’s absence, at least, had given Inigo time to work out another matter.

To his surprise, when he found himself at his father’s tent it was occupied not just by Chrom, but Say’ri and Robin as well. Despite Chrom’s permission to entire, Inigo hesitated in the doorway, realizing he’d probably interrupted something important.

“Come in, Inigo,” Chrom prompted again, and his son straightened up. “What is it?”

Clearing his throat, Inigo put on a formal tone, trying to focus solely on his father and ignore the gazes of the two women. “We’ll be entering the territory formerly held by the dukedom of Rosanne tomorrow,” he said.

“Quite,” Chrom said. “What of it?”

Clasping his hands behind his back, Inigo said, “Permission for myself and a handful of others to take a short leave from the army and catch up again in a week or so.”

“Permission denied,” Chrom said without missing a beat. Inigo faltered. “At least if that’s the only information you plan on giving me.”

Blowing out a breath, Inigo paused to compose his words. “I’ve… well, I have a hunch that another of our future company may be near. Without Laurent’s map, we can’t know for certain, but… well, if Gerome were to be anywhere, it would be Wyvern Valley, a two days’ march east of here. Since we’re so near, we thought to take a short scouting mission to see if we could locate him.”

“Owain hasn’t mentioned any such mission to me,” Robin said, the flat statement holding a questioning tone.
“We, ah…” Inigo broke off to rub at the back of his neck. “We hadn’t exactly told him yet.”

“I see,” Chrom said after a beat, then surprised him with a slight chuckle. “I would not be eager to step in the middle of that either, were I you.” His words left Robin ducking her head, her face coloring and a half-embarrassed smile coming to her lips. “Who did you plan on bringing, Inigo?”

“Severa, Brady, Cynthia—and myself, of course,” Inigo answered promptly. He’d spoken with all of them about it the day prior, and to his surprise it had been Severa who brought up leaving Owain out of the loop. He’d been grateful he didn’t have to be the one to point out dragging his lovesick cousin along probably wouldn’t be pleasant for anyone.

Now, though, a shadow crossed Chrom’s face. “That’s an awfully small group, should you run into trouble.”

“With all due respect, Father, we weren’t planning on finding trouble; and even if we do, we ran companies like this all the time in the future. We know what we’re doing. Besides, Brady’s a healer.”

“This isn’t your future, Inigo,” Chrom pointed out. “What it is is the thick of enemy territory. I’ve no doubt of your abilities against Risen or small pockets of the Imperial army, but if you were to stumble across one of the dynasts’ forces…”

A moment passed before Inigo could answer that, and as the words rose to his lips another voice interrupted. “If that’s what you fear, Lord Chrom, then I shall join them.”

Inigo froze.

“Say’ri, you’re needed here,” Chrom pointed out.

“Fie, but if you can’t spare me for a week, I fear for the state of your Shepherds,” Say’ri replied. “Besides, we ken not how Rosanne fares after Lord Virion took his leave; ‘twould be a boon to find out firsthand if they truly stand with Walhart or if they merely put on a front of devotion. In addition, should we cross one of the dynasts I may be able to speak sense to them.”

After a moment, Robin sighed. “She’s got a point, Chrom.”

Chrom nodded. “Very well. Inigo—lay low, keep quiet, and come back in one piece.”

“Aye, I’ll make sure of that,” Say’ri said, then turned back to Inigo. “When do we leave?”

It took a second for him to unstick his tongue from the roof of his mouth. “Tonight.”

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At least, Inigo thought to himself, a horse was always there for you when your entire world fell to pieces.

He’d barely seen Scottie since he’d loaded the big gelding on the ship to Valm, and being back astride his ebony mount after so long apart was an achingly familiar comfort when everything else in his life seemed to have turned upside down. Severa, too, had gone back to Studlee, while Brady had brought Ada in Owain’s absence. Cynthia, of course, had her pegasus, and Say’ri had laid
They rode over the Rosanne border only by the light of the moon, aiming for stealth over force, but despite that every one of them was armed and prepared for the worst. Even Brady had brought a set of throwing axes in addition to his usual collection of staves. It was just one more thing that had changed in the last few months.

It was nearly dawn when they stopped, setting up camp in a particularly secluded wood. Not that ‘setting up’ took long—they hadn’t brought tents nor were they risking a fire, leaving them only to tie their horses, lay out sleeping bags, and settle down for cold rations.

“This is…” Cynthia interrupted herself with a yawn, flopping to the ground beside Brady and leaning her head on the priest’s shoulder, “…super exciting.”

“Yeah, you sure sound excited,” Inigo teased, only to break off as Brady chuckled and wrapped an arm around the pegasus knight’s shoulders. “Um, hang on. Guys? Since when is this a thing?” he asked, raising his brows at the sudden display of affection.

“Gawds, don’t tell me you didn’t know,” Severa said with a roll of her eyes.

“No…?”

Severa lifted her gaze, as if she were praying to Naga to keep from hitting him. “You are so freaking dense,” she finally sighed. “They’ve been together since… like… before the Mila Tree, and you’re just noticing now?”

“What?” Inigo exclaimed, looking back over to find matching blushes on Brady and Cynthia’s faces. “Wait, why?”

Severa did hit him that time, reaching over to smack the back of his head. “Inigo! You can’t just ask people why they’re dating!”

“Well excuse me for being surprised!” Inigo cried, trying to duck away from her assault and only narrowly avoiding ending up half-sprawled in Say’ri’s lap on the other side instead. Feeling his face heat up all the way to the tips of his ears, he picked up his meal and scooted away until he was a safe distance from both of them. Turning back to Brady and Cynthia, he continued, “You guys hardly ever spent time together in the future!”

“Yeah, well, we spent an entire year together before you guys got around to showing up!” Cynthia shot back. “Stuff happens, Inigo!”

“No colorful comments of yers needed, neither,” Brady added quickly.

Inigo snapped his fingers in mock disappointment and settled back into eating. “Way too many people are getting married right now.”

Say’ri made a soft, derisive sound that might’ve been a snort. Inigo paused mid-chew with a distinctive feeling that the insulting subtext of that quiet noise had been directed toward him.

“Hey now, nobody said nothin’ ‘bout marriage yet,” said Brady. “Unlike a certain somebody we all know ‘n tolerate, not everybody wants t’ get engaged right off the bat.”

“Of all the words in Owain’s admittedly vast vocabulary, I don’t think patience is one of them,” Inigo agreed. He expected at least one vehement agreement from behind him, and when he didn’t get one he glanced back to find the spot Severa had been occupying now laid empty. “Hey,
where’s Sev go?”

“Did she not take first watch?” Say’ri asked.

“No, that was supposed to be me,” Inigo replied. With a sigh he stood, dusting the last remaining crumbs from his clothing. “I’ll go find her.” With a grin, he added, “Brady, Cynthia, don’t do anything I wouldn’t.”

“That’s not a long list!” Cynthia cried toward his back.

“Exactly, I’m not your mother!” he called back. Chuckling at his own humor, he set about scanning the woods.

It took him a surprisingly long while to locate Severa, and had he not caught the flash of ginger hair through the trees it would have taken even longer.

“What are you doing out alone in the cold?”

The redhead let out a huff that sounded suspiciously wet. “I’m not in the mood for your idiocy, it’s probably contagious.”

He let her familiar barbed words roll off him. “Now, is that any way to treat your dear old friend Inigo?” he inquired, stopping beside her. “What’s the matter?”

“I’m fine, you dolt,” Severa replied, despite the fact that she ducked her head in a discreet attempt to wipe her eyes on her sleeves.

With a shrug, Inigo dropped down to settle cross-legged. “Well, if you’re so fine, you won’t mind me joining you in our mutual fine-ness.”

Her lip curled, but to his surprise she didn’t shoot back a retort. Instead, after a moment, she let out a soft sigh. “We’ve all… changed so much, these past few years.”

“Indeed,” Inigo replied quietly. “Quite frankly, I never really expected to live long enough to see the end of my second decade.”

“Neither did I,” Severa admitted. “But now we’re all… here.”

He had a feeling she meant the metaphorical over the literal.

“And… like… Owain’s getting married.”

“Certainly one of the most deeply surprising aspects of our lives in this timeline,” Inigo said dryly. “But I suppose there’s no accounting for taste.”

Severa looked up this time, eyes closed against the coming dawn, arms curled around her knees. “I mean… I always figured someday he’d grow up and realize women existed.”

Inigo had thought along the same lines, himself—but his friend’s next words were so quiet he very nearly missed them.

“I guess I always just thought it would be me.”

His breath hitched before escaping his lungs in a rush as the realization abruptly sank in of why it seemed Severa’s emotions on the matter had seemed to mirror his own so closely… although, it seemed for an entirely different reason. “Oh, Severa…” he murmured.
A humorless chuckle escaped her. “If you ever so much as breathe a hint you just heard me say that, I’ll make sure they never, ever find your body,” she said, and her tone only seemed to have half-joking.

“Duly noted,” Inigo replied softly. “But… why didn’t you ever say anything?”

Severa scoffed. “I know this is a hard concept for you to wrap your head around, Inigo, but there’s only so much you can do when someone doesn’t love you back.”

“It’s not as foreign an idea to me as you might think,” he answered.

Several moments passed in silence. “I’m happy for him,” Severa finally said.

“Me too,” said Inigo. In an exchange of only six words, they might as well have spoken a thousand for all the subtext that came across.

There they sat, a peaceful quiet stretching out between two people who had spent so much of their lives together they didn’t need to fill it. “We should head back,” Severa finally whispered.

“Yeah,” Inigo said.

“Do you suppose we’ll find Gerome?” she asked.

He shrugged, then answered, “I honestly don’t know. But it’d be remiss of me not to even try.”
Chapter Summary

The search for Gerome comes to fruition.

Two days later, Inigo was beginning to regret his trying.

They had arrived in Wyvern Valley in the wee hours of the previous morning, thanks to the punishing pace both he and Say’ri had insisted on to ensure they were away from the rest of the Shepherds for as little time as possible. They’d caught what sleep they could with the threat of roaming, feral reptiles, and ventured to the nearby village that afternoon to see what information they could scrounge up.

Eventually, thanks to Inigo’s description—tall, brooding, probably wearing a lot of black and a mask—they’d found a lead with one of the village elders. Against all odds, Inigo’s hunch had been right.

Gerome was here.

Mid-morning on their fourth day in Rosanne, here turned out to be far from what Inigo had been expecting. In the midst of a craggy, mountain landscape patched together by wood-and-rope bridges he really hadn’t enjoyed crossing, a slate and wood house sat nestled into the cliffside. It looked, for all intents and purposes, to be a quiet family home—even sporting a nondescript white picket fence.

In fact, if it hadn’t been for the familiar wyvern sleeping at the front door, Inigo would have been certain they’d gotten the directions wrong.

Said wyvern got to her feet when they neared, hackles raised and teeth snapping. Everyone but Cynthia had left their mounts behind, and the pegasus knight hung back, wary of provoking the great beast any further.

Inigo, on the other hand, signaled the rest of their company to a halt, stepping forward despite the trembling in his legs. “Easy, Minerva,” he said softly, arms outstretched in a gesture of peace he hoped she’d recognize. “You remember me, don’t you? I know it’s been a while…”

Minerva stomped closer, the smell of meat hot on her breath making him nearly gag. Her giant eyes met his from far too close.

Gods, he’d forgotten how massive her teeth were...

A low growl rose in her throat; for a terrible moment, Inigo was afraid he’d gotten this all horrendously wrong and the tale of his life would end with him becoming wyvern food.

A second later, though, the great beast dropped to her side, tail thumping as her lips widened in a draconic grin, her growl transforming into a croon. Inigo let out the breath he’d been holding and obliged her with a scratch, glancing back to the others.

Say’ri was the first to speak. “Zounds, Inigo, but for a moment I was certain she was about to
“Yeah, actually, so was I,” Inigo replied with a weak laugh, continuing to run his hand over Minerva’s jaw. “Thank Naga she always did like me more than her rider did.”

“Um, guys?” Cynthia interrupted, reining her mount in closer as she shielded her eyes. “There’s… I see smoke to the north.”

Inigo’s head snapped up, confirming the sight with his own eyes. “Trouble always does find us, doesn’t it? Take Brady with you, in case they need a healer.”

“Hey, I’m going too,” Severa put in. “Might be the Imperials.”

“Are you saying you don’t think I can handle them?” Cynthia asked, her voice rising.

“I’m saying I—”

“Naga, all of you go, then,” Inigo cut in. “I’ll talk to Gerome and catch up.” Without waiting for a reply, he gave Minerva one final pat and started up the hill.

To his chagrin, another set of footsteps followed.

“I thought I told all of you to go,” he said flatly, without turning around.

“Aye, that you did. On the other side, I have orders from your father to keep you in once piece.”

Inigo sighed and decided it wasn’t worth the argument, only muttering under his breath, “On the other hand.”

“Pardon?” Say’ri said.

He sighed. “It’s ‘on the other hand’ in Ylisse.”

“Is it?” she asked. “The translation to mine own tongue would be marginally less literal.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” he replied, stepping up on the porch and rapping his knuckles against the heavy wooden door.

A painfully long time passed before it opened—he’d even shot Say’ri a somewhat pleading look before the lock clicked.

Inigo had to blink against the dark of the interior, made worse by the all black wardrobe of the figure in the doorway. Only a pale, unfamiliar face stood out, leaving Inigo wondering again if he’d screwed up their location.

Several beats passed while they both stared each other down until the wrongness of the stranger kicked in.

Gerome wasn’t wearing his mask.

His old compatriot curled his lip as he looked Inigo up and down for another moment, a final, flat “No,” escaping his lips before he shut the door again.

Inigo stared blankly at the block of wood in front of his face, then raised his hand to pound on it again. “Dammit, Gerome, I’ve been riding for three straight days, I haven’t had a real meal, taken a bath, or slept in a tent in that length of time, and I swear if you don’t open this Naga-forsaken door
I’m going to break it down!”

He was starting to think he’d have to actually make good on that threat when Gerome reappeared, his mask firmly and unsurprisingly back in place. “What are you doing here?” the wyvern rider asked flatly.

“Oh, nothing much, was just in the area and I thought I’d drop by,” Inigo replied deadpan. “We’re here looking for you, genius.”

Gerome crossed his arms over his chest, disdain apparent in his voice even if Inigo couldn’t see it on his face. “You should not have come.”

“Yeah, I’m beginning to see that now, but since I’ve already wasted my time getting here the least you can do is let me in.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“What isn’t?” Inigo snapped.

“It isn’t the least I can do. The least I can do is nothing. And I’ve no intention of whiling away my valuable hours with a vapid male floozy.”

A beat passed. “You know, I honestly haven’t the slightest clue how my sister could stand you,” Inigo said flatly.

A delicate cough sounded from behind him and he nearly jumped at the reminder that Say’ri was still there. “Pardon my intrusion, but it seems we have had a poor start here. I am Say’ri of Chon’sin, and I am here with Inigo on the orders of Lord Chrom to see if you will join your cause with ours.”

Inigo resisted the urge to groan, knowing her wording would only make the matter worse.

“Is that so,” Gerome said flatly, before looking back to Inigo. “You know full well I have no cause and I’ll not join your ridiculous fight. No man can stop fate. Death will always have its due.”

Inigo let out a soft huff, eyes dropping momentarily to the familiar axe hanging from Gerome’s hip, then shook his head. “Fine, then. I’ll not force your hand; remain if you wish. Come, Say’ri, let’s join the others.”

He turned back toward the porch stairs—however, instead of moving toward them, he took a broad step sideways, placing himself a good length away from Say’ri before he spoke again.

“I should have known he would be too craven to join us.”

Had Gerome’s roar been his only warning, the axe would have been Inigo’s end. Had he not stepped away from Say’ri, Falchion’s retaliating arc would have torn her in half. As it was, axe met sword with a resounding clang, both holding the block, resolute.

“What will you do, Gerome?” Inigo asked, echoing from long ago as he faced down the wyvern rider once more. “Will you strike me?”

Gerome realized it, too. “You would use my own words to mock me?”

Instead of answering, Inigo shot a look to the side. “Stay your hand, Say’ri.” He broke the block, letting Falchion fall back to his side as Gerome’s axe dropped just as harmlessly. “Let him answer
for assaulting his Exalt.”

“I swore my fealty to Lucina,” Gerome spat. “Never to you.”

“And what would she say to see you now?” Inigo shot back. “I dread to think of her reaction to the fact that you would rather bow your head in cowardice than carry on the battle she fought and died for!”

Gerome’s axe returned to its spot on his hip. “I see you have not changed in the slightest, but perhaps your sad semblance for authority going to your head. At least the Inigo I once knew would never have dared order the Queen of Chon’sin to stay her hand.”

“The Gerome I knew probably still would have struck me in the back. Why do you think I was ready for it?” Inigo lifted his chin, about to continue when a shout of his name drew his attention.

“Inigo, we’ve got trouble!” Cynthia called, now alone on her pegasus. “Brigands to the north! They’re capturing the wyverns and killing the villagers—Severa and Brady are trying to hold them off but we need help!”

Inigo shot one final look at Gerome. “We won’t be coming back. Join us or don’t.” With that, he strode toward Cynthia, Say’ri on his heels.

Gerome watched them for a long moment, finally murmuring, “It is a fool who breaks himself against fate’s tide.” He sighed. “That said, I suppose I’m as big a fool as any… Come, my dear Minerva. For Lucina.”

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“That was incredibly foolish.”

“I know,” Inigo sighed. “He tends to bring that out in me.”

“He nearly caved your head in!” Say’ri exclaimed.

“I did tell you Gerome and I were never exactly the closest of friends,” Inigo defended himself, staring deliberately forward toward where Cynthia’s pegasus was rapidly diminishing into a white blur on the horizon. It was far easier than glancing toward the princess flanking him.

“Aye, and I expected you meant he would be of the like to snap at you as Severa does, not that you intended to deliberately provoke him unto the point of nigh killing you!”

“Spare me the lecture, Say’ri, I knew what I was doing,” he replied, ignoring the unsettled turn in his stomach as they strode for the nearest bridge. It reminded him far too much of another cavern on the Plegian border from so long ago, and he wondered briefly if Owain—who had seemed to take that event even more to heart than Inigo had—would have even stepped foot on it if he’d been with them.

The first board creaked under his foot. He tried not to think about how easy it had been to tear down another bridge in another lifetime.

Just behind him, Say’ri breathed out a snort. “Sometimes I forget you truly are the arrogant dastard
Inigo managed to bark a laugh and ignore the way her words stabbed right at his heart. “My, I didn’t know you were capable of such uncouthness, milady—gods!”

The last word tore from his throat in a scream, a rotten board snapping beneath his weight and leaving half his body suddenly supported by nothing but air. The ground below—far below—blurred together in a dizzying swirl of colors as he flailed for any remaining purchase on the far-too-unsteady bridge.

Only a single terrifying instant passed, though, before Say’ri’s hands caught him under the shoulders and hauled him out of the hole he’d inadvertently made. His feet hit relatively solid ground again, but the bridge’s protesting tremors to his struggle had his knees buckling immediately—only a mad, unthinking grab for her waist kept him upright.

“Fie, but you are making this ‘keeping you in one piece’ business remarkably difficult,” Say’ri said, but the hint of a tremble in her voice and the sudden glazed look in her eyes belied the lightness of her words.

Inigo was much too focused on making sure the contents of his stomach remained in his stomach to think of a comeback for that. A shaky laugh escaped him when he finally swallowed back the bitter tang in his throat, and the motion only left him acutely aware that his chest was pressing tight against hers with his every heaving breath.

Dear Naga, not again, he thought to himself, trying to wrestle back under control the part of his mind that told him to drag her even closer. He failed spectacularly, his arms tightening their grip of their own accord for reasons that had nothing to do with the fact she was the only thing keeping him on his feet.

Let go, chided one of the last reasonable fragments left in his head, only for his gaze to drop to her lips at the exact moment he needed to to catch the slightest flash of her teeth dragging over the lower one, and now he didn’t think he was breathing at all.

Don’t —

Her head tilted to one side, no more than half an inch, but gods how could she expect him to take that as anything other than an invite? Had it been any other woman he’d have already closed what little distance remained between them and been caught up in that passionate dance of lips as old as time itself—

Except he wouldn’t have, Inigo realized, because he’d long ago stopped pining for any woman but the one he was half a second away from kissing right then and there.

One agonizing moment passed, then another, as he waited for her to shove him away in disgust, to mock the heated look in his gaze and remind him she was far from being one of his simpering conquests, but none of it came.

What did was a none-too-distant flap of wings and a shout. “Come swiftly,” Gerome called from the far side of the bridge, atop his wyvern’s shoulders. “Minerva can carry you both, but I’ll not have you keep her waiting.”

Inigo swallowed hard, loosening his grip as he should have far before now, unsure if he wanted to laugh or cry.
Chapter Summary

In which Inigo has terrible coping mechanisms.

By lunchtime, the wyvern-thieving bandits were soundly defeated by the six of them. By
dinnertime, said six were crammed into a booth meant for four in one of the local taverns, leaving
Inigo wondering what sort of miracle he’d managed to pull off that Gerome hadn’t gone sauntering
back to his cabin never to speak with them again.

At the moment, it hardly mattered—as the villagers’ thanks, ale flowed more freely than Inigo
could have asked for, a welcome distraction from what had so nearly transpired earlier. Even if he
was in far closer proximity to both Gerome and Severa than he had ever wanted to be. It seemed
Brady and Cynthia were the only ones not complaining about the seating.

“—and then,” Cynthia was saying, laughing so hard tears were beginning to gather in the corners
of her eyes, “the goat gets him! Blam! Right in the head!” She dissolved into another fit of giggles,
leaning half on top of Brady in an attempt to keep herself remotely upright.

“It seemed like a good idea at th’ time!” the priest defended himself, trying to nudge his girlfriend
into a more stable positioning.

Say’ri—who was currently the only one besides the completely sober Gerome who was not on at
least their second drink—edged a little further away from the couple, then put in softly, “Aye, ‘tis
amazing what seems sound in the heat of the moment.”

The way her gaze ever-so-slightly flicked to Inigo—so subtle he doubted any of the others would
notice—told him exactly what she meant by that.

Heat of the moment, he repeated internally, the words carrying a sharp, bitter edge. So she means it
was the only the ‘heat of the moment’ that kept her from shoving me right back down that hole.

With a dark, muttered “Ha,” he tilted his head back and drained his glass. What had moments ago
been a pleasant, alcohol-induced fog on the fringes of his consciousness had suddenly turned into a
damp blanket of poor decisions he would almost certainly regret in the morning. Pushing that
thought firmly aside, he waved down the nearest serving girl. “Bring us another, would you, love?”
he said with a smile that practically oozed charm, if he said so himself. He’d spent many hours
practicing, after all.

All three women at his table shot him the exact same look and he ignored every one of them. If
Say’ri wanted to be so frigid to him, he’d give her a reason to be. Maybe she’d stop associating
with him entirely. Maybe he could stop worrying about the way she played his heartstrings with
the slightest possible glance. Maybe he’d stop being so intensely jealous of Owain if his own
happiness wasn’t dangling so tantalizing near to him.

Maybe this was all just the drink talking and he should give up and go to bed before he screwed up
everything yet again.
With that last reasonable thought shoved away, Inigo shot a wink to the returning serving girl. “Excuse me, darling,” he said, lightly touching her wrist when she set his drink down. “I think you’ve something in your eye.” He paused a bit, then grinned again. “Oh, never mind, it’s just a sparkle.”

After a shocked beat, the girl jerked her hand away and wordlessly turned away. Severa, meanwhile, shot Inigo a glare that could curdle milk.

It was only twenty minutes later, on his third girl of the night when his question of when she got off her shift was met with a scalding “Past your bedtime,” that Say’ri set her long-empty glass on the table with a little too much force and wordlessly got to her feet.

“What’s the matter, sweetheart?” he found himself calling after her. “Not feeling neglected, are we?”

The princess spun back with a look so scathing he could almost feel the sting of it. “Not nearly as neglected as your good sense,” she replied. “I am retiring to my bed, whilst you continue your search for someone vapid enough to join you in yours.” With that, she headed for the staircase leading to their rented rooms.

...Yup. Screwed everything up, again, Inigo thought to himself, about to blow out a sigh when Severa rolled her eyes in his direction for the umpteenth time that night.

“You. Complete. Idiot,” she muttered, before she got to her feet as well. “Come on, Cynthia. Say’ri’s got the right idea.”

“Huh?” the pegasus knight asked, before comprehension dawned. “Oh, yeah. Sleep sounds good. Brady?”

“Yeah. Good plan, Cyn.” Brady, meanwhile, lingered for a moment after the girls disappeared. “You two better not kill each other, or I’ll make sure Ma slaps ya both into next week, aright?”

Gerome acknowledged that with a muffled snort; Inigo, a mocking salute.

“Sooooo…” the latter said after a long moment, aware he’d imbibed to the point of his tongue growing much too loose but also to the point he was too flippant to care. “Since you’ve not gone sulking back to your cottage—lovely place, by the way, big fan of the decor—am I to take that to infer you plan on joining us after all?”

Gerome might have given him a sidelong glance, but it was hard to tell with the mask.

“All right, fine, don’t answer. I just thought you’d want to know that I’m sure Minerva will miss me if you stay.” Inigo paused. “By the way, considering I was under the impression you came to the past for the sole purpose of setting her free, I was rather surprised to see her.”

Another long moment passed before Gerome grunted, muttering something he couldn’t make out.

“You’ll have to speak up, Gerome old buddy. It’s getting a bit rowdy in here.”

This time Inigo definitely got a glare. “I am not, have never been, and never will be your ‘old buddy,’” the wyvern rider said flatly. “And I said she would not go.”

“Really?” Inigo asked, lifting his brows in genuine surprise.

A soft exhale. “Indeed. She refused to depart when I released her. And so she has remained with
“That’s actually kind of adorable,” Inigo said. “I mean, all on her part, not yours. Although I’m actually pretty impressed that even that didn’t manage to melt your heart of stone, Mr. I’m-Too-Good-For-Everyone-Else.”

Gerome snorted. “Better a heart full of stone than a head full of dirt.”

With a frustrated huff, Inigo said, “That does it! You’re coming with me!”

“I am most certainly—Now see here! Unhand me!” Gerome cried as Inigo grabbed for his arm and hauled him from the booth. “If you wish to settle our score, then do so with your blade! I’ll not be dragged about like one of your insipid—”

“Nope, not the plan at all,” Inigo replied. “Sure, a couple hours ago we might have been trying to kill each other, but that was the past. We’re surely older and wiser now.”

“I highly doubt that—and where do you think you’re taking me?” Gerome demanded.

“Gerome, my friend slash enemy slash rival slash acquaintance I slightly tolerate… You and I are going to find some ladies!”

“We are doing no such thing!”

“Oh, yes we are! Me, because… well, now, it’s me, let’s be honest, I can’t contain my charm. And you, because dear Naga you need to lighten up for a minute. So, for tonight I shall generously put aside our great many grievances while we find some lovelies and be each other’s wingman.” Inigo hadn’t slowed as he weaved through the room toward the bar. “Now stop moaning and keep up!”

“Fate stalks my every step, fool! I’ve not time for such lunacy!”

“Look, if you’re that afraid that I’ll get all the girls, you can just say so,” Inigo told him nonchalantly.

“I fear nothing but the cold hand of death!” Gerome exclaimed.

“Great! Then let’s get going!”

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“It’s really a shame we need boys to repopulate the human race, because if it were up to me I’d just do away with all of them.”

Across the room, Say’ri snorted. Cynthia, meanwhile, had curled into a ball with her face smashed into her pillow, and as such offered no comment but a particularly loud snore.

“I mean, really,” Severa continued, sitting cross-legged on her own bed and beginning to run a brush through the wet, tangled mess her hair always was after she washed it. “Sometimes I really just can’t wrap my mind around what must float through their brains.”

“Aye,” Say’ri agreed, then paused to pat her face with a towel. “Tis a thought I must imagine runs through all heads at some point or another about the opposite sex.”
“I honestly forgot how terrible Inigo and Gerome were,” Severa said with a sigh, wincing as her brush hit a particularly nasty knot. “They’d usually tone it down when Lucina was around, but when she wasn’t… Our last few days in the future were basically just one extended argument between them.”

“I can see it,” the princess replied with a slight chuckle.

They fell silent for several minutes, with only Cynthia’s heavy breathing and occasional sleep-mumble the only sounds in the room. Severa’s fingers worked quickly and automatically, pinning her red locks into a series of braids.

“‘Tis a pretty thing you’ve done with your hair,” Say’ri commented when she’d finished.

“Oh, thanks,” Severa replied, tossing the braid over her shoulder. “It would be a rat’s nest in the morning if I didn’t, but I wasn’t going to pass up a real bath.” A beat passed before she held out her brush. “I could, uh, do yours. If you wanted, I mean. Well, obviously I wouldn’t if you didn’t want —”

“Peace, Severa,” Say’ri interjected. “We are allies. There is no need to trip over yourself in an attempt to avoid offense. Besides, I do not think that’s your usual… shall we say, style?”

“Not really, no. The opposite, actually,” Severa replied dryly.

“So I thought. I’d like if you would, anyway.”

Severa gestured the other woman over to sit in front of her and started her work, falling silent once more.

“What was he like, in your future?” Say’ri asked softly. “Inigo?”

Severa paused for a beat, taken aback by the line of questioning. “Pretty much exactly the same as he is now, honestly,” she said after a moment. “You know, a dithering idiot.” Her tone held a fondness that belied her words. “If anything… a little more carefree. Flippant. There’s a big difference between being the crown prince and actually being the Exalt, I suppose.” She shrugged. “He’s been coming on to every woman that moves since he figured out there was a difference between men and women, if that’s what you’re asking. Yet despite all that practice he’s still hilariously and obnoxiously bad at it.”

Say’ri didn’t answer for a long moment, as if processing that, so Severa continued.

“You know why he does it, right?”

“Nay?”

Severa chuckled from an errant memory of a young Inigo peering at her from behind Olivia’s skirts. “When we were kids, he was terribly, painlessly shy. I mean agonizingly so. Still is, actually, if you can catch him off-guard and see past the bluster. Well, you can’t have a crown prince that’s so timid he can’t even talk to people he doesn’t know, so it started as a way for him to be comfortable chatting with strangers. Then it… I dunno, it turned into his weird little coping mechanism that he just automatically falls back on when he doesn’t know what else to do.” She paused, then added, quieter, “Gods know all of us kids have one or another.”

“What do you mean?”

“C’mon, you know. Inigo flirts. Owain’s got his swordhand deal. I’m the ice queen. Cynthia has
her justice spiel, Brady acts like a thug, Gerome has all his… Gerome-ness.” She barked a humorless laugh that came with the realization she wouldn’t have said any of this if she were sober. “Sure, we might’ve gotten out alive, but Grima broke all of us one way or another.”

“I apologize,” Say’ri said quietly. “I didn’t mean to bring up—”

“No, don’t worry about it,” Severa said, finishing the princess’s hair with a flourish. “Look, you said I could be frank with you?”

“Indeed, please do.”

“All right. He’ll kill me if he finds out I told you this, but what he doesn’t know won’t hurt him. If this does get back to him, though, I will deny involvement until my dying breath, okay?” Severa said. “I’m just getting tired of watching the back and forth, it gets old after a while.”

“Speak plainly, then, and come out with it,” Say’ri told her, twisting to face her.

“Inigo’s in love with you.”

A beat passed. “Aye, I’m sure,” Say’ri said dryly, an unreadable flicker crossing her eyes. “As he is with any other woman who crosses his path for more than an instant.”

Severa shook her head. “No, that’s the exact opposite of what I’m saying.” She adjusted her positioning a little, clasping her hands together over her crossed legs. “Listen. I’ve known Inigo literally my entire life. He thinks he’s being subtle but he’s really not, because I have never once seen him act around a woman the way he does around you.”

The Chon’sinian princess didn’t answer that, merely glanced away.

“Look, I’m not trying to put you on the spot or anything. Just thought you should know. Although I will totally say you’re probably going to have to be a little less subtle about telling him off, because he really doesn’t get hints.”

“Nay,” Say’ri said after a long moment. “I fear you’re mistaken, Severa.” She paused, then added in a quieter tone, “‘Twas him, in fact, who turned me down.”

“...Wait, what?” Severa asked, blinking. “Turned you—huh?”

“There was discussion—facilitated by Lady Olivia, though approved, of course, by Lord Chrom—of arranging a marriage between us. When I mentioned such negotiations to him, however, Inigo rejected the prospect immediately.”

Severa felt her mouth fall open but couldn’t quite stop it. “You—you asked him to marry you?” she demanded. “And he didn’t… I don’t know, just keel over and die on the spot?”

“Mainly, he seemed perturbed at the notion ‘twould be a union of politics, rather than affection,” Say’ri replied. “Though in hindsight, I daresay I find it unlikely he would willingly tie his affections to one woman in the first place. As I said, Severa, I must believe you’ve misread him.”

“I have not!” Severa exclaimed with a spike of offense. “Ugh, trust me, I know how he thinks. Just…” She waved a hand. “Give me a second to figure this out.”

“While I appreciate your dedication,” Say’ri said, her tone turning slightly icy, “at this point I think it matters not whether or not he returns my feelings. His stance on the matter was quite firm.”
Severa looked up sharply. "Returns your feelings?" she asked incredulously. "You—gods, and you're in love with him."

For a moment, the other woman’s composure faltered. "I—love is a strong word, Severa, that I hesitate to use, though I can admit I... hold some fondness for him—"

"Okay, yeah, same difference in this case," Severa cut her off. "If you're fond enough of him to considering marrying him, that's plenty for my purposes, even if I really do have to question your judgment. But that? That is your whole problem right there."

"I... I apologize, but you've lost me."

"He doesn't get hints," Severa repeated flatly. "Okay, so you're not ready to come out and flat tell him you love him, and that's fine, but unless you do he's not gonna figure it out. Could probably straight up kiss him, actually, and he'd wonder if you meant it romantically or not. Yeah, of course he panicked and backpedaled that you jumped straight to tying the knot, I'd be more surprised if he didn't. As I said, he's an idiot. Doesn't necessarily mean he doesn't have feelings for you."

"As you've said," Say'ri said, though her tone was softening slightly. "Though I've usually found when a man wishes to hold the affections of one woman he does not markedly turn his attention to others."

"It's Inigo," Severa replied flatly. "Like I said, coping mechanism. And yeah, so tonight he's in full-on idiot mode. Might be Gerome's fault, might not be. I don't know. What I do know is that, contrary to what you seem to think, he's not going to fall into bed with some random girl tonight. For one, there's a ninety-nine percent chance he'd never get that far in the first place, and for another, on the one percent chance he did... he wants you. Trust me."

"So you keep saying," Say'ri murmured, glancing away.

"Say'ri, he's not going to marry you," Severa said, her voice dropping. "Definitely not yet, at least. Not at this point in his life and not in the middle of a war. It's not necessarily because he's immature or not ready to settle down or whatever, though yeah that's certainly part of it. But the real reason? Except for Owain, he lost every member of his entire family by the time he was sixteen. Think about that for a second."

From the ghost of a pained expression, Say'ri certainly did.

"If he made you his wife, you're one more person he has to protect," Severa finished softly. "And knowing him, he thinks he'll fail. He'd rather never have you than risk losing you."

"What, then? Am I to remain, watching and loving and knowing this war could claim either of our lives at any point?"

"You really want my advice? Kind of, yeah. Just be there. No expectations, no labels, definitely no marriage proposals. Be his friend, have his back, drag him up kicking and screaming when he tries to get bogged down in his own head. Sooner or later... he'll get his head wrapped around the matter and grow up." Severa shrugged. "In the meantime, try to knock some sense into him on occasion. He might actually take it from you, and gods know he needs it." She broke off to let out a bark of laughter. "I'm giving advice to a girl on how to woo Inigo. What sort of weird opposite realm have I landed myself in?"
Inigo woke with his face on a table and regretting a great many of his life decisions. Most of them being the ones that had occurred the previous night.

With a groan, he turned his head to the side, opening his eyes to slits and taking in his surroundings. He was at a different table than the one they’d eaten at last night, and mid-morning sun was filtering in through the tavern’s windows. He was about to sigh and close his eyes again when he caught sight of the fact that Gerome was sitting across from him, nursing a steaming cup.


He pitched his tone up into what was supposed to be a mocking, feminine inflection, only to have it ruined by the gravelly note granted by his recent wakefulness. “‘Ooh, Gerome! You’re so mysterious!’ ‘Your mask is sooo dreamy, Gerome!’” Inigo straightened, wincing at the crick in his neck before his voice dropped back to its normal timbre. “You were supposed to be my wingman! Not my competition!”

Gerome didn’t answer, but for the slight quirk of a brow over top of his mask. Inigo was about to question why he was even still there when another thought occurred to him.

“...Say, Gerome?”

“What is it?”

“Your mask is falling off there, buddy.”

A curled lip. “The strap is broken,” the wyvern rider said flatly. “A woman damaged it while she was… reaching for me.”

“And I suppose the same woman tore those holes in your clothes?”

“She did not want me to leave. She was… stronger than she looked.” A huff of disdain escaped Gerome’s throat. “I’ve never been so manhandled.”

“I want to be manhandled!” A few early-morning breakfast patrons glanced over at him for that
outburst. Inigo hurriedly looked away and let out a drawn-out sigh. “How did this happen?”

“I wish I knew,” Gerome replied. “I find your flirtatious lifestyle to be utterly exhausting.”

“Oh, quit gloating,” Inigo shot back with less venom than he’d actually intended, sinking down into his seat.

“I’m not gloating.”

“So says the guy who had a band of women sing love songs—”

“How could you possibly expect me to content myself with the likes of shallow affections you so wantonly seek when the only woman I’ve ever loved is dead and gone?”

Inigo froze with the second half of his sentence still caught on his lips. “You… what… huh? Gerome, how long have you been here that you’ve learned how to joke?”

The other man didn’t answer—an expression that looked something like shock was spreading over what part of his face Inigo could see, and a moment later he wordlessly got to his feet.

“Gerome, dammit!” Inigo called after him, standing himself and cursing the pounding in his head. “You can’t just leave me on that!”

“Fie, Inigo, ‘tis too early for you to be shouting like that.”

“What is it, Say’ri?” he nearly snapped, softening his voice at the last possible moment.

She stood with familiar dignity in the same staircase Gerome had just disappeared up, the ghost of a smile touching her features. “Not ‘manhandling,’” she said crisply, while Inigo felt himself turn a fabulous shade of burgundy. She heard that? “We need to be starting back to the rest of the Shepherds,” she continued. “Will Gerome be joining us or nay?”

“I… don’t actually know,” Inigo admitted, then sighed. “I’ll go see if he’ll actually tell me or not.”

She paused at the landing; in that moment the only thought that popped into his head was how queenly she looked, even without the extravagant trappings of royal clothing. He did his best to shake that thought away.

As he passed her, though, she reached out and caught his arm in a light grip. He couldn’t help but glance down at her hand before he managed to bring his gaze to her face.

“You look ghastly,” Say’ri said softly, a flicker of concern in her eyes.

“Yeah, well. Rough night. See how you look after you fall asleep on a table.”

She blinked at that; a moment later her hand slipped from his elbow. Inigo looked at her for a moment more before starting up the stairs.

He found Gerome and Brady both in the room he was regretting more and more not retiring to the previous night. “All right, Gerome, look, I don’t really care what it is, but I need a straight answer out of you one way or another—”

Inigo paused as Gerome reached for the axe on his belt, his own hand dropping to Falchion’s hilt out of automatic habit. “Stay your hand,” the wyvern rider said with an edge of exasperation as he handed the weapon over, handle first. “If you wish such a straight answer.”
Inigo blinked, taking the axe and finding it heavier than he’d expected, momentarily glad it was not the type of weapon he’d chosen to favor. Brady, still half-asleep and buried under several blankets, looked at both of the other two in confusion.

It took a long moment to figure out what Gerome was referring to, but eventually Inigo caught sight of a small etching just below the axehead. Brow furrowed, he lifted the weapon to examine it closer. “Why’ve you got the Mark of Naga on your axe?” Gerome’s own nobility was tied to Rosanne, not Ylisse—and while a few weapons from the royal treasury were marked, this particular design looked to be carved by an inexpert hand, the depth varying, the design itself not completely symmetrical.

“Lucina carved it there,” he answered bluntly, but his voice was soft. “On the night we were wed.” Inigo’s mind rebelled from that thought so quickly he actually almost blocked the entire thing out.

“What’n the…” Brady mumbled. “Ya came in here shoutin’, wakin’ me up and that’s what ya’ve got to say for yourself?”

“The only woman I’ve ever loved is dead and gone.

“You married my sister?” Inigo demanded, voice rising to a level that might well get them kicked out of the building. “And you—neither of you told me? Did you tell anyone? When did that even happen?”

“A few weeks before our company split to search for the Gemstones,” Gerome said, something akin to chagrin in his tone.

“And you didn’t tell anyone,” Inigo repeated, still trying to wrap his head around the fact. “Was that your idea, that she didn’t even tell her own brother—” He broke off. “Gods, no, I do not want to be your brother-in-law!”

“I think you’ll find that protest is coming several years too late,” Gerome said, crossing his arms.

“Would you have approved?”

“No I would not have!” Inigo cried. “I absolutely would not have!”

“Hence you see, then, why we kept our union secret.”

Inigo blew out a breath through pursed lips. “I so didn’t need this right now,” he muttered. “Honestly, when I asked you for a ‘straight answer’ I meant whether or not you were coming back with us, idiot!”

“...Ah,” Gerome said, shifting his weight a little. “I see I… misunderstood you.”

“No kidding.” Inigo sighed again, burying his face in his hands.

“Ah…” Brady said after a long moment. “Are we, uh, leavin’ then?”

“Well,” Inigo said after a beat. “Yeah, we are.”

Gerome cleared his throat. “I have a few things that need packing. If you wish to set off, I shall join up with your company in a few hours.”
Inigo resisted the urge to bark a humorless laugh. And of course he would actually be coming, he thought bitterly.

“Did she love you?” was what actually escaped his mouth.

From the doorway, Gerome turned back. “Pardon?”

“Did she love you, Gerome? Simple question. Yes or no answer.”

A long silence stretched out. “Yes,” he finally answered. “Yes, she did.”

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When the six of them caught up with the Shepherds again, they were greeted by a camp that was far larger and far louder than the one they’d left. “What’s going on?” Inigo asked aloud as they passed a small clump of unfamiliar soldiers, outfitted in Ylissean colors.

All he got in response to that were shrugs. Not that he expected anything less, considering the others with him had been gone just as long as he had.

As they weaved through the suddenly-expanded maze of tents, his confusion only grew. They’d left a force that consisted of little more than just the Shepherds, but the camp they traversed had to be at least a thousand strong.

By the time Inigo found his father amidst the chaos, there was no point wasting time on pleasantries. “Dad? Why are there—”

“—so many people?” Chrom finished, falling in step beside him as they strode through the camp. “It’s one of the companies we sent south last fall. They managed to escape Yen’fay and the other dynasts; actually, according to their commander, they haven’t fared quite as badly as the original reports led us to believe.”

For possibly the first time since Fort Steiger, Inigo felt a flicker of optimism rise in him. “You mean we’ve actually got some semblance of an army again.”

“Indeed,” Chrom replied, the ghost of a smile coming to his features. “And while Yen’fay’s forces still outnumber us by a margin I’m loath to think about, we stand a far better shot than we did a few days ago.”

Inigo let a grim smile come to his features.

“Anyways, how did your trip go?”

Inigo gave him the basic rundown, omitting the unfortunate myriad of personal issues that had come up. As he spoke, a small tickle of awareness came to him—there was no hint of patronization in their discussion, just the meeting of equal minds and exchange of information. Inigo could have been Frederick or Robin for the way Chrom spoke.

For the first time, his father was treating him as an equal.

“Actually, Inigo, now that you’re back… with this much manpower to keep track of, we really need as many hands as we can get. Robin’s working out a chore rotation currently.”
And there was the catch, he thought with a dry laugh. It still didn’t wipe the half-smile from his face. “All right, all right, Father, I get the hint. I’ll leave you be.”

“Aye, this bustle ’tis a sight for sore eyes,” came a familiar voice.

“Say’ri,” Chrom greeted. “Glad to see you back. I was just telling Inigo how we’ve fared while you were gone.”

“Exceedingly well, it seems!” she said, with a lilting, jovial note Inigo hadn’t heard in her voice in a long time.

It brought another quirking smile to his lips.

“If you’d join me in the council tent, I’ll fill you in on the details—” Chrom continued.

“Aye, I’ll be there in a moment,” said Say’ri. “For now, I would wish to speak with your son.”

Inigo’s breath caught while Chrom shot him a look that held a barely-continued glimmer of amusement. Save me, the former wanted to plead, but didn’t dare voice it aloud.

“All right then,” said Chrom. “I’ll see you shortly.”

Inigo watched him go for a long moment, then closed his eyes and made a concentrated effort not to gnaw on his lip. “Haven’t seen enough of me these past few days?” he finally managed dryly.

“I…” Surprisingly enough, Say’ri glanced away too, her hands clasped together a little too tightly to simply be a resting gesture. She cleared her throat and looked back at him. “Inigo, you and I have clashed a fair few times since we’ve met.”

“Well…” Inigo said, rubbing the back of his neck. “There’s no point in denying that, is there? Considering the fact that we come from wildly differing backgrounds, it’s no real surprise.”

“Nay,” she agreed. “I just have held the thought, of late, to assure you that despite our frequent dissent, I am proud to stand behind the future you fight for.” She took a step closer. “You carry a burden that should not be borne alone; I hope you know that have you need, you might come to me for support, as someone I’ve grown to consider… one of my most cherished friends.”

Well, how in Naga’s name was he supposed to answer that? “I… Thank you, Say’ri,” he finally said.

Friend, he thought mockingly.

At least she’s not asking you to marry her anymore, was his next, and he wondered why it sent a pang through him.

“I’ll not keep you from my father, then,” Inigo finally managed, and started making his way through the rows of tents again.

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Well, there were certainly worse ways to spend the afternoon, Inigo thought. Sorting through the Ylissean company’s weapons and bringing a report to Robin on the inventory certainly sounded
like something more up Owain’s alley than his own, there were certainly worse things he could have been assigned to.

“Ah, my vaunted cousin! Returned at last from his hallow’d journey of myth and daring!”

And apparently Robin thought that too, Inigo said, blowing out a breath as he let the tent flap fall. He swallowed hard and braced himself for awkwardness. “Hey, Owain.”

Owain had been bent over a silver-tipped lance, but upon Inigo’s entrance he’d looked up without a hint of malice on his features. “I’ve already laid eyes upon the not-so-fair visage of our masked former companion, so I must assume your mission was a rousing success.”

“Something like that,” Inigo replied, thinking of everything on said mission that had not been a success and quickly growing dizzy. Instead, he latched onto the first topic his mind came up with. “Goodness, have you raided these stores already?”

Owain stared at him blankly for a moment, before he caught sight of where Inigo’s gaze had dropped to the sword at his hip. “Ah! Nay, actually! Whilst you were away, we chanced upon a hamlet that guarded a mighty and long-hidden treasure.” With a flourish, he drew the blade. “‘Tis the legendary demon blade Mystletainn! You are no longer the only one who carries a weapon of divine legacy!” After a moment, though, his face fell. “Er… so I thought, at least. Turns out it’s actually the not-so-legendary Missletainn. So… slightly less impressive.”

“Ah,” Inigo said, before turning toward a crate of swords. “Sorry to hear that.”

“But no matter! ‘Twas an adventure for the ages! So, you know, I’m definitely not upset you left me behind or anything like that, because I had plenty of fun without you.” Owain gave a sniff that was probably supposed to sound haughty but definitely carried an edge of genuine hurt.

Inigo winced. “Owain…” he mumbled, only for any other words to stick in his throat unsaid.

They fell into silence after that, but it wasn’t the comfortable quiet they could usually achieve. Tension crackled in the air that couldn’t be ignored.

“Inigo?” Owain finally ventured.

“Yeah?”

A beat passed before his cousin spoke again, his voice painfully small. “Why are you mad at me?”

Some unseen force grabbed at Inigo’s heart and twisted. “I’m not,” he said hurriedly, still up to his elbows in the crate.

“You haven’t spoken to me in a week and a half,” Owain pointed out softly. “You went on this… quest and you didn’t even tell me you were leaving.” He paused. “And you don’t even have the decency to look me in the eye right now.” He audibly swallowed. “And I don’t… don’t even know what I’ve done to upset you.”

Inigo squeezed his eyes shut, sighed, and straightened up. “I’m not mad at you,” he repeated, turning back to face his cousin.

“Then what is it?” Owain demanded. His face fell even further. “Is it… is it Robin? Do you object to our union? I’d thought you encouraging, but it’s only been since I told you we planned on wedding that you’ve been cross with me—”
“Gods, Owain, I’ve told you I’m not mad!” Inigo exclaimed. “I’m jealous! There’s a difference!”

Owain paused with his mouth still hanging open, blinking several times before he spoke again. “...Huh? You…”

Inigo sighed. “No, I am not jealous of Robin, if that’s the conclusion your likely hormone-addled brain is about to jump to.”

“Uh, bit ‘pot-and-kettle’ on that bit, yeah?” Owain put in.

“Not helping,” Inigo grumbled, dropping down to the crate Owain was using for a stool. “I… meant to apologize for how I reacted the other night,” he said quietly. “But by the time I got back, you were already gone, and then you were avoiding me…”

“I assumed you were upset with me,” Owain said. “I thought it better to let you cool down rather than to force you to share sleeping quarters…”

“Which really only succeeded in reminding me you’d just gotten the one thing in my life I can never seem to figure out.”

“...A bigger tent?”

Inigo elbowed him harder than strictly necessary. “A woman that actually loves you, you dolt.”

“Ahh, that,” Owain replied airily, but with a half-smile that said he’d meant it with levity.

“I’m really happy for you,” Inigo continued hurriedly. “Honestly, I am. I’m sorry I couldn’t say that when you told me—”

“Inigo,” Owain said in a tone that booked no argument. “What’s happened with Say’ri?”

“...Actually, I take that back,” Inigo said. “Robin has made you perceptive and I don’t approve. You no longer have my blessing.”

“Ha, ha,” Owain replied. “Now, cousin, I’ll have an answer from you, if I must cross your blade to pry it from your lips.”

“Ah, geez, we’re violent today, aren’t we?” Inigo muttered. He grabbed a dagger from the supply, turning it over in his hands and watching light glint off the wicked blade. “And I suppose the answer would be a complete and unmitigated disaster on every possible front.”

“...That bad, huh?” Owain asked. “It’s been that way for a while, hasn’t it?”

“...Since before we left Storash,” Inigo admitted. “She… we discussed the, ah, courtship issue. It didn’t go well.”

“Clearly, or we’d not be having this discussion,” Owain said, crossing his ankle up over his knee and clasping his hands together.

“Well, she wasn’t opposed to it,” Inigo said.

“Good?” Owain ventured.

“As in it would be nothing more than a political match.”

“Less good,” he said. “And your response?”
“Response?” Inigo said with a humorless laugh. “I panicked. I can’t—gods, even the thought makes me want to scream.” He hadn’t even noticed his knee had started anxiously bouncing of its own accord, and it took a conscious effort to still it. “I’m not sure how she could possibly think me marriage material in the first place.”

“A fair point,” Owain said loftily. “You snore quite tremendously.”

“I do not.”

Owain sighed. “Right, then. The important question on the matter seems to be: is she aware of the affections you bear for her?”

Inigo paused. “I… guess so?” he said, tone turning up. “I mean, if she didn’t before…” His gaze flicked away as he voice dropped. “I… almost kissed her when we were in Rosanne. I’m honestly not sure if I more regret the fact that it happened it all or that I didn’t actually go for it. I mean, it wouldn’t be the first time I’d had scalding liquids headed in my direction… Or a handprint on my cheek…”

“Or she might’ve kissed you back,” Owain pointed out in an undertone.

Inigo shook his head. “Owain, a matter of hours ago she called me ‘one of her most cherished friends.’”

“Oooh,” Owain said sympathetically. “That’s not a good sign.”

“Trust me, I’m aware. More likely, I’m going to guess she assumes I’m as distantly infatuated with her as… well. You know what I’m getting at.”

“As you are with any other female?” Owain finished helpfully, getting an eye roll in response.

Glancing up at the tent ceiling, Inigo blew out a breath. “I hope you just realize how good you’ve got it that your biggest romantic issue is going to be arguing about how many thousands of people your mother is going to try to invite to your wedding.”

“Yeah…” Owain said, the hint of a smirk coming to his face. “We’re not waiting until we get back to Ylisstol.”

“You’re not? Why?”

“One of the reasons being precisely the one you just mentioned. Another being the fact that… to put it simply, we’re at war. Anything can happen.”

Inigo swallowed hard, trying to push the implications of that statement away. An instinctive piece of him, long buried, wanted to wrap Owain up and hide him away from said implication. His cousin might have been older, but he’d always been the more childish of the two, the more optimistic, the more innocent.

And gods knew he’d already lost enough.

“We thought it better to cling to what we have while we still have it,” Owain finished in a soft voice. “And well, yes, Robin was swift to point out it’s a very short courtship, but we met years ago at this point. Plenty of the Shepherds were married after knowing each other for much less time—your parents, for instance.”

“I’m pretty sure my parents are an outlier that skews the average and shouldn’t be considered,”
Inigo pointed out. “Or, you know, something along those Laurent-like sciencey lines.”

Owain chuckled. “Either way, I’m assuming it’ll likely be in the next few weeks.”

A long moment stretched out before Inigo shook his head. “When did we grow up?” he whispered. “Seems like not long ago we were sitting on the palace roof whilst you insulted my katana.”

“Hey, I’ll have you know I have not grown out of insulting your breadknife, and were it not broken I would continue to do so on a regular basis!” Owain exclaimed. “But, you know, if you were to take it up again, I call dibs on Falchion.”

“I thought you were all gung-ho on being a sorcerer now,” Inigo grumbled.

“I’m adaptable! Heroes of legend are not confined to one source of heroism!”

The atmosphere settled between them again, filled with rolled eyes and muffled laughter. With a quiet peace in his chest, Inigo wondered why he’d been so worried it wouldn’t.

“Inigo?”

“Yeah?”

Owain waved a hand. “Since this is all cleared up… You’ll still be my best man, yeah?”

Inigo snorted a laugh. “Yes, you dork, of course I will.”

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“You look chipper, dear.”

Dropping onto the bench beside his soon-to-be-wife, his plate clattering slightly on the table, Owain felt a well-deserved grin spread over his face. “Indeed!” he exclaimed, pecking Robin’s cheek before continuing. “The blood of heroes courses through me! Today I will mete out great justice!”

“If I find anyone in need of that great justice, I’ll be sure to let you know,” Robin replied with a chuckle. Her own plate had long ago been pushed aside in favor of her typical spread of papers and tomes and Owain peered over at them—the fact it conveniently brought him significantly closer to her in the process was purely coincidental.

“What then shall we say, to concoct a new plan to make our next fatal strike at our enemies? Truly, with our new company in tow, our master tactician shall be utterly unstoppable!”

With another low laugh and the flash of a grin, she pointed to one of her papers, walking him through her plans as had become their custom months ago. He listened raptly, occasionally offering an overly-flourished comment or question as he saw fit.

“So,” Robin said when they made it to a breakpoint. “Did you talk to Inigo?”

“Indeed,” Owain answered, “we had a long and involved discussion about the great myriad of events that have taken place over the past week, as well as—wait, how did you know?”
She smirked. “What, you think you ended up on the same chore by coincidence?”

He paused, blinking. “Er, yes?”

“Owain, sometimes your naivety is adorable. Don’t think I didn’t know that you’ve only been so out-of-sorts the past few days because you two were bickering.”

“Heroes of legend do not bicker with their rivals slash best friends slash cousins,” Owain said with a greatly offended sniff.

Robin lifted her brows. “So? Better now?”

“Yeeees…” he admitted.

“Excellent.”

A long moment stretched out. “I cannot believe you would go so far as to orchestrate such a thing…” he pondered aloud.

“Well, it’s like you said,” she replied, throwing him a wink. “I’m a master tactician.”
Vows of undying devotion.

As a child—or, more truthfully, up until very recently—Owain had never put much thought into his potential marriage prospects, nor spent any great time pondering the particular ins and outs of a wedding. Namely, his own. There had been a few times—usually when Lissa was tearing at her pigtails, her eyes turned toward the heavens while she insisted vehemently she hoped his children turned out just like him—that he’d briefly thought about meeting an unfailingly courageous other half of him, perhaps producing a gaggle of hero-children, but for the most part he’d been content to leave such daydreaming to Inigo.

Whatever nebulous concepts he’d imagined, they certainly had not included getting married in the middle of backwoods Valm, fighting a war from before his birth, whilst his mother—who was younger than him—wrung her hands and sobbed.

“...they just grow up so fast!”

Owain fiddled with the too-stiff collar of his shirt, rejoicing all over again that this was not the decadent, extravagant Ylissean royal wedding he would have gotten in a future without Grima. In fact, he was fairly certain the only reason Lissa hadn’t put up a massive fuss that he wasn’t getting one was because in this timeline, he couldn’t very well rightfully lay claim to his lineage.

All the better in his opinion, still fumbling with the top button. He couldn’t exactly pull off a heroic wedding if he couldn’t breathe.

“Lissa.” Lon’qu’s voice was soft, but firm in a way that filled the entire tent. “He grew up in an alternate timeline.”

“That’s beside the point!” Lissa wailed.

“Mother, I think that’s the entire point,” Owain replied.

“Lon’qu!” she continued, ignoring him. “Our baby boy is getting married! How can you be so stoic about this?”

A beat passed. “Did you forget who you were talking to there, Mother?”

Lissa sniffed. “Maybe.” Her eyes went wide as she swatted at Owain’s hands. “Stop that! Leave it alone!”

“It’s choking me!”

“Try wearing a corset!” she screeched.

“I am already being deprived of the air necessary for my existence, thank you very much! Do you wish me to simply keel over in the middle of my vows of undying devotion?”
“It’s not that bad, stop being melodramatic!” she cried. “Honestly, I don’t know where you get it from!”

A soft puff of air that might’ve been a laugh escaped Lon’qu’s lips. “Really?”

The other two members of the family ignored him. “Mother, please, release your hands from my throat!” Owain cried.

“There!” Lissa exclaimed, stepping back and putting her hands on her hips. “Now leave it be! Can’t you manage to look dignified for at least the next couple of hours?”

“Clearly not,” Lon’qu muttered.

“Mother, I am the definition of dignity! The very model of the code of chivalry! I am a hero of legend —”

“You better not have put any of that nonsense in your vows, young man!”

“Nonsense? Nonsense? ‘Tis only what the hallowed stirrings of my heart bid me to write—” Owain said, fumbling in his pocket.

“Is that a scroll?” Lissa cried with horror. “We’re in the middle of a war! We don’t have time to listen to three hours of your blah-blah stuff—”

The tent flap pulled back. “How’s it going?” asked Chrom as he appeared in the opening. A long moment as he took in the sight of his sister practically climbing her son, trying to reach the writings he had gripped tightly in his hand, held as high as he could reach. “Oh. Oh dear.”


“...Good plan,” Chrom agreed.

“Actually, I will join you,” Lon’qu added in an undertone.

“Wait!” Owain cried, still holding his vows high above his head. “Have you not any great pearls of fatherly wisdom to grant me before I embark on marital adventure?”

Pausing in the doorway, Lon’qu fixed him with a long look. “Don’t make her angry,” he finally said. “She will probably throw figs at you.”

“Or soap dishes,” Chrom added helpfully.

“...Wait, why would Robin throw a soap dish at you?” Owain asked.

“That’s... er... a story for another time. Possibly never.” Chrom pointedly looked away. “Yeah, let’s go with never.” He cleared his throat. “Anyway, if you two are quite finished, it’s about time.”

“Time?” Owain said eagerly. “Time for my great—ow! Mother! Ow, no, let go! Mooom!”

“All right, making good on your advice right now,” Chrom said aside to Lon’qu.

“No, Uncle Chrom, wait! I’m coming, I’m coming!” Hot on the heels of his father and uncle, Owain skittered out behind them.

“You really do enjoy tormenting your mother, don’t you?” Chrom asked.
“Nay, Uncle! ‘Tis the opposite!” Owain replied, his face suitably horrified.

Chrom gave a snort at that. “Go on, then, Owain. I’m off to fetch your bride-to-be—can’t have you seeing her, now.”

“That’s a stupid tradition,” Owain grumbled.

“What’s a stupid tradition?” Lissa called.

“Er, nothing, Mother! See you there Father, Uncle!” With that, Owain broke into a jog, weaving through the camp.

To his surprise, he found the time at hand must have been closer than he realized. Their makeshift venue—a small clearing in the woods, bisected neatly by a stream and thankfully far away from any dynast camps their scouts had located—was already filling up with the usual colorful assortment of Shepherds. A few had managed to bring chairs, but most were making do with settling on the ground. Libra stood by their makeshift podium, looking to be deep in prayer; Inigo stood to the priest’s left, looking to be deep in boredom.

“Thank the gods,” his cousin muttered when he made it within listening distance. He was dressed similarly to Owain, that being much more formal than the war usually allowed for but still quite casual on the wedding spectrum. Dark pants were tucked into Inigo’s usual boots, though the latter were polished to a much higher shine than typical, and his dress shirt was Ylissean blue to Owain’s own favored yellow. “This is not my day to be the center of attention, so do kindly take that from me.”

“Why are you standing up here, then?” Owain inquired, noting with envy that Inigo’s collar looked far less uncomfortable than his own.

“Waiting for you, don’t be daft.”

“If you didn’t want to be the center of attention, mayhaps you should have waited until the true hero of the hour arrived before taking your place at the forefront,” Owain pointed out.

“I—” Inigo said, then broke off to clear his throat in a very clear attempt to hide the fact he hadn’t thought of that. “Whatever. Are you ready, oh ‘hero of the hour’?”

“Hang on,” Owain said, then took the opportunity to fiddle his collar open, releasing the top button with a triumphant ‘ha!’ “Okay. Now I am.”

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Inigo might’ve cried a little.

Embarrassing as that was, he hadn’t been full-blown sobbing into a handkerchief almost the entire ceremony (like Lissa), nor had he let out a snore during the couple’s vows (like Vaike), so all-in-all he considered it a success.

It didn’t dampen the bittersweet pang that went through him as Libra pronounced them man and wife.
When did we all grow up? he wondered yet again, with a slightly sad half-smile that was a world away from the beaming grin on Owain’s face.

Besides the aforementioned sobbing and snoring, the whole thing wasn’t much to write home about. While they’d sent out scouts that reported none of their enemies were within a day’s traveling distance, the war still left them wary of prolonging things, and most people were more eager for the rare, Chrom-approved dinner and dancing post-ceremony.

Inigo sent a prayer skyward, for Owain’s sake, to give them just this night of peace as they slipped back into camp, the first rousing chords of Brady’s violin filling the air.

“...My dearest Robin, my heart, I am the son of a princess and I happen to be related to both Olivia and Inigo, and you think I don’t know how to dance?”

“If you can call it dancing,” Inigo called after the couple.

Owain spun back, Robin still tucked into his side. “Inigo! I know you have seen my legendary moves!”

“Seen them?” Inigo shot back. “Indeed. And felt them, as well. Like that time we were eleven and you spun around so fast your leg caught me behind the knees and left me in the dirt. Or when we were fourteen and you botched a landing and elbowed me in the face hard enough to knock me out cold. Or when I was attempting to give you a refresher course on ballroom dancing and you nearly broke three of my toes, which was... oh... two days ago?”

“Okay, so I literally did not ask—”

“Shut up and go dance with your wife, because I am literally never going to ever again in my life.”

Robin tried—and failed—to muffle her laughter in her elbow whilst Owain shot his cousin a very cross look. “Hmph. Say things like that and I may bring up a great many unsavory past encounters of yours when I am your best man!”

“See if I let you be my best man,” Inigo shot back.

“See if he gets married,” Robin said in a jesting tone.

“Owain, you’re a bad influence on her,” Inigo replied without missing a beat. “I apologize, Robin, for my cousin’s corrupted—”

“Yes, my dark aura of potency and agony!” said Owain.

“Can we perhaps not discuss agony at our wedding, dear?”

Her grinned, lifting her hand to his lips. “For your sake, oh keeper of my heart, I shall desist.”

Inigo made a pointed gagging motion and gestured them toward the dance floor.

For quite a while, he was content to people-watch, taking note of who was present. Gerome and Severa were both, unsurprisingly, absent, but to his interest nearly all the other Shepherds were there.

He neatly dodged Say’ri’s gaze for about twenty minutes, only to find his own wandering back every time he managed to force his eyes away. He couldn’t help himself—she wore a silky, bright red dress of the likes he’d never seen before, clearly Chon’sinian in origin, and the entire garment
managed to both billow and still cling in all the right places.

Sometime later, while Inigo was lost in his daydreaming, Owain reappeared. “Lost her already?” the former couldn’t help but tease as his cousin dropped into the seat beside him, flushed and still grinning.

“Uncle Chrom has stolen her away for a spell,” Owain explained, nodding to where Chrom was attempting to lead Robin in some sort of sad imitation of a dance that made Inigo shake his head in shame. At least they looked like they were having fun. “I fear they are deep in a conspiracy that somehow involves mysterious and violent soap dishes. I have yet to unravel it.”

Inigo lifted a brow and decided not to pursue that any further. “Well, I’m sure you’ll get to the bottom of those dastardly… soap dishes… eventually.”

Silence stretched out. “I am quite surprised to not see you out there,” Owain finally said.

“I don’t dance in public,” Inigo replied flatly. “Not unless I am very, very drunk, and—” he held up his glass, “—this happens to be water.”

“Don’t speak too loudly, dear cousin, Gaius is lurking.”

Inigo’s face turned suitably horrified. “…He would, too…”

Owain cackled. “Besides, what’s it matter? It’s ballroom dancing… er, well, field not-a-room dancing, in this case. No one’s watching anyone else.”

“I’m watching everyone else,” Inigo pointed out.

“You are creepily staring at Say’ri because you’re too chicken to actually go ask her to dance,” Owain retorted.

“I’m not staring!”

“Okay, sure,” Owain said, sounding unconvinced. “But if you don’t get up and start heading over there in the next thirty seconds, I’m going to go ask her.”

Inigo flushed. “Owain! You can’t ask a woman to dance on another man’s behalf! It’s not… proper!”

“What do you mean another man’s behalf? I’m going to ask on my own behalf.”

With a squeak, Inigo latched onto his cousin’s arm. “No! Not fair! You’ve got your own!”

Owain stared at him owlishly for a long moment, then whispered, “Twenty-nine… twenty-eight…”

“Okay, okay! I’m going, I’m going!”

“It’s for your own good,” Owain said somberly as Inigo scrambled to his feet.

“I hate you.”

“You’ll thank me later! Hardship builds character!”

The fact that he was in Maribelle’s direct line of sight just then was the only reason Inigo did not throw a particularly rude gesture over his shoulder.
As Inigo stepped away, a pair of arms that were swiftly becoming familiar wrapped around Owain’s shoulders, a set of lips brushing his ear. “When did you learn how to be so devious?” Robin murmured.

Owain leaned back, tilting his head until he was nearly looking at her upside down, and answered, “I think ‘twas when I married you.”
Chapter Summary

The best things happen when you're dancing. (Sometimes.)

Chapter Notes

Update schedule may be slightly accelerated for the next week or so, as I've been quite productive lately, I'm extremely excited for the next few chapters I have written, and I'm going to be incredibly busy this weekend. I'm aiming for Monday/Wednesday/Friday instead of the usual Wednesday/Saturday.

[Here](#) is the song I used in this chapter. Several of the next few chapters also have songs while, not in the work, are heavily associated to when I was writing them, so I may link those too later on.

Okay. Just don't think about the fact that it’s Say’ri. Think about it like it’s any other girl that will… probably either slap me or throw obscenely hot liquids in my general direction, or possibly tie me to a tree and rob me. Actually, this isn’t helping.

Inigo blew out a shuddering breath, for the first time in quite a while longing for the mask that he hadn’t worn in nearly a year. It had certainly done Gerome plenty of good, though somehow it had never had the same effect when he’d worn one. At least it might hide the fact he seemed to be about half a second away from descending into a stuttering mess.

He found Say’ri deep in conversation with Panne; he froze on the fringes, wondering if it would be wiser to cut his losses and just bolt now rather than interrupt. That plan flew out the window when the former caught sight of him, lifting her brow with an appraising “Aye?”

“I was wondering if I might…” *Breathe, Inigo.* “...have this dance.” A beat passed before he hurriedly added, “Milady.”

An entire eternity passed in the next few seconds. *Gods, just say no already so I can go yell at Owain.*

She reacted, though, not with derisive expression nor a barbed comment, but instead a hand extended in his direction and a formal, “I should hope to continue this discussion later, Lady Panne.”

Oh. *Oh.*

In a motion that was more than a little too quick to be casual, Inigo caught her hand in the formal manner his mother had taught him so long ago that he couldn’t remember ever actually using in practice. With a nod to Panne, he turned away.
“Aye, so do warn me,” Say’ri said as they wove through the crowd. “After having many an eager suitor step on my toes, I must inquire if you can actually dance.”

Though her phrasing sent an all-too-familiar spike of jealousy through him—she was a few years older than him, and had likely quite the variety of male attention turned her way before the war—he couldn’t help but chuckle as he pulled her in. “Milady, you wound me. You should know by now my mother is a dancer, and unlike my father, she has managed to teach me a thing or two.” The smirk coming to his face was a familiar comfort, and he forced himself not to think about the surrounding crowd, focusing on the slightest drag of his thumb up and down the curve of her waist. “I should think you might do better to ask yourself if you can keep up with me.”

He had, at least, come in at the right moment, he thought to himself as he led her through the first few steps. The music was leisurely enough to set an easy rhythm, but plenty upbeat to allow for more than the terrifying intimacy of a more romantic tempo. Within a couple of beats, Say’ri fell in perfect step with him. “Fie, and there is that arrogance again,” she said with another expectant quirk of her brow. “I’ll believe it when I see it.”

“Careful now, love, I could take that as a challenge.”

“Well, you’ve still yet to best me in combat, so I say take it as you will,” she replied coolly.

“Oh, Say’ri,” he said, tone rising to a teasing note. “Let it be known I gave you a chance.”

“Ha! A chance, he says—”

She cut herself off with a surprised squeak he’d never heard the likes of as he abandoned the music altogether, footsteps never faltering as he spun her into a much quicker tempo. “Do keep up,” he said. “I think it’s the least you can do after such teasing.”

To her credit, she only stumbled for a moment before she sorted out the new rhythm and fell back in step. “Aye, do you think I’ve not done this before myself? ‘Tis as much of an art in Chon’sin as in Ylisse—”

“Spin,” Inigo interrupted her lowly, lifting one hand from her waist and guiding her through the twirl with the other before he met up again at the end, having to alter a few steps to account for the fact she’d fallen behind. “Too slow,” he chided.

“If you’d but warned me—”

“I did warn you! I said spin!”

“A half step before—”

“Love, if you need that much time you must learn to be lighter on your feet,” he replied, his own steps never having slowed through the entire exchange. “Try it again?”

This time, with Say’ri a little more prepared, the gap between them at the end of the spin was not quite so insurmountable. “One normally expects such a lighthearted tune to be accompanied by a little less reprimanding and a little more fun.”

“Hey now, don’t tell me you’re backing out already. This is the warm up; we haven’t hit the fun part yet.” He realized, dimly, that the music had picked up considerably, matching the rhythm he’d started rather than vice versa. “Better that time, though.”

She snorted lightly, a sound he chose to ignore as they spun on.
Inigo didn’t quite know when it happened—he hadn’t taken his eyes off her face for more than a split second the entire time—but somewhere along the line her expression went from unimpressed and challenging to something significantly softer, and as the jaunty song wound down there was a light nearly akin to joy in her eyes.

“Aye, all right, I give!” she finally cried with a breathless laugh. “‘Twas wrong of me to tease you!”

“You sure you’re done already?” Inigo asked with a crooked grin. “I could spin you above my head.”

“Nay!”

As if ignoring her, he settled both hands on her waist. “Come now, give us a bit of a jump—”

“Inigo!”

With that exclamation, she grabbed for his shoulders, clutching his shirt as if she really thought he would. “Okay, fine, that one I was kidding about,” Inigo admitted, an impish smile still turned in Say’ri’s direction. Her grip loosened but didn’t fall away completely, her hands still resting on him lightly.

He hadn’t exactly let go of her, either, though their feet had stilled—quietly, he realized that if she asked, he’d be hard pressed to come up with a reason he was still holding her other than the fact that he wanted to be. Such a fool, he couldn’t help but think, and let his eyes flutter shut as the music swelled, fell, and finished.

The applause reached him a moment later.

His entire body jerked like a hundred invisible threads had been tied to him and yanked all at once, his eyes snapping back open with an instant flash of horror. No no no —

“Oh gods,” Inigo muttered, taking several stuttering steps backwards in a far cry from the sure-footed confidence he’d just had. How had he not noticed the sudden room available when there had barely been space to find a slot between the bodies when they’d first started dancing? And the music—Naga, the music had changed to match their dance, which meant Brady had noticed and adjusted and been watching —

And so had everyone else.

Inigo’s head swiveled, only to find the entire makeshift dance floor empty but for where he and Say’ri stood at the very center, as if they’d planned to end up there. But he hadn’t planned anything; he’d been working off no choreography, no concrete design whatsoever. He hadn’t tried to make it look pretty or graceful or effortless, hadn’t been dancing with an audience in mind because no one was supposed to be watching him.

Yet no one had turned into everyone. The merriment had come to a screeching halt because every single one of the Shepherds had decided they wanted to watch what could hardly have amounted to anything but a disaster in progress.

He couldn’t hear them clapping any more, but that was probably to do with the buzzing in his ears. Still beside him, Say’ri flushed a little and dropped into a curtsey, catching Inigo’s suddenly-clammy hand in her own on her way back up. “Bow, would you?” she whispered aside to him. “‘Tis for us.”
“They’re staring,” he hissed back, distantly amazed he’d even managed to get the words out for the rigidity pervading his entire frame.

“Aye. I should think we’ve dazzled—”

Instinct finally kicked in.

Inigo bolted.

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Stupid, stupid, stupid.

I never should’ve let Owain talk me into it.

Inigo didn’t have to go far to escape all the prying gazes—the edge of the woods proper was but a few hundred feet away from their little get together, near enough that he could clearly hear when the music started again, even over the sound of his own ragged breathing.

He leaned back against the nearest tree, squeezing his eyes shut and trying to burn away the afterimage of several dozen gazes keen on him. He’d caught a glimpse of Olivia as he pushed through the crowd to escape; his mother, yet to see him dance before that, though not from lack of trying, had been wiping tears from her cheeks.

It was literally so bad I made my own mother cry.

“Are you quite finished?”

“Please don’t,” he heard himself beg, swallowing hard in a vain attempt to keep his voice from breaking. “Just… Please, Say’ri, just leave me be.”

The crunch of a dry twig underfoot revealed she hadn’t listened, though her tone was less blunt when she spoke again. “Are you all right?”

“Don’t you think I’ve had enough humiliation for one night? Save the superiority and mock me another time.”

“Why would you think I should be here to mock? Fie, you took off as though a fire had broken out, I wanted to see if you were—are you crying?”

“No,” Inigo said petulantly as she came into view, then crossed his arms tightly over his chest as if that would somehow make his words more convincing.

Say’ri arched a delicate brow, then asked, “Prithee, then who has come and wept on your face?” With a hurried motion, he wiped his sleeve over his eyes, which only drew a soft huff from her. “Inigo, ‘tis not helping your tale any.”

“It was a Risen,” he deadpanned. “That cried on me. Big, ugly thing, face all twisted up while it blubbered—”

“Inigo.”
“All right, fine, if you won’t leave then get it out of your system,” he snapped. “Look, it’s Inigo, the only Exalt in the history of ever who cries when people stare at him. How fan-bloody-tastic.”

“Gods, but you are a stubborn piece of work,” Say’ri replied, stopping in front of him and crossing her arms in a mirror image of his own posture.

“Yeah, heard that one before. If you’re going to insult me at least have the decency to be imaginative, I’m sure there’s plenty of ground to cover—”

“Enough!” she barked. “Be done with this… this ridiculous self-deprecation of yours! Are you so convinced I am here to wound you that you are going to simply do it to yourself before I could?”

Inigo glanced away, clenching his teeth so hard a knot formed on the side of his jaw. “Can you call it self-deprecation if it’s true?” he finally asked.

“True? Aye, perhaps in the most remote, over-exaggerated of fashions. Do you realize what else is true, Inigo? What is true is that you came from another world to fight in a war that never should have been yours, that you set aside everything you had to do it, and you have done it all with a smile on your face. What is true is that whilst half the time you drive me to madness, I can but consider you one of the bravest men I have ever known.” She took a step closer, her voice dropping. “And you assume I’m going to think you craven because you’ve a case of stage fright?”

“If by ‘stage fright’ you mean crippling self doubt and a massive inferiority complex with my entire family, it sounds fairly reasonable to me.”

“Must you defend yourself by tearing yourself down?”

He held his arms out, gesturing to his body. “Look at me. Behold the Exalt of a broken world that fell through his fingertips with every decision he made, who fled to the past because he screwed up so badly there was no one left alive in the future, and who has failed at changing the greater fate with every damn step he takes.” He barked a bitter laugh. “What is there to defend? The leader who was never trained to lead, the lover who no woman will love, or the dancer who can’t dance because he’s too busy worrying about what everyone thinks of him?”

For a moment, he thought that after everything, maybe that would be what scared her away. Instead, though, she took another step toward him and whispered, “I thought you were beautiful.”

A beat passed before Inigo answered, “Well, at least that’s a new one. The sincerity mixed in with the sarcasm actually really sold it.”

“Stop, damn you,” Say’ri muttered, taking another step closer. “I tire of repeating myself.”

“So leave. If you’re tired than just go. Why are you even still here?”

“Because I’ve told you I would be there when you needed me,” the princess said with a lift of her chin. “Not necessarily when you wanted me.”

Inigo ran a hand over his jaw, holding the other open in a questioning gesture. When he spoke again, the acid in his tone had faded, replaced by nothing less than sheer exhaustion. “What the hell do you want from me, Say’ri?” he finally asked. “What on earth is this game we keep playing? Every time I figure out the rules you end up changing them on me. Can we just—just once, just tonight—stop toying with each other?”

A long moment passed, and her chest visibly heaved with a sigh before she answered. “If that’s what you wish,” she said. “But are you prepared for the answer?”
He broke their gaze again, blowing out a breath. That’s what he was asking her, wasn’t it? For her to take his heart and tear it to pieces with what was sure to be a formal, unfailingly polite rejection, because he would never live up to who she would want him to be. Did he really need to hear the words to know it?

“As I thought,” Say’ri said softly. With a searching look, she held her hand out. “Dance with me, Inigo.”

He blinked, brow furrowing. “...What?”

“There’s no one watching,” she whispered. “‘Tis just me.”

Hesitantly, he accepted her grip, all-too-aware of the fact that the strains of music reaching them now were of the slow, painfully romantic variety he’d been so fearful of earlier. “Aren’t I supposed to be leading?” he murmured.

“Aye, but you wouldn’t have if I hadn’t asked.”

“True enough,” Inigo replied, then decided to forgo the proper—if reversed—positioning in favor of slipping both his arms around her waist, if only so that he could pull her close enough to press his cheek to her hair and neatly avoid having to actually look at her. In response, she looped her arms around his neck and tucked herself against him.

“I’m trying to hold my breath, let it stay this way, can’t let this moment end…”

“Is that your mother singing?” Say’ri whispered.

“Mm,” Inigo answered, suddenly both glad and mortified they were close enough to hear the words. He hadn’t heard the song in years—not since his true mother had died, he didn’t think—but as soon as he recognized the tune they came back to him in an instant.

“Take my hand, will you share this with me? ‘Cause darling, without you…”

Without warning, pretense, or thought, the words slipped past his own lips as well.

“All the shine of a thousand spotlights, all the stars we steal from the night sky will never be enough… Never be enough… Towers of gold are still too little, these hands could hold the world but it’ll never be enough… never be enough… for me.”

“Of course you would sing, too,” she said with a soft chuckle.

“I’m a man of a great many talents.”

“And there is the arrogance again.”

“Did you miss it?”

“Well,” Say’ri said, sounding greatly put upon, “I suppose ‘tis better than the alternative.”

“How flattering,” Inigo replied, pulling back slightly to give her a wounded look and only realizing that was probably a mistake when he was reminded just how close they were by her nose brushing against his.

Too close, the last rational part of him chided, while the rest of him wondered how something that felt this good, this right could be too much of anything.
“Say’ri,” he whispered, knowing the moment he uttered it his last fragment of self-control had escaped with the puff of air he’d used to breathe her name.

“Aye?”

Wordlessly, he answered her with nothing but the achingly tentative press of his lips to hers.

There was no thinking about it—he wanted to kiss her, she was there, and he did. For a single, beautiful moment, all his protests fell away. What was the point driving such a distance between them when they only seemed to be drawn back together time and time again? Every time they shoved and ran and pushed against it, Fate only tossed them toward each other once more.

*Maybe it was time he stopped fighting.*

And in that lone, perfect instant, he let himself believe it.

*You realize you’re kissing a woman with a death sentence.*

With all the subtlety of a slap to the face, that thought brought Inigo crashing back to reality, his lips parting from Say’ri’s in a motion far too quick to impart any semblance of tenderness. There were *reasons* this had never happened, very important reasons that should never have been overridden by even an atmosphere charged by his own attraction to her. “Gods, I’m sorry,” he murmured, feeling the threat of tears prickle at his eyes again. “I shouldn’t—”

“Inigo,” she replied softly, eyes flicking open to meet his, hands falling from his shoulders as he forced himself to take a step backward.

“That shouldn’t have happened,” he pushed on, before she could say anything that was going to wedge another metaphorical dagger in his heart. “I shouldn’t have let myself get carried away—not when you deserve so much more—”

“Inigo.”

He dared not look her in the eye for fear of what either one of them would see. His throat raw, he could only repeat, “I’m sorry.”

It wasn’t just the kiss he was apologizing for.

He was so close to retreating with at least a tiny semblance of his dignity left that it was his back she spoke to just a moment later. “How do you think I deserve more?”

Eyes squeezed shut, Inigo whispered with conviction, “You deserve the *world*, Say’ri.” *Not me.* “Not a man who’s been broken by it.”

*And certainly not the end of Walhart’s blade.*
Never Be Enough (Part 5) Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

The Ylissean League crosses blades with Yen’fay.

Chapter Notes

Song of the chapter is here.

(Another double-length chapter!)

For three months and one day, Inigo rebuilt his self-control.

From the night of Owain’s wedding—May the fifth—until now, the sixth of August, he had held himself to a standard of discipline that would make even Frederick proud. He rose before dawn, trained until he thought Falchion might fall from his limp fingers, and threw himself completely into the war. He spoke up at every council, shyness be damned, and when they dynasts would draw too close for comfort he fought no longer at Owain’s side, but Chrom’s. He’d gained a smattering of new scars, an extra handful of calluses, and seemingly permanent dark circles under his eyes.

No one had commented.

For three months and one day, he had not let himself be alone with Say’ri, for fear of this carefully crafted restraint abandoning him. He dared not fight at her side nor go out of his way to speak to her of anything but war, lest he slip and go tumbling back down into the temptation that still lingered so near to him.

He knew, deep down, that it couldn’t last—that the cracks starting to form on his psyche would only grow until he shattered—but he ignored it. He just had to make it until the end of the war, until they put Walhart in the ground and he could leave Valm and everything in it to his past. Just a little bit longer. You only need to keep it together for a few more months.

It lasted for three months and one day.

Until they met Yen’fay.

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“All these months, and it comes down to today…” Robin said quietly.

“Ha! As if my beloved wife’s illustrious plans would fail us now,” Owain said, leaning back in his
chair as a breeze wound through the open flap and around the tent. Despite the earliness of the hour, the heat was already mounting to unwelcome levels. “Besides, ’tis not our end yet. We are yet to face the Conqueror himself, only his most afeared and imposing general…” He paused. “I’m not helping, am I?”

“No, dear, not particularly.” Robin replied crisply, causing a ripple of laughter to echo around the table from the other council members.

Of them, Say’ri remained stoic. “He speaks the truth, though. Yen’fay’s forces approach swiftly. And another concern: the dynasts who betrayed us. As we have fled Steiger the past few months, they have attacked us and let us go both, as it has suited their purpose. But should they strike us from behind as we battle Yen’fay, ’twould be an easy victory. They would curry favor with the empire without the risk of injury. ’Tis likely, in fact, what they have been waiting for.”

Robin’s lips thinned to a line. “That is how they think, isn’t it?”

“We cannot defend two fronts,” Chrom pointed out, rising to his feet. “We’ll need to choose our battlefield carefully.” He paused at the edge of the tent and pointed. “Say’ri, that mountain—I’ve seen it smoke for hours but I see no trees on it anywhere?”

The princess’s brow furrowed. “What… ah. That is no forest fire, Lord Chrom. ’Tis a volcano, have you never seen one? That one is called the Demon’s Ingle. It is known and feared by all people of Valm. Few dare even get close, lest they anger the wicked fire god.”

“Hmm…” Chrom said. “Robin? Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“Oh, gods, I’m sensing a terrible idea forming,” Inigo groaned.

“Only if you’re wondering how quickly we can reach the volcano,” Robin replied to Chrom, ignoring Inigo.

“And I was right,” the younger royal sighed.

“Go to the Demon’s Ingle?” Say’ri demanded. “Do you know what you’re saying?”

“I’m saying your opportunistic former friends wouldn’t dare risk following us,” Robin said.

“For damned good reasons,” Inigo pointed out.

“And we can use the flames as barriers, to limit how Yen’fay’s army approaches.”

“Mmm…” said Say’ri. “And my brother will still come. His stubborn pride will force his hand.”

“You know, I’m getting the distinct feeling I’m being ignored,” Inigo said.

“Probably because you are,” Owain replied.

“I understand your protest, Inigo, but it seems this may be our best strategy,” Chrom said.

Inigo sighed. “Okay, but if we all die I would just like to preemptively say ‘I told you so.’”

“That’s fair,” Robin replied.

Blowing out a breath, Say’ri said, “‘Tis a risky plan, but I can devise none better. And you Ylisseans seem to have a peculiar talent for performing miracles. May our luck hold true another day.”
"I told you," Inigo said, spitting blood from his mouth, "this was a terrible idea."

With a sigh, Chrom wiped the sweat from his brow and replied, "Yes, Inigo, I heard you the first six times."

Frederick offered no comment but a swing of his axe and a "To your right, milord."

Chrom spun, Falchion slicing through his nearest opponent whilst Inigo ducked out of the way, nearly skittering sideways as the rocks beneath his feet gave way. He came up out of it, rebalancing in time for his own version of the divine blade to punch through another swordsman.

"I regret ever cursing Regna Ferox," he muttered, trying to take the too-hot air into his lungs.

The other two ignored him. "Shepherds! Hold rank!" Chrom bellowed. "We are outnumbered but not outmatched! Heavy armor to the west flank! Don’t let them through the lines! Division Six, that means you!" Across the way, Robin’s voice could be heard shouting similarly, and the lines began to reshape from the new orders. Voice dropping, Chrom muttered, "There he is," shielding his eyes against the smoke.

Inigo peered through the cavern, following his father’s gaze. Sure enough, across the sea of soldiers stood a tall, lean man, dressed in attire that was unmistakably Chon’sinian, his pale hair tightly pulled back. To his left stood a diminutive, raven-haired woman who did not even come up to his shoulder, only visible thanks to the slight rise the two stood on.

"I had hoped Yen’fay still had the honor to lead from the front," Chrom said. "It seems he no longer has even that."

As if she had heard them, the woman across the way tilted her head, seeming to whisper something to Yen’fay. The swordmaster gave a sharp nod, leaving the woman to pull something from her robes.

A moment later, an orange blur came toward them.

For a second, Inigo forced himself to believe it had to be some kind of obscure fire spell he’d never seen before, though the motion of it was all wrong. The spell seemed to bound toward them as if it were alive, and as it grew closer it seemed to resemble not the flames around them but some sort of animal.

That was the only thing he could register before the strange spell flew near enough to force him to dodge. "What in the name of holy —" he started to exclaim, then cut himself off.

He realized, too late, that whatever that spell was, it had been a distraction.

Chrom’s orders cut off mid-word, replaced by Frederick’s urgent "Milord!" Inigo spun back two seconds too late.

The Imperial’s strike had been suicidal but true. While the warrior had been impaled on Chrom’s Falchion, but he’d landed a blow that left quite the hole in the Exalt’s armor and sent Chrom to his knees.
“Dad!” Inigo cried, but dared not turn away from the battle.

“I’m fine,” Chrom wheezed. “I’m… gods, no, I’m not fine.”

“Do you require a healer, milord?” Frederick asked, even as he dispatched another of Yen’fay’s men.

“D’you think?” the Exalt shot back, still clutching at his side. He groaned. “We can’t—lose this point—”

“I can hold it,” Inigo got out through gritted teeth.

“Inigo, you’re going to get bottlenecked by yourself—” Chrom started.

“He’s right,” Frederick said. “You’re barely armored—”

“I said I can hold it!” Inigo snapped. “Just get help and send me back up when you can.”

A beat passed before Chrom muttered something Inigo couldn’t quite make out, but it definitely contained something along the lines of as damned stubborn as I am. Another bolt of that strange magic blurred past them, drowning out anything else and forcing Inigo to focus back on the fight.

Before he realized it, he was alone in the thick of battle, muscles reacting automatically as he defended against too many fronts. He was, as he said, able to hold the critical point, but in his peripherals he watched the west line Chrom had been so intent on earlier begin to buckle. He cursed under his breath, knowing he was pinned where he was and there was nothing he could do for it.

Five minutes passed—perhaps maybe ten—before the unmistakable blast of a Thoron spell nigh-instantly cleared out every enemy in Inigo’s immediate vicinity. “Robin,” he managed to greet, though he was bent nearly double in an attempt to catch his breath. “Thank Naga, I don’t think I could have held that much longer. Listen, the west flank’s in trouble, Division Six wasn’t enough. Can you send down Kellam, maybe Gerome—”

“I know and I would,” Robin said quickly, “except you’re going to for me.”

Inigo straightened slightly, searching the tactician’s gaze. “Sorry, what now?”

“I’m bringing in Vaike and Stahl relieve you here,” she said. “As soon as they get here I want you down at the west flank. You’re getting a field promotion, Commander Inigo.”

Smoke-filled air stilled in his lungs. “What—you can’t, I’m not—”

“You can, you will, and you are, ” Robin cut him off, her voice low.

“Robin, you don’t understand, I’m not—I can’t lead the entire west flank,” Inigo said, panic started to creep up his throat. “I mean, I can’t. My father could but he’s not—”

“And why do you think I’ve had you at his side all summer?” she interrupted. “So you’d be able to do this if I asked you to!”

“Ask Frederick! Or hell, ask Say’ri! Someone they’ll actually listen to!”

“I’m not asking them, I’m asking you!” she shouted. “You’re a damned Exalt, Inigo, pull it together and GET DOWN TO THE WEST FLANK!”
There was no disobeying that—his body responded automatically, feet backing away as his eyes caught a glimpse of the two aforementioned Shepherds charging forward to take his place. Distantly, he could hear Owain’s distinctive yelling from the east, likely holding Robin’s position until she returned.

Even that faded as he half-ran, half-stumbled west.

All he could think when he got there was that it was worse than it looked.

He hadn’t even made it to what was supposed to be their first line before he found himself clashing with Yen’fay’s men. The Shepherds and the other Ylissean soldiers were scattered, each one holding their own but managing nothing resembling cohesiveness.

*How am I supposed to fix this?*

Inigo stood frozen, fear taking over once more without the imminent threat of Robin tearing into him. He wasn’t a tactician and he wasn’t the leader his father was—

But she was right. He’d spent three months at Chrom’s side, and he’d learned.

“*Shepherds!* If you’re armored I want you up front! Make a line and hold it with your lives!”

The words had come easier than he’d thought they would. No one was watching, or even really paying attention to where their orders were coming from—just that suddenly they had them, and structure was starting to return. The army before him wasn’t listening to Inigo, just their commander.

“Distance fighters, fall back behind! Prioritize the enemy archers so we can start sending flyers in! C’mon, once Yen’fay figures out we’ve gotten our lives together over here he’s going to hit us again and he’s going to do it hard! Don’t let him have the chance!”

Like Inigo’s words had been a foreboding prophecy, a blast of magic hit his front line. He sprinted for the hole, prepared to fill it himself if he had to.

The line had reformed before he got there, sudden synergy returning to the ranks. “Ricken! Hit that mage!” Inigo called, spinning to pace back down the line.

“Hey, idiot,” came a familiar voice. “Need a hand down here?”

“Severa, I have literally never been more happy to see you in my entire life,” Inigo said passionately, feeling his shoulders slump slightly. “I could honestly kiss you right now.”

“I’ll slit your throat if you try,” Severa promised.

“I’m sure you would—” Inigo said, then broke off. “Say’ri. Uh. You’re here.”

“Aye, Robin sent us down from the east flank,” the princess said. “She believes Yen’fay more likely to assault your side than hers.”

“We’re getting hit hard over here,” Inigo forced out. “Especially with this… *magic* I’ve never seen the likes of—”

“It’s Chi’hiro,” Say’ri replied flatly.

“It’s what?” Inigo and Severa both asked at once.
Say’ri pointed to the small, dark-haired woman Inigo had noticed earlier. “My brother’s retainer, Chi’hiro. She remained at his side when he defected to Walhart, and she’s long been a practitioner of the more obscure Chon’sinian magics. You’ll not touch Yen’fay until she’s out of the way.”

“Wonderful,” Inigo muttered. “How do we get rid of her, then?”

“Another mage, or preferably more than one.”

“All I needed,” Inigo told her, then called, “Ricken! Henry!” With the mages given their orders, he turned back to Severa. “I’m going to put you up on the north end, okay? Keep them organized up there.”

“On it,” the redhead said, and jogged off.

Inigo blew out a breath and started pacing the line again. “Say’ri,” he said, staring resolutely ahead. “Answer me a question.”

“Aye.”

“Are you going to go after your brother the second you leave my sight?”

A long silence was his answer.

“Then you’re staying here with me.”

A bark of laughter reached him. “After all we’ve been through, do you truly trust me so little?” Say’ri asked.

“It’s not a matter of trust,” he shot back. “It’s a matter of respect.” He glanced over his shoulder at her. “Robin placed me in command of the west flank, which means I could order you not to engage Yen’fay.” He let that sink in for a moment. “But with regard to ‘all we’ve been through,’ I’d rather merely ask you to remain at my side instead of having it come to that.”

“...So be it,” she finally answered.

Inigo spun away, scrambling toward a skirmish just south. “Kellam, hold him off!” he shouted.

It was a mere moment later he realized no other footsteps followed him, and only a moment more before he saw the form of one Chon’sinian princess sprinting across enemy lines, heading for Yen’fay.

“Dammit Say’ri!”

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He knew it was her; of course he did.

The merest gesture of Yen’fay’s hand cleared a path for Say’ri, both a challenge and a mocking invitation. She slowed her dash, feeling a scowl tug on her features as she continued to stride toward her brother, back straight and chin lifted.

She heard Inigo call after her twice more before he was forced to return his attention to his
command. There would be hell to pay later—from Robin for abandoning her post and from Inigo for exploiting the trust he’d extended to her—but for now she was far more concerned with the enemy before her. Silently, she drew her katana as she approached, challenge unmistakable.

“Let her pass, Chi’hiro,” were the first words she heard her brother speak in over a year. “But ensure none of the Ylisseans attempt to interfere.”

The diminutive mage—once as dear to Say’ri as her own family—gave a stiff-backed bow to Yen’fay. “Of course, my lord.”

Say’ri let her peripheral gaze linger on Chi’hiro as she passed, then turned her attention back to Yen’fay. “Draw your sword, Brother. How dare you mock me to leave it sheathed.”

The quirk of his brow was so familiar it stole her breath away. “As you wish, Sister.”

Firelight glinted off the familiar seven-pointed blade of Amatsu, the generations-treasured sword passed down through the Chon’sinian dynasts just as Falchion had been through the Ylissean line. Say’ri watched it with a wary eye, but her gaze was turned to meet her brother’s. “I won’t ask you why. We are well beyond that point now. I will speak it plain: I cannot forgive you, neither can I let you live.”

Yen’fay gave a slight tilt of his head, sharp features somber. “I’ve asked you for nothing, Sister, least of all your forgiveness.”

“But you will have my justice, like it or no!” she cried, surging several strides forward to stop just out of his range. “You, who stood by in silence while everyone else suffered! While villages were razed and fields burned, you watched but said nothing. When Father and Mother were murdered—you said nothing! Nothing, before you ran to the arms of the one man responsible for all of it! Your silence was deafening! Maddening!” She paused, chest heaving. “Even now, have you still nothing to say?”

When the only sounds she heard came from the Ylissean line, she shook her head.

“Damn you, Yen’fay,” she whispered. A distant part of her murmured this could be suicide, reminded her that he had always been the superior swordsman to her. She ignored it. “Then I will make your sword answer for you! Let your blade sing your final words!”

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“I’m going to kill her,” Inigo muttered with a vitriol he couldn’t admit was real even to himself. Still, it made him feel slightly better. “That’s just all there is to it.”

Unless Yen’fay gets to her first, he realized with sickening twist in his stomach.

Had Say’ri even realized how far her lone action was going to force his hand? Had she stayed back, the front line could have played it safer, more careful and more defensive in how they advanced. Now, they were going to have to push forward fast and hard to catch up to her. From what he could see, she was locked in single, dizzying combat with Yen’fay, but Inigo didn’t trust the Imperial general near enough to dare hope it would stay that way long.

“Front line, advance! Step quick and stay together!”
Duty bid him to stay at his post; love told him to forget it all and sprint for the duel; both urged him past the beginning of the Ylissean lines and into the fray.

“Severa!”

“I’m right here, dolt!”

He spun back, eyes going wide as Severa was suddenly at his side once more. “What are you doing? You weren’t supposed to—”

“—come back? Yeah, well, I figured when your girlfriend ran off you wouldn’t be long for command here.”

“She’s not my girlfriend!”

“This is not the time to argue about your weird personal issues, Inigo!” Severa cried. “Nor is it the time to go abandoning my post in the middle of battle!” he shot back.

“You did what you needed to,” she said, voice dropping. “You pulled them back together. We can handle it from here. Now go before she gets herself killed!”

He couldn’t deny the words struck something akin to the fear of Naga into him. If Severa’s words rang true—he couldn’t lose her now—

“Inigo!” the redhead called after him.

“Yeah?”

“The hell’s your sword glowing for?”

Inigo paused, brow furrowed as he glanced down. Sure enough, true to Severa’s words a soft blue light had started emanating from Falchion’s hilt. “I’ve no idea,” he admitted, despite the tug in his gut that told him it had to be important.

Still, it wasn’t like there was time to dwell. With an absent hope he wasn’t about the make the stupidest—or possibly last—decision of his entire life, he broke rank and headed after Say’ri.

He didn’t make it far.

A blast of magic sent him flying sideways, making him hit the ground with an incredibly unpleasant thud that left him coughing in a desperate attempt to pull air back into his lungs. Even before he fully caught his breath back, Inigo forced himself back upright, wincing thanks to a sudden assortment of cuts and burns from the searing ground. At least it didn’t feel like he’d broken anything.

Eyes locking onto his newest opponent, he held back a bitter sigh. I hate fighting mages. Instead of saying that aloud, though, what he spoke was, “Chi’hiro, is it?”

“Aye,” answered the dark haired woman, an accent even thicker than Say’ri’s coming through even on that one word. “Retainer and second to General Yen’fay, the—”

“Yes, hi, I’m Inigo, could we perhaps skip the formalities? I am in a bit of a rush.”

Chi’hiro hesitated with her hand paused as if a spell lingered half-formed on her fingertips. “I’ll not allow you to interfere,” she said. “My liege’s orders were exceedingly clear. The Lady Say’ri may
Inigo let out a sigh. “Well, then, we have a problem, because I’m not taking no for an answer. Not to mention that’s kind of a weird time for whatever fragments of honor he’s got left to show up—”

“How dare you speak of him so!” Chi’hiro cried, tears falling in two well-worn tracks down her cheeks. Inigo hadn’t a feeling it wasn’t from the smoke. “You know nothing of Yen’fay! Nothing!”

“Like I said, I’m afraid I don’t exactly have the time to,” he replied grimly, creeping closer. Falchion’s weight was a familiar comfort in his hand, but he had no desire to simply cut Chi’hiro down. Something in her eyes reflected himself far too much, in a way he couldn’t quite put to words.

*But Say’ri…*

His eyes darted to the duel just for the slightest moment, not enough to really get a grasp of who had the upper hand. As he did, the unmistakable purple flash of dark magic blurred past, followed by an equally distinctive “Nya ha ha!”

Inigo’s hand flew up instantly with the universal signal to *stand down*, though he wasn’t quite sure what was making him call off Henry other than sheer gut instinct. Chi’hiro yelped, her tome falling from her hands to the rocks below as the Flux spell at her feet petered out.

“Aww, Inigo! Don’t ruin my fun!” Henry called to him.

“I said *hold!*” Inigo shouted for good measure, and could only hope the order stuck. He shot a glance backward, only for a flash of silver to catch his eye in the moment he did; Falchion came up in an automatic block as Chi’hiro drew the katana at her hip. “Damn, I was rather hoping that was decorative,” he said with a sigh, though the parrying blow came to him easier than he thought it would. His blade still held that blue mystery glow and adrenaline ran hot in his veins, leaving him feeling like the world had slowed while he still moved with his usual lightning speed. The fact he’d gotten his opponent to switch to a weapon he could actually counter was a bonus.

Still, Chi’hiro was proving to be a fearsome opponent with a sword as well, though not quite as terrifyingly devastating as she was with magic. Forced to stay on his toes, Inigo could only hope none of the other Imperials would take advantage of the focus he had to pay to this single combatant.

*There.*

He wouldn’t have seen it coming if not for the fact Say’ri had used the same move on him half a dozen times when he was still desperately trying to win to the use of her katana—and, he realized in hindsight, trying to win her affections. The thought sent a pang through his heart even as Falchion caught his opponent’s blade and sent it flying.

Time froze, his blade still inches from her as she fixed a steely gaze on him. “Well fought,” she whispered. “You hesitate. If you are going to cut me down then do it.”

“Why do you serve him still?” Inigo asked instead of responding to her challenge. “How can you have any honor—”

“Don’t you speak to me of honor,” she hissed. “Not until you’ve thrown away everything—”

“And don’t you presume to know what I have or haven’t lost,” Inigo interrupted harshly. “Answer
the question.”

Chi’hiro paused, then replied, “I’ve no wish to see a world without him.”

And he realized, just then, what he saw that looked so much like himself.

He must have hesitated too long, before Chi’hiro warned, “If you spare me, I’ve no choice but to bring you down.”

With a sad, crooked smile, he said, “Milady, I think you’ve too narrow a view on things.”

With a quiet grace at odds with the actual action, he twisted, bringing the butt of Falchion’s hilt down on the back of her head in a single, sharp motion.

“Forgive me. I fear you’ll indeed have to face a world without him when you wake.” Face set with determination, Inigo stepped away. “But at least you’ll wake.”

~~~

She was outmatched.

There was no way to ignore the fact that Yen’fay was pushing her back with every blow, that her arms felt like butter and her feet like lead, and it was all she could do just to stop Amatsu piercing straight through her heart.

Still Say’ri pressed on, her teeth gritted until her jaw ached and her hands screaming from the reverb of Yen’fay’s every blow. Nothing. Nothing! her mind chanted over and over, sucking in a breath over the constant mental flashes of Chon’sin on fire, overrun by Walhart’s wretched soldiers, her parents’ still, ashen faces from that final, worthless last stand—

The ground betrayed her, in the end.

The heel of her right boot hit a crack in the volcanic rock, sending her sprawling backwards with a cry she couldn’t quite muffle, followed by a sickening snap in her ankle that sent her stomach lurching up to her throat. Pain washed over her, a thousand needles pricking at her spine that was only outweighed by the deathly look in her brother’s eyes.

“Yen’fay,” she murmured, and thought for a moment she caught a flash of hesitation amidst the coldness in his gaze.

Not that it mattered. Say’ri realized, as the moment itself came, that she was too craven to stare Death in the face.

With no recourse, no way to retaliate against the inevitability, she let her eyes fall shut.

Amatsu never met her flesh.

What did come was the clang of steel, and a quietly muttered but completely unmistakable “General Yen’fay.”

For a long moment, Say’ri dared neither open her eyes nor let out the breath she was holding, too afraid her mind was playing tricks on her.
A moment later, though, the chilly voice of her brother reached her. “Aye, that is the name. You would dare interfere with a duel, Ylissean?”

Hard, but far warmer than the first, the other voice came again. “You may call me Inigo. And you’ll find when it comes to people I care about there’s very little I wouldn’t dare to do.”

Say’ri’s eyes snapped open to find Amatsu and Falchion clashing together with dizzying speed, a muted light coming from the latter casting both Inigo and Yen’fay into eerie relief as they circled each other. The entire scene took a moment to process, and by the time it did her brother was speaking again.

“What would you have of me?”

“I would ask why a famed swordmaster and the heir apparent to the proud Chon’sin would sell his honor to Walhart,” Inigo said flatly, ducking a blow and very nearly scoring his own in return.

“That is not your concern,” Yen’fay replied, blocking the strike at the last second.

“Are you truly your sister’s brother?” Inigo asked, as if Say’ri herself weren’t ten feet away from their match. She felt like the spectator of a play, of no consequence to the drama unfolding before her. “Even knowing Walhart’s strength, she has fought on tooth and nail, to the sacrifice of nearly everything. She, at least, is a woman of principle.” A pause, as if he had to steady himself before he spoke again. “A woman I have grown to love.”

Say’ri’s breath caught; Yen’fay’s eyes widened almost imperceptibly.

“Are you so deluded as to genuinely consider her your enemy?” Inigo continued. “Or are you just afraid of your master?”

Yen’fay did not answer for a long moment, Amatsu still flashing so fast as to be a blur. “Afraid?” he asked with a quirk of his brow. “Yes, fear plays its part, that I cannot deny.”

“Then you admit your cowardice!”

“I did not say it was fear for my life,” Yen’fay replied with a curl of his lip. “That my reasons exist is not cause to explain them to strangers.”

A flash of pain crossed Inigo’s face. “If there’s any honor left in you, then speak now,” he said. “I know my father would take you if you wished to join us.” He took in a sharp breath. “I lost my sister, Yen’fay. I know full well the pain of it. Would you rob Say’ri of her brother also?”

Yen’fay shot the slightest of glances toward Say’ri, something unreadable in his expression. “The bones have been thrown, Inigo of Ylisse,” he said. “All that remains is to see where they fall.”

Lips pressed together in a line, Inigo shook his head and whispered, “So be it.”

He hadn’t thought this through.

A more rational Inigo would have taken note of the fact that even Say’ri had been struggling against Yen’fay, and remembered that if he himself had never beat her in combat, it was more than
a little unlikely he’d have much of a chance against her brother. Logic would have bid him to at least bring backup.

Rationality and logic had long abandoned him, though, replaced only by the lone thought of *You will not harm her.*

It was that thought that drove him to keep pushing back against Yen’fay’s relentless assault.

Inigo had long fallen silent, much too focused on the entire aspect of ‘not dying’ to worry about questioning his opponent any further. Fighting Yen’fay was like struggling against the sheer brute strength of Frederick, yet still having to contend with the nigh-unmatchable speed of Lon’qu—perhaps together Inigo and Say’ri could have taken down the swordmaster, but considering the princess had not yet risen from where she’d fallen, Inigo had to assume she was injured beyond the point of being able to.

One more reason to fight all the harder.

He’d hoped and prayed, as he sized up Yen’fay, that the swordsman’s lack of defensive techniques could give Inigo an opening, only to find his opponent so damned fast he hardly had any need of defense, because Inigo was much too busy trying not to get skewered by a seven-pointed blade to come anywhere near finding a hole to exploit. A part of him whispered hopeless, told him that he’d finally picked the battle he couldn’t win.

With a painful wrench, his hand bending in a way it really wasn’t supposed to, Falchion abandoned him.

Yen’fay’s face darkened, especially with the sudden absence of the divine blade’s light, but Inigo had no backup plan. The point of the golden Chon’sinian sword stilled at his throat, so near he felt the sting as it pierced his skin, and his only thought was to take that final moment to cast a look sideways.

**Say’ri.**

But the spot she’d occupied was empty, and Inigo didn’t have time to search for her. Had she fled? Been healed? Caught unawares by another Imperial soldier—

Yen’fay’s blade wavered, pulling back with naught by a pinprick of a wound left in its wake, leaving Inigo’s train of thought pulled up short. “Well fought, Inigo of Ylisse,” the general said softly. “You’ve proved to be her true ally.” The tiniest fraction of a smile came to his face, at odds with the sword still a hair’s-breadth away from being Inigo’s end. “Prithee keep her safe for me.”

...**Wait.**

The realization crashed into him without warning, though what exactly it was escaped Inigo just then. All he knew was that *something didn’t quite add up.*

Blood streaked silver punched through Yen’fay’s chest.

Say’ri’s katana withdrew again a moment later, its wielder poised at her brother’s back, half-kneeling to take all her weight on her left leg. Tears were streaming down her cheeks, though from grief or pain Inigo couldn’t quite tell.

“Don’t you dare touch him, Yen’fay,” she whispered hoarsely as her sword hit the ground with a clatter.
Amatsu joined it a moment later, Yen’fay dropping to his knees with a grimace etched on his face. “Say’ri… you have grown… so strong…”

“Do… do you mock me?” Say’ri asked, choking on a sob. “I have seen your best swordplay… that was not it. You went easy… but why?”

“What I could not tell you in life…” he groaned, “I say with my death…”

“But, Yen’fay…”

“You have found… strong comrades… I no longer need fear for you.” The swordmaster’s breaths came wet, his last words a rasp. “I die… in peace…”

“Yen’fay, wait!” Say’ri cried, dragging herself to his side. “What do you mean? Why? Don’t leave me with more silence—not this time! Yen’fay!”

He didn’t answer.

“Yen’fay?”

Her last plaintive whisper of his name rose and hung in the air, only for her to finally fall silent as Inigo dropped to the ground beside her and wrapped his arms around her shoulders.
Chapter Summary

The Shepherds learn that two heroes have laid down their lives.

Chapter Notes

So... Friday's update didn't happen because horse shows are freaking brutal, but here we go today instead.

The cavern inside the Demon’s Ingle no longer held the clashing sounds of battle, but nor was it quiet. Healers moved with startling efficiency, tending to groaning, wounded men; the occasional clang of metal could still be heard as soldiers checked and redistributed their weapons.

It was Lissa’s group Inigo sat in, all of them in various states of injury that ranged from Chrom’s healing sword wound to Say’ri’s broken ankle to Inigo, Owain, and Robin’s assortment of burns and smaller injuries. It didn’t seem like anyone had escaped unscathed.

They’d sat in silence for a nigh-interminable amount of time before Say’ri finally spoke. “Our victory ‘tis at last secured. Yen’fay has fallen. I will never understand why he joined Walhart… his reasons die with him.”

With a familiar pop and a flash of light, a simpering voice reached them. “But oh, what a death it was!”

Every member of the group reached for a weapon as Excellus appeared, the pudgy man cackling to himself.

“Did you see the grief etched on his face?” Walhart’s tactician continued, seemingly oblivious. “The mix of longing and pain in the eyes? He had become such an accomplished actor, but that was all too real!”

“Excellus,” Say’ri said lowly, getting to her feet with a wince. “What would you know of my brother, you loathsome toad?”

“More than you, princess of Chon’sin. Oh, except this’d make you queen now, wouldn’t it? Ha!” Excellus replied, before his voice lost all humor. “And I would hold that tongue of yours… I am honoring Yen’fay’s sacrifice by not killing you now, but even I have my limits.”

Say’ri froze with a hand still on the hilt of her sword. “…What? What do you mean, ’sacrifice’?”

“Oopsie! Did I just spill the beans?” Excellus broke off to giggle again. “I’m so sorry, but I promised your dear brother I’d never tell…”

“Explain yourself, snake,” she hissed, “or die!”
“Bah! As if you could harm me! You only live by my grace, you ungrateful wretch!”

Inigo’s hand curled so tightly around Falchion’s grip his knuckles went white as he moved to stand at Say’ri’s side. “Watch your mouth.”

Excellus ignored him, pointing a chubby finger at Say’ri. “I could have had you killed countless times! And I would have, if not for Yen’fay!”

“Enough talking around it—say what you mean!”

“Oh, did Yen’fay not groan out the truth as you stabbed him in the back?” Excellus goaded. “No, I suppose not. He always was so quiet. And proud… honorable, I think they call it? Yet he swallowed his pride and cast aside his honor… all to protect his beloved kin.” He paused for a beat. “That’s right, Little Sis. He did it… to save you.”


“No, I’m telling the truth, which I admit is a rare treat, so you best shut up and enjoy it. Before you met these Ylisseans, I could have had your head with a word. In Chon’sin, at Valm Harbor… Did you really think yourself so elusive? You were my leverage for Yen’fay. Unwitting and unbound, but a hostage all the same. I let you live, he fought for us. That was our deal. And he kept his end, right to his end!”

“No,” Say’ri whispered, taking half a step backwards. “No…”

“Phew!” Excellus said lightly. “Well, I don’t know about you, but I feel much better having that off my chest! Maybe I will give this truth telling a try more often! Yes, I shall resolve to do so! In any case, goodbye, friends! I wish you safe travels, and so sorry about Yen’fay…” With that, he reached out to pat Say’ri’s shoulder, as if he were a friend offering comfort.

Falchion flew from its sheath, no longer glowing as it had been earlier but still glinting with deadly sharpness. “Get your filthy paws off her,” Inigo growled, and this time he managed to send the tactician reeling back several steps.

“Aww, so defensive,” Excellus cooed. “Although… Oops! I suppose I did break my resolution twice already.” He tittered again and vanished with another pop just in time for Falchion to sweep through the spot he’d been standing.

“Get back here, you despicable creature!” Inigo called to the empty air. “Damn you, Excellus, I know you can hear me!”

His words echoed for a long moment before a much smaller voice spoke. “N-no… this isn’t… this can’t be… Y-Yen’fay, no…”

In a painfully slow motion, Inigo returned Falchion to its spot on his hip and turned back.

“Say’ri…” Chrom offered softly.

“Gods,” she whispered hoarsely. “The things I said to him… the things I did… I have wronged him beyond imagining.”

After those words, even Owain was forced to remain silent.

“If he had only spoken!” the princess continued. “Told me! I could have joined the ruse, I…”
Inigo stopped thinking, and let instinct close the distance between them, catching her waist and pulling her in. Say’ri buried her head against his shoulder, her entire frame shuddering in his arms as a sob wracked her.

“I am wretched! I’ve repaid my brother’s kindness with death! Oh, Yen’fay, forgive me… please, oh please… please.”

Lissa started wailing out apologies of her own that Inigo couldn’t keep up with, drowning out whatever words anyone else was speaking. “Say’ri, love…” was all he managed himself before he was forced to squeeze his eyes shut, pressing his face to her hair.

It was finally Chrom’s quiet, unflinching voice that broke through. “Say’ri, you did all you could. Your brother knew that. You are blameless in this. Excellus and the empire are at fault here, and they will be made to answer for it, I promise you.”

“Lord Chrom, I…” Say’ri started, before gulping in a breath and stepping away from Inigo. His arms ached at the loss of her. “Pray, forgive me,” she said, her voice leveling out. “You have done so much for this land while I can give nothing in return. Or worse… what help I offered turned against us.”

“We’re the Resistance now,” Robin said firmly. “And we’ve yet to lose a battle!”

“Yen’fay, your anointed brother, surely could not be anything less than proud of you,” Owain added. “And he would wish you to pick up your sword and continue the battle, so his sacrifice might have true meaning.”

“And fight we will, Say’ri,” Robin continued. “Until this land is free.”

With a shaky breath, Say’ri gave a decisive nod. “Aye, my lady. And thank you. I owe my life to you all, and to my brother… I swear to you, and to him… I will make the most of it.”

Inigo couldn’t decipher the look she gave him at the end of that sentence.

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“Inigo.”

It was nearing evening when they made it back to camp, prepared to settle and regroup for their next move, though no one had to ask what it was.

Their next move was Walhart.

It was the only thing Inigo could think about—how close they were—when Owain flung himself into his tent, not bother to announce himself and with an urgency in his tone that left Inigo with the only assumption they were under attack again.

“What, what is it? Did Yen’fay’s men regroup, did Walhart—” Inigo started, already scrambling for what little armor her usually wore.

“Huh? No, none of—Inigo, calm down, it’s not a battle call,” Owain said, holding his hands out. Inigo paused with one glove half on, several fingers in the wrong holes. “Have you spoken with
Say’ri?”

“...No, not since we left the volcano,” Inigo admitted, rather sheepishly pulling the glove back off.

Owain let out a sigh that might’ve blown down the tent if it had been any larger. “You, my dear cousin, are completely hopeless.”

“Um, I’m sorry, I’m pretty sure you were the hopeless one until a couple months ago. ‘Kissing is weird, I don’t wanna mush my faaaace.’”

“Inigo, which one of us is married?”

“...You,” Inigo admitted, rather grudgingly, then hurriedly added, “After the fastest one-eighty in the entirety of known history.”

“Hey, at least I realized the error of my ways,” Owain shot back.

“Yeah, now if you could realize you need to knock before you come barging in, that’d be great.”

“Inigo, I’ve never knocked on your door for our entire existence. Also, how would one knock on a tent?”

“Figure it out,” Inigo said flatly. “You don’t happen to live with me anymore, and I would like to point out my life is far quieter because of it.”

“You miss me and you know it.”

“Actually, I sleep exceedingly better now, knowing it’s Robin who’s being kept awake by your inane two-am queries instead of me.”

“You’re changing the subject,” Owain interjected, flopping to the floor of the tent. “Why have you not gone to offer sweet words of comfort to the lady who has stolen away with your heart?” He quirked a brow. “Put that accursed glib tongue of yours to some actual use.”

“She just lost her brother, Owain,” Inigo replied tartly, sitting back down himself. “Now is not the time. I can tell you from experience that those sweet words of comfort aren’t going to mean a damn.”

Owain actually had the decency to wince at that. “Okay, fine, then don’t talk. Just go. Just be there. Maybe that’s all she needs.”

A long pause stretched out, forcing Inigo back to his feet. It wasn’t very well like Owain would leave of his own accord once he’d invited himself in with a mission in mind. “You know why I can’t,” Inigo said, heading for the tent flap.

“Because you’re scared.”

Inigo froze with his hand stretched out, inches from his escape. “I’m sorry?”

“You heard me.” Owain rose as well, but his voice was soft. “That’s all it is, Inigo. All this nonsense, all these months... you’re just scared.”

A beat passed before Inigo gave a humorless laugh. “Just scared,” he muttered. “I’m bloody terrified is what I am.”

“So do something about it.”
“Do you think it’s that simple?” Inigo demanded, turning around.

“I’m not telling you to stop being afraid,” Owain said. “We both know it doesn’t work like that. I’m telling you, as your best friend, to stop letting it control you.”

Inigo squeezed his eyes shut. “Where is this pep talk coming from all of a sudden?”

“Have you looked in the mirror lately?” Owain whispered. “Three months, Inigo, I’ve watched you—probably longer if we’re being honest—and I’ve kept my mouth shut, because I hoped…” He shook his head. “If you keep going the way you’re going you’re going to destroy yourself, and I can’t watch—” This time he broke off with a sharp intake of breath. “You can’t just keep loving her from arm’s length, because it’s eating you alive. I’m seeing it eat you alive. You have to either let go or let yourself love her. ...Personally, I’d rather like to see the latter, but that’s not my choice to make.”

“Owain…”

“I know it’s not easy, but you’ve got to start somewhere.” A tiny smile quirked his lips. “Just go talk to her.”

With another sigh, Inigo shook his head. “Funny, isn’t it. Robin asks me to take command of half the army and suddenly I can do it, then it comes to matters of the heart and half a year’s gone by and I’ve yet to stop panicking.”

“Because when it comes to war you know what’s at stake,” Owain replied. “You know the lives that are on the line and you know how to save them. But when it’s your life, your future, all you know is loss.” He reached out, lightly grasping Inigo’s elbow. “Let yourself remember there can be an alternative, if you would but let yourself reach out and grasp it.” With a firm look and gentle squeeze, Owain whispered “Hope will never die.”

A thick, murmured, “But she might.”

“Not if you don’t let her.” Owain nudged him. “Go, Inigo. Trust me. When have I ever steered you wrong?”

Inigo paused a beat, then held up his index finger and opened his mouth.

“We agreed never to mention the swamp,” Owain hissed in interruption.

Inigo’s face fell. A moment later, though, he repeated the gesture.

“Oh, allow me to rephrase,” Owain cut him off again. “When have I ever let you down?”

“...Never,” Inigo finally admitted.

“So listen to me.”

With a deep intake of breath, Inigo reached for the tent flap again. “...Okay,” he finally said. “Okay, I’ll go.” He glanced back over his shoulder. “But don’t expect us to magically be together in the morning, all right? I’m just going to go talk to her for a bit.”

“Baby steps, my friend,” Owain said, ducking to follow him out of the tent. “Seems to be all I can expect of you anyways—”

“Shh shh shh,” Inigo interjected sharply, a hand flying up as his eyes locked onto a flash of red on
the horizon.

Owain froze, clearly catching the urgent note in his cousin’s tone. “What is it?”

“I don’t know,” Inigo whispered. “...Hand me Falchion.”

Still half inside the tent, Owain obligingly ducked back and, a moment later, handed over the divine blade. “Are we going to—”

“Yeah, of course we are,” Inigo answered, sword held with a loose, disarming facade nonchalance as he headed for the edge of camp. Eyes narrowed, he peered down the road, only to blink in surprise as recognition hit him.

“Wait, is that—” Owain started.

“Flavia,” Inigo finished, gazing toward the downtrodden east khan and her handful of men—no more than a dozen. He sucked in a breath. “Go ahead and meet them; I’m going to go find my father.”

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“Damn it all! You’re certain?”

With uncharacteristic dullness, Flavia ducked her head in confirmation. “I am. He’s gone, Chrom. I saw him fall myself…” She sucked in a breath. “He’s gone.”

Inigo merely stood frozen, barely registering the others gathered—Owain, of course; Flavia and a few of her men; Chrom with his shirt buttoned wrong and Olivia close at his side. The only thought in his mind was an echoing He’s gone. He’s dead. Basilio’s dead.

Having known the west khan himself in this timeline, worked both under him and with him, it seemed even more impossible that such a legend could truly be dead. Inigo half expected Basilio to pop out of some hidden cervice, guffawing that he’d fooled them all.

“Gods damn me for outliving that one-eyed clod!” Flavia muttered, beginning to pace. “That big, bald oaf! That, that… argh!”

“And again I’ve failed,” Inigo whispered with a shuddering breath.

“I’ll kill him!” the east khan continued to rant. “I’ll cut that dastard Walhart down myself, I swear it before the gods!”

Why did we let him go? Inigo internally wailed.

Owain caught his arm before he could take more than two steps backwards. “Inigo. This doesn’t change anything,” he said with a stern look.

“Exactly,” Inigo whispered back. “It doesn’t change anything because nothing ever does change —” He cut himself off, feeling his voice begin to rise.

“...It’s Gules,” Flavia was saying when he focused again. “Don’t ask me why in hell’s name the oaf hid it from you. He always did love his surprises, damn him.”
“Whatever his reasons,” Chrom said with a heavy sigh, “I accept his gift now, and gladly.”

“It’s hard to believe he’s truly gone,” Flavia said wistfully. “The larger the man, the larger the void left in his wake…”

*If only I’d tried harder...*
Chapter Summary

Inigo finally hits his shatterpoint.

Once he’d made it outside the fringes of camp, Inigo had to stop and let his eyes adjust before he continued on. Angry storm clouds had rolled in just before dusk, and their cover gave no quarter to the light of the moon and stars. The lone lantern he’d brought wasn’t much help, and had he not learned long ago how to navigate in the dark, he thought it likely he would have faceplanted more than once.

As it was, he managed to make it to his intended destination—although could he call it a destination when what he sought was a person rather than a location?—intact but for a lone stubbed toe. “You’re a long way from home,” he whispered.

A sniff answered him, along with a hurried rustle of fabric. “Aye, in more ways than one,” Say’ri replied, not quite managing to hide the tell-tale tremble in her voice.

Inigo set the lantern down a short distance away, moving gingerly to avoid disturbing the contents of the mugs in his other hand. With that accomplished, he dropped to the ground beside her, pressing his back to the tree she sat against, and held out a cup.

“...What’s this?”

“It’s tea, woman, what else do you think it’d be, poison?” he said, delivering the words with a teasing half-smile in some poor attempt to lighten her mood. “Consider it repayment for that night at the Mila Tree, yeah? I thought you might be in need of some—” He shut his jaw with a click, suddenly realizing the insensitivity of his planned ‘cheering up.’ “Company,” he managed. “Some company,” he repeated, then realized he’d effectively just smashed any chance of chickening out and escaping. Instead of dwelling on that, though, he sent an apprehensive glance to the mug still in his hand. “Er… I really hope I didn’t mix those up.”

In the muted light, he saw Say’ri quirk a brow, but the rest of her face remained expressionless as she lifted her cup to her lips. After a beat, she told him flatly, “You did.”

Inigo muttered a curse, moving to switch with her.

“...Fie, and you waited for me to try it first, didn’t you?”

“Maybe,” he admitted sheepishly, taking a sip of his own much sweeter brew.

“Craven.”

“Hey, look, I’m sorry my taste buds have the self-preservation instincts to avoid that stuff you drink. I’m pretty sure it’s bitter enough to kill small animals.”

“I pity the fact you’re so accustomed to drinking syrup that you cannot even appreciate an actual array of flavor.”
“If you think this is syrup you probably shouldn’t come within a mile radius of what Owain and Gaius drink,” Inigo pointed out.

“Believe me, I’ve no desire to.”

Despite the banter, Inigo could have sworn Say’ri had been creeping closer to him since the moment he sat down, and found that suspicion only confirmed as one final shift brought her shoulder pressing against his. He tamped down the longing, excited little twist in his belly and told himself to ignore it. *It’s like Owain said. She just wants someone to be there.*

He forced himself to clear his throat, finally asking, “How are you doing?” He paused, kicked himself, then hurriedly added, “I’m sorry, that’s a stupid question.”

“A bit of one, aye,” Say’ri replied. She fell silent for a long moment before continuing, “I… heard about Khan Basilio.” In sharp contrast to her quiet words, she dropped her hand with marked casualness, brushing the back of it against his own.

Inigo’s voice shot up nearly an entire octave. “Yeah, I… I—” He broke off to clear his throat again, hoping the dim lighting would hide the massive blush surely forming. *What in Naga’s name is she doing?* “I can’t believe he’s gone,” he managed in a rush.

“Inigo,” Say’ri said, his voice still significantly higher than he would have liked it. “Yeah, it has been,” he continued, then took the opportunity to try and hide his flustered features behind his cup and took a long draught.

“Nor can I.” Her hand stilled, resting lightly against his, and he was about to very subtly shift his mug into that hand as some sort of desperate self-defense mechanism when he realized that would leave hers still settled on his thigh, and the mere thought sent his heart galloping. Say’ri, meanwhile, let out a soft sigh. “Zounds, what a day ’tis been.”

“Yeah,” Inigo said, his voice still significantly higher than he would have liked it. “Yeah, it has been,” he continued, then took the opportunity to try and hide his flustered features behind his cup and took a long draught.

Only to promptly choke on it when she shifted her hand a little bit more to silently lace her fingers with his.

“Are you quite all right?” Say’ri asked, sitting up and fixing him with a concerned gaze.


After a beat, she nodded, settled wordlessly back against the tree—and dropped her head to lean it on his shoulder.

Once more, his thoughts came to a stuttering halt, then took off again at a mile a minute. *What was happening? Barring that lone, idiotic kiss, she’d never done anything that couldn’t have been qualified at least questionably platonic, yet within a span of five minutes they’d suddenly gone from the realm of reasonably close friendship to holding hands and practically cuddling —*

This needed to stop, he thought desperately, about to force himself to slide his hand from her grasp when she mumbled, “Thank you.”

“…For what?” he whispered, voice tight.

“For coming here.”

He wasn’t sure if she meant literally *here* or just Valm in general, but either way his resolve slipped and his hand stayed clasped in hers. “Of course,” he murmured, setting his cup down so he could catch the lone tear running down her cheek on his knuckle. He let the touch linger a moment
too long before he said, “I’m sorry.”

Say’ri took a shuddering breath. “Sorry won’t bring him back,” she replied, and he knew they weren’t talking about Basilio anymore.

“I know, Say’ri. I know.” Despite himself, Inigo brushed his thumb along the hand tangled with his.

A soft sigh escaped her before she said, “I had never known it possible for one to feel so alone when surrounded by so many people. Is that what it is, Inigo? When you’ve lost everything, is this cursed emptiness all that remains?”

He hated that she had to ask that question and he hated that she knew he’d know the answer. “You haven’t lost everything,” he deflected instead of giving a proper response. “I know it’s not the same, but you still have all of us. And I promise you, Say’ri, I promise you Chon’sin will know peace because of what Yen’fay did.” He paused, then added, “At least you’ve still your home.”

There was a strange note in her voice when she asked, “Will you not return to Ylisse when this war is over?”

When it was phrased so bluntly, Inigo realized abruptly he didn’t actually know the answer. “I… well, I mean, probably. It’s just that—well, not too long from now my parents are going to have their own Inigo to take care of. This timeline’s Inigo. I rather doubt there’ll be much room left for me.” He shook his head. “That was the price we paid to return, Say’ri. We came back to save a world that would have no place for us.”

He half-expected her to make some cliche insistence that of course Chrom and Olivia would still make room for him, that he was being foolish and self-sacrificing to think otherwise, only to feel a wave of relief when she didn’t.

“I’m sorry,” he said again. “I shouldn’t be trying to make this about me.”

“You could come to Chon’sin,” Say’ri offered softly.

“What, you’re sure you’d want me in the same country as you? I thought you’d be counting the days till you were rid of me,” he teased lightly.

“Of course I wouldn’t,” she replied, lifting her head to fix him with a gaze that told him she was more serious than he’d first thought.

Inigo glanced away to fiddle with a blade of grass. “What would you want me for, anyways? An ambassador? An advisor?” He paused, barked a laugh, then added, “A retainer?”

“If that’s what you wished,” Say’ri said, “I could make any one of those happen.” Slowly, she lifted a hand to rest it on his cheek. “But if you wanted… the offer to return at my side is still open.”

Inigo froze, knowing it was the first time either of them had dared bring up their doomed marriage arrangement since she’d all but stormed out of his room half a year ago. “Say’ri,” he croaked out.

“Fie, Inigo, but I heard what you said to my brother,” she said, “And I can only wonder what point there is in continuing to dance around it when we so clearly feel the same.”

For a moment, he was so caught up in trying to make sense of the first half of the sentence he couldn’t even register the latter. His mind reeled, trying to figure out what exactly he’d spoken that
she’d latched onto, and felt his stomach drop somewhere into the ground below.

*A woman I have grown to love.*

“Say’ri, listen,” Inigo started with a desperate note in his voice.

He should have known she wouldn’t.

He’d never known a kiss could be so fierce, never realized it possible that a claim of *mine, mine, mine* could come across so clearly with only a demanding crush of lips and not a word actually spoken. His breath left him, stolen away by her fervor, so much so that when they finally parted he had to gasp air into his aching lungs before he could even think of doing anything else.

Say’ri was already peering down at him when Inigo finally dared open his eyes; she had shifted so only the barest few inches separated them from being completely pressed together, one of her knees planted on the ground between his legs, a hand on the tree behind his head and the other never having come unlinked with his.

A short eternity passed before he could bring himself to speak. “Say’ri, love, I need you to listen to me,” he finally whispered, bringing his free hand to rest under her chin. His chest clenched in a way that had nothing to do with his recent lack of oxygen. “This can’t happen.”

“Fie, how can you speak it and yet still be unwilling to act on it?” she demanded. “If you are about to repeat your nonsense about not deserving me, then do not even bother to open your mouth.” She sank a little lower, a little closer to him, and drew in a ragged breath. “In just one day I’ve managed to disobey my orders, betray your trust, and murder my own kin in cold blood because I was so consumed by hate I was blinded to the truth. If anything ’tis I who could never hope to deserve you —”

Self-control long lost, Inigo let himself tilt his head up to meet her lips again, the gesture far more tender than the previous. “It’s not that,” he murmured. “And I can never blame you for any of what you’ve just said.”

“Then prithee what is your problem?”

“We just—we can’t be together.” He knew she wouldn’t buy it but couldn’t quite bring himself to form the words of his true reasoning.

“Why not? What fear of yours can be so great it outweighs the fact that I love —”

“Don’t—gods, don’t say it,” Inigo muttered, feeling the first sting of tears in the back of his eyes. “Gods above please don’t tell me you love me.”

A long silence stretched out before two words hung in the air so heavy he could almost feel them. “Why not?” Say’ri whispered again.

He had to close his eyes and swallow once, twice before he could force the words out. “Because in my timeline you were killed by Walhart in the final assault on Castle Valm,” he finally said, and an ominous rumble of thunder on the horizon punctuated his words. “About two months from now.”

She was silent for so long he forced himself to wrench his eyelids back open, and was met with such a maelstrom of emotion in her own dark eyes he didn’t think he could pick out and name even one.

“Don’t you see?” he whispered. “I couldn’t save Emmeryn, I couldn’t save Basilio, and I don’t
know if I can—” He cut himself off and had to take three shuddering breaths to keep from completely bursting into tears. “That’s why I can’t—why we can’t—” This time he clenched his teeth so tightly his jaw ached and he still couldn’t keep his body from shaking in a sob. “Gods damn it,” he bit out. “Everything I’ve lost, everything I’ve given up, why can’t I have this? Why can’t I just have this?”

Say’ri’s voice was so soft when she finally spoke he almost missed her words. “How long have you known?”

Inigo gave a bitter laugh that ended in a whimper. “How long have I known? My whole damn life,” he said. “I was raised on the tales of the hero Say’ri, the last Queen of Chon’sin who never got to go home to claim her crown, who gave her life to weaken the Conqueror just enough that my father could bring him down. How do you think I knew exactly who you were the moment you introduced yourself back at Valm Harbor?”

After a painfully long moment, she broke his gaze, dropped his hand, and pushed herself to her feet. “So you’ve been lying to me from the moment we met,” she finally whispered.

“I haven’t been,” he said desperately, forcing himself upright when she turned away from him. “I just didn’t want—”

“A lie of omission is still a lie, Inigo!” Say’ri cried, whirling back. “And that’s not counting every time you told me that we’d win this war, every time you assured me we’d make it out alive! Not five minutes ago you promised me Chon’sin would know peace only to tell me now you cannot change the fact that I will fall and I’ll surely bring her down with me! How dare you whisper your pretty little tales to me! Was this your intent all along? To woo me and string me along until I had no choice but to fall for you, so you’d have someone to fill your bed until you could bury me and move on to the next?”

No longer even remotely bothering to hide his tears, Inigo flinched away as if every word had been a blow. “If it makes you feel better to think so low of me,” he whispered, “then sure.”

Say’ri paused her tirade, falling silent with a stunned look.

“Go ahead,” he continued. “Just go ahead, because if I can’t do this, if I can’t change anything, if I have to search that damned battlefield to find your body I’d rather do it knowing you hated me than thinking you loved me, because whatever humanity I have left is not going to survive seeing the lifeless eyes of a woman who could have so easily been my everything and knowing I failed her.” He let out a humorless laugh that was more broken than any sound he’d ever heard himself make. Another roll of thunder came, followed by the first beginnings of rain. “Not that it matters anyway, because you’ve worked your way so deep into my heart I think nothing short of forgetting you entirely is going to make that day bearable. So go, Say’ri. Leave us and go home to your people or follow us and go march to your death, because whether or not I save you I’ll never unlove you and I’ll never be able to have you.”

Only the patter of rain against the leaves overhead and the ground below sounded, and Inigo was beginning to feel the damp seep through his clothes when Say’ri finally spoke.

“I’ll not leave the Shepherds now,” she said. “Not when we’ve come so far.”

Hardly daring to move, to breathe, Inigo only replied, “Okay.”

She took one step closer, then another, before she stopped again. With a deep inhale, she said, “I must ask. ‘Tis certain, then, that this war will claim my life?”
“I don’t know,” Inigo said roughly. “That’s just it. Say’ri, I don’t even know if we can truly stop Grima, no less who I can or can’t save along the way. Emmeryn—Emmeryn didn’t fall in Plegia in my timeline. She was assassinated a few weeks beforehand, originally. We thought we’d stopped it, thought we’d saved her, and then… For all I know you might live through the battle only to fall off your horse and crack your head open the next day.”

Another step closer, as a crack of lightning lit up the clearing and illuminated the conflict on her features. “So we’ve no way to know.”

“Exactly,” he murmured.

Abruptly, she strode across the distance between them, pausing only when she was so close she had to flick her gaze up to meet his. “Then prithee let me love you tonight while I still can.” She must have seen the hesitation in his eyes, because she added, “Just tonight. Don’t fear for the future you might not win. Let tomorrow worry about itself and let me have you tonight.”

*If I let you have me tonight I’m never going to be able to go back,* Inigo thought, but didn’t dare voice it.

What he did do was drop his hands to her hips and pull her in, letting his lips crash into hers for the third time that night as the rain beat down on both of them.
Inigo wasn’t sure how long they’d been out in the woods for, just that by the time they crossed the doorway of Say’ri’s tent they were both soaked to the bone.

“Sorry about dripping on your floor,” he mumbled, the heat of Demon’s Ingle long forgotten as he suppressed a shiver.

“Fie, ‘tis not like I’m not doing the same,” Say’ri replied, struggling for a moment to light the candle in the corner before it abruptly cast a yellow warmth through the tent. “I’ll fetch some towels.”

“No, don’t go back out,” Inigo said, already about to duck out into the rain again. “Let me.”

“I’ve a rain cloak, Inigo,” she said. “I’ll go.” Shrugging into said cloak and gathering an assortment of other clothing to tuck underneath it—likely to go change somewhere he wasn’t, he realized with a blush—she fixed him with a look. “Just—please don’t leave.”

“I won’t,” he said. “Promise.”

She’d no sooner slipped away when Inigo started to fumble with his own shirt, hoping if he wrung it out he might at least get it from ‘dripping’ to ‘damp.’ considering he didn’t think Say’ri’s tent was likely to have a change of men’s clothing. Maybe it would have been wiser to go to his instead, but the thought of her draped in one of his shirts was nearly enough to make him squeak aloud, and more pressingly he wouldn’t put it past Owain to come wandering in at some random hour. There wasn’t much point trying to duck out and grab a change of clothing, either, since it would likely end up as soaked as his current set by the time he made it back.

He was just going to have to spend the night waterlogged, he realized with a sigh. Not that it would be the first time.

Distracted as he was, it took a rather long moment before he actually yanked his shirt over his head, hoping if he wrung it out he might at least get it from ‘dripping’ to ‘damp.’ considering he didn’t think Say’ri’s tent was likely to have a change of men’s clothing. Maybe it would have been wiser to go to his instead, but the thought of her draped in one of his shirts was nearly enough to make him squeak aloud, and more pressingly he wouldn’t put it past Owain to come wandering in at some random hour. There wasn’t much point trying to duck out and grab a change of clothing, either, since it would likely end up as soaked as his current set by the time he made it back.

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through my clothes!"

A beat passed before Say‘ri pinched the bridge of her nose. “So you would rather stand there soaking wet, half undressed, and the approximate color of a lobster?”

“N-no!” he tried again. “Er—yes! Er—whichever of these options is going to leave me with some semblance of my dignity!”

“Likely neither, it seems,” she replied dryly. “Fie, then, take my coat and go fetch your own clothes.” She slipped out of said garment and held it out, while he only stared wide-eyed, taking a step back with his shirt still hugged tightly to him. “I’m not going to bite.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about!” Inigo said, wondering if it was actually possible to blush over one’s entire body.

Another beat passed. “What… are you actually worried about?” Say‘ri asked, coat still extended in his direction.

“I don’t know!”

She blinked, tucked the coat to her chest, and let out a snort of laughter.

“This isn’t funny, Say‘ri!”

Say‘ri ducked her head, lips quirking. “‘Tis a bit, actually.”

Inigo groaned, moving to bury his face in his hands and somehow managing to forget said hands were still gripping his shirt. It fell to the floor with a rather anticlimactic rustle, leaving him to pause, let out a squeak, and hurry to cross his now-empty arms back over his chest.

“…You’re acting as though I’ve not seen a male torso before,” she said.

“Not mine, thank you very much!” Inigo shot back.

“Nay, but so? ‘Tis naught but a body, Inigo, we all have one. Some of the Shepherds parade into battle in less cloth than you’ve got on right now.”

“Yeah, but I mean…” His heart rate was finally starting to come back down to a normal rate, but he hadn’t quite gotten up the courage to lower his arms yet. “It’s me. And it’s… you.”

Say‘ri shrugged. “I speak frankly when I say I don’t care. It cannot hardly be any more intimate than what has already passed between us tonight, nay?”

“I…” Inigo swallowed. “I speak frankly when I say I don’t care. It cannot hardly be any more intimate than what has already passed between us tonight, nay?”

“I…” Inigo swallowed. “Suppose not…” The flush in his cheeks that had finally started to fade redoubled when he dared loosen his arms and her gaze snapped toward the movement. “I—Please, Say‘ri, we’ve talked about the staring.”

This time it was her face that started to redden. “Sorry. I was merely wondering if you remembered all of them.”

It took him a long moment to figure out what she was talking about, until he glanced down and remembered the dizzying assortment of scars that dotted and criss-crossed his entire torso. “Most of them, actually,” he admitted, then sucked in a breath through his teeth. Perhaps if she got caught up on the details she’d be distracted from the bigger picture, he thought as he pointed to a long score just above his hip. “I was ten when I got that one. Owain forgot we were training with live
blades that day,” he told her with a soft, fond laugh. “Let’s see…” He found a nearly faded mark on his left arm. “Twelve: the day I learned never to come between Sully’s horse and grain.”

Say’ri chuckled a little at that, taking a step closer to get a better look.

The humor had mellowed things a little, but the slight smile Inigo managed faded when he gestured to a particularly large, nasty scar beneath his ribs. “Thirteen: Risen with a dagger—close quarters, caught me by surprise. That one nearly got me.”

“Gods,” she whispered, then reached out as if to touch, pausing a couple inches away to send him a questioning look.

With a slightly shaky exhale, he gave her a nod. “Go ahead,” he murmured. He couldn’t help but shudder a little when she laid her palm over the scar, but she’d been right—on top of everything that had already happened, once he’d calmed down a little this didn’t feel like that much of a step. “Mm. Fifteen: Got too close to Nah—a manakete, Nowi’s daughter—when she transformed, and she caught me with one of her claws by accident. Uhh… sixteen: Risen again, I think that one was a throwing axe. Still sixteen, but quite a bit later: Plegian soldier, broadsword. Oh, and if you look on the back of my head, sometime between those two you’ll find where I caught the back end of an axe the day I met up with Owain in Regna Ferox. Forgot how cocky I was back then…”

“Fie, and you’re not still?”

“I’d like to think I’ve gotten better.” Inigo ignored the roll of Say’ri’s eyes and continued his catalogue. “Seventeen for that burn scar, that was a Grimleal dark mage we bumped into after the Plegian War ended. Oh.” He shifted to point to a graze on his bicep. “Nineteen: arrow at Fort Steiger.”

Say’ri caught her lower lip in her teeth for a moment, then whispered, “Zounds, I forget how young you are sometimes.”

“That’s—” Inigo broke off with a light cough, feeling his face start to heat up again. “That’s kind of a really weird thing for you to say considering what’s just gone on between us.”

“No, I… ‘tis not what I meant,” she said, glancing up at him again. “How I intended it was… most men who have seen as much war as you have are not nineteen.”

“…Twenty tomorrow, if it makes you feel any better.”

“You jest with me,” Say’ri accused.

“Nay, my lady,” Inigo said, bringing a hand up to rest on the back of her head. “Well, I suppose not if we’re being completely technical, I did lose somewhere in the vicinity of a few months when we jumped timelines, but no one was entirely sure when it was, exactly, that we left the future, and since we all came through at different points I don’t think anyone’s ever actually figured precisely how old we are at this point. But, as far as I see it, my birthday is tomorrow and that’s plenty good enough for me.”

“…Three and a half years ‘tis not that large of a gap,” Say’ri said after a moment, a flash of white appearing over her lip again. “Mine own parents were near twice that.”

Inigo, meanwhile, had found distraction came quite abruptly. “Love, if you keep doing that thing with your teeth I’m going to have to kiss you again.”

“What thi—” She broke off with a pleased hum, twining her arms around his neck as he made good
on that statement. She was all but pressed against him when they broke, him leaning his forehead against hers with a soft sigh. “Don’t think about it,” she whispered.

“How did—”

“Tis etched all over your face, Inigo,” she replied softly, then repeated, “Don’t think about it. ‘Tis still two months away.”

“Not nearly as long as I’d like,” he muttered.

“Nay, nor I. But ‘tis not tonight.” She drew in a breath, nuzzled into his neck, and added, “Just tonight, remember?”

“...Right,” Inigo said, subconsciously tilting his head away to give her more room and subsequently shuddering as she took the invitation to trail her lips down his skin.

“You still need to go fetch clothes,” Say’ri whispered. “You’re shivering.” He flushed, trying to figure out the words to tell her he was definitely not shivering because of the cold—at least not entirely—when she ran her palms over his shoulders and down his arms. “Though I’m glad to see you’ve settled down in this matter.”

He gave a soft, embarrassed cough, then said, “To be fair, I’m quite certain that outside the occasional healer, the only woman who’s ever seen me shirtless would be my mother.”

Say’ri pulled back, her gaze sliding down him as she replied primly, “Mm. What a waste.”

The sound Inigo made was something between a splutter and a screech, his earlier bashfulness returning with a much too high “Say’ri!”

Her frame shook with a suppressed laugh as he stumbled backward a handful of steps. “My love, how have you lived this long if you are this easily flustered and you’ve spent the entirety of your life with Owain?”

“Acquired immunity from continued exposure,” Inigo replied deadpan. “Also, he doesn’t flirt with me.”

“Fair enough.” She bent down, reaching for her coat again. “Go on, then, and pray be swift about it.”

“Of course, my lady,” Inigo said, shrugging into his still soaked shirt before he tucked himself into her coat. “Whatever you wish,” he added, catching her hand to bring it to his lips before he ducked out.

The rain had died down, so much so that by the time he returned he was all but completely dry again. Say’ri, too, had changed in his absence—at least he’d had enough foresight to announce himself before slipping inside—and he was greeted by the sight of her cross-legged on the floor, a blanket in her lap and her hair falling loosely over her shoulders.

“I return,” Inigo offered, draping her coat over a lightweight stool in the corner before dropping beside her when she gestured to him.

“Aye, I see that.” Her eyes fell shut as he snaked a hand through her hair and pressed a kiss to her temple, firmly telling the part of his conscience that protested to shove it.

Just tonight, after all.
The thought sent a pang through him—*just tonight because we can’t have any longer than that*—and he forced himself to push away thoughts of the future. Here and now was where he was, here and now was what mattered, and if he only had tonight then by Naga he wasn’t going to waste it moping.

“Inigo,” Say’ri said softly, interrupting his self-reflection. “Could you… tell me of your sister?”

“…Lucina?” he asked dumbly, as if he’d ever had another sister. “How come?”

“Curiosity,” she admitted. “And, ‘tis said that as long as long as our comrades live on in our memories, they’ve never truly left us.” She paused, then hurriedly added, “If you don’t wish—”

“No, I… you’re right,” Inigo said. “I was just… gods, the last time I saw her was months before she died, and if we’re counting that… it’s been nearly four years.” He pursed his lips and blew out a breath. “But I mean, if you really want to know, just picture the female version of my father and there you go.”

“Aye, I can see it,” Say’ri said after a moment.

“We weren’t… particularly alike,” Inigo said. “I take after Mother, and like I said she took after Father. She was serious, confident, a natural-born leader… you know, everything I’m not. On the other hand, looks-wise you could definitely tell we were siblings—same hair, same features… Even her Brand was just opposite mine, her left eye instead of her right.”

“Were you close?”

“Mm, I suppose. Not in the way you’d probably think. It wasn’t like Owain and I. More like… when our parents died she just took over. Almost more of another mother than a sister. She was only three years my senior but it usually felt like a lot more than that. She protected me and I looked up to her. So… yes, she was very dear to me.”

“I’m sorry,” Say’ri said softly.

“It’s been a long time,” Inigo replied, before a smile quirked on his lips. “If you want a handle on what she was like and want to laugh at me, I’ll tell you about the first time I used Falchion.”

Say’ri raised a brow. “Sounds like ‘twould have been a serious occasion,” she said.

“I was using it to cut apples.”

“…You weren’t.”

“I was.” When she ducked her head and laughed, he added, “I was ten! And yes, she was very cross with me!”

Before he realized it, one tale after another was spilling from his lips, reminding him that there had been times when his life wasn’t constant doom and gloom, and a sudden comfort in Say’ri’s presence settled over him. Gone were the nerves that left him prickling and thrumming when she was around, gone was the longing ache in his chest every time he looked at her. Every so often, in the midst of his stories, one or the other would grow distracted by the more than welcome proximity they suddenly shared, breaking off the reminiscing for a few minutes of eager, searching little kisses until they’d had their fill again and Inigo could resume.

In fact, the only thing he could find wrong with the entire evening was that *just tonight was never going to be enough.*
He was in the middle of telling her the tale of the mirage village they’d found with Laurent when the thought hit him, causing him to break off mid-sentence. By that point in the night, he’d ended up flat on his back, Say’ri tucked into his right side with her head on his chest, tracing absent patterns over his shirt with one hand while the other was linked with his over her hip, one of her feet sporadically trailing up his calf when the mood struck her—which, now that he thought about it, had been quite a while ago. Instead of resuming the story, he asked, “Goodness, what time is it? It has to be getting near one.” When she didn’t answer, he continued, “Are you still awake, love?”

An overly long moment passed before a quiet “Mmhmm,” reached him in a way that said she wasn’t going to be much longer.

_Just tonight_, Inigo thought again, making the next words out of his mouth taste much too bitter. “I should go.”

“Mmhmm,” Say’ri hummed again, only to turn her head and nuzzle at his chest. A beat passed before she mumbled, “Or you could stay.”

He thought her words should have sent him panicking, only to realize with something of a mental shrug they did no such thing. Now that he thought about it, a bone-deep exhaustion hit him, reminding him that it had been a very long time since they’d been plotting their strategy against Yen’fay that morning. Maybe he just didn’t have enough energy left to expend it on freaking out.

“And I could do that,” he whispered, finding the sudden option of _not moving_ to be extremely appealing.

“Mm. Please do.”

“...Well, who am I to deny the lady’s request?” Inigo asked with a soft chuckle.

“No one,” she mumbled firmly.

“Huh. I see how it is.” With another laugh, he started working on disentangling himself from her.

“Be right back,” he said, rising to his feet for the sole purpose of blowing out the candle and shaking his head fondly at her whimper of protest.

Darkness fell over them, but fortunately he didn’t have far to go before he could drop down next to her again. “Just tonight, yes?” she asked softly as she curled back against him.

Inigo blew out a breath and whispered, “Something like that,” even as he realized there was no way in seven hells this was going to be _just tonight_.

...
The first thing Inigo registered when he swam back to consciousness was warmth. The second was light.

The brightness of the tent swimming before his bleary eyes told him it was far later in the morning than he’d taken to sleeping recently, but between the comfortable heaviness in his limbs and his still rather ponderous thought process, he couldn’t bring himself to care. The borderline unpleasant heat at his back, though, forced him to stir, only to catch on the arm wrapped around his waist.

Still not entirely awake, Inigo was about half a second from screeching at Owain to get the hell off him when he registered this was not his tent and it was definitely not his cousin spooning him.

“You’re still here,” Say’ri mumbled, her face tucked into his shoulder.

For a moment, every ounce of complete and utter terror that should have been coursing through him last night finally made an appearance, and had Inigo been any more awake and coordinated he thought he might’ve tried to up and vanish from her tent before she could say another word. It ebbed quickly, though, leaving him only to swallow and reply, “So it seems I am.” He shifted to his back, catching his first glimpse of her for the morning, and found that wave of panic entirely washed away by the lone thought of Gods I love her. Letting a newfound smile play on his lips, he reached a hand out to tangle in her hair. “Somehow in your continued assertions of just tonight you’ve managed to keep me here until morning.” He chuckled. “How devious of you, my love.”

“‘Twasn’t intentional,” Say’ri insisted, dark eyes searching his. “And I think I rather expected you to be gone with the dawn.”

Inigo paused, then admitted sheepishly, “I might’ve been. Had I been conscious.” With another chuckle, he said, “I can’t remember the last time I slept that long.”

“Then it seems you needed it,” she replied. “It does no good to run one’s self ragged for months on end without respite.”

So she had noticed, Inigo thought with a slight exhale.

“Inigo,” Say’ri said softly, and he braced himself for what was sure to be a well-meaning but extremely uncomfortable lecture.

“...Yeah?”

What actually came past her lips was, “Happy birthday.”

A beat passed before he shot her an awestruck look. “You remembered.”

“‘Twas only a few hours ago you told me and you expected I’d forget already?” she asked, propping up on her elbow to fix him with a offended look. “Although… perhaps ‘tis been more
than a few at this point.”

“More than…” Inigo started, before his gaze went distant. “Oh,” he suddenly whispered. “Oh no.”

“What—”

“War council,” he said with horror. “This morning. There’s no way we’re not late.”

“Zounds, you’re right,” Say’ri said, flinging the blankets aside. “Go, quickly, mayhap they’ve waited for us—”

“My dad is going to kill me if he sees me leaving your tent in my nightclothes,” Inigo hissed. “That or he’ll just set Frederick loose on me which is basically the same thing if not worse.” He groaned. “I see a ten mile run with armor in my future.”

“Then also be discrete!” Say’ri exclaimed, shoving at his back. “Go!”

“I’m going!”

For a few minutes, Inigo thought he’d almost managed it. He kept his head down and didn’t meet the gazes of any of the Shepherds in camp, and he’d not caught sight of anyone who should’ve been at the council before he ducked into his tent.

“Hail, cousin.”

Inigo jumped about a foot in the air, a hand clutching at his chest while his heart did its very best to hammer its way out of his ribcage. “Dear Naga, what have I said about my tent?”

“...That you miss me dearly and you wish I would come visit you more?” Owain ventured, sitting cross-legged on the floor with complete nonchalance.

Inigo didn’t dignify that with a response, instead rummaging to find a shirt that didn’t look slept in.

“You’re late,” his cousin said flatly, after a beat.

“I know, I know,” Inigo replied, making the executive decision his pants were presentable enough as they were. “Er... I’m probably going to regret asking this, but what time is it actually?”

“Nearly nine.”

“And the council was supposed to start... when?”

“Eight,” Owain replied primly.

Inigo groaned.

“We thought to give Say’ri the benefit of the doubt in her absence, in light of recent events, but your presence was rather more expected,” Owain continued. “Not to mention necessary, considering your role in yesterday’s conflict.”

Inigo hoped to any god that was listening that his cousin hadn’t managed to put two and two together in that matter. “I’m sorry, all right? I overslept.” With that he rucked his shirt over his head with significantly less embarrassment than the same situation had left him in last night—he’d learned long ago that Owain had no modesty when it came to such matters and there wasn’t much point in trying to maintain his own.
A long moment stretched out before Owain spoke again. “Interesting, because I’ve been waiting for you for twenty minutes and you certainly weren’t in here. So I must ask, dear cousin, where exactly you were sleeping?”

“Nowhere,” Inigo replied without missing a beat.

“...You’ve discovered the secret to leaving this plane of existence and you used such knowledge to take a nap?”

“That’s not what I—you’re impossible.”

“Not impossible, just rather improbable,” Owain corrected. “If I were impossible I wouldn’t exist.”

“And the world would be quieter for it,” Inigo muttered as he shrugged back into a shirt with slightly fewer wrinkles.

“And your life sadder than it is,” Owain replied with a soulful look. “Anyways, fascinatingly enough, I came ‘round about eleven last night to discuss a matter of grave importance with you, only to find you weren’t here then either.”

“What sort of matter?” Inigo asked.

“It happens to be one that can wait until a more opportune time,” Owain said with a wave of his hand. “But the fact of the matter is I’m well aware you did not retire to your own abode last night, your clothes look slept in, and there were two noticeably absent members of the council this morning. Goodness, my dear Inigo, all that evidence would be damning enough without the hickey.”

“The what?” Inigo gasped, clapping a hand to his neck as the second wave of sheer terror of the morning hit him. Had he wandered through camp without even noticing? He scrambled for the looking glass he knew he had somewhere as his cousin bent double with laughter. “Damn you, Owain!” he cried when his reflection revealed his skin was pale and unmarked. “There’s no such thing!”

“But you wouldn’t have fallen for it if you didn’t have a reason to!” Owain gasped out, practically rolling on the floor as he clutched at his sides.

“That was bloody uncalled for!”

“Oh, I think it was plenty called for after all the secondhand angst you’ve put me through!”

“Like you’re not one to talk!”

“I’m not, in fact!” Owain said. “Er, or... Am I? No, no matter! ‘‘Not going to magically be together in the morning,’ huh?”

“Shut uuuuuup,” Inigo whined, knowing he had to be a shade approaching burgundy.

“I told you,” Owain said in a sing-song voice. “I toooooold you!”

“Yes, Owain is a great foreseer, can you get up off the floor?” Inigo said with exasperation, crossing his arms over his chest. “Since when do you even know what a hickey is?”

“I’m married, Inigo,” was Owain’s reply as he wiped at his eyes.

“Huuush. My innocent ears don’t need to hear this.”
“Not quite so innocent as they were yesterday, eh?” Owain asked with a waggle of his brows.

“We didn’t—shut up, you’re going to give people the wrong idea,” Inigo groaned. “It’s not like we—we didn’t sleep together.” Still several shades more flushed than he wanted to be, he coughed. “Well, I mean, we did. But. You know. Literally.”

“I figured as much, but still extremely impressive for Inigo of the Indigo Skies, Doomed Philanderer of Legend,” Owain said, getting to his feet and clapping Inigo on the shoulder. “C’mon, we’ve a war council to get to.”

“What kind of a nickname is that?” Inigo asked, following on his cousin’s heels.

“The second half should be rather self-explanatory. The first half is not only a fantastic play on words but also a reference to the fact that nothing of interest seems to happen between you and a certain beloved princess of yours during any hour that comes before dusk.”

“That’s not… actually, I think that is true,” Inigo admitted. “Although technically speaking any hour is before dusk, it just depends on which dusk you’re talking about.”

“Technically speaking, nothing was happening at any hour for a good three months, my friend.” He let out an exaggerated sigh. “Better late than never, though, I suppose.”

“Okay, in all seriousness,” Inigo interjected. “Please don’t say… anything. Don’t say anything.”

“Oh, I wasn’t going to,” Owain said, pausing in front of the council tent and dropping his voice. “I’m just going to employ various forms of silent needling that will leave you horrendously uncomfortable for the entirety of this meeting.”

Inigo balked. “Owain, I would rather you literally just stabbed me now and got it over with.”


“Hello,” Inigo said weakly.

“Told you long enough,” Robin muttered. Inigo barely registered her words, much too distracted by the fact that in the same length of time he’d had, Say’ri had managed to get there looking far more presentable and far less flustered than he did. To be fair, she hadn’t had to contend with Owain, he thought as his cousin unceremoniously dropped him in the seat beside her.

“Good morning, Inigo,” she greeted, with hardly an indication that it was not the first time she’d seen him that morning—although she was only glancing at him from the corner of her eye, as if afraid she’d give something away if she looked at him head on.

“Morning,” he managed, then frowned at the feel of a hand on the top of his head. “Owain, why are you petting me?”

“Bedhead,” his cousin said somberly as he took the seat to the other side of him. “It’s quite unflattering, dear cousin.”

“Well stop,” Inigo said, swatting at Owain’s hand. “I doubt it’s helping.”

Chrom cleared his throat, bringing them both up short. “Now that everyone’s here,” he said tersely, “can we get started?”
“One thing, before we do,” Robin put in, peering around Owain. “Inigo.”

“...Yes?” he said, his voice quite a bit higher than he would’ve liked.

The tactician let out a slight breath before saying, “I wanted to apologize for how I acted toward you yesterday. I was harsher than I should’ve been.”

“Nothing to worry about, my dear Robin,” Inigo replied.

“Hey,” Owain muttered.

Ignoring him, Inigo continued, “We all know that sometimes battle forces us to be shorter with each other than we’d like, and you were right. Frankly, I probably needed the push.”

“Very true, now please stop flirting with my wife,” Owain grumbled. Flavia cackled.

“I’m not—I said three words!”

“My friend, in your case any three words you exchange with a woman are three words too many —”

“Hush you,” Robin chided, cutting Owain off. “Anyways, Chrom?”

“Tell me to hush,” Owain grumbled. “You should be telling him to hush.”

“Maybe she just likes me better,” Inigo teased.

“Likes you—” Owain started to cry. “I am her other half! Her most beloved! Her soulmate! Do not whisper such heresy in my presence!”

Inigo leaned over to whisper, “Revenge is a dish best served hot.”

He could have sworn her heard Say’ri give a soft snort of laughter before Chrom, very loudly and pointedly, cleared his throat. “Could we possibly begin this at some point today?”

Before the words had even left his lips, the tent flap pushed open. “Milord,” Frederick said smartly, only to be cut off by the Exalt’s groan before he could get out another sound.

“I give up,” Chrom muttered, then sighed. “What is it, Frederick?”

“A company of Yen’fay’s has just reached the edge of camp,” the knight said, then hurriedly added, “They come under a white flag.”

“They wish to talk?” Chrom asked, lifting a brow. At Frederick’s nod, he blinked, then said, “Well, let’s go talk, then.”

“Milord,” Frederick said again as Chrom rose. “They asked specifically to speak with Lady Say’ri.”

A beat passed as every gaze turned to her. “...Aye?” She laid a palm flat on the table and only Inigo was close enough to catch the way it trembled.

Love? he nearly murmured, only catching himself at the last possible moment with a quiet exhale and a curl of his fingers.

“Did they say what for?” Robin asked sharply.
“Nay, milady, but their commander was extremely insistent.”

“Trap,” Owain muttered. “Such obstinacy can only rouse suspicions of a double-cross.”

“Unfortunately, my thoughts exactly,” Robin said. “Say’ri, I’m going to say this is unlikely to be anything good.”

There was something desperate Inigo had never seen before in the gaze Say’ri shot him for only half a second before she cleared her throat and spoke again. “I imagine not, nay.” She paused, her voice growing quiet. “They know whose hand he died by.”

“Well, they’re just going to have to deal with me, then,” Chrom said firmly, stepping toward the exit.

“I did not say I wouldn’t go, Lord Chrom.”

The entire room paused. “Hey, did you miss the whole part about ‘almost definitely a trap,’ love?” Inigo asked, not quite catching the endearment this time and kicking himself for a moment before he remembered it wasn’t the first time he’d called her that in public.

This time her eyes were steely when she fixed them on him. “‘Twouldn’t be the first time. I’ve faith Lady Robin can pull through.”

“They asked to speak with her, as well,” Frederick put in ruefully. “As the Ylissean League’s tactician.”

“...Trap,” Robin said again. “If it were me, one of the most prominent figureheads of the opposing force and the strategist behind all their victories would be exactly who I would take out.”

“Well then neither of you are going!” Inigo said, voice rising.

“A motion I wholeheartedly second,” Owain put in.

“Yeah, one big fat problem with that, boys,” Flavia drawled. “You might’ve taken out Yen’fay, but you didn’t make that big of a dent in his forces. They’ll probably turn around and slaughter us all if we don’t play nice.”

“Unfortunately true once again,” said Robin. “So for right now we have to play by their rules.”

“You’re going to saunter right into the ambush they’ve surely set?” Owain asked, aghast.

“Please, dear,” Robin said, patting his knee before shooting him a wink. “Surely you know me better than that by now.”

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“Hey. You’re sure you’re okay with this?”

The sideways look Say’ri sent him was borderline unreadable—like she couldn’t quite decide if she’d rather kiss Inigo or throttle him—and it made tension settle heavily in his stomach. “I’d not have agreed if I weren’t,” she replied shortly, facing forward again.
Inigo bit back a sigh and did the same, though he could see little more than the back of Frederick’s armor. The knight stood to Chrom’s right, the Exalt in full armor himself, as were Stahl and Sully to his left. Should things go south, they had four metal-encased human shields ahead of them, despite protests that Chrom was one of them.

Behind that line in much lighter attire, prepared for mobility in case of a quick escape, Inigo and Owain respectively flanked Say’ri and Robin. To their rear were Miriel and Henry, spellbooks at the ready for what was sure to be a very explosive distraction, should it be called for. And that was without counting the fact Gaius, Lon’qu, and Virion were strategically placed in the woods, outflanking Yen’fay’s former company.

The message couldn’t have been clearer if they’d held up a sign and had the lettering stamped on their foreheads: We don’t trust you.

There was nothing to be done but to immediately acknowledge it. “While I appreciate your wariness,” came an icy voice, “I can assure you we have naught in the way of ill intentions.”

Inigo managed to place the voice a moment before Say’ri gave a sharp intake of breath and murmured, “Chi’hiro.” She stood on her tiptoes, trying to peer over Chrom’s shoulders to pinpoint the tiny woman among the two dozen men gathered. “I hadn’t realized she yet lived.”

“A near thing, if we’re being honest,” Inigo muttered under his breath, but she didn’t seem to hear.

“I asked,” Yen’fay’s retainer said, her voice not growing an ounce warmer, “to speak with Lady Say’ri.”

“Aye, Chi’hiro, and I’m here,” Say’ri replied, pushing past Inigo with a very clear look of stay put that he promptly ignored, following at her heels as she unceremoniously abandoned the formation they’d spent the last half an hour coming up with to ensure the safety of Chi’hiro’s two most likely targets. “What do you wish of me?”

“Milady,” Chi’hiro breathed, gaze dropping immediately in reverence. “I must pray your forgiveness for what has transpired of late. Please know it has caused me nothing but pain to see you from only the other side of battle.”

“Forgiveness,” Say’ri said flatly, her tone disbelieving. “You ask my clemency after having spent the last year in the service of the man who destroyed our country, who murdered our dynasts—my parents—and who has wrought not but death and destruction in his wake? He who you so gleefully bowed to whilst neither you nor Yen’fay ever bothered to inform me ‘twas all a ruse on my behalf?”

Still not looking up, Chi’hiro had a rueful note in her voice when she spoke again. “Then you’ve learned the truth.”

“Aye, and from that repugnant shadow of a man that is Walhart’s tactician,” Say’ri spat, before her voice softened slightly, “rather than a woman I once considered as dear to me as mine own kin.” She took a step closer, arms held out. “Forgiveness is a difficult thing to ask when ‘tis I who must live, for the rest of my life, with the knowledge that my only brother was slain by mine own hand. So tell me what it is you really wish, Chi’hiro, because as of right now you’ll not be getting that.”

Finally looking up, Chi’hiro said softly, “Your brother… was a brilliant man. We both know that. Honorable to a fault, yes… but a schemer when he needed to be.”

“I’ve already learned of his bargain with Excellus,” Say’ri said coldly.
“Aye, but if ‘twas him you spoke to you’ve not heard the full tale,” Chi’hiro replied. “Though we climbed through Walhart’s ranks together, myself as Yen’fay’s second, my lord managed one very neat thing—one that still nigh befuddles me.”

“And that would be?” Say’ri asked, her tone clearly growing short.

“He was able to prevent me from ever swearing my fealty directly to Walhart,” Chi’hiro replied, then paused a moment to let that settle. “My loyalty remained to Yen’fay, and Yen’fay alone… and hence to the crown of Chon’sin.” The barest fragment of a smile came to her lips. “And as such, Lady Say’ri, my service now returns to you.”

Say’ri didn’t answer immediately, shooting a look first towards Chrom, then Robin. “I see. A boon and an honor to have you return to my side, Chi’hiro, but I cannot see why you’ve made such a commotion over it.”

Chi’hiro, surprisingly enough, let out a chuckle, her gaze flicking to Robin—who was staring with eyes narrowed, a hand pressed to her chin. “You’ve realized, haven’t you?”

“You’re Yen’fay’s second,” the tactician answered immediately. “And Yen’fay is dead.”

“Exactly.” Chi’hiro lifted her chin. “And with his death, control of the southern divisions reverts to the next highest commander.”

“…You,” Chrom said.

“I, who have never sworn myself to Walhart,” Chi’hiro confirmed. “Lady Say’ri,” she said formally, “my forces are yours to command. Three hundred thousand of Walhart’s finest, ready and awaiting your orders.”

A very long silence dragged out.


“I’m all ears,” Robin said eagerly.

“But first…” Chi’hiro paused to draw in a breath. “Milady, your brother’s final outstanding order as my liege… was for me to ensure you received this.”

She moved as if to draw a weapon, leaving Inigo’s hand dropping to Falchion’s hilt automatically even with her hand raised in a gesture of nonaggression. A familiar glint of gold hit the light, far cleaner than when last he’d seen it.

“Amatsu,” Say’ri whispered, her voice not quite breaking but coming very near.

“Aye, milady,” Chi’hiro said, dropping to her knees to lay the sword at Say’ri’s feet in a way that brought Inigo back to a long doomed future. “Yours, now, and I’ve faith you’ll wield it well.”

Say’ri looked as if whatever she wanted to answer got caught in her throat, and a moment later Chi’hiro had turned her attentions back to Robin, making rapid-fire plots of tactics.

“Soooo…” Owain said, dragging the word out as he appeared suddenly at Inigo’s side. “Rather surprised this wasn’t a trap.”
“No,” Inigo said, feeling a grin spread over his face as he snuck an arm around Owain’s neck, ruffling his hair obnoxiously in a very satisfying payback from earlier. “This wasn’t a trap.” Say’ri was still beside him, Amatsu now at her hip, and with a burst of levity he snaked his opposite arm around her shoulders as well, drawing them both closer as he glanced between the two. “This is us about to go win a war.”
It was dinnertime that night before Inigo even had a moment to breathe again. “Tell me what’s happening,” he said, dropping unceremoniously beside Owain in the mess tent. “My father’s had me running around like a chicken with my devastatingly attractive head cut off.”

“My vaunted cousin, you’re not devastatingly attractive as a human, why would you think you’d be as an unfortunately witless domesticated fowl?”

“You know I can name plenty of people who beg to differ on that, right? Er, as a human, at least, not sure about the chicken part.”

“Plenty being… two?” Owain put in. “Also, you can’t count your mother, she’s obligated to think her children are good looking—which summarily narrows your pool to one, and as such that can be chalked up to an unfortunately misguided opinion.”

“Hey, you know, this is not what I came over here to talk about,” Inigo said with a pointed cough, though he felt his cheeks heat up at the memory of a certain prim What a waste.

“Funny, because you’re the one who brought it up—”

“Owain.”

His cousin rolled his eyes, leaning back in his seat. “Yes, we have a plan. As a sign of good faith Chi’hiro’s going to lend us a small force, should we come up against any factions still loyal to Walhart. Their cover is that Yen’fay’s death did not sit well and they turned coat to follow Say’ri. Meanwhile, to maintain the element of surprise, the rest of her army is going to ‘pursue’ us north to Castle Valm, as if in hopes of recapturing their defecting men.”

Inigo blinked, pondering the plot for a moment, then asked, “And when you say a ‘small force,’ you mean…?”

A beat passed before Owain shook his head, a disbelieving chuckle escaping him. “Ten thousand.”

“...Ten thousand,” Inigo repeated, then whistled. “Naga above, how overpowered do you have to be to give away ten thousand men as a sign of good faith? That’s almost as many as the entire army we brought over from Ylisse.”

“I know,” Owain said. “At this rate our confrontation with Walhart is going to be nothing more than a formality.”

The thought sobered Inigo almost instantly, making him look down at his plate. “Mm, but still one I could do without.”

A long silence stretched out before Owain spoke again. “Hey, you know, I still need to talk to you
“Right!” Inigo said, forcing his tone into something a little more sunny and trying not to think about the fact he hadn’t seen Say’ri since morning. “What’s up?”

Owain shook his head. “Finish consuming your rations of sustenance,” he said gravely.

“Dinner,” Inigo corrected.

Owain waved a hand, then gave a pointed glance around the tent. “It’s not something to be discussed here.”

“That’s ominous,” Inigo said through a mouthful.

“Depends on your definition,” Owain replied cryptically.

With those nebulous words ringing in his ears, Inigo rather unceremoniously shoved the rest of his food in his mouth as quickly as he could and got to his feet, following on Owain’s heels toward somewhere less public.

“I spent last night speaking with those of our old company,” Owain finally said as they wound through lines of tents.

“Our old… you mean us kids?” Inigo asked. “What for?”

“I had a hunch. An ill-remembered suspicion, more accurately. Thankfully, by cross-referencing among us, we were able to draw the correct conclusion—turns out I was right.” Owain paused at the edge of a clearing in camp, firelight catching his eyes when he turned his gaze back on Inigo. A large company of the Shepherds were gathered around the blaze, but still far enough away as to be out of hearing distance. “Inigo, it was in yesterday’s battle, in our timeline, that Ricken and Kellam both laid down their lives.”

Inigo swore for a second his heart stopped—he remembered, clearly, ordering both of them yesterday at various points in the battle. Both mage and knight had been in the west flank; both under his command. “Oh, gods,” he murmured, knowing his face had to have gone white.

He remembered clambering back over the field after Yen’fay’s death, half-carrying Say’ri in grief-filled silence as he kept his gaze resolutely forward, knowing if he let himself look at the bodies before him the weight of their lives on his shoulders would have brought him to his knees. It nearly did now, knowing he’d let his eyes sweep unknowingly over a man no one noticed and a boy who just wanted to grow up.

“Inigo.” Owain’s voice said it wasn’t the first time he’d spoken again, as did the strength of his grip on his cousin’s arm. “Listen.”

Inigo paused, waiting for whatever paragraphs-long reassurance he was surely about to be given, but it wasn’t Owain that spoke.

No one spoke, actually—what reached him was a high, gleeful laugh from the campfire.

Ricken’s laugh.

Inigo’s gaze snapped toward the clearing, eyes locking onto the young mage, who was bent nearly double cackling at something Lissa had said. Ricken finally caught his breath, pushing himself upright, and the only thing Inigo could think was how bright he looked.
He swallowed hard, looking around again, though the second target of his search proved harder to
find. By the time he finally found Kellam, the dark-haired knight almost unrecognizable without
his armor, he was certain his gaze had actually swept over him several times. Kellam looked far
more subdued than Ricken, at the fringes of the group and sitting by himself, but with a slight
smile on his face that proved he was so very alive.

“Wait,” Inigo said, taking a step backward. “Wait, but they—if they didn’t—”

“They didn’t,” Owain replied softly. “Two men who would’ve been dead in another world yet live,
Inigo. And the only thing I can point to as different is that we were there this time. You were there.
You pulled that west line back together, fast enough that you had Robin in my ear voicing disbelief,
and I believe with all my heart that’s what saved their lives.” His hold on Inigo’s elbow tightened.
“Stop dwelling on the lives you’ve lost and start thinking about the ones you’ve saved. And the
ones you still will save.”

Say’ri didn’t need to be spoken—it came across in the thick determination in Owain’s voice. For a
moment, Inigo almost believed him. If not for… “Emmeryn,” he said quietly.

“Indeed, the thought of the late Exalt has consumed my mind as well. And perhaps it’s possible,”
he nodded toward Ricken and Kellam, “they are living on nothing but borrowed time. But on the
other hand… perhaps they’re not.” Owain tilted his head in a fashion that was almost birdlike, his
free hand drumming on his thigh. “I’ve long held the private suspicion that Emmeryn’s death
was… necessary, however it happened. Think of how much longer the Plegian War might’ve
dragged on without our foes being so unwilling to fight. Think of how even now, even in Valm,
people still speak of her fall with reverence. However bitter a drink it is to swallow, I think we’d
have been worse off had she lived.”

Inigo glanced away, rubbing a hand on the back of his neck. “Perhaps you’re right…” he
murmured.

“I don’t think I could ever say the same of Say’ri,” Owain whispered. “This world we’re making is
going to need her. Chon’sin needs her.” A beat. “My dear cousin, you need her.”

Inigo closed his eyes and sighed when he found those words did nothing but further tangle the knot
of emotion that had been sitting tight and painful in his chest since the night before.

“If there is one thing I can get through to you,” Owain said, “it’s this: The fear that whispers to
you, that creeps into your bed at night and tells you you can’t save anyone, that you will never be
enough to live up to your predecessors, that you are anything less than an Exalt I am proud
to follow… That fear is lying.”

The lump came to Inigo’s throat faster than he could swallow it back, forcing him to glance away
and take a shuddering breath. “I… Naga, Owain, I don’t know what to say.”

“You could try ‘Pray thank you, my most beloved and dearest compatriot, keeper of fell darkness
and lifter of my sensitive, weeping soul—’”

“Oh, be quiet,” Inigo said with a watery laugh, elbowing him.

“Hmph. I go through all the trouble of arranging this aforementioned soul-lifting scenario and
that’s the thanks I get?” Owain grumbled. “‘Be quiet’?”

“Yeah, pretty much,” Inigo replied. “Honestly, I feel like half of what I say to you is some
variation on that phrase.”
Owain rolled his eyes, reaching over to wrap his arm around Inigo’s shoulders and summarily ignoring his cousin’s squirming protests. “Happy birthday, you nerd.”

“Nerd!” Inigo cried. “I am not the nerd of the two of us!”

“No, you’re just the one so locked into traditional conventions of compliments you won’t take it as one—ow! Inigo! You dare make use of the dreaded Strike of Fatal Pinching?”

“Oh, I dare,” Inigo shot back with a smirk, slipping from Owain’s grasp and backing away with a threatening snap of his fingers. “What are you going to do about it?”

Owain paused, throwing a hand over his face in his trademark pose. “Oh, I could do so many things, my dear cousin… I’ve many a move aching to see the light of day and the heat of battle… Effervescent Dusk Barrage… Ultimate Blitz of the Nether… The Thunderous Tiptoeing Trap—hey, get back here! Inigo!”

His only answer was a shriek of laughter as Inigo spun on his heel and darted away.

“Treachery! Perfidy!” Owain cried, taking off after him. “My own blood! I’ll have you for this!”

“If you can catch me!”

Inigo tore through camp, light and fleet-footed and significantly faster than his bulkier cousin. Within a few moments of ducking and darting through the rows of tents, he was convinced he’d actually lost Owain and pulled up short, slightly panting. That was easier than I’d —

“Shadow Strike of Nightmare Redux!”

Evidently having found another path, Owain launched himself from somewhere at Inigo’s left, his battle cry his only warning before they both went down in the dirt, tussling like boys half their age.

“Ha,” Owain said when they’d both caught their breath. “I win.”

“Get off,” Inigo grumbled, wheezing a little.

“Say please.”

“I’ll sock you.”

“Close enough.” Grinning, Owain rolled off him, landing on his own back on the ground. After a moment, he tilted his head back, gazing up. “Oh. Hi dear.”

Startled, Inigo did the same. “Ah. Good evening, Robin,” he managed. Acting on the instinctive reaction of a five-year-old, he pointed at Owain. “He started it.”

Arms crossed, but with a glimmer of amusement in her eyes and a desperately contained quirk in her lips, Robin merely peered down at both of them. “You know, I’m not even going to ask.”

“Wise decision, lady of my heart,” Owain agreed sagely.

Robin shook her head, not quite managing to hide the fondness on her features, and moved past them.

Even after she left, the two boys still stayed on the ground, laying side-by-side like they had so many times before, twin sighs escaping both their lips at the same moment. “Owain, I.. had a question for you,” Inigo said quietly.
“Indeed, fire away, and I shall endeavour to answer you to the best of my knowledge.”

“You’re… familiar with Falchion, yeah?”

Owain shot him a look. “For how little you allow me to lay my blighted swordhand on its divine hilt, yes.” Inigo rolled his eyes. “Why do you ask?”

“...Do you know of any reason why it would… er, glow?”

A beat passed. “Was it, perhaps, particularly sunny out?”

“Would I be asking you this if that was the answer?”

“Okay, so that’s a no.”

Inigo pressed his palm to his forehead. “It started sometime after I took over the west flank yesterday, though I’m not entirely sure when. It had stopped again by the time I retrieved it from when Yen’fay disarmed me.”

After a long silence, Owain said, “I must admit I’ve never heard of such an otherworldly occurrence.”

Inigo sighed. “I was afraid of that.”

“However, that does not prevent me from attempting to come up with a hypothesis,” Owain continued. “There does lie the potential that it is, perhaps, a sign from Naga herself.”

“...Really? That’s the conclusion you come up with?”

“Hey, it’s not as far fetched as you seem to believe. Falchion is one of her own fangs, Inigo. It’s not unreasonable to think she could still bear a connection to it… Nor unthinkable she might use it as a form of communication. We’re not exactly within daytrip distance of Mount Prism right now.”

“To communicate what, though?” Inigo asked.

Owain paused for a long moment. “Maybe that you got it right,” he finally whispered. “Maybe that they’re saved for good.” Another beat dragged out before he said, “Of course, it’s all just a theory. I could be completely wrong.”

“Mm,” Inigo said. “Maybe. I suppose it’ll stay a mystery.”

Silence hit them again before Owain spoke again. “So, twenty, huh?” he finally ventured. “Feel older?”

Inigo shrugged. “Not really. I mean I… never thought I’d live to see twenty.”

“Nor did I,” Owain admitted softly.

“I… I wouldn’t have if not for you,” Inigo said, affection coming haltingly when it wasn’t in the form of posturing and teasing. “I—Naga, Owain, I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Yeah, I don’t know what you’d do without me either,” Owain replied flippantly. “Cry, probably. At least more so than usual.”

A long moment stretched out before Inigo sighed again. “You know, for about a third of a second there I thought we were having a moment.”
“Gross,” Owain replied. “Go have a moment with Say’ri if you want one so badly, just leave me out of it.”

“How old are you, six?”

“Our birthdays are but three weeks apart and you’ve already forgotten my age?” Owain asked forlornly.

“Well maybe if you were capable of acting older than twelve I wouldn’t have that problem,” Inigo shot back.

“Age is but a number, my friend.”

“Yeah, and heroes of legend can’t do math,” Inigo replied.

“I said I didn’t need math, not that I couldn’t do it!”

“What’s sixty-nine times twenty-seven?”

Owain paused, brow furrowed as he gestured absently to himself, then hurriedly said, “Hey, what’s that even got to do with anything?”

Inigo giggled to himself, crossing his ankles and lacing his hands together over his stomach, uncaring of the fact they were laying in the middle of a fairly major pathway.

They both fell silent, neither moving beyond softly slowing breaths. Finally, Inigo inhaled deeply and whispered, “I told her.”

“...Told who?”

“Say’ri.”

“How you felt? Yes, I gathered that from the events of this morn.”

Inigo shook his head. “No. Well… yes, but what I meant was… about Walhart.”

Owain shot him a sharp glance, but his voice was measured when he spoke. “Ah. How’d she take it?”

“Uh, let’s go with ‘not well,’” Inigo replied.

“‘Not well’ as in crying or ‘not well’ as in screaming?”

“...Closer to the latter, I suppose,” Inigo said. “Although I think she was more upset that I hadn’t told her than at the actual news. Which… I mean, on top of everything, that really probably wasn’t the best time to drop ‘hey, you might only have two months to live’ on her, was it?”

A long moment stretched out before Owain said, “You’re really very bad at this.”

“Shut up, I know that already.” Inigo blew out another breath and reached up to run a hand through his hair. “I need to go talk to her, don’t I?”

Owain quirked a brow. “Aha, he can learn!”

“I swear to Naga, Owain—” Inigo started, only to be soundly ignored as his cousin dramatically clutched at his heart.
“At long last, Exalt Inigo of the Indigo Skies discovers the secret that has so long eluded him! *Communication!* No longer shall he wallow in silent sorrow, unable to comprehend the fact that his most beloved, however lovely she may be, does not possess the talent of reading minds.”

“I’m leaving,” Inigo announced.

“Have fuuuuuun.”

“Shut uuuuuup.”

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Inigo had actually dared to hope, with how comfortable things had been the night before, that perhaps it would stay that way.

He’d been wrong.

“Say’ri?” Her name came out as little more than a whisper, and though the light in her tent betrayed she was inside, she didn’t answer. He sucked in a breath and rubbed his hands together, wincing at how clammy they’d suddenly gotten. “Say’ri, it’s Inigo.”

Silence stretched out, long enough that he was about to try a third time when she finally said, “Aye?”

“...Can I talk to you?”

Another long moment that left Inigo catching the hem of his shirt in his fist. “Come,” Say’ri said at last.

She didn’t look up when he entered, bent over a wide sheath that could only be made to hold Amatsu, needles flashing in and out of the leather as she repaired a loose stitch. Inigo briefly noticed the sword itself was propped up in the corner, but the rest of him was far too transfixed on the woman who wielded it.

“What do you wish of me?” Say’ri asked, a hardness in her tone he hadn’t heard since Rosanne. She still wasn’t looking at him, either, and the combination made his heart drop with trepidation.

“I wanted…” Inigo trailed off, wondering if those two words had managed to describe everything he felt about her. *I wanted.*

“Yes?”

It was gone, Inigo realized abruptly. The comfort, the intimacy had vanished without a trace, as if it had never been. For a terrible moment he was afraid it had all been a dream.

*No,* he thought firmly.

“I was worried about you,” he finally whispered. “With—everything—I… Say’ri…” He swallowed. “This Chi’hiro, do you trust her?”

“Aye,” Say’ri answered, her stitching not even pausing. “I’ve known her half my life. You need not question her loyalty.”
It was quite possibly the shortest answer she could have given him. Inigo shut his eyes, taking in a shuddering breath.

“Is that all?”

“Gods, Say’ri, don’t do this to me.” The desperate whisper escaped his lips before he could stop it.

A long moment dragged out before she said, “Do what, exactly?”

“You know what!” he burst out, eyes snapping open to see she still hadn’t lifted her gaze from that cursed piece of leather. “It’s not like—you can’t just pretend last night didn’t happen!”

“Aye, and I won’t,” she replied, her voice far more measured than his. “I’ll keep it dear to my heart, always.” She set the sheath aside, getting to her feet but with her eyes still cast away from him. “But it shan’t happen again.”

“Say’ri—”

She moved to her desk, projecting her words over her shoulder. “‘Twas a foolish, foolish thing we did last night,” she said quietly. “Because all it’s done is given me a taste of what I know I cannot have. I know now, Inigo, I understand why you would never wed me, why we must not—” She broke off to draw in a breath. “You made it clear to me why we cannot be, and I accept that. But you cannot expect me to linger at your side within arm’s reach of everything I wish. I love you, Inigo, irrational as it may be, and if you requite a fraction of that then let me have my distance.”

His heart both lifted and broke at her words, some undefinable force tugging him toward her.

“Love me?” he asked softly. “You won’t even look at me.”

“You think ‘tis not agony to?” she demanded, her voice finally rising above her carefully metered tone. “You think I can even see your face without being consumed by what could have been and never will—”

Inigo cut her off with a boldness he’d never known he had, catching her shoulder with one hand to spin her toward him and covering her mouth with his.

“Now I know how everyone else feels when I’m too busy freaking out to shut up and listen,” he whispered, lips still inches from hers.

“Inigo,” Say’ri whispered in a pained voice, eyes still closed with tears glittering barely unshed on her lashes. Her hands had caught his arms just above the elbow, fingers curling tightly around the fabric of his shirt. “Please.”

“Two minutes,” he said softly, tucking her hair behind her ear. “Give me two minutes, and if you still want to send me away, I’ll go.”

After a beat, she nodded and he drew in a breath.

“You were right, you know,” he said, tracing the shell of her ear. “That day you were shot, when we were still at Storash… you asked me if I really thought one man could slay Grima alone.” He shook his head. “And the sad thing is I did. I thought… I’m the Exalt, I’m the leader, and the burden is mine and mine alone.”

Finally, slowly, she lifted her eyes to him and got a soft smile in return.

“It’s not,” he whispered. “No one can carry that without help… especially not someone who’s
already as broken as I am.”

“Inigo—”

“I think I’ve got one more minute, love,” he murmured, touching his thumb to her lips. “Just let me finish.” At her nod, he started again. “Point being, I… I…” He paused. “Damn, this is harder to put into words than I thought it would be. Say’ri, love, it took me far longer than it should have to realize I can’t face this alone. What I knew from the start, though, was that the moment I let myself… have you, I was never going to be able to go back.” He’d rather wanted to use a different four letter word than have, but hadn’t quite been able to make his lips form it. “That’s why I tried so hard to stave you off for so long, because once this happened…” He carefully gestured to what little space remained between them. “And if you die, I…”

“You’d rather never have me than risk losing me,” Say’ri said, her tone sounding like it was something she’d heard rather than something she’d come up with.

A bitter nod. “After everything else I’ve lost, I can’t… But I can’t go back, either. I can’t return to watching and wishing when you’re right here. Say’ri… gods, if we only have two months then let me have two months. If I’m going to shatter anyways then at least let me do it with memories instead of regrets.”

“You won’t,” she said, reaching up to trace his jaw. “You’re stronger than that.”

“I’m really not.” He ducked his head. “So there’s my piece. I’m here and I’m scared out of my mind but I can’t pretend anymore. I knew the moment I held you once I was never going to be able to let go. So I’m asking… asking if you’d be willing to stay with me for however long we have.”

A very long moment stretched out, and Inigo finally forced himself to step away, his face starting to flush as he cleared his throat.

“Right. So, I’m assuming this is the part where my two minutes run out and you send me away,” he said ruefully.

Instead, Say’ri spoke with her voice colored with disbelief. “If I didn’t know you better I’d have believed that to be a proposal.”

“I—” Inigo all but squeaked, only to find he couldn’t find the words to either confirm or deny such a statement.

“I know ’twas not,” she hurried to say. “And even if ’twas… I would have to decline. If only,” she continued, “because I could not bring myself to saddle you with Chon’sin’s trouble as well as your own if I should perish.”

Her words dropped a weight off his shoulders, but he still couldn’t bring himself to speak.

“I only ask if you’re sure,” Say’ri said. “If you truly wish to tie yourself to me, after everything I’ve done and all that might await us. Do you really care to take that risk?”

Are you really going to risk losing me? she asked with nothing but her eyes.

Inigo took one more deep breath and closed the distance between them again. “Do you know what the last words I said in my original timeline were?” he asked softly.

She shook her head.
“'I challenge my fate,'” he whispered, and kissed her again.
Chapter Summary

Calm before the storm.

A day went by, then another.

Two days turned into three, and then a week. One week turned into two; two turned into a month. A month turned into six weeks, then seven, then eight as the Ylissean League, plus ten thousand, journeyed north.

Inigo could hardly catch a glimpse of a sunset without thinking _One less day._

Say’ri always seemed to know the moment such a thought crossed his mind—if they were alone, she’d reach over and squeeze his hand or lean her head against his; if they weren’t, she’d give him a knowing look and a slight little smile he was learning was only for him. It usually calmed the seize of his heart and soothed the panic clawing at his throat, but sometimes the only thing that would keep him sane was spending the night in her arms.

It had been four nights after the first they spent together that she’d shown up at his tent at two in the morning, shivering and borderline incoherent when he poked his head out. It had taken him almost ten minutes to pry out of her that she’d dreamt of Yen’fay. Far too familiar with horror of nightmares himself, he’d let her stay, stroking her hair until she’d finally dozed off in his bedroll. She’d left before the sun rose with a peck on his forehead, but with that the precedent had been set, and at least once a week one would show up at the other’s tent, never there before midnight and always gone before dawn.

Neither of them went out of their way to announce or advertize their relationship, partially because neither of them seemed to know how to categorize it in the first place. Say’ri shied away from anything relating to courtship or betrothal, fearing an implication that would force Inigo onto the throne of Chon’sin. On the other hand, they both agreed that something as informal as _boyfriend and girlfriend_ was far too cheesy and could only manage to cheapen what had happened between them. Inigo privately thought perhaps _lover_ would fit best, if such a word didn’t carry connotations of a certain physical aspect that definitely hadn’t happened yet—not with her so proper and him so bashful.

Without title, without label, they simply… _were._ Free moments were spent with each other, savored in case they never came again, and as they days closed in the nights they spent together became more common than not.

It was how Inigo knew that neither of them were managing to sleep more than four hours at a stretch, and how Say’ri plainly noticed he was eating enough to keep himself alive and little more. Dark circles and gaunt cheeks were acknowledged with tiny, concerned glances but never spoken of.

Every day the battle drew a little closer, and every day the cracks grew a little more.

And so, practically on the doorstep of Castle Valm, Say’ri’s voice only held the barest touch of
surprise when Inigo showed up at only nine o’clock. “You’re early.”

“I know,” he said. She must have noticed the hoarseness of his tone, or perhaps that his eyes were already red-rimmed and bloodshot, because she’d wrapped her arms around him before the tent flap even fell shut.

She didn’t need to ask—he honestly didn’t even know why she did when they’d spent almost the entirety of the last two days locked in war councils. “‘Tis tomorrow, isn’t it?”

Tomorrow.

Tomorrow morning they launched their assault. Tomorrow they faced Walhart. Tomorrow the Valm War ended.

Tomorrow it was over, one way or another.

“Yeah,” Inigo whispered against her shoulder, and wondered if he’d ever hold her like this again. “Can I stay?”

“Of course.” She pulled away, moving to her desk, and held up a small kettle. “I just made tea,” she offered, then shook her head at the trepidation on his face. “Ylissean,” she added.

“Oh. Please,” Inigo replied absently, more intent on watching her than anything else.

Say’ri didn’t speak again until she had nearly finished doctoring the tea to his tastes. “You weren’t at dinner again,” she said, her voice carefully measured as she turned around.

“I was with Owain and Robin. Strategy.”

She gave a soft sigh. “Inigo, you might’ve at least—”

“Love,” he interrupted with a rueful grin, “I rather doubt dinner would have stayed down long anyways.” He stepped closer, catching the mug with one hand while he lifted the other to her chin. “Hey, don’t worry about me. I’m just peachy.”

“You’re a horrific liar,” she accused softly.

“Maybe you just know me too well,” he shot back.

Say’ri had no answer for that but a shake of her head. Eventually, though, she said, “We should have dinner together tomorrow night,” she said firmly. “In here. Just the two of us.”

Inigo dropped his hand, throat working for a moment. “Tomorrow—Love…”

“Perhaps even forgo the tea in favor of wine?” she offered lightly. “Make a proper date of it, aye?”

“Say’ri…”

“Inigo.” This time she pressed her hand to his face, stroking her thumb over his jaw. “I fully intend to still be here tomorrow night. Especially with such tempting plans awaiting me.” She searched his gaze. “We’re not to be anywhere near where Walhart will be. And even if we were… I’ve faith in you, my love.”

“…Gods, come here,” Inigo said roughly, setting his still untouched drink back on her desk to embrace her again.
The shudder that went through her revealed her flippancy was as much of a front as his own.

“I’m so glad you’re going to be with me tomorrow,” he murmured.

“Where else would I be?”

“Oh, I don’t know. You could’ve found yourself a suitor far less scarred than I, for one.”

“Aye, mayhap I could have.” Say’ri pulled back just enough to meet his gaze, tilting her head a little in a very clear, very tempting invitation. “Excepting the fact I wanted you.”

“Strange decision, but I’ll take it,” Inigo said, leaning in.

His lips hadn’t yet met hers when a loud whoop that sounded suspiciously like Sully sounded from outside, followed by a chorus of raucous laughter.

Say’ri blinked, then sighed. “Do they wish to face battle hungover?”

“Yeeeeeeeeeaaah!” came a yell that was absolutely Vaike.

“...To be fair, at this point I’m pretty sure Vaike and Sully are immune to hangovers,” Inigo pointed out. “Either that or they’re just hungover so perpetually they don’t notice anymore. As for the rest... Well, as we say in Ylisse, ‘Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.’”

“Your people have a very strange sense of humor,” Say’ri said.

“You’ve clearly not spent enough time with Feroxis.”

More yelling came from outside, leaving Say’ri to reply, “That might be a good thing.”

“...Maybe my tent would be better,” Inigo suggested.

“Aye, let’s do that.”

They had no sooner left the tent that she linked their hands together. He shot her a glance—dark though it might have already been, neither one of them tended to be so overtly affectionate anywhere outside the privacy of a tent. The next beat, though, she pressed her shoulder to his, far closer than she needed to be, and he let her.

After all, she might never get to again.

He shook that thought away with a quiet, strangled sound in his throat and dropped a kiss to the top of her head as the sounds of drunken revelry faded.

“...not being ridiculous!” came in another voice, immediately recognizable as Owain even at a distance. Inigo shot a glance toward the tent his cousin shared with Robin as they passed and shook his head.

“I find that unlikely, Owain,” he muttered to himself, drawing a chuckle from Say’ri that drowned out whatever muted reply Robin gave to her husband.

“... perfectly reasonable course of action!”

“Well maybe I need...” Robin started, her voice rising to audible levels for a few words before it dropped off again.
“...need? You’ve nearly twelve thousand men at your disposal, you don’t need...”

“Ah,” Inigo said dryly. “Marital bliss.”

“Clearly something you’ve no interest in,” Say’ri replied in the same droll tone.

“Oh, you know,” Inigo replied with a quirking grin. “Perhaps down the line, if I met the right woman—and by that of course I could only mean you, my love, please stop glaring at me like that—ow, Say’ri, my ears are attached to me you know, I meant you —”

“Just making sure,” she demurred, reaching up to soothe where she’d tweaked his ear by ghosting her lips over the rim.

“Goodness, aren’t you insatiable tonight.”

“As you said,” she whispered. “Eat, drink, and be merry.”

And they were back to the wyvern in the room, Inigo thought ruefully.

“Inigo,” Say’ri said softly. “You do know that if you were... to meet someone else—”

“No, Say’ri.”

“I mean only that I want you to be happy,” Say’ri continued. “And if that may not be me—I don’t wish you to cut yourself off from someone else that could make you happy for the sake of—”

“I don’t want anyone else,” Inigo said desperately. “Love, if the flirting bothers you I wish you’d said, I thought you knew it didn’t mean anything, nothing more than a habit at this point—”

“I mean if I’m dead, Inigo.”

Her words sent him reeling and suddenly he was ten years old again, sitting in Ylisstol palace with Falchion in his grasp as Lucina spoke almost the exact same words. “Don’t.”

“I don’t want you,” she said firmly, turning stand in front of him and clasp his hands, “to stop living your life just because this war might cost me mine.”

“So... you were saying something about wine tomorrow night?” Inigo tried valiantly.

Say’ri drew in a long breath and let it out slowly.

“Hey. You’re the one who keeps saying we’re going to fine, right? You’ll have my back tomorrow and I’ll have yours. And that’s without almost four thousand of Chi’hiro’s men under our direct command.”

“You command,” she corrected gently.

“I’m really trying not to think about that part,” Inigo admitted.

“You’ll be fine.”

“Of course,” Inigo said. “I’ve quite the accomplished second. Accomplished, mm... and really quite beautiful, now that I take a closer look.”

“Oh, fie, stop that,” Say’ri chided with a faint blush coming to her cheeks.
“Never.” Hoping the silly gesture would lighten the mood a little, he touched his nose to hers for an instant, then pulled away with his trademark grin. “Come now, love. It’s getting too chilly to keep standing here.”

They started on their way again, letting the silence rest between them before Say’ri spoke again. “’Tis a wonder to me that we stand on Walhart’s doorstep and we’ve not had any more deserters.”

Inigo blew out a breath. “Say’ri, it’s not your fault,” he said quietly. Within a week of Chi’hiro’s men joining them, about two hundred of their ten thousand had turned tail back to Chon’sin, citing grievances with their queen-to-be that had clearly gotten to her far more than she’d let on—especially since they hadn’t actually said what the problem was. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned about being royalty is that there’s always going to be someone that hates you for some reason or another. You can’t let it get to you.”

“Fie, I know that!” she said. “‘Tis just that… the realization that I’ll not return home as a princess is still one strange to me.”

“You’re going to make a fantastic queen,” Inigo said as theyducked into his tent.

“Aye, and did they say that of you when you lost your sister?” she asked, drawing attention to the fact that they’d ended up far more similar than he had ever thought they would.

“Funnily enough, now that you mention it, off the top of my head I can’t remember anyone telling me I’d make a good queen,” Inigo replied, shooting her a cheeky grin when she huffed and crossed her arms.

After a moment, though, a devious little smile came to her face. “Hmm, quite the oversight on their part. I rather think you’d look quite fetching in a petite diadem. ‘Twould set off those dark tresses in a lovely manner, don’t you think?”

“Oh, fie on me,” said Inigo. “not only as she learned how to take it, she’s figured out how to dish it out now, too,” said Inigo. “My ego will remain forever bruised.”

“‘Tis good for you, my love.”

“Yeah, that’s what Owain tells me, too. Though usually without calling me ‘my love.’”

“If he does I’ll have to have quite the discussion with him,” Say’ri said.

“Now, now, there’s plenty of Inigo to go around, no need to fight over me.”

“I beg to differ,” she replied, her voice dropping. “I’m not keen on sharing you with every passing girl who catches your eye.”

“Surely you know that’s not what I meant,” Inigo said, mirroring her inflection. “Besides, I’m quite certain there’s only one lady left who can catch my eye, and as far as I know she’s not passing.”

Say’ri’s eyes fluttered a little. “You’re a dangerous man when you say things like that.”

After a beat, Inigo replied, “Funny, because it never worked before now.”

“All the better for me.”

Inigo shook his head, settling on his bedroll with an arm held open in invitation. Obligingly, she tucked into his side. “Tell me of Chon’sin,” he said quietly. At her questioning look, he continued,
“War’s almost over, love, I was rather hoping you’d take me soon. So,” he held out a hand, “tell me the itinerary.”

A deflection, Say’ri plainly realized by the look in her eyes. Another way to pretend tomorrow wasn’t almost upon them and Fate wasn’t staring them in the face with her life on the scales.

She played along.

“We’d start in Dai’chi, of course,” she said softly. “The capital. It lies along the western sea, nearly a straight shot back to Ylistol if one has a ship with enough speed and supplies to make the journey. To the east and north are mountains, and from the former comes a river which splits the city in half before it bleeds out into the sea. ‘Tis… ‘tis a beautiful place. If we can make it in spring, aye, the cherry blossoms will steal your breath away.” She paused. “Speaking of springs, ‘tis one about a day’s ride from the palace. ‘Tis quite popular for tourists and locals alike—our parents used to bring Yen’fay and I when we were small.” She let out a soft sigh. “We should put that down, aye?”

“Mm, just the two of us?” Inigo murmured. “Scandalous.”

“Fie, you put words in my mouth. If we could manage it soon, we might be able to bring along some of the others.”

“Owain is not invited on this romantic vacation of ours,” Inigo replied. “I can hear him now: ‘My blood simmers with a fervor greater than ever before, mirroring the mercurial springs of… springy…ness.’ Dang it.”

“You were doing well until the end, there,” Say’ri said.

“Yeah, not one of my better ones. Still, my point stands.” He brushed his thumb over her shoulder. “And I never said I was opposed to it just being the two of us.”

“Aye, but Chi’hiro would,” Say’ri said with a chuckle. “Yen’fay and I tried to go once, without guards nor retainers… ‘Twas about two years ago, now, before the war truly reached us. We had to turn back, though—we had intended to stay the night in a port town about two hours out from the springs, only to have our first encounter with your Risen during dinner.”

“You—so that’s how you knew what they were,” Inigo said.

“Aye, indeed. We handled it, obviously, with the help of—” With startling abruptness, Say’ri’s jaw clicked shut. “The locals,” she finished in a quieter tone.

Inigo glanced at her for a moment, then whispered, “Love?”

A very long moment before she started, “Inigo, I—” Once again, she cut herself off and shook her head. “Fie, never mind. I misremembered something.”

“Ah. Maybe you should get some rest.”

“…Aye, mayhap,” Say’ri finally said.

Inigo pondered what she’d might have been about to say for a moment more, then put it out of his mind.
In the very town and tavern Say’ri spoke of, thousands of miles south of her, a rather drunk man pounded on the bar. “‘Tis just ridiculous, I say! All of it!”

“Zounds, Jun’ichi, surely it could not have been that bad,” said a man to his right, a skinny fellow with narrow, skeezy eyes. “I mean, I’ve always thought her to be a bit of a frigid—”

Lucina winced automatically as she passed and caught a word that would have had her clapping her hands over Lysander’s ears, and very deliberately turned back to the glass she was polishing.

“—but you’re clearly painting her with a broad brush right now.”

“One can still draw truth with wide strokes,” the first man shot back, presumably Jun’ichi. “And I say, having been there, that Chon’sin is doomed.”

On the other side of the skinny man, a much older figure pulled his pipe from his lips. “Chon’sin is not doomed, child. I’ve seen many a less capable figure than Lady Say’ri ascend a throne and do good by their kingdom.”

“Who d’you mean by that, Kai’to? Mad King Gangrel?” Jun’ichi barked. “Fie, well, those two have got one thing in common—empty space between their ears.”

The sleazy man shot a look around the room. “Watch it,” he hissed. “Mayhap be counted treason to speak so of the future monarch.”

“My monarch was Yen’fay,” said Jun’ichi. “And my general as well, aye. Not Say’ri and not Chi’hiro. Pah, she’s just as bad—Yen’fay might have asked her to jump off a cliff and she’d have done it gleefully with that damned hangdog expression on her face. Typical women, both of them, thinking with their hearts instead of their heads.”

Lucina tried very, very hard to keep from shooting him a death-glare, and just barely managed to succeed.

“Yet you keenly omit the fact,” said Kai’to, “that ‘twas Lady Say’ri who secured the assistance of the Ylissean League and so turned the tide of the war.”

“Ylissean League! Ha! They might be better called the Ylissean Circus! They’ve a division of their so-called ‘Shepherds,’ supposedly Chrom’s most elite force, aye? ‘Tis a wonder they ever managed to walk away from their maiden battlefield, and I was expected to serve with them! Beneath them!”

The skinny man licked his lips. “What of their chief tactician, though? Isn’t she supposed to be a pretty little piece of work?”

Jun’ichi shrugged. “Frankly, I cannot decide if she was a fool to position her forces inside the Demon’s Ingle or a genius to do it and live, so make of her what you will. Her husband, on the other hand? A madman. I spoke with him once and I am convinced he is a lunatic. One would think he had been gifted a dictionary and absorbed the entirety in a lone, fevered night.”

At least this fellow’s descriptive, if a bit of a lunatic himself, Lucina thought dryly.

“...Still,” Kai’to said, his voice growing more uncertain. “They did free Naga’s Voice from her
imprisonment, did they not?"

“Pah, and what do I care? I don’t worship Naga. ‘Specially not with how those Ylisseans parade around like they’re better than everyone else because they’re ‘blessed by the goddess,’” Jun’ichi said, with added air quotes. “‘Twas their damned holy war that drove me an’ my ma outta Plegia just shy of twenty years ago, and led by who? Chrom’s dear old daddy. Nah, I couldn’t stomach serving with ’em for more than a week, and ten score men agreed with me. Walhart wants to do away with the gods? I say more power to him!”

His two companions looked a little less certain about the idea.

“The Ylisseans are due to reach Castle Valm any time now,” Jun’ichi continued. “Mayhap the Conqueror will take care of them and save us the trouble. Get Say’ri out of the way and Chrom can get right back to Ylisse and get his usurping little hands off the throne.”

A beat passed before the skeezy man reached for Jun’ichi’s drink. “Man, you’ve had too much, methinks.”

“Oh ho ho,” Jun’ichi’s said, keeping a grip on his glass. “Did I neglect to tell you the juiciest part?” With a lecherous grin, he continued, “Say’ri’s taken herself a lover, and it’s Chrom’s brother.”

“...Didn’t Chrom only have sisters?” Kai’to asked.

“Oh, sure, that’s the official story. And the official story is that this kid’s some distant cousin of the royal line. But the Ylissean Exalts all have their precious Mark of Naga, aye, and it dies out after a few generations the further from the throne that line gets. This ‘distant cousin’ is not only the spitting image of Chrom but he’s got that damned Brand right in his eye for all to see. Yeah, you ain’t telling me the kid’s anything but a little dastard they’ve kept secret.”

Lucina froze with a glass that had been clean for at least three minutes still in her hand, the words ringing in her ears.

“Gods, and Say’ri’s got him in her bed? Damn, there’s taste for you,” said the skinny man.

“It’s a plot,” Jun’ichi said, slamming his hand on the bar again. “Chrom’s married, it’s not like he can go after Say’ri himself—at least not without an unfortunate accident for his pretty pink wife—but look at this convenient little pawn he’s got. He gets the brother to marry Say’ri and suddenly we’ve got the Ylissean royal line on the throne of Chon’sin.”

“You know, in some places we like to call that an alliance,” Kai’to said dryly.

“I call it damned dirty,” Jun’ichi retorted. “If Walhart don’t get ‘im... Maybe I will.”

“And that’s enough for me,” Kai’to said, pushing his glass away and dropping a handful of coins on the counter. “Evening, fellows. May the queen take mercy on you should you ever let those words slip again.”

“...Bah,” Jun’ichi said as the older man left the tavern. “Craven.”

His remaining companion shrugged. “Didn’t think Chrom had the guts in him to pull such a move. So what about the brother—what did you say his name was?”

“Oh, he’s a smarmy little fellow,” Jun’ichi replied derisively. “Awful brazen for such an obvious dastard. Couldn’t stand him—seems to think the world should bow at the feet of the great Inigo.”
Lucina caught her glass half a second before it shattered on the floor.

No. No, it can’t be…

Years of half-remembered images and one lone, puzzling conversation coalesced in her mind with startling speed.

An Ylissean man, quite a striking one, with a regal bearing…

The reason I ask is because he looks quite like you…

Brand right in his eye for all to see…

...A man by the name of Inigo.

Wordlessly, she got to her feet, leaving the pair at the bar as their conversation devolved into buzzing background noise. Years she’d been here now, with not a hint to her past but those maddening dreams that always gave her more questions than answers.

And now, could it all so easily be solved by this one man?

But how? What connection could she bear to a man who—if the gossip was to be believed—was apparently an illegitimate child of the Ylissean royal family? If they knew each other, why did she reside in Chon’sin, a continent away? And how did Nalia, that strange mage, come into all of this?

Lucina barely processed the rest of her shift, trotting upstairs as soon as she got off. She paused in the corner of her room, prepared to change into her nightclothes when the mirror in the corner caught her eye.

Slowly, she approached, lifting her hair away from her eye and staring at the mark on her iris.

The Ylissean Exalts all have their precious Mark of Naga.

Lucina sucked in a deep breath and let her hair fall again.

Inigo knew something. He had to—the pieces fit together far too neatly for it to be coincidence. But what could she do about it? The Ylissean League was all the way at Castle Valm, prepared to challenge Walhart himself. It wasn’t like she could just up and leave Lysander for months to meet a man she knew nothing about.

Say’ri.

She hadn’t a clue if the princess would remember her, not after one meeting nearly two years ago, but there was a chance. And if there was a chance… surely Say’ri would return to Chon’sin once the war was over, if she lived that long. With luck, perhaps Inigo would be with her.

And Lucina intended to find some answers.

End of Part 5
Chapter Summary

*It never goes the way the you plan, success is a door that always slams, I'm trying to break it*
*Searching for words and praying for signs, I struggle to find the rhythm and rhyme*
*Don't know how to say that I'm losing my mind, trying to find the perfect line*
*I think I'm running out of time, I need a miracle*
*Counting seconds passing by, and I don't know when I'll be fine, I need a miracle...*

Chapter Notes

Song of the chapter (as well as the summary) is [here](#). Highly recommend a listen, because it does an excellent job of capturing Inigo's current mindset. (It's also a prime example of how heavily a playlist can influence my work, if you pay close attention in this chapter.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*Whip, whip, run me like a racehorse, pull me like a ripcord, break me down and build me up, I wanna be the slip, slip, word upon your lip, lip, letter that your rip, rip, break me down and build me up...*

Say’ri had learned, quite quickly, that Inigo was not actually an easy person to share a bedroll with. Most nights he was a restless sleeper, constantly shifting to the point it could almost be called *flailing* and jerking her from her own slumber on more than one occasion. They had shortly figured out that however pleasant it was to *fall* asleep tangled up together, sleeping and cuddling really did need to remain two separate things lest he startle her awake an hour later—and usually, summarily end up in the same boat himself in retaliation. As such, it seemed the best way for them to sleep typically ended up being back-to-back; still near enough to take in the sorely needed comfort of each other’s presence but also protection enough from either of them catching a stray elbow to the face.

So it was rather a surprise to wake up to him *clinging* to her.

Her first instinct was the thrash out of the death-grip he had on her—between the leg locked over hers and the way he had both arms clutching at her waist to keep her flush against him, she hardly had room to breathe, no less move—but after the first initial moment of claustrophobia she managed to tamp it down. “Inigo,” she whispered, and was met with only a pained groan in response and an even-further tightening of his hold.

“*Say’ri.*” The broken, desperate note in his voice made her ache, but it was the way he shuddered against her a moment later that gave him away—he hadn’t yet left the realm of slumber.
“Inigo,” Say’ri tried again, a little louder, trying to twist in his grasp and managing to turn enough
that she could stroke his face. “Awaken, my love. You’re dreaming.”

Inigo gave a tremendous gasp before his eyes shot open, a wild look in them she thought better
suited to a cornered prey animal than the man beside her. “Say’ri—you’re—”

She hushed him softly, turning to face him fully and continuing to run her hand over his cheek.
“‘Twas just a nightmare,” she murmured. “Breathe easy.”

“But—no—it wasn’t —” Every other word seemed to be punctuated by a ragged inhale, like he
couldn’t quite get enough air into his lungs to speak a full sentence. “I can’t—you’re going to—
because I can’t —”

“Breathe,” Say’ri repeated, in a quiet but firm tone that should have left no room for argument.

Inigo didn’t listen, instead kissing her with the desperation of a drowning man, as if she were the
only air in the world he had left to breathe. A sound of surprise got caught in her throat as she all
but fell on her back, him chasing after her to erase what space the motion had put between them.

She managed another half-gasp of his name, this one slightly questioning. His only response was to
move from her lips to her neck, fervor not dampening an ounce. She caught a lone syllable slip last
his lips but couldn’t quite discern what it was.

“Please,” she finally realized, over and over again with each brush of his lips over her skin.
“Please, gods, please just let me—”

“Shh, shh. It’s all right, it will be all right.”

“No, but I’m going to… I can’t… gods, please. I’ve lost—I’ve lost everyone else, my parents and
my sister and everyone, and all I had left was Owain and Owain has Robin and he doesn’t need me,
and now I’m going to lose you too and I can’t—”

The first real, proper sob escaped him, leaving him burying his face in her shoulder.

“Please don’t leave me,” Inigo choked out. “Please, I can’t lose you too.”

“Oh, Inigo…”

Say’ri hadn’t a clue what to do but to keep tracing her hands over him and let him weep. She’d
known it was coming—had been watching his smiles grow more brittle with every passing day,
caught the moments of melancholy introspection and the silently trembling hands that he tried
so desperately to hide from her simply because that was who he was.

She’d known he was ready to shatter, but watching it happen was something else entirely.

A hard swallow and a hiccuping inhale warned her he was about to speak again, and his words
were plaintive when he did. “Can’t you… can’t you just stay behind? We can handle it, it would be
okay, you could stay in camp…”

Say’ri shut her eyes and drew in a breath, unable to deny the thought had crossed her mind before
but knowing she’d already made her decision. “‘Tis rather hard to challenge fate if all one does is
cower from it, my love.”

Her words only brought on a fresh wave of tears. Inigo tucked his face against the crook of her
neck again, his whole body shaking as she shifted to wrap her arms around him entirely. “I don’t
want to be alone,” he whimpered.

“Aye, and you won’t. I’ll be at your side, whatever it takes.”

The breath he sucked in still sounded shaky, but far better than it had a minute ago. “Promise you won’t leave?”

“Vow to me the same,” Say’ri whispered in return. “We face the future together, aye, and I’ll not have it any other way.”

Nearly a full minute passed before he replied in a voice that sounded more boy than man. “Okay.” With that, he shifted off her, sitting up with a look in his eyes that was nothing less than naked terror, quickly masked as he turned away from her and let a shadow fall over his face. “Sorry, I—” He broke off when his voice cracked, then wiped his sleeve over his face.

“Don’t you apologize,” she said, her tone quiet but still sharp as she pulled herself upright. “The world is not going to end because you’ve finally allowed yourself a moment of vulnerability.” She pressed her lips to the corner of his jaw, about to trail down his neck when he slipped his thumb between their skin.

“Probably not your best idea right now, love,” Inigo said with a throaty note that hadn’t been there a moment ago.

“Whyever not?” Say’ri asked, giving him a questioning look only for him to keep his head resolutely turned away from her.

“...It’s the middle of the night, you’re literally in my bed at present, and my self control is at quite the remarkable low. I think you can do the math on that one.”

A beat passed. “Oh.”

“Yeah, ‘oh.’” He dropped his hand to her thigh for a moment, squeezing in a gesture that was more affectionate than amorous, and got to his feet. “I’m going to go for a walk.”

Say’ri knew his pattern well enough now: realize he was in deeper than he wanted to be, panic, and proceed to remove himself in the quickest way possible. Now that she picked up on it, it was amusing at best and beyond irritating at worst. Right now, trending toward the latter, she decided to cut to the chase. “To dance, you mean.”

The wide-eyed look his shot her, again, might have been entertaining under lighter circumstances. “I—but, wait, you knew... knew about that?”

“‘Tis not exactly a secret where you vanish off to in the middle of the night,” she replied crisply, quirking a brow and crossing her arms. “Besides, ‘twas not hard for me to learn the pattern. If you actually did plan on taking a walk, aye, you’d have put on your boots, and you manage to return appearing even more despondent than when you depart. When you wear those,” she nodded toward the much lighter shoes he was currently stepping in to, “that means you plan on dancing, and you usually come back looking as though your burden has lightened even just a touch.”

Inigo straightened, still with a wary look on his face. “I didn’t realize I was quite so easy to read.”

“Aye, because your cousin can barely notice when the room he occupies is presently on fire,” Say’ri replied dryly.

“I mean, you’re not wrong.” Immediately after his light words, though, Inigo tensed again, a
tightness in his shoulders visible even in the darkness. “You haven’t—you haven’t followed me, have you?”

“Nay,” Say’ri assured him. “I would have asked if I believed you comfortable enough.”

“...Asked? To come... watch?” Inigo replied, before a derisive expression came to his face. “It’s not like I’m any good, love.”

“Fie, that’s a lie and you know it.”

“No, it isn’t,” he insisted. “It’s not like I have a fraction of my mother’s skill—”

“Your mother,” Say’ri interrupted, “is incredibly talented, and even a fraction of that it still quite a bit.” She rose from her seated position, pulling her nightgown closer as she left behind the blankets still warmed from their body heat. “You must learn to give yourself some credit.”

Inigo looked away from her again, clenching his jaw as he moved to shrug into his coat.

“Inigo, may I come?”

A long moment stretched out before he answered in a clipped tone. “Sure. Fine. If you want.”

“I didn’t wish to—” she started, only for him to vanish from the tent before she even finished pulling her boots on. Hurriedly, she stepped out after him, trying to ignore the bite of the night wind as he strode away.

She stayed on his heels, though he didn’t look back until they’d reached the fringes of camp. The moment he glanced back over his shoulder, though, he pulled up short. “Naga, woman, are you trying to catch your death?” he demanded, turning back to grab her shoulders. “There are things called coats, you know!”

“Mayhap I would have had time to take one if you hadn’t been so keen on leaving!” she shot back.

“Then why didn’t you ask me to wait?”

“I didn’t think you would have!”

“Why on earth wouldn’t I have?’

“Because you’re too busy being wrapped up in your own self-pity to bother worrying about me!” Say’ri cried.

Inigo made a sound of disgust in the back of his throat, dropping his hands from her and spinning away again. “Because gods forbid I have my own problems to work through!”

“I’m the one who’s going to die tomorrow, Inigo!”

“And I’m the one who has to live with that!”

His shout echoed through the trees for a long moment, neither of them daring to speak again. Finally, Inigo let out a shuddering sigh and scrubbed a hand over his face.

“Why are we fighting about a damned coat?” he finally whispered, beginning to unbutton his own.

“Fie if I know,” Say’ri replied with a burst of watery laughter.
Inigo echoed her, wordlessly draping the coat over her shoulders and searching her gaze as she tucked her arms into the sleeves. “I wish tomorrow would never come,” he whispered. “But I wish it were already over. Because at least… at least I’ll know.”

She wrapped her arms around him for simple want of something to do, knowing her continued assertions of we’ll be fine weren’t going to work any longer.

“I can’t do this!”

Say’ri found she couldn’t bring herself to be surprised at Inigo’s outburst, nor at the fact his cheek was already wet again when he pressed it to hers.

“I can’t just go out there tomorrow and know you might not come back!”

The notion that popped into her head was completely, entirely ridiculous, and she voiced it anyways. “You could leave,” she whispered. “We could both leave. Right now. Run away and never come back.”

A dry laugh. “You’d never.”

“And neither would you,” she replied softly.

Inigo sighed, then finally murmured, “Let’s just go back to bed, yeah?”

“You still owe me a dance,” Say’ri replied.

“…I suppose I do, don’t I?” he said, feet already moving as he swept her into a slow tempo.

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Clank.

Bang.

Crash.

“Inigo!”

Owain’s voice, unmistakable, sliced through Inigo’s slumber and what remained of his sanity in one fell swoop. He groaned, the glimmer of dawn suddenly breaking through the tent flap.

“My friend, the morning of our glorious victory has arrived!” Another crash of metal sounded, forcing Inigo to lift his head to see what in Naga’s name was going on. “Today we shall end the war that has so long been the thorn in our sides—hi Say’ri—and bring the Conqueror himself to his knees! Behold!”

With that, Owain very dramatically dropped the armor in his grasp with another clatter that made Inigo’s ears ring. He still caught the soft sigh from his left as Say’ri proceeded to bury her head against his shoulder.

“Owain,” Inigo said in a tone that anyone else would have recognized as a dangerous one indeed.
“Yes, my beloved cousin?”

“We’ve had this discussion.”

“What discussion?”

“You. Do not. Live with me. Anymore,” Inigo said with a pointed raise of his brow.

“...What’s that got to do with the price of milk in Plegia?” Owain asked. “I bring you a great and hallow’d gift!”

“Ah,” Inigo said dryly. “A very large tin can.”

“What? No. It’s an exquisitely crafted suit of armor, Inigo! My illustrious bride insists you use it to outfit yourself today.”

“Ah,” Inigo said again. “So it’s a very large tin can you expect me to stuff myself in to. Truly, you shouldn’t have.”

“I know!” Owain said, beaming. “My generosity is hitherto unmatched in this realm of existence!”

“Owain?” Inigo repeated.

“Yes, oh dearest relation of my soul?”

“Get out!”

“Oof,” Owain said, though Inigo’s glare was at least making him back toward the exit. “Someone is in a poor mood indeed this exceptional morning.”

“Gee, I wonder why,” Inigo replied.

“I have not the slightest,” Owain said, then offered a bow. “We convene to advance on the castle in an hour, cousin. I shall see you and the fair lady thusly.”

As soon as he slipped out, Inigo very deliberately slammed his pillow over his face. “You see what I have to put up with?” he asked Say’ri, though the words were decidedly muffled.

“You love him and you know it,” Say’ri chided in return.

“Hush, love, he might hear you.”

She sat up, rubbing her hand in a soothing circle over his shoulder. “I find it sweet that he cares so much for you.”

Inigo pulled the pillow from his face and unceremoniously dropped it onto his torso, fixing her with a look. “Yes, and if we could get him to care that much about my privacy, we might get somewhere.” That only drew a laugh from her and he brought the pillow back over his head. “You mock my pain!”

Say’ri laughed again, though it quickly trailed off. “I should go make ready,” she whispered.

Inigo’s breath hitched. He set the pillow aside, propping up on his elbows. “Love…”

She bent down, the kiss she gave him quick and tender. “I’ll see you soon.”
With a shuddering exhale, he watched her retreating form, and silently prayed for a miracle to any god that was listening.

Chapter End Notes

And... a teaser for next time, because I'm nice like that (and I'll be on vaycay for a few days.)

Inigo was forced to refocus, first by the lance that nearly buried itself in his thigh, and second by the sudden wave of shouting and muttered expletives coming from his soldiers. He spun Scottie again, and felt the world freeze. “Oh, hell,” he whispered.
Chapter Summary

“Your concerns are not mine. I have risen to a higher plane of existence.”
“Then today you come crashing down to the hell you’ve made of this one.”

“...Fie, don’t you make the picture of a handsome general.”

“I hate it,” Inigo replied vehemently, trying to fasten a buckle that was placed in what he decided was an incredibly stupid spot. “Hello, look at me, I am a shiny metal target that’s conveniently on horseback and several heads above everyone else! Also, I can barely move! Have at me!”

A breathy half-laugh came past Say’ri’s lips as she crossed the tent, already outfitted in her own, far lighter white lacquer armor. “My love, the point of wearing armor is that it prevents you from getting wounded by those who wish to target you,” she said, swatting his hands from the offending buckle to pull it closed herself.

“That doesn’t mean I have to like it,” he grumbled.

“Would you rather be ‘conveniently on horseback and several heads above everyone else’ without armor?” she asked with a quirk of her brow.

“I would rather put this whole command thing behind me and return to my usual strategy of just being too fast to get hit,” Inigo replied. “A strategy which a full suit of armor is not conducive to in any way, shape, or form.”

“Nay, ’tis not,” Say’ri agreed. “Though with luck, by the morrow you’ll not have to worry about battle for a good long while.” While he paused to process that, she paused to run her hand over a thin gap between his chest and stomach plates. “This seems a poor place for a joint,” she said with an edge of concern.

Inigo glanced over to find the same spot was one seamless piece over her own torso. “It’s common enough in Ylissean designs,” he said. “Looks more dangerous than it is. The way it’s angled, it’s not much of a vulnerability unless your opponent has very good aim and a significant height advantage on you. It’s not a bad trade-off for the extra flexibility.” He paused. “Although I think I’d rather be wearing yours right now.”

“Mayhap if you gained the ability to shrink,” Say’ri replied.

“Come now, love, it’s not like you’re talking to Owain here. I’m quite lithe.”

Her voice dropped a little, followed by that dangerous little smirk of hers that made his heart skip. “Aye.”

Inigo felt the familiar heat come to his cheeks. “Gods, I love—”

He froze, eyes going wide. How many times had those words stuck in his throat over the past two months, only to nearly roll off his tongue now without a second thought?
A long silence stretched out before Say’ri whispered, “Are you going to finish that sentence?”

Swallowing hard, Inigo admitted, “It feels like tempting fate.” Glad he hadn’t yet put on his gauntlets, he reached to stroke her cheek. “Like saying, ‘Here is someone I love. Come take her from me.’”

Say’ri glanced away, her voice quiet. “I see.”

With a steadying breath, he stepped across the remaining distance between them. “Though I suppose—if it’s my last chance to say it—”

“Inigo—”

“I love you, Say’ri.”

His words hung in the air for a moment before she met his gaze again. “Tell me that again tonight,” she whispered.

“Yes,” he said. “Tonight. And again every night after that.”

“Is that a promise?”

“You know it is.”

She had her hands tangled in his hair and her lips on his before he even fully registered what she was doing. A low moan slipped out, followed by a frustrated sigh.

“Damned armor,” Inigo muttered. “Can’t get you close enough.”

“Time enough for that later,” Say’ri replied, having scarcely pressed her mouth back to his when a pointed cough reached them.

Inigo all but leapt away from her, turning red to the tips of his ears. “Owain is a terrible influence on you!” he cried to the tactician suddenly in the doorway.

“I would like it to be known,” Robin said coolly, arms crossed over her chest, “that I did, in fact, announce myself. It just seems you were both too… preoccupied to notice.”

Inigo probably looked like he was about to burst into flames, he realized dully, and even Say’ri had started to color a little.

“Oh, come now, it’s not like I didn’t know,” Robin said flatly. “For one, Owain exists, and for another, you’re not nearly as subtle as you think you are.”

“Oh,” Inigo managed eloquently.

Robin lifted her eyes skyward, as if begging for patience, then finally said, “It’s fifteen minutes until we head out. I just wanted to make sure you were ready.”

“...As I’ll ever be,” Inigo replied under his breath. The tactician gave a crisp nod in return and ducked out again.

“So,” Say’ri said after a long moment. “The moment finally comes.”

Inigo could manage nothing but a nod until she reached over and squeezed his hand.
“May Naga bless us,” she whispered, “and keep us safe.”

He managed a mute nod before he reached over to strap Falchion’s familiar weight to his hip. “And may we all come back in one piece,” he murmured.

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“Brave of him to face us himself.”

Inigo’s words were dry, but surprisingly steady for the way his heart thrashed in his chest. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t seem to find any form of moisture in his mouth, and he’d had to consciously loosen his grip on Scottie’s reins when the gelding had started tossing his head in protest of how much his rider’s hands trembled.

“Brave?” Say’ri replied. “Aye. But more likely he just wants to enjoy this firsthand.”

Her words sent a shudder up his spine—how could any mind be so twisted as to take joy in the horrors of the battlefield? Inigo forced himself to look away from Walhart’s mountainous, red-plated figure and down the Ylissean line. Their current force was mostly made up of Chi’hiro’s borrowed ten thousand, plus the Shepherds and the remnant of Flavia’s men, all combined together and summarily split in three. The khan herself had taken the east third along with Lon’qu, Inigo and Say’ri had the west, and Chrom and Robin headed the middle. Inigo assumed Owain was in the last group, though his cousin had been conspicuously absent since he’d dropped off his gift that morning.

Walhart’s current force seemed nearly equal to their own, though Inigo had no doubt the Conqueror had innumerable reinforcements waiting in the wings. On the other hand, they had Chi’hiro—prepared to surround and strike once they drew the enemy out of the safety of their castle.

At this point, the battle really did seem to be little more than a formality, even if Walhart didn’t know it yet.

The scarlet-garbed Conqueror urged his mount forward, stopping across the way from Chrom. “You do your sister’s legacy proud, Prince!” he bellowed. “But humanity already has a savior—a conqueror who broke stronger men than you when they refused to bow! Warriors of Valm, ride with me now! Together we will stamp out this final pack of insurgents and unite the world!”

“Over my dead body,” Inigo muttered, though it was drowned out by Chrom’s urge of “Forward!”

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As the battle wore on, Inigo started rethinking his previous prejudice against armor. After all, it was quite nice to not have to yank every passing arrow out of his skin.

On the other hand, said arrows were coming at him with much more frequency than he was used to, as were every other kind of weapon imaginable. Falchion came down across the head of a
Valmese soldier, the blow arresting just in time to avoid decapitating one of Inigo’s own men on the other side. Scottie sprang away from the blood spatter with a challenging neigh whilst another arrow bounced off Inigo’s shoulder with a quiet ding. “Press forward and hold together! Don’t let them split you up!”

In the hairsbreadth of a gap he’d gained, he spun toward the rest of the army, trying to locate a mountain of crimson armor amidst the melee.

“You!” he asked the nearest soldier, one of Chi’hiro’s men he didn’t recognize. “Where’s Walhart?”

“ ‘Bout midway between Chrom and Flavia, last I saw!”

Inigo let a grim smile crack his features. In other words, far, far away. “Excellent.” He spun Scottie out of the line of a throwing axe and called, “Say’ri!”

For a terrible, breathless moment, she didn’t answer.

“SAY’RI!”

Like the soothing balm of a healing spell, her voice finally reached him. “Aye!”

Inigo let out the breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. “West end!” he shouted back to her. “Aye!”

The west end didn’t need her, and he would fully admit that if anyone questioned him. That knowledge was far and away overruled. Keep her safe, keep her away from Walhart, whatever it takes.

Inigo was forced to refocus, first by the lance that nearly buried itself in his thigh, and second by the sudden wave of shouting and muttered expletives coming from his soldiers. He spun Scottie again, and felt the world freeze.

“Oh, hell,” he whispered.

“Behold!” bellowed an enemy who was definitely not over on Flavia’s flank. “I am Walhart the Conqueror! And you are but a pebble on my path to immortality!”

There wasn’t time to wonder if Chi’hiro’s man had been wrong, or if Walhart had somehow managed to cross the entire battlefield in a matter of minutes, because at that moment in time Inigo’s worst nightmare was twenty feet in front of him.

His focus narrowed to a pinpoint, adrenaline buzzing in his veins and reminding him that any careless mistake would be the end of him. “Right,” he said under his breath to the three men nearest him. Dully, he wondered how the rest of his line had gotten so far away—although far away was only thrice the distance between him Walhart. “When I charge, head to flank him—”

“Oh, hell no,” one interrupted. “Holdin’ the line is one thing, but the Conqueror? I ain’t risking my neck for you.”

Inigo stared, blankly, at the three identical, derisive gazes suddenly being directed at him from his own men.

“Skinny little Ylissean dastard,” another spat—and just like that, they melted away into the rest of
the army.

...What just happened? Inigo asked himself, suddenly very much alone.

Walhart gave a low, dangerous chuckle that had even Scottie backing away without cue. The Conqueror’s warhorse—three hands bigger than Inigo’s own mount, minimum—pressed forward to make up the distance. “I’d say you have much to learn about the mastery of men… but considering your blood is about to stain my boots, you won’t have the time, boy.” With that, the Conqueror’s long, jagged blade came down.

Falchion came up.

Walhart’s blow would have shattered any lesser sword, and even if Falchion didn’t break Inigo was still left muffling a cry of agony from the sheer force of the reverb. His hands went instantly, blessedly numb—thank Naga he’d had enough time to get a double-handed grip on Falchion’s hilt, because he’d have surely been disarmed with a single—and he urged Scottie sideways with a kick of his heel.

Bless this horse! he thought desperately as Scottie leapt away from the next blow. Walhart was far faster than his bulk should have allowed him to be, and had Inigo’s mount not darted away the strike would have surely left his right shoulder fractured in half a dozen places.

Again, the Conqueror struck, indomitable—this one nearly cleaving Inigo’s head right off his shoulders. There was no point trying to land a blow of his own; it would only leave him open long enough to die instantly.

His only hope was to keep dodging.

A blast of lightning—too far away to do any good but unmistakably Robin—went off just in his line of sight.

“Inigo!”

Another sweep of Walhart’s blade, narrowly avoided, nearly kept Inigo from picking up on his father’s voice.

Help!

He couldn’t see Chrom, nor Robin. No one was in his line of sight but Walhart himself, looming over his entire field of vision. His ragged blade scraped across Inigo’s armor, the metal wrenching and digging into his arm and surely drawing blood.

And Inigo started laughing.

“What is the meaning of this, boy?”

“All this time,” Inigo gasped out, part from pain and part from sheer hysteria, “all this time I’ve been so scared of you. Like you’re Fate itself! But you’re not! You’re just a man with fancy armor and a god complex!”

Another blast of lightning, still too far, while Falchion met Walhart’s sword with another titanic clash.

But it was all okay. Robin was coming, Chrom was coming, and Say’ri was on the other end of the fight.
“Men can be killed!”

Inigo realized, distantly, that Walhart’s incoming strike was designed to unseat him—without Scottie, he’d be too slow, too short, too easy to trample or stab or crush. “And so too can boys,” the Conqueror growled.

“WALHART!”

A pause, a beat where the two pulled back out of reach and stared at each other as the woman’s voice registered. The realization hit him over a small eternity.

*That wasn’t Robin.*

“No,” Inigo breathed.

Walhart paused, tilting his head sideways like he’d caught sight of a mildly interesting insect.

*No, no, no NO!*

“Hmm?” Walhart said, still in his slow, barely attentive manner. “The princess of Chon’sin? It’s a wonder you yet live.”

“Say’ri,” Inigo said desperately, so quietly it was little more than a motion of his lips, like he was living in a nightmare that stole away his voice.

But oh, what a sight she made.

“I have survived your gauntlet of betrayal and death, tyrant,” Say’ri spat. Shoulders back, chin lifted, white armor smeared red, she looked nothing less than the warrior-queen she was. Her mount, Dior, could have been a creature from the seventh hell itself, ears pinned and teeth bared, looking as if she would tear Walhart from his saddle and smash him underfoot the instant she had the chance. “Shall I describe to you now the searing pain of it all? The torture of watching friends, family… my entire kingdom perish? The fresh hell of each new day, with no respite in sight?”

“Pain is a concern of men,” Walhart said flippantly, as if she were so far beneath him she should be honored he was gracing her with his attention. “And respite? Beg that from your gods.”

“Say’ri,” Inigo tried again, her name scraping his throat.

“Your concerns are not mine,” Walhart continued. “I have risen to a higher plane of existence.”

“Then today,” Say’ri replied, lifting her bloodied katana, “you come crashing down to the hell you’ve made of this one.”

Finally, finally, Inigo found his voice. “Say’ri, you have to *GO!*”

For the first time, she turned her gaze to him. “I told you, *I am not leaving you.*”

“Say’ri, PLEASE!”

Three things happened at once, just then.

Scottie stepped forward, plainly sensing his rider’s urgency to close the distance between the two black mounts.

Say’ri’s composure finally faltered, her mouth opening in a wordless scream and a hand reaching
And Inigo realized he’d made a terrible, terrible mistake.

Time slowed down, maddeningly lethargic, giving him just enough of a buffer to process what exactly he’d just done. He’d taken his eyes off Walhart, and Scottie’s extra step had taken him back inside the Conqueror’s reach.

Falchion came up again—but too slow, far too slow to do anything but skitter harmlessly off Walhart’s armor.

**It’s not much of a vulnerability unless your opponent has very good aim and a significant height advantage on you,** Inigo had said, a matter of hours ago, and the words rang through his head as he dully realized now that his opponent had both.

Walhart’s blade slid through the chink, plunged into Inigo’s side, and caught.

All he knew was pain, agony that lit him up from the inside out and overwhelmed even the fact that he was flying—that Walhart had pushed him hard enough to lever him right out of the saddle—until he hit the ground with a horrifying crack in his chest, his whole body spasming as fire spread down every one of his veins, licking away at his limbs and extremities and he couldn’t breathe, couldn’t breathe!

Air, air! his body screamed at him, but he couldn’t take anything in, could only choke on blood and writhe and now he wasn’t even sure where he was hurt anymore because everything hurt dear Naga make it stop!

Cold settled in around him and the freezing pressure made him gasp, suck in oxygen that wasn’t nearly enough but it was something, and he dimly realized above it all that Robin’s voice cried “EXCALIBUR!” and somewhere, a long way away but maybe not so far he could hear his father, anger and anguish both in his voice that was soon drowned out by the clash of metal.

He still couldn’t breathe, still couldn’t think, the world was still too bright but suddenly covered in black spots, when the knowledge came to him. It didn’t feel like a realization; there was nothing sudden about it. More like he’d known it all along and now, only now in the throes of anguish could he acknowledge it.

*I’m going to die, aren’t I?*

All at once, the pain dissipated—not in the soft, comforting manner of a healing spell but in the sheer chill numbness of blood loss. His limbs were too heavy to move and now the world was no longer bright but fading to black and maybe, just maybe, he should slip into the darkness and see where it led.

Well, he thought dryly, Owain’s gonna get Falchion. He wondered where the divine blade had landed when he’d fallen and realized he’d probably never know.

“Inigo—Inigo, my love— oh, gods.”

Someone was touching his face, he realized absently, and felt a flicker of irritation. Couldn’t they just let him sleep?

Wait, said one final, rational voice, shoving him unceremoniously back toward consciousness. “…Say’ri?” he rasped like he hadn’t spoken in years, trying to make her blurry form focus.
“You fool!” she cried, running her hands over his cheeks, his jaw, his hair with a frenzied desperation. “You absolute, utter imbecile!”

With what little awareness that was left, Inigo managed a chuckle that sent such a wave of agony through him he nearly curled up again to die on the spot. “Love you too,” he finally got out.

“Be still!” she chided, though her voice was far too tearful to hold the command she surely intended. “You need a—a healer…”

The break in her voice told him there were no healers.

“Hey,” Inigo whispered hoarsely, trying to muster enough strength to lift his head and failing utterly. “If I… saved you…” He broke off with a horrific cough and tried to ignore the metallic tang on his tongue, barely eeking out, “...worth it…”

“Damn you, Inigo, no it isn’t!”

“Sorry…” he managed to wheeze. “I fear I’ve become… food for the flowers… my love…” She grabbed his hand hard enough that he could just, just feel it before she dropped it and got to her feet. A rush of panic washed over him. “C-come back —said you wouldn’t… leave—”

“I’m trying to find a medic;” Say’ri snapped from somewhere far above and Inigo wondered, absently, where Walhart had gone. Maybe Chrom and Robin had chased him somewhere else. “Fie and vexations, you promised me, you vowed to me —”

She broke off with a soft little gasp and went silent.

Inigo realized, after a long moment, that that had probably not been a good thing, and tried not to think about the fact that his entire form twitched when he craned his neck.

And found Say’ri still standing frozen above him, wide-eyed shock etched on her face and a throwing spear jammed straight through her armor and into her stomach.

“No…”

This couldn’t be happening. He was still dreaming, still stuck in last night’s nightmare and he was going to wake up to Owain barging into his tent and he would laugh at his cousin’s utter disregard for privacy and then they would face this battle and Walhart really would be on Flavia’s flank and they would both be fine—

Say’ri crumpled and the illusion shattered.

“NO!”

She was so close to him, in the grand scheme of things—maybe four or five feet away. Yet Inigo’s attempt to roll onto his side was in vain, and his last desperate stretch ended with his hand falling back into the slick and still surely growing pool of his own blood.

“No, gods, please, I was supposed to… change… this…”

“I… suppose… you did,” Say’ri whispered in that same terrifying, wavering tone his own voice had. “‘Twas not… Walhart… who killed me…”

“Say’ri, please.”

He didn’t even know what he was asking. Maybe for her to at least throw herself close enough that
they could die hand-in-hand instead of so maddeningly far apart.

“...Say’ri?”

Say’ri didn’t answer.

Inigo shut his eyes, felt his last tears slip from his lashes, and let himself tumble headlong into the darkness.
The battle rages on.

In all the years she’d served beside him, Robin had never heard Chrom roar like he did the moment Inigo went down.

When Emmeryn had taken her fall, she remembered, the then-Prince had torn through Mustafa’s lines like they were made of paper, rage and grief taken out on the Plegian soldiers in the stead of the man who’d wrought the trouble in the first place.

Walhart had no such shield as Gangrel had.

A blast of magic from the tactician hit the same moment Falchion collided with the Conqueror in what, by all right, should have been a killing blow. Walhart hardly even moved, his blade—broken at some point during his clash with Inigo—already coming up in retaliation. Say’ri, with a cry of anguish, flung herself from her saddle, fight long forgotten. Robin noted all of it, moving her mount to both cover Chrom and shield Inigo and Say’ri both.

"Why do you resist me, little Prince?" Walhart asked.

She half-expected nothing but an incoherent response, but Chrom’s voice was remarkably level—if not one of the most terrifying things she’d ever heard—when he answered. “You enslave the weak and kill the able. You are the enemy of peace.”

The Conqueror gave a bark of disbelieving laughter. “I would end the reign of the gods, and you object on moral grounds? Blood is spilled in any new birth, Prince. And in many a just cause, as you know.”


“By whose laws do you judge me?” Walhart asked, voice maddeningly even. “Yours? Your sister’s? The gods’?”

Robin missed Chrom’s response, for it was that moment a lone spear—randomly thrown, perhaps even having missed its original target—hit Say’ri.

The tactician muttered a curse, letting an Elfire spell fly toward the offending soldier but realizing, deep down, she couldn’t do anything else when Walhart spoke again.

“Look at you! Are you not ashamed? Your mind is filled with nothing but secondhand beliefs. You dance upon the stage of your gods like a mindless puppet! That is what I reject: being a slave to tradition, to obligation. The old ways. Damn the gods! Damn their fates and their destinies! I will have true freedom! Any man who offers less is my enemy… and will be cut down.”

“Enough!” Chrom shouted. “I don’t require every detail of your twisted philosophy. You’re a
villain and a murderer, plain and simple, and I am the justice you deserve.”

The Conqueror let out a laugh. “Better, Prince. Much better! Be not an agent of someone else’s justice, but justice itself! Now, let us fight as two great men, freed of their gods. I grant any challenger the chance to test his will against my own… But you, too, shall be found wanting!”

Like Chrom had taken that as a personal challenge, his next blow very nearly unseated Wallhart. The second, closely following, finished the job.

“...You think you have won? You blow as if to douse a candle… but you only stoke the fires of hell!”

“Thunder!” Robin cried, the only warning she could give as a wave of Valmese hit them before Chrom could land the killing blow. The Exalt spun, locked in combat again, and by the time he had room to look up, the Conqueror had vanished.

“Damn him!” Chrom cried, whipping his head around. “Damn him!”

Robin couldn’t quite form the words to answer, just swayed a little in her saddle as she felt the effect of her spells start to catch up with her.

All at once, Chrom froze. “Where’s Inigo?” he asked, slightly breathless.

Robin’s head snapped back, finding the spot in the field where the two had fallen suddenly empty. Oh, please tell me —

She shot a look across the field, feeling her shoulders drop a fraction of an inch as her gaze dropped to the very back of the Ylissean line.

Where Owain was just turning away, with rescue staff in hand.

~~~

“...ake up...”

Warm...

“...please... up...”

Dark...

“...have to... you have...”

Quiet...

“...’Nigo...”

Actually, not very quiet, on second thought. “Five… more minutes… Owain…”

“INIGO, WAKE UP!”

Involuntarily, Inigo’s eyes sprang open. “Agh…” he managed, though his mouth felt like it had
been stuffed with cotton.

“Oh, thank Naga,” Owain said above him, his concerned face filling Inigo’s entire field of view.

“Ge’ off,” Inigo muttered, trying to shove his cousin away only to find his limbs wouldn’t answer his command. “...Wha...?”

“Hold still, my friend,” Owain said with a watery note Inigo didn’t think he’d ever heard in his voice. “And don’t try to talk. You’re hurt quite badly.”

Inigo blinked. He didn’t feel hurt. Actually, he felt more floaty than anything, almost pleasant but for the fact he couldn’t move. Hurt? he puzzled again.

*Hurt*, he realized abruptly.

**Battle.**

**Walhart.**

**Say’ri!**

He hadn’t realized he’d blurted the last one aloud and tried to force himself upright until Owain grabbed his shoulders and shoved him back down. “Don’t move!” he repeated urgently. “Just hold still. She’s fine, okay? Well, not fine at all, actually, but let’s go with *alive*, shall we? I got both of you—Naga, I got both of you.”

That didn’t make any sense at all to Inigo, but if Owain said she was alive, then...

“And I’m very proud of you, baby, but I said hold him *down!*” interjected a new voice that Inigo somewhat slowly placed as his aunt. “Why in the name of the *gods* did you wake him up?”

“I didn’t think he was going to!” Owain cried.

“Two more minutes and I don’t think he would have,” Lissa replied in a darker tone, her voice possibly coming from somewhere over Inigo’s midsection.

Owain’s only answer to that was a barely contained sob, and now that *really* didn’t make any sense. Inigo really wanted to ask for some clarification on the matter, but his throat hurt terribly and his tongue seemed too heavy to form the words.

Lissa’s voice drifted into awareness again. “...ready, Owain honey, he’s not going to like this.”

Owain’s grip on Inigo’s shoulders tightened, a grim expression coming to the former’s face while the latter privately wondered *He who?*

Something reached into his insides—where things should really never be reaching—and *grabbed.*

There would be no shame later when Inigo admitted he’d *screamed*. His entire body arched away from the bed, only Owain’s grip on his shoulders keeping him from flailing completely off the edge as his nerve endings cried out, begging for it to stop, to escape from the horrendous, agonizing *tugging* —

As suddenly as it had started, it was over. Inigo fell back, spent, a cold sweat suddenly covering every inch of him. *He me,* he realized.

“Sorry,” he heard Owain whisper. “I know that *sucked* but we had to get it out.”
Gasping, his ears buzzing, Inigo nodded like that meant something and every word out of his cousin’s mouth wasn’t raising more questions than answers. He shut his eyes and shuddered.

“...Mom?” Owain said in a small voice. “Can you put him back to sleep now?”

Lissa’s voice started to fade from Inigo’s consciousness again. “...be afraid to cast something on him,” he heard, then, “...lost too much blood… just have to hope he passes out again…”

Like her words had been the permission he’d been waiting for, he felt his awareness fall back into the welcome black.

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Owain was not a man who was keen on waiting.

As a child, he’d watched Lucina train with the sword and hadn’t wanted to wait until he was big enough to actually wrap his hand around the hilt of a training blade. When they returned to the past, he hadn’t wanted to wait for the Feroxi-Ylisse alliance to fall into place, so he’d spurred it on himself. He hadn’t wanted to wait for his sword arm to heal, so he’d taken up magic. When he met the woman he realized he wanted to marry, they had wed in the matter of a few short weeks.

And now, watching Walhart’s men retreat into the capitol while the Ylissian League pieced itself back together, there was nothing for Owain to do but wait until Chi’hiro showed up to make their final stand.

He’d made himself useful in the healing tent, even when her mother had done as much with Inigo as her mana would allow with so many others to heal—which, frankly, was nowhere near enough—but the entire prospect of running around fetching things seemed useless, boring, and unnecessary.

He stood in the tent flap for a while, watching, then paced for a while more. When a certain blonde figure appeared in the opening, he nearly cried with relief.

“Robin!”

“You got them?”

To someone else, his wife’s words might have sounded brusque and uncaring, but Owain picked up on the concern buried under the layers of exhaustion. “Yeah.” He fiddled with his hands for a moment before closing the distance and wrapping his arms around her.

“They’re okay?” Robin mumbled into his neck.

Owain took in a shuddering breath, then replied, “If by ‘okay’ you mean, ‘Inigo and Say’ri were—and frankly still are—all but laying on Death’s doorstep,’ then…” He let out a humorless laugh, “...sure, they’re okay.” He shook his head and pulled away. “And Inigo thought all my meddling with rescue staves was nothing more than mischievous entertainment.”

“At the time, dear, I think it was,” Robin said.

“Beside the point,” Owain grumbled.
A long moment passed before she whispered, “I’m sorry I didn’t trust you.”

“In the past, heart of mine,” he replied, putting a hand to her cheek. “My cunning plan nearly failed me anyways.”

“How so?”

“A company of Walhart’s broke through the rear line,” Owain said. “They nearly slaughtered all the healers, and those already injured. We finished fending them off just in time for me to see Say’ri get hit, so I went with the plan and pulled her in.” He ducked his head. “...I didn’t even realize Inigo was already down until she started crying for him, and by the time I grabbed him … Gods, Robin, he’d nearly bled out entirely. If I’d—just been paying more attention —it’s not like either of them are out of danger yet—”

“You did what you needed to, Owain,” Robin said softly. “They’ll pull through.”

After a beat, Owain said in a low tone, “Is he dead?”

“...Huh?”

“Walhart,” Owain continued. “Is he dead?”

“No,” Robin admitted softly. “They’ve retreated to make a last stand inside the capitol. You know, exactly what we were hoping they wouldn’t do.”

“Chi’hiro?”

“Any minute now.”

“So we take just enough time to regather and recover, then push ahead again and strike,” Owain mused. “Good. I’ll be with you this time.”

“Hey, you want to ask your tactician’s opinion on that one?” Robin asked dryly.

“She’ll say yes,” he replied blithely.

Before she could answer, the tent flew open again with a force that jostled a shelf of elixirs on the wall and had several healers sending dirty looks. “Where is he?” Chrom demanded.

“I don’t think Mom’s going to let you—” Owain started.

“Like hell she won’t!”

“Like hell I will!” Lissa shouted back, in a remarkably un-princesslike manner. Chrom, taken aback, paused and blinked.

“He’s in bad shape, Uncle,” Owain said, the words far from necessary but succeeding in filling the sudden silence. “As is Say’ri.”

“What happened to Say’ri?” Chrom asked with alarm. “I haven’t seen her since we hit Walhart.”

“She took a spear when she was trying to tend Inigo,” Owain replied softly. “Went right through her armor. A very lucky shot, I’d say, except in this case I think it qualifies more as a very unlucky shot.”

“...Damn,” Chrom said after a beat. “Damn, damn this war and damn Walhart.” He let out a sigh,
shoulders slumping. “What was Inigo thinking, trying to one on one him?”

“I doubt it was his intent,” a new voice interjected, dripping with disdain. “His men deserted him.”

Owain blinked—with a bandage over his head precluding his usual mask, it took a long moment for Gerome’s black armor and silver hair to click into place. “Wait, they what? They just— left him?”

“Indeed,” Gerome said, getting up from his seat and striding over. “Unfortunately, Minerva and I were too far away to aid, but I did chance to see the majority of the exchange.”

“Oh, like you’d have actually aided,” Owain said, crossing his arms.

The tension in the air increased ten-fold with nothing more than a raise of Gerome’s brow. “It’s been a long time since we left our future, Owain, but I thought even you might have remembered that I believe in bigger things than the mutual disdain Inigo and I hold for each other.”

“Oh, is that what they call it now? Disdain? The way you’ve challenged his authority at every turn, the way you tried to kill him in Rosanne—don’t think I didn’t hear about that—all because… because why? Because he’s not your precious Lucina?”

A long moment stretched out where no one dared speak.

“Don’t think I didn’t hear about that, either,” Owain finally added.

“I won’t stand here and be baited by you, Owain,” Gerome said lowly.

“Sit down, then, there’s plenty of chairs!”

“Boys!” Chrom interjected sharply. “That’s enough!”

“Just how far away were you, Gerome, that you couldn’t… oh, I don’t know… fly over?” Owain continued anyways.

“Owain!” Robin snapped.

“Minerva,” Gerome said flatly, “had just taken an arrow. We were not going to be flying anywhere.”

The wind suddenly taken out of his sails, Owain paused. “…Oh.”

A beat passed before Robin spoke again. “Okay,” she said softly. “Everyone’s a little riled up right now, so why don’t we all take a step back, breathe, and start from the top. Gerome, what happened to Inigo?”

“From what I could see,” the wyvern rider replied, “he had three men directly accompanying him, and they turned tail and fled once Walhart was on the field near them.” He paused, then spat, “Cravens.”

“Were they Chi’hiro’s, or were they ours?” Chrom asked.

“That, I could not tell you.”

“They just left him,” Owain said again. “They just left him to die.” He took a sharp breath, then muttered, “By my aching blood, I’ll…’
“Save it for Walhart, dear,” Robin replied. “He’s going to have to come first.”

Blowing out a breath, Owain nodded, then said, “Uncle Chrom? Did you… happen to find Falchion?” Chrom’s brow furrowed, a hand dropping to the hilt of his own blade before Owain shook his head and added, “Inigo didn’t have it on him.”

“Oh,” the Exalt said. “No, I’m afraid not.”

Owain muttered a curse. “I wanted to know if it glowed…”

“Glowed?” Chrom asked, then added, “Oh, right. He did ask me about that.”

“Did you know…?”

Chrom shook his head. “As far as I know, you’re theory’s the right one.” He scrubbed a hand through his hair. “We’ll search the field for it later. Provided…”

Provided he’s still alive to wield it, Owain filled in with a pang in his chest, sending an automatic glance back toward the scurrying healers behind him. C’mon, Inigo…

For all his joking, Falchion had never been meant for him and he knew it.

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Owain hadn’t quite realized how heavy their casualties had been until they actually put their strike force together.

Frederick and Flavia were both out of the fight, as were nearly all of their mages—either due to injury or being drafted into the healing tent themselves—but for Ricken and Robin. Even those they did have weren’t all in one piece: Lon’qu had a slight limp, Gerome an undisclosed head injury he insisted was not going to slow him down even without a mount. All in all, the Shepherds headed for Walhart’s throne room totaled a paltry eight.

Wordlessly, Owain passed out as many elixirs the infirmary had been willing to spare them. The smack of a lollipop broke the silence, warning him who was about to speak before the ginger thief opened his mouth. “Swordhand, this is ‘bout the most serious I think I’ve ever seen you.”

Owain didn’t dignify that with an answer, but Severa filched a toffee from her father’s pocket and popped it in her mouth. Before he could respond to such an affront, she said dryly, “Careful, Daddy, he does know magic now. He might turn all your sugar into salt.”

Gaius made a horrified noise.

“I’ve not yet come to dabble in the mercurial art of transfiguration,” Owain grumbled. “Your sweets are safe for now.”

“That sounds more like Owain,” Chrom said dryly, while Gaius sighed in relief, though with a wary gaze still directed in Owain’s direction.

“True, Blue,” the thief said, then paused to laugh at his pun. “Was starting to get worried there.”

“Fear not, oh Pilferer of Plunder,” Owain replied, but it was plain his heart wasn’t in it. “My blood
still boils with the rage of a thousand suns, prepared to strike—”

“And still he is not ashamed to say such things out loud,” Lon’qu muttered.

“Ashamed?” Owain replied. “Ha! Far from it, Father! Though I suppose I can’t blame you for not understanding my bleeding-edge aesthetic. After all, you are the product of an earlier, simpler time…”

A beat passed before Robin said, “Well done, dear, you just managed to insult five out of the eight people standing here.”

“Can we get going already?” Owain asked, a little more snappishly than he’d intended. “My swordhand hungers after being held back from the earlier skirmish. I fear I can contain it for only a little longer.”

“Gods forbid we don’t feed the swordhand,” Gaius muttered.
Chapter Summary

The Valm War draws to a long-anticipated close.

For all his theatrics, Owain thought he’d never really felt his blood boil until he caught sight of Walhart himself. This time, his swordhand really did twitch, and it wasn’t for effect.

“It doesn’t seem like he’s thinking about escape,” Chrom muttered from the darkened doorway, just out of sight of Walhart’s forces.

“And his soldiers… they look ready to die before they surrender,” Robin said. “One must admire their loyalty, at least.”

“He does inspire that in people,” Chrom admitted. “It’s part of what makes him so dangerous.”

“He inspires that in some people,” Robin replied.

“Yes, in some. But not me.”

Robin glanced out over the seemingly endless line of soldiers stretching toward Walhart’s throne room, then cast a discrete look to either side. “It looks like those hallways branch back further up,” she whispered. “Might give us a good element of surprise.”

“Might do,” Chrom murmured in agreement.

With that, the tactician gave a sharp nod. “Gaius, Severa, take the left. Ricken, Gerome, the right.”

“Aye aye, Bubbles,” Gaius said, before the four slipped away on their respective paths.

The remainder exchanged glances. “On your mark, Chrom,” Robin said, spellbook at the ready.

Chrom nodded sharply, held up three fingers, and dropped them one by one. “Your end has come!” he bellowed as they burst from the shadows.

“Elthunder!”

“Binding Blade!”

Lon’qu was the only one not to bother with a battle cry, merely ramming his sword into the belly of the nearest soldier in dead silence as Robin’s spell dazzled the room.

Half a dozen Valmese fell before they rallied themselves enough to strike back. When they did, though, they fell into a plainly well-trained formation, forming a wall the four Shepherds would be hard-pressed to break through. “Let’s have it, then, rebellious scum!” shouted a heavily mustached man that had to be a general—Cervantes, Owain remembered distantly. “Like a flimsy belt around the waist of defeat, you shall buckle here!”

Before he even finished speaking, a high cry of “Wilderwind!” reached them from up ahead, followed by a battle roar that was unmistakably Gerome. Ricken’s spell broke a hole in Cervantes’s
ranks, leaving Robin shouting immediately.

“Lon’qu, Owain, push forward!”

The former smashed into an enemy warrior just past the gap, leaving the latter scrambling to catch up with a shouted “Dual Strike!”

How many times had he wished to do this when he was younger? Owain wondered to himself, striking a killing blow on a foe already weakened by Lon’qu’s katana. To fight side by side with his father, a warrior of equal caliber instead of a boy who needed to be protected, at the cost of Lon’qu’s own life—

“Owain, down! Now!”

His body responded automatically, a half-formed syllable of query falling past his lips as he dropped at the order. Lon’qu answered with only a grunt, leaving Owain whipping his head back around with wide eyes.

“...Father, you’re hit!” he cried, locking onto the arrow now sprouting from Lon’qu’s shoulder.

“Nng… I noticed.” Lon’qu shook his head for a moment, as if to clear it, then reached up to snap off the arrow’s shaft. “They were aiming for you.”

His words made Owain’s ears ring. “Let me look!” he cried.

“Not here, Owain!” Lon’qu snapped.

Not bothering to answer, Owain saw an opening and dove for it, trusting his father to follow. A few moments later they broke through the fringes of the battle, popping out in the hallway Gaius and Severa had gone down.

The thief and his daughter were nowhere in sight, to Owain’s chagrin—Gaius, at least, knew a few basic healing spells—but on the other hand, their enemy didn’t seem to be making much use of the hallway either. Owain slumped, taking in a shuddering breath. “Gods, not again…"

He’d barely been able to save Lissa when the Valmese had broken through their rear line… Say’ri and Inigo were still so near to death either or both of them might have fallen over that line in the time he’d been gone… and now his father…

“How?” he heard Lon’qu say, his eyes dark with pain and his jaw clenched in a way that said he was trying to ignore it.

“Why?” Owain couldn’t help but burst out. “Why did you take that arrow for me? You could have died! This is how it happens, you know! This is exactly… how it…"

Don’t cry, don’t cry…

“This is how what happens?” Lon’qu asked softly.

Owain choked on a tiny sob he couldn’t quite hold back, the battle waging outside forgotten as he muttered, “Oh, Father…”

There was a softness in Lon’qu’s voice Owain didn’t think he’d heard since he’d come to the past. “Owain… are you crying? What’s wrong?”

“I…” Owain started, then trailed off. “No, nothing. Nothing’s wrong. It’s just more of my
swordhand nonsense, all right? Just forget I said anything. More importantly, we need to get that shoulder looked at. I’ll go see if I can find Uncle Gaius.”

With that, he hurried away before Lon’qu could catch sight of the tears he couldn’t quite hide.

Owain followed the hallway ever nearer to Walhart’s throne, the sound of fighting still coming from the other side of the walls but neither friend nor foe stumbled upon him. When he poked his head out again, he’d come out far ahead of Chrom, Robin, and the others, finding another company of Valmese laying in wait for them.

He paused, peering at them for a long moment and deciding, with no sign of Gaius, his best bet was probably to double back and inform Robin of what laid ahead. He’d taken two steps back when a simpering whisper reached him.

“...They forget who I am,” Excellus muttered, weaving back and forth from foot to foot at the fringes of his company. “I could have fried them both where they stood with my magic!”

Owain instantly forgot about turning back.

“We will crush these rebels… we must crush these rebels… Or maybe… if Walhart is sufficiently injured… I might ‘amuse’ him with a spell…” Excellus continued under his breath.

Carefully, quietly, Owain slunk forward, temporarily taking refuge behind one of the suits of armor that lined the walls before creeping ahead again. His eyes locked onto a flash of silver at Excellus’s hip.

“But he’s a mage… Owain thought, train of thought pulled up short until Walhart’s tactician began to pace in earnest, his cloak parting slightly to reveal the sword’s distinctive hilt.

“Eee hee, either way this spider crawls out alive! Eee hee hee hee—EEP!”

Owain let Missletainn linger at Excellus’s throat for a moment before he spoke. “Oh, what lady of fortune has smiled upon my visage to bring me to you?” he said lightly, nudging Excellus behind one of the suits of armor and out of sight of his men. “And with you bearing such a fine blade, whose search has thus consumed me…”

“You…!” Excellus cried, voice rising for a moment until Owain’s sword pointedly poked at his throat.

“Ah ah. Do meld your lips together, lest Owain Dark is forced to silence you for all eternity.”

Owain shot him a glare that should have burned the paint off the wall behind him.

“Excellent,” Owain said with a menacing grin. “It appears you are indeed capable of thinking beyond your hideous scheming.” With a deft motion, he pried Excellus’s spellbook from the tactician’s pocket and tossed it aside. “Now, tell me how you happened to acquire that gleaming blade you have defiled with those fat fingers of yours.”

“All of your business!” Excellus hissed, twisting a little in Owain’s grasp. Missletainn pressed a little closer, drawing a drop of blood from the tactician’s neck. “Okay, okay, you madman! I found it! I went out after the battle and it was just laying there, so I took it! What’s it to you?”

Owain forced down the urge to shove his blade through Excellus’s throat then and there. “It belongs to a very dear friend of mine,” he said lowly. “I think he’ll be wanting it back.”
A beat passed before Excellus chortled. “Oh, that friend? Yes, I remember him! Goodness, he was nearly as sour about this war business as you are. Well, we all do what we have to to survive! And as for his sword, I don’t think I really feel like returning it. It’s quite lovely—definitely much prettier when it’s not pointed at my sweet little face! It makes me look rather dashing and heroic, don’t you agree?”

Pointedly, Owain let his grip relax, ears perked toward where he could hear the sheer fury of Chrom approaching from behind at a rapid pace. “Honestly?” he said conversationally. “I believe that even Falchion fails at bringing your image past the filthy, murderous, conniving pig that you are.”

Excellus gasped with offense, spinning free from Owain’s grip. “Why, you little…!” he cried, forced to bring up Falchion in some sort of clumsy attempt at a defense.

“And one more thing!” Owain yelled as Chrom, Robin, and Gerome burst through the line at the front of the room. “Get your hands off my cousin’s sword!”

Excellus’s strike wouldn’t have done any damage even with a blade that hadn’t dulled to stone in his grasp. Owain parried it with hardly a thought, not even bothering to do anything but leave himself wide open.

“You think I’m afraid?” Excellus screeched. “Of you? Come, then! Come at me!”

Owain didn’t answer—just grabbed Falchion’s hilt with his free hand, sheathing Missletainn in the same motion as he twisted Inigo’s blade free.

Excellus cried out the same moment that the sword came to life under Owain’s fingertips. The latter spun in a pirouette that must have looked remarkable Inigo-esque, giving himself just enough room to ram the divine blade through Excellus’s chest.

Owain stepped back, watching the pudgy tactician fall to his knees. “Eee hee hee… eee hee… Heeeeeauuugh…”

“That…” Owain muttered absently, spinning Falchion to get a feel for the heft of it. A little longer and a little heavier than Missletainn, he noted. “…was for Yen’fay, and all you wrought because of him.”

Excellus did not answer, which made Owain give a grim smile as he turned away.

He was about to wonder to himself when, exactly, Say’ri had become something of an extension of Inigo in his mind, to be defended to the same extent, when the suit of armor in front of him lunged forward, impaling a Valmese soldier who had crept up in Owain’s blind spot.

Owain—though he would deny it until dying breath—gave a very unheroic shriek. “The statues of old! They rise again!”

The statue answered, “Swordhand, calm down, geez.”

A beat passed. “…Uncle Gaius?”

“Last I checked, yeah,” the suit of armor said, reaching up to remove his helmet to reveal a familiar mop of ginger hair.

“What are you doing in there?” Owain asked carefully.
“Element of surprise, Swordhand,” Gaius answered breezily. “Sure worked on you.”

“Yeah, but how…?” Owain asked, trying to figure out how the thief had gotten inside undetected and coming up empty.

“Just… don’t ask.” Gaius shot a look toward the other three that were in the fray—where had Ricken gone? Owain wondered—before giving a low whistle. “Go get ’em, honeybunches!”

Like a streak of flame, Severa came barreling out of a hallway Owain hadn’t actually noticed. “C’mon, look alive!” she called. “Stop standing there looking like an idiot—if you can manage it!”

Owain trotted after her, Falchion absently twirling in his hand, before he abruptly looked back at Gaius. “Hey! My father—back in that hallway—took an arrow—”

“On it, Swordhand!” Gaius called back, vanishing with startling abruptness that shouldn’t have been possible even for the accomplished thief. Owain shook his head and dove back into the fight.

“Uncle Chrom!” he cried. “I found Falchion!”

“Very good!” the Exalt called back, in a short tone that managed to convey both genuine praise and an implied Right now, really? He spun toward an enemy at his back, his own version of the blade flying in an arc. “Can you even—”

Only to find Falchion’s twin already piercing through his target, attached to the hand of a grinning Owain.

“—wield it?” Chrom finished after a beat. “Well, guess that answers that.”

“Verily!” Owain cried. “Naga’s own fang also answers to my call, having recognized the right of my exalted blood to lay my hand upon its divine hilt—”

“Owain!” Robin called.

“Yes, my dear?”

“Not the— Fire! —time! Focus!”

“...Okay, but I would like to point out how totally cool it is that my generation is three for three on being able to use Falchion!” Owain called back.

“Yes, dear, very cool!”

Owain beamed.

Before anyone could say anything further, though, the bellow of a Valmese soldier reached them. “Rally every last man! We make our stand with Emperor Walhart!”

Chrom cursed, head spinning back toward the sudden commotion at the entrance of the palace. Half a second later, though, a blurry form bounded through the air, clearly taking the form of one of the massive, wild cats Owain had only seen in books.

“Then know you make your stand in vain!” Chi’hiro cried from the front of a company that could barely fit into the room. “Lord Chrom, our strength is thine!”

“That’s more like it!” Robin shouted.
Chrom’s face split into a deadly smile. “Shepherds! Forward! This ‘Conqueror’s’ reign ends now!”

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Eight had been reduced to five.

Ricken, Lon’qu, and Gaius had been forced to fall back behind Chi’hiro’s line, the former two due to injury and the latter being, even for all his skill, unable to breach the gap between Chi’hiro and Walhart.

Still… Owain thought. Five versus one can’t be that bad, can it?

“Walhart!” Chrom said, stepping forward toward the Conqueror. Robin moved to flank his right automatically, Owain taking his left as Gerome and Severa took up positions to the rear.

“Prince,” Walhart acknowledged, not even bothering to rise from his throne.

“Will you surrender?” Chrom asked with a defiant raise of his chin.

“Don’t waste my time with questions you know the answers to, boy,” Walhart replied, crossing one red-plated leg over the other.

“It did not have to be this way,” Chrom said, taking another stride closer to the throne. “You believe in mankind’s strength… So did my sister. You believe that we are masters of our destinies… So do I. You could have joined us.”

“ME? JOIN YOU?” Walhart bellowed with a volume that made the rafters rattle, getting to his feet in a motion reminiscent of the sheer power of an angry bull. “Does a pegasus join with the flea on its back? A dragon, with the cow it eats? You forget your place, boy! I am the Conqueror! I will unite the world!”

“No!” Chrom snapped back. “I will! And not by forcing all the people to choose the sword or the knee. Peace will only come by stoking people’s hearts—not their fear!”

“You think that’s what you’ve done?” Walhart demanded, beginning to stride toward them. “What your sister did before you? No, she shouted some nonsense and leapt off a rock! Such weakness!”

“Wrong! Not weakness—strength! That one act lives on, and will live on, longer than all your conquests!”

“And longer than you will…” Walhart said, drawing the massive axe that had taken up residence on his hip in place of the sword that had broken in Inigo’s side. “Come then, flea, and die for your peace!”

The two clashed with a thunderclap, multiplied again by Robin’s chant of Elwind that left the Conqueror stumbling back a mere half a step. The spell still had its intended effect, though, giving enough space for Owain, Severa, and Gerome to leap in and surround him.

“Heh, just like old times, huh?” Owain asked, only managing to strike a glancing blow off Walhart’s shoulder.

“Shut up,” Severa said.
“Be silent and stab him,” Gerome agreed.

Owain didn’t have time answer that before Walhart roared, spinning with such speed all three were forced to leap out of his way or be torn in two. Gerome, a fraction too slow, caught the edge of the axe and went flying backward as if launched—though his heavy black armor saved him from being ripped open like the other two would have been, he hit the wall with a crack and a groan. The wyvern rider struggled to rise for a moment before he slumped down in defeat.

There wasn’t time for Owain to be concerned, just to note that five had become four and raise Falchion for another strike.

“Are you blind?” Severa demanded, her own steel blade sliding in between Falchion and Walhart’s axe, preventing a blow that would have slid down the the divine sword and probably severed Owain in half. “Watch it!”

Owain merely let out a laugh. “I have taught you well!”

“Bite me!”

A spell from Robin sent Walhart staggering backwards again, the Conqueror’s broad shoulder clipping Severa in the head and one of his booted feet stomping down on hers. She fell backwards with a cry, nearly landing on her own blade before she scooted back out of reach, yelping and clutching her swordarm to her chest.

Four became three, and Owain realized then they were in far deeper than he’d thought. He fell back a few steps, letting Chrom take point again as he dropped toward Robin’s side.

“He’s a nasty piece of work, isn’t he?” his wife muttered, spellbook still at the ready but a pale, drawn look to her face that said she didn’t have much more left in her.

“You’re hitting him harder than we are,” Owain replied in a clipped tone.

“I know,” she replied, straightening up to gather herself for another spell. “Thoron!” she cried, the magic taking longer to gather than either of them were used to before it blasted Walhart. The Conqueror stumbled in earnest this time, but Robin bent double with a heavy sigh. “I’m done,” she sighed. “No, I’m—I’m okay,” she continued as Owain wrapped his free arm around her shoulders.

“We need another mage,” Owain said, cursing internally as he glanced back toward the entrance.

“We brought another mage,” Robin replied, standing upright again and drawing the sword at her hip.

“I thought you said Ricken—”

“I don’t mean Ricken.”

Owain paused for a long moment, utterly puzzled until Robin extended her spellbook in his direction.

“Hit him hard, dear,” she said, pressing the tome into his hands before leaping into the fray herself.

Owain continued to stare after her for several seconds, then abruptly blurted, “Oh!”

Hurriedly, he flipped the book open, hands already tingling in anticipation as the magic rose to meet him—Not that much, he thought to himself, mentally brushing away the excess before
throwing the rest out with a called “Wind!”

Nothing happened.

Well, he thought, to say nothing happened wouldn’t have been completely accurate—the spell flew far and true from his fingertips, hitting Walhart square in the chest, but the Conqueror didn’t as much as break stride. Owain realized, after a beat, he hadn’t heard Robin call out anything less than an Arc- spell after that first, ineffective Elwind.

He wondered, briefly, if he trusted himself to start throwing around spells of that caliber and not bring Valm Castle down around their ears.

With a hard swallow, he fought back that thought, pulling out an “Elfire!” that was marginally more effective than his first spell but also nearly succeeded in lighting his uncle on fire. Chrom yelped and Robin skittered sideways, leaving Owain cringing and quickly deciding No more fire spells.

Okay, he thought with new determination, flicking toward the center of the book. I can do this. I know how to do this! By my twitching swordhand — no, by my aching fell hand!

“Arcwi—”

Owain, distantly, felt his concentration slip as he released it; realized with a curse that he hadn’t put quite enough force into the spell. For a moment, he thought it was merely going to fly uselessly off course, or perhaps just be a particularly weak excuse for Arcwind.

It was only when the spell lashed back and summarily blew up in his face that he realized just why Robin had been so upset with him back at Steiger.

Distantly, part of him wondered how such a spell hadn’t so much as budged Walhart, because the very same magic sent Owain flying. Only the wall of the throne room stopped him with a force that stole the air from his lungs and left him seeing stars. Like Gerome, he swayed before a second before his knees buckled, sending him sliding down the wall to land with an unpleasant bump. The spellbook somehow still clutched in his fingers slipped from his grasp.

“Owain!”

Part of him recognized Robin’s voice and ached to call back to her, but the rest of him couldn’t quite remember how words worked. The world spun in time with the pounding in his head, brusquely informing him Concussion and warning Don’t move. For a moment, he still struggled to stand anyway, quietly realizing that three had ticked down to two and there was suddenly a terrible chance that Walhart was going to emerge from this room the victor.

The thought made Owain’s gut churn in a way that probably didn’t have to do with the blow to the head he’d just taken. Walhart had to die, for the sake of every drop of blood he’d shed, for the horrors they’d seen in the past year and a half, for the pain his mere presence had wrought to their company long before they met him on the battlefield.

And for the pain he’d brought on the battlefield, Owain thought, eyes going wide as the world slowed, a long moment before Walhart’s next blow would, without a doubt, hit Robin. He was going to turn from Chrom and she would be in just the wrong spot —

For a moment, Brady’s voice rang in his head, from a wound sustained in a future long dead. That’s th’ thing ’bout mages, the priest had grumbled over top of Owain’s own whining. They hit ya from a distance.
Owain reacted.

He didn’t think about the fact that the spellbook he’d just snatched up again had flipped toward the end, certainly far into spells he’d never dream of casting yet.

What he did think of was all he could have lost that day—Lon’qu, as stoic and reserved in this timeline as Owain remembered him, but he’d never, ever doubted his father loved him, not in life or in death, even with a Valmese arrow sprouting from his shoulder. He thought of Lissa, fighting for others’ lives far more than she fought for her own but still ready to tear into the company that had broken through their rear line that day.

He thought of a hero he’d known only in tales until this time, of Say’ri and all she’d lost in the war, all she’d gained that could have been so easily stolen away by a single spear. And that, of course, led to Inigo —the cousin he had teased relentlessly, the prince he had turned to when the world fell apart, the Exalt he had followed into the past with reckless abandon, the idiot who had spit tea at the announcement of his engagement, the best friend who had never, ever failed to have his back—who could have so easily been lost to Walhart’s own blade.

He thought indignantly, furiously, of everything Walhart could have so easily stolen away, and how near, in that moment, he was to adding Robin to that list.

And Owain channeled every ounce of that fury into the buzzing spell that was bucking against him, begging to escape from his fingertips.

“RUIN!”

Finally, finally, Walhart reacted, staggering back with his axe coming up to cover him defensively—but neither Chrom nor Robin followed the opening, both shooting Owain the same look of mixed disbelief and horror.

Owain, for the life of him, couldn’t figure out why, nor why the spell felt like it hadn’t quite released all the way. His body still prickled and burned, unspent magic settling under his skin with an itchy, stinging sensation that told him Do it again.

He obeyed.

“Ruin!” he repeated in a much lower tone that didn’t dampen the sheer power heading toward Walhart. Once more, the Conqueror stumbled, while Owain wondered to himself what type of magic that spell had to be a derivative of to be coming out purple.

He didn’t have long to dwell on that—the burning redoubled, somehow familiar as it drowned out the pounding in his head and the ache in his ribs that told him he’d probably broken a few. He ignored all of it, pushing himself to his feet, the next spell already gathering in his hand.

“Waste,” Owain murmured, gaze darting down the page just long enough to catch them name of the spell before fixing it back on Walhart. Two bursts of violet fire shot out in short succession, lighting up the sudden alarm on the Conqueror’s features as well as the fact that Robin was mouthing Owain!

Probably shouting it, actually, though Owain couldn’t hear it over the surge of blood to his head that left his ears ringing. Chrom finally struck, taking advantage of Walhart’s distraction with a blow that cracked through the crimson chestplate.

Owain noted, distantly, that another blow in the same spot would probably be enough to end even the Conqueror, but he himself had to glance down to make sure he hadn’t actively set himself on
fire from the way his skin blazed. He hadn’t, somehow—his hand was as pale as usual despite the way he felt like he’d been set alight.

Another spell rose to his lips unbiddenn, a moment before he placed the sensation.

It was the same searing, scalding pain that had come hand-in-hand with that long ago Goetia spell that, by all rights, should have killed him.

*Dark magic.*

Panic bubbled up his throat, but it was too late to re-harness the magic about to blow out of his hand, too late to seal his lips against the chant of “Nosferatu!”

Owain threw Robin’s tome away from him, as hard and as far as he could, but it didn’t stop the spell from slamming into Walhart at full force, the Conqueror finally falling to his knees at the onslaught.

Without the tome to channel through, the pain of the backlash started to fade, only to be overpowered by a blunt healing spell slamming into him at full force. Owain gasped, feeling the pain in his head and chest fade even as a distant part of him thought *Mother will tear apart whoever cast a spell that imprecise.*

He remembered, a beat later, what exactly Nosferatu did, and thought for a moment he might vomit.

But Robin was there, throwing her arms around him so quickly he almost missed Chrom strike the final blow of the Valm War—*almost but not quite,* he thought. “You scared the hell out of me,” she muttered.

“I’m sorry,” Owain whispered thickly, feeling himself shudder in her arms. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know—I didn’t realize—”

“Shh,” Robin said. “It’s okay. We’ll talk about it later.”

“...I just wanted him dead,” Owain said.

“And he is.” Robin somehow managed to squeeze him even tighter before she whispered, “We’ve won, dear.”

Owain peered over her shoulder, seeing the now-still lump of scarlet armor on the floor, and realized she was right.

The Valm War was over, and the Valm War was won.
Word Upon Your Lip (Part 6) Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Hangovers and aftermath.

Dusk had long since come and gone by the time camp settled down enough for Robin to retire. She was greeted by a darkness only broken by the candle in her hand, an irritated hiss, and a voice that was uncharacteristically sharp.

“Might you douse that?”

Robin paused, taken aback at the fact that Owain was curled up with his knees to his chest, doing nothing less than glowering at her, his narrowed eyes accented by dark circles that hadn’t been there a few hours ago. “Sorry,” she said after a beat, hurriedly blowing out the candle and blinking against the sudden dark.

She didn’t quite miss the soft sigh she had a feeling she wasn’t supposed to have heard.

When several minutes passed in silence, she finally dropped to the floor beside him. Owain shifted slightly, but didn’t acknowledge her otherwise.

“Talk to me, dear,” Robin said softly.

“I don’t want to talk.”

“You? Not want to talk?” she asked, nudging him with her elbow. “Who are you and what have you done with my husband?”

Owain didn’t answer but for the slightest tilt of his head toward her.

“You freaked yourself out, didn’t you?” Robin asked quietly.

He grumbled. “Owain Dark does not ‘freak himself out.’”

“There we go, that’s a bit more like it.”

This time, the sigh he gave was of such blustering proportions that it likely could have been heard several tents over. “I feel as though I have recently indulged in an abundance of intoxicating beverages, yet have received none of the enjoyment such a partaking would have granted me.”

Robin reached over, scratching her hand lightly over his spine and feeling him soften slightly at her touch. “That makes sense, considering you’ve basically got what amounts to the magical equivalent of a hangover.”

Owain’s next words, though clearly a question, were phrased with such flat disbelief they lost the rising intonation that would have deemed it one. “I have a what.”

“Dear,” Robin chided. “If there weren’t some sort of kickback to it, it wouldn’t be called dark magic. It would be called… Oh, I don’t know, ‘Epic Spells of Awesome Coolness,’” or something
else you’d think up.”

She was rewarded by a very slight but still present quirking smile. “Not bad, my dear. Not entirely as amazing as what I would have come up with, granted, but points for effort.”

With a soft chuckle, she looped her arm through his and pressed closer. “I suppose I’ve done you a disservice, as your teacher, to not warn you about this,” she said after a long moment. “I guess I hoped we weren’t going to come to this point.”

“It seems we have both underestimated the depths of my malefic aura,” Owain replied, glancing away again. “Perhaps I must change my epithet to the Anti-Hero of Legend.” He sniffed. “Or maybe just begin referring to myself as a creepy-creep who should probably never touch a tome again.”

“Hey now, stop that!” Robin said with a sharp note in her tone. Her voice softened again as she continued, “It’s not like a handful of spells are going to instantly turn you into some evil overlord.”

Owain shifted and muttered, “You say that, having not lived in my timeline.”

“Owain,” she said firmly, catching his chin so he had to turn his head and meet her eyes. “I am not going to deny… that dark magic can be used for unspeakable things,” she continued. “What I’m going to remind you is that is not a trait exclusive to it. So to can anima magic, so to can the sword, so to can one’s own hands. Yes, dark magic is more potent and more volatile than any of those things, but that does not make it inherently evil.”

He didn’t answer that, but there was a glimmer of something on his face—a spark that begged for redemption, asked her to soothe it all away.

“It’s a tool,” Robin said. “And like any other, it’s not the tool that does good or bad. It’s the intent behind the use of it. So I’m going to ask you—what was your intent this afternoon?”

A long moment passed before Owain answered, “To kill Walhart.”

“Yes. And?”

Another long silence while he seemed to struggle to piece together what she was getting at. “To avenge the lives he’d taken,” he finally answered. “To pay him back for the destruction he wrought. For Inigo, and for Say’ri, and… and so he wouldn’t hurt you.”

In response, Robin looped her arm around his shoulders and squeezed. “A noble cause and a viable strategy, if I say so myself.”

“So why were you so keen on making me stop?”

She let out a sigh. “Dark magic is… draining in a way that anima magic isn’t—as I’m sure you’ve guessed by now, if your little hangover speech is anything to go on. And, as I said, generally more potent. Especially in the beginning, that power can get… a little bit addicting. With time, you can learn to think past the high—it’s how mages like Tharja and Henry can operate with almost exclusive use of dark magic—but if you’re not thinking about it, it’s entirely possible to cast yourself to death and not even realize.” She chewed on her lip for a moment. “And again, we’re back to the fact this is all training you don’t have.”

Owain let out a blustering sigh. “It seems there is still a great deal I have left to learn.”

“It takes years to understand all this, honey.” Robin tucked her head against his, nuzzling at his
neck for a moment before adding, “But you’ve got your whole life to learn it.”

“A whole life,” Owain repeated, “with you to teach me?” The first real smile of the evening graced his face as he dropped a kiss to her head. “I can think of naught better I could spend it doing, my bride.”

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Awareness came slowly, then all at once.

Inigo blinked, finding the world only marginally brighter with his eyes open than closed. The sharp scent of concoctions and antiseptics mingled together told him he was in the healing tent—his parched throat and empty stomach told him he’d been there a while.

He nearly sat up before a long-cultivated instinct, born in a dead timeline with only one full-fledged healer, told him to stay down for a minute and assess himself.

He first found his left hand was bound and splinted, a worrying beginning particularly when his memory of the past few… Hours? Days?… was little more than a series of blurry, nonsensical fragments. Inigo twisted said hand a few times, trying to guess if it was sprained or actually broken, and where. Without remembering how it happened, he came up short. The fact that it hadn’t been healed was disquieting as well—it meant they’d taken heavy enough casualties that the healers had had to save their mana for the more life-threatening injuries, and leave those less fatal to be taken care of later or merely heal on their own. A common enough situation in the future with only Brady, but Inigo couldn’t remember being stuck in such circumstances since they’d joined up with the Shepherds.

His right hand still seemed to be intact, at least, and he used it to push himself slightly more upright and pull back an almost-suffocating amount of blankets. He realized why a moment later—while everything from the waist down looked to be in good shape, he was bare from the waist up, wrapped in bandages from his naval all the way up over his chest.

That is not a good sign, Inigo thought to himself, staring down at the swathe of white and trying to piece together what on earth had happened to him.

There had definitely been a battle—that much was clear just from his own state, even without the flashes he remembered of green fields, gray skies, and red armor.

...Red armor?

“‘Tis tomorrow, isn’t it?” Say’ri had asked him the night before, or maybe several nights ago now.

Walhart.

Inigo sat bolt upright with a gasp that sent a white-hot spike of pain through his chest—broken ribs, he noted absently—only to find himself bent over the edge of his cot a moment later, dizzy and heaving at the elevation change. Nothing came up, leaving him deciding he’d been out long enough there was nothing currently in his system to come up and quietly adding probable concussion to his ongoing mental list of injuries.

The pieces fell back into place faster now. The battle had come, he’d fought Walhart… alone, for
reasoning he couldn’t quite remember. And Walhart had gotten a hit in. That explained the bandages on his stomach, at least, and Inigo guessed he’d probably cracked his ribs and hit his head when he’d fallen from Scottie. The hand was more of a mystery—perhaps when he’d landed on the ground, as well, or maybe he’d been too overwhelmed with adrenaline to notice he’d injured it when he’d been trying to block those devastating attacks. Either potential seemed equally likely, and he supposed it didn’t really matter which.

Say’ri was there.

Their conversation slammed into him all at once. Him so sure he was in the middle of breathing his last it made him question for a moment if he were even still alive now—no, surely he’d be in far less pain than this if he were dead. Say’ri, so desperate and afraid it had come across as borderline anger. “Fie and vexations, you promised me, you vowed to me—”

She’d been hit, Inigo remembered.

And she hadn’t answered him.

...She’s dead, he thought dully. Oh, gods, she’s dead.

Half a sob escaped him, absorbed by the curtains surrounding him. Inigo scrubbed his good hand over his face, waiting for the tears to start gathering in earnest when a conflicting memory hit him.

“She’s fine, okay? Well, not fine at all, actually, but let’s go with alive, shall we?”

Owain. Why had Owain been there?

That part he couldn’t piece together, since it had ended up as little more than fragments of pain, panic, and shattered lines of dialogue. He couldn’t remember his cousin saying anything more about Say’ri, but at the point, at least, she’d still been breathing.

Well, he thought. If I’m still in here, then so’s she.

Much slower and more carefully this time, he pushed himself upright, gingerly swinging his legs out to set bare feet on the canvas floor. His eyes had adjusted to the dimness of the healing tent now, though the light of a candle clearly flickered outside from underneath the privacy curtains.

At least my legs still work. Inigo thought, though being unconscious for Naga knew how long left him clutching at the bed frame to actually get himself to shaky feet. Mostly.

On second thought, he couldn’t remember the last time standing had been such a monumental effort. He’d probably been very drunk. A rational voice told him to crawl back into bed and return to the land of slumber, but an equally reasonable one said he was going to sit there for hours with his thoughts churning away until he knew what had happened, and that was a far more unpleasant option than the aching weakness washing over him in waves.

Quietly, thinking it likely that if he got caught his mission would come to a premature end, Inigo slid back the curtain at the foot of his bed and peered out, not daring to loosen his grip on the bed frame. What he found was an obstacle as impassable as the canyon on the Plegian border would have been, had it lacked a bridge.

A three-foot hallway.

Inigo stared at the gap for a painfully long moment. There was a small table a few feet down the hall he could lean on, and a shelf a few feet after that, but the rest of the immediate path would
have to be accomplished under his own steam.

*I am an Exalt,* he told himself firmly. *I’ve brought down hundreds of warriors and countless Risen. I am not going to be defeated by a hallway.*

He started to nod to himself, quickly stopped when it sent another wave of nausea through him, and pushed away from the bed with shuffling footsteps.

*“Just where do you think you’re going?”*

Inigo squeaked, alarm bells ringing *Caught!* with the same ferocity as if he’d just stumbled upon a pack of Risen. He whipped his head around on instinct, catching a rather terrifying glimpse of Lissa with her hands on her hips before the vertigo caught up with him.

He reached back for the stability of the bed on instinct, realizing a moment too late he’d done it with the wrong hand as pain shot up his arm. It temporarily overruled the dizziness and he clutched it to his chest, only to realize he’d just thrown away his only chance of actually staying upright.

Somehow, a beat later he found himself sitting on the floor, his ribs so thoroughly jarred from the impact it had instantly brought tears to his eyes. He curled up on instinct, not bothering to bite back a whimpered “Ow…”

*I have been defeated by a hallway.*

An exasperated sigh came from above him, followed by, “Geez, you’re as bad as Owain.” Lissa bent down, offering a hand and continuing, “C’mon, back to bed with you.”

Wordlessly, Inigo complied, absently marveling at how easily she lifted him when he had nearly a foot in height on her.

“What exactly did you think you were doing, young man?” she chided, pressing him unceremoniously to sit back on the bed. He didn’t bother to remind her he was technically older than her in this timeline. “You can barely stand.”

The answer was immediate and blurted. “Say’ri. Please, I need—Aunt Lissa, please just let me see her—”

A flicker of unmistakable *pity* came to Lissa’s face that left Inigo’s heart stuttering.

*Please, no…*

“That’s not an answer,* Inigo thought with alarm. “Aunt Lissa? Please, just—tell me and get it over with,” he whispered hoarsely.

Her lips tightened to a line. “Okay,” she said, sitting beside him and smoothing her yellow skirt. “She’s still alive.”

With three words, Inigo’s world shifted back into place. “She is?” he breathed.

Lissa nodded, then quickly added, “I can’t guarantee she’s going to stay that way.”

His world wobbled a little bit.

*“You actually fared better than we first thought when you came in,”* Lissa continued. *“Once you were beyond the risk of bleeding out none of your injuries were actually life-threatening. People*
survive breaking a few ribs,” she said dryly, “even if one did puncture your left lung. That’s healed now, by the way, even if I’m sure you’ve noticed most of the rest of you… isn’t.”

“Strangely enough, I think I did,” Inigo said dryly, quickly cutting off a breathy laugh that made him wince.

His aunt shook her head, though the gesture was fond. “The important difference is that you got hit between the plates in your armor. There was, frankly, only so much damage that could be done at that angle. Say’ri, on the other hand…the spear she took hit her with enough force to go right through her armor.” Lissa linked her hands together in her lap and turned serious eyes on him. “You asked me to tell you the truth and I will. It did a lot of damage going in and it did even more coming back out.”

Inigo let out a shaky breath and ducked his head as her words sunk in. “What sort of damage are we discussing?”

“Maribelle was the one to tend her when she first came in, so if you want all the details you’d need to ask her,” Lissa replied. “But all told, some pretty massive internal injuries. The big problem is we’re looking at a big risk of infection and I don’t think she’d be strong enough to fight it if that happens.”

“But if she doesn’t get infected, do you think she’ll be okay?” Inigo prodded, even when his mind rebelled from the thought. Say’ri? Who survived losing everything, who still rallied a resistance around her, who managed to keep me from shattering? Not strong enough?

Not possible, he deemed, and ignored the little voice in his head that said war claimed who it willed.

“Too early to tell,” Lissa replied with a shake of her head. “And it’d also depend on how broad your definition of ‘okay’ is. There’s lots of room for future complications even if she does bounce back.”

“...Like?”

“It depends on what got hit and how badly. There’s an awful lot of organs packed into a really small space right there, you know? She could return to completely normal, if everything heals nicely, or it could be…” She shrugged. “Almost anything else. And, like I said, there’s really no way to tell any of that without time.”

Inigo inhaled deeply and quickly blew it all back out again, knowing the potential repercussions weren’t going to really sink in for quite a while. “Can I please go see her?” he finally whispered.

A quirk of her brow was Lissa’s response. “You’re not exactly ready to be up and about yourself, young man.”

Once again, Inigo didn’t bother to correct her terminology. “Yes, but I must point out to you, the loveliest of my aunts—”

“I’m your only aunt,” Lissa pointed out flatly.

“To borrow a phrase from your son, ‘That does not negate my affection for you.’”

“Yeah, and you’re still not going to flirt your way out of this.”

“Ah, and it seems I am as transparent as glass under those keen eyes of yours,” Inigo replied
ruefully.

“And I spend too much time around Owain for you distract with me with all those fancy la-dee-das.”

Inigo’s face fell before he tried another tactic. “Well, on the other hand, if you actually tell me no I’ll probably just sneak out again as soon as you leave and wind up injuring myself further, so technically it’s in the best interests of your patient to just say yes.”

Lissa crossed her arms and fixed him with a glare. “I could tie you down.”

Inigo recoiled slightly. “...Yeah, but you wouldn’t,” he said, his tone slightly unsure. “...Right?”

Lissa paused, sighed, and rubbed at her temples. “I take it back,” she muttered. “You’re worse than Owain.”

“That’s still not a yes, Aunt Lissa.”

“Okay, yes!” she finally burst out, then caught hold of his arm before he could make good on his sudden permission. “If — and only if — you can manage to stay conscious for the next hour, and you can keep some fluid in you, then I will send someone to come bring you to her. Is that clear?”

After a long moment, Inigo gave a long-suffering sigh. “I suppose that’s fair enough,” he admitted, then winked. “Challenge accepted, my lady.”
Word Upon Your Lip (Part 6) Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Reunited.

Chapter Notes

Whew... okay, so I usually try not to go this long between updates, but I literally did not have a chapter to post until this morning. Usually I try to stay between 2-5 chapters ahead of what I'm actually posting, but this one really fought me and by the time I'd figured out what wasn't working I managed to catch a pretty nasty cold, so that was super great. I'm better now and driving home for Christmas break tomorrow (two weeks! Hallelujah!) so I should hopefully be able to post more quickly next time.

Sixty minutes stretched into nearly ninety, and Inigo didn’t think staying conscious for that long could ever be so much of a struggle. He’d forced himself to stay sitting upright on his cot with a blanket draped over his shoulders, knowing the moment he ended up horizontal he’d find himself back in the realm of sleep in an instant, and lose the only chance to see Say’ri he might have in a while.

Dawn had come by the time the curtain slipped back, a familiar face poking through the opening. “Greetings, my exalted companion. I’ve been informed you resolved to rejoin the land of the living.”

Inigo held his arms out—gingerly and not quite to his full span—and gestured to himself, probably looking like some sort of mutant cotton bird with the blanket still draped over his shoulders. “More or less.” His brow furrowed before he asked, “How long was I actually out?”

“’Round about a day and a half,” Owain replied. He stepped fully through, tossing a bundle of cloth that was thankfully light enough for Inigo to be able to catch it with only one hand. “Here. I’ve taken the liberty of acquiring raiments with which to cloak your mortal figure.”

“Oh, thank Naga. You’re officially my favorite cousin again.”

“Must I remind you again that I am your only —hey, wait, that implies there was a recent point in time in which I wasn’t your favorite cousin!” Owain cried. “Who replaced me, Inigo?”

“Well, technically Robin is my cousin by marriage—” he started to reply, only to be cut off by a massive, offended gasp.

“My own wife! Usurping my place!” Owain clutched at his heart, sorrow etched on his features as he continued, “The both of you, conspiring to shatter my weary heart beyond repair—”

“Shut up and let me put my pants on,” Inigo groused, gesturing to the curtain. Owain, surprisingly obliging, ducked out with a bow.
With equal remarkableness, it was several minutes more before the latter spoke again. “Did you fall asleep, my friend?”

His answer was a sharp, “No.”

“...Are you decent yet?”

A reluctant, “Yes.”

Owain all but bounded through the curtain again. Inigo didn’t look up from where he was still struggling with the third button on his shirt in as many minutes, cursing the way his wrist twinged nearly continuously with the attempt.

“Do you require aid, my friend?”

“No,” Inigo snapped.

A beat passed before Owain gave a soft huff. “And here I thought you were rather eager to go see a certain beloved princess of yours.”

“I am!” Inigo cried, before his voice dropped again. “I am,” he added, more quietly, then gave a soft sigh. “Whatever. It’s not like I’m showing any skin under there anyways. Can we go?”

With a flourish, Owain produced a cane from behind the curtain. Inigo eyed it as if it had personally insulted his mother.

“I’m not an invalid,” he protested.

“You nearly bled out less than forty eight hours ago,” Owain replied. “Even a hero as the great Exalt Inigo should know there is a time to put aside his pride—unless you wish me to carry you—”

“I would rather die,” Inigo said flatly, then felt a flash of guilt as his cousin winced at the phrasing. “Give it here, then,” he added hurriedly. “It’s not like I’ve any fragment of dignity left anyway.”

Owain, mercifully, did not comment.

On the whole, Say’ri was not particularly far away. Normally, Inigo could have made the trek in about forty-five seconds, if not less. As it was, Owain had about five minutes in which to fill him in on the current state of the army—notably leaving out anything to do with the actual battle other than the fact that they had, indeed, put Walhart in the ground for good. Inigo, meanwhile, found himself far too focused on merely placing on foot in front of the other and trying to keep his breathing regulated to a pace that didn’t sound like he’d just run the entire way up Mount Prism. His cousin, though managing to bound about with all his usual enthusiasm, stayed near enough to offer security.

“And just what is this?”

If Lissa could be an intimidating sight at times, Maribelle was thrice that, Inigo thought. The blonde healer somehow managed to stare down her nose at them despite the fact she was physically shorter than both of them, her arms crossed and her foot looking as if it would start tapping at any second.

“Ah!” Owain said without missing a beat. “Lady Maribelle, mender of all ills and most esteemed friend of my own beloved mother! Who should have informed you of our impending presence, no?”
“Lissa did, yes,” Maribelle replied shortly. “And I told her no. She’s not fit for visitors and he—” she paused to nod toward Inigo, “frankly, is not fit to be out of bed.”

Inigo squared his shoulders a little, trying to look like the slightest breath of wind wouldn’t knock him over and mentally preparing to plead his case again. Luckily, Owain interjected once more.

“Oh, but have you not heard the long-told legends? The touch of a lover, suffice to bring one back from the brink of catastrophe? Surely you must know the unparalleled healing powers of true love’s kiss?”

“Owaaaain.” The flush coming to Inigo’s face surely wasn’t from the walk.

“There will be,” Maribelle said firmly, “no kissing, petting, fondling, canoodling, or any variations thereupon in my healing tent.”

“Oh,” Owain said, face falling. “Is that a new rule?”

While Inigo did his best not to choke, a familiar low voice reached his ear. “Hey,” Brady said. “I’ll distract ‘er. Go ‘head and make a run for it. Er, best ya can, anyway. A hobble for it, maybe.” With that, the healer cleared his throat and, very loudly, said, “Ma! Can ya come look at this all quick-like?”

With a pointed sigh, Maribelle asked, “What is it, Brady?”

“Uh, well, ya gotta come look, see? Ain’t really something I can ‘splain.”

Giving a click of her tongue, Maribelle nodded. “Very well. Owain, ensure Inigo gets back to bed.”

“Oh course!” Owain said, nodding solemnly and putting a hand over his heart. “I vow on my honor as a true hero of legend that he will return to his pallet of slumbering, whatever the cost may be!”

As Maribelle stepped away, though, he smirked and added aside to Inigo, “You know, eventually.”

“You’re the best,” Inigo whispered fervently.

“Clearly so, though it does my darkened, weary soul good to hear you finally acknowledge it after twenty years of our existence—”

Inigo fixed him with a look. “Don’t push it.”

“Push what?” Owain asked innocently, darting a glance over his shoulder to make sure Maribelle really had left before heading toward another long line of sectioning curtains. “This one, my friend,” he said quietly, holding one open.

Had Inigo been able to dart in that moment, he would have. As it was, he managed something of an ungainly scramble that wasn’t nearly fast enough but did, eventually, get him there.

“...Love?” The endearment tumbled from his lips just in time to get past the lump of emotion suddenly sitting in his throat, his heart thudding painfully in his chest. Inigo froze in the opening, Owain at his side completely forgotten in an instant.

Say’ri hardly had any more color to her than the starched linens surrounding her, pale enough that he felt the claws of panic dig into his sides until he zeroed in on the steady rise and fall of her chest. Her face—clearly drawn with pain even in unconsciousness—was all that he could actually see, and Inigo decided in a moment of cowardice he didn’t want to glimpse that damage that had to lay under the blankets.
“Oh, love,” he found himself whispering again, his footsteps once more slow and unsteady as he closed the distance between them. He had to drop to the edge of her bed as soon as he reached it, afraid for the last two steps he was going to end up on the floor again as his knees wobbled. He pointedly ignored the sudden, irritating weakness and reached a hand out as if he could soothe the crease from her brow.

Inigo nearly flinched as soon as his fingertips brushed her cheek. The moment he touched her the only thing he could register was heat; that Say’ri was far warmer than she should have been, her lips dry and chapped and a few beads of sweat starting to form along her hairline. He forced himself to put aside that unfortunately alarming realization, sliding his hand to cradle her neck and bending down so he could drop a kiss to her forehead.

*I’m sorry,* he thought, though his tongue suddenly couldn’t form the words. *Oh, my love, I was supposed to be able to protect you from this.*

“Huh,” Owain said softly, suddenly reminding Inigo that the rest of the world existed. “Never could I have imagined I would actually see the day that my infamously philandering cousin was actually going to fall in love with a woman for something other than her skirt.”

“Glad to know you had so much faith in me.”

“Glad to know there’s actually a potential that my children will have cousins who aren’t silverware.”

“What in Naga’s name are you talking—oh my gods,” Inigo cut himself off. “You remember that?”

“Of course I do! I destroyed you almost as badly that day as I did Lilith the Breadknife a few months later.”

“You don’t have to be so gleeful about it,” Inigo grumbled.

“Well someone’s still sore about the matter,” Owain replied with a sniff. “It’s not my fault I became an agent of Falchion’s curse after you spurned the divine blade. I fear your purse would hold nothing but crumbs had you not finally given in and taken it to hand.”

Inigo paused for a long moment, still letting his fingers slide absently through Say’ri’s hair, then said, “Speaking of Falchion…”

Owain seemed to catch his hint. “We don’t know,” he said quietly. “You didn’t have it on you when you came in.”

Inigo glanced back at him with alarm. “Is it still missing?”

“Indeed not,” Owain replied with a shake of his head. “During the zenith of the battle I chanced to find it and reclaim it. …Which also came with the rather neat side effect of ridding the world of a certain morally despicable tactician.”

“Excellus?” Inigo asked, then joked darkly, “And you didn’t save him for me?”

“My friend, at this point in time I think you would have difficulty taking out a medium-sized spider.”

“Depends on how long I could get it to hold still.”
“Oh, yeah,” Owain said, then pitched his voice into an obnoxiously high tone that might have been intended to be a mimicry of Inigo. “Just… stay there… I’ll come squish you… eventually…”

Before Inigo could retort he did not sound like that, there was a quiet stirring under his palm, a soft sound in the back of Say’ri’s throat and a fluttering of her lashes that didn’t actually reveal her eyes. “Love?” he said softly, and was met with only still silence again.

“You did that a couple times, too,” Owain said after a beat. “She might be able to hear us.”

“Oh,” Inigo replied, and tried to swallow back his disappointment. “Sorry about that, darling. I know Owain’s voice is a terrible thing to hear in your dreams.”

“Hey.” Owain gave a haughty sniff. “See if I stick my neck out again for you.”

“You will,” Inigo replied with great certainty. “You’ve a terrible weakness for my debonair charm.”

Owain stared at him flatly for a moment. “I did not risk my life,” he said slowly, “bringing you to your fair princess to be insulted like this.”

Inigo gasped. “Really? Well pray tell then, dearest cousin, why did you?”

“At this point I’m not entirely sure,” Owain deadpanned.

“Well, quite frankly, I’m not entirely sure how you qualify this as risking your life,” Inigo replied. “What’s Maribelle going to do, stare you to death?”

“Hem.”

Both boys snapped their heads around, twin expressions of horror coming to their features as the object of their discussion cleared her throat. Brady, at his mother’s side, rubbed the back of his neck. “Sorry, man. I tried.”

Maribelle tapped her foot.

“…Ah,” Owain finally ventured sheepishly. “See… the bonds… of true love… were able to overpower even the devotion to the vow I made you…”

“I love how that explanation places the entire blame on me,” Inigo said dryly.

“I’m quite certain you could have picked him up in a bridal carry at this moment in time, Owain,” Maribelle said flatly.

Owain seemed to genuinely consider the possibility for a moment, giving Inigo an appraising glance that had the latter desperately saying, “Let’s please not test that theory, thanks?”

“But I probably could…”

“No!”

Before their bickering could get any further, Maribelle firmly pointed to the exit. “Out. Both of you. Now.”

“…Yes, ma’am,” Inigo replied quietly. He allowed himself one final, tender brush of his thumb over Say’ri’s jaw before forcing himself back to his feet.
The day he’d so dreaded had come and gone, he finally realized, but he still wasn’t any closer to finding out which way fate was going to tip.
“...How am I still alive?”

Inigo hadn’t quite intended for the words to fall past his lips as they walked, but they did nonetheless, the slight breathlessness of his words standing out against the previous silence.

Owain shot him a sideways glance. “It seems not even Walhart had the strength to bring down Inigo of the Indigo Skies,” he replied flippantly.

“I’m being serious,” Inigo replied. “I was... I mean, I was dying. I shouldn’t—I know for a fact there wasn’t anyone around who could’ve healed me in time.”

A beat passed. “My friend, that is the exact sort of situation they invented rescue staves for.”

“Oh…”

“Why sound so surprised?” Owain asked. “I told you on the very day you first confessed your affections for Say’ri to me that I would have your back every step of the way—of course I would have been particularly diligent on the date of her original demise.”

His frank words pulled Inigo up short. “Wait. Wait, you had the rescue staff?”

“It’s not as though you’re not aware I can use them,” Owain said flippantly. “I seem to remember a great deal of complaints lodged about the matter, in fact.”

“Yeah, but... I mean... Weren’t you busy fighting?”

“No? I remained at the rear line with the healers. Robin and I had a bit of a row about it actually, though considering what happened I suppose it’s a very good thing I won that argument.”

The revelation shouldn’t have shocked Inigo quite as much as it did, but he couldn’t quite help it. “Is that what we heard you two shouting about the other night?”

“...Quite possibly,” Owain admitted.

Inigo blinked, ears ringing with not being ridiculous and perfectly reasonable course of action. “You specifically stayed behind to keep an eye on Say’ri?” he asked softly.

Owain moved as if to rap his head, but the gesture was so gentle his knuckles hardly so much as ruffled Inigo’s hair. “My friend, I think they may need to examine your head again. In the meantime, I must repeat my query of why the matter seems to shock you so.” His tone softened. “On the other hand, perhaps I needn’t ask. It surely wouldn’t be the first time you got so caught up in your complex of needing to save everyone you forgot the rest of us existed.”

“It’s not a complex,” Inigo protested. “I’m—”
“The Exalt, the leader, yes I’ve heard this all before,” Owain cut him off. “Have you forgotten that I am not only a hero of the epochs but a prince myself as well? If you so fear to shoulder the burden your royal blood grants you then do remember you have to share that glory with me.”

Inigo rolled his eyes, ignoring the tangent and focusing instead on the fact that he was alive, that Say’ri was alive—even if it was thanks to Owain rather than himself. “Thank you,” he whispered.

“Ha! Of course it was nothing,” Owain replied, though his voice wavered just a touch and his eyes suddenly looked suspiciously damp. “Of course Owain Dark would swoop in at the last moment with a grand plan to save the day and… wrest…” He paused to sniff. “…wrest his dear cousin from the… clutches of death…” Another sniff.

“Owain,” Inigo said with a burgeoning sense of horror.

“But… of course I cannot guarantee I will always be there to… deliver you from such foolhardy plans… so I must request that you… you don’t…” Owain broke off with a shuddering breath and a gulp. “…don’t you dare almost die on me again like that.”

“Owain. No. Stop. Stop it,” Inigo said desperately. “I swear to Naga if you start crying—”

“You’re gonna what?” Owain asked with a watery laugh. “Sock me?”

“Yes! Yes I will!”

“That’s… not much of a threat right now, my friend.”

“I will!” Inigo insisted. “Just—just hold still a second! Uh…” He paused for a long moment, trying to figure out how to balance a cane and a broken wrist and still have one hand free to hit his cousin. “Hang on, uh, I’m getting there.” He finally managed to get himself organized, though the gesture was closer to a tap on the shoulder than a punch and probably hurt Inigo far more than it did Owain.

A beat passed before Owain sniffed again. “Huh. I feel as though a newborn kitten has blessed me with the gentle touch of one of her delicate paws.”

“…You are literally the worst,” Inigo told him.

“A few minutes ago you told me I was the best, can’t you make up your mind?”

“I have, just somehow you manage to be both at the same time,” Inigo retorted. “And apparently now I’m a cat, so.”

“You’d make a good cat,” Owain replied. “Only wanting attention on your terms, always annoying the person in the room who likes you the least—oh, and very vain…”

“Just don’t hold out on me purring for you, because that’s not gonna happen.”

“Yeah,” Owain said with one final sniff. “You save all that nonsense for Say’ri.”

Inigo froze, sputtering. “I—I don’t—” He broke off and cleared his throat. “Since when do you have the self-awareness to make these sorts of jokes?”

Owain draped an arm over his shoulders, lowering his voice to a conspiratorial tone. “I had to learn when I discovered I suddenly had a completely unexplored and amazingly effective new avenue of teasing you, my dear cousin.”
Inigo snorted, ignoring the way he started to sway on his feet again. “Glad to be of service,” he said, as Owain clearly caught on to his sudden unsteadiness and tightened his grip.

“You look ready to return to the land of slumber.”

“Yeah,” Inigo admitted, despite the fact he’d been awake for an entire two hours. He supposed they had been a rather exhausting two hours.

“Come then, my friend. I think you’ve had enough adventuring for one day.”

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After two days of, to put it simply, badgering, Maribelle came to accept the fact that Inigo was going to visit Say’ri one way or another. This only came about after the fourth such incident of her chasing him out, but he quickly decided the effort had been well worth it.

After four days, Inigo was, relatively speaking, back in one piece. He had two fully-functional hands again and a torso free from bandages, though Walhart’s blade had left behind an incredible scar that he would undoubtedly bear for the rest of his life. The healers had left his ribs to mend the rest of the way on their own, leaving him to continue carrying himself rather gingerly but still well enough to have been dismissed from the healers’ tent and allowed to return to his own.

He found out, however, he didn’t rest any better in his own bedroll. His side still ached and the tent was horrifically, cavernously empty when he’d grown so used to sharing it with another. After an hour and a half, he gave up on trying to sleep.

A few indulgent smiles were turned Inigo’s way as he wandered through the healing tent—even those healers who weren’t part of the Shepherds had learned of him quite quickly for the time he’d spend at Say’ri’s side. As of yet, she hadn’t come awake for more than a few moments of extremely questionable lucidity, and despite the fact that Inigo had come to the point he spent more time at her side than in his own bed he’d managed to miss every single one of them. The onesided-ness of their conversations was beginning to grate at him.

Walhart was dead. Say’ri was not. Why couldn’t he be allowed to move past the ordeal?

He expected, with the clock nearing eleven, to find the spot at her side reserved for him as dim and empty as it had been when he abandoned it a few hours ago. Instead, he found himself blinking against the dizzying light of half a dozen candles, constantly shifting as three—no, four—healers crossed through his line of sight.

Libra was the first to spot him, the priest casting a look over his shoulder. “You’re going to have to come back another time,” he said in a mild voice.

Inigo froze. “Why?”

The other three—Lissa, Brady, and another woman Inigo didn’t know—all glanced up. “Ah… Brady, do you want to go talk to him?” Lissa asked.

Brady gave her an apprehensive glance, then rubbed his hands together. “Sure thing, Auntie,” he said, a little too quickly.
Inigo felt every ounce of anxiety in his body triple. They had hardly passed through the curtain when he forced himself to ask, “Is she getting worse?”

A beat passed. “Well,” Brady said, “she ain’t gettin’ better, and at this point, that’s ‘bout the same thing.”

“I thought we were just waiting for her to wake up,” Inigo said with an unabashedly desperate note in his voice.

“Inigo,” Brady said with a sigh, scrubbing at his eyes. “We’ve been keepin’ ‘er under on purpose.”

“What?” That was certainly news to him. “Why?”

“So the pain don’t kill ‘er when she wakes up,” Brady said matter-of-factly, continuing to walk only to have to pause and turn around when he realized Inigo had stopped with a distraught expression on his face. “Ma’s really not been tellin’ ya this?”

“No,” Inigo said hoarsely. “I mean, I haven’t really asked, but—I thought, I thought she looked better.”

Brady let out another sigh, leaving Inigo to notice that his shoulders were hunched even lower than usual and his eyes had remarkably dark circles under them. “Ah. Tell ya what, there should be a pot o’ tea ‘round here somewhere. Grab a seat, lemme find some, and I’ll fill ya in.”

“Yeah,” Inigo said, finding it all he really could say. “Okay.”

In the ten minutes it took Brady to return, Inigo nearly up and scurried back to Say’ri’s side no less than three times. Gods, he needed to see her, needed her to be okay, needed to hear her voice say something other than that last, desperate _You promised me, you vowed to me —_

_You promised me too, love_, he thought, ducking his head with a muffled sob.

“Hey now,” came Brady’s voice. “Ya start that nonsense, then I’m gonna start, and we’ll both here all night blubberin’.”

Inigo glanced up sharply, muttering a quiet “Sorry.”

Brady shrugged. “S’not like I’d be much better if it were Cyn, yeah?” He dropped to the seat beside Inigo. “There’s been some… complications.”

“There were four of you in there,” Inigo said. “That doesn’t seem like a complication.”

With a sigh, Brady said, “That fever she’s had spiked hard ‘bout an hour ago. We’re tryin’ to bring it back down but she ain’t taking the spells well.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Inigo demanded. “Can’t you just—” He broke off, waving his hand in a gesture that might have been an approximation of using a healing staff.

Brady gave a short bark of laughter. “Man, if we jus’ had to do that my job’d be a helluva lot easier.” He shook his head. “Ya can’t just wave a staff around an’ fix everything. Ya gotta know what’s wrong t’ be able to mend it, an’ she’s tellin’ us we missed somethin’. S’why we’re all in there tryin’ to figure out what.”

Inigo swallowed and glanced away. “But is she going to…?”

“Listen,” Brady said softly. “She’s been fightin’ and she’s been fightin’ hard but she ain’t got much
left t’ fight with. If we can’t get that fever down in the next couple’a hours I don’t think she’s gonna last much longer. So jus’… be prepared.”

*Be prepared for her to die,* a little voice said. Mocking, he thought, because he wasn’t prepared and had never been prepared for that inevitability.

“You could leave,” she’d said. “We could both leave. Right now. Run away and never come back.”

Inigo suddenly, desperately wished he’d taken her up on that offer.

“Ya ain’t lookin’ so hot yourself,” Brady said, interrupting that train of thought. “Get some rest. I’ll make sure ya know as soon as anythin’ changes.”

“Yeah,” Inigo said dully. “Thanks, Brady.”

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Inigo didn’t bother going back to his own tent. His feet, instead, had carried him to Say’ri’s, and he’d found it untouched, frozen in time to exactly how it had been the night before the battle. His forgotten teacup still sat untouched on the desk.

She’d promised him dinner, he thought bitterly, on a night that was nearing a week ago, when they’d both ended up unconscious and wavering on the brink of death. Now, he dropped to the ground with a sigh, drawing a pillow that still smelled like her to his chest and burying his face in it. How long would it be, he wondered, until her scent no longer clung to the blankets they’d shared? How long until he remembered how to sleep alone again?

The first sob wracked over him with the suddenness of a wave crashing to shore, his eyes going from dry to blindingly overflowing in a matter of moments. *You promised me!* he might’ve screamed if he’d been able to find the air. *You promised me you’d stay with me! You said whatever it takes!*

Inigo choked, trying to remember what she’d told him of Chon’sin, of the landmarks they were going to visit when the war was over, and found he couldn’t even recall the name of the capital. But did it matter? If Say’ri died, Chon’sin lost its final remaining heir. In his timeline, it had descended into anarchy long before Grima turned toward it. Without Say’ri, what was the point in seeing the beauty she’d told him of?

“I thought I might find you in here.” The voice that reached him was soft, causing him to break off with a shuddering hiccup. “Oh, Ini darling.”

Under other circumstances, Inigo might have desperately tried to put himself back together, tried to play it off like he wasn’t on the verge of shattering altogether, but he knew now there wasn’t going to be a point. There would be no hiding it. “Mom,” he got out, lifting his head from the now tearstained pillow.

“Come here, my sweet boy,” Olivia said softly, though it was she who closed the distance, dropping down beside him with her arms already outstretched. Inigo, unthinkingly, clung to her, finding in that moment there was no difference between the mother who had raised him and given her life and the one who hadn’t even yet given birth to him.
She was *Mother* and that was who he needed.

She held him until he’d long cried himself out, whispering soothing words that mattered less than the tone she used until he finally managed to quiet himself.

“I don’t…” Inigo said eventually, then broke off with a heaving breath. “I don’t know what to *do.*”

“You did everything you could, Ini,” Olivia told him softly.

“But it wasn’t enough!” he cried. “I was supposed to keep her safe and—and now—they don’t know if she’s going to last the *night*—”

“You did everything you could,” she repeated, “and she loves you for it.”

“She shouldn’t! She shouldn’t have loved me and I should never have let myself love her because I knew this would happen, I *knew* it, and I knew it was going to kill me when it did!”

Olivia let a moment pass in the wake of his outburst. “Darling, it doesn’t always work like that.” She gave a soft sigh. “Sometimes love makes us do mad, mad things.”

Inigo sniffled. “I’m such a fool.”

“No, my precious boy, of course you’re not.”

“You were right, you know,” he continued. “You were… gods, you knew I loved her before I did.”

A tiny smile tugged on Olivia’s lips. “Mothers know these things, dear.”

Inigo sighed. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

He told her, still slightly teary, before giving her an expectant look.

“Darling, why would you think you needed permission for that?” she asked softly.

“I… dunno. I just thought it felt like I should.”

“Ini, you’ve had our blessing for that for a long while indeed,” she chided.

“So you wouldn’t mind?”

“Of course not.” She stroked a hand through his hair. “As long as you’re happy then I’m happy as well.”

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Inigo had the sneaking suspicion he dozed off at one point, because the next thing he knew the voice in his ear was distinctly masculine. “Hey, ya big lug, thought’cha wanted me to come wake ya up.”

“…Huh?” Inigo managed eloquently, flailing slightly with the surprise of finding himself horizontal. His mother had clearly tucked him in before she left, and now he found himself a little
bit trapped under the covers as he struggled to make Brady’s face focus. “S’going on? Time is it?”

“‘Bout three,” Brady answered. “Told ya I would come get ya, didn’t I? ‘Sides, think she was ‘bout ready to tear my head off if I didn’t go fetch ya anyways.” He shuddered. “I ain’t never been more ‘fraid of a woman I thought was gonna be a ghost by sunup.”

Inigo sat up carefully, pressing his palms to his eyes. “Say that again, but slowly,” he muttered.

“Someone’s askin’ for ya is what I’m saying,” Brady said. “Well. Demandin’ ya, more like.”

Inigo froze as his words sunk in. “Say’ri?” he asked, his tone soft, as if he were afraid saying it was going to shatter the illusion. On the contrary, however, Brady nodded. “She’s awake?”

“Oh, I’d say she’s awake,” Brady said, and Inigo all but flung himself upright. “Found out what’d been goin’ on. Armor shattered when she got hit, yeah? Couple little pieces got left behind. We missed one, her body didn’t want to heal ‘round it, s’why she weren’t takin’ the spells. Once we sorted that out she came right ‘round, dropped the fever, wound’s just ‘bout healed up at this point. Gonna take her a while to come all th’ way back but it don’t like look she’s gonna keel over on ya at this point.”

Inigo had paused again, chest heaving. For a moment he feared he was dreaming up such an easy solution—gods, could a tiny piece of lacquer really have been what stole her away from him?—before he shook himself back to reality. “Well let me go see her!”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m comin’, keep your shirt on,” Brady grumbled. “Some o’ us have been awake all night. Go on ahead if yer really that eager.”

Inigo was.
For a moment, Inigo stood still, watching, not quite ready to draw the attention of Lissa and Maribelle.

The sentiment didn’t last long, though—because at that moment her voice reached him, a quiet murmur he couldn’t quite make out, but it was enough to make his heart hammer against his chest. He took another step inside, hands shoved in his pockets with a facade of casualness, and offered, “I’ve heard I’m being summoned?”

“Inigo!”

He was completely and utterly gone, he thought to himself, and it didn’t remotely stop the splitting grin coming to his face. “Hey, you.”

Gods, but he’d thought he’d never see her like this again, all raven hair and bright eyes and with more color to her face than he’d seen since the battle. Say’ri was already reaching for him—as best she could, at least, without being able to sit up—and Inigo couldn’t decide if such an unreserved gesture was a testament to how close they’d come or if she was still just a tad delirious.

He moved to lace his fingers with hers as soon as he came within reach, only for her to tug at him with such unexpected strength he nearly ended up sprawled on top of her. With a surprised ‘oof’ he caught himself on his elbow, managing to find his balance a few inches above her. “Goodness, love, I don’t want to hear about you missing me, you’re the one who’s been unconscious.”

“Be quiet and come here,” Say’ri said, wrapping her arms around him as tightly as she could.

It was quite possibly the most awkward embrace he’d ever had in his life, with the way he had to contort himself so as to not crush her, but Inigo found he couldn’t quite bring himself to care about that fact as he nuzzled at her shoulder and breathed in a shuddering sigh of relief. Distantly, he noted the fact that Maribelle was muttering something disgruntled about propriety, and heard Lissa loudly shush her with a declaration of “It’s romantic!”

Inigo felt himself start to go pink while Say’ri gave a soft laugh beneath him. “I told you, did I
“not?” she said softly.

“Told me what?” he murmured.

“That I had faith in you.”

“...That you did, my darling,” Inigo said, pulling back slightly so he could drop a kiss to her forehead. From the way her lips parted at the motion, she’d likely expected that gesture to end up somewhere else, but he really didn’t plan on giving his aunt any more fuel to tease him with than she already had. “I’m sorry for not believing you.”

“‘Tis over now though,” Say’ri replied, fixing her gaze on his. “Aye?”

“Aye,” he answered, bringing his hand to her cheek. He ducked his head for a moment, wondering how he hadn’t managed to completely cry himself out with his mother earlier as his eyes started to prickle again.

“Are you all right?” she asked softly.

“Yeah,” he answered. “That’s just it. We’re all right.”

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Two days later, a snowstorm swept through—unusual and typically unseasonable, but not entirely unexpected for how far north they were. With the last battle fought and Walhart’s men having accepted unconditional surrender, most of their army was beginning to disperse back to their respective homelands, but those who remained were forced to take shelter inside Castle Valm itself.

Inigo had decided this was a brilliant idea and wondered, exactly, why they hadn’t done so to begin with. The fact that the castle was nearly on par with the palace in Ylisstol when it came to amenities—including but not limited to ensuite bathrooms—might have influenced his opinion a little bit.

What could he say? Life could only be infinitely better after a hot bath. Especially if, after said hot bath, one got to crawl into a proper bed.

He continued to tell himself this while wearing a flush that he couldn’t attribute to the steam, standing in the bathroom doorway as he tried to figure out whether Say’ri was actually asleep or not.

Her state was still delicate and her midsection swathed in bandages, but she’d been deemed stable enough to no longer need the round-the-clock supervision of the healers, so long as she shared a room with someone. And, well, there really hadn’t been too many choices in roommates available. Inigo hadn’t exactly been complaining, even with Maribelle’s pointed statements of I don’t see any rings, now do I?

He’d really tried not to dwell on the perilous paths such words were going to lead his thoughts down.

But on the other hand… such thoughts suddenly weren’t half as perilous as they had been before
the battle. Not a quarter, even.

And there his thoughts went down said paths, he thought ruefully.

“Something the matter?” Say’ri asked softly, shifting a little on the bed to fix her gaze on him. Inigo felt his face grow ever-hotter and thought to himself that his hair was going to be completely dry before he ever got around to leaving the doorway.

“Ah—no, it’s just…” He trailed off. “I might have—forgotten something.” He had been a bit distracted, after all.

Say’ri didn’t answer for a long moment, leaving Inigo to gather himself and step through the doorway, only to be immediately be greeted by a low chuckle. “Might that something have been a shirt?” she inquired.

“Ah… quite possibly,” he managed, very deliberately not making eye contact as he crossed the room.

“Tell me,” she said with amusement thick on her tone as she sat up, “If you had ever managed to have your previous advances reciprocated, were you just planning on blindfolding the girl?”

“Love!” Inigo sputtered, spinning around with what he was sure were comically wide eyes. “That’s—I mean—hardly an appropriate line of questioning!”

Once again, Say’ri didn’t answer right away, her gaze roving over his form until the weight of it made him take a step back.

“Love,” he said again in a bit of a whine.

The light teasing abruptly faded from her tone. “Zounds, we did come close, didn’t we?” she asked softly.

She hadn’t yet seen what Walhart had wrought, he realized. She hadn’t gotten to look at the very permanent mark the Conqueror’s blade had left on his side, nor the more temporary but still ugly mosaic of bruises blooming on his chest that was only just beginning to fade from black and purple to yellow and green. “Yeah,” Inigo answered. “We did.”

He turned away again, discovering the shirt that had apparently fallen from the pile he’d brought in before his bath and shrugging into it. “But we made it,” Say’ri offered quietly.

Inigo found, abruptly, that he couldn’t bear the distance that spanned between them. He hadn’t been able to kiss her properly since before the battle, considering there was very little resembling privacy in the healing tent, and in that moment he couldn’t resist the urge to remedy that problem. He dropped to the edge of the bed and pulled her in, finding that once the initial moment of desperation passed he was far more enthralled with the leisurely series of kisses they ended up exchanging than the hungry, demanding press of lips that he’d expected.

There was less of her, he thought—she felt slighter under his hands than she had been, less the warrior queen and more the reserved princess he thought she must have been before the war swept through.

Inigo broke off without preamble, lips still halfway parted before he got out, “I’m sorry.”

“Aye, my love, you had best not be apologizing for kissing me again,” Say’ri chided. “‘Tis not a moment I am particularly keen on repeating.”
“No, nor I,” Inigo agreed, then added ruefully, “Though I suppose I can add that particular apology to the list of things I’m apologizing about.”

“You seem quite out of sorts right now,” she noted.

“I feel quite out of sorts right now,” he admitted with a knot in his stomach. “Although I suppose it makes sense, with all that I’m—” He broke off, coughed, then said, “Yes. Out of sorts. Very.”

“Are you all right?” Say’ri asked in a tone that said she couldn’t quite decide whether to be amused or concerned.

“Yes. Quite so. I think,” Inigo answered. “I also think that I should just stop talking and kiss you again.”

Though still looking rather bemused, Say’ri did not protest in the slightest.

“I love you,” he said, cradling her cheek in one hand. “And I know that doesn’t mean very much—”

She cut him off with the press of her thumb to his lips. “It means everything, Inigo.” She scooted a little closer, whispering, “You seem very not yourself right now.”

“I’m just thinking,” he answered quietly. “Thinking that the war’s over, and that’s wonderful, but for the fact that now you have to go back and… try to piece together a country that you haven’t stepped foot in since you still had a family, and now you have none of that, and… It occurs to me now what a poor consolation prize I must be.”

“...Inigo,” Say’ri said again after a moment. “You are... how could you possibly think you were any such thing to me?” She visibly swallowed, then added, “I’ll not deny... the ache that my brother and my parents have left behind, because I know ‘tis one you know keenly as well. But, fie... ’Twas not some loneliness left in their wake that drove me to seek your affections, you know. ’Twas the fact that I had realized I loved you well before the Demon’s Ingle.”

Inigò felt very much like a child with the petulant way he asked her, “How long?”

Say’ri shook her head. “I could not give you an exact date... To begin with I was far too busy being driven mad by your incessant challenges to single combat.”

“I missed the katana, okay?”

“Ironic, because I can hardly imagine you ever wielding anything but Falchion.”

“Oh, love, there was quite a long time when you could barely pay me to use that blade.” He sighed. “Suppose I settled into it eventually.”

A long moment stretched out before she said, “Owain and Robin’s wedding.”

“What about it?” Inigo asked blankly.

“I very nearly told you I loved you that night,” Say’ri answered.

“...You what?” he continued in astonishment.

“Aye,” she answered. “And I mean it when I say very nearly. There was one point that you asked me... I think, about defending yourself. That you were a leader who couldn’t lead, a dancer who couldn’t dance, and a lover no one loved. And I wished, so badly, to tell you you were wrong,
because I loved you… But I was sure you wouldn’t take such news well, and so I kept it to myself.”

“…No, I don’t suppose I would have,” Inigo said after a moment. “You might’ve killed me in one stroke if you’d actually told me that, love.”

“My point is,” Say’ri said, “you are… one of the grandest things that ever happened to me, and I’ll never have you tell yourself otherwise.”

Inigo gave a soft but drawn-out sigh, then said, “I could say the same of you.” After a murmured “Thank you,” he brought himself to ask, “Do you mind if I just… hold you for a while?”

“Aye,” Say’ri said with a soft chuckle. “I was expecting that.”

It took them a moment to get settled, but when they did—her resting on his chest like she had been that very first night, a thick blanket draped over both of them, and a fire crackling merrily in the corner—Inigo thought to himself that he could very, very easily doze off for the night just then.

His thoughts strayed to a suddenly familiar path, and that abruptly flew out the window.

“Must you fidget so?” Say’ri asked, her tone affectionate but with a weary note that said she was as comfortably tired as he was.

“Sorry,” he said, realizing he’d started tapping his fingers absently on her waist. “It’s just…”

“Aye?”

“…Nothing,” Inigo managed. “It’s just nothing.”

She hummed, nodded, and snuggled a little closer.

“Love?” he said abruptly.

“You’re going to be like this for a while, aren’t you,” Say’ri mumbled.

“Like what?”

“Clingy.”

“I’m not being clingy,” Inigo protested. Say’ri shifted up, fixing him with raised brows and forcing him to admit, “Okay, yes, I’m being clingy.” He ducked his head nearer to hers. “You almost… and I almost… and I don’t want to think about…”

“Shh,” she said. “Everything is fine. We’re fine. ‘Tis over, all of it.”

“I know,” Inigo said. “We just came so close.”

“I know,” Say’ri echoed.

He wondered, briefly, if she could hear how fast his heart was pounding when he sucked in a breath and said, “I want to show you something.” A tiny voice chided him for his stupidity and he forced himself to put it down to nerves as he fumbled in his pocket. “Ah. Here we are.”

Say’ri carefully eyed the length of chain he produced from his pocket, her brow furrowing the slightest bit as she caught sight of the delicate gold band it was threaded through. “‘Tis lovely,” she finally said, in a carefully neutral tone.
“It’s my mother’s,” Inigo told her softly.

Her brow furrowed a little bit more, lifting a hand to trace it. “Will she not be wanting it back?”

He gave her a slight, melancholy smile and said, “No, love, I don’t think she will.”

A beat passed before Say’ri gave a soft *oh* of realization.

“Originally,” Inigo said, “my grandparents had it crafted when my father was born, to be given to the woman he eventually would wed.” He ran his thumb over the royal crest in the center of the ring, flanked by two surprisingly un-ostentatious sapphires. “Which, I’m sure you can guess, he did. Later on… well, you know Lucina was the one to inherit Falchion when my father first died, so when Mother… we decided it was most fair for her ring to end up with me.” Swallowing thickly, he shifted his grip to unclasp the chain, letting the ring slide off the end. “I used to wear it around my neck, but the last chain I had broke, and I almost didn’t find it again…”

Say’ri reached up to stroke a hand along his jawline, saying, “I’m glad you had a piece of them to carry all these years.”

“Suppose I did, didn’t I?” Inigo said. With a quiet, steadying breath, he caught her hand in his, pressing the band into her palm and curling her fingers around it before pressing his lips to her knuckles. “I want you to have it.”

A long moment passed before she hurriedly tried to fumble it back into his hand. “Fie, no, Inigo, I couldn’t take something so precious to you—”

“Haven’t you realized by now,” he interjected softly, “that you are far more precious to me than any ring could ever be?”

“That is still—’tis one of the last things you have left of your parents, how could you possibly expect me to…?”

“Darling, I’m only going to ask you once more, because if you say no again that means I’m going to have to find it in me to *buy* you an engagement ring and trust me when I say my purse is already cringing at the thought.”

In that moment, Inigo thought it was quite possible that Say’ri currently bore the most shocked expression he’d ever seen on her face.

“Come now, love,” he managed, feeling himself go red up to his ears. “It’s not like spending the last year and a half of my life off saving the entire continent of Valm has paid particularly well.”

She ignored his plain deflection, quietly breathing out, “You’re *proposing.*”

“Ah, well, I am trying to, but it’s a little difficult when the lady I’m asking is being rather mulish about accepting the ring. I’d get on one knee if that made it better but you’ve got me just a tiny bit pinned right now.”

He realized, as she continued staring at him agape, that he had actually rendered her speechless.

“I mean… last we spoke of it, you did mention something about the offer to return to Chon’sin at your side being still available,” Inigo said. “And, well, last I heard, that is where my father was hoping to hold the peace talks, so it seems like we’re going to be returning sooner rather than later, and…”
“You’re rambling,” Say’ri said, a little distantly.

“You’re not saying anything and one of us has got to fill this silence before I get the bright idea to flee the room, the building, and possibly the country.”

“Please don’t do that.”

“Then please say something,” Inigo all but begged, then proceeded to talk over any response she could have given him. “Gods, leave it to me to mess this whole thing up. Listen, I’m sorry, you can forget it happened, I’ll take the ring back and we need never talk about this again—”

Say’ri, however, quite deliberately lifted her hand out of his reach. “’Tis a very rude thing to take back a gift one has already given,” she said flatly.

“But—but I thought—mmm…”

“And if you would mind,” she continued, lips almost still brushing his, “not having an existential crisis in the middle of asking me to spend my life with you, ‘twould be appreciated.”

“Love, if you want to spend the rest of your life with me, you are going to be privy to a great deal of existential crises. Might as well get used to it now.” He paused. “Ah, I mean, that is if you wanted—”

“You keep telling me to say something and never giving me the chance to get a word in edgewise,” Say’ri chided.

“...Oh,” Inigo managed.

After a moment so long he was convinced she was just trying to kill him now, her lips finally curled into a grin. “Aye,” Say’ri said softly. “Aye, aye, and aye again.”

“Oh,” Inigo said, and immediately seized her in a hug so tight she practically fell the last little distance between them, quickly leaving him wincing. “Ah—ribs, love, ribs.”

“That ’twas most certainly your own fault,” Say’ri told him, though she obligingly shifted her weight back over to the other side of his chest. She reached up, curling her fingers into his hair and whispering, “Gods, I love you—you maddening, arrogant, ridiculous man.”

“Well there’s a ringing endorsement to begin a marriage with,” Inigo replied dryly, then said, sounding baffled, “We’re going to get married.”

“Aye, yes, ’tis typically what happens at some point after getting engaged.” She settled back against him—after having slipped his mother’s ring on to her finger, he noted with glee—and continued, “I rather thought I would have to wait a few more years for this.”

“There are some things in life in which I’m only marginally less impatient than Owain,” he answered.

“Mayhap, but I seem to remember you saying you’d no wish to wed until Grima was vanquished.”

Inigo didn’t speak for a long moment. “Grima,” he finally said, “didn’t rise for another ten years after the Valm War.” He let his tone grow light again. “Did you really expect me to wait that long?”

“You do seem quite adept at falling into your aforementioned existential crises for some truly
staggering periods of time,” Say’ri pointed out.

“Thanks, love, I do appreciate your faith in me.” He snuggled her a little tighter, then whispered. “Ten years, love. I think we have plenty of time.”

He tried to ignore the sudden chill that went up his spine after he spoke, the quiet, ominous press of the future he hadn’t felt since he’d been staring up at Grima’s skull the day Emmeryn fell.

Soon.
Chapter Summary

In which the entirety of the Shepherds gang up on Inigo.

Chapter Notes

This ties into my recent oneshot "Oh My Love," so it's probably a good idea to go ahead and read that first, but long story short: the Shepherds throw newly engaged couples in the nearest body of water as a sort of hazing tradition. Because, basically, it's the Shepherds, and logic need not apply.

The snow did not last for a particularly long time. A few days later, when Say’ri was up and about in earnest, the weather had rebounded into a more typical chill fall, leaving various piles of gray slush in the wake until even they, too, faded.

Though not nearly as cold as it had been, the warmth of the dining hall was a welcome relief as Inigo left both his coat and Say’ri’s by the door, letting her wind through the tables to find a seat while he ducked into line for plates, whistling a particularly jaunty tune as he went.

“Kitchen duty again, eh, Stahl?” he asked. “Leave any for the rest of us?”

“Hey, taking samples as I go is the repayment I get for cooking!” Stahl protested. “It’s chef’s privilege!”

“Oh, indeed,” Inigo indulged. “Just surprised, is all. Weren’t you just in here the day before yesterday?”

“Well,” Stahl said, “someone accidentally put Sully in the cooking rotation.”

“...Sweet Naga,” Inigo replied. “In that case, on behalf of everyone’s stomachs, I completely applaud your diligence, and take as many samples as you like.”

“Ha! I’m going to make sure your old man knows you said that!” Stahl chortled. “Anyways, are you wanting two plates again?”

“I am indeed,” Inigo confirmed, then grinned at the reminder a certain someone was actually well enough to join him in the dining hall instead of needing food brought to the room. Dinner acquired, he wove back through the tables, dropping into the seat beside a woman he had recently and cheerfully been able to start calling his fiancée (if not yet in public). “Love, a certain cousin of mine is going to be very cross indeed when he discovers we did not decide to sit with him,” he chided.

As if on cue, Owain turned around from a few tables over, caught Inigo’s eye, and raised both arms in a questioning, offended gesture. Inigo chuckled, leaned back in his chair, and shrugged in
“Mayhap I wanted you to myself a little while longer,” Say’ri replied lowly.

“You’ve had me to yourself for close to a week now, darling, at some point you’re going to have to start sharing again.”

She gave a sigh, as if this was a very great thing he was putting upon her, and started on her dinner. He chuckled again, patted her knee—which had come to rest quite neatly against his under the table—and did the same.

“You look better,” Say’ri said after a few minutes.

“I could say the same of you,” Inigo replied.

“Nay, ’tis not what I meant. Mayhap I should have said you look happier.”

“How could I not be happier?” he asked, then dropped his voice, throwing a cautious look around the room to ensure no one was within earshot. “If you must know the reasoning, a very beautiful woman has recently agreed to marry me.”

“You’re incorrigible.”

“And what does that say about your taste, my dear?”

Say’ri was saved by having to answer that question by a soft, timely query of, “Are these seats available?”

Inigo glanced up with a grin. “For you, my darling mother, I’m sure any seat in this room is available,” he told Olivia, then let out a great sigh. “I guess you can sit with us too, Father.”

“You’re getting awful cheeky,” Chrom said, pointing his fork at his son.

Inigo set his own flatware on the table abruptly and replied, “Goodness, is that a recent development?”

“Nay,” Say’ri said with dry certainty.

“Oh, excellent. I was going to be quite alarmed if such a thing had happened without my noticing,” Inigo said as his parents settled across from them.

“You know, I kind of dread to think that there are going to be two of you running around in a couple of years,” Chrom said conversationally.

“The world will be twice as good, clearly.” Inigo said with a shrug, taking a sip of his drink. “I’d be more worried about the two Owains, frankly.”

“Say’ri, it’s lovely to see you up and about,” Olivia interjected with aplomb.

“Tis lovely to be up and about, Lady Olivia,” Say’ri replied, then tilted her head towards the Exalt. “And fortuitous to catch you both as I am. Lord Chrom, I’ve heard rumors you are wishing to hold the peace talks in Chon’sin, aye?”

“Would that be possible?” Chrom asked. “I hate to impose, but this war has not left much in the way of neutral territory. Rosanne is in shambles and it seems particularly unwise to linger here in Valm where all of Walhart’s strongest supporters will be.”
“Aye, I agree, and my homeland is far enough south ‘twould discourage all but the most vengeful of those supporters. Besides, ‘tis been over a year and a half since the Imperials overthrew the capital—Chi’hiro tells me Dai’chi is nearly rebuilt at this point.” She said it so blithely, so off-hand it caught Inigo off-guard for a moment. “I think ‘tis an exceedingly wise course of action.”

Say’ri leaned forward, pushing her now-empty plate aside and beginning a rapid-fire exchange with Chrom about troop movements and travel arrangements, leaving Inigo thinking to himself she was going to make a far better monarch than he ever had. He momentarily tuned them out, taking another long draught from his glass.

“...Besides,” Chrom said, with a barely contained grin tugging on his lips, “it’ll be nice to see the homeland of my future daughter-in-law, anyways.”

Inigo tried—very valiantly—to not spray water everywhere, and failed miserably. What he ended up doing was making a sound that might have resembled some primordial sea creature before coughing wildly in an attempt to clear his airway.

He finally managed to suck in something resembling oxygen, Say’ri with a hand on his back as he moaned, “I think that went up my nose.” With one last cough, he flushed red and exclaimed, “Mom, I told you not to say!”

“Sorry,” Olivia said in a small voice.

“Who’s to say I didn’t notice the ring?” Chrom asked.

“Because you would never, in a million years, notice something like that,” Inigo shot back.

“...That’s fair,” he admitted. “I will say, Inigo, you certainly took your time about it—”

“Dad,” Inigo interjected, folding his arms on the table and unceremoniously dropping his head into the crook.

“Chrom, don’t embarrass him,” Olivia chided.

“I’m his dad, that’s my job,” Chrom shot back with a grin.

“Can we please not make a big deal about this?” Inigo asked, though the words were muffled in his elbow.

A very long, very worrying beat went by before Chrom said, “Inigo, you’re a Shepherd. There’s no such thing.”

Inigo shot bolt upright again. “No.”

“...No what?” Say’ri asked, looking slightly lost.

“You know what they do,” he whined. “You were here with Virion and Cherche, and Owain and Robin, and—please, gods, I want no part of this.”

“It’s tradition,” Chrom said, “and has been since your mother and I got engaged—”

“Which really wasn’t all that long ago, so you can stop talking about it like you’re a couple of village elders and make one little, tiny exception for your favorite son?” Inigo tried in a wheedling tone. “Who really doesn’t want to be thrown in a lake right now?”

“Everyone has done it since,” Olivia pointed out.
“Well, could it at least be, ah, postponed? Actually, I’m feeling rather lightheaded right now, I really think it would be best if I just went to bed—” Inigo said, starting to rise to his feet.

Only to be pushed back in his seat by a pair of hands on his shoulders. “My vaunted cousin,” came Owain’s voice from above, dripping with mischief. “Please don’t tell me you’re trying to escape from the time-honored ceremony, long held by the Shepherds to bring unprecedented good fortune to an upcoming marriage?”

“Why aren’t you taking my side in this?” Inigo whined.

“Because, my dear Inigo, I seem to remember you rather gleefully chucking me into a mountain stream when Robin and I announced our intent to be joined in sacred matrimony,” Owain replied gravely. “It’s only fair I get to return the favor.”

“That was in April!” Inigo cried, aghast. “There was literally snow on the ground yesterday! We’re going to get pneumonia!”

“I would assume,” Say’ri interjected softly, her thumb pressed lightly to the seam of her lips, “twould be why there has been a pile of blankets warming by the fire all through dinner.”

“Nya ha! Oh, she’s clever!” Henry said from a few tables over, then burst into cackling again. Miriel responded something that probably meant that such a thing should have been obvious, but Inigo wasn’t paying close enough attention to her words to actually decipher them.

“Ya can’t just sit it out!” Vaike said. “Yer gonna disappoint ol’ Teach!”

“Yeah, Pretty Boy,” Gaius drawled, removing the lollipop from his mouth for a moment. “Can’t disappoint ol’ Teach now, can you?”

Finding himself growing both redder and more outnumbered by the second, Inigo shot his father an accusing glance. “You planned this!”

“He had help,” Robin piped up.

“Yes, because that makes it so much better.”

“Indeed!” Owain said. “Any situation involving my most fated companion is made better for it.”

“Aww, Owain, I’m blushing,” Inigo said, unable to help the snark. “Ow,” he quickly added as his cousin smacked him on the back of the head.

“Besides,” Chrom interjected, “when else am I going to be able to celebrate the fact that my son’s getting engaged?”

“Oh, I don’t know, maybe when your actual son from this timeline gets engaged,” Inigo replied, then shot a glance at Say’ri. “You are being remarkably unhelpful.”

“I’ve taken note of the fact there are very few forces in the world that are harder to deter than a Shepherd on a mission,” Say’ri replied demurely. “And considering our current situation involves a great deal of Shepherds, I thought it wiser to not bother expending my energy delaying the inevitable.”

Inigo let out a massive sigh, his head falling back. “Love, do me a giant favor and just… kill me now,” he said, then glanced up. “And then hide Falchion for me because Owain no longer deserves to inherit it.”
“Hey, that’s a cruel thing indeed to accuse me of!”

“Fie, we did not go through all the madness involved in our courtship only to have you keel over now,” Say’ri replied.

“Darling. Look at me. I am literally begging you.”

“Pleading will not save you!” Owain interjected again from above.

“Can I get one voice of reason in here?” Inigo asked. “Maribelle? Surely as a healer—”

“I think the entire situation is insanity, but I know well enough by now they will not be deterred,” Maribelle said with a sigh. “A few minutes will not kill either of you, provided you do not linger outside and tempt hypothermia.”

A very long moment passed before Inigo said, “Why.”

“Consider it Fate repaying you for that fact that you did not inform me—your dearest, most beloved cousin, who literally followed you back in time and single-handedly ensured you got your life together long enough to stop freaking out and actually pursue your bride—that you planned on proposing.”

“Okay, you know what, don’t even give me that, Mr. I’m-Not-Sick-I’m-Engaged,” Inigo immediately shot back.

“I can spit tea on you if that would make it better?” Owain offered.

“I will end you.”

“Now, now, boys,” Chrom said. “Haven’t we dawdled enough?”

“No, I really don’t think we have,” Inigo replied.

“Aww, c’mon!” Vaike said. “The sooner we get’er done, sooner we can come back an’ celebrate!”

A long moment passed. “Oh,” Inigo said. “And now it all makes sense.”

“Fie, does it?” Say’ri asked.

“Yes, my darling, indeed it does. Of course the literal entirety of the Shepherds have ganged up on us,” Inigo said, pausing for effect. “There’s alcohol involved.”

He thought, later—with his hair still damp, Say’ri curled into his side with a blanket draped over both of them, and something warm and definitely spiked in his hands—that at least he’d gotten a drink out of the deal.
Late night discussions.

“...and this is...” Stretched flat on his back in a tent that had once been Say’ri’s and really now belonged to both of them, Inigo squinted in the dying candlelight, struggling to make out the words on the paper he was holding above his head. It was a long list of names, several of which had been scratched out and written over multiple times. “Love, what am I looking at again?”

Say’ri glanced over from her veritable nest of blankets, having to unearth herself from the many reams of paper in her lap to get a glimpse of what he was reading. “The official representatives for each country in the negotiations,” she replied. “Mayhap the final one by this point, if we’re lucky.”

“Oh, that makes sense,” Inigo said, bringing the papers closer to his face and debating whether it would be more comfortable to roll onto his stomach, then deciding against it. Having had a real bed in Valm Castle, he decided, was a teasing torment even two months later. “You did say we’re nearly to Dai’chi, right?”

“Aye, a week if the weather permits. Just in time for the solstice.”

It was odd to think they’d been comfortably settled in Storash a year ago, Inigo thought, and still in the thick of the war. This year they had left Castle Valm in the early days of October, their company splitting soon after—the majority of the Shepherds going home via Valm Harbor to Port Ferox, while those heading to Chon’sin began their journey south. It meant the Ylissean contingent for the peace talks had remained unchanged, with everyone else gone, but several of the other Valmese dynasts had greatly waffled over who they planned on sending, bringing word of changes every few days.

It was, Inigo thought, a great reminder of why he was very glad he was not the Exalt in this timeline.

“Wait,” he said. “How in the seven hells did Gerome’s name get on this list?”

Say’ri looked up again, blinking. “Did you not notice he was still with us?”

“Well, I mean, I did, but so are the rest of us kids,” Inigo pointed out. “I thought he was just... lurking. You know, for the lark of it.”

“Nay,” Say’ri said. “‘Tis typical for a land to send, at minimum, three representatives. We have Virion and Cherche for Rosanne, aye, but they could not send another. In light of this, I asked Gerome.”

“And he agreed?” Inigo asked dubiously. At her nod, he continued, “Oh, well, this is certainly going to be interesting.”

Returning her attention to her papers, Say’ri said absently, “Your name is on there as well, you know.”
A beat went by. “Uh,” Inigo said. “I don’t remember my father mentioning anything about that.”

“You father has very little bearing on who I chose to represent Chon’sin,” Say’ri replied.

Another beat. “You do remember I have literally never set foot in Chon’sin in my life, right?”

“Aye.”

“...And that doesn’t make you think that maybe you might want to pick someone else?” Inigo continued to prod.

“Fie, stop giving me that deer in the sights look,” Say’ri said, finally glancing up at him again. “I won’t be asking you to speak, nor to have much bearing in the actual negotiations. ‘Tis mainly for you to be exposed to the deeper political workings of the land you’ve chosen to marry into.”

Inigo blinked. “Note to self,” he said. “My wife-to-be ascribes to the ‘trial by fire’ school of learning politics.”

“‘Twill be good for you.”

“Everyone tells me that about things and they never end up being very good,” he said mournfully. Say’ri did little more than sigh in response. “Love, there is perhaps a small chance I have forgotten to mention this, but upon marrying you I would be perfectly content to retire from politics completely, you know.”

Say’ri glanced up again with a withering look. “Do you think you are going to convince me to let you out of it so easily?” she asked. “And that you will simply spend your wedded life lazing about whilst I am off running the country?”

“Is that what I said?” Inigo asked innocently. “I merely meant I see no need to come in and take the reins when I know my darling fiancée is so much better at international maneuvering than I am.”

A beat passed. “My love?”

“Yes?”

“You’ll not be taking any reins. I have you there to take notes.”

“That’s fair.”

After a moment, she blew out a sigh. “‘Tis likely not far off from the reality, though. We are a proud people, Inigo, and for a great many years a very isolated one. I fear the people will not take well to you simply for the fact that you are not of Chon’sin.”

“Hold on,” Inigo said, sitting up. “Wasn’t that the entire point of us getting married? I mean, you know, before. When the topic first came up. The whole ‘closer ties to Ylisse’ thing? If that was going to be an issue why did you even try to arrange it in the first place?” He paused. “Not that I’m trying to say that’s scaring me away or anything, because it’s not.”

“Because,” Say’ri said softly. “We’ve one key difference between then and now.” She paused. “Yen’fay yet lived then.”

Inigo felt his shoulders slump with the realization. “You were still second in line.”

“Aye,” she said. “And another thing—‘tis rare for a woman to inherit the throne in the first place. Succession passes through the male heirs first, in Chon’sin. ‘Tis only when there are none that a
woman may ascend. If we had twelve daughters, aye, they would all be ineligible the moment I bore a son.”

Inigo raised a brow. “Love, if you want thirteen kids we’d really best have that wedding sooner rather than later.”

Say’ri caught him on the back of the head with her current stack of papers. “Fie, ‘twas a theoretical situation used for the purposes of example!”

He continued as if he hadn’t heard her. “Probably going to need at least a couple sets of twins in there, do you know how to do that? Some sort of spell, perhaps—”

“Inigo!”

“Darling, stop giving me that look, I never said I had any objections to this idea.”

“Aye, really? Twelve theoretical daughters would draw in a great many suitors…”

Inigo paused. “I have objections,” he announced primly.

“As I thought.” Say’ri shook her head. “‘Twould be what you took from that discussion.”

“Actually, the main thing I took was that the male heir thing is stupid and we should change it.”

She chuckled. “Aye, ‘twould be a thing indeed,” she said indulgently.

“Hey, I’m being completely serious over here,” Inigo said. “If that had been the case in Ylisse I would have been the Exalt before Lucina and the apocalypse probably would have come about even earlier. Or, equally possible, my father would have been assassinated instead of Emmeryn at the beginning of the Plegian War and I would never have existed in the first place.”

“A fair point, my love, but ‘tis not like we can go barging into the throne room and changing age-old traditions without penalty.”

“Even stupid traditions?”

She shot him a gaze that very plainly said Yes, even stupid traditions.

He held his hands up. “Okay, okay. Just a suggestion.”

Say’ri peered at him for a moment, then said quietly. “Nay. They are not going to like you.”

“Most of the time I don’t even like me, love, it’s nothing I’m not used to,” Inigo replied, laying back again and clasping his hands on his stomach. A moment later, though, he held up his finger. “Actually, I do like me when I’m drunk. I’m far more interesting. Must be why I don’t do it all that often, the world wouldn’t know what to do with an Inigo who isn’t constantly wrapped in twenty-seven layers of self-deprecation.”

“What time is it?” Say’ri asked abruptly.

“Late,” he answered. “Very.”

“Aye, I know that,” she replied dryly. “You’ve just crossed over into ‘extremely chatty’ and that rarely happens before one.”

“My brain is mush and it’s coming out my mouth,” Inigo said in a sing-song voice.
“You need to go to sleep,” Say’ri replied without missing a beat.

“Are you going to go to sleep?” he asked.

“Nay, I’ve quite a bit more I need to finish before morn.”

“Are you going to come cuddle then?” he inquired, rolling to his side to face her with earnest eyes.

She shot him a glare. “Nay, I’ve quite a bit more I need to finish before morn,” she repeated, slower.

“Is that mutually exclusive with cuddling your lonely fiancé?”

“Aye,” she answered, deadpan.

Inigo gave a dramatic sigh. “Well however am I to sleep, then?”

Say’ri quirked a brow. “Do the words ‘unofficial and very nigh to be official queen regent’ mean anything to you?”

“Of course they do, my love, I just don’t see how that has anything to do with snuggling.”

“Fie, I’m getting quite the preview of married life, and ‘tis beginning to look quite complicated indeed.”

“Darling, don’t tell me you’re saying loving me is complicated.”

“Exceedingly.” Before he could splutter a response to that, she rubbed at her temple and said, “I do need a break, though.” He held out an arm, gesturing for her, and was immediately shot down by a shake of her head. “Nay, I’ll fall asleep.”

Inigo gave her a put-upon look for a moment, then suggested, “Take a walk?”

“At this hour?” Say’ri asked, then paused. “Zounds, never mind, ‘tis you.” She sighed. “Aye, all right then.”

“Excellent,” Inigo said, already scrambling to his feet and reaching for his coat.

She tucked herself into his side as soon as they slipped out—as best she could with the blade on her hip, at least, that he’d almost told her to leave behind. The night was peaceful, after all, and quieter than he’d heard in a while, but old habits died hard. He still had Falchion at his own side, after all.

“‘Tis awful quiet,” Say’ri murmured.

“Mm, isn’t it,” Inigo agreed. “It’s why I like the odd hours so much. This time, when there’s no one around but the night watch… It’s tranquil.”

The Shepherds had camped in a clearing not far from the edge of the woods, both of which eventually intersected a particularly impressive ravine. The two of them reached the edge within a few minutes, Inigo splitting off to peer over and suddenly feeling very small indeed at the sight of the expansive rock faces.

“If you fall…” Say’ri warned.

“I’ll be fine, love, there’s a path a few feet down,” he replied. “I wouldn’t end up in the river. Not that I’m going to fall in the first place, now, mind you.”
He straightened, only to be fixed by a severely unimpressed gaze.

“Okay, all right, I’ll move.” Inigo stepped away from the cliff’s edge, moving back to her side. “How far are we from Chon’sin, anyway?”

“The river at the bottom of that canyon,” Say’ri replied, “splits in two about a day’s ride farther south from here. ’Tis the border of my homeland.”

“We really are close, then.” He shot her a glance. “Must be exciting.”

It was a long moment before she answered him in a guarded tone. “Aye.”

“...That sounded a little less than excited,” Inigo pointed out carefully.

Say’ri continued to stare toward the south for a few more seconds, though it couldn’t have been possible to see anything beyond where the woods met the ravine not far away. “I am glad,” she finally said, “to see home again—fie, I have missed her so.”

“Okay,” Inigo said. “There’s going to be a ‘but’ in there somewhere.”

She blew out a breath. “I am to be queen, Inigo.”

“Yes, my love, I think we were just talking about that a few minutes ago.”

Say’ri looked at him for a brief moment, then turned away again. “My father,” she said softly, “was intensely beloved.”

Inigo immediately dropped the snark, realizing how rare it was indeed for her to speak of her parents.

“Proud, and honorable,” she continued. “Measured in every word, and dedicated to his people until the very end. My mother, as well, was deeply cherished... demure and supportive and all that a queen ought be when ’tis not the queen who rules. And Yen’fay... my brother was perfect. He was all the people could have asked for in a prince, in an heir. ’Til he joined Walhart, I truly believe the people thought he could do no wrong. Even then... had he lived, I am certain they would have but forgiven him in a moment had they learned why.” She let out another soft sigh, her shoulders slumping. “And then there is me.”

“Say’ri,” Inigo said softly, cupping her cheek with one hand and dropping the other to her waist.

“I was there,” she continued. “I existed. The second child, a daughter, inferior to Yen’fay in every way as far as the people were concerned. ’Twould be most useful of me to be married off in some advantageous political union, and there would my usefulness end, but for the off chance my brother could not produce an heir himself. And now they are gone, my parents fallen in a vain attempt to stave off the Conqueror and my perfect brother slain by mine own hand, and now I remain to return and try to heal a war-torn people who are undoubtedly going to despise me.” She lifted a hand to the nape of his neck, catching his hair in her fingertips. “And I can but think that I’ve dragged you into it as well.”

“Hey, I came plenty willingly,” Inigo said.

Say’ri huffed. “Are you really jesting with me right now?”

“I’m not jesting,” he told her. “And all I can say is prove them wrong.” He brought his other hand to her face, continuing, “Be the most damned fantastic queen Chon’sin has ever seen. Be Say’ri.
They’ll have no choice but to love you. Gods know it certainly worked—”

Inigo broke off abruptly, the hair on the back of his neck standing up in warning.

“—on me,” he finished absently, so quietly he wasn’t even sure she heard him.

Wrong, he thought. Something’s wrong.

The night had abruptly gone from quiet to silent— dead silent, he would have ventured to say. His gaze slid from Say’ri’s face, back towards the woods.

The dark, silent trees suddenly seemed far more ominous than they had a moment ago.

“Inigo?” Say’ri whispered, hardly more than a breath, and it was the only reason he didn’t bother to reprimand her.

The wind shifted, just a fraction, but enough for the familiar stench to hit him. Inigo took in one long breath, body coiling on instinct as he took a step back with aching deliberateness.

“Love,” he said quietly, his tone deceptively light for all its seriousness. “Run.”
Word Upon Your Lip (Part 6) Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Reality returns.

Chapter Notes

Me, last Friday as a I wrapped up winter break: I just need to put ONE MORE scene at the end of this chapter!
Me, after returning to school and having no motivation whatsoever to write for a week: screw it this chapter's long enough I'll put it in the next one

(In other news I outlined about two thirds-three quarters of the WIT sequel today if that makes anyone feel better...)

Say’ri only hesitated a moment, though it could have been eternity.

“Go,” Inigo urged again. “I’ll be right behind you.”

Relatively speaking, at least, he thought, watching the treeline with narrowed eyes as she retreated. No explosive pursuit followed her and he drew Falchion, padding toward the treeline. I don’t care what you are, you’re not finishing Walhart’s job.

He knew what they were, but the thought that he’d gotten Say’ri back out of harm’s way was a solid comfort. He paused, blade still at the ready and his own breathing deafening in the dead quiet.

The first Risen launched at him, snarling, talons bared and headed for his throat.

Inigo swung with all the force born of automatic instinct, slashing through the creature’s arms at the elbow before he reversed with a blow that severed its head from its body. Red, lamp-like eyes went dark just before creature exploded into dust.

He took a step back, chest heaving, and watched the forest come alive with a hundred pairs of crimson lights. His own eyes went wide, the only thought registering in his mind being a particularly ineloquent curse.

He’d hoped—stupidly, he chided himself—that such a large group of Risen wouldn’t have gotten so close to camp without being spotted, and that he’d been able to merely get a rough count of a small party of straggling undead while simultaneously giving Say’ri a head start back toward camp. What he might have actually done, he thought with detached ruefulness, was committed suicide.

His moment of introspection cut off with the twang of a bowstring, arrow flying through the space he’d occupied half a second before. Inigo hardly ducked out of the way in time, then was forced to
twist Falchion up into a block against the axe about to come down on his head. If he wanted to make a run for camp he had a minute at most before he was surrounded and the option was lost to him forever, but as the second arrow missed his ear by an inch he realized he’d be shot down long before he made it to cover.

He thought, longingly, of the way Owain would have already spun to cover his back as he caught the second axe a split-second too late—it immediately bounced off Falchion, catching his arm with a familiar bite. Inigo winced, ignored it, and swung again as he tried desperately to think.

Putting his back to the ravine would be a risky move indeed—one misstep and his life would be ended with the same certainty of a blade—but the potential existed that it was better than being surrounded. He cut down another of the slower, clawed creatures and darted through the fray before he could think better of the idea.

With an unmistakable crack, a Thunder spell hit the ground not a stride from his feet, sending him sprawling as the air turned acrid.

Get up get up get UP, every instinct in his body told him, but for a terrifying moment he found he couldn’t answer. Nothing felt hurt, which meant he’d either stunned himself or he was actually very, very hurt, but he supposed it didn’t really matter which because if he didn’t move he was going to be dead in another handful of breaths.

“No!”

Inigo wouldn’t have called her tone anguished or desperate —if anything he would have said she was furious, and it was a sentiment he could fully identify with as a flicker of anger started to burn in his own chest. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Right behind me?” Say’ri replied in a clipped, scathing tone as she cleaved the nearest Risen in half. “Arrogant, self-sacrificing—”

“Move!” he bellowed, lunging to drive Falchion into another’s belly, the creature’s lance coming far too close to his face for comfort. Say’ri spun to take out her second, giving Inigo enough room to scramble back to his feet. “Careful, careful, there’s a mage!”

His words proved prophetic as another blast hit. The wave of Risen pushed them backwards, nearer to the canyon, as even more of the creatures poured out of the woods.

Inigo whistled—a long series of highs and lows he’d had memorized for nearly half his life by this point—and prayed to any god that was listening that they were still near enough to camp for someone to hear it.

Say’ri shot a glance backwards. “Fie, but they’ll—”

“—push us right off the edge, love, I know,” Inigo replied curtly. He shot another glance backwards, parrying a blow automatically, and found the ravine even nearer than he’d thought it was.

A soft cry of pain sounded beside him and he moved to cover Say’ri automatically, feeling another blow strike home on the top of his shoulder.

There was no way they could last until help came, he thought, and no way they could make it back to camp without being overwhelmed.

“Say’ri,” he blurted, almost able to feel the emptiness of the canyon at his back. “Do you trust
me?”

Her answer was immediate. “Aye, with my life.”

“Good, because I’m about to do something incredibly stupid.” He swung in a wide arc, trying to clear them a space, then spun back and caught her waist, hoping his back wasn’t nearly as open as it felt. “Jump.”

For a terrible, breathless eternity, there was nothing but open air until they both landed, staggering, on the path around the edge that Inigo had spotted earlier. He flung an arm out, pressing Say’ri back against the wall that hardly rose above their heads to keep her from tumbling over into the ravine proper.

“Come on, we need to go deeper before they start poking at our heads,” Inigo urged, nudging her towards where the path started trending steeply downwards. He shot a glance up and found several sets of red eyes watching them, but none of the Risen had yet gotten bold enough to jump after them.

They made it about thirty feet downwards when another ledge poked out above their heads, leaving the path cutting deeper into the cavern’s walls and giving them a modicum of shelter from aerial attacks. “Jump?” Say’ri finally asked incredulously.

“Hey, we’re still alive, aren’t we?” Inigo asked, facing up the path with a wary eye.

She blew out a breath. “My love, I fear your last words are going to be some variant on, ‘Hold on, watch this.’”

“Honestly, you’re probably not wrong.” He added, under his breath, “And it’ll be Owain’s fault.” He finally dared look back at her and felt his heart leap into his throat. “Hey, hey,” he said, trying to keep his voice from shaking. “Where are you hit? Let me see.”

Say’ri, though hunched over with her arms curled around her middle, shook her head. “‘Twasn’t a blade,” she said. “A torn muscle, I think.”

“Let me look anyway,” Inigo insisted gently, daring to sheath Falchion when another glance up the path revealed it still empty.

She gave a breathy laugh. “One might think you had ulterior motives, my love,” she whispered as he parted her coat.

He flushed red, muttering, “Hardly the time, darling.” He felt her stomach spasm under his touch and winced in sympathy. “Yeah, you tore something good.”

Inigo mentally cursed, casting another wary look behind him. Gods, but they’d both been lax about training since the end of the war, first for the sake of recovery and then because the war was won, what did it matter if they missed a couple of Frederick’s Fanatical Fitness Hours? How stupid could they have been when Grima and his undead were still lurking in the wings?

“What were you doing?” he finally asked softly.

“What were you?” Say’ri retorted, tangling a hand in his hair. “You could have died, you would have—”

“So could you,” Inigo shot back, then forced himself to exhale a tempering breath. “Look, we can have a blowout about who was more stupid later. Right now I’m a little more concerned about that
“Mages are very rare among Risen,” he explained under his breath, still glancing back up the path every few seconds. “Laurent always theorized it’s much easier to keep a body together enough to swing a sword than it is to keep one in condition to cast magic, so either that’s a very recent batch of undead up there or we’re dealing with an actual human dark mage. Judging by how stealthy they were being, that implies they’re under some sort of command and I’m guessing the latter.”

“...Zounds,” she said after a beat. “Then pray tell, what are we to do now?”

“Well,” Inigo said, “they haven’t followed after us, so I’m going to say we sit tight until they either leave or someone figures out we’re missing and comes looking.”

“Suppose ‘tis all we can manage at this point,” said Say’ri.

Why haven’t they followed us? Inigo couldn’t help but ask himself as he turned away from here again. If there had been room for the two of them to jump down, there was room for the Risen to jump down. He could hear their growling and the heavy scrape of feet up above, but still none of the creatures had descended.

“You’re bleeding,” Say’ri said softly, shuffling forward to lay her hand below where the axe had cut into his upper arm.

“Just a scratch, love,” he replied absently, not even bothering to look.

“Inigo, ‘tis deep,” she chided.

“A deep scratch, then,” Inigo acquiesced. “I’ve had worse. I’ll be fine.”

“Fie, not if we end up remaining out here for the rest of the night,” Say’ri replied, then produced a handkerchief. “Here.” Inigo took it with a sigh she echoed. “I suppose ‘twould have been better had we just cuddled,” she finally said.

“I’m going to remember you said that,” he said.

Inigo’s head shot up as a skitter of stones sounded from above, his hand dropping to Falchion once more. The divine sword came out as footsteps registered on the ledge above; a beat later, in a swirl of fabric, a figure descended in one graceful leap.

“...Oh, come now. If I wanted you dead I would have done it from a distance.”

The voice—and the form—were decidedly female. Despite the fact it was the middle of December, she wore the distinct, revealing outfit of a Plegian dark mage, complete even with the dragon-bone headpiece. The only thing unusual, in fact, was the mask settled on her face not at all unlike the one Inigo himself had used to wear.

“You’ll forgive me if I don’t find that particularly comforting,” Inigo replied dryly, not shifting Falchion from her throat. “I tend not to trust people who associate themselves with Risen.”

The mage chuckled. “You could hardly raise arms against me the first time we crossed paths. Why should I think now would be any different?”

Inigo’s eyes narrowed. “Have we met?” Instead of answering, the woman’s gaze flicked back
towards Say’ri and he pointedly shifted Falchion. “Hey. I’m the one with a sword at your neck, eyes on me.”

“Oh, you haven’t changed a bit, have you?”

“Fie, and just who is this?” Say’ri asked, hand on her own blade, though she hadn’t yet drawn it in the close proximity.

“Love, I’ve pissed off a lot of dark mages over the past few years, unless they do something rather spectacular they don’t tend to stick in my mind.”

“What, that neat little hex I put on your cousin in Port Ferox wasn’t spectacular enough for you?”

If Inigo hadn’t been on alert already, now he certainly was. If she knew that Owain was his cousin, and about the hex they’d discovered at the Mila Tree that had, indirectly, led to his taking up magic… “Close,” he finally said, endeavouring to keep his voice level. “We fought Valmese invaders at Port Ferox, not the Grimleal.”

“Well, exactly,” the dark mage said. “You never knew I was there.” She shrugged. “He always was the reckless one, I’m surprised you managed to find the curse before he killed himself in some adorable act of heroism.”

“Just who the hell are you?” Inigo demanded.

She deflected again. “How long have you had this one around, then?” she asked, looking back toward Say’ri once more. “A week? Or have you managed two this time?” She lifted one shoulder in a shrug. “I’d bail out now if I were you—his record with relationships isn’t particularly pretty.”

“Answer the question,” Inigo snapped.

“Or you’ll what?” the dark mage goaded. “If you were going to kill me you’d have done it already.”

“Don’t think I don’t still reserve the right,” he shot back. “You’re just lucky you’ve got me curious. As a matter of fact, the way I see it, you’ve got me cornered with someone I care about and that would make me about… oh, perhaps ten times more dangerous than usual?”

A cruel grin spread over her features. “I’ll be sure to let Master Validar know that,” she said sweetly. A wyvern’s screech sounded, leaving her looking in search of it. “Oh, I think that’s my cue to leave.”

“Not yet you—”

Inigo scrambled to pin her to the wall, only for her to shove him back and, with a spectacular flip, launch herself into the ravine.

“—don’t.” He stared after the mage’s receding form for a painfully long moment. “Dammit.”

The Shepherds were coming, he realized absently. The sounds of combat above were starting to reach them—against those numbers, without their mage-commander, the Risen wouldn’t stand a chance. Inigo blew out a breath, sheathing Falchion once more before scrubbing his hands over his face.

“Are you all right?” Say’ri asked softly.
“I think,” he replied, then glanced up at the flap of wings to see Minerva’s familiar form descending over the lip of the cavern.

“If you are going to find trouble,” Gerome said with flat exasperation as he brought the wyvern nearer to their hiding spot, “must you insist on doing it at such obscene hours of the night?”
Chapter Summary

In which Say’ri learns of the existence of Nalia and Inigo learns of the existence of futons.

All told, they couldn’t have been away from the tent for more than two hours, healing included. Inigo found himself wondering why it felt like it had been days.

He thought it was perhaps a tad cowardly to have asked for Owain and Severa at three o’clock in the morning when his questions could have certainly waited until after dawn, but he could practically feel the way Say’ri was bristling beside him from his sending away and he was far from keen on starting that argument tonight. They’d be over in a few minutes, Severa had said.

Still, they could have taken a little less time about it.

“Inigo.”

“Mm?” he answered, purposefully obtuse as to where the conversation was bound to head without either of the other two there as a buffer.

He honestly expected her to shout, or at least chide, or ask him what the hell he’d been thinking to go in against unknown numbers alone, and he felt an ember in his chest flicker to life in preparation to defend himself. What Say’ri did instead, though, was let out a soft sigh and whisper, “Fie, but you’re going to be the death of me one day.”

“Don’t say that,” Inigo replied quietly, glancing over at her.

“‘Tis the truth, though.”

“Hey,” he said, bringing a hand to her face. “It all worked out fine in the end, didn’t it?”

“‘Twill come a day when it doesn’t, Inigo,” Say’ri said.

“Have some faith, love,” he replied with a press of his lips to hers. “We’ve made it this far, haven’t we?”

“We can come back later,” a dry voice drawled. “I mean, it’s not like you’re keeping us up at some utterly unholy hour of the night or anything.”

Flushing and shooting Severa a glare, Inigo responded in an equally sardonic tone, “Sure, Severa, just come right in, why don’t you.”

“You asked me,” the redhead shot back. “Since apparently your average Risen skirmish has gotten you all bent out of shape.”

“It’s not that,” Inigo replied. “There was——”

“Beloved cousin!” Owain interjected, bursting into the tent. “What ails your weary mind so that
you must call upon my dark insight?"

“Owain,” came Robin’s voice, her blonde figure appearing a moment later. “It is three o’clock in
the morning.”

“Have you met Inigo?” Owain replied. “That’s basically dinnertime for him.”

“Fie, ‘tis true indeed, but mayhap our neighbors ‘twould be less pleased with your caterwauling,”
Say’ri said.

Owain shrugged. “That sounds like a ‘them’ problem, not a ‘me’ problem.”

“What do you want, Inigo?” Severa asked with a sigh, settling on the floor of the tent without
preamble.

“...Right,” Inigo said, doing the same and gesturing for the others to as well. “So...”

He explained, as close to word-for-word as he could remember, their encounter with the Plegian
dark mage. It was a pity Laurent wasn’t with them as well, to compare notes from the time they’d
spent wandering Ylisse in between the wars, but surely between Owain and Severa they could shed
some light on the subject.

The former, unfortunately, didn’t prove to be much help. “A strange and obscure thing,” he said,
rubbing his chin with a ponderous expression, “for one to know so much of our history... particularly
if she is indeed the one who cast such a bizarre hex on Owain Dark himself.”

A long moment passed. “Wow, you really are both incredibly stupid,” Severa finally said.

“Hey now,” Inigo replied, overlapped by Owain’s “By whose measure do you deem me such?”

“My measure,” Severa shot back. “Come on. Think very hard. It’s really, really obvious.”

The other two women stared at her expectantly, while the boys both gave her blank expressions.

With a long sigh and a glance skyward, Severa started numbering on her fingers. “One: obviously
Plegian mage. Two: knows that you and Owain are related and how. Three: hilariously barbed
comments about Inigo’s love life—which I actually gotta give her props for even if I do still hate
her.” When she still received empty stares in return, she said with exasperation, “Dear gods, you
buffoons, it’s Nalia.”

A beat passed. “Oh, sweet Naga,” Inigo said, putting both hands to his face. “You’re right.”

“Well duh, of course I am,” Severa said, flipping a pigtail over her shoulder.

“What could the she-devil of years past want with us now, though?” Owain asked.

“She’s working for Validar,” Inigo continued, words still muffled by his hands.

With a quirk of her brow, Say’ri asked, “May I inquire as to who this ‘Nalia’ would be?”

“No,” Inigo replied. “You may not.”

“Oh, Inigo, that is so not gonna fly,” Severa said with a cackle. “Now you’re just going to make her
suspicious.”

Owain giggled—Inigo’s head shot up before he mouthed Do not.
“Have I need to be suspicious?” Say’ri asked with a quirk of her brow.

“No,” said Inigo.

“Yes,” said Owain and Severa both.

Say’ri shot Inigo an expectant look, while Robin leaned back with a greatly amused expression.

“Ex-girlfriend,” Severa finally said in a sing-song voice.

“Severaaaaaa,” Inigo whined, falling backwards to the floor of the tent.

“Oh,” said Say’ri. “Now that does explain quite a bit. Though I must say I am rather surprised.”

“Yeah,” Owain piped up. “We were too.”

“I would like to point out,” Inigo said from the floor, “that the entire situation was abject and unrepentant emotional manipulation.”

“Yeah,” Owain said again, “but before you figured that out you were still pretty into it.”

With a groan, Inigo flung his arm back over his face.

“Now, now,” Robin interjected. “Shouldn’t we move on to more serious topics?”

“Yes, I agree,” Inigo said.

A wicked smirk bloomed over the tactician’s face. “Such as, does anyone have snacks? I feel like the kind of drama we’re witnessing right now definitely needs snacks.”

A moment passed before Owain interjected fervently, “I love you.”

Severa snorted while Robin let out a light laugh. Inigo, meanwhile, sighed again and said, “I hate all of you.”

“Thank you kindly,” Say’ri deadpanned.

“Obviously, you are excluded from that statement, my love,” he replied. “Mostly.” He lifted his arm, a vulnerable expression crossing his face before he ventured, “I hadn’t met you yet, you know.”

“Aye, I realize,” she replied. “But I would think you knew by now that giving you a hard time seems to be a right of passage in this social circle of yours.”

“I need new friends,” Inigo agreed.

“I’m offended,” Owain said. “Deeply. Wounded to the very depths of my inner soul—”

“Wait, you have a soul?” Inigo shot back, sitting upright again.

Owain opened his mouth to retort only to be cut off by Robin. “Before you two start going at it again, do you think maybe we could hear this story?”
They arrived in Dai’chi well after dusk a week later—which, considering it was the night before the winter solstice, arriving in the dark wasn’t a particularly remarkable accomplishment. What was rather noteworthy, however, was that the entire remainder of the trip had passed without any mention of certain self-sacrificing tendencies or Grimleal ex-lovers. Inigo found himself wondering just how long that was going to hold out as the exhausted company of Shepherds trudged through the city.

The streets were all but silent—a lone leaf scattering along the ground was enough to make several people jump. It brought Inigo back to a dying Ylisstol in an extraordinarily unwanted manner. So too had the homes they’d passed coming down through the northern mountain range, growing more populated as they neared Dai’chi proper—but nearly all of them had been closed away, hidden behind long shutters of wood as if those inside wished to protect themselves from the prying gazes of outsiders.

Jaded, Inigo couldn’t help but think. He could practically feel it in the air. Tired, withdrawn, wary. Wartorn.

He wondered if Say’ri had known how weary and guarded her people were, and had kept it secret, or if the palpable heaviness in the air was as much of a shock to her as it was to him.

He wasn’t quite sure where Dai’chi well and truly started, too caught up in introspection to notice when farms and villages had turned into a winding, cobbled maze of streets that Say’ri led them down with silent, unerring steps. She had barely spoken a word edgewise to him for the entire day, and it seemed now would be no exception.


For the first time in what he thought might have been several days, a smile tipped up the edge of her lips. “Aye.”

The longer he looked, the less similar his wife-to-be’s home seemed to his own. Ylisstol’s palace sat high and above the rest of the city, visible for miles, while as of yet he hadn’t seen anything resembling a home of royalty over Dai’chi’s high, unusually curved roofs. He could see the city rising up to the east and north, toward the mountains they’d come down, but the west and south were clearly far flatter, falling toward the coast.

Without warning, the road opened up, homes and businesses giving way to a thick stone barrier perhaps the height of Inigo’s shoulders, a sharp contrast from the wooden buildings they’d been passing. Over top of it was the glittering black expanse of a river, and not far from the bank was an island, surrounded by wide white walls with sprawling buildings just visible over top.

“Home awaits us,” Say’ri said softly.

“Is that the palace?” Inigo asked, hardly daring to raise his voice above a hushed tone.

“Aye. ‘Tis not accessible but by boat,” she replied, pointing toward where a staircase ducked down past the wall and led toward a dimly lit ferry. “Chi’hiro ensured ‘twould be ready for us.”

“A mystic castle, shrouded by the river’s impassable mist…” Owain piped up. “But is it truly? For I, Owain Dark, have of late discovered a spell that allows one to levitate their own body—”

“You’re not levitating across the river,” Robin said.
“But my love—”

“No. You’re going to screw it up and either drown or explode.”

“As amusing as that would be,” Inigo put in.

Owain sniffed. “I can swim! My own bride, carrying so little faith in me—”

“There are flesh-eating eels in the water,” Say’ri deadpanned.

“...There’s what?” Owain and Inigo both cried in unison, drawing the gazes of several other Shepherds.

“Aye,” she replied, but with a tell-tale twitch of her lips.

Owain cleared his throat. “I… uh… upon further pondering, perhaps I should take the boat. At least the first time. For research purposes.”

“Good plan, dear,” Robin said, patting his cheek.

“...Are there really eels in the water?” Inigo asked Say’ri in a hushed tone as they started down the steps.

“As far as your cousin is concerned there are,” she replied demurely.

“Gods, I do love you,” Inigo said with a snicker, then raised his voice. “Hey, Owain, I think this boat is called the Gullible.”

“It is?” Owain asked, craning his neck toward the side of the boat as if he would find that name emblazoned there. “Where does it say?” Robin clapped a hand to her mouth but didn’t quite muffle the shriek of laughter that escaped her, while Inigo didn’t bother with such niceties and bent double with whooping mirth. “Hey, what’s so funny? Inigo! Has someone hexed you? Robin, my dear, what’s the matter? Do I have something on my face?”

Wiping tears from his eyes with one hand, Inigo held the other out to Robin, who obligingly slapped her palm to his. Even Say’ri looked as though she was biting her cheek to keep from giggling, and from the side Gaius put in, “You know, Pretty Boy, I don’t often say this, but that was pretty damn fabulous.”

“Thank you, thank you,” Inigo said with a bow. “I’ve had twenty years of practice.”

“It’s all right, we know you needed every one of them,” the thief replied.

“I still don’t understand what’s so hilarious,” Owain said, crossing his arms.

“Nothing important, dear,” Robin assured him.

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Having been sent on ahead of the group a few weeks before to assure the Shepherds were to be properly received upon their arrival, Chi’hiro greeted them at the palace dock. Say’ri, with a few muffled words, turned the company over to her and summarily vanished within the palace walls.
Inigo might’ve followed her, had he not been immediately lost. A few tiny buildings were scattered between gardens and ponds, all joined together by decorative stone footpaths. Lanterns lined the edges, flickering off the water in a fashion both eerie and comforting. Though it was hard to get a scale for it on a cold winter’s night, Inigo had a feeling in the warmer months when everything was in bloom it would be more than a sight to behold.

The building Chi’hiro led them toward was by far the largest, however, and spread across the grounds like its own maze. It looked like it had been pieced together and added on to over the generations, each little section with its own unique styling that somehow still managed to appear completely cohesive on the whole. On the inside, the hallway they emerged into was far lighter and more airy than Inigo had first expected, made up of light woods and translucent walls. As they continued for what couldn’t have been any less than ten minutes, he wondered absently if he’d ever be able to find his way back out again.

Finally, they reached a long hallway which, at first glance, appeared completely empty, without even doors. Unhesitating, though, Chi’hiro slid aside one of the wood-and-paper panels that made up the walls, revealing a dimly lit-room on the other side.

Those among their company who were swiftly divvied up into their quarters, first those unmarried roomed together by sex, while the four married couples—Chrom and Olivia, Owain and Robin, Virion and Cherche, and Maribelle and Vaike—were given rooms further down the hallway.

Inigo realized, when no one remained but himself and Chi’hiro, that he didn’t exactly fall into either one of those categories. Say’ri’s retainer shot him a glance, continued down the hallway, and said curtly, “This way.” At the very end, she revealed the hallway opened into a room that, at first glance, looked quite a bit larger than the rest. “I will be to your left,” she continued, then proceeded to vanish into another room before Inigo could so much as offer a thank-you, leaving him blinking at the empty hallway for a moment before shrugging to himself and stepping inside.

He supposed, after a long beat, that being engaged to the queen really did have its perks. The light mats under his feet were cushier than he’d anticipated and the walls mainly the same material as the hallway he’d come from, though a few of them had stylized paintings emblazoned across them. The apartment itself wrapped around the corner, a few more of the decorated panels sectioning off what he assumed was the bedroom—likely sharing a wall with Chi’hiro’s room, from the look of it. A sunken brazier, already alight, took up a small portion of the main room, lending a comforting warmth to the entire space.

Inigo padded forward, absently investigating without much real intent. The exterior walls were on a track sunk slightly into the floor, which actually did pique his interest. Perhaps there was a deck? They were up on the third or fourth floor, if he remembered correctly. He nudged the wall carefully and it slid open with ease, but he found himself facing not a view of the garden but instead another plank of much sturdier wood perhaps three feet from his face.

“Well what good is that?” he asked himself, staring along the dark corridor.

“Inigo?”

He poked his head back into the room, rather amusingly irritated at the new mystery. “What is this?” he asked, gesturing to the exterior hallway.

“What is—” Say’ri began to ask, stepping toward him with her brow furrowed. “Ah. They’ve merely closed the storm shutters, Inigo. ’Tis a balcony on the other side of them.”

“...Oh,” Inigo said, noting on further inspection that the second set of walls were on the same
tracks as the first. He stepped back inside, sliding the inner wall back in place. “...Well now I just feel stupid.”

“’Twould be different in Ylisstol, I imagine,” she replied, closing the distance and linking her hand with his. “If your buildings are mainly made with stone.”

“Yeah,” he admitted, glancing away.

“You find the accommodations adequate?” Say’ri asked abruptly, a hint of anxiety in her tone.

“Yes,” Inigo replied quickly. “Perfectly so. It’s lovely, darling.” Gods, but what was with the sudden awkwardness? “So... just how many times am I going to get lost coming to find you?” he added.

“What do you mean?”

“How far away are your quarters?”

Say’ri stared at him blankly for a long moment. “I’m staying in here,” she said, sounding puzzled.

Inigo paused for a moment. “O-oh.”

“Is that a problem?” she asked. “We’ve been sharing a tent for two months by this point, I rather assumed—”

“No, no, it’s fine,” he assured her hurriedly. “I mean— I haven’t a problem with it. It’s just—I suppose that sharing a tent in the middle of a war camp is just a little bit different from... sharing a room in the palace.” He rubbed at the back of his neck. “It... really wouldn’t be a done thing, so to speak, where I’m from... But, I mean, if it’s different here...?”

Say’ri dropped his hand, stepping away. “Not especially,” she admitted carefully. “But I find myself coming swiftly to the point where I no longer care.”

The revelation startled him, but only for a moment. “Well,” he ventured. “It’s not like we have to advertise the fact from the rooftops. What no one knows isn’t going to hurt anyone.”

“Aye,” she said. “And ‘tis not as if we won’t be wed soon enough.”

“Right,” Inigo agreed. His tone dropped into something softer. “Love, can I ask where you were?”

A sigh lifted and dropped her shoulders. “There’s a shrine in one of the gardens,” she whispered. “To... honor those departed. I thought myself overdue for a visit.”

Yen’fay, Inigo realized. “I could’ve come,” he said quietly.

“Nay, ’twas better for you to get settled,” Say’ri replied, still turned away from him. She cleared her throat, voice rising to a more comfortable conversation level. “Speaking of, ’twill be a busy day tomorrow. ’Twould be wise to turn in now.”

“Yeah,” Inigo agreed after a long moment, following her toward the panels that sectioned off the bedroom.

And quietly pulled up short.

“That’s not a bed,” he blurted.
Say’ri quirked a brow in his direction, a sudden amused tug on her lips. “‘Tis here.” After a beat, she offered more seriously, “‘Tis not as uncomfortable as it looks, my love.”

Inigo let out a sigh. “Not that I don’t believe you, love,” he said, abruptly remembering a much earlier mention she’d made of futons, “but I was really looking forward to not having to sleep on the floor.”
Inigo woke to a crash.

Long-developed instinct pushed past the fuzzy disorientation of slumber, telling him to ignore the fact he couldn’t quite remember where he actually was and replacing it with the awareness of exactly how far away Falchion was where it stood propped in the corner. Say’ri let out a bleary sound of alarm from where she’d been tucked into his side as his hand wrapped around the hilt while muffled sounds of cursing came from the other room.

He paused when he made it into the main room, his grip on the divine blade loosening as he let it fall from a ready pose to hang at his side.

“It is way too early for this,” he announced.

An irritated groan from the floor reached him in response, Owain twisting his head to fix Inigo with an upside-down gaze. “Ah. Good morning, my fair cousin.”

“That’s my wall,” Inigo said, tone disbelievingly flat as he took in the shreds of paper and splinters of wood surrounding his cousin.

“Technically, it was your wall,” Owain corrected.

“You jumped through my wall,” Inigo continued in a monotone. “Say’ri, Owain jumped through our wall.”

“I will have you know that I fell through your wall!” Owain interjected indignantly.

“After launching yourself at it, I’m assuming,” Inigo shot back.

“I did no such thing! I merely leaned on it for the barest of moments!”

“They’re made of paper, Owain!” Inigo cried. “Why would you lean on paper?”

“Well perhaps it would be wise to invest in a substance more durable than paper! Which would be… most everything, methinks.”

“‘Tis a long-held and traditional aspect of our architecture,” Say’ri replied from behind Inigo, rather testily. “Constructed with the expectation of being treated with due care.”
“Well then maybe you should make the doors more apparent,” Owain grumbled, gathering himself to stand.

“They slide,” Inigo said, putting his free hand to his forehead.

A beat went by before Owain let out a sigh, dusting himself off. “Also, paper walls seem like a bit of a security hazard.”

“We’re on the fourth floor of a palace that’s on a walled island,” Inigo pointed out. “I really don’t think it matters.”

“Anyways!” Owain said brightly. “There’s a festival tonight!”

Inigo shot a questioning glance to Say’ri, who sighed and nodded. “Aye. For the solstice.”

“Ah,” Inigo said with a nod, then looked back to Owain. “I would like to point out that tonight would be the operative word. Not, you know, dawn. When I really had absolutely no desire to be awake. Because you jumped through my wall.”

“Fell!” Owain cried again.

“For you? Same thing.”

“Fie, we needed to be awake anyway,” Say’ri cut in.

“Did we?” Inigo asked. “Did we really?”

“Aye,” she replied, not rising to the bait. “We’ve an appearance to make later this morn, and the grand council wishes to meet before the festival tonight to discuss Chon’sin’s goals for the summit, and knowing my father’s advisors such deliberation is liable to continue until the summit actually begins.”

Inigo blinked. “So you need me for, ah, my formerly-mentioned note-taking abilities?”

“Aye, for the latter,” Say’ri said, turning back toward the bedroom. “For the former you’re mainly required to stand there and look pretty.”

Falchion clattered unceremoniously to the floor.

Owain let out a snicker to fill the silence left in the wake. “My friend, you just went completely white.”

Inigo flapped a hand at him in a vague approximation of the “shut up” he couldn’t quite get past his lips. “I—but—Say’ri, my love, what sort of appearance are you talking about?”

“Tis but a brief speech,” she said. “Merely an opportunity to confirm my position as regent and yours as my future consort.”

“...In public?” he squeaked in reply.

“No, my love, we’re going to climb back up the mountain and announce it to the birds,” Say’ri replied dryly.

A mortifying whine escaped Inigo’s throat, prompting another round of muffled laughter from Owain. “Why didn’t you warn me I was going to have to do this?”
“Because if I’d spoken of it to you last night, or gods forbid beforehand, you’d have worked yourself into such a frenzy about it you would have suffered a heart attack by now.” Say’ri quirked a brow in Owain’s direction. “Might you have more important things to attend to at this moment?”

“More important than reveling in the flustered vexation of my favorite cousin?” Owain replied, lifting a hand to his heart. “Surely not!”

“Well, some of us have need to change into attire appropriate for the event, so I fear you must cut your reveling short,” she said. “And mayhap try using the door this time.”

Though he grumbled for a moment, Owain did eventually exit in the proper fashion. Say’ri stared at the hole he made for a long moment before letting out a sigh.

“I’ll ensure they’ll have that fixed by tonight,” she said, then glanced back at a still-motionless Inigo. “Breathe,” she chided.

He responded with another wordless whine.

“Inigo,” she said with another sigh, stepping forward to put a hand to his cheek. “‘Twill be five minutes at the most. You’ll not have to say a word. Literally all that ‘tis required of you is to stand at my side for a moment.”

“While the entire city stares at us,” he replied, his eyes squeezed shut and his voice growing higher with each word.

“You can close your eyes if you wish,” she told him.

“Darling, the last time I had to make a public appearance of this sort, I was small enough to hide behind my mother’s skirts and I still passed out,” Inigo told her seriously.

“Before or after?” Say’ri asked.

“During.”

“...Ah,” she said after a beat.

“My parents stopped bringing me after that. And before you ask, yes I have heard about imagining everyone in their smallclothes, and trust me when I say that makes the problem ten times worse.”

“That… ‘twas not at all what I was about to say,” Say’ri said. “That’s what they advised you? Fie, I’m beginning to see where half of your issues come from.”

“Tell me about it.”

She brought her other hand to mirror the first, absently stroking his jawline in a fashion that would have had him sighing in contentment at most any other moment. “Inigo,” she said seriously. “You have led armies and fought gods. How can this be any worse than that?”

“It—it just is, okay?” Inigo replied, ducking his head. “Also. One god, singular, and I lost.”

Say’ri shook her head. “Zounds, but if I weren’t to need you sober later I’d just let you into the festival stores now.”

“How can this be any worse than that?” Inigo asked, perking up slightly. “Because that sounds like a fantastic idea.”

She snorted. “My love, you are not going into the grand council immediately following your first
foray into saké. I’ve had your alcohol, and ‘tis far from comparing.”

“...Well, darling, now I really want to try some.”

She patted his cheek. “Then you have something to look forward to. Tonight.”

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“...Is this excessive?” Inigo asked, his tone tinged heavily with anxiety. “This feels excessive.”

There was no easy way to make a public appearance without leaving the isolated island Dai’chi’s palace sat upon, which meant Inigo was currently in the underbelly of the same ferry they’d arrived in. The rolling under his feet was not helping to ease the nerves settled in his stomach in the slightest.

“You look dashing,” Say’ri assured him.

“I look like Virion,” Inigo shot back. The comparison didn’t feel far from apt, either—while he’d at least managed to avoid a crash-course in Chon’sinian fashion and been allowed to attire himself in a more Ylissean style, it wasn’t exactly his typical dress either. The white shirt he had on featured more than enough ruffles to be worthy of Sully’s nickname for the aforementioned duke of Rosanne, though at least the majority of the excessiveness was buried under a borrowed vest that was, quite honestly, a shade too tight. What made the whole thing utterly unbearable though, was the cape hanging from his shoulders, clearly on loan from Chrom—deep Ylissean blue, trimmed in white fur and with the golden Brand of the Exalt emblazoned across the left breast.

Apparently Say’ri really hadn’t been kidding about trying to pass him off as a cousin of the Ylissean royal family. On the other hand, it wasn’t like he would be able to wear a mask for the rest of his life, and he supposed they had to be able to explain the far more permanent Brand in his eye somehow.

Instead of answering his complaint, Say’ri turned kohl-lined eyes back to him, catching his hand in hers. “You’re all right?” she asked him softly.

“No,” Inigo admitted, swallowing hard. “But I’ll probably live.”

Gods, he wished he’d been able to drag Owain along, because even his cousin’s constant teasing would have been more welcome than the restlessness bubbling in his stomach.

She squeezed his hand one more time, then swept her own through his hair affectionately. “Half a step behind me and to my right,” she reminded him gently. “And remember to breathe.”

“I’ll try very hard to,” he managed, though his tone fell flatter than he’d intended.

“Milady?” came Chi’hiro’s voice from the ship’s deck.

“Aye, we’re coming,” Say’ri called back.

Inigo just barely tugged his lips into a semblance of a smile and muttered, “Let’s get this over with.”

He regretted those words the moment he stepped out on the deck.
He kept his eyes on the middle distance just long enough to fall into the proper place beside Say’ri as she took her place at the railing, then took full advantage of her permission to squeeze them shut. The murmur of the crowd still reached him, with how near the boat had pulled to the riverbank, and his next breath shuddered a little when he let it out.

**Five minutes at the most, he told himself.**

Inigo, quite frankly, did not hear a word of Say’ri’s speech. She could have been talking about how her plans for Chon’sin involved using pink pegasi to fly to the sun and he would have nodded right along with her. With effort, he kept his hands tucked behind his back, standing like he’d seen Lucina do it a hundred times in the early days of the war, and tried to keep his lungs from hitching. **Breathe, don’t pass out, just look pretty, do not pass out…**

With a gentle tug, Say’ri caught his elbow, sliding down his arm when the surprise made him jerk a little bit, eyes flying open to shoot her a glance as she laced her fingers with his. He caught a moment of a reassuring gaze from the corner of her eye, though her metered words hardly faltered. Though judging by the muffled but still scandalized gasp from Chi’hiro behind them, his fiancée had just done something that was not done.

Inigo chose to ignore that fact, clinging to Say’ri’s hand hard enough that his knuckles went white and closing his eyes again.

“**Inigo?**”

By the time her voice finally registered again, her tone said it wasn’t the first time she’d said his name. He sucked in a gasp, managing a **“Huh?”**

**“‘Tis over,”** Say’ri told him softly. **“We can go back below.”**

**“Oh,”** Inigo got out, and made the mistake of glancing out into the city again.

He froze, and this time not from nerves.

**“Love?”** he whispered. **“Didn’t you say all the Shepherds were still in the palace?”**

**“Aye, they are.”**

Inigo’s eyes narrowed, feeling his heart start to hammer against his ribs—because for a single moment in the press of the crowd, he’d seen blue. The blue he saw in the mirror, the blue he shared only with his father and the parallel, infant version of his sister, the blue he was all but certain he should never have spotted in Chon’sin.

And he would swear on everything he held dear that that hair had been far too long to belong to Chrom.

“**Inigo,”** Say’ri said again, and when the familiar shade didn’t make itself visible in the crowd again, Inigo forced himself to turn away and dismiss it.

Chi’hiro hardly waited until they had started down the stairs that led below deck to speak. **“Milady, I must remind you that was hardly appropriate—”**

**“I need not the reminder, Chi’hiro,”** Say’ri cut her off.
“‘Tis my duty to give it to you anyways,” her retainer shot back.

“Your advice is noted,” Say’ri told her. “As for the moment, you are dismissed.”

After a beat, Chi’hiro responded with a stiff “Milady,” and a glance toward Inigo that could curdle milk.

“...She doesn’t like me, does she?” Inigo asked softly.

With a quiet sigh, Say’ri replied, “Give her time. She grieves my brother still.”

“As do you, my love,” Inigo pointed out under his breath.

“‘Tis different,” she said, but didn’t elaborate any further.

“...Was it really so terrible of you to do that?” he couldn’t help but ask.

Say’ri exhaled, saying, “‘Twas certainly far from proper of me, I must admit. My people are a fair bit more reserved than your own.” She reached for his hand again. “Yet when it comes to you I find I care very little.”

“There’s no need to embarrass yourself for my sake.”

“You say that, having just done the same for mine.”

“That’s different,” Inigo said, though he couldn’t quite deny that his hands still shook a little from being so overtly on display.

“Fie...” she muttered, then sighed again. “Suppose it’s time I introduce you to Chon’sin’s politics proper, then.”

Right, Inigo thought. The grand council. Whatever that is. “Joy.”

With one final moment of introspection, he put the thought of blue from his mind.
Inigo and Owain have an epic duel... with skewers.

“...can’t believe you fell for the eel thing last night!”

Inigo’s words echoed through the streets of Dai’chi, though over top of the festivities no one seemed to pay him any mind.

Barring Owain.

“Inigo of the Indigo Skies, do not act as if you were not as duped by your bride-to-be’s ensnaring lies as Owain Dark was!”

The quartet of the royal cousins and their significant others had split rather quickly from the rest of the Shepherds, Say’ri guiding them expertly through a city that held the polar opposite of the previous night’s dour air. The capital was alive and vibrant, paper lanterns pushing back against the cold dark and streamers hanging from almost every available surface.

“I most certainly was not!” Inigo cried with offense.

“Aye, and that’s a fib if I’ve heard one,” Say’ri cut in dryly.

“Darling!”

“Ha! You can’t hide the truth from me!” Owain said, wildly gesturing with the leftover skewer from some sort of particularly tasty street food Inigo had promptly forgotten the name of.

“Stop waving that around, you’ll take someone’s eye out,” he chided his cousin in a lofty voice.

“Duel me!” Owain retorted instead, dropping into a fencing pose with the skewer extended.

“Owain, don’t duel your cousin with a stick,” Robin said.

“But dear, I still need to test out the Exalted Dueling Form of Awesomeness!”

“Exalted Dueling Form of Lameness,” Inigo put in.

“—I fear it too powerful to use on any but our enemies with a proper weapon—You take that back!” Owain shouted, rounding back on his cousin.

“Make me!” Inigo shot back, lifting his own skewer. “Or are you afraid I’ll win?”

“I fear nothing you could possibly hope to attempt against me!” Owain cried.

As the two tiny sticks clashed, both boys’ feet shifting against the stone street, Say’ri shook her head and shot Robin a querying glance. “Zounds, and how old are they again?”

“Eight,” the tactician shot back drollly. She nodded toward Inigo, who had started cackling as he
ducked and parried, then continued, “You do realize if you marry him you’re basically getting both of them. They come as a package deal.”

“That is not—ow!—true!” Inigo interjected. “I’m not sharing my wife with him!”

“You flirt with my wife all the time!” Owain retorted.

“Oh, for gods’ sakes, I’ve told you before I’m not flirting with her—”

“—my own soulmate, the other half of my own essence—”


“Never let it be said that I didn’t warn you,” Robin told her with a shrug.

Owain’s skewer splintered with a crack, Inigo laughing triumphantly. “Ha! Victory is sweet!”

“You broke it!” Owain cried in anguish, staring at his now-unusable impromptu weapon.

“How’s it feel?” Inigo goaded.

“How long do you think ‘twould take them to notice if we left?” Say’ri asked Robin.

“Must you perpetually dangle Lilith’s demise over my head? It was Falchion’s fault!” Owain said.

“Probably not long, but there would be a significant lag with the amount of time it would take them to find us again.”

“Aye, probably.”

“Why yes, Owain, I am in fact going to hold that against you for all eternity,” Inigo replied.

“Robin, my beloved! Might I borrow—”

“No, I already threw my skewer away, and even if I hadn’t you wouldn’t be getting it,” Robin said.

Owain’s face fell into a pout. “...Say’ri?”

“I value peace in my household,” Say’ri replied demurely.

“Good answer, my love,” Inigo told her with a roguish grin.

“She’s no fun,” Owain complained.

“No, not for you she isn’t,” Inigo replied primly, then threw back his head in a laugh as Say’ri colored a little. “Oh, darling, don’t give me that look—hey now, there’s no need to resort to violence!” he said, rubbing the spot on his shoulder she’d smacked.

“We’re in public!” she muttered.

“Technically true, but it’s not like anyone is paying attention,” he pointed out, grabbing her hands and tugging her closer. He hadn’t even touched the saké yet—Say’ri having warned him to save it for later in the night if he wanted to arrive back on the palace on his own two feet—but the atmosphere alone was enough to make him giddier than usual. Besides, after having spent the entire afternoon stuck listening to the droning of the grand council, it was hard not to let loose already. Especially after the high of sneaking out of the palace without Chi’hiro’s attempt at an
honor guard, because with that following them around there surely would have been no room for
the casual fun they were being afforded now.

Say’ri snorted, but her posture softened toward him. “Fie, you had best hope so,” she replied.

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For the most part, Inigo wasn’t wrong. There was, however, one set of eyes paying rapt attention to
the little group.

Say’ri had changed little in the years since Lucina had last seen her. The now-queen carried herself
with the same dignity, a presence that filled her and made her seem almost taller than she was
despite the fact she was by far the shortest of the four. There was a more defined edge to her face
and a sharper, leaner tone to her body than when they had met before, but Lucina would have had
to have been blind to mistake her for anyone else.

The blond boy she knew as well, though not in person. She’d seen him in her dreams, a whirlwind
of manic energy that always seemed to be shouting something even if she’d never been able to hear
what. The woman, on the other hand, was a face unfamiliar to her, and the mere sight of her sent a
chill up Lucina’s spine.

And Inigo.

If she’d had doubts when she’d seen him on the boat that morning, they were gone now. At the
distance it had been hard to tell, but from up close it was impossible to deny she’d seen him in her
sleep before. Of the three faces she knew, his had clearly changed the most—he’d filled out from
the images she knew, perhaps gained a few extra inches. More noticeably, though, was the distinct
handsomeness of maturity, a confidence to his pose and a cockiness to his grin in the fashion of a
man who had finally begun to come into himself.

And the Brand in his eye that mirrored her own.

Lucina couldn’t catch what Inigo murmured to Say’ri, but judging by his tone and her reaction it
had been decidedly teasing. For a moment her breath caught—if the rumors she’d heard were true
and he was little more than a political pawn of Ylisse, he certainly seemed unbothered by the fact,
and fond enough of the future queen. A clearly ribbing comment came from the other man, and
Inigo glanced up with what had to be a sharp retort before all four of them burst into various
degrees of laughter.

Lucina was almost loathe to interrupt.

But it was what she’d come to Dai’chi for—answers. Answers about herself, about her dreams,
about her child and her family and her friends and her history—

Yet how to approach? Just march up and introduce herself to see what the reaction would be? Such
informality with the monarch might get her executed on the spot. She had come this far, but how to
proceed?

The group she sought began to move away and she sucked in a breath, torn for a moment whether
to reveal herself or stick to the shadows for a moment more. Before she could decide, though, the
distinct, gut-curling feeling of a sharp line of steel pressed against her throat.
“Of all the forms you could have taken, shade,” came a voice from behind her, low and cold, “the shape of the dead is the cruelest indeed.”

Lucina swallowed, feeling the lump catch on the knife’s blade on the way down. “I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she managed to whisper, every nerve in her body suddenly on a hair-trigger.

“Do not presume to speak to me in her voice,” the man at her back spat. “If I were not about to demand what dark creature dares wear her image you would be dead.”

...Sweet Naga I know that voice.

“...Gerome?” she whispered.

For the briefest of moments, the blade loosened a fraction, and instinct took over. Lucina slammed her weight backwards, feeling the press of heavy armor at her back but also the intended connection of her crown to his chin at the same moment she jammed her thumbnail into the wrist at her throat. What should have caught painfully between the tendons instead hit only the leather of a gauntlet, but the mere suddenness of her retaliation seemed to startle him into dropping the knife.

She pivoted, half-crouched and a hand reaching for a blade on her hip that wasn’t there. The involuntary reaction startled her, but her assailant barely paused, his own grip dropping to the axe on his belt.

Despite the threat, Lucina froze, her trembling hands stilling and her lips parting.

“Gods,” she whispered hoarsely. “It is you.”

“Spare me the act,” Gerome snapped. “I am not the type to swallow it. Tell me what you are.”

*What,* Lucina thought. Not even *who* but *what.* “I don’t know what you speak of!!”

“I said name yourself!”

This was going south far quicker than she’d hoped, Lucina thought, glancing backward to find she was swiftly coming up the the alley’s wall. With naught left to lose, she squared her shoulders and lifted her chin. “I am Lucina!”

“False!”

“How can you be certain?” Lucina demanded.

“Because Lucina is dead,” Gerome all but roared, “and I was there to watch her fall!”

Lucina stilled.

Another piece of the puzzle fell into place. Had it been a traumatic injury, perhaps, that had robbed her of her memories? But if so, how had she woken alone on the beach? Had her comrades abandoned her, mistaking her for dead? If so, why had they never returned?

Gerome did not seem keen on letting her ruminate in silence. “I ask you for the last time: *who are you?*”

Lucina lifted her gaze, meeting the slits in his mask instead of his gaze. “I… don’t know,” she whispered hoarsely.
A beat went by before he responded with an unimpressed scoff. “*You don’t know,*” he repeated in a mocking tone, but he had stilled a few feet away, no longer advancing toward her.

“I don’t remember,” Lucina clarified. “I woke on the shore perhaps a day’s ride south of here, about three years ago this past fall, and… try as I might I cannot remember aught of my life before that.”

For a moment, she almost thought she saw his posture soften. That hope summarily died when he let out a snort. “A pretty tale,” Gerome replied. “Who did you plan on ensnaring with it? Her brother has always been a little too soft in the heart, it’s possible he would have believed you. Perhaps her cousin, as well.”

Her breath caught. “...I have a brother?”

“Lucina had a brother,” Gerome corrected tartly. “As if you weren’t stalking his every step a moment ago.”

The thought hit her with the force of a crashing pegasus, almost enough to make her physically stagger backward. “Inigo.”

“Your knowledge seems increasingly vast for one who claims none,” Gerome said.

She ignored him, lunging forward to duck past him and breaking into a run the moment she was out of his reach. Her brother—*gods, she had a brother,* and now there was no question about whether or not she was going to speak to him, but where in Naga’s name had they gone?

A grip on her arm reeled her back in before she even made it over into the next street. “I’ll not risk you seducing the rest of the Shepherds with your deceit,” Gerome said. “I can only assume your form is some new machination of Grima’s, and I’ll learn the truth of it if it ends me.”

“And just what is that supposed to mean?” Lucina demanded, lifting her chin.

“It means that we are leaving this place, before the image you wear causes any more discord.”

For a moment more she paused, casting a glance over her shoulder to where the company she had originally sought had disappeared.

“If that’s what it will take to convince you of my story, then so be it,” she finally said. “Besides, Gerome, I’m sure *you* can grant me a great many answers I seek.”
Word Upon Your Lip (Part 6) Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

AND WE'RE BACK! Yours truly needed a short break, during which I have been packing, showing, and preparing for my last two (!!!) weeks of school. In the midst of our short hiatus, a certain Nohrian prince whose name rhymes with "Neo" decided to drag me into his head and refuse to let me back out for approximately eleven thousand words, which can be found in my newest three-shot in this series by the name of "Natural." But now Inigo has come back out to play, so hopefully this extra-long and action-packed chapter was worth the wait!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Okay,” Inigo admitted. “So you weren’t kidding about the saké.”

Say’ri made an indelicate little sound at that, as if wondering why he’d question her about that fact in the first place. Inigo responded with a perfectly innocent grin.

“Fie, ‘twas there more I might’ve said that would have made the matter clearer?”

“Mm, probably. But I could likely be convinced to forgive you.” As he spoke, he crossed their room—now only lit dimly by the brazier—and dropped his chin to the top of her head, wrapping his arms around her waist.

“Oh, could you really now?” Say’ri replied. “‘Tis a relief.”

“I’m going to tell myself you meant that very sincerely and without a drop of sarcasm, darling, because I feel like you should be more upset by the prospect of my unforgiveness.”

“Mayhap I would, if I didn’t know ‘twould last all of five minutes before you decided you had need to come snuggle.”

A long moment passed while Inigo attempted to come up with especially witty reply to that. “Well, that’s just uncalled for,” he finally mumbled into her hair.

“The truth?” Say’ri asked, lips quirking as she leaned her head to peer at him.

“An exaggeration,” he insisted. “I could probably make at least an hour.”

“Ten minutes.”

“Forty-five.”
“Fifteen, mayhap.”

“...Twenty?”

“On an especially good day.”

Inigo found his protest of that cut short by a soft rap on the door—the wooden frame this time, thankfully, rather than the paper—and the arrival of a maid he didn’t recognize and two delicate looking mugs of tea. The sudden concept of requesting food and having it immediately brought was one he was still wrapping his head around—in the future, merely getting enough to eat period had been a chore in itself, and even in this timeline every Shepherd who wasn’t going to poison the entire army took rotations in the kitchen. And now… not only had Inigo ended up more than well off, he was but one set of vows off of being royalty in this timeline as well as his own.

Say’ri unceremoniously extricated herself from his arms, moving to fetch the tea and bringing it back to the bedroom. By the time Inigo joined her a moment later, she had brought her mug to her lips and was making a face that borderlined on a grimace. “Fie, I told them only to sweeten yours,” she muttered.

“You’ve got the right one?” Inigo asked, reaching for the other. “Ah, Naga, mine tastes like Gaius got his hands on it, too.” He snorted and set the cup aside. “Probably his idea of a prank. Also, returning to our previous discussion, I’m entirely sure I could last a mere twenty minutes.” He settled, cross-legged, on the futon. Every so often the wind would shift enough that the noise of the city and the festival that still continued would reach them, or sometimes the nearer sounds of merriment from the palace itself. “I mean, it’s already been two, so I’m a tenth of the way there.”

She let out a soft huff. “If you are so confident, then, I’m certain you wouldn’t mind if I should stretch before bed,” she said, settling on the opposite end of the futon before extending one leg and reaching for her toes.

“Not at all, my love,” Inigo replied.

His resolution lasted about five minutes, at which point he found himself stretching out fully across the futon. Say’ri gave a quiet snort. “Couldn’t even make it ten, could you?”

“I’ve no idea what you’re talking about,” he said. “I’m merely getting comfortable. It’s pure coincidence such a thing has brought me marginally nearer to you.”

“Ah,” she said. “I see. Pure coincidence.”

“Exactly,” Inigo affirmed.

That lasted for another handful of minutes, during which she shot him an amused glance every time he squirmed.

“Have I made it to twenty yet?” he asked, after what had surely been forty.

“Nay,” she said dryly. “Eleven.”

“What?” Inigo said.

She glanced back at him with a click of her tongue. “My, but you remind me of the cats that roam through the gardens. Feigning such disinterest whilst secretly craving affection… or mayhap not so secretly, considering they would lay across one’s face if given half the chance.”
“Owain called me a cat not too long ago, too,” Inigo said with a pout. “What is with this sudden comparison?”

“Mayhap because you act very much like one sometimes,” Say’ri said with a quirk of her lips. “Shall I rub your belly as I do theirs?”

“No!” Inigo squeaked, curling up and rolling away from her on instinct, before pouting at the sound of melodic laughter.

“Ah, and I’ve bought you about two more minutes, there.”

He looked at her through half-lidded, betrayed eyes. “Why must you employ such reverse psychology on me?”

Her response to that was a maddeningly innocent smile, and with a huff he rolled back over, caught her waist, and pulled her against his chest.

“...Just barely thirteen, my love,” she said against his collar.

“Still better than your first two guesses,” Inigo pointed out, nuzzling into her hair.

Gods, he couldn’t help but think as the world began to settle into the comfortable swirl of pre-sleep darkness. When did I get so lucky?

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When did the gods become this cruel?

The night was still, broken only by the steady beat and glide of Minerva’s wings. Gerome had left the ghost of Not-Lucina under the wyvern’s watch when they’d slipped away from the festival, just long enough for him to grab the lone bag that contained the entirety of his belongings from the palace. Virion and Cherche could surely handle Rosanne’s affairs in the peace talks without him—this new mystery was proving far more important.

“Where do you live?” he’d asked the shade gruffly upon his return, and to his surprise she had answered without hesitation. The town was perhaps a day’s ride from the capital—by wyvern, they would arrive a handful of hours before dawn. He wondered why an illusion of Grima’s would give away the answer so easily, and had to ask himself if he was going to end up walking into a trap.

Part of him thought he should have employed backup, but he couldn’t risk a heart as soft as Inigo’s being taken in by this figment. Chrom, too, he feared would be too willing and eager to believe the future version of his daughter actually lived, and Gerome was not exactly what would be considered close to any of the other Shepherds, in either generation. Perhaps Laurent’s analytical mind would have been an asset, but with the mage on another continent entirely he wouldn’t exactly be much help now.

So Gerome went alone.

They had hardly been airborne for an hour when Lucina—not Lucina, he forcibly reminded himself—had fallen dead asleep. Part of him scoffed that she’d been so foolish as to let her guard down so, to risk unconsciousness with a man who had already openly threatened her and could,
quite easily, push her from the saddle and to her death.

The other part simpered that *why wouldn’t Lucina be comfortable enough to fall asleep in his arms?*

*She wasn’t Lucina,* he reminded himself firmly. He’d been there when she died, in those last terrible days of their future. He’d seen the real Lucina lay down her life with his own two eyes.

He’d seen Lucina *vanish,* another unhelpful voice pointed out.

But how, then, was there even the slimmest possibility she could have jumped back in time just as the rest of their company had? It had taken Naga days to gather up the power to send them all back, and they had had to do it at Mount Prism. Besides, Inigo had said the goddess herself had confirmed Lucina’s demise.

No, Gerome thought. He couldn’t let his guard slip—couldn’t let himself believe that his oldest, dearest friend, the only person he’d ever let himself truly *love,* could still be alive. Those thoughts were far too dangerous to entertain.

It was growing more and more difficult to remember that when he was drowning in the familiar scent of her, when there was nowhere he could turn his head to rid his gaze of that devastatingly nostalgic shade of blue, and when he couldn’t block out the sensation of the endless rise and fall of her chest.

Gerome shook his head in a vain attempt to clear it as Minerva continued south.

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Inigo was in Ylisstol.

A distant part of him recognized it was wrong—should he have been elsewhere? Smoke hung heavy in the air, burning at his lungs with every breath, each intake another quiet tick of *wrong,* *wrong.*

Falchion hung in his hands, heavier than it should have been. Inigo lifted the blade, squinting in the dark, and very nearly blinded himself at the bright orange glint reflected in its unyielding steel. He spun with a soft half-gasp, blood running cold.

Inigo was in Ylisstol, and Ylisstol was on fire.

*I left this behind,* he told himself, but his own thoughts rang without conviction. His boots crunched over the rubble at the feet, at the remains of—judging by where he should have been standing—the east wing of the palace. Had he ever *really* left this place? He’d fled to the past, or had he *really?*

Or was he still sixteen, still caught up in the end of the world with the entire weight of it crushing his shoulders, fracturing his mind until it had been forced to come up with an alternative before he went completely, entirely *mad* from that burden?

“...Owain?” he whispered, his voice flat and harsh. His cousin would know. Owain would have the truth, if Inigo could find him. He took one step, then another, a singular purpose now propelling
his footfalls. Find Owain.

A rumbling laugh filled the air, so loud it rattled his bones, so loud he could feel it as deeply as he could hear it. Inigo spun with a scream that didn’t sound, a cry for help that he couldn’t make; Falchion grew ever heavier as he struggled to lift it, but what good would the divine blade do now? I couldn’t be Awakened. I couldn’t—I can’t save any of them!

“So ends the human race…”

That voice… raspy, metallic, and dead. Inigo felt his entire body rebel from it, Falchion desperately held aloft as his head snapped around, searching for the source he knew was there despite the fact it was the last thing in the entire universe he wanted to see.

“The future is built upon the past… but YOUR kind shall never see it.”

His eyes struggled to focus, stinging against the smoke, but it didn’t stop him from seeing those horrific eyes—glowing and vermilion, each thrice as wide as Inigo was tall, achingly and terrifyingly familiar.

“You mother and father are dead, tiny one,” Grima simpered, tone sadistically elated. The Fell Dragon’s face emerged from the thick air, all curling horns and gargantuan teeth and scales of sickly black.

Falchion was seeming less and less like a weapon and more like an accessory. Inigo felt his shoulders quake, the point of the divine blade trembling in time as it sank toward the rubble.

“And now it is your turn…”

Grima lunged, colossal mouth snapping open with a roar that somehow didn’t drown out the end of the sentence.

“...TO DIE!”

Inigo did scream that time, Falchion flying back up despite the fact that he felt like a spider raising a toothpick against a warhorse, and braced himself for the inevitable end as Grima loomed, loomed,—

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Inigo was in Dai’chi.

His eyes snapped open, chest already heaving and heart hammering against his ribs, nightclothes plastered to the sticky sheen of sweat coating his skin despite the relative chill of the room. The race of his pulse screamed out wrong, told him he wasn’t safe, said Grima was still there hovering, waiting, watching—

His eyes met those of the man above him for a moment that stretched into eternity before he fully registered why.

“SAY’RI!”

Inigo lunged, his cry of her name in the exact same tone he would’ve used to pitch his voice across
an entire battlefield, instinct propelling his entire body weight into the intruder with as much force as he could launch himself up with. His assailant stumbled backwards, clearly not having expected such an immediate retaliation—*gods, knife!*—Inigo realized, a fraction too late to miss the blow entirely but just soon enough to tuck his head and bring his shoulder up to catch the blade before it could slash through his throat.

Another shout escaped him, nearly as loud as the first but this time an oath of pain as the knife sunk into his flesh. Say’ri let out a muffled yelp behind him, words blurring into unintelligibility as Inigo grappled for the man’s wrist.

Gods, but the intruder—*assassin;* he really couldn’t be anything else—was built like a house, and once Inigo had lost the element of surprise he was finding himself nigh-instantly outmatched. The assassin levered him back as every nerve in his body screamed for Falchion, but even if he could’ve gotten clear long enough to snatch up the blade it would certainly leave him open long enough to catch a far more fatal blow from that knife, and that was if the killer didn’t take the shot at an easier target and turn on Say’ri.

Inigo kicked out, finding himself suddenly desperate enough he just hoped he connected at all without being too concerned about where. He caught the assassin in the thigh, several unfortunate inches away from where it might’ve really done some damage, and an instant later he was falling, caught on futon and sheets and trapped between meaty arms and wicked steel. He hit the floor with a breath-stealing crack, his chest spasming with a now-familiar spike of pain.

Still he struggled to throw himself backwards, trying to close the distance to Falchion even with every motion of his torso bringing on another wave of nauseating throbbing. Before he could scramble any farther away, there was a dull *thunk* of metal on flesh, and for a moment his assailant paused. Inigo shoved again, fingers finally catching on the knife’s hilt, another agonizing push against the assassin’s weight giving him just enough room to jam the blade up.

It plunged into the intruder’s chest in the very same moment Say’ri struck again, slamming the flat of her own blade—no, Inigo realized, that was most definitely *his* blade—once more into the back of their enemy’s head.

“Milady, I—” Chi’hiro’s voice, bleeding panic, sounded the moment the assassin dropped to his knees, face contorted. Inigo hardly looked up, blurting an order automatically.

“Go fetch a healer!” He scrambled mostly upright again, resisting the urge to clutch at his side and knowing that despite the ache, the healer was going to be for himself second—he wanted to know *exactly* why they’d almost just had their throats slit in their sleep, and they weren’t going to be getting that information from a dead assassin. Say’ri lowered her impromptu club—also known, he noted with a hint of pride he couldn’t quite suppress, as Falchion—while Inigo bent back over the assassin, making a careful double check for backup weapons whilst he tried to ascertain whether the man was going to bleed out before help arrived.

“Inigo! What hap—” Owain, for once having a valid excuse to come barging into Inigo’s room—though perhaps not for being entirely shirtless—broke off with comically wide eyes. “Gods.”

“Are you both all right?” Robin questioned, robe pulled tight around her waist as she paused beside Owain.

Inigo, despite the wicked pulse in his ribs that kept time with his every breath, forced himself to nod. “Who hired you?” he asked in a low voice, eyes still turned on their intruder.

The man’s response was a flat, slightly gurgling chuckle. “Maybe I wanted you dead myself.”
“You had help,” Inigo said bluntly, his eyes flicking up for a moment as the room continued to crowd; Chrom appearing next with a flustered Olivia, followed by Severa and shortly Gaius. “You didn’t make it all the way here by yourself.”

“I ain’t a snitch,” the assassin protested.

“Just an idiot,” replied Inigo. Maribelle’s sharp voice sounded as she pushed through the gathering, Brady on her heels, and he nodded them towards their assassin.

“And you’re… just a dastard,” the intruder replied. Inigo resisted the urge to flinch—unfortunately, it was far from the first time he’d heard that assumption—as the man continued, “Don’t bother with healing me. I’d rather die before I see this damned Ylissean on the throne.”

Maribelle shot a querying glance upwards, though her staff was already raised and glowing. “Heal him anyway,” Say’ri told her flatly.

“Inigo?” Owain’s voice broke through again, his brows furrowed as he held an abandoned teacup to his face. “Was this from tonight?”

“Yeah?” Inigo replied, wondering what in Naga’s name that had to do with anything that had just happened.

Owain’s lips turned down as he took a long sniff, then passed the mug over to his cousin. “Someone tried to give you a sleeping draught, my friend,” he said. “I’m impressed you woke up at all.”

“Gods,” Inigo muttered, eyes going wide as he abruptly picked up on the bitter note the too-sweet drink had tried to disguise. “No wonder it didn’t taste right…”

“Chi’hiro,” Say’ri interjected sharply; Inigo hadn’t even noticed when she’d reappeared. “Find the maid who delivered this and have her brought her immediately.”

“Someone put a lot of planning into this,” Gaius said, beginning to navigate around the room with careful steps. “Smart of ‘em to do it on the solstice, too… Plenty of extra people in the city, everyone’s making merry, no one’s gonna be paying attention to a few unfamiliar faces—you all right there, Pretty Boy?”

Inigo made a conscious effort to still his shaking hands and forced out a stiff nod. “I’m all right,” he managed. “Just a bit shaken up. And… probably more than a bit hungover, now that I think about it.”

“Sit down, Inigo,” Chrom said gently. “We’ve got it from here.”

Inigo nodded again, half-falling back to the futon before scrubbing a hand over his face, then wincing as the wound on his shoulder pulled. Beside the assassin, Brady abruptly cursed, bringing his staff back up as he sat back on his heels.

Every gaze turned to the two healers. “He’s dead,” Maribelle said flatly, straightening up and wiping her bloodied hands on a towel.

“...Did I hit him that hard?” Inigo asked with wide eyes.

“No,” Maribelle replied.

“Ma, was that…?” Brady asked.
“I’m almost entirely certain yes, but I’m afraid it lies rather out of my area of expertise,” his mother replied before looking up. “Someone send for Tharja.”

“Wait,” Inigo said, his head and the room both beginning to spin. “Tharja?”

“I believe,” Maribelle began, “that this man had the exact same hex placed on him that Owain did.”

“Oh, gods,” Inigo muttered for what felt like the umpteenth time that night.

“Nalia’s hex?” Owain asked, bending down to examine the man himself. “That which blocks the almighty healing power of priest’s and cleric’s stave alike?”

“Indeed,” Maribelle replied. “I suppose it wasn’t bravado when he told us not to bother attempting.”

A long silence stretched out; then, as if the night hadn’t had enough revelations, Chi’hiro finally ventured, “Lady Say’ri? I know this man.”

“...You do?” Say’ri replied. “Then pray tell how?”

“He served under Yen’fay,” Chi’hiro said. “One of his highest officers beside myself. He was one that deserted when we joined with the Ylissean League.” A beat went by as her eyes dropped. “His name was Jun’ichi.”

Chapter End Notes

Say’ri can’t wield Falchion? Haha no she’ll use it for a flipping club if she has to.
Word Upon Your Lip (Part 6) Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

If I was whole, I'd turn right now,
I'd forget it and just walk away,
Cause I've been told that I'm dragging it out,
But I've been dying just to see your face,
And all I wanted was to say "goodbye..."

Chapter Notes

Had this song on repeat for basically the entirety of the first scene of this chapter, so hop on over and have a listen if you'd like. I've also recently made a Tumblr if you're interested in peeking at where I'm compiling a more complete soundtrack!

Gerome really rather expected to be walking into a trap. It wouldn’t be his first time and it likely wouldn’t be his last, but if Not-Lucina had given up her location so easily he highly doubted she was about to lead him into some sort of important Grimleal base of operations.

Still, even a trap could prove enlightening.

It was perhaps nearing four o’clock when Minerva touched down on the beach, one side stretching to the dark, rolling ocean and the other leading toward the rising silhouettes of a town. Lucina slid down the wyvern’s shoulder with comfortable ease, offering her a pat as the landed and leaving Gerome narrowing his eyes before doing the same. With a short gesture, he told Minerva to stay put, leaving himself an easy escape should things go south.

“I haven’t… got a spare room or anything,” Lucina ventured, shouldering her pack. “You’re welcome to my couch if you’d like, or there’s an inn across the road, but I… admittedly spent quite a bit getting to Dai’chi, so I imagine you’d have to put yourself up.”

“The couch is fine,” Gerome said curtly. It wasn’t like he was planning on lingering, anyways—he intended to stay just long enough to blow a few convincing holes in this shade’s story and gather enough information that he had some reasonable suspicions to bring back to Dai’chi. Just enough, he reasoned, to keep any of the Shepherds from falling prey to this lie.

Lucina— not Lucina, he reminded himself firmly—led the through way through winding streets, her steps never slowing. After several minutes of silence she ducked around the side of what was unmistakably a tavern, taking a set of keys from her pocket for the back door.

The interior was dim and empty, already closed. The chairs had been flipped upside down and placed on top of their tables and the bar had a neat line of clean glasses stretched across it.

“Do you work here?” Gerome asked, brow furrowing behind his mask. Imposter or no, the woman in front of him still looked like Lucina, and the thought of the Exalt he’d fought countless battles
behind being relegated to waiting tables felt wrong on every conceivable level.

“Yes,” Lucina said, her voice low as she started for the staircase in the corner. “I… couldn’t exactly venture far.”

He felt his guard go up again. “Whyever not?” he muttered as he followed.

“That’s… something I really ought tell you now, I suppose,” she replied, stopping at the top of the staircase with a second key dangling from her fingers. She glanced back at him for a moment, then paused and looked at the door once more, tilting her head to peer underneath. “Why in Naga’s name is the light on in this hour?” she murmured to herself, a note of panic bleeding through her tone as she clicked the door open.

True to her words, a lone candle flickered in the corner of the apartment, giving sight to the modest kitchen that adjoined directly to a small living room. A narrow hallway off one side of the room led to mirroring doorways that both clearly led to bedrooms— She said she didn’t have a spare room, Gerome thought with suspicion—one of which was propped open with a brighter light flooding through it.

“Shai’si?” Lucina called, striding for the opening.

“Lucina?” another voice answered. “Didn’t expect you back for two days at the least.”

“Everything all right?”

“Oh, somebody had a nightmare.”

At that moment, unexpectedly, a third voice interjected, high and trembling. “Mama?”

Gerome froze.

“Hello, darling,” said the woman who was not Lucina, who couldn’t be Lucina.

“Mama!” the child wailed again, already tucked in Lucina’s arms when Gerome finally forced himself to step into the doorway.

Shai’si glanced up from her seat in the corner, her long salt-and-pepper hair tied up and her eyes, lined with crow’s-feet, narrowed in his direction. “You brought a friend,” the woman said to Lucina, a slight emphasis on the last word that managed to hold both suspicion and an implication Gerome didn’t really want to think about.

“Long story,” Lucina replied, swaying a little as she soothed the sobbing toddler in her arms.

“Should I be going, then?” the older woman asked.

“Goodness, it’s far too early for me to go kicking you out of your bed—” Lucina started.

“Technically it’s your bed, dear,” Shai’si replied with a wink. “And a bit of a stiff one, at that, mayhap you should speak with your landlady about it.” Her tone, along with Lucina’s lilting laugh in response, rather implied Shai’si herself was said landlady. “I’ll keep my old nose out of your business. You kids have fun.” She got to her feet, shooting Gerome a look that was rather more terrifying than he thought it should be as she passed with a curt nod. “Young man.”

“Thank you ever so much for watching him,” Lucina called after her. The child in her arms had settled a little, still letting out the occasional sniffler but at a volume that was far more bearable than
it had been a few minutes ago. She fixed her gaze on Gerome and continued, “There’s tea in the corner cabinet, bottom shelf, if you would be so kind as to start some. I’ll be out when I’ve put him down again.”

For a moment, there was such a color of Lucina the Exalt to her words he had no choice but to obey immediately. Still, it was long second where Gerome’s throat worked, unable to find words before he finally said, “Indeed.”

As he half-stumbled to the kitchen, though, the only sight he could see in his mind’s eye was that of the shock of silver hair tucked against the shoulder of his wife’s image.

No, he thought, clenching his hands together and letting out a breath. Dangerous thoughts, impossible thoughts—

He forcibly pushed said thoughts from his mind and focused intently on the process of tea-making.

It lasted until her footsteps sounded perhaps ten minutes later. Hardly daring to turn from the counter, Gerome managed to venture, “You have a…” The sentence refused to come to fruition and he clicked his jaw shut again.

A quiet sigh sounded from behind him. “His name is Lysander,” Lucina said, her tone soft but matter-of-fact. “He’ll be three in February.”

“A hole? Gerome wondered. “You spake that you arrived the fall previous to that.”

“Yes,” she said. “That September. I was still carrying him at the time, obviously.”

One tiny, treacherous voice whispered that counting the months between when their company had split to look for the Gemstones back in the future past in with that timeline added up awfully close to nine. Far too close to be coincidence.

Which meant either Grima was playing this game with startling accuracy, or…

“And you remembered nothing of your life prior?” Gerome inquired, pushing that thought aside.

“A few things,” Lucina admitted. “Images. Faces, mainly. Yours, Inigo’s, a few others I couldn’t name.”

“Describe them.”

“A blond boy… built fairly square, full of movement… He seemed very loud even if I never heard him.” Owain, Gerome thought, but considering he’d been with Inigo earlier that night, that proved nothing. “A girl with long red hair, usually in twintails, always wearing a scowl…” Severa hadn’t been present, but that didn’t mean Lucina hadn’t spotted her at some point during their time in Dai’chi. “And another boy with very shaggy, dark hair and…” She gestured to the side of her head. “Ears?”

Yarne. That description had a brow creeping toward Gerome’s hairline—he’d heard naught of the Taguel since they’d left their own timeline. As he pondered, Lucina proceeded to describe, in vague but flawless detail, every member of their future company and a few of the past generation.

“I don’t know how else you expect me to prove myself,” she finally said. “I’m afraid you’ve exhausted the extent of my knowledge.”

Frankly, Gerome wasn’t entirely certain what else he wanted, either.
What he truly wanted, he couldn’t help but admit, was to believe her.

“So,” Lucina said after a long moment. “I must inquire if you would lend me some of your own.”

Gerome stiffened. “Beg pardon?”

Her shoulders slumped a little. “I’ve spent the last three years,” she said, “desperate for some tiny clue as to who I really am. Now I stand across from someone with all that information at his fingertips, and you expect me not to ask?”

He let out a breath, closing his eyes and knowing she wouldn’t be able to tell the difference from behind his mask.

“You are, and have always been,” Gerome whispered, “my Exalt.”

And he told her.

~~~

Dawn hung, chill and misty, in the air. Owain, though mainly content in the light cloak he had shrouded himself in, pulled it a little closer.

After the night before, he found himself checking nearly every corner of the palace he passed through, every semblance of a shadow getting at least a precursory glance. Gods, but when he’d joked about security hazards the morning before he really had meant it for a joke, though in hindsight it felt like some sick form of prophecy.

He wandered the palace gardens rather aimlessly, chewing on a roll he’d snatched from the kitchens until he caught sight of a familiar figure leaning over the railing of one of the gazebos. Polishing off his breakfast, he dusted his hands on his cloak and hopped up the steps. “Where’s your better half?”

His light tone went unmatched. “She and Chi’hiro are busy trying to patch up the holes in our security,” Inigo answered, inclining his head slightly toward his cousin as Owain took up the spot beside him but not actually shifting his gaze. “Apparently there’s a few more than we thought.”

“Mm, you don’t say,” Owain replied. After a beat, he thought his dry tone might’ve hit a little too close to home, and continued, “Hey, you’re both still alive.”

Inigo snorted. “ Barely,” he said, then added, “Broke my damned ribs again.”

Owain made a sound of sympathy. “No other leads, then?”

Inigo shook his head. “The maid who served us is gone without a trace. Jun’ichi snuck in last night as one of the royal guards. Our only real clue is that hex he had on him and… well, we know who cast that.”

Owain rubbed the back of his neck, debating for a moment whether to bring up the topic gnawing at him, then decided it was probably better for his cousin to know. “So… maybe not the best time to mention that Gerome’s vanished without a word.”

Inigo finally did look at him then, gaze snapping sharply sideways. “…What?”
“Apparently he came back to the palace an hour or so before the four of us got in,” Owain said. “Just long enough to get his things and then he left again.”

Inigo shot him a long look. “I really hope you’re not implying what I think you’re implying.”

“I really hope I’m not either, frankly,” Owain replied. “But… it’s not as though you two have ever particularly gotten along, and the timing seems a little coincidental to not be suspicious.”

After a long moment, Inigo shook his head. “No,” he said. “Gerome doesn’t like me to be sure, but I’m pretty sure the only time he ever actually wanted me dead was for the three seconds after I called him a coward to his face. And if he did… he’d challenge me to my face, and certainly not hire someone to take the pleasure from him.”

“…I agree,” Owain said after a long moment, scratching the back of his head. “But still…”

Half a minute passed before Inigo blew out a breath, his head hanging even lower than before. Owain glanced at him sidelong, unable to help noting the circles under his eyes so dark as to be black, the faint shadow along his jaw that contrasted so sharply against his pale skin.

“Did you get any more sleep last night, after?” Owain ventured softly.

Another shake of Inigo’s head.

Abruptly, Owain straightened, drumming his hands on the railing. “You want to get out of here?”

Inigo shot him a look. “What are you talking about?”

“Head out into the city for a couple hours,” Owain elaborated. “Escape the palace walls. Be not royalty for a little while. You know… you and me, wandering, meeting people, probably causing trouble… think old times.”

“You mean when you and I were roaming around Ylisse for months on end performing menial drudgery to keep ourselves fed and living in perpetual terror that your future wife’s wrath would rain down upon us at any moment?” Inigo asked dryly.

“You, my friend, have a terribly pessimistic way of looking at the world,” Owain told him.

“And you usually ignore the world entirely to go and live in the fantasy that is Owainland, so it all balances out.”

“I’ll have you know that Owainland is a thousand times cooler than Inigoworld.”

“Whatever you tell yourself that helps you sleep at night,” Inigo said with a sniff, but a faint smile was starting to form on his lips.

“So that’s a yes?” Owain said blithely, arms crossed and a grin on his own face.

A beat passed before Inigo pursed his lips, blew out a breath, and pushed away from the railing himself. “Give me ten minutes and I’ll meet you at the dock.”

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“Now there’s something I haven’t laid eyes on in a while.”

Inigo, unconsciously, lifted a hand to the mask that hadn’t graced his face since the night they’d spent on Carrion Isle. His ten minutes had stretched into fifteen solely because it had taken him so long to find it again. “Unfortunately, as of yesterday morning, I’m now a bloody public figure,” he said dryly. “And as of last night I thought perhaps parading around with the Brand of the Exalt on full display might not be the smartest idea I’d ever had. Some of us are not so lucky as to be able to disguise it with a mere sleeve.”

“Okay, whilst I know that comment was directed at me, I would like to point out that Uncle Chrom pretty much does the exact opposite of disguising it with a sleeve.”

Inigo let out a snort at that, pulling his hood up over his head. “I mean, you’re not wrong.”

“Do you think he specifically requests it when he goes to the tailor or does he just immediately rip off the one arm whenever he gets new clothes?” Owain asked.

“You know, for some reason I’ve never pondered it too much,” Inigo replied. Both boys looked at each other for a moment.

“Tailor,” they both said at once, then proceeded to burst into laughter.

When it died down into breathy silence, a few moments went by when Inigo said, “You know, I’m slightly terrified to ask this, but why do you have a book with you?”

His cousin veritably lit up, all but shoving the leather-bound tome into Inigo’s arms. “Look! It was Robin’s solstice present! ‘Tis my own hallowed lexicon of fell conjury!”

A beat went by. “She gave you your own spellbook,” Inigo translated.

“Indeed! I no longer must query to borrow hers!”

Another beat. “Naga help us all,” Inigo whispered with conviction.

“My dear cousin, I’ll have you know my abilities have grown quite remarkably since my days as a fledgling mage! No longer does the uncontainable power of my fell hand explode my surroundings with accidental impunity!” A glint came to Owain’s eye. “Now I explode things on purpose!”

“That’s not reassuring,” Inigo told him.

“How is it not?” Owain asked.

Inigo clapped a hand to his shoulder. “Because you, my friend,” he said, “are very easily bored.”

Owain snorted. “My dear cousin, I’m rather offended by your lack of faith in my self-control.”

“I’m not entirely sure you actually know the definition of ‘self control.’”

Their perpetual needling continued until they’d made it back into the city proper, and as they stepped out onto the street a comfortable silence stretched out. “Hey,” Owain finally ventured. “Can I ask you something?”

Inigo held up one finger for silence, using his other hand to shield his eyes as he gazed skywards.

“...What?” Owain asked after a long moment.
“You’re actually asking permission before you proceed to spout off whatever asinine nonsense is currently bouncing around in your brain,” Inigo replied. “I’m sure I’ll spot the winged pigs any moment now.”

Owain replied to that with a none-too-gentle sock to the arm. “Rude.”

“Owain, after twenty years, two timelines, and ‘round about three different wars I should think you would be well acquainted with my unique and frankly incredibly hilarious brand of humor.”

“Unfortunately so, my dear cousin,” he replied with a sigh. They continued down the street, their wandering aimless and uncalculated. “I am actually being serious, though.”

“Funny, I thought you were being Owain.” As his cousin quirked a brow Inigo continued, “Okay, okay, I’ll stop. What’s on your mind?”

“...How many people have you killed?” Owain asked softly. “Since coming to this time period.”

Inigo balked, glad his mask disguised the shell-shocked look that had to have come to his features. “What kind of a question is that?” he asked, unable to help the defensiveness creeping into his tone. “This hardly seems a topic to joke about.”

“Do I sound like I’m joking?”

After a long moment, Inigo shook his head, his eyes falling shut and giving way to a kaleidoscope of blue, brown, and hazel that he hadn’t pondered in an astonishingly long time. When he finally spoke again, his tone was hesitant, laced with guilt. “Honestly, I think I’d lost count before we ever set foot on the shores of Valm.”

“You too…” Owain whispered.

With a deep inhale, Inigo glanced up again and said, “Why do you ask?”

“I dunno,” Owain admitted. “I think… last night… the bright lights, the festive decorations. And we were all just… happy.”

“You mean how there was nothing like it in our timeline,” Inigo said, understanding dawning as they began to walk again. “No time to gather and celebrate—not that we ever really had anything to celebrate in the first place. Hardly had time to stop and take a nap between the fighting, sometimes.” He resisted the urge to grimace. “But on the other hand, we only ever had to fight Risen.”

“Right,” Owain said. “It wasn’t until we arrived in this era that we were forced to fight the living.”

Inigo took in a shuddering breath. “I’ll never forget—that night in the palace, with Emmeryn…” He’d spent months with the spectre of the first life he’d ever taken haunting his nightmares right alongside Grima.

“You didn’t sleep for three days,” Owain whispered.

“I didn’t.”

“You can’t just… flip a switch, like magic, and be able to kill the next day.” He sighed. “It’s just strange. There’s no doubt our future was a harsher, bleaker place, but…”

“But this world has held its own share of harsh experiences, hasn’t it?” Inigo asked. “I get it,
Owain. I really do. I suppose we just have to face down our troubles until we win our fight and bring them to an end.”

Owain gave a soft snort. “Then we get to try our hands at peace.”

“Ha! And isn’t that a terrifying prospect,” Inigo replied. A beat later though, he turned his head, a hand dropping to Falchion’s hilt out of automatic. “Hold up, what have we here?”
Chapter Summary

All right, so some real author talk right now. When I got to sit down and do some serious writing over Christmas break, I worked out a goal for where I wanted to be writing when I graduated. In fact, I set a Certain Scene as my goal. And... well, it's my last night in my dorm room and I'm hitting the road to head back home permanently in the morning, and I didn't quite make the Certain Scene. But--it is due to hit, if my planning rings true, in the chapter DIRECTLY after this one, and you know what? I'm calling that close enough.

On to new figurative and literal chapters! (Also I've been so busy the last few days I am nearing zombie-territory right now so please do pardon any wackiness in this literal chapter.)

“Hello, dove.” With practiced charm, Inigo leaned his elbow against the counter of a market stall, shooting the girl behind it a flashy grin as he ran a hand through his fringe. “Not having any trouble over here, I hope?”

The mousy girl’s shoulders hunched a little further toward her ears as she said, “N-no, sir.”

“Excellent,” Inigo said brightly. He drummed his hand on the counter for a moment, surveying a selection of foods that all looked terrifyingly unfamiliar to him, then decided to just take the leap and say, “I’ll take your finest, then. It all looks nearly as divine as the one who prepared it.” He gave her a wink that left her flushing.

“As will I,” Owain added from behind him, his odd inflection and sideways glance very plainly asking what exactly Inigo was up to.

Inigo couldn’t give him an answer, nor did he have time to when the tall, lean man beside him, perhaps ten years his senior, let out a hmph. “My good sir,” Inigo said conversationally. “I must admit I am rather new to this city, but surely there are more interesting things to do than stare at the back of this maiden’s head?”

The man bristled a little. “I’m attending a business matter,” he said flatly. “Not that it concerns you.”

“Ooh, actually, I’ve quite the head for business,” Inigo said. “Unlike my friend here, definitely don’t ask him. Not much good at math, either, I’m afraid.”

“Hey!” Owain said.

Inigo ignored him. “So do tell me, because you’ve got me curious.” His voice, though still cheerful, hardened. “What sort of business matter of yours could be so dire that I could hear you shouting at this sweet girl from three streets over?”

The man’s lip curled. “If you truly must know, she entirely botched my order. When I requested, she gave me neither a remake nor a refund.”
Inigo glanced back toward the girl, who had bowed her head as she worked behind the counter. “Is that so, my dear?”

“I… I might’ve messed up,” she admitted in a small voice. “I can’t say I didn’t, but…”

“Enough of your ‘but’s, wench!” the man exclaimed.

Inigo sent him a curt gesture, his eyes still on the girl. “But?” he prodded in a gentle tone.

She sucked in a breath. “But he’d already eaten it!” she burst out all at once.

“Ah,” Inigo said, turning so his back was to the counter, nonchalantly leaning against it as he crossed one foot in front of the other. “Surely, though, you’d have realized the mistake before you made it through the entire meal?” he asked the man conversationally.

“I did not, until the very end,” the man said stiffly.

“Mm, must not have been that big of an error, then?” Inigo shrugged. “Quite frankly, I’ve traveled over quite a bit of this big wide world we live in, and I’ve never encountered anywhere that would reimburse a meal already eaten. Have you, Owain?”

“Nope,” Owain agreed.

Inigo’s tone abruptly lost the deliberate lightness he’d kept to it as he turned toward the man. “So if I were you, I’d be on my way.” He shifted his hip, just a fraction, but enough that the tip of Falchion’s hilt poked through the hem of his cloak.

The man suddenly puffed up like a mortally offended cat. “You dare?” he asked. “Do you have any clue who I am?”

“Oh, playing that card, are we?” Inigo asked derisively, crossing his arms. “Out of all your reasonable ones now?”

Ignoring him, the man continued, “I am Lord Kruger—Lieutenant-General in the army of Valmese Empire, second to General Cervantes. And I am here,” he said lowly, “as the official ambassadorial representative of the same.”

Part of Inigo thought that it would be just his luck to run across such a man. Another part of him wanted to laugh that of course he would be from Valm. The rest of him said, “I’m not sure if you’ve checked lately, but there is no Valmese Empire anymore. I should know. I helped depose it."

Kruger quirked a brow. “You’re of the Ylissean League,” he said flatly, his gaze falling to Owain. “I thought I recognized you. The swordsman-turned-mage.”

Owain, startlingly, remained silent while Inigo shot him a puzzled look. What exactly had happened at the end of that battle that he’d missed?

“I don’t see the relevance of that,” Inigo said after a moment. “War’s over.”

“You’re the one who brought it up,” Kruger replied, turning and crossing his arms in what was probably a deliberate mirror of Inigo’s own posture.

“Old habits,” Inigo said with a shrug. “It was kind of the only thing on my mind for a rather long time.”
A beat passed. “If you’re here, it’s in official capacity,” Kruger said. “I could speak to the queen of your insolence.”

Inigo felt a slow grin start to curl on his lips but couldn’t quite stop it. *Oh, if you had any idea of the mistake you just made…* “Actually,” he said nonchalantly, “the queen and I have a bit of an understanding.”

“Is that so,” Kruger said, his tone clearly unimpressed. “Does that understanding extend to the harassing of a foreign diplomat?”

“Well, harassing’s a strong word,” Inigo replied mildly. “Although, if you’re really that curious, I suppose I still haven’t introduced myself properly…” He dropped his hood and nudged his mask up, watching Kruger’s gaze follow the motion. “Inigo of Ylisse,” he continued lightly. “Say’ri’s fiancé.”

To his credit, the other man paled a fraction. *I win,* Inigo thought.

Sliding his mask back into place, Inigo shot a slight glance back to the girl, clicking his teeth and saying aside, “Sorry about that, sweetheart.” She let out a tiny squeak as his tone hardened again. “Since it seems we’re going to be seeing a rather unfortunate amount of each other, in that case,” he continued to Kruger, “perhaps we ought cut this meeting short, eh?”

“Perhaps we ought,” he replied stiffly, then spun on his heel and walked away.

Inigo watched him for a long moment, then shot a glance back at Owain. “Well,” he said. “That went well, didn’t it?”

~~~

*You are, and have always been, my Exalt.*

*Gods,* Lucina couldn’t help but think, *but could that possibly be true?*

The tale Gerome had woven her spoke of heroism and grief, of death and destruction, of impossible feats and divine aid. For the first few minutes she’d been sorely tempted to sharply demand he stop telling tales, but even without her memories of him she realized shortly he was far from the type to weave such a story of his own accord.

How she’d arrived in the past with no memories save her name when no one else had seen her since Grima had presumably slain her was still a mystery in and of itself. Yet, for the first time in three years, she *had* a past—even if it was a story that beggared disbelief.

Lucina sat bent forward on her couch, elbows on her thighs and her hands still clasping an empty mug between her knees. Gerome, still clearly regarding her even through his mask, was kitty corner from her, his posture far from relaxed but perhaps just a touch less coiled to spring at any moment.

“So…” she finally ventured, glancing up again to find the first dull beams of sunrise making their way through her windows. “Somehow Naga managed to send me back separately from the rest of you.”

“Perhaps,” Gerome acquiesced. “Your lack of knowledge does leave the matter rather conveniently
ambiguous.”

“Perhaps your own obstinace is making it more obfuscated than it needs to be,” Lucina shot back. He straightened a little at that, plainly affronted. “If you’re so convinced that I am a new ploy of Grima, then I can only ask you one question: How would he knew what I looked like?”

A very long moment stretched out before he finally admitted, “That, I do not know.”

“And so you see my point,” she replied.

“What, then?” he asked. “Will you rejoin the Shepherds, if they would have you?”

After a beat, it was Lucina’s turn to reply, “I don’t know.” She glanced away, her gaze falling on Lysander’s door. “I cannot just leave him.”

“Should you remain, then?” Gerome pushed. “It is not as though they have not already mourned you.”

Lucina got to her feet, thinking of the title and the sword she’d left behind for her little brother to bear in her stead. Had he cracked under the pressure, or stepped up and flourished? Would he resent the return of a sister he’d already grieved or eagerly thrust that burden back upon her?

Could she bear that weight again herself after three years without knowing of it?

“I just… need some time,” she finally said. “To think things over.”

Before Gerome could answer that, the click of a door sounded, another familiar call of “Mama?” reaching her ears.

With the ease of practice, Lucina shoved everything else aside, a fond smile coming to her face. “Good morning, dear,” she said brightly. “You’re up early.”

“‘M hungry,” Lysander told her in the unceremonious fashion of an almost-three-year-old.

“Mhmm,” Lucina replied. “And what do you say, then?”

It was a long moment before Lysander answered her—he had paused at the end of the small hallway, his face scrunching up in confusion as he caught sight of Gerome. “...Please?” he finally said.

“Please what?” Lucina prodded again.

Lysander blinked, still gazing at Gerome with a plain air of wariness.

“Please can I have breakfast?” Lucina finally prompted.

Lysander let out a great sigh, as if wondering why she wasn’t smart enough to just respond to what he so clearly desired without his phrasing it perfectly, and dutifully repeated “Please can I have breakfast, Mama?”

“Yes, dear,” she told him, scooping him up in her arms and earning a giggle in return.

The clank of Gerome’s armor sounded behind her as he got to his feet. “Perhaps I should see about that inn you mentioned,” he said lowly, and headed for the door.
“Pardon my presumption, Your Majesty, but I believe we were all under the impression your betrothed was to be joining us again today.”

With the careful ease of many years of practice, Say’ri kept a carefully neutral mask on her face and replied, “I’m afraid he’s currently indisposed.”

As in I have no idea where in Naga’s name he’s gotten himself off to, she thought with a flicker of irritation she had to consciously tamp down. The rest of the grand council had no need to know of that.

It was still odd, she thought, to sit in a room almost entirely filled with men two and three times her age, those who had supported and advised her father through his reign. Combined together, she thought, she had to have an entire century of experience at her disposal.

“I see,” continued the advisor who had spoken a moment ago, a particularly lean man by the name of Suzu’rin.

“Perhaps, then,” said another, Ira’sagi, “two would not be an ill time to bring up a matter concerning him.”

Say’ri took in a deep breath in an attempt to keep from bristling. “I see not what you should have to say about Inigo that ought not be spoken to his face.”

“Then with all due respect, Your Majesty, whilst I would be loath to imply you are being deliberately obtuse, perhaps matters of late have clouded your judgement.”

“I beg pardon?” she all but snapped, eyes narrowing in Ira’sagi’s direction.

A few places to her left, the particularly tall Tao’zi spoke next. “Milady, we understand your inexperience in matters of state—and a lack of desire to rule as a single monarch is perfectly reasonable.”

A long moment stretched out. “...But is he truly the best choice you could make in a consort?” Ira’sagi finally finished.

Say’ri counted to ten before she let out the breath she’d been holding. “Do you find such an alliance with Ylisse undesirable?” she finally asked.

“I think it ought be a fair bit lower of a priority than you seem to find it,” said Suzu’rin. “And if ‘tis indeed an end goal of yours, I think you ought negotiate a more tasteful way of arranging it with Exalt Chrom.”

Tasteful. Say’ri linked her hands on her lap, pressing her thumb against the Ylissean crest on her ring in a vain effort to keep herself grounded. They thought her marriage—no, they thought Inigo—distasteful.

“There are a fair few other young lords who would likely prove to be of a far more immediate political benefit, Your Majesty,” said Ira’sagi. “Those more familiar with the modern issues Chon’sin should face with the war resolved... and those who have not had rumors of both Ylissean power-mongering and questionable legitimacy surrounding them from even before they stepped foot in the country.”
“If we might present a list—”

“No.”

Her lone word brought Tao’zi up short. “Beg pardon, Your Majesty?”

“I said no,” Say’ri told him flatly. “I cannot see how you expect me to be any more plain about the matter.”

A long silence stretched out. “...Milady?”

“In other matters,” she said formally, “I should find your knowledge and advice a boon to me indeed. I humbly admit every one of you has far more experience than I could perhaps garner in a lifetime.” She paused. “But you are not to interfere or attempt to control my personal life.”

“...Your Majesty, a matter of your personal life would be akin to that of taking a lover,” Suzu’rin finally said. “This is a marriage.”

“Aye,” Say’ri replied. “Of that I am aware, and since you still seem to disagree I’ll make my point again: Advise me on any political matter you wish, and I shall consider it humbly and gladly—but Inigo is off-limits.”

Another silence hung through the room. “Very well, milady,” Suzu’rin finally said, grudgingly. “...Perhaps we ought discuss the matter of security.”

“Perhaps we ought, yes,” she replied in a clipped tone.

“Milady?” The voice that reached them this time was unmistakably Chi’hiro’s, reaching them from outside the council room. A moment later the door slid back. “My deepest apologies for the interruption, but Lord Kruger of Valm wishes to speak with you.”

“What is his concern?” Say’ri asked.

“A personal matter of urgency, he says.”

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“Feels pretty good to play the white knight again for a little while, huh?” Inigo paused, then turned to wave at Owain. “Hey, you in there? You’re being really alarmingly quiet right now.”

“Just… thinking,” Owain admitted.

“Mm, now doesn’t that sound dangerous,” Inigo replied. “If your head starts hurting I’d recommend you put a stop to the ‘thinking.’”

Owain rolled his eyes and didn’t dignify that with a retort. “About what we were discussing earlier...” he ventured.

“Ah,” Inigo replied.

“What do we do about it? Where do we go from here?”
A beat went by. “We both know where we go from here,” Inigo said softly. “To Grima’s door. What else is there?”

“No, I know,” Owain insisted. “It’s just…it all feels off all of a sudden. Maybe it’s all this political nonsense we’re about to be embroiled in. In the future, all we had to think about was fighting Grima and the Risen, and they didn’t care much for bureaucracy. Things were awful…but simple. But now, in the past, there are living, breathing people standing in our way.”

“You’re worried you’re losing sight of who we’re really fighting?” When his cousin didn’t answer, Inigo continued, “Owain, the fact of the matter is, our enemy is anyone standing in the way of a peaceful future. Whether that’s Grima, or Walhart, or Nalia, or… a certain man who, in our timeline, became the self-declared monarch of Chon’sin and, in this one… turned to assassination.”

A long moment went by. “Oh,” Owain blurted. “Oh—gods, I thought that name sounded familiar.”

Inigo glanced away, resisting the urge to shudder just as he had when the name Jun’ichi had spilled past Chi’hiro’s lips. His would-have-been killer, he knew, in another timeline, had seized control of a rapidly destabilizing country in the void left behind by both Yen’fay and Say’ri.

His mad reign had been, the future children had always been told, a massive contribution of Chon’sin’s devastation long before Grima had reached it.

“Well,” Owain pointed out, “at least we don’t have to worry about that part of the timeline self-correcting anymore.”

“Extremely reassuring,” Inigo replied dryly.

Neither of them spoke for a moment. “Ugh,” Owain finally said eloquently. “Our was never an easy fate, and it just gets more complicated every day.”

“That’s why we’re here though, isn’t it? To change our fate?” Inigo let a fraction of a smile quirk at his lips and said, “I don’t know about you, but I think we’ve at least managed to make one heck of a dent in it.”

“Mm,” Owain replied. “Suppose we have.”

“Then you’ve no cause to waver. Actually, please don’t waver, because this sudden role reversal is kind of freaking me out and I’m probably going to panic and need you to drag me up out of it again pretty soon.”

Owain let out a sharp laugh. “Truer words, my friend, I don’t think you’ve ever spoken!”

Inigo rolled his eyes. “Point is…we’re all this for the long haul now. I mean, it’s been almost four years at this point. Today just happened to be your day of doubt.”

“Blast my moment’s weakness!” Owain exclaimed. “But fear not the devilry, my dear cousin! ‘Twas but the dark whimsy of wicked spirits!”

Inigo grinned. “Ah, now there’s the Owain I know and completely fail to understand.”

“What’s to understand? It’s simple! I am a chosen warrior of light!”

“Point is…we’re all this for the long haul now. I mean, it’s been almost four years at this point. Today just happened to be your day of doubt.”

“Blast my moment’s weakness!” Owain exclaimed. “But fear not the devilry, my dear cousin! ‘Twas but the dark whimsy of wicked spirits!”

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“What’s to understand? It’s simple! I am a chosen warrior of light!”

“Yes, good, good,” Inigo told him. “Well, it would seem I have repaid you for all of your pep talks.”
Owain quirked a brow. “Inigo, we would have to have this discussion over a hundred-fold before you had repaid me for a fraction of the soul-lifting I have had to do in the past year and a half. And that’s just counting the ones about Say’ri.”

“I’m pretty sure our numbers are not matching up in the slightest,” Inigo told him.

“Rounding errors,” Owain replied. His voice sobered. “But you do know, of course, that I am ever a shoulder for you to lean on, as your most beloved and favorite cousin—”

“My only cousin—”

“—and I shall always be willing to listen to whatever trouble has laid plague to your mind.”

“Are you sure?” Inigo asked. “Listening’s not always been your forte…”

“Hey! I’ll have you know—”

“Kidding, Owain, kidding. Like the pigs.” Inigo paused. “Mostly kidding, at least—hey, stay that swordhand of yours!”

“Yes, but what of my fell hand?”

“Please stay that too!” Inigo yelped. “Actually I’d really rather if you had to pick one or the other if you stayed that one!”

Owain burst into laughter once more, obligingly tucking his tome away again. “Come now, Inigo of the Indigo Skies. Let us continue forth on our adventure!”
In which several very important things happen.

Yes hello this is the Certain Scene I mentioned last chapter, I have been waiting to write it since before I started the fic and just about EVERYTHING I have done was set to line up to this point so ENJOY this chapter I finished about two seconds ago because I can't wait any longer.

“Where in Naga’s name have you been?”

Say’ri’s words came out as little more than a hiss, so low that Inigo felt himself actually blanche with the force. “Um,” he ventured. “Out?”

He had scarcely set foot back in the palace early that afternoon when she found him, the courtyards bustling with staff and early-arriving diplomats alike. Say’ri’s expression might have been perfectly demure if not for the unmistakable narrowness of her eyes.

Owain nudged him with his elbow. “Well,” he whispered helpfully. “Someone’s in trouble.”

Apparently he hadn’t been quiet enough, because Say’ri’s gaze snapped to him. “Might you leave your comments out of this, for once?” She gestured to Inigo with a sharp incline of her head, leaving him to shoot his cousin a chagrined look before he followed.

“Is… something the matter, darling?” Inigo asked, despite knowing full well the answer to that particular question.

“We,” she said, “had a council meeting this morning.”

A beat went by. “Oh,” Inigo said, rubbing the back of his neck. “I—I’m sorry, love, I completely forgot.”

“Clearly so,” she snapped under her breath, still half a step ahead of him as they wound through the halls.

That still didn’t quite explain how incensed she was, so after another moment he dared ask, “What did I miss, then?”

“Hardly a thing,” Say’ri replied, pulling up short and spinning on her heel, “as we’d barely been at the discussion for twenty minutes when I was forced to take my leave and spend the next hour attempting to talk down a newly-arrived and completely irate Lord Kruger.”

Inigo paused, falling silent for a moment. Now that explained it.
“You could not have just left well enough alone?” she demanded. “Must you run in and provoke the one ambassador who is likely to have the strongest vendetta against us?”

“It’s not like I knew who he was!” Inigo shot back. “What was I supposed to do, leave the poor girl to his wrath?”

A long moment went by before Say’ri blew out a breath that bordered on a scoff. “Of course it was a girl.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” Inigo asked, though the words only reached her back as she spun away again. “Say’ri!”

“I think we both know what that is supposed to mean!”

“What has gotten into you?” he couldn’t help but ask, striding after her and catching her arm.

“What has gotten into me?” she replied. “Mayhap you ought ask yourself that!”

“...Darling, what’s the matter?” Inigo asked, his tone softening. “It’s not as though we can’t handle one irritated diplomat.”

“You don’t understand it, do you? ‘Tis not a war camp we’re living in anymore! We’ve the eyes of an entire nation judging our every step and whilst I am busy trying to tread the very thin line that may just win their approval you’re off flaunting a title that isn’t even technically yours yet!”

“Because that’s clearly what I was doing,” Inigo said. “Look, I’ve spent my entire life cultivating the instinct to defend those who can’t defend themselves—I’m sorry if I’m not just going to turn it off when it’s inconvenient for you!”

“‘Tis not what I’m saying!”

“That’s exactly what you’re saying!”

A long moment of silence dragged out before Say’ri heaved a sigh. “Naga’s sake, Inigo, you’re not some anonymous mercenary anymore.”

“I know that,” Inigo replied, still with a slight chilliness in his tone.

“Which means there is a certain image to be maintained. For both our sake and that of Chon’sin.”

“I know,” he said again.

“‘Tis bad enough I’ve the grand council clamoring for—” Say’ri started, then broke off with another sigh.

“For what?”

“Nothing,” she replied. “‘Tis naught I cannot take care of.”

Another moment went by. “Look,” Inigo said, his voice low. “I might’ve been born royalty but that doesn’t mean I was raised like it. I don’t have that instinctive decorum you do. Just... give me some time to get over this learning curve.”

“Fie, but I’m trying,” Say’ri muttered.

“I stand by what I did,” he told her. “I might’ve handled it in a way less... divisive, but I won’t say
“’Tis not just that,” Say’ri said. “’Tis—gods, Inigo, ’twas an attempt on our lives last night and you left without a word.”

He paused, shoulders slumping as he blew out a breath. He could swear her face had aged five years since they’d arrived in Dai’chi, he thought as he searched her gaze. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. “That was stupid of me.” He held his arms out, saying in a gentle tone, “C’mere.”

After a moment, she stepped forward, looping her arms around his waist and laying her head against his shoulder. “You frighten me half to death sometimes, I swear,” she finally murmured. “I promise it’s not on purpose,” he told her.

“I know.”

He held her in silence for a moment more, before pulling back and fixing her with a smile, hands still resting on her shoulders. “Hey now,” he said. “We’ve fought Fate itself and we came out on top. How bad can a few cranky politicians be?”

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The answer, Inigo learned, was very bad.

The last of the ambassadors—but for the still conspicuously absent Gerome—arrived in Dai’chi about a week after the Shepherds did. Without further cause to delay, the peace talks began—maddeningly boring affairs that lasted from just after dawn till well after dusk, six days a week, continuing on until nearly the end of February. Inigo was fairly certain if he heard the word ‘reparations’ one more time, his head was liable to explode.

At long last, though, negotiations had reached a point where everyone was happy—or, as he’d learned, everyone was actually angry about one thing or another, but at such a level that all their anger was at least at manageable levels that canceled each other out to the point it was unlikely to lead immediately into another war. Which, apparently, was about the best that could be hoped for.

Gradually, the ambassadors began to return to their respective countries, beginning the process of healing their own wartorn peoples until only the Shepherds remained in Chon’sin. Their return, unlike the rest, depended on the date of a certain royal wedding which had not yet been set.

At the moment, though, none of that mattered in the slightest. What did matter was that Inigo was still quite comfortably half-asleep at a point in the morning in which he’d typically been stuck in politicking, and that was a very glorious feeling indeed.

“Inigo, my love,” came Say’ri’s voice, her tone indulgent but with a slight edge of exasperation, “you are going to have to be up and about sooner rather than later.”

“I disagree,” he mumbled, pulling the covers higher over his head.

“’Tis after eight,” she informed him.

“Disgustingly early,” he replied.
He heard her snort at that. “I dread to think what you would call six o’clock, then,” she said. “When I was quite content to start my day.”

“There’s something wrong with you.”

“Tis called training oneself to be a morning person, my love. And also not staying awake until four.” He felt the futon shift as she knelt on it and he lowered the blanket enough to fix her with a one-eyed, unimpressed gaze. “Did you forget we have a full day’s ride ahead of us?” At his guilty silence, she snorted again. “And here you told me you were looking forward to this vacation.”

“I told you that Owain was not going to be invited on a potential romantic hot spring trip,” Inigo replied. “And then you went and invited him.”

“Aye,” she said. “And the rest of your future friends. ‘Tis not as though I asked him alone just to irritate you.”

He rolled his eyes, about to sink back under the covers when she huffed and tugged them away. “Hey,” he protested, fixing her with a gaze that was likely too bleary to be intimidating.

“I’ve a letter for you,” she informed him, cutting off any further complaints. “Apparently ’twas waiting at Valm Harbor for the past few months. The roads have finally cleared enough for it to make it the rest of the way here.”

Inigo blinked, sitting up and rubbing at his eyes before reaching for the parchment she offered. “A letter from who?” he asked blankly.

“’Tis from Laurent,” she said. “I’ve not read it. I wouldn’t know.”

Inigo studied it for a moment before breaking the seal, eyes sweeping over handwriting that he definitely recognized but couldn’t quite place until he caught the signature at the bottom of the page. “It’s from Laurent,” he said with a surprise that chased away his last fragments of sleep.

“…Miriel’s son?” Say’ri asked, taking a moment to place the name.

“Yeah,” Inigo said, beginning to scan the letter in earnest. “I guess he sent it last fall.” He stilled abruptly, the words on the page forcing him to pause.

“Ill news?” Say’ri ventured.

After a beat, Inigo shook his head, a disbelieving laugh falling past his lips. “The opposite, love. He found them,” he said. “All the rest of us kids. Kjelle, Yarne, Noire, and Nah. And since we found Gerome, Brady, and Cynthia…” He fixed his gaze on her with another laugh. “That’s it. That’s everyone. We’re all here.” A splitting grin came to his face as he took one last look at the parchment. “They’re waiting in Ylisstol for us as we speak. Gods, love, we all made it.”

A moment that lasted slightly too long went by before she returned his smile. “Aye, ’tis excellent,” she said.

“Yeah,” Inigo said, then thought with a pang, Everyone but Lucina. “Yeah, it is.”

“If you’re properly awake, then,” Say’ri said with a lilting note, “I’ve something else for you.”

Inigo chuckled. “I’m afraid you’re unlikely to top this, love. Maybe you should’ve done it the other way around.”
“Oh,” Say’ri said. “Mayhap I knew what I was doing.” She got to her feet, offering a hand. “’Tis a bit easier to surprise you when you tend toward obliviousness.”

“I’m not oblivious,” Inigo said. “Have you met my cousin?”

“’Tis quite the protest when I’ve been wearing your surprise through this entire conversation,” Say’ri replied.

“...What?” Inigo said, brow furrowing as he got to his feet and eyed her for a long moment. Her attire was nothing out of the ordinary—a tunic of the high-slitted sort she favored for riding hung over dark breeches, and though she was currently without boots a katana hung ready at her belt. “Darling, I’m not entirely sure what you mean.”

“I’m sure ’twill dawn on you in a moment,” Say’ri said with a chuckle, and moved to unbuckle the sword’s sheath from her belt.

“...Wait,” Inigo said, heart skipping a beat as he caught a better glimpse of the blade. The sheath itself was worn in a familiar pattern, the hilt slightly different than her own weapon but still achingly recognizable. “Wait.”

She laughed again, passing the sword over to him.

If Inigo had had any doubts, they were gone the moment he wrapped his hand around the handle. “This is mine,” he whispered, the words almost reverent.

“Aye,” Say’ri replied. “’Tis indeed.”

Carefully, hardly daring to hope, Inigo took a firmer hold of the hilt of the old familiar blade and, in one swift motion, pulled it free. The katana left its sheath with buttery smoothness, edge as sharp and silver as he remembered it, with hardly a mark on the steel where it had rejoined with the hilt.

“You had it fixed,” Inigo said, voice so thick he didn’t dare add another word.

“I told you I would, did I not?” Say’ri said.

“Yeah, but... I...” He held the sword aloft, scanning the length of the blade. “I can’t even tell where it broke.”

She gave a snort at that. “’Twould have been grounds for quite the recompense if you could,” she told him. “Mayhap enough to put the man I sent it to out of business, to put such shoddy work into the queen’s commission.”

Inigo slid the blade away again, then flung his arms around her waist with such force she let out a squeak as he pulled her feet off the ground. “Thank you,” he whispered.

“I told you,” Say’ri said her words muffled, “’twould be the least I could do.”

“Oh, darling,” he said. “You’ve done so much more for me than that.”

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The news from Laurent was met with as much enthusiasm as Inigo had expected, which meant
their party of seven—Inigo, Say’ri, Owain, Robin, Brady, Cynthia, and Severa—made their journey south in high spirits.

It had been Say’ri who originally suggested such a vacation for the future children to take once the peace summit ended, and her idea had been met with enthusiasm. After all, jumping from one timeline to the next had only succeeded in plunging all of them from one war into another, and it was hard to imagine any of them had had anything resembling a vacation in a very long time.

Say’ri proved to be a more than capable tour guide as they headed for the very same hot springs she had mentioned to Inigo a lifetime ago, following the line of Chon’sin’s coast ever further down. They arrived and made arrangements in the town she had recommended to them an hour or so after twilight, renting out a few rooms before wandering back outside in search of dinner.

“I know a place,” Say’ri had said, rather cryptically, and so they had deferred to her expertise.

Somehow, Owain had managed to pass the entirety of the main course with one long regaling of an adventure they’d had before the Valm War. “...and thus we snatched victory from the vise-grip of certain doom and won the day!” he finally exclaimed, after a climax of reality-defying proportions.

“Not how it happened,” Inigo said flatly, gesturing to his cousin with his fork.

“What! Inigo! That’s exactly—”

“Not how it happened,” Severa echoed. “Like, at all.”

“And since Laurent isn’t here to speak for himself, let me just add on his behalf, ‘Not how it happened,’” Inigo added.

Owain ducked his head with a mighty pout, then glanced sideways. “Robin, my beloved, my heart, you believe me, don’t you?”

A beat went by before she raised her hand flat, then wiggled it slightly side to side in a ‘so-so’ gesture. “Partially.”

Owain leaned his head back with a sigh, to laughter of the rest of their table. “Oh!” Cynthia exclaimed, bouncing in her seat a little. “Did we ever tell you guys about the goat?”

“Yes,” Inigo and Severa both said at once, overlapping with Say’ri’s dry “Aye.”

“The goat?” Owain and Robin echoed.

Cynthia clapped her hands together. “Okay! So, about a month or so after Brady and I met up, we...”

Inigo leaned back, contentedly sipping at his glass as he mostly tuned out the story he’d heard before. “You’re awful quiet tonight, love,” he whispered to Say’ri, furrowing his brow a little as she almost ignored the table entirely and looked out over the rest of the tavern. “Are you all right?”

She shook her head for a moment, as if coming back to reality, and fixed her eyes back on his. “Aye,” she said. “‘Tis just... Fie, nothing. I should be back in a moment.”

“...All right,” Inigo said, watching for a moment as she got to her feet and strode across the room.

As if her departure had been a cue, several of the others began slipping away as well, a few heading for the bar on the long wall while the rest plainly wandered in search of restrooms. Within
a few minutes, the only two remaining at the table were Inigo and Robin.

“Well,” the former said brightly. “Nobody here but us chickens, eh?”

Robin chuckled a little at that, but otherwise didn’t answer.

“Goodness, you and Say’ri both are acting like we’re heading to the gallows in the morning,” Inigo said. “Turn that frown upside down, my dear Robin! We’re on vacation!” He gestured across the table at the mug of tea she’d been nursing the entire night. “You’re not even drinking!”

“The tea’s quite good,” the tactician defended herself.

“. . . If you say so,” Inigo said with a shrug, then added, “Just pardon me for finding it a little odd when I have absolutely seen you drink my father under the table.”

Robin chuckled again, though her gaze was still distant. After a moment, however, she turned her gaze back to him and asked, “Can you keep a secret for me?”

“Likely better than your husband can, yes,” Inigo replied. Robin rolled her eyes and he continued, “In all seriousness, unless it’s . . . a matter of national security or that sort of nonsense, then of course. What’s troubling you?”

Robin chewed on her lower lip for a moment, then said, “Well, I’m not sure it’s troubling, per say, but . . . On the other hand I suppose it is.” She blew out a breath and held up her mug. “There is a reason for this. A . . . little reason, so to speak.”

Inigo blinked twice, brows pinching together as he struggled to make sense of her emphasis. After a beat, though, he set his own glass on the table with a little more force than necessary as the realization dawned. “You’re not.”

A bemused smile came to her face. “Oh, did you actually get that? I thought I was going to have to drop about eight more hints and then come out and just tell you directly.”

“Again I say, it’s not Owain you’re talking to right now,” Inigo replied, a grin creeping over his face. “And if you’re telling me that I need to start getting used to the title of Uncle Inigo, then yeah, I think I got it.”

“First cousin once removed, technically,” Robin pointed out.

“Yes, but that’s just such a mouthful,” Inigo complained. “Owain’s practically my annoying younger brother anyways.”

“He’s older than you.”

“Like I said, practically.” Inigo glanced across the room towards where he could just see the top of Owain’s blond head over the crowd and inquired, “Have you told him yet?”

Robin shook her head. “Only learned last night, myself.”

“Au. Then, for the sake of your marriage, I shall pretend to be extremely surprised when he informs me of the good news.”

“Much appreciated, thanks,” Robin replied dryly.

Inigo gave a sort of half-bow from his seat. “As long as you realize that I would bet you any money you wished that that child if going to turn out exactly like him.”
“Oh really, now?” Robin asked with a lift of her brow.

“It’s not your fault,” he offered sympathetically. “He’s still basically six himself, they’ll just identify too readily with him for anything else to happen. Can’t be helped, I’m afraid.” He hummed thoughtfully. “Hmm, and I thought it was going to be scary enough that his younger self will be running around rather shortly. Wonder what Aunt Lissa will say to learn she’s going to be a grandmother before the birth of her first child.”

“That’s… going to give me a headache,” Robin said.

“Yeah, me too,” Inigo admitted. He slid his now-empty glass along the table for a moment before taking it in his hand. “Well, I’d say this calls for a celebration. Let me buy you another,” he offered, getting to his feet and about to gesture for her own cup when he moved just a hair too quickly, catching the elbow of one of the waitresses as she passed and knocking her off balance. “Goodness, sweetheart, I’m sorry, that was my bad—”

Inigo turned, just a fraction, but enough to catch a proper glimpse of her—enough that the end of the sentence died on his tongue long before it made it into the air.

His glass slipped from his fingers, hit the floor, and shattered unceremoniously, leaving unexpected, deafening silence in its wake, only drowned out by the sudden, pounding heartbeat in his ears. He swallowed once, twice, trying to rediscover the air that had been sucked so quickly from his lungs.

And, at long last, one lone, utterly shocked word fell past his lips.

“Lucina?”

End of Part 6
Yet a Masterpiece (Part 7) Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

A long awaited meeting.

Chapter Notes

Ha, April Fool's, I actually updated.

In all seriousness, I feel like this chapter went through about eighteen drafts even though realistically I'm quite sure it wasn't nearly that many. I've noted that the only time I ever really seem to get writer's block is when my characters are telling me I've done something wrong and they're going to go on strike until I fix it, so that's been happening the past several weeks until I figured out how to rework this chapter. In that time I also spent a week in Florida on vacation with my grandparents, which was a blast, and spent three days this past week manning a booth at a conference with my dad, which was less of a blast and also super exhausting. Thanks to said exhaustion and interaction with way too many people, I ended up sick this morning, which made me have to cancel the appointment I was supposed to have today to get my wisdom teeth pulled, so I have to wait about two more weeks to get that taken care of. In other news, Life Be Crazy, and hopefully I'll have the next chapter out sooner than this one, ha.

I'm just a product of the system, a catastrophe, and yet a masterpiece, and yet I'm half-diseased...

Lucina stood, frozen, her name still hanging in the tavern air, the gaze staring back at her in utter shock bearing a Brand that mirrored her own.

Her throat worked for a moment before finally forcing out a question that might as well have been a statement. “Inigo?"

Inigo continued to stare at her with eyes so wide it might have been comical under other circumstances, then stumbled back half a step to lean against his table, narrowly avoiding the shards of glass decorating the floor at their feet. “Lucina?” he ventured again, the word no more than a whisper.

Lucina watched his chest heave in a breath a moment before the blonde at the table, clearly on guard, put in, “Inigo, are you all right?”

“You’re dead,” Inigo blurted, his eyes having never left Lucina. “You’re—but you’re—” He pushed away from the table, stepping toward her again with a hand raised. He hesitated and her breath hitched a moment before he reached, with gentle disbelief, to nudge away the lock of her hair falling over her left eye.
“Hello,” Lucina murmured, the two syllables feeling painfully inadequate even if it was all she could muster.

“You’re alive,” Inigo whispered, his hands falling to rest on her shoulders. “You’re—how in gods’ names are you alive?”

“Long story,” Lucina said—or tried to, at least, because at that moment Inigo tightened his grip on her, catching her in an embrace that muffled her words in his collar.

“You’re alive,” he said again, a moment before she felt him shake with a sob. Quite suddenly, she found it didn’t quite matter her memories of him were nothing but shattered fragments—there was something so achingly familiar in her brother’s grip, his frame, his very scent that she couldn’t help but sink into it.

“I think so, yes,” Lucina got out, and earned a watery laugh in return.

“Why didn’t you come find us?” Inigo asked, finally pulling away. “You—or have you not been here long? When did you come through? And how did you come through? And—Naga, it’s been so long I honestly can’t even tell if you look older or not.” He let out a little choke and scrubbed a hand over his eyes, then blinked at her as if he expected her to fall out of focus as soon as he looked away. “Gods, it’s really you.”

“I could say the same to you,” Lucina replied, hesitating a moment before daring to add, “Brother.”

Inigo all but beamed at that in a fashion she couldn’t help but find endearing. Before he could speak again, though, his companion rose to her feet with an appraising look in her eyes that made a chill run up Lucina’s spine.

“Okay, hold on,” she said. “This… is Lucina?” At Inigo’s nod, she continued, “But you’ve all said Lucina died.”

“She did!” Inigo exclaimed. “Er—you did.” He paused. “Except clearly you didn’t, so…”

“Hey now,” interjected a new voice. “What’s all o’ this ruckus? Sounds like yer ‘bout to start a brawl o’er—” The hunched figure paused, eyes going wide. “Lucina?”

“Brady,” said Inigo, gesturing toward Lucina. “It’s—look, I mean, it’s—” He broke off with another incredulous laugh. “Where’s everyone else? Get them back over here!”

Lucina balked, taking half a step backwards. “I don’t mean to make a scene.”

“Luce, if there’s ever been a time for you to make a scene, it’s right now,” Inigo replied, then called, “Owain! Get your skinny butt back here!”

“Inigo, I really—” Lucina tried again, only to be drowned out by the answering call.

“My vaunted cousin, ‘tis not my rear that’s the skinny one!”

“Yeah, but you’re still an—” Inigo went to shoot back under his breath, then broke off with an abrupt clearing of his throat.

“Hang’n,” interjected the man Lucina could only guess as Brady from Gerome’s descriptions. “Didn’t ya tell us that Naga ’erself said she was, ah…?” He gestured across his throat. “Kaput?”

For a moment, Inigo’s face fell. “She did,” he whispered. “She did. She said…”
He was cut off by yet another astonished greeting. “Cousin?”

“Except she didn’t.” Inigo said with realization, eyes falling to meet Owain’s dumbfounded gaze before he looked back to Lucina. “She never told me you were dead. She said you walked this world no more.” Yet another breathless laugh fell past his lips. “She meant you weren’t in our world anymore. She’d already sent you back, hadn’t she?”

Owain took another step forward, regarding her. “You have also... crossed the streams of time itself to cheat death’s embrace and join us here?”

“So it seems, yes,” Lucina replied. Motion caught the corner of her eye, making her turn and let out a startled, “Lady Say’ri!”

The queen dipped her head in greeting, returning, “Lady Lucina.” Back straight and gaze resolutely forward, she paused for a moment, then added in a lower tone, “’Tis good to see you again.”

Inigo stilled, a different kind of shock entirely writing itself across his features as he shot Say’ri a look the woman wouldn’t meet.

“All right, all right,” the blonde woman interjected once more, coming to stand at Owain’s side with a hardness in her eyes that still sent a chill up Lucina’s spine. “Are we sure this is actually Lucina?”

“What do you mean, Robin?” Inigo asked, defensiveness creeping further into his tone with every word.

“I mean every one of you has told me that Grima killed her,” Robin pointed out.

“Grima made her vanish.” The redhead’s correction was flat, and Lucina hadn’t even noticed when she’d come into the conversation. “I saw it. I was the only one of us here that was there. She vanished, Grima vanished, we never saw her or the avatar again.” She cocked her head towards Lucina. “Until now, apparently.”

“All right, all right,” Inigo said. “That’s established.” His tone softened and he held a hand out in Lucina’s direction. “Luce. When was the first time I ever used Falchion?”

She resisted the urge to flinch. Gods, she’d been afraid of that, of being put to a query only she didn’t. A long silence stretched out before she whispered, “I don’t know.”

Inigo blinked at that, clearly taken aback. “Um,” he said, then prodded, “Apples?”

Another moment passed before Lucina shook her head. “It seems that… However I was sent back cost me my memories. It’s only been in the past few months that I’ve been able to piece together any knowledge of the rest of you.”

“...Oh, Lucina,” Inigo said softly. “How long have you been here?”

“It would be about three and a half years.”

He blew out a breath at that, posture visibly slumping.

“Well,” Robin finally said. “Memories or no, we do have one very easy way of figuring out if you’re really Lucina or not.”
“We do?” several voices asked at once.

A beat went by before the tactician blew out a sigh, then pointedly nodded to Inigo, who shot her a blank look in return. “Naga,” she whispered, gazing towards the ceiling for a moment. “Falchion.”

“Oh!” Inigo said belatedly. “That’s true!”

“Ha! Once again the master tactician that is my beloved bride come through in the clutch,” Owain said. “The divine dragon’s fang-blade shall give us the proof we seek on my mislaid cousin’s genuine identity!”

Lucina blinked, almost feeling dizzy with the effort of trying to keep up with Owain’s sentences. “Wait,” she said. “What do you wish to do, exactly?”

Owain clapped his hands together, happily launching into an explanation. “In the wake of your absent memories, allow me to elaborate on our proposal! For the blade you see your beloved baby brother bearing is no ordinary sword, but the divine and immortal Falchion, forged in the world’s dark hour of need a millenia ago! The privilege and burden of wielding its power is given merely to the self-same royal bloodline which it was granted to, and of those only with the strength of conviction to harness its might! And, I may proudly say,” he finished with a flourish, “I am one of the mighty chosen. Also Inigo. And you.”

Lucina blinked.

“Let me give you the translation of that,” Inigo said. He loosed one of the blades at his hip, holding it out for her to see though he still left it sheathed. “Falchion can only be used by certain members of the Ylissean royal bloodline. Anybody else? Dull as a stone,” he explained. “And since we know you could wield it, if you still can, then you must be… ah, you.”

“I see,” Lucina said, eyeing the hilt. “Is there perhaps, then… some ceremony I ought to perform?”

A moment went by. “Take it outside and swing it at something,” Owain suggested.

“...I see,” Lucina said again. Abruptly returning to her senses, though, she took a step back, scanning around the room. “Listen, but I work until midnight.”

“I’ll wait,” Inigo said immediately, though he didn’t actually lower the sword proffered to her. “That’s fine.”

Still, a part of her continued to stare at Falchion’s grip, helplessly drawn. Surely, she realized now, this had been the blade meant for the sheath still on her hip when she’d woken on the beach. A part of her, long forgotten until now, ached for it.

Before she’d even quite realized it, she’d reached for the divine blade’s hilt.

The comfort she felt in such a bold weapon startled her, but she felt her eyes flutter shut as a quiet sigh escaped her. She didn’t exactly plan on drawing it in the middle of a crowded tavern, so after the barest of moments she dropped her hand again, glancing up to meet Inigo’s gaze once more.

“You know what I’m about to say, don’t you?”

“...Be sure to wash Falchion after I’m finished cutting this apple?”

The memory slotted into place so freely, so easily, for a moment she hardly noticed its sudden presence. Only a lone conversation—hardly her entire life hitting her like a bolt from the blue like
she might’ve hoped, but a memory nonetheless. “Oh,” she whispered.

“If you are, in fact, among Falchion’s chosen, that is knowledge we need. There may come a time when it proves necessary for you to take it up.”

“Like... if you’re too busy?”

“Like if I’m dead, Inigo.”

“Oh, Inigo,” Lucina said again, presently, her tone tinged with regret.

“I said no! I’m not doing it! Don’t make me! Don’t make me practice for your death, Lucina!”

“...Luce?” Inigo ventured yet again, his voice wavering. “You okay?”

“I just… found myself remembering something,” Lucina admitted after a moment. Bitterly, she continued, “I suppose I did more than just make you practice for my death, didn’t I?”

Inigo’s mouth worked for a moment, though he’d finally let Falchion fall back to his hip. “But you’re back,” he finally said. “I can’t… you’re here.” At that moment he shot another glance towards Say’ri, his expression unreadable and hers all but blank.

“Lucina?” another voice interrupted, this one familiar. Lucina glanced back to see one of her fellow serving girls, a delicate but bright girl by the name of Yuu’ki, pause with a stack of dirty dishes in hand. “You’ve everything in hand over here?”

Lucina felt her shoulders slump at the familiar phrase—Shai’si tolerated very little in the way of harassment in her establishment, but every so often a patron got it into their head to get a little too friendly with the staff. You have everything in hand? had long been the code phrase between them, innocuous enough to seem like the inquirer could be asking if the receiver needed a hand taking orders.

“Indeed, I do,” Lucina said, leaving off the second half off Thank you for offering, which, in all reality, meant Go and fetch Shai’si.

Yuu’ki shot an odd look to the group gathered and nodded, but paused at Lucina’s back. “If you need to take five then I can cover for you,” she whispered, so quietly Lucina would guess her lips had hardly moved.

“Thank you,” she returned as the other woman moved on. “So,” she finally said appraisingly. “This... sword, then?”
Outside, the air still wavered somewhere below ‘crisp.’ Inigo suppressed a shiver, pulling his coat a little closer. A few passers-by gave them odd looks, plainly wondering about the disparate group emerging into the alleyway at the back of the tavern.

**Lucina.**

His heart still pounded out its disbelief, a cynical part of him still urgently insisting he was dreaming, hallucinating, or that his long-held grief had finally just straight-up cracked him.

A tiny exhale escaped him as he watched her. He’d been fifteen the last time he’d seen her—they hadn’t kept too close of an eye on the passing of the calendar back in the future-past, but it had been the heart of summer when they had left for Plegia in search of the Gemstones, perhaps nearly to Owain’s birthday but too early for Inigo’s.

With a grunt, Brady set out Lucina’s target—a gourd that they had used for decoration the previous fall, she’d explained, that hadn’t been used up before it had been too old to eat. The priest dusted his hands and straightened, shooting an expectant glance toward Inigo.

Actually, most everyone was shooting him expectant glances—everyone, that was, but Say’ri, who hadn’t so much as met his eye since she’d left the table. It left his heart with an entirely different kind of twist in it.

**She’d known.**

Inigo forcibly pushed that thought aside to be dealt with later, loosing Falchion from his hip once more. In silence, with a motion that spoke of both familiarity and gingerness, Lucina took it.

His katana hung heavy on his off side and his palm ached where Falchion’s hilt had just rested. A part him remembered that short time when those blades had been reversed—katana at his left, to be drawn in an instant; Falchion at his right, hidden in the folds of his coat as the burden he’d never wanted.

It felt like quite a long time ago.

There was a trepidation in Lucina’s form Inigo hadn’t seen in even longer, perhaps not since the early days after their father’s death. She had always been immutable, unflappable, such an ever-present force that he could have never hoped to fill up a fraction of the hole she’d left behind.

Experimentally, Lucina twirled the blade—a little slower and a little sloppier than he remembered from her, but if she’d been here for over three years, when had been the last time she’d even laid hand on a sword?

Without Inigo’s notice, every gaze had switched from him to her and every voice had silenced. It
was if, as one, the group held their breath.

Lucina swung.

For a moment, nothing happened. The gourd remained unbudged and Inigo wondered, desperately, if she’d missed it entirely. There had been no dull *thunk* that would have sounded if Falchion had rejected her—

A beat later, gravity overcame friction, and the top half of the gourd fell to the ground, the fruit sliced neatly in half.

Inigo’s heart slammed against his ribs again. *It’s her.* He hadn’t exactly been *doubtful,* per say, but he’d grown so used to having everything in his life go as wrong as it possible could that immediately accepting her at face value had been almost counterintuitive.

“Lucina,” he said for what surely was the umpteenth time that night, and still her name didn’t feel any less foreign in his mouth.

There was a hint of the old familiar regality in both her posture and her voice when she turned back to him. “I assume that would be the proof you required?”

A long moment passed before he swallowed and said, “I suppose so, yes.”

Finally, after a few more seconds of hesitation, Lucina twisted Falchion, extending the grip towards Inigo once more.

The words came haltingly, a little more bitter than he could have ever expected them to be. “Keep it,” he whispered.

Every gaze snapped back to him once more, expressing various degrees of shock—Lucina’s far from the least. “I shouldn’t mean to take your weapon from you,” she said, her eyes searching.

Inigo reached out, nudging her hand away from him. “It was yours long before I had any right to it,” he replied, then quietly added, “Exalt Lucina.” Another moment went by before his voice dropped some of its somber edge. “Actually, hang on, which one of us *is* the Exalt?”

Speaking for the first time in several minutes, Say’ri put in, “Technically, if you took up the title, ‘twould mean she forfeited.”

“Technically yes, but I thought she was dead,” Inigo pointed out.

“Also, technically, you were never coronated,” Severa added.

“Yes, because it was the end of the entire world and we summarily fled the timeline a week later,” Inigo replied dryly. “And, technically, Lucina never was either, so if we’re going by that metric then neither of us are.”

A beat went by. “Now, the question is, will this conversation ever progress behind ‘technically’?” Robin said.

“You could both be the Exalt,” Owain put in helpfully.

“‘Tis not how that works,” Say’ri said.

“Why not?” Owain continued. “Those of our future company do still, on the off occasion, refer to one Inigo of the Indigo Skies by his Exalted title, despite the fact his claim to it in this timeline is
without legitimacy and the rank is held in truth by Uncle Chrom.”

“And that has to do with…?” Inigo asked, not entirely sure of the point his cousin was trying to make.

Owain rolled his eyes. “There are already two Exalts running around, why not have a third?”

With a plainly exasperated sigh, Say’ri said again, “‘Tis not at all how that works.”

“Well not with that attitude,” Owain said with a sniff.

Robin muffled a fond snort at that.

“Um,” Lucina finally put in. “I do have to go back to work, if we could perhaps have this discussion later?”

“Er, right,” Inigo said. “Midnight you said you get off?”

“Yes,” she replied. “I should like to talk to you at length sometime, but I don’t mean to keep you awake so late waiting on me—”

“Trust me,” Say’ri interjected dryly. “He’ll still be awake.”

“...Yeah, she’s not wrong,” Inigo admitted.

“All right, then,” Lucina said, and turned to go.

“Lucina?” he couldn’t help but call after her one last time. He caught her shoulder lightly as she turned back. “I’m really glad you’re back.”

She offered him a soft smile at that, then turned to go back inside.

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Just after eleven-thirty, Inigo turned his borrowed key in his borrowed lock, feeling the gentle snick before the rented room’s door swung open.

To his surprise, he was not met by pitch dark. A lamp glowed quite happily on the near nightstand, casting Say’ri in something of an ethereal light as she sat against the headboard, neck craned toward the book spread open in her lap. She glanced up sharply at his entrance, a flicker of surprise crossing her eyes.

“You’re still awake,” he blurted, though he kept his voice low in deference to the hour.

“Aye.” She straightened, marking her book before setting it aside, then tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. “I did not expect you back for a few more hours at the very least.”

Inigo let his gaze slide from hers, padding across the room in search of the lightweight traveling bag he’d unceremoniously dropped in the room a few hours and an entire lifetime ago. “Lucina asked if I wanted to just come spend the night,” he finally said. “Said we’d probably still be going over things by the time the tavern closed for the night. And apparently there’s someone she wants me to meet.” He’d wondered, briefly, if his sister had a roommate, and had decided not to dwell
too much until she introduced them herself.

“I see,” Say’ri said after a long moment. “Enjoy yourself, then.”

“Yeah,” Inigo said shortly, digging through his bag and trying to remember what he’d already set out that he would need again before morning.

“‘Tis good to see you again.”

He tried to slam a lid down on that thought before it sent his blood boiling again and failed utterly. How many times had he been so arrogantly convinced of Lucina’s death that he’d missed the evidence staring him in the face? How Say’ri had brought her up when they were still in Storash, then so boldly denied what she’d been about to mention when Inigo pressed her about it later? And again, right before Walhart, when they’d first mentioned taking this very trip?

“Yen’fay and I tried to go once, without guards nor retainers… ‘Twas about two years ago, now, before the war truly reached us. We had to turn back, though—we had intended to stay the night in a port town about two hours out from the springs, only to have our first encounter with your Risen during dinner. We handled it, obviously, with the help of—”

And she’d cut herself off, almost unconvincingly. “The locals,” she’d said, then insisted “I misremembered something,” when he’d pushed again.

How could have been so blind to not prod any deeper?

“You knew.”

The words fell past his lips without Inigo quite intending them to, his voice so hard it felt brittle in his throat. He took two deep breaths in some vain attempt to calm the turmoil churning in his stomach before he finally looked up.

“Aye.” There might have been some hint of contrition in Say’ri’s features, but it was hard to tell in the soft light. He wondered if he’d even really expected her to deny it.

He stared her down for a moment more, then resumed restuffing his bag.

“You’re angry,” she said softly.

“Say’ri, I am so far beyond angry right now I’m not even sure there’s a word for it,” Inigo snapped back, slamming the bag’s flap closed with quite a bit more force than was strictly necessary.

Again, as always, Say’ri’s reply came quiet and metered. “I suppose I expected that.”

“I damn well think you should have expected that!” The words flew out of him, unstoppable, and he realized all thoughts he’d had of get in, get the bag, get out he’d entertained on the walk over had flown away just as well. “You knew she was here the entire time! Gods’ sakes, you met her before you bloody met me! And never once, never once did you entertain the notion of maybe telling me that my sister’s actually alive!”

A moment went by in the wake of his outburst. “Don’t assume I didn’t entertain the notion, as you put it,” Say’ri corrected.

“Well clearly you never acted on it!” Inigo shot back. “And as far as I’m concerned, that’s the same thing!” She opened her mouth again only for him to cut her off. “Don’t. I don’t want to hear you try to justify it. Maybe when my head’s clear I’ll be able to grant you that the war was one
thing, but I’ve been a day away from her for two months and I doubt I’m going to find it in me to give you an excuse for that.”

A beat went by. Inigo slung his bag over his shoulder and turned on his heel.

“It took you a year to tell me about Walhart,” Say’ri said, still in that maddeningly even tone.

Inigo snapped his head back around. “Don’t you dare throw that back in my face.”

“’Tis the same thing, is it not? You did it so as to spare me the burden of it.” She paused. “I did it because I could not bear to break your heart if I were wrong.”

Inigo shook his head and started for the door again. “I’m not going to have this argument with you right now.”

“You have stepped into that den of snakes already,” she replied. “I met her once, Inigo, long before I knew of you or your company. Aye, I’ve held my suspicions for a long while now, but ’twas not as if I could just abandon the war to return here and inquire of her if, perchance, she might be from the future.”

“The war’s been over for four months, and we’ve been here for half that time.”

“A period of time where it was of the utmost importance you and I both remained in Dai’chi.”

Inigo’s shoulders seized, frustration pulling the muscles taut.

“And what if I had been wrong?” Say’ri asked. “What if I had met another woman named Lucina, who just so happened to have a particularly keen way with a blade and no relation to you? What if I had told you, built your hopes up until you had rushed here and found a perfect stranger? Would you have rather grieved her all over again?”

“But it was her,” Inigo said, the words sounding petulant even to his own ears.

“Aye, and believe I am glad of that. Yet still I find myself unable to do anything but stand by my actions.” Her voice dropped. “Had it been Yen’fay in her stead, I would have hoped you had done the same.”

Inigo shook his head. “But it wasn’t Yen’fay.” Hefting his bag again, he padded once more to the door. “And I’m not you.” A moment went by where she didn’t answer him, so he twisted the handle and moved to leave.

“Good night, Inigo.”

A huff escaped him, so soft he doubted she’d heard. “Yeah,” he finally answered. “Good night.”
Chapter Summary

Inigo meets his nephew.

The shock of seeing Lucina again was nearly as visceral as it had been the first time. Evidently, Inigo’s subconscious was still lagging behind on this particular turn of events.

“Hello,” he managed, shifting how his bag rested a little as he neared.

“Hello,” she returned with a tight smile. She’d found a small table in the corner to wait for him and he fidgeted for a minute, unsure if she wanted him to sit or if they were leaving immediately.

“Where to, then?” Inigo ventured after a few moments of uncomfortable silence.

“Here, for the moment,” Lucina said; at that confirmation, Inigo set his bag just under the corner of the table and settled across from her. “I live just upstairs, but there are a few things I ought to prepare you for first.”

Inigo’s mind jumped in a few Owain-esque directions at that statement. “Ah,” he said. “Should’ve guessed you’d gotten up to some more interesting things than just waiting tables.”

“...Not really,” Lucina said after a beat, her brow furrowing. “What do you mean?”

“Er,” Inigo said, and scratched at his chin. “What do you mean?”

Lucina blew out a breath. “Over the past few years,” she started, “I’ve overheard and partaken in a few… interesting conversations. Between them, I was able to piece together enough to realized you were someone important to me, even if I wasn’t quite sure exactly how.”

Inigo quirked a brow. “You’ve heard about me all the way down here? Like, before or after I proposed to the queen regent?”

The expression that crossed her face said she might have been about to say something else, then thought better of it. “I don’t exactly know when that was.”

“...Right,” Inigo said. “Not long after the end of the war, so I guess a better question would be before or after that.”

“Definitely before,” Lucina replied. Inigo felt his expression crumple into confusion, but she continued before he could voice it properly. “We can discuss that later. My point is, I had hoped to speak to you before now, even. Just before the winter solstice, I came to Dai’chi in hopes of seeing you.”

“That was part of it, yes,” Lucina agreed. “We heard the news of that a few days later, and I rather doubted I would get into the palace under claims of being a sister that you would immediately refute as dead.”

“Yeah, I really can’t see that going well for you.”

“No, nor could I.”

Inigo chewed on his lip for a moment, then said, “I’m sorry. If I’d only known—”

“It’s quite all right,” Lucina replied. “I didn’t make the trip entirely in vain.”

“Oh?”

Something shifted in her gaze, a note he couldn’t quite read until she said, “I ran across Gerome.”

Several very uncomfortable factoids he’d done his best to forget about resurfaced with a vengeance. “...Oh,” Inigo said again, his gaze shifting to a dark knot on the boarded wall behind Lucina’s head. Doing his best to keep his tone carefully neutral, he continued, “Has he been here since then? That would explain a lot, actually.”

“You married my sister?” he could all but hear his own voice demanding.

“Indeed,” said sister answered. “He’s away this evening. This area’s populated enough that he must take Minerva a ways out of town to hunt.”

“I see,” said Inigo flatly.

From the corner of his eye, he watched Lucina duck her head to peer at the table, sliding her hair behind her ear. Inigo blew out a breath, focusing his gaze back on her fully.

He could be an adult about this. He didn’t have to like it, but he could be.

“If you’re working out how to tell me what I think you’re trying to tell me, you should probably realize he’s told me already,” Inigo finally said. “About the two of you.”

Lucina glanced up again. “Ah,” she said. “I hadn’t realized.”

A moment went by; Inigo wished he had a drink to rinse away the sour taste in his mouth. “Well,” he said when Lucina didn’t continue, “It wasn’t the happiest news I’ve ever received, but it’s not my life.” He leaned back in his chair. “I’m sure he was just ecstatic to see you.”

“Not exactly...” Lucina admitted.

“It’s called sarcasm, Lucina, and I see amnesia hasn’t made you any better at recognizing it,” he replied dryly. Blowing out a sigh, he added, “Ha, but if this entire thing isn’t surreal.”

“I’m afraid I’m about to make it more so,” Lucina said cryptically.

Inigo blinked. “Okay...?”

“Listen,” she said. “I’ve spent the last few hours attempting to think of an easy way to say this. I’ve found none, though, so I’m just going to come out with it.” She paused slightly, then said, “You have a nephew.”

For the first moment, Inigo’s mind jumped back to Robin’s earlier news. But Lucina wouldn’t
know of that, and even if she did, she’d have no way of specifying a nephew in particular—and, as the tactician had reminded him, any of Owain’s children would still, technically, be Inigo’s cousins.

Lucina’s children, on the other hand…


With a slightly abashed expression, Lucina said, “I didn’t wish for you to be… alarmed come morning.”

“Alarmed would be one way of putting it, yes,” Inigo replied, then paused. “Wait, no, sorry, you have a kid?” Before she had time to do anything more than nod, he continued, “How? No, sorry, I know how, but—oh dear Naga I am going to kill him.”

“Calm yourself, Inigo,” Lucina said, with the full brunt of Exalted authority behind her words. “There’s no need to overreact.”

“Definitely not overreacting,” Inigo shot back. “You just told me you have a child, this is a perfectly reasonable reaction.”

Her face softened. “I suppose it is,” she replied, something bittersweet coming to her features. “It would seem a fair few things have changed since last we met. You’re engaged, for one.”

A frown threatened to tug on the corners of his lips, forcibly replaced by at least a semblance of a smile. “Suppose so,” he said. “It’s... been a very long road.” A dry laugh escaped him. “One that I walked in shoes far too big for me.”

And his sister, so long lost and in front of him once more, said, “Tell me about it.”

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Inigo did not sleep well that night.

Lucina’s couch was far from the worst place he’d ever slept, but it was just as far from being the most comfortable. That alone wouldn’t have been difficult to overcome—by this point, he’d learned how to sleep just about anywhere—but the sheer number of earth-shattering revelations the previous day had held kept his mind processing in circles until he was convinced he was liable to see the sunrise any minute.

His argument with Say’ri hadn’t settled well at all, either; suddenly his mother’s old adage of Don’t let the sun go down on your anger made much more sense than it had as a child. Distance made Say’ri’s decisions seem far more reasonable than they had at first glance, and his own immediate lashing out seem unreasonably petty. He imagined the unease would remain coiled in his stomach until he caught a glimpse of a smile from her.

He felt as though he’d scarcely fallen asleep when he awoke to the distinctly unpleasant sensation of being poked in the face.
“Dammit Owain, what the hell do you want?”

The voice that answered him, however, was not his cousin’s. Instead it was a tone high both in pitch and in loftiness, which told him, “You shouldn’t say that. Mama says those are bad words.”

With a disgruntled groan, Inigo forced his stinging eyes open to find himself blinking at a very small, very earnest, and very close face.

Why is there a child staring at me, he asked himself, his thoughts still so flat it didn’t quite seem like a question.

“...Can I help you?” he finally asked, which had sounded a lot more coherent and a lot less nonsensical in his head.

“You’re on my couch,” the child informed him, his tone sounding suitably offended for such a grave transgression.

Inigo blinked again and found the last twenty-four hours slamming into him. Right. Lucina. Lucina’s son. “Er, so it seems I am, yes,” he said. Lysander, hadn’t she said? “Is... that a problem?”

Lysander shrugged.

Clarity coming upon him about the manner in which he’d woken, Inigo realized, Dear Naga, Lucina’s going to kill me if I accidentally teach her child how to swear.

As Inigo began to contemplate his imminent demise, Lysander spoke up again. “Your eye looks like Mama’s.”

“Mm, yes it does,” Inigo replied after a moment, surprised at the boy’s astuteness. “It’s something of a family thing, I suppose.”

“Family?” Lysander asked dubiously.

Right. Inigo supposed Lucina hadn’t had any chance to explain his presence to the boy if her firmly closed bedroom door was anything to go by. “Um. Yes. Your mama is my sister. Which makes me your uncle, I suppose.”

The look Lysander gave him seemed to say, That sounds fake, but okay.

Still a bit flabbergasted by the entire situation, Inigo sat up properly, casting his blanket aside. Realizing he hadn’t technically introduced himself, he added with what he hoped was a reassuring smile, “My name’s Inigo.”

“...Uncle Inigo,” Lysander said slowly, as if he were testing out the way the title sounded. Inigo thought it sounded very odd indeed.

He blew out a soft breath. He could do this. He might’ve been able to count on one hand the number of times he’d actually interacted with small children since he’d still been a small child himself, but this was going better than he expected.

Until Lysander poked him in the eye.

“Ow!” Inigo yelped, barely remembering to keep his voice down. “Don’t—” he started. “Don’t do that to people.”
“But why?”

_Goodness gracious._ “Because it’s not nice to poke people in the face,” Inigo said, hoping his tone was suitably stern. “They generally don’t appreciate it.” _Lucina please come save me from your spawn._

Lysander sighed, as if he thought Inigo was particularly thick, and crossed his arms. “What is it?” he asked, pointing at his eye again, though thankfully this time the boy kept his chubby fingers out of stabbing distance.

“Oh,” Inigo said, and realized it was unlikely Lucina would have been able to explain the mark that graced both of their eyes. “It’s called the Brand of the Exalt.”

“No it isn’t,” Lysander immediately insisted.

Inigo paused. “Er… yes it is?”

“No it isn’t,” Lysander said again. “Cause I have one.” His voice grew slightly alarmed. “How can I have the Brand of the Egg-Salt when I don’t put salt on my eggs?”

Inigo couldn’t help it. The boy looked so accursedly serious about the matter that Inigo burst out laughing, trying in vain to muffle it against his knuckles. “No,” he finally managed when he could suck in a proper breath. “No, it’s got nothing to do with eggs. Or salt, for that matter. _Exalt is a title._” _A title you’d have inherited in another world_, he thought with a pang.

“A title for what?” Lysander asked suspiciously.

How to explain that? “A title for a person,” Inigo finally settled on.

Lysander’s eyes went wide. “So I’m an Exalt?” he asked with wonder.

“Er… not exactly,” Inigo said. “It’s all rather complicated.” _Unless you’re Owain and you just decide we’re all Exalts_, he thought dryly.

Wonderment swiftly turned to pouting. “But I have one!” he cried. “Look! I’ll show you!” With that, faster than Inigo could react, Lysander yanked his shirt over his head.

“Oh dear heavens, no, wait, put that back on—”

“Nuh-uh!” Lysander said, arms crossed over his chest. Sure enough, emblazoned just below his collarbone, at the top of his sternum, was a Brand. “See?”

_I have not been trained for this_, Inigo thought desperately.

His salvation came with the click of a door. “Help,” he couldn’t stop himself from blurting as Lucina emerged, her hair still tousled with sleep.

For a moment, Lucina glanced between the two of them, a bemused expression on her face. “Lysander,” she finally said. “Are you bothering your uncle?”

“No,” Lysander immediately said.

“Are you sure?”

Lysander’s eyes widened, as if fully realizing he might be in trouble.
After a beat, Lucina sighed. “Let’s go get dressed,” she said, holding her arms out to the boy.

Inigo slumped back against the couch, letting out a sigh. *Well, that was quite possibly the shortest and most exhausting battle I’ve ever fought in my life.*

Lysander’s door had scarcely closed when there was a knock at the front.

Inigo straightened again, shooting a glance back down the narrow hallway. A second knock came, but Lucina did not. After a moment he shrugged, got to his feet, and strode for the entrance.

And let out a sigh.

“What are you doing here?” Gerome asked flatly.

“I could ask you the same thing,” Inigo shot back. “Except I’m fairly sure I already know.”

Gerome crossed his arms—bereft, for once, of armor—and didn’t answer.

“So,” Inigo said. “You couldn’t be bothered to tell us, either?”

“I am not convinced it is her,” Gerome said stiffly.

“That’s bull,” Inigo said. “You wouldn’t still be here if you weren’t.”

With a sigh, Gerome said, “Are you going to let me in?”

“Maybe,” Inigo replied. “Maybe not. Part of me *really* wants to just slug you right now.”

“But then do so, and get it out of your system so we can both move on.”

Inigo couldn’t help but quirk a brow. “Really? You’re giving me permission and everything? Damn, what sort of lucky charm did I pick up?”

Behind him, a throat cleared. Inigo glanced back, finding his sister and his nephew standing with comically identical postures, both of their arms crossed over their chests. “Good morning, Gerome,” Lucina said. “Do come in.”

Inigo stood in the doorway for a deliberately long moment more before stepping aside with a glare. “Yes,” he said with a twisted smile. “Do come in.”

Gerome metered out a glare in kind—presumably, at least, through his mask—as he made his way inside. “How long are you here for?” he asked, his voice surprisingly conversational.

“No long,” Inigo replied. “We’re heading for the hot springs in a few hours.” He glanced sideways. “Speaking of, Lucina, if you wanted to join us…”

“What’s a hot spring, Mama?” Lysander asked.

“A place where people go to take baths,” Lucina replied absently.

“Blech,” Lysander said, making a suitably horrified expression.

“I couldn’t,” Lucina continued. “I have work, and I…” She broke off. “I couldn’t.”

Inigo hoped his face didn’t fall too far. “Well,” he said, forcing brightness into his tone. “At least come join us for breakfast, would you?”
Lucina bit her lip, looking torn, but it was Gerome who spoke next. “Go,” the wyvern rider said. “I can stay with Lysander.”

The boy’s face lit up. “Is Minervykins here?”

Hilariously enough, Gerome’s ears bloomed red. “Er, indeed, she is.”

Lysander clasped his hands together, eyes wide in supplication. “Can I go, Mama, please?”

With a sigh, Lucina nodded. Over her son’s delighted squeal, she said to Gerome, “Don’t take him flying without me.”

“Excellent,” Inigo said brightly. “Let me get changed and I’ll be ready in a moment.” He paused, a wicked smirk coming to his features as he eyed Gerome. “Say hello to Minervykins for me.”
Owain reiterates, with offense, the sacred call of "dibs."

“Owain, my friend,” Inigo said brightly. “Look who I’ve brought.”

“Ah,” Owain replied. “My favorite cousin! Lucina, I hope the land of dreams beckoned you quickly and did not release you until you had slumbered sufficiently!”

Inigo blinked. “Wait, I’m sorry, so she’s your favorite cousin now and I don’t even get a hello?”

“My friend,” Owain replied gravely, “You know what offense you have committed.”

“...I do?”

Owain leaned back in his chair with an exaggerated sigh, shaking his head. The inn their company had stayed at didn’t boast a table large enough to host all of them, meaning the group had splintered off and scattered throughout the room. Inigo discovered, to his immediate chagrin, that he found Say’ri nowhere among them.

Ignoring that fact, he dropped into the chair kitty-corner from his cousin, nodding to where Brady sat on the other side. “Brady, have you any clue what Owain—who still holds the title of my favorite cousin, by the way—is talking about?”

“My dear Inigo, I am still your only cousin,” Owain pointed out.

For now, Inigo thought to himself with an internal snicker. “Mm,” he said aloud. “And what a pity that is.”

“An honor, you mean.”

“Yes, Owain, I know you’re honored to be related to me. It’s quite a prestigious gift to be awarded in life. Perhaps I’ll invent a few more imaginary cousins of mine to bestow it to, so I might converse with them and simultaneously screw with you.”

Owain barked a laugh. “And have everyone who crosses your path believe they should transport you to a mental ward?”

“Hey, no one’s carted you off yet, so clearly this route has some potential for success.”

“Ignore ‘em,” Brady said aside to Lucina, who had perched rather delicately on the last seat at the table. “They’re always bein’ loons like this.”

“...I see,” Lucina said. “I—my, are you quite all right?”

Brady gave a long, watery sniff in reply to that, swiping his hand across his eyes. “S’just... really
great… t’ see ya again…”


“Vanquish the watery vagabonds that threaten to overflow with your joy!” Owain told him.

Honking into his handkerchief, Brady replied, “Neither of ya are helpin’.”

Several moments passed without a sound besides the priest’s sniffling. “Anyways,” Inigo interjected brightly. “You two, help me out a minute, because I spent the entire way over here trying to convince Lucina to come on vacation with us and it hasn’t—” He broke off, eyes darting to the side, caught up in the automatic draw of Say’ri. “It hasn’t worked,” he finished, feeling a pang in his heart as his wife-to-be, with hardly a glance in his direction, took a seat besides Severa halfway across the room.

_I have to fix this_, was his first, immediate, and overwhelming thought.

Lucina’s lips thinned into a pained smile. “It’s not that I don’t appreciate the offer,” she said. “But some of us do have jobs.”

“Hey now, don’t talk to me like that awful summit wasn’t a job,” Inigo said with a shudder. “I’d have rather fought the war over again.”

Lucina shot him a glance, something odd—judgemental?—in her eyes. Inigo looked away, feeling himself bristle. He pushed it aside.

“You don’t wish to accompany us on our grand and relaxing expedition to the realms of the mythical springs?” Owain asked.

Lucina pinched the bridge of her nose. “...How long are you staying?”

“We’re plannin’ on bein’ back in Dai’chi a week from today, so’n we’d back here the day before that,” Brady said.

“And you’ll come back with us then, at least?” Inigo prodded. She opened her mouth and he cut her off. “I mean, Mother and Father are going to be ecstatic—I should send them a letter, shouldn’t I? Actually, wait, maybe I shouldn’t, I’m afraid she’d honestly just pass out…”

“I shudder to think the kind of damage Uncle Chrom could do to those paper walls,” Owain put in.

“Inigo, might I speak to you for a moment?” Lucina asked abruptly, rising to her feet.

“I—yeah, of course,” Inigo said.

She didn’t speak again until they had stepped outside the inn, a cheery bell on top of the door tolling their exit. “I wish you wouldn’t speak as though I am going to drop everything in my life simply because you’ve come back into it,” she said in a low tone.

“Don’t you want to come with us?” Inigo asked. “As soon as Say’ri and I get married we’re all going back to Ylisstol. When we find Sable we’ll have all the Gemstones and we’ll be a hundred times more prepared for Grima than we were in our timeline. And that’s if Robin doesn’t come up with some ingenious plan to put him down before he even rises again, which last I heard she’s
working on.”

“So I’m to leave it all behind for a fight that isn’t even mine?” Lucina asked.

“What are you talking about? Of course it’s your fight. We all came back in time for this fight,” Inigo said. “We’ve literally defied every law of fate and nature to be here, how can you possibly say it’s not your fight?”

“How am I to lead a cause I don’t even remember?” she demanded in return.

“Why should it matter? You’ve learned of the stakes! It’s not just your life at risk, Lucina, it’s the fate of mankind!”

“It’s not a decision I can make overnight!” Lucina exclaimed. “And it’s not just my life! I have a child if you would care to remember that!”

“If we fail,” Inigo said, “then he’ll die as surely as the rest of us.”

She sucked in a sharp breath at that, looking as if she were about to bite back with a sharp retort before she ducked her head. When she glanced up again, a flicker of something unreadable crossed her face. “And you assume you’ll fail without me?” she asked softly.

Inigo paused, feeling his hands quiver at her directness. When he finally did speak, his voice had dropped as low as hers. “Will you think less of me if I say yes?” Once the words had started, he found he couldn’t stop them. “Because I’m not you. I’ve never been you. I think the minute we lost you was the minute we doomed ourselves because I—” He broke off. “I couldn’t hold them together without you. I wasn’t enough and I won’t have this world go down in flames because I make a poor excuse of an Exalt.”

“Don’t say that,” Lucina whispered.

“Why not?” Inigo said thickly. “It’s not a lie.” He let out a shuddering sigh. “I just got my sister back. My Exalt back. Do you think I don’t want you to stay with me?”

A flash of pain crossed over her features and she paused, reaching for his hand then stopping halfway. “Is there somewhere he could go?” she asked. “Lysander? To be safe, away from it all?”

“Luce, I’m not asking you to bring a toddler into a warzone,” Inigo replied dryly. “I’m sure he could stay at the palace with—uh… you.” He shook his head. “Okay, that’s going to be weird. Especially when I’m born.”

Lucina sighed. “I’ll see if I can make a daytrip up to the springs on my day off,” she finally said. “It’ll be good for Lysander to get away from here.” Her eyes went distant. “And spend some time with his father.”

“Hey, I never said I was inviting Gerome,” Inigo said.

Her eyes narrowed. “If you two have a problem,” she said, “I’d appreciate if you resolved it.”

Inigo couldn’t help but snort. “Right,” he said. “Talk to me when it snows in Plegia.” Lucina’s gaze didn’t shift until he finally rolled his eyes and said “Fine. I’ll be civil. Mostly.”

“...I’ll accept civil,” Lucina said. “And I…” She reached across her chest, rubbing at her upper arm. “I’ll give you my answer before you return to Dai’chi.”
“Truly?” Inigo asked, and at her nod continued, “Thank you.” With a glance back at the door he said, “Well, I don’t know about you, but I’m freezing. And I still need to find out why Owain’s knocked me down on his list of favorite cousins.”

“...Aren’t we his only cousins?” Lucina asked.

“Yup,” Inigo replied.

In fact, it wasn’t until they were nearly ready to leave that Inigo finally managed to snag his cousin. “Yes, oh my vaunted second-favorite cousin?” Owain asked.

Inigo sighed, rolled his eyes, and asked, “What did I do?”

Owain blinked at him with an owlish look. “You,” he said, “gave Lucina Falchion.”

“...Well, yeah,” Inigo said. “It was hers first.”

Owain sighed. “Do you not remember what I said, long ago, when we spoke of the potential of your taking up your broken breadknife once more?”

“Not of the top of my head, no,” Inigo replied.

“We spoke of the fate of Falchion,” Owain prodded.

“...Nope, not ringing any bells.”

Owain shook his head gravely. “I will remind you then, dear cousin, of the slight you have committed against me. I called dibs on the divine blade.”

Inigo paused for a moment, then burst out laughing. “I never agreed to that!”

“One does not need to agree to the sacred call of dibs! It is a fact that, once spoken, cannot be refuted!”

“You’re so ridiculous,” Inigo managed to get out through his gasping.

“I’m not ridiculous! I. Called. Dibs.”

“Dear heavens, there’s something wrong with you.”

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“Say’ri? Might I have a word?”

The other woman had scarcely mounted, still gathering the dark Dior’s reins in her gloved hands when she turned in acknowledgment. “Aye, Lady Robin. What do you wish?”

Robin couldn’t help but make a face, urging her own mount closer. “For one, I was pretty sure we dropped the whole ‘lady’ thing.”

Say’ri tipped her head. “My apologies,” she said with a light chuckle. “‘Tis a habit left from the summit, I suppose. You are technically a foreign military commander.”
“Yeah, and I also remember somewhere along the line I ended up being your friend, correct me if I’m wrong.”

“Aye,” Say’ri said again with a touch of a smile. “So what then did you need me for?”

“It’s a personal matter,” Robin admitted, giving a pointed glance as the rest of their group continued to mount up. They had a two-hour ride before they reached the hot springs, and she thought she was unlikely to find a better time for the discussion.

“I see,” said Say’ri.

“Speaking of the summit, though,” Robin put in, “I’ve been meaning to speak to you about it. I wanted your overall opinion, considering you’re more familiar with Valm’s politics than I am.”

Say’ri’s expression turned thoughtful. “Chon’sin came out well enough,” she said. “For all the damage she sustained. Rosanne was shafted, I dread to say; I’ve offered what personal aid I can spare to Lord Virion, though I fear ‘twill be little help.” She let out a soft snort. “Valm the country is liable to hold a grudge until our children have taken the helm, especially with General Kruger on the political rise.”

“Yeah, I really can’t imagine he’s going to be anything but a piece of work,” Robin agreed. “Although it’s… funny you should mention children.”

“‘Tis?” Say’ri asked with a quirk of her brow as they fell to the back of the group, far enough behind the others to not be overheard. “Whyever so?”

“I was just wondering if you’d put much thought into it,” Robin said. “Having children. You and Inigo both, I suppose, if you’ve discussed it.”

“Aye, a passing mention or two,” Say’ri said. “Chon’sin will need an heir, after all, and I have none.” She glanced away. “He wishes to wait until our business with Grima is finished, and truly I cannot blame him for it. On the other hand, I fear reconciling those two may prove difficult if we do not come up with a plan to end the Fell Dragon sooner rather than later—he tells me ‘tis still nearly ten years until Grima rose in his world, and I dare not leave my homeland without a straightforward line of succession for that long.” She let out a soft sigh. “Though I suppose I ought to focus more of my attention on simply marrying Inigo in the first place.”

Robin’s tone softened. “Your council’s still throwing fits about him?”

Say’ri snorted. “Fie, they grow worse by the day. I only pray Inigo hasn’t realized, for all the gaudy and arrogant young lords they attempt to dangle in front of me as if I were a cat to be distracted by a shiny object.” She shook her head. “No matter. I intend to stand fast whether they like it or not.”

“Good for you,” Robin replied. “Although, will it offend you terribly if I say ‘better you than me’?”

Say’ri let out a laugh. “Nay, I can hardly blame you for such a thing,” she said. “In fact I rather envy the straightforwardness of your own wedding. ‘Twas a delight I could hardly hope to replicate.”

“Ha, in the middle of the war and everything?” Robin asked. “No, I could’ve done without that part, but I understand what you mean. And I’m glad we did it when we did.” She blew out a breath and added in a low tone, “Mostly.”
“...Did you and Owain quarrel?” Say’ri asked in a low tone.

“No,” Robin said, then added, “Not yet, at least.” Bracing herself, she continued, “I just imagine he’ll feel the same, you know? About Grima. The hell they went through... I can’t blame any of them for not wanting to bring children into a world where that might still come to pass again. And I just...”

She trailed off, and in the silence Say’ri said, “Robin, pray forgive me for presuming, but are you with child?”

After a beat, the tactician nodded, stiffly.

Say’ri’s expression softened. “How far along?”

“No very,” Robin admitted. “Maribelle says her best guess would be a due date somewhere in September.”

“And you’ve not told him yet,” Say’ri presumed.

“I don’t have the slightest clue what he’ll say,” Robin told her. “It’s not like we were trying, but… it’s not like we weren’t trying, and... gods, you must think me a fool.”

“Nay,” Say’ri said. “Mayhap a bit surprised, to know Ylisse’s tactician finds herself without a plan.”

“There’s no need to mock,” Robin said.

“‘Twas not my intent,” Say’ri assured her. “If you wish my advice, I think I would find such a secret ill to keep for long.”

“I know,” Robin said. “I’m just not entirely sure how...” Once again, she trailed off with the end of her sentence unsaid.

“Robin, I have had precious little chance to interact with your husband on a personal basis, as it seems whenever I am in his presence he is far too busy ribbing my own fiancé for me to bother even hoping to speak a word edgewise,” Say’ri said. Robin gave a short chuckle at that. “But I feel as though, by extension of both you and Inigo, I do know something of his character. I must doubt he will react poorly. Aye, he might fret about the matter, but he believes in your more than you know. I think ’tis entirely possible he has more faith in you than you yourself do.”

“I know he does,” Robin said quietly. “And it’s a frightful thing to ponder, sometimes. That he—that they all—have put every ounce of trust in me, that I’ll come up with some brilliant stratagem to stop Grima, and I haven’t. This feels like it’s just one more to juggle and bear alongside it.”

“Then tell him,” Say’ri suggested. “That he might bear it along with you.”

“...I suppose you’re right,” Robin said after a moment, her lips twitching up in a tight smile. “Thank you, for the ear.”

“Aye, anytime,” Say’ri replied. “And I offer my sincerest congratulations.”

“Yeah. Thank you,” Robin said again, and hoped dearly it was something worth congratulating.

Chapter End Notes
Writing that last scene made me bitterly regret how little I've had Say'ri and Robin interact before now. I mean sure, they're close via proximity to Inigo and Owain, but it's not the sole thing their friendship is based on, and I'm kind of sad I haven't touched on that. Because this fic isn't long enough already.
Chapter Summary

The younger Shepherds scramble to rid their vacation spot of some unwanted guests.

Chapter Notes

Haha, scramble. Shut up I'm hilarious.

“Of course,” Inigo had said, “this would be just our luck.”

His words had been spoken with his typical dry, self-deprecating humor, but there had been a pang of something deeper and far more bitter buried within that Owain couldn’t help but notice. Of course, having their first vacation in what felt like a lifetime thwarted by finding their destination overrun with Risen would do that to a guy.

It wasn’t a spectacularly large force—a fraction of the size of the group they’d fought on the Chon’sinian border, or the one they’d faced in Storash for that matter—nor, curiously, were the Risen particularly aggressive. The undead seemed mostly content to stick to the shadows of the shallows, hardly emerging from the springs until provoked.

Still, their menacing presence had all but trapped the other guests inside the ryokan’s main building, and there was little to be done but to rid the place of Grima’s servants. Brady, in particular, had been surprisingly offended by the presence of the Risen— “What if an old-lady tourist got scared and fell and broke a hip or whatever?” — while Cynthia had taken the opportunity to spout off a particularly rousing entrance, and off the group had gone.

“At least they had the courtesy to show up before we got into the springs,” Inigo had quipped. “Had they waited a bit longer, we’d have been stuck throwing buckets at them.” He’d paused, then added, “You know, that actually sounds kind of fun…”

“Ha! Perhaps you have finally realized that even a rusty pail full of holes ought make a better weapon than your newly restored breadknife,” Owain replied.

“Shut up before I start throwing buckets at you.”

Owain had cackled at his cousin’s unwarranted threats, then had split off to scamper after one of their foes. Cutting down one had led him to another, then another, until he had found himself halfway across the sprawling resort without another of his compatriots in sight.

It was at that point that he stumbled upon what appeared to be a quaint little gift shop, the boarded door being set upon by a handful of Risen. Owain had dispatched them handily and emerged, blinking, into the dim shop, to find it occupied by an elderly, terrified, and soon intensely grateful shopkeeper.
It was such a chain of events that led to him leaving the shop a few minutes later with his purse a small handful of coins lighter.

The brief period he’d spent inside had been enough time for the rest of his company to grow nearer once more, and Owain, eased by their proximity, took the opportunity in the much brighter, snow-blanketed landscape of the outdoors to examine his purchase in greater detail.

“Heh,” he said aloud. “Even the obscuring vapors of the springs cannot quench this gemstone’s fire. I knew it for a worthy tribute in an instant. A treasure suited to adorn my treasure…”

As if his words had summoned her, Robin’s voice reached him a few moments later. “What are you up to, Owain?”

With a hurried motion, Owain tucked his prize away in his palm. “Ha! My beloved wife and she who binds the power of two times together! No doubt it was the stone’s otherworldly sparkle that summoned you hither? I ought to have known such a riotous spectacle would catch your keen eye.”

“...Sure, dear?” Robin ventured.

Owain gestured back to the building behind him. “When I came upon this place, rescuing its lone inhabitant from certain doom, I could hardly resist the urge to feast my eyes upon the dazzling contents within!” His wife’s eyes had grown slightly glazed at that, so he cleared his throat and said, plainer, “I took a peek inside the shop and I found this amazing necklace. I couldn’t help myself, so I snatched it up.”

“You were souvenir shopping during combat?” Robin asked with a quirked brow and the edge of an exasperated sigh. Owain responded to that with a pained, offended look, leaving her to shake her head and continue, “Well, no use worrying about it now, I suppose. So tell me about this necklace.”

He chuckled. “Sparked your curiosity into a towering blaze, have I? Then hark! It bears a glistening sheen fit to shame the lustrous pinions of the bird of paradise. Its design is so inspired, it is less a work of man than aught revealed by the very gods!”

“Wow,” Robin said with a hint of an indulgent smile, though her eyes still scanned their surroundings every few seconds. “Sounds pretty impressive, honey. Um, out of curiosity, is this going to take a while?”

“What? No, I’m nearly done,” Owain said. “By which I mean: here, have a look for yourself!” With a flourish and a beaming smile, he produced his newest possession. “Ta-da! Behold, my beauteous spouse!”

Robin’s expression turned from amused to faintly alarmed, and he shot an automatic glance behind him to make sure a stray Risen hadn’t snuck on them.

Upon confirming none had, he prodded, “Well, what do you think? Pretty great, huh?”

“...Wow, dear,” she said again after a very long moment. She cleared her throat, lifting her hand to catch the charm better in the light. “Pegasus wings, wrapped in roses, wrapped in chains, and… more chains. And for a souvenir, it deftly manages to avoid any reference to the springs whatsoever. It’s a very, er… unique… choice.”

“Right?” Owain said, still grinning. “I’m glad to hear you singing its praises.”

“...Not praises so much as the opposite of praises, but yes,” Robin said under her breath.
“So confident was I that you would absolutely love it, in fact, that…” he continued, producing a second charm with the same enthusiasm as the first, “Ta-da-da-daaa! Behold! I bought you the ladies’ version!”

Robin’s look of alarm grew slightly less faint as Owain pressed the second necklace into her hand. “A matched set?”

“Just so, my heart! They shall hang about our throats, mirror images in their elegance. And through them, our hearts shall be an even more perfect mirror. The truest pair! They shall stand as symbol of our oaths, everlasting proof of a love beyond time!”

“Yes… They’re lovely… Thank you,” Robin replied, her voice slightly distant. She cleared her throat. “I’ll lock mine away safe and sound and privately treasure it always.”

“What?” Owain exclaimed, his grin slipping. “Such a sparkling gem deserves the light of the sun! Let us wear them together!”

“Yes, I’ll… I’ll take that into careful consideration, dear,” Robin said absently. “For now, I’ll just get back to slaying Risen. You get back to work too, honey.” With that, she turned away, brandishing an Elwind spell at a nearby undead archer with Severa in its sights.

“What? Hey! Robin?” Owain called, slipping into chagrin. “What would drive you to leave your loving husband behind so?” he pondered, before the surety reached him and he bit his lip in a vain attempt to keep from grinning again. “Ahh, yes. You’re overcome! Cheeks ablush with joy! Oh, my bride, you are adorable!”

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“Aha! There you are! Say’ri, my darling, are you free a moment?”

Neither Inigo’s face nor his voice held a trace of the previous night’s ire, yet a ripple of tension washed over Say’ri’s shoulders nonetheless. “‘Tis the middle of a skirmish, am I likely to be anything resembling free?” When he didn’t answer, she turned back and found his face a downturned display of hurt. With a quiet sigh, she continued, “Did you need something?”

Latching on to the opening she’d given him, his expression brightened again. “Hm? Do I need a reason to want to see you? Robin stole away with you all morning; I’ve hardly had a chance to lay eyes on you, no less speak to you.”

“Aye, then, so speak,” Say’ri said, starting down a slight rocky incline towards one of the springs, a hand gripping the hilt of her blade and eyes scanning the wooded surroundings for more of their foes.

“Well,” Inigo said, following after her. “We’ve spent the last two months locked in some of the most boring discussions I’ve ever had to listen to in my life, and we’re on a vacation that we’ve been discussing for twice that period. Perhaps I thought it a fitting place for some quality time.”

Say’ri glanced back over her shoulder and was met with a boyish grin that was far too charming for its own good. So, she thought to herself, we’re to pretend the quarrel never happened. The thought shouldn’t have surprised her as much as it did, for every time she’d seen Inigo gloss over a slight with a smile rather than face the problem directly. “I suppose,” she answered. “What do you
propose, then, when we’ve finished our task here? A dip in the mixed bath?”

The sound of his boots at her heels abruptly stopped. She turned back with a brow raised to find him gaping openly at her.

“‘Twas a joke, Inigo,” she said flatly. “‘Tis still quite a conservative portion of the country we’re in; I rather doubt the staff would allow it, considering we’re not yet wed.”

Inigo, who was still several very interesting shades of scarlet, didn’t quite seem to comprehend her words, only stuttering out “M-mixed—”

“Deep breaths, my love, I told you I was being facetious.”

“That’s a thing?” Inigo asked, hurrying to catch up to her again. “Are they, like, private, or do you actually just have giant pools that anyone can walk into?”

“For all your goings on about romantic vacations, I had assumed you knew that.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but you told me about springs, which imply coverings, and now you’re talking about baths, which do not.”

“Someday our cultural differences will cease to astound me,” Say’ri said dryly. “Your people really do have an odd reticence when it comes to the matters of the body.”

“It’s not odd!” Inigo cried. “And you didn’t answer my question!”

To that, she replied by casting a smirk over her shoulder. “I, for one, find the words interchangeable.”

“Say’ri!” He strode after her, his longer legs closing the distance until he’d come up alongside her. When he did, he cleared his throat, a bit of color leaving his face. “Baths aside, I’m all for going somewhere when the fighting’s over. We could take in the scenery, maybe browse the shops for a nice memento…” He broke off to clear his throat. “Er, that’s if you wanted to, of course.”

Say’ri’s teasing—along with her earlier upset—faded at his earnestness. “Aye, I’d like to,” she said softly. “You speak as though I’d turn down an invitation to spend time with you.”

With a suddenness that practically gave her whiplash, he beamed at her. “Wonderful! Thank you, my love! It’s a date, then!” Hardly giving her a moment of warning, he spun to wrap his arms around her shoulders and snatch her against him.

“Fie, ‘tis the middle of a battle!” Say’ri cried, her words slightly muffled against his shirt. “Would you let go?”

He responded with a chuckle that she felt as much as heard, his breath washing over the side of her face. “Oh, indulge me one quick embrace,” he said lowly, then took in a deep inhale. “Mm, you smell nice. Is that the perfume I gave you for your birthday? I’m happy you’re wearing it.”

She resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “Aye, ‘twas a gift from you, of course I should—” She broke off, clearing her throat pointedly. “Zounds, enough of your flattery. Would you let go already so we might finish this battle?”

“Aww,” Inigo said. “But as long as I have you in my arms, I can keep you safe from the Risen.”

“By leaving the both of us unable to reach for a weapon? ‘Tis a strange definition of safe you
present,” Say’ri replied dryly. With a shake of her head, she moved to extricate herself. “Prithee have an ounce of self-control.” Inigo’s face fell at that, leaving her to sigh and add, “We ought snuggle as much as you like, later.”

“Well, I suppose if you promise,” Inigo replied airily.

“A vow,” Say’ri replied with another indulgent sigh, then nodded ahead of them. “In the meantime, I ought check this next section.”

“What, by that little structure?” Inigo asked, something unreadable crossing his expression.

“Aye?”

“Hm, better not. Why don’t you let me handle that, and you can take that direction instead,” he continued, pointing. At her dubious expression, he explained, “I saw Owain headed that way earlier and I needed to speak with him about something.”

“Aye, then,” Say’ri said, and wondered if his words were as true as they seemed. “Be safe.”

“Of course!” Inigo replied, a little too brightly.

She glanced back, once, to see something akin to chagrin cross his face.

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The next time Robin saw her husband, he was frowning.

“Why have you not donned your necklace, Robin?” Owain asked gravely. “There’s no call for sheepishness.” His face split into a grin once more. “Ours is a love worth shouting from the mountaintops. Let everyone see our bond!”

Robin did her best not to grimace, though her own lips slipped into a downturn. “Er… yes, well…” She let out a sigh, figuring it was best to just come out with it. “I’m sorry, Owain. It was very sweet of you, but I just don’t think I can wear it.”

“Huh? Why not?”

Because it’s quite hideous. Curse him and his puppy dog eyes, Robin thought. “Ah, I’m afraid it’s… just not quite my style.”

“What? You don’t like it?”

“I’m sorry, dear,” Robin said, reaching for Owain’s hand in an attempt to leave him looking less than crestfallen. “It really was a lovely thought.”

“No, it’s… it’s nothing to apologize for,” Owain replied forlornly. “I see… No, I ought to have known. Absent the goddess’s blessing, even an epic treasure is a bauble lost to history’s great—”

Robin cleared her throat, pointedly. “Dear, is this really the best time for your theatrical effect?”

Owain paused, blinking for a moment, then said. “Oh. Apologies. I wandered off a bit there.” He let out a sigh that was nearly as theatrical as his earlier ramblings. “But the necklace is a bust, is it?
I was hoping it would serve as a stand-in for a ring for a while, but so it goes…”

“...A ring?”

Owain cleared his throat, turning a light shade of pink. “Well, yes. We’re married, but you still don’t have a proper wedding ring. You wouldn’t take my mother’s, and… I haven’t exactly been able to afford one. I was hoping this might serve in its place until I could.”

“What?” Robin said, blanching. “Oh, dear, I’m so sorry! I had no idea! I…” Hurriedly, she reached in her pocket for the offending necklace, fumbling for a moment with the clasp. “I’ll wear it! I’m putting it on right now! Who cares about the design? Like you say, we should be celebrating our bond!”

“You don’t have to do that, Robin,” Owain said, gently catching her hands—a long with the necklace—in his grasp. “We can wait to match until we’ve got two gold bands. I’m not sure when that’ll be, but you’ll have to come with me to pick them out.”

“Oh, Owain…” she whispered. “I’d be more than happy to.”

“I’ll keep tucking away the money I find along the road and any change from errands,” he promised.

Robin blinked. “You’re saving up?” she asked with a soft, disbelieving laugh. “That’s so sweet. And a little surprising, to be honest.” She glanced away, chewing on her lip. “You tend to surprise me often, lately. I guess that means I still don’t know you as well as I imagined I do.”

“And I think this business with the necklace proves I don’t know you that well either,” Owain said, squeezing her hands again before lifting one of his own to her cheek. “But we have all the time in the world from here on to teach each other.”

“That we do,” Robin said quietly. She opened her mouth, closed it again, then blurted, “Though I fear I know little more about myself than you do.”

Owain made a soft sound of query in his throat, brushing his thumb along her cheekbone.

She glanced down, finding his gaze far more earnest than she could handle. “My birthplace, my mother’s face, my childhood memories… All a blank. It frightens me at times, Owain. Sometimes… sometimes I fear the memory of all the times I’ve spent with you will desert me too…”

“Robin,” he said gently.

“Heh, sorry,” she replied lightly, forcing a happier expression. “Didn’t mean to darken the mood.”

Meanwhile, Owain’s lips turned down as far as hers had turned up. “Don’t hide behind your smile,” he said seriously, resting his hands on her shoulders. “If you’re afraid, say so.” After a moment more, he shifted his grasp, pulling her against him.

“Owain, you’re squeezing me awfully tight,” Robin protested. “I don’t—mmph?”

Her words faded into a muffled squeak of confusion, then the breathy quiet of contentment as he brushed his lips over hers. He leaned his forehead against hers when they broke, a fond smile playing on his lips.

It took her a moment to catch her air back enough to speak again. “This is hardly the place for a
“I needed to tell you you’ll be all right, and the words weren’t enough,” Owain replied softly. “I’ll keep your memories safe. I’ll stay by your side, memorizing each and every one. So don’t ever hide what you’re feeling. Tell me everything. I’ll be here, listening. Your favorite color, favorite meal, favorite season. Your favorite words and phrases. I’ll memorize the lot of it. And no matter how many times you forget, I’ll be here to remind you, every time.”

Robin ducked her head again, blinking rapidly in an attempt to rid her eyes of their sudden stinging. *Gods, if I ever doubted I married the right man...* “Thank you.”

“Feel a little less scared?” he whispered.

“A lot less,” she replied. “So, um... it’s safe to let go now. The others are starting to stare.”

“What? Oh, right,” Owain said absently. A beat went by before he made some unidentifiable sound between a wail and a roar, his face abruptly turning burgundy. “Ack! What am I doing? We’re in the middle of combat!”

Muffling a fond snort in her hand, Robin replied, “Well, no use wailing about it now. We can kick ourselves for it later. Together.”

A doofy expression came to his features, the same one he’d worn on a night long ago when he’d inquired *You like my face?* “You’d free up time in your schedule for me?”

“Of course, silly. You’re my husband.” Biting her lip, she continued in a low tone, “I have something I need to tell you, anyways.”

“Oh?” Owain said, his interest clearly piqued. “Something good?”

“...Yeah,” Robin said. “I think so.”

“Then... after the battle, and a nice, long bath, and after we eat dinner... you think maybe we could spend some time together, just the two of us?”

“I think I’d like that very much.”

“Yesss!” His exclamation was a little too loud to not draw unwanted attention, and they already had several more gazes keen on them when he moved to draw his sword again. “With that decided, we’ve no cause to stay our blades further. Be forewarned, minions of evil!” he shouted. “You face Owain, crosser of worlds! Your ruin is nigh!” He half-darted, half-danced away, calling back, “All right, honey, I’m off! I’ll see you tonight! I love you, Robin!”

“Owain, shh!” she called after him. “No need to shout that! People are... already...” She broke off with a sigh when it was clear he hadn’t heard. “Staring...” She shook her head, plastering a hand to her face. *Honestly, what am I going to do with him? He’s a mad fool, and totally inscrutable.*

*But still...*

*I love you too. My chosen warrior, come from beyond the rift to ransom peace beside his beloved.*

If anyone nearby heard her quiet giggle, no one commented.
Yet a Masterpiece (Part 7) Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

_ I was scanning through the skies and missed the static in your eyes_
_ Something blocking all reception is distorting our connection_
_ With the distance amplified, was it all just synthesized?_
_ And now the silence screams that you are gone, you've tuned me out, I've lost your frequency..._

Hot springs, Inigo had decided, were not ideal locations in which to hunt Risen.

He’d been stalking one such creature for so long he’d actually lost track, unable to find a place he could actually get a clear shot at the beast without being caught on open, slippery ground. If the Risen had been armed with a melee weapon, Inigo liked to think he could’ve ducked in and dodged a few blows for long enough to bring it down; alas, the foe he stalked was armed not with axe or sword but a bow.

Finally, after nearly losing the Risen in question three times, he found it paused on the edge of one of the pools, vermillion eyes narrowed as it scanned ahead of itself, missing where Inigo had perched just outside of its peripherals.

He winced as his foot caught a patch of gravel with a crunch. The Risen twisted its head roughly in his direction in a stiff, uncanny motion, but Inigo had hidden himself well among the copse of bare winter trees, and after a moment the creature turned away again.

The Risen continued down the waterline, still apparently oblivious as Inigo mirrored it at a distance, coming to a stop behind a particularly large tree. The spring came nearer to the treeline not far down—if his foe continued its trajectory and Inigo remained unseen, he ought to be able to dart out of the woods and put his sword through its back before it had time to draw the arrow nocked on its bow.

With a crack as loud as Arcthunder, a branch snapped.

Inigo’s head snapped around the same moment the Risen’s did.

_Oh, gods, no!_

Say’ri’s entrance hadn’t been particularly overt until that moment—she was hardly a few paces from Inigo when he whipped back to look at her—but it had been enough. With startling alacrity for what was supposed to be a corpse, the archer strafed to the side, aim clearing the tree that was Inigo’s impromptu hiding spot.

A clear shot at either one of them.

After half a lifetime, the reaction came without his thinking about it. He flung himself sideways, twisting into a contortion he had no hope of keeping his balance through, but Say’ri—_bless her_—had caught on in that half-moment, leaping forward to meet him in the middle, her arms locking onto his with just enough force to keep them both upright. His weight still sent them both
staggering a handful of steps, but if they had been extremely lucky the Risen would’ve been aiming for where Inigo had been standing.

Unfortunately, Inigo never did seem to end up that lucky.

It wasn’t quite the blinding, all-consuming agony of Walhart’s final blow, but the pain racing out in waves from the back of his shoulder wasn’t that many steps below it. His vision blurred white and he couldn’t quite seem to muffle the cry that escaped him but gods it had been a while since he’d actually gotten shot.

The pain couldn’t quite compare to a blow from a sword or an axe—blades didn’t typically stay embedded in a wound like arrows did, which meant the latter lent themselves to entirely indescribable but completely distinct worlds of hurt.

It took a long minute—though really it couldn’t have been more than a second—for the realization to dawn on him that they were far from out of danger, that he had no way of stopping potential second and third arrows from striking him where he stood.

“Say’ri—” Inigo started, his breath ragged, though he couldn’t quite be entirely sure what he wanted to tell her to do. He scrabbled for the hilt of his katana, his grasp rushed and unsteady and utterly useless.

In the blink of an eye she was gone with a duck and a dodge he could barely process. A hollow thunk sounded as the next arrow flew wide and embedded itself in a nearby tree. By the time the Risen had gotten its weapon up to fire again, Say’ri was already there, slashing so quickly Inigo could hardly see the killing blow before the creature disintegrated.

“Are you—”

“I’m okay,” Inigo said, forcing a brightness to his tone and a smile to his face. It was ill complimented by the quaking of his knees.

“No you aren’t,” Say’ri immediately replied, striding across the distance between them. “Sit before you fall.”

“I am, I—I’ve had worse,” Inigo said, still with a plastered grin and almost certainly babbling, though he followed her instructions in a motion that was more falling than sitting.

“Let me be the judge of that.” She knelt beside him, a hand resting on his neck to keep her steady as she bent to examine the rest.

“It’s hardly a scratch, I mean, I’m sure I’ll be fine—”

“Would you stop?” Say’ri’s words came out in a snap and she took a quiet breath before she spoke again. “I am hardly a wallflower of a maiden that will be reaching for smelling salts at the sight of blood. I have been through a war; don’t pretend on my behalf.”

Inigo let his smile slip, giving a stiff nod that pained him more than he hoped he let on. “Okay.”

A long moment passed before she let out a sigh. “I wish you wouldn’t do these things.”

If it got me in the shoulder it would’ve gotten you in the throat, Inigo thought, though he kept the comment to himself, if only so he wouldn’t have to dwell on such a grim thought. “The lives we lead— ow ow ow please don’t do that.”
“Sorry,” Say’ri whispered, then inhaled deeply. “Brady must be nearby still.”


After a long sigh, she said, “I should have been more careful.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he replied. “I’ll be fine.” He winced. “Er. ‘Will be’ being the operative term.”

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Inigo spent most of the rest of his first day of vacation staring at a wall.

Their rented room was a fair bit smaller and cozier than their abode at the palace, as was to be expected, though the design was in a similar, traditional Chon’sinian style. He’d spent the last twenty minutes or so studying the intricacies of a stylized fish painted across the wall.

Frankly, it was not at all what he’d signed up for.

He unabashedly jumped when the door opened, though his face settled into a smile a moment later. “Say’ri, darling,” he said with a note of relief in his tone. “I was starting to think you’d run off and left me.”

“Did I wake you?” Say’ri asked, instead of answering that.

“No,” Inigo said. “Brady told me to get some rest but I’m afraid ‘rest’ was about as far as I got.”

“Do you still wish to join the rest of us for dinner or should I have the staff send something up for you?”

Inigo pulled himself to sit upright, wincing once as his newly-healed shoulder protested and then firmly ignoring it. “After all that you built up the food here? I’m still coming.”

“If you’re sure,” Say’ri said, slightly dubiously as she moved to the room’s small dresser.

“As sweet as it is that you’re worried about me, love, I’ve had worse,” Inigo pointed out.

Apparently that had been the wrong thing to say, because the next thing he saw was the line of her spine stiffen with the tension of a drawn bow.

“...Darling?” he asked after a long moment.

A breath of a sigh escaped her, just loud enough that he could hear it from his place on the futon. “Did you do it on purpose?”

Inigo blinked. “Do what on purpose?”

“Send me the other way,” Say’ri said, her back still turned to him. “Away from where you were with that Risen.”

Inigo got to his feet with delicate care, moving to stand a few feet behind her. “Does it matter?”
“’Tis not an answer.”

He paused for a moment, not so much weighing his answer as trying to figure out what sort of conversational rabbit trail she was leading him down. “Okay,” he finally said. “Yes. I did. I saw it hiding in the shadows and I didn’t want it to catch you off-guard so I went after it myself.”

“And you didn’t think that you might’ve asked me?” she asked. “That we could have gone together?”

“It was one Risen,” he said with a shrug. “I didn’t think it was going to be a big deal.”

“Are you going to keep saying that until the day you die?” Say’ri asked, her voice rising just the slightest bit.

“Probably, yeah,” Inigo said. “You know me.”

That was the wrong answer again.

A long moment passed in silence but for the sharp snap of unfolding fabric as Say’ri yanked a neatly folded yukata from the drawer. “Sometimes,” she finally said in a soft voice, “I fear we spent so much time preparing for my death we neglected to plan for what might happen if I lived.”

Inigo closed the rest of the distance, settling his hands on her forearms. “I’m not quite sure what you’re saying,” he admitted.

“What else am I to think when you continue to do this so unendingly? Mayhap I was too frightened, too lovesick to note it during the war but it is far too clear to me now.” Say’ri turned in his grasp, yukata gripped so tightly in her hands her knuckles had gone white. “When the blade comes down will you forever cast me away? Will you throw yourself into the fray like you’ve nothing left to live for and toss me aside like I am yesterday’s refuse?”

“Don’t say it like that,” Inigo protested, a bitter taste rising in his throat.

“How else ought I say it?” she demanded. “I cannot understand how you can continue to be so recklessly self-sacrificing in practically the same breath you croon of the life you wish to make with me—”

“Because it’s the same thing!” Inigo interrupted, jerking his hands back to his sides. “Because I want you safe! How can you not understand that?”

“Is my safety to be bought with your dying breath?”

“If that’s what it takes, then yes!” He took a step back, a dozen conversations—arguments, really—resurfacing with such speed and vengeance he was left coming to the dull realization that the wounds they’d left hadn’t healed at all. Lucina, Kruger, Nalia, and every mark they’d left in their wake hadn’t knitted back into scar tissue, merely crusted over and festered until the time came for them to be rubbed raw again.

And apparently that time was now.

“Do you think I stopped worrying the day you woke up? Just because Emmeryn didn’t die when she should have didn’t mean she didn’t die and don’t you dare think I’m not spending every day looking over my shoulder because I know the second I stop is the second your fate catches up with you and I can’t do that again. There are nights it takes me three hours to fall asleep because some part of me is convinced you’ll stop breathing as soon as I stop counting your breaths and there are
mornings I wake up to find you already gone and I have to stop myself from screaming because how can I know you’re not gone for good?” He took another step backward, his breathing ragged and his throat raw.

Say’ri’s voice dropped a fraction into something softer. “You cannot live like that, Inigo.”

“I do live like that! I’ve spent half a lifetime living like that!” His burning eyes finally overflowed and he paused to press the heels of his hands against them. “Trust me when I say I love far too deeply for the life I’ve been handed,” he finally said in a trembling tone. “I cut down a bridge that was our last hope of escape so I wouldn’t have to say goodbye to my best friend. Hell, once I threw away half of my convictions because I had a crush on a girl. All that and you think I wouldn’t lay down my life in a heartbeat for you?”

The yukata fell to the floor in a crumpled heap. “I want you as a man far more than I want you as a martyr,” Say’ri finally whispered.

“We don’t always have that choice,” Inigo said.

“I don’t accept that, and fie if I will.”

“Don’t you?” The laugh he gave came out even more bitter than he’d expected it to.

She lifted her chin, a spark of something unreadable in her eyes. “I cannot remember agreeing to spend my life with someone who carries such an air of defeat.”

“Then maybe you should just be rid of me while you’ve still got the chance!”

The words were out before he could hope to suck them back in. Inigo couldn’t help but flinch at the utter hurt that flashed across Say’ri’s face and wish he’d never spoken them at all.

“I don’t…” he started, then trailed back off into a silence so thick he could hear her swallow before she spoke again.

“Did you mean that?”

A humorless laugh stuck in his throat before it made it out his lips. “I’m not blind, Say’ri,” he finally replied. “It doesn’t take a genius to figure out why every time we try to set a date for the wedding your council pipes up with an excuse that it’s some snotty lord’s niece’s cousin’s cat’s birthday and we couldn’t possibly have it then. I’m well aware they’d rather you married just about anyone other than me.”

Say’ri ducked her head before she replied, “I didn’t realize you knew.”

“Why wouldn’t I?” Inigo asked. “Or was that another secret you were keeping for my own good?”

“I told them they were to leave you alone,” she whispered. “I suppose in their minds they are. The difficulties they create aren’t directly related to you, after all.”

Inigo let out a wobbly laugh, like every word out of his own mouth wasn’t shattering his heart even further. “Come now, darling,” he said softly. “We both know your life would be far easier with a husband who doesn’t panic at the sight of crowds and might have a hope of understanding a political treaty without being clobbered upside the head by the thing.”

“When have I ever said I wished for my life to be easy?” Say’ri asked, her tone carrying all that fiery snap he loved so much as she finally lifted her head to meet his eyes again. It faded as she
spoke once more, shifting her hands to fiddle with her engagement ring. “Though I must admit I have often asked myself of late if you would be happier if you were to release me.”

“If I’d be happier,” Inigo repeated in a dull tone.

“My position and my duties are inseparable from me, Inigo. Surely you’ve realized that by now.” She let out a quiet sigh. “As I said. I wonder if mayhap we spent so long preparing for my death we never thought of what might be if I lived.”

“If I’d be happier without you,” he said yet again.

Say’ri offered him a thin smile that didn’t come anywhere near her eyes. “I’d not hold it against you if you were.”

He stared at her for a long moment, as if could memorize every line and plane of her face to hold with him in a life without her.

And Inigo broke.

He all but fell back down on the futon, head in his hands and knees to his chest as full-blown sobs wracked him. Warmth tucked in against his side a mere moment later, one hand curling around his bicep and the other starting to card through his hair.

“If I’d be happier,” he managed to get out. “Without you. You say that like I wouldn’t—wouldn’t face Walhart a hundred times over, face Grima a hundred times over if that was what it took to spend the rest of my life by your side. Like you aren’t the best damn thing that ever happened to me in my sorry excuse of an existence. Like I could ever even dream of throwing you aside like yesterday’s refuse.”

A beat passed before she pressed her forehead to his cheek and replied, “You say that like I don’t feel the same for you.” With a quiet sigh, she continued, “And I love you enough to have no wish to trap you in a life that would make you unhappy.”

“Did I ever say it would?” Inigo whispered. He thought of a quiet offer from another lifetime, five words that had summarily changed the course of his entire life. You could come to Chon’sin.

“Would you not be, though?”

“Would you be happier without me?” he returned.

“I thought you knew the answer to that.”

“Humor me.”

Say’ri shook her head, a lock of her hair brushing the bare skin of his neck. “Nay, of course not.” Then, quieter: “You would still wish to marry me, then?”


“Fie, as if I didn’t know that already,” she replied.

“Touche.” Inigo let out a soft sigh and added, “Are we okay, then?”

“Aye, I think we’re well on our way,” Say’ri said. “I’m sorry if I hurt you.”
“I’m sorry if I hurt you,” Inigo returned. “Next time might we skip the yelling and go straight to this part?”

“One might hope,” she said. After a moment, she continued, “The grand council is still going to be giving us quite the fight.”

“Well,” Inigo said thoughtfully, “we’ll just have to give them a fight back, yeah?” He chuckled. “It’s about time they learned who they’re up against.”
“Bear witness to the legend reborn! My visage commands evil’s gaze like moonlight reflected on drawn steel! Behold—the fabled lost raiment of the legendary Enigma King!”

Robin clapped, very politely, from her seat on the futon as Owain leapt out from behind the changing screen with all the grace of a cat.

A very uncoordinated cat. That couldn’t see. And had three legs.

Perhaps ‘catlike’ wasn’t quite the right comparison. Maybe ‘klutzy baby manakete’ would work better.

“I’m okay!” Owain cried, struggling to remain upright for a moment more before giving in and turning his momentum into a bodily launch at the futon. Unfortunately, it didn’t seem that he’d quite processed the fact the motion would send him into said futon face-first; a moment later he groaned and muttered against the sheet, “Less okay.”

“You look very dashing, dear,” Robin assured him, patting his shoulder. Owain twisted enough that she could see the dopey smile her words brought to his face. She poked his cheek in response and he mumbled something unintelligible. “What?”

“I said ‘the yukata’s power overwhelms!’” Owain replied, rolling over. “‘You must put up shields of warding before I am consumed!’”

“Oh?” Robin said, her lips twitching. “And how do you propose I do that?”

His smile turned worryingly mischievous a moment before he tugged her down on top of him. Pressing a brief kiss to her lips, he announced, “There. I am warded.”

“Oh,” she replied, muffling a giggle. “That was easy.”

“Of course it was, my beloved. For one with such skill as the master tactician even a rite so perilous as the Kiss of Warding would be but child’s play.”

“Ah,” Robin said. “I see.”

Owain wiggled a little in an attempt to settle them more comfortably. “So,” he said. “What is the
news of great blessing you have promised to bestow on me?”

A soft flush came to her face, leaving her to duck her head against his shoulder in an attempt to hide it. “Er, what do you mean?”

“You said you had something you wish to speak to me about.”

“Shouldn’t we be heading down to dinner?” Robin asked, abruptly twisting until she was sitting upright beside him.

“Is it a terribly long tale of epicness and heroism?” Owain asked, pulling himself into a seated position as well.

After a moment, Robin shook her head and, with Say’ri’s earlier advice ringing in her ears, decided it might be better to simply get the discussion over with. “Owain,” she said, taking one of his hands in hers and resisting the urge to bite her lip. “What if I told you there would be three of us soon?”

“Three of who?” he asked blankly.

She gave his hand a meaningful squeeze. “Three of us,” she repeated.

He blinked at her. “Are you referring to the imminent birth of my alternate and unspoiled self? Because I suppose technically if you’re counting him as me then that would make three of us, but I really don’t have any intention of sharing my most beloved—wait. Wait.”

Finally, Robin thought dryly.

Owain shifted to grasp her other hand, eyes shining brightly. “Robin,” he said, his tone growing higher. “Are you telling me you have an evil twin?”

Had she had a hand free, it would have met her face with impressive speed. “No, I don’t have an evil twin,” she said with a sigh.

“Oh,” Owain said, sounding vaguely disappointed.

With a steady breath, Robin said quietly, “I’m talking about our family. Adding to it, more specifically. A baby.”

“Oh,” Owain said, in roughly the same tone of voice, one which betrayed none of the surprise she’d expected. “What sort?”

“...What do you mean, ‘what sort?’”

“Well, a baby what? I’ve always rather wanted a dog myself, but I’m not sure Say’ri would be too pleased about keeping a potentially un-housetrained puppy in the palace…”

At that point, the urge to whack him across the shoulder was nothing short of involuntary. “I’m not talking about a puppy!” Robin cried. “I’m talking about a baby! A human baby! Our human baby!”

A long moment went by.

“Oh,” Owain said, his eyes suddenly very wide. “That sort. A baby baby.” He paused, blinked, then cried, “Wait, a baby baby?”

“You keep saying that word, but I’m not entirely sure you know what it means.”
“I know what it means!” Owain protested. “I—I just—” He broke off, cleared his throat, and jumped to his feet. “I’ll be back,” he said, his tone hollow.

And with that, he bolted from the room.

~~~

Tears had turned into tiny nuzzles and whispers of affirmation. Inigo had a feeling someone would likely come looking for them with a complaint they were holding up dinner, but at that moment he couldn’t quite bring himself to care.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled against Say’ri’s hair, feeling as if the last of his energy had drained away in the wake of his shouting. “I shouldn’t have flown off the handle about Lucina.”

“I understand why you did,” she replied. “I wish you hadn’t attempted to pretend all was well afterward.”

“Love, when am I not pretending everything’s fine?” Inigo replied.

Say’ri was saved from having to answer that by an urgent rattle of the doorknob—Inigo expected to hear Severa’s voice next, berating them about dinner.

Instead, the sound was followed by a loud bang, as if whoever was outside had slammed themselves bodily against the door.

“What in the name of…” Inigo started.

The banging continued as he got to his feet, crossed the room, and flicked the lock.

He should not have been at all surprised, he realized with an internal sigh, to see Owain.

“Can I help you?” Inigo asked dryly, quirking his brow.

“InigoIneedtotellyousomething,” Owain said, all in one breath and in what was likely the fastest possible fashion that sentence could ever be uttered.

Inigo bit the inside of his cheek to keep from smirking. Three guesses to what this is about. “Mm?”

“Well, for one your door is broken—”

“It’s called a lock, my friend, and it’s actually a pretty spectacular invention—”

“Inigo!”

“What?”

Owain pushed through the door, so quickly it threw Inigo off-balance for a moment. Owain grabbed for his shoulders a moment later, though the motion seemed less intended to steady and more a reflex out of panic. His eyes comically wide, he blurted in a hushed tone, “Inigo I’m having a baby.”

A moment went by during which Inigo heavily debated the merits of actually being a kind,
supportive best friend instead of immediately falling back on the first snarky thing that popped into his head.

Then Inigo decided that would be rather boring.

“Last I checked I do believe it would be Robin having a baby, unless there’s something rather important you’ve neglected to tell me.”

Owain’s expression turned to one of vexation. “Inigo, I’m being serious.”

“Yes, so am I,” Inigo replied. “Look, I know you pride yourself on not being shackled by the constraints of normal human beings and whatnot, but I’m pretty sure even you can’t defy the laws of nature and physical structure. Which is all to say, my dear cousin, that I’m quite certain you are not having a baby. Your lovely wife, whose body holds the actually ability to carry out such a procedure, is having a baby. Correct me if I’m wrong?”

“Yes, that’s the point, please stop calling my wife lovely,” Owain said in an exasperated tone.

“Just pointing out the obvious, my friend, no need to jump down my throat.”

Say’ri interjected with a pointed cough, rising to her feet. “If I may take a moment to cut in upon the teasing to offer my congratulations?”

“Congratulations?” Owain asked blankly, then added, “Oh. Er, yeah. Thanks. But I—now what do I do?”

“Generally speaking, the next order of business would be for one to wait for about nine months, at the end of which one has a tiny human to take care of for a very significant portion of time,” Inigo said. “Also, I’m really not sure why you’re asking me this like I’m supposed to know.”

“I don’t know!” Owain cried. “I officially do not know anything about any of this business! I thought she was talking about having an evil twin!”

Inigo couldn’t hold back a snort of laughter. “You thought what now?”

“She was speaking of there being three of us! In very vague terms! I thought she meant my parallel self! Or an aforementioned evil twin! Or getting a pet!”

Inigo snorted even harder.

“Be gracious,” Say’ri chided, elbowing him.

“But my love, that’s no fun,” Inigo replied, then let out a sigh. “All right, all right, no need to give me that look. What did you tell her, Owain?”

“...Tell her?” Owain asked.

Inigo’s own eyes went wide. “You did tell her something, right? ‘Congrats, honey, that’s wonderful, meneh meneh, insert six unnecessary adjectives about the unborn scion of legend’? Tell me I’m jogging a memory here?”

Owain blinked twice and shook his head.

“...So let me get this straight. She gave you the news and you immediately ran off to tell me?”

“Yes! It was very important information for me to relay!”
Inigo’s palm met his face. “Sweet Naga, you really are hopeless. Say’ri, tell him he’s hopeless.”

“I am not getting involved in this,” Say’ri said.

“You got involved in this the moment you agreed to marry me, love.”

“I don’t see what the problem is!” Owain interjected.

A beat went by before Say’ri said, “Aye, in all fairness, Inigo does have a point.”

“See!” Inigo cried.

“What point?” Owain cried back.

“Your wife. Just told you. You’re having a baby. And you ran away,” Inigo said, very slowly.

A long moment passed.

“Oh,” Owain said.

“There it is,” Inigo said with a sigh. “It’s like Fort Steiger all over again.”

“Oh no I gotta go, bye Inigo bye Say’ri—”

In a motion so fast Inigo actually felt the wind change, Owain tore from the room. “Congrats, you dork!” Inigo called after him, and hoped their neighbors wouldn’t be too cross with him. “Well,” he said brightly, glancing back at Say’ri. “Would you look at that? I now have the perfect example number one of what not to do in this situation.”

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Owain stood in front of his door for a good several moments before he remotely figured out what he planned on doing when he opened it. Instead of actually being helpful, his brain decided to conjure up his father’s advice.

*Don’t make her angry. She will probably throw figs at you.*

He never had actually learned why Uncle Chrom had added ‘soap dishes’ to the list of things Robin was apt to throw, had he?

Owain sighed, decided his brain wasn’t being much help in the matter, and remembered abruptly that he was actually very good at making things up on the spot. Clearly, the solution here would be to improvise his way out. Inspiration would surely beckon to his lips when the moment arose.

With a decisive nod, he nudged the door open and strode inside.

He found Robin on the futon as she’d been before, though now she was stretched out with her back to the door, and she made no move to change that as Owain shut the door with a quiet click. “Um… I’m back?” he ventured. Why it came out sounding like a question, he had no idea.

Still she gave no response. Owain padded over, and caught the slightest of trembles in her shoulders.
“Oh, my dearest,” he whispered, automatically reaching for her as he neared. “I’m so—oof!”

It was at that moment that he found himself assaulted by large, relatively solid, and at least thankfully soft object. Owain stumbled back, his gaze falling to the offending object, which now laid innocently on the floor.

A pillow. She’d thrown a pillow at him.

“You jerk!”

Owain blinked, his eyes snapping up from where they’d been locked on the pillow in bewilderment, just in time to see another fluffy projectile being aimed at him. “Wait—Robin, my beloved, I’m here to—agh, wait, I’m pretty sure throwing spellbooks is not remotely beneficial to the health of this building no less to your husband—can’t we please talk about this like rational beings?”

Robin did not seem to be in the mood to have any sort of discussion resembling rational, judging by the downright murderous expression on her face. “If I could bring down the building by just throwing the spellbook you’d be in even more trouble right now!”

“Robin!” he squeaked, scrambling to find something resembling cover amidst their tight quarters. “Wait, can’t you please just—” He dodged her next projectile—a boot—and finally managed to maneuver himself close enough to gently grasp her shoulders. “Agh, I’m trying to say I’m sorry!”

“I hope you’re more than sorry!” she cried, though her words were beginning to sound too choked to be truly angry. She beat her palms against his chest, tears starting to streak down her face in earnest. “You stupid… Did it ever remotely occur to you how scared I was?”

“Scared? Scared of what? My dear, please talk to me. Er, preferably in normal sentences, without projectile pillows…”

The last of her fire gone, she slumped against him, fingers tangling tightly in the folds of his yukata. “That… that you would… Do something like this! Freak out! And run away! And not want anything… to do with…”

“Want nothing to do with what?” Owain asked. “Our own child?” After a beat, she nodded miserably. “Perish the thought, my heart. Did you really think I could stoop so low? The manner of your dramatic reveal merely caught me off-guard.”

“Only you would cycle through ‘evil twin’ and ‘puppy’ before ‘pregnant,’” Robin said dryly. Her eyes, still damp, fluttered shut. “But Grima…”

“Don’t worry about Grima,” Owain said.

“How can I not worry about Grima? How can any of us afford to not worry about Grima?” she demanded, fixing her gaze on his again.

“Because,” Owain said, “he’s not going to win.”

“You can’t know that,” Robin protested. “And you can’t possibly want any child to grow up like you had to. Least of all your own.”

He sobered. “Of course I don’t,” he said. “And they won’t. Because that world will never come to
pass again, all right?” He leaned his forehead against hers. “My compatriots and I did not come jumping timelines just to lay down and roll over the moment Grima wishes to open his ugly maw.”

She let out a watery laugh. “Yeah?”

“Never again,” Owain repeated. “So don’t go worrying about the world our children will be born into. It will be far better than the ones we were.”

Robin pulled back, quirking a brow. “Children?” she said.

“Well, you’re not suggesting we stop at just one, are you?”

“I’m suggesting we take things one step at a time,” she replied. “And I’m also suggesting you watch your tone, before I figure out a spell to make you carry the next one.”

Owain’s face turned suitably horrified at that threat, letting out an awkward laugh as he rubbed at the back of his neck. “Er… yes…” Then, in an undertone: “And just when I thought you’d forgiven me…”
Chapter Summary

Lucina makes her decision and Chrom and Olivia find themselves the victims of more than one shocking discovery.

The rest of their vacation actually passed relatively uneventfully.

That is, barring the night Inigo had accidentally wrapped his yukata backward and Say’ri had all but chased him around the room, aghast, telling him he looked like a ghost whilst he squeaked out that he could fix it himself thank you very much!

Or when Lucina, Gerome, and Lysander had shown up on their last full day, and Gerome had attempted to keep his mask on the entire time, until a monkey stole it—at which point the newly arrived Owain had utterly failed to recognize him, deemed him an assassin, and started chasing him around the springs.

“As entertaining as this is, Owain, I should probably inform you that he’s an ally!” Inigo had shouted as his cousin jumped over a boulder with his broadsword in hand.

“Cousin, I believe this steam is obstructing your eyesight! This man has never before crossed my path, let alone fought beside me in battle!”

“Well, it would be a tad difficult to fight directly beside a wyvern rider—unless Robin finally relented about your levitation practice?”

“I haven’t!” Robin shouted to them.

“Did you fall in the springs and get waterlogged?” Owain asked. “The only male wyvern rider we have is Gerome!”

“Owain, for Naga’s sake, get a clue! That is Gerome!”

“Then why, pray tell, is he fighting me?” Owain demanded. “And where is his mask?”

“You started it!” Gerome roared in return. “And I lost it! To a monkey!”

“Haha! That just what an imposter would say!” Owain cried.

“Owain, you dolt, he lost it! I saw it happen! Lucina’s trying to get it back but if you don’t stop trying to kill him then she’s going to kill me when she gets back!”

So, all told, the rest of their vacation passed as uneventfully as any vacation that involved the Shepherds possibly could.

On their last night—during which Lysander had found himself infinitely entertained with the addition of several newfound honorary aunts and uncles—Inigo slipped out after dinner, eventually finding himself on a second-floor balcony that looked out over one of the springs. Mist clung to the water, dulling the reflection of the moon overhead.
He pulled his coat a little tighter, leaning over the railing. For all that the week had gotten off to a rocky start on multiple counts, it had ended on a far better note.

Now, though, reality would be due to come knocking. Their return to Dai’chi came with the promise of a bitter and unavoidable clash with Say’ri’s council, one that Inigo was not looking forward to living through for all he knew he had no intention of backing down from it. Further ahead, Grima loomed ever-menacing, a threat far larger than any uppity advisors could hope to match.

The door behind him creaked, leaving him spinning with a hand already on the hilt of his katana out of automatic habit. His alarm quickly faded into a warm smile. “Lucina. I thought you’d gone home already.”

Lucina shook her head, letting the door swing closed as she moved to stand beside him. “We’re staying until morning,” she explained. “It was not the original plan, but Shai’si…” She cleared her throat. “Well. She insisted that I deserved it.”

Inigo shot her a sidelong glance. “You’ve made up your mind, then?” he asked, trying his best not to get his hopes up.

“...I have,” Lucina said. She blew out a soft breath. “You’ve convinced me to join you.” Inigo’s heart leapt for a moment until she spoke again. “But not quite as you wished me to.”

His brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“I’ll return to Dai’chi with you, as you asked,” Lucina said. “And to Ylisse, eventually, I’m sure.” She shifted to face him. “But I will not reassume my title.”

Inigo blinked, his brow furrowing. “What are you saying?”

“I’m not the same woman you remember me to be,” Lucina said. “I cannot remember who she was, no less become her again. I’m no Exalt, Inigo. Not anymore.”

“Don’t say it like that,” Inigo said. “You’re still—” He broke off, swallowing hard. “You’re still my sister.” His voice rose a little. “You can still wield Falchion—”

“So can you, Inigo.”

He glanced away, running a hand over his jaw, because a part of him did ache for the blade that had answered to him for nearly four years now. “If you’d only been there right after we lost you,” he whispered, “you would have seen how utterly I failed without you.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“You don’t need to believe me,” he snapped.

“Good,” Lucina said. “Because I still don’t. You led them back, did you not? When all was lost, it was not I who brought them away from it. That was you.” Lucina fixed her gaze on him. “And I’m proud of you.”

His breath hitched in his lungs. Gods, how many times had he wished to hear those words over the last four years? How often had he longed for just one more hour, one more conversation with his elder sister? Just a few words to assure him he’d done something to make himself worthy of following in her footsteps?
Inigo couldn’t quite stop a sniffle, glancing away as he hurriedly wiped the heel of his hand under his eyes. “Sorry,” he mumbled. “It’s just…” He let out a shuddering breath. “I missed you.”

The corners of Lucina’s lips tipped up. “I think I missed you, too,” she said softly. “Even if I didn’t quite realize it at the time.”

Inigo sighed, inclining his gaze towards her again. “You’re sure about this?” he asked. “You really want to forfeit?”

“It seems like a matter of semantics to argue over a title that has little actual bearing in this timeline,” Lucina pointed out.

“…Point taken, but I’m still going to say it’s going to be really weird to technically rank you in any timeline,” Inigo replied. He paused, then asked quietly, “Do you still want to keep Falchion?”

He almost wanted her to say no. Despite that wish, after a moment she nodded. “For now, at least,” she said. “I think it will serve well to remind me of my duties.” She shot him a sidelong glance. “Would you mind that terribly?”

Inigo hesitated again, attempting to sort his thoughts into some kind of order before he spoke. “On one condition.”

Lucina shot him a puzzled look. “Name it,” she said.

“You don’t want to be my superior,” Inigo said, his words measured. “But neither do I want you to be my subordinate. So,” he continued. “Would you be my equal?”

She stared at him for a long moment. “So you wish to ascribe to Owain’s philosophy that we ought all be Exalts?”

A beat went by. “Damnit,” Inigo said. “That is what I’m saying, isn’t it? He’s going to be insufferable.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “It makes sense though, doesn’t it? You have the charisma and the leadership that I lack. We’d make a good team, I think.”

“I suppose we would,” Lucina replied. “All right, then.”

“You agree?” Inigo said, slightly shocked. He’d expected more of a fight out of her. Instead, he got a nod. “…All right then.” He paused for a moment more, then shot her a grin. “Now, if I could just have a smile before I go…?”

She shot him a blank look. “Whatever for?”

He sighed, shooting a look skyward. “Ah, and here I was hoping that perhaps amnesia would have left you just a little less grim. Fretting is contagious, you see. If you keep it up, you’ll have everyone infected with it!”

For a moment, she continued to stare at him flatly. “You think I’m contagious?”

“In a way, yeah!” Inigo said, a little too brightly, before pausing. “Well… You’re still our leader, you know. Even after all this time… We all look up to you.” He nudged at her arm. “So don’t forget it, all right? Smile a little! Even if you have to fake it. It’s not hard, you know. You just raise your cheeks like this! Here…”

Lucina let out a sound that was half cry of offense and half squeak. “Gah! Ret go uh mah fafe!”
“See there, Luce? That’s the cheeriest I’ve seen you in any timeline!” Inigo said brightly. “I think I feel a new infection coming on!”

“You’ll feel more dan dat if you don unhand muh!”

“Oh, all right, all right,” Inigo said with a roll of his eyes. “Keep your hair on. It’s nice hair, after all, even if it does look better on me.”

Lucina shook her head. “You are… stranger than I expected you to be.”

“After spending my lifetime with Owain, I’ve learned to take statements like that as compliments,” Inigo told her loftily. “But hey, cut me some slack. I’ve spent four years unknowingly neglecting my duties.”

“Your duties?” Lucina asked, a trace of alarm in her tone.

He winked. “My annoying little brother duties.” With that, he gave her a cheery wave, backing towards the door. “Night, Luce!”

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They arrived back in Dai’chi surprisingly on schedule, two nights later.

“Just… go ahead and wait out here,” Inigo said, glancing down the airy hallway as he paused in front of his parents’ door. “I’d rather take a few minutes to warm them up to the idea before I drop you into their laps.”

“You make it sound as if you’re about to gift them some kind of venomous snake,” Lucina replied.

“Well now you’re just being dramatic,” Inigo said. “Owain’s wearing off on you.” He rapped on the door frame, then shot Lucina a wink as Chrom’s muffled invitation reached them. “Be back in a minute.” He slid the door back, double-checking that Lucina was out of sight of the opening, and stepped inside with a grin.

“Ah. You’re back,” Chrom said, glancing up. “Good.”

The room was similar to Inigo’s own, if a little smaller. Olivia sat delicately on the center of the room’s futon, while Chrom stood upright, paused across the room.

“Hello,” Inigo said with a delicate wave. “I have some news.”

“So do we,” Chrom replied.

“Yeah, I bet mine’s bigger,” Inigo said. He paused, then, his grin fading as the room’s sober air set in. “...Has something happened?”

Wordlessly, Chrom crossed the room, fetching a creamy-white envelope off the dresser on his way over. “Read this. It arrived this morning.”

Brow furrowed, Inigo flipped the letter over. Even with the seal broken, the crest of Ylisse embedded into the cobalt wax was unmistakable. Below it, still mostly intact, was the crossed sword-and-javelin symbol of the Knight Commander, revealing the letter’s author—Frederick.
Inigo perused the letter’s contents too quickly to take in every single detail, but what he did note was more than enough. Having gone back to Ylisse at the end of the war with most of the other Shepherds, Henry had spent the last few months making use of his connections with the Grimleal. Though the specifics were spare, the news relayed was… disturbing, to say the least. Worse yet, Risen attacks in both Ylisse and Ferox had been increasing exponentially since the new year had started.

Inigo couldn’t quite bring himself to glance up, even when he reached the end of the page. Frederick had signed it Requesting your urgent return, and his eyes stayed glued to compulsively neat writing. “Gods,” he finally whispered.

“We’re already trying to arrange a ship,” Chrom said. “With any luck, we’ll be at sea by the end of the week.”

“I know you still haven’t set a date for the wedding, Ini, but…” Olivia started.

Inigo waved a hand at her. “Forget the wedding,” he muttered, though the words burned at his throat. “This is far more important.” He finally handed the letter back to his father.

“It might not be as bad as it looks,” Olivia ventured.

Inigo shook his head, his steps slightly unsteady as they carried him to sink to the edge of the futon beside her. “I’m quite certain it’s worse than it looks,” he whispered. He glanced up at Chrom once more. “I remember this happening,” he said. “It was less than a year before…” He cleared his throat. “Before Grima rose. The beginning of the end, if you will.” He scrubbed a hand through his hair. “And it’s coming almost a decade early.”

A long silence stretched out, followed by a soft knock and a quiet, “Is everything all right?”

Both Chrom and Olivia glanced toward the door. “Did you bring a friend?” Olivia asked.

“Ah,” Inigo said, feeling his cheek flush slightly at the fact that he’d almost entirely forgotten his entire reason for coming. Namely, the fact his dead sister wasn’t actually dead. “Well. About that.”
Yet a Masterpiece (Part 7) Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

In which Olivia becomes a voice of reason.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for such a wait on this one--I've been job hunting and it's sucked me dry. May be a bit of a gap for the next one, too, as I'm aiming to get a Heart of Stone fic out for Leo's birthday at the end of the month and who knows how long that will take me. I haven't been completely unproductive, though. I've been working on an updated soundtrack which is up to around midway through Part 4. The tracklist is here. I'll also be linking them to the first chapter when they're complete.

“So,” Inigo said when the explanation was given. “Er… surprise?”

A long moment passed. “You’re kind of terrible at this,” Lucina said flatly.

“Hey, didn’t see you saying anything,” Inigo shot back.

“Because I believe we agreed the news would best be broken by you?” Lucina shot back with a quirk of her brow.

Before Inigo could retort, Chrom cut in with a pointed cough. “Well, you certainly act like siblings.”

Brother and sister shot him the exact same look—silently, though, as Olivia rose from her seat and cut off any protest they could have made.

“Lucina,” she whispered, her voice cracking. Her gaze flicked to Inigo as she closed the gap between them, her next question directed at him. “Did you know? Is that why you never outright told me she was dead?”

“I hadn’t a clue,” Inigo admitted. “I just… didn’t want to break your heart. I thought maybe if I didn’t say…”

“I knew.” Olivia’s words were flat. “How else would you be the Exalt?”

“…Fair point,” Inigo said, rubbing the back of his neck.

“And I…” Their mother’s voice hitched again. “I mourned a daughter who had only so recently come into the world, yet one I would never meet. And now…” She stepped forward, resting her hands on Lucina’s shoulders. “Here you are.”

Tears spilled from her eyes, then, as she drew her long-lost daughter into an embrace. Chrom and Inigo exchanged a glance over their heads, the latter with a melancholy half-smile.
“I’ll leave you be,” he said under his breath.

“There’s no need for that,” Chrom replied.

“No,” Inigo said, watching Lucina tentatively return Olivia’s embrace. “I think I should. I need to speak to Say’ri, anyways.” He paused, then added, “Can I borrow that letter again?”

Chrom nodded, passing it back. “Very well.” A softness crossed his features as the letter changed hands. “Thank you.”

Inigo wondered, wryly, just what he was being thanked for as he slipped away.

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“It went well, then?”

Say’ri spoke without turning, her posture impeccably straight as she poured over the paperwork that had gathered in their absence. Inigo didn’t speak for a long moment, weighing his words.

She glanced back at his silence, concern flickering over her features. “Inigo?”

“Read this,” he said quietly, extending Frederick’s letter. “I think it will explain better than I can.”

She rose to her feet, catching the paper in her fingers, blessedly not asking for any more clarification. It didn’t seem to take her any longer to read it than it had taken him, though the seconds stretched out agonizingly.

“I see,” she finally said when she looked up. “They’ll be leaving as soon as they can, I imagine.”

“Yeah,” Inigo said. “I mean, for all we know, this might be…” He sucked in a breath. “Gods, I really didn’t think it would be this soon.”

“It might not be,” Say’ri offered. “‘Tis always the potential of a false alarm.”

“My life never works like that,” Inigo replied dryly. His tone softened to a murmur, eyes searching hers. “I have to go.”

“Aye,” she said. “Of course.”

“I don’t know how long it’ll be. Could be months, could be years. If this is really Grima, then I…” I might never come back. “But I swear to you I’ll be on a boat to here the moment it’s settled.”

A long moment passed before she answered in an odd tone. “You speak as though I’m not coming with you.”

“I thought…” He swallowed. “You’d be needed here.”

“Aye,” Say’ri said. “I’m sure. And you will need me there.” She stepped forward, raising a hand to brush his cheek. “If this truly is what you fear, I shall hardly do my people any good if I sit and twiddle my thumbs half a world away from the harbinger of their destruction.” She slid her fingers through his hair. “You will need every pair of hands you can possibly raise against Grima, and I will gladly offer mine own.”
Inigo hesitated before the tension in his body eased, leaving him slumped against her. “Thank the gods,” he said thickly. “I was afraid I’d…” He left the thought of getting on a boat and never managing to see her again unsaid and shuddered. “I can’t do it again,” he whispered. “That world, I can’t go back.” His voice rose with the edge of hysteria. “I can’t live through that again.”

“They promise,” she whispered, “with everything in my power that you won’t.”

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When Inigo did the math, he figured he had probably gotten enough sleep to make two good night’s rest—stretched out over the previous five. It had been that long since they’d returned from their vacation, and they were due to board a boat for Ylisse in less than two more days.

He was laid out flat on the futon, one leg crossed loosely over the other at the knee as he watched the shadows of the room shift oh-so-gradually as the night wore on. Say’ri slept on beside him, close but not quite touching, near enough for him to follow the quiet rhythm of her breath. It hadn’t taken him long at all to grow so used to the sound he found himself hardly able to sleep without it.

With a delicate touch, he traced a hand down the curve of her shoulder, laid bare by the shift of her nightclothes. Had it all been a pipe dream, he wondered, to pretend he could build a life with her? Emmeryn’s death had only briefly been thwarted. The manner of Basilio’s hadn’t even been altered. Say’ri had so narrowly averted her own, by far the largest change in the timeline as far as Inigo was concerned, yet the solstice’s assassination attempt had come far too near for comfort.

And now, if Grima really was coming early, there was no guarantee for anyone coming back out alive.

Inigo sucked in a breath, trying to ignore the tightness in his chest that kept him from taking in as much air as he wanted. From the moment he’d tumbled to the ground in the woods outside Ylisstol, he’d banked his entire plan on this new timeline remaining parallel to the first. He was supposed to have almost fourteen years to change the past, not the mere four he’d already lived through. They were supposed to have a gap, a respite—there was a reason all the Shepherds’ children bar Lucina and Gerome had been born in the immediate three-year aftermath of the Valm War. Of course there had been a flurry of marriages and births when everyone had thought the world at peace.

Inigo’s heart ached for his cousin a little more than the rest.

Owain’s reaction had been much the same as Inigo’s; surprise followed by resignation. Fate had gone from marching on undeterred to recklessly careening ahead, and it seemed there was little they could do but try their damnedest to catch back up.

Presently, Inigo sat up, scrubbing a hand through his hair. Say’ri stirred beside him, his name slightly slurred as she murmured it.

“Go back to sleep, my love,” he whispered, tracing around the rim of her ear with one finger. “I’ll be back soon.”

She gave a soft hum at that, and quickly fell back to the stillness of rest.

“I don’t deserve you,” he murmured, then shoved the covers aside and got to his feet.
The main room was a little warmer than the bedroom, thanks to the warm glow of the brazier, but Inigo fumbled in the middling light for his coat anyway, knowing the outdoors would prove far colder.

The air bit at him, as he expected. The weight—or lack thereof—of his katana still felt odd at his hip, though the rustle of dead leaves to his side still sent him grasping for the hilt.

A tabby cat emerged from the bushes, hissing, leaving Inigo to blow out a sigh and do his best to ease the tension in his shoulders. It wasn’t as if a horde of Risen was going to pop out of the ground inside the palace itself. The cat scampered off, swishing its tail in distaste. Inigo pinched the bridge of his nose, thinking to himself that he was more than a mess already.

Though winter hadn’t fully loosened its grip yet, the most stubborn of early blooming plants were beginning to show their buds. He couldn’t help but wonder as he followed the winding stone paths what the palace would look like in full bloom; with a pang, he pondered if he’d ever get to see it.

It would be spring proper by the time they made it back to Ylisstol. How many seasons would pass for them there? How long until Grima reared his head, until they put the Fell Dragon down for good or died trying? Though perhaps other thoughts should have been occupying the forefront of his mind, Inigo couldn’t help but think of the fact that his marriage was effectively on complete hold until they managed to return to Dai’chi—and who knew how many months, or years, that would be?

*If they managed to live that long.*

He didn’t think he life had felt so tangentially *finite* since he’d left his own timeline.

A flash of movement caught his eye again, shimmering and ethereal. He turned toward it, eyes going wide as he let out a soft breath through pursed lips.

Olivia hadn’t even started dancing, yet already the grace of her motions was mesmerizing. She dipped into a deep stretch, partially obscured by the surrounding trees.

Instinct bid him to leave—gods knew his first reaction would be to have an entire meltdown if their situations were reversed. Before he could take a step, though, his mother lifted her head, turned, and let out a squeak.

“Sorry!” he said with a cringe. “I didn’t mean—I was just passing!”

Olivia splayed a hand over her heart, squinting in his direction. “Inigo? Is that you?”

“Er,” Inigo said, batting a branch aside with his hand as he emerged into the clearing proper. “Yeah. Sorry.” Part of him was surprised his mother was alone; she and Lucina had been all but inseparable since their reunion. Add in the fact Lysander was busy soaking up every ounce of newfound attention he could find, and Inigo had found himself doing little more than hovering on the fringes of his newly expanded family.

Presently, Olivia let out a heavy sigh. “Goodness, you scared the life out of me.”

“Yes. Well.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “At least I wasn’t hiding in a barrel.”

Olivia made a strangled sort of sound at that. Their first few months in Valm had been rather terrifying in that regard—once Olivia had learned of Inigo’s true identity, and the fact he shared her greatest passion, he’d been hard pressed to find anywhere safe from her prying eyes. The barrel had been one of her tamer ideas.
At least her sneaking had died down as the war unfolded. Inigo did have a sudden, alarmed though then, about remaining very careful on the confines of the ship back.

“It seems so silly of me, in hindsight,” Olivia said with a sigh.

“It was rather silly of you, Mother,” Inigo pointed out. “Not to mention mortifying.”

“There’s no need to be mortified, though. You’re as wonderful as I expected.”

He balked, feeling his face grow pale. “Uh… and how would you know that?”

“Oh,” Olivia said, one hand flying up to cover her mouth. “No, I just was speaking of Owain and Robin’s wedding.”

“Oh,” Inigo echoed, trying not to dwell on that disaster of an evening. “Right. Hold on, didn’t I make you cry that night?”

“You’re saying that like it was a bad thing,” Olivia said, dropping into another stretch.

“It… wasn’t?”

“You understand that people can cry for reasons other than being upset, don’t you?” she asked. “Because if not, I may have to send a word of warning to your fiancée.”

“Yes, Mother, I grew up at the end of the world, not under a rock,” Inigo replied. He paused. “Although in some ways those two weren’t that different.” Olivia let out a somber chuckle at that. “Er,” he continued, “so you’re saying you weren’t crying because of how awful I inevitably looked?”

She straightened again, fixing her gaze on him. “No,” she said. “I was crying because in the entire time I’d known you—before you explained who you were and after—that dance was the happiest I had ever seen you.”

Her words brought him up short. If he took out the nerves and anxiety leading up to them and his utter despair regarding what happened after the fact, if he focused solely on that one dance, it did have to count up there as one of the happiest moments of his life. They had been Inigo and Say’ri, nothing more and nothing less—unclouded by his dwelling on her death, or the grief yet to come of Yen’fay’s sacrifice, or the now seemingly endless burdens Chon’sin placed on the both of them.

Inigo glanced away, scrubbing a hand over his face. “I don’t know if I can do it,” he whispered.

“What?”

He gestured vaguely, as if it would help his case. “It. All of it. I—” He broke off, voice cracking. “Some days I feel like I can hardly even be a functional human being, no less an Exalt, no less a—

a husband. Say’ri’s council is openly against our marriage; the people are indifferent at best on the matter and more than apprehensive at worst. I just keep wondering if one day she’ll wake up and realize she’s trapped herself with a hopeless buffoon that gave her no advantages whatsoever.” He let out a humorless laugh. “And that’s if Grima lets us live that long.” He glanced away, blowing out a breath. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to unload on you.”


Inigo let out a soft laugh. “Fancy that,” he said. “You started this war with one child and now you suddenly have three.” His lips quirked. “Even if two of them are your contemporaries and one of
them has a child of her own.”

“Hey,” Olivia said, reaching out to lay a hand on his arm. “Just because you’re only a handful of years younger than me doesn’t mean I don’t love you and Lucina any less than… Lucina.” She sighed. “You know, I really wish you’d told us who you were back in the Plegian War. I would have named the little Lucina something different.”

Inigo frowned at that. He’d pondered a little about that, especially since Virion and Cherche had—rather unexpectedly—decided against naming their son Gerome. The boy, born the previous fall, had instead been dubbed Jules. “Like what?” he wondered aloud.

“I’ve always been rather partial to Soleil,” Olivia admitted. “I suppose if I were ever to have another daughter…”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure you’re just going to end up with the disaster case that is me,” Inigo replied. “Sorry about that.”

“Inigo,” Olivia said.

He ducked his head to hide the grimace coming to his features. “I’ll leave you to your practice, if you want,” he offered under his breath.

“Inigo,” she said again. “I know what you’re going through.”

He looked up again, his mouth open with some half-formed retort on his lips that definitely wasn’t going to get thought through all the way before it came out his mouth.

“Do you think half of Ylisse wasn’t up in arms when your father proposed to a no-name Ferox dancer?” Olivia asked. Inigo paused, his mouth closing. “One that he’d only known for a matter of months? We had a short engagement, Inigo. I’m sure you can guess what people thought.”

Brought up short, he nodded stiffly. Her implication wasn’t exactly a leap of a conclusion, not when Lucina had been born less than a year after their parents’ wedding.

“And during those brief few months,” she continued, “I wondered many times if it would be better to call it off. I asked him if it wouldn’t be better for him to marry someone more politically suited. Maribelle, perhaps, or Sumia.”

Part of Inigo almost wanted to gag at the idea—even if, as an adult now, he could so clearly see his mother’s thought process on the matter, some childish part of him couldn’t help but reject the notion in its entirety. Those were his parents. “I see,” he said noncommittally.

“So I asked him, a few weeks before the wedding, if he really wanted to start up the storm that would surely come from marrying me. What your father said was this: sometimes people who dislike you will find a way to dislike you no matter what you do. There would be a storm no matter who he married, and he didn’t want to weather it with anyone except me.”

For a moment, Inigo thought of his childhood—the years before the dreaded Your father isn’t coming home, before the threat of the Grimleal became so great that Chrom had spent far more time out of the palace than in it. He thought of nights the four of them had spent curled up in front of the fire, with Chrom and Olivia narrating tales of grandeur and fallen heroes to their wide-eyed offspring. It had been where Inigo had first heard the stories he’d hence gone back and lived through.

Lucina always wanted to hear the epic stories, the Shepherds’ battles and their father’s daring.
Inigo, instead, had been partial to the tale of how his parents had fallen in love. A perfect fairytale, he’d thought, something he’d grown to long for himself when he’d gotten older.

Yet love wasn’t a fairytale, he realized. He’d gotten it wrong—stumbled into the arms of the wrong people, taken months to come to the realization when he *had* found the right one, lashed out and hurt her and made mistakes that no charming knight fresh out of a romance novel ever would have.

The realization that his parents’ tale was no more the perfect love story than his own shocked him more than it probably should have, but it was something of a comfort as well.

“That’s…” Inigo trailed off, clearing his throat. “That’s how I feel.”

Olivia offered him a soft smile. “Then I think,” she said, “as long as you hold to that, you’ll be all right.”

He let out a sigh. “I just wish,” he said, “the wedding didn’t have to wait until whenever it is we manage to make it back here.”

The edge of a devious, worrying smile appeared on his mother’s features. “Says who?”
Yet a Masterpiece (Part 7) Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

A long-awaited moment.

Inigo had vanished.

The last time Say’ri had seen him had been when she’d woken that morning; had he already been gone before she had risen, she might’ve really worried. He had still been sound asleep when she left—but that had been the last time she’d seen him.

Owain, rather worryingly, had disappeared as well. Robin seemed less than concerned by that, though Say’ri spent the day half-wondering if she was going to receive a tip from the local jail about her fiancé and his cousin.

She found herself too busy to worry much, though, setting affairs in order for their journey to Ylisse. Chi’hiro would be bearing the brunt of responsibility in Say’ri’s absence, a task the queen did not envy. Disappearing to another continent with hardly a word of warning was certain to go over poorly, and she could only hope the explanation she presented upon her return would prove satisfactory.

Of course, if an eldritch dragon deity rose from his thousand-year slumber, it would certainly provide a ‘reasonable’ excuse.

By dinner, she still hadn’t caught sight of Inigo, though at least the worst of her work was finished. All that remained was to pack her own personal items for the trip, and she could worry about that in the morning, considering their ship wasn’t due to depart until mid-afternoon. For now, she trudged up the stairs, keen on the idea of a cup of tea and the hope her wayward fiancé had found it in himself to return.

Inigo did not greet her when she entered—but what did was a small basket, set upon the low table in the corner, overflowing with a plant of dark leaves and white blossoms.

Well, she thought to herself wryly, if it wasn’t the first sign of his existence she’d seen all day. A scrap of parchment, tucked into the leaves, caught her eye as she neared, bearing her name in familiar handwriting.

She unfolded the note, scanning its contents. Meet me at the gazebo in the east garden at 9:30. -I, it read, then, P.S. It’s a formal occasion.

Say’ri set the note back in its place, then crossed her arms. Just what exactly was he planning?

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He’d grown to love the gardens.
Perhaps it was the water, so prominently featured yet so intricately woven into the garden, or perhaps it was the abundance of evergreens that meant it never looked quite as dead as Ylisse’s equivalent did in the wintertime. The gazebo in the center sat perched out over the largest pond in the palace; the soft light of the candles inside crept out over the water.

Inigo leaned over the railing, a smile tugging on his lips as he stared out over the black expanse. Back in January, Gaius had—very deliberately, everyone knew—proposed to Cordelia during the coldest week of the entire year, when every water feature in the palace had been frozen solid. To Vaike’s greatest dismay, the ginger thief had then proceeded to go skating across the frozen surface, making up a merry little ditty along the lines of “I’m not in the lake~!” Then, before the cold snap broke, the newly engaged couple had decided to take a long and extended trip back to Ylisstol via Valm Harbor to Port Ferox, and had thus become the only couple so far to avoid the traditional dunking.

Inigo had a feeling the rest of the Shepherds might have protested harder, had they not been too busy laughing at Vaike’s utter horror and his vow of vengeance.

Footsteps on gravel jerked him from his reverie and his smile lifted up into a genuine grin as he turned around. “Oh, good, you got my note.”

“‘Twas not as though you made much effort to hide it,” Say’ri replied, lifting the hem of her dress with one hand as she ascended the two steps into the gazebo. “Mm, that would rather defeat the purpose,” Inigo agreed. “It wouldn’t be a very good secret rendezvous if only one person knows about it.”

“Aye, is that what this is?” Say’ri asked with a quirk of her brow. Inigo fell silent for a moment as he closed the distance between them, then admitted, “All right, that might be a bit of an exaggeration.” Deflecting the subject with a crooked smile, he caught her hands and lifted them to his lips. “You look amazing,” he murmured. “I feel underdressed.”

“‘Twas you who called it a ‘formal occasion,’” she replied.

“This is what I wore to Owain and Robin’s wedding,” Inigo protested. “It counts.”

“Your cousin was married in the middle of the woods,” Say’ri pointed out. “Still counts,” he said sullenly. He brightened a moment later, though. “Anyways, this is beside the point.”

“The point of what, exactly? Just what scheme have you spent the entire day planning?”

“Scheme?” Inigo asked. “Moi? It wounds me, my love, to hear you accuse me so. Can’t a man plan a romantic evening without ulterior motives?”

Say’ri didn’t answer with anything but a deadpan stare.

“...Stop looking at me like that,” Inigo complained.

“Aye, perhaps. When you admit we both know I am right.”

After a moment, he let out an exaggerated sigh. “All right, all right, you win. Just give me a minute, I’m getting there. I did have a plan that you’re kind of ruining.”
“Fie, color me impressed,” she said. “You’ve planned something?”

“Would you hush,” he chided, sliding a hand to her waist and shifting to guide her steps. “Let me have this.”

“Oh, aye,” she said with a fraction of a smile. “Of course, ‘twould help if I actually knew what it was you were trying to have.”

He ducked his head, bringing his lips to her ear. “Perhaps,” he said, “a romantic evening that happens to begin…” He dipped her then—unexpectedly, judging by her sudden grip on his arm—“with my sweeping you off your feet.”

When they straightened, Say’ri’s smile had faded from teasing to melancholy. “Aye,” she said. “‘Tis as good a way as any to spend our last night here.”

“You don’t have to say it like that,” Inigo said. “It sounds so final.”

“I pray it won’t be,” she replied.

They fell into silence, but for Inigo’s soft humming to keep their footsteps in time.

“‘Tis a pity we’ll miss the cherry blossoms,” Say’ri finally said. “I was looking forward to your seeing them.”

“I was looking forward to my seeing them as well,” Inigo said. “Since you seem to love them so much.”

“Aye,” she said. “I do.” Her lips quirked slightly. “‘Tis a part of me that has wished, since I was a little girl, to be wed under them.”

Inigo slowed to a stop, his face coloring a little as Say’ri’s gaze turned piercing. “Funny you should say that,” he murmured.

She lifted a brow in silent query.

“I have two questions I want to ask you,” he continued, dropping his hand from the pose of their dance to settle on her waist. “The first is: Do you want to marry me?”

“...Aye,” she said after a beat. “Have I given you cause to doubt it?”

“No,” he said with a chuckle. “Gods, no. Although I am rather glad you said that, because it would have made the second question a little more awkward if you hadn’t.”

“And that would be?”

“...Do you want to marry me tonight?”

A long moment passed. “Would that I could, Inigo,” Say’ri said. “Even without the council’s disapproval, ‘tis not as if there are no protocols for such things. There are traditions to be adhered to, people who must be invited lest we offend them enough to cause another war… ‘Tis not as though a royal wedding can be planned in a day.”

“Well, no,” Inigo said. “Not that sort of wedding. And I’m not saying we can’t arrange one of those later. As far as I see it, though, that sort of wedding seems to be for just about everyone except the bride and groom.” He leaned his forehead against hers. “There are alternatives, you know.”
Say’ri jerked a little, pulling back to meet his gaze again. “You’re serious,” she breathed.

“I do believe I am, yes,” Inigo said. “As long as your definition of ‘serious’ lines up with the fact that this is my rather roundabout way of asking if you want to elope with me.”

She paused, her expression torn. “The council would throw a fit,” she finally whispered.

“Well, like I said. We can have a ‘proper’ wedding later,” he said, finger-quotes included, “and they need never know.” He shrugged. “Or, look at the flip side of the coin. They can’t exactly stop us from getting married if we’re already married, can they?”

With a shake of her head, she whispered, “You’re mad.”

“And you say it with all the love and affection in your heart,” Inigo replied.

She hesitated again. “You mean truly, then,” she said. “A proper wedding.”

“Just a very small one,” he agreed. “I’ve already talked to Brady. Approval or no—say the word and he’d be more than happy to wed us.” A beat went by. “Started crying the moment I asked him, actually.” When she didn’t answer, he lifted a hand to her chin. “Hey. It’s just an option. We absolutely don’t have to if you’d rather wait.”

“Nay, ‘tis not that,” Say’ri said. “‘Twas just… not an option I’d considered. I forget sometimes how little you care for the proper way of doing things.”

“Because the proper way of doing things is usually incredibly boring,” Inigo said. “See: the entire peace conference we just went through.”

She rolled her eyes at that, then added in a more somber tone, “You’re certain, then?”

“Darling,” he whispered, “I don’t think I’ve ever been more certain of anything in my life.” He raised his other hand, his gaze serious as he brushed his thumbs over her cheekbones. “Before I met you,” he began, “there were a great many things I was willing to die for. I would’ve died for my friends, and for my family—what little remained of it, that is. My people, when they yet lived. My cause, when I came back to this time. Some days… I came quite a bit closer to that fate than you might realize.” The fall of Ylisstol in his long-dead future sprang helpfully to mind. “And you came into my life. Then, somewhere, in the midst of my blushing and stuttering and stumbling head over heels… I realized I had something I was willing to live for.”

Say’ri dipped her head, his name quiet on her lips. “‘Tis so easy for me sometimes to forget what you’ve been through, when there is so often such a smile on your face,” she said. “‘Twas the light of it, I think, that carried me through the shadows of this war. And I can but hope ‘twill do the same for many years to come.” She shook her head. “What a reversal of our fortunes, is it not? With you standing there, attempting to convince me to wed you.”

“I think my methods are more persuasive than yours,” Inigo said, sliding his hands to her shoulders so he had room to lean forward and press his lips to the corner of her jaw.

“Ah, is that how it worked, then?”

“Oh, absolutely.”

“Ironic,” she murmured through a crooked smile, “since you were the one who needed persuading.”
“Now, I’m not sure you’re being entirely fair.”

“Mayhap you’re just remembering wrong.”

“Whatever helps you sleep at night.”

Say’ri barked a laugh, then shot back, “Whatever helps you sleep at night, mayhap!”

Inigo only grinned at that.

After a moment, she shook her head fondly. “Aye, then. I suppose we shouldn’t keep Brady waiting.”

His eyes widened. “...You want to, then?”

“Fie, of course I want to, you fool,” she said. “Did you think I would cut you down after waiting this long for you to gather up your nerve?”

Slowly, he stepped back, leaving his hands on her for a lingering moment. “Okay,” he finally said. “Okay. I’ll be right back. Don’t go anywhere!”

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“...and so my beloved cousin has finally, at very long last, after a most excruciating wait, decided to join the illustrious ranks of married men...”

“It really oughtn’t surprise me,” Say’ri said, “that out of everyone you could’ve called in to witness the ceremony, you picked your cousin.”

“Darling,” Inigo said, very seriously, “if I hadn’t, we would not have heard the end of it for the next decade.”

“No,” Owain agreed. “You would not.”

Robin snorted, then put in, “I did tell you. Package deal.”

“We’re not—” Inigo started.

“—a package deal,” Owain finished.

“For one, I’m far more attractive,” Inigo added with a pointed quirk of his brow.

Owain mirrored the expression. “Yet I happen to be a great deal more hilarious.”

“That’s a matter of opinion.”

“An incorrect opinion, perhaps,” Owain said with a sniff.

“Okay, so you’re not denying I’m the better looking one, excellent,” Inigo said.

“‘Tis a veritable miracle,” Say’ri interjected, “that you are both so wildly different and yet manage to be exactly alike.”
They both shot her identical, sulking expressions. “My darling, please don’t insult me like that,” Inigo said with a pout. He sidled up to her, draping his arm over her shoulders. “Is that really the note you want to begin our marriage on?”

She shot him a stern look, replied, “The truth?” and reached over to pinch his waist. It resulted in an affected yelp and further pouting.

“Not gonna lie, Inigo,” Robin cut in again. “She’s bloody perfect for you.”

He spared a moment to shoot the tactician a grin at that, but his gaze quickly returned to Say’ri. For a moment, she merely gazed at him, attention drawn to the glint of the Brand in his eye. A part of her wondered if their children would bear the same mark, and where.

Was that what the rest of her life held? Marriage, children, ruling a country she’d never expected to inherit, an eldritch deity bent on the destruction of mankind, and not necessarily in that order?

A pointed cough finally reached them. “Ya ready t’ get on with this or what?” Brady asked, scaling the steps into the gazebo. The hint of a smile accompanied by red-rimmed eyes belied the gruffness of his tone.

Say’ri glanced up again—and found herself wondering if she’d ever seen a wider smile on Inigo’s face.

“Oh,” he said. “More than ready, I think.”
Chapter Summary

Children, innuendos, and sparring matches.

Chapter Notes

Another long wait has passed, but this time I have an excuse—I finally found a job. I'm only working a couple days a week at the moment and I'm just a handful of chapters away from some Very Exciting Content, so hopefully the updates will pick back up again soon, but no guarantees.

Sunshine poured through the ship’s port window, bathing the entire room in yellow despite the narrowness of the entrance. Even the meager morning light seemed blinding with the room as small as it was—there was just enough room for a narrow walkway around a bed that could only barely be qualified as a double, and the only other furniture was a low trunk at the foot of it. The scene had become a familiar sight in the past three weeks, though one that would soon be no more —traveling in a single ship, rather than a military fleet, had allowed the Shepherds to hire on a pair seafaring wind mages, cutting the time of their journey in half relative to their arrival in Valm despite taking a far longer route by distance. Time was of the essence and extra weeks at sea would have been a waste of it.

“‘Tis a pity.”

Say’ri’s voice was soft enough that Inigo didn’t register it immediately—lazy, dawdling mornings wiled away in a state of half-slumber had become something of a guilty habit on their seafaring journey, a habit that would surely be more than uncomfortable to break when they returned to land once more. He’d assuaged his guilt about the matter with both the fact his wife had very quickly taken to joining him, and the realization that three weeks on a ship might well be the closest they ever came to a honeymoon.

“Mm?” he finally said, shifting his hand to run it through her hair. “What’s a pity?”

“That we’re not returning to your homeland under brighter circumstances,” Say’ri said, shifting to lay her chin on his chest and fix her gaze on him.

“Ah,” Inigo said, glancing toward the low wooden ceiling. “Yeah. I suppose it is.” He blew out a soft breath. “Honestly, I’ve been trying not to think about how weird it’s going to be.”

She shot him a questioning look when he looked down again.

“I’ve been in the palace a grand total of twice since we came back to this time. The last time I saw it before that… Well. I’d rather not dwell on that.”

“I see,” she murmured.
“It’s been a very long time since I called the palace home. Hell, it’s been a long time since I’ve set foot in Ylisse, period.” One corner of his mouth tipped up impishly. “I was a different man than.” Too quickly for her to swat him away, he lifted a hand to poke her nose. “Thanks for that.”

Said nose wrinkled in an affronted and yet entirely adorable fashion. Inigo couldn’t quite stifle a giggle. “What?” Say’ri demanded, levering herself a few inches off him.

“Sorry,” he said. “That was just really cute. Couldn’t help myself.”

“Fie, I hadn’t realized that marriage was somehow going to turn you into even more of a sap than you were before.”

“Oh, love, don’t say that like you’re not enjoying it.” She rolled her eyes at his insufferable smirk, but had no chance to answer before pounding footsteps sounded outside. “Gods, did someone let the horses loose?” Inigo asked, propping himself up on one elbow.

“Uncle Inigo?” a high, impatient voice came from outside the door.

Say’ri let out a short laugh. “Apparently, ‘tis merely your nephew.”

Inigo let out a sigh, flinging back the covers. “Farewell, my last hopes of sleep,” he said. “And need I remind you he happens to be your nephew now as well?”

“Uncle Inigo?” Lysander called again, his tone rising in both pitch and volume.

The boy was standing with his arms crossed, chin imperiously raised, when Inigo opened the door. “Good morning,” Inigo said.

“Uncle Owain,” Lysander said, “wants you.”

“Does he now?” Inigo mused. “I hadn’t realized he wasn’t capable of fetching me himself.”

Lysander continued with his lofty stare for a moment more, then abruptly asked, “What’s a spur?”

Inigo blinked, brow furrowing at the question. He shot a glance back at Say’ri, now perched on the side of the bed, and got only an equally blank look in return. “It’s… a piece of metal you can put on your boot when you’re riding a horse?” he ventured.

The boy’s face lit up. “Are we going to ride the horses?” he demanded.

“Er… I don’t… think so?”

Lysander huffed, his mussed bangs moving slightly with the movement. “Uncle Owain said he wanted to spur with you.”

Inigo paused for a moment more before comprehension dawned. “Oh. He wants to spar with me. That’s different. It means to fight.”

Lysander looked vaguely disappointed by that, but scarcely had a chance to respond before Owain came bolting around the corner. He pulled up short, gasping, finally managing, “There you are.” He glanced up, quickly adding, “Good morning, cousin.”

Inigo answered with a lazy wave. “Are we getting our parenting practice in?”

“Heroes… of legend… need not practice… the innate instincts of paternity… since surely… they shall come naturally… when the fated hour tolls…” Owain replied, still breathing a little heavier
than normal. “At least I surely hope they do.”

“Why do you want to fight Uncle Inigo?” Lysander asked, turning wide eyes in Owain’s direction.

“He always wants to fight me,” Inigo said, pretending to examine his hands. “With unimaginative insults if nothing else.”

“My insults are the opposite of unimaginative!” Owain cried. “I employ the epitome of creativity when I take it upon myself to vex you!”

Lysander glanced blankly between them at that. “...What?”

“He means he thinks he’s clever,” Inigo explained.

“I am clever!”

“‘Tis a wonder Lucina lets you both near her child when you do naught but bicker in his presence,” Say’ri put in, coming around to stand just behind Inigo. “You’ll make a poor influence on the boy.”

Lysander beamed at her. He’d taken to his life upheaval surprisingly well for a three-year-old—his angst about leaving the comfort of the home he’d spent his entire life in had been mostly outweighed by the fact he could very easily make himself the center of attention of just about every Shepherd present. Lucina seemed to have been more relieved at the sudden influx of willing babysitters more than anything else.

“You’re saying that like any of his other options are any better influences,” Inigo riposted, then finally glanced up at Owain. “What’s this about wanting to fight me, then?”

“Aha!” Owain said. “Those in our esteemed company have taken it upon themselves to arrange a friendly tournament on this illustrious day. I took it upon myself to inform you so that you may engage in the process of reacquainting yourself with your... breadknife.”

Inigo snorted. “You just want the chance to break it again,” he accused. “And I’ll have you know I’ve spent plenty of time ‘reacquainting’ myself with it these past few weeks.”

“Huh,” Owain said, raising a brow. “Here I thought you’d spent the past few weeks busy acquainting yourself with your wife.”

With a strange sound that seemed to resemble a peep more than anything else, Inigo bloomed into several fabulous shades of red. “There—” he squeaked out, before clearing his throat and starting again. “There are innocent ears present!”

“I’m pretty sure he doesn’t know what we’re talking about,” Owain pointed out, looking down at Lysander, who was glancing between the two of them with curious eyes and a slightly tilted head.

“I’m pretty sure it—” Inigo broke off again to cough. “That it doesn’t need to be talked about! Naga’s sake, is nothing sacred?”

“Not especially, no,” Owain replied.

Inigo didn’t deign to answer, instead sliding his gaze over to Say’ri and demanding, “Would you stop smirking?”

“I am doing no such thing,” Say’ri replied.

Evidently having tired of the conversation no longer revolving around him, Lysander half-stumbled
forward, arms raised up. “Aunt Say’ri,” he beseeched.

A fond smile stole its way onto her features. “Come here then, love,” she said, bending down to meet him.

“I thought I was ‘love,’” Inigo complained as Say’ri settled the boy on her hip.

“Don’t pout, my love,” she replied, reaching up to press a kiss to his cheek. Inigo’s face flamed again. “Come, Lysander, perhaps we ought find your mother, aye?”

They started on their way, Lysander chattering animatedly as they went. “You’re an embarrassment,” Owain said after a long moment of Inigo’s staring after them.

“Shut up.”

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Unfortunately, the Shepherds’ ‘tournament’ came to a rather unceremonious end only two rounds in, when Chrom accidentally broke a barrel of rum while dueling with Vaike, turning the floor of their makeshift arena into a dangerously sticky mess.

Without a declared winner, they had all relocated elsewhere, and the event quickly devolved into casual, unofficial sparring. Inigo had tangled with Owain twice, though it had come to draw when they each won a round and Robin had broken in before the rubber match to ask where her husband had hidden some of the papers she’d lent him. Owain had gone scampering off while Inigo had, in turn, paired back up with his other favorite partner.

Despite the relative chill of the sea air outside, it was stuffy enough below decks that Inigo’s hair was beginning to stick to his brow by the time Amatsu finally clattered to the floor. “Ha!” Inigo managed, lowering the tip of his katana and swiping the back of his hand over his forehead. His hair was probably sticking up at some wildly comical angle now, but he couldn’t quite bring himself to care.

Say’ri glanced between his face and her sword. “Fie, and just what was that?”

“‘Tis something I might’ve accepted with Falchion, but there is—” She cut herself off to inhale deeply, rubbing at her temple. “Absolutely no form, style, or school in which that move should ever be executed with a katana.”

“Hey, it worked, didn’t it?” Inigo shot back.

Say’ri snorted. “By some miracle,” she replied. “‘Tis a wonder you didn’t break that blade half a decade before Owain did the honor for you.”

“Well, pardon me for having hardly any formal schooling with a weapon that barely anyone I knew had ever laid a hand on,” Inigo pointed out, though with a crooked smile and a lilting tone that kept his words from being sharp. “You may care to remember I grew up in the apocalypse.” He sheathed the sword in question, stepping toward Say’ri. “Besides, I’ve got you to teach me, don’t I?”
“Aye, and that’s all you keep me around for, is it?”

“Mm, clearly nothing else.” He lifted her chin with a hand and murmured, “No hard feelings. We both know I couldn’t have done it if you weren’t training with a new blade yourself.”

Say’ri shot a glance sideways at her fallen blade, her expression darkening. Inigo’s smile slipped—it had taken this long since Yen’fay’s death to convince her to even begin carrying the oddity of a blade that was Amatsu, even if it had rightfully fallen to her.

If it wasn’t the perfect mirror image of his own beginning with Falchion, he hadn’t a clue what was.

Inigo’s gaze wandered to the assembled crowd. A few pairs were still fighting, but the session had begun to die down, and he automatically sought out Falchion before looking up at the one who wielded it now. His hand fell from Say’ri’s face as she turned away to fetch her weapon; he cleared his throat and began to study the boards of the deck beneath their feet.

“Inigo?”

“Yeah, Luce?” he answered automatically.

Lucina strode past the others with her head raised. “I was hoping I might trade a round or two with you.”

Inigo fell back on his automatic reaction—to let out a self-deprecating laugh. “What, you can’t remember what it’s like to beat my butt and need to remind yourself?”

Lucina tilted her head. “You seem to forget that I am about three years out of practice.”

“Yeah, and you’ve been training with Father every day since you came back with us,” he retorted.

“Seems to me as though you’ll be rather evenly matched, then,” Say’ri said.

Inigo swallowed. Never had he ever thought there would be a world where he and Lucina would be anything resembling even ly matched. “All right, then,” he managed.

Lucina gave a slight nod to Say’ri as they passed each other, while Inigo resisted the urge to wipe his suddenly clammy hands on his pants. Like he would ever beat her.

Falchion gleamed even in the muted light as Lucina drew the divine blade. Inigo shifted his weight from foot to foot. “I’ll try not to be too sore of a loser,” he offered gamely as he produced his own weapon.

Lucina shot him an odd look at that but otherwise didn’t answer.

Inigo cleared his throat. “Ready when you are, then.”

When, apparently, was now. Lucina took full advantage of Inigo’s hesitation with a mighty opening strike, forcing him back and immediately on the defensive. She might not remember her old fighting style, but he certainly did—no-nonsense, unembellished, and powerful.

He parried swiftly, footsteps light as he moved to outflank her. Lucina spun to match him, though, aborting his strike halfway through as he ducked to cover himself.

They circled each other, swords clashing a few times more in some attempt to seek out a flaw, an opening. Briefly, Inigo thought himself back in the tournament in Regna Ferox—facing an
opponent both stronger and more skilled than himself, with a weapon that didn’t quite respond how his muscle memory demanded it should—

As if Lucina had read his mind—or, more accurately, had taken advantage of his distraction—Falchion struck then, the blow of metal ringing as it connected. Inigo bit back a yelp and a curse both, his hand going numb for the crucial moment his sister needed to wrench his blade free.

A nervous laugh turned into a sigh. “Damn,” Inigo finally said with a shake of his head. “What did I say? Three years off and even now you still couldn’t possibly be worse than me.”

Lucina didn’t answer him for a long moment, her gaze instead falling to Falchion. Inigo shrugged, bending to retrieve his fallen sword.

When he straightened, he found Say’ri staring at him, arms crossed and one eyebrow raised. He shrugged again at her and her eyebrow quirked another notch higher.

“Hold a moment, Inigo,” Lucina said. Inigo glanced back, but found her looking instead over his shoulder. “Owain?” she continued. “Would you trade swords with me for a moment?”

Inigo’s newly-arrived cousin seemed to add six inches to his height with the pride in his gaze. “You wish to bestow upon me the divine blade of legend?” Owain asked, voice rising with every syllable.

“And then switch with Inigo,” Lucina added.

Owain blinked, before disgust writ itself across his face. “I have no wish to lay my blighted swordhand upon the breadknife!”

“Uh, Luce?” Inigo asked. “What are you doing?”

“One more round if you would, brother,” Lucina answered. “I would have simply traded blades with you, but I fear your katana would do me precious little good.”

“So… you want me to have Falchion?” Inigo ventured.

“You are more familiar with it at this point, yes?”

He paused. Perhaps the past two years of wielding Falchion shouldn’t compare to the five years he’d grown up on his katana, yet it seemed Lucina was right.

They traded weapons between the three, Owain muttering about ‘perverse machinations of his relations’ that the other two both ignored.

Falchion’s hilt warmed his palm—likely just from the mundane explanation of Lucina’s body heat, but his heart lifted nonetheless. When exactly, he wondered, had the divine blade truly become his? Had it been when he’d stopped bothering to carry substitutes, or had it been long before that? He supposed it didn’t matter, as he met the mirror-image Brand across from his own. Falchion had gone back to Lucina, as well it should have.

Still, there was a surety to Inigo’s motion as he took the first strike, holy steel swinging through the air to clash with Owain’s blade in Lucina’s hand—a fluidity he held the private suspicion would never be replicated with any lesser blade.

There was no need to think. Inigo shut his mind off and moved, watching for the slightest twitch that would give Lucina away before she struck. His focus narrowed to the few square feet around
them, Falchion flashing into a blur as it tangled with its opponent, keen on its target.

_Crack_!

It took a moment for the sound of metal on wood to process. The handle of Falchion was still held tight in Inigo’s grip, after all, despite the unmistakable sound of a disarm.

“Well done,” Lucina said softly.

Inigo sucked in a breath, coming back to himself as he lowered Falchion. Though it beggared his belief, Lucina’s hands were empty, her borrowed blade laying on the ship’s deck at their feet.

“Oh,” he finally managed.

Oh didn’t seem to quite cover it. He’d spent his entire life watching his sister grow into a swordsman so formidable he’d never seen her beaten in single combat past her thirteenth birthday. Before her supposed death, he’d never once beaten her in an even fight—just as, in this timeline, he had never claimed victory from Chrom.

And he had just won.

“I—uh—” he tried. “Good fight.” He cleared his throat. “I’m sure you want this back,” he continued, extending Falchion in her direction.

“You as well.”

She’d been right. She was three years out of practice—clearly, _that_ was the only reason he’d won. Inigo felt a hot flush creep up from under his collar as he ducked his head and moved to reclaim his katana from Owain.

“Interesting,” his cousin said, head tilted slightly.

“What is?” Inigo demanded, a little more sharply than he’d intended.

“Nothing much,” Owain replied with annoying sort of smirk.

Inigo shook his head, sliding his katana back into its sheath as he made for the exit. He’d had plenty of sparring for one day.

Say’ri only said one word as she fell into step beside him. “Better.”
In which all twelve members of the future children appear on the page together for the first time in 230,000 words.

Inigo supposed that if circumstances had been different, the returning fraction of the Shepherds might have been paraded through the streets of Ylisstol to cheers and confetti—a prospect that faintly nauseated him to even think about. As it was—with Grimleal lurking in the wings and Risen appearing throughout the land at the drop of a hat—only the earliest of risers were around to witness their return in the last few moments before a frosty dawn.

“Copper for your thoughts?” Say’ri asked, just loud enough to sound over the quiet plod of hooves and feet alike against Ylisstol’s cobbled streets.

Inigo reined Scottie to fall in step beside Dior, watching his parents’ mounts gain a few strides of distance up ahead. The other Shepherds were spread out behind them, some riding and some walking, their chatter muted in the first watery vestiges of morning light. Up above, he could just catch the silhouettes of both Minerva and Cynthia’s pegasus. “Oh,” he said casually. “I wouldn’t waste your money.” A fraction of a sad smile came to his lips. “They’re a bit melancholy.”

She matched his look with a wry one of her own. “I seem to remember signing on for the worse as well as the better.”

After a moment, a fond chuckle escaped him. “You’re a godsend, you know?”

“Oftentimes I try,” she replied airily. “Aye, then?”

“Well,” Inigo said, “it’s not much you haven’t heard before. Just…” He trailed off. “It’s weird to be… home, I guess.”

How long had it been since the white-walled palace rising above their heads had truly been home? Surely, Inigo thought, it had been long before he left his own timeline. He could see even now the pale eave of the roof he and Owain had sat on a lifetime ago, trading pep-talks and insults alike in the very last twilight days of their fallen world.

“I know the sentiment,” Say’ri replied.

The pair of them fell silent as the last few moments of their ride passed. When they came near, the great white gates of Ylisstol Palace swung open of their own accord. A handful of soldiers lined either side of the interior road in perfect formation, the group far smaller than Inigo had seen in either of his prior trips to the palace in this timeline.

Frederick strode out from the end of the line, sharply spinning to face the new arrivals and snapping into a salute. “Welcome home, milord, milady,” he said, nodding to first Chrom, then Olivia. “I trust your return proved expedient and secure.”

“It was blessedly uneventful,” Chrom said, swinging his leg over the front of the saddle and dropping to the ground. The rest of their group began to follow his lead as the two flying mounts
touched down as well. “I wish I could say the same for the home front.”

“Unfortunately, I regret to inform you little has changed since my previous correspondence.” Frederick gestured to the other soldiers gathered. “I have sent members of the palace guard out to secure the city with the sudden influx of refugees. We’ve seen a great many of late, with the Risen terrorizing the more remote villages—” He broke off to clear his throat. “Apologies, milord. I’m sure the details can wait until after everyone has settled.”

“It can’t wait long, Frederick,” Chrom pointed out, handing his reins off to a stableboy.

“No, milord, I agree with that.” Frederick’s gaze landed on Say’ri then; he dropped into a bow with a quiet, “Your Majesty. And—” He broke off, looking at Inigo. “How exactly would you prefer I addressed you now?”

“I think there are bigger issues right now than my title,” Inigo pointed out, peeling his gloves off as he went. “Which hasn’t actually been decided yet, anyway.”

“Fair enough,” Frederick said. The gates began to swing closed behind their group. “I’ve also taken the liberty of arranging rooms in the royal apartments for those who do not already have quarters in the Shepherds’ garrison.” He paused at the sight of Lucina and Lysander. “I wasn’t informed I was to be expecting you.”

“Oh,” Inigo cut in before his sister could respond. “Yeah. Long story there.”

“Then, as long as milord wishes, I will ensure another room is prepared without delay.”

“That would be excellent, Frederick, yes,” said Chrom. “Then let’s you and I meet, and give everyone the chance to get settled, and convene the rest of the Shepherds… say, around ten or so.”

With murmurs of agreement, the handful of first-generation Shepherds—less Olivia, Robin, and Say’ri—split away. “I can show you the way,” Inigo’s mother offered in a soft voice.

“Mother,” Inigo said, “I think you’ll find most of us already know it.”

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“OWAIN MY PRECIOUS BOY I MISSED YOU SO MUCH!”

The earliness of the hour seemed to make Lissa’s piercing words reverberate even more painfully across the white stone walls, echoing until they distorted into a cacophony that mixed with the princess’s pounding footsteps as she charged down the stairway from the royal apartments.

Owain let out a squeak, ducking down as if he could presume to hide himself behind Robin. The gesture was unfortunately in vain and did nothing to prevent Lissa from launching herself across the remaining distance to practically hang off her son’s neck.

“It’s been so boring here without you and I was so worried—”

“Mother I can’t breathe—”

On the level above their company—which featured those of the future children who had been in Valm, minus Lucina, who had gone in search of a restroom for Lysander, plus Olivia, who had
followed to ensure they didn’t get lost on the way back—a door slammed against the stone walls with a distinct bang, quickly followed by a familiarly irate voice. “**BLOOD AND THUNDER! Who disturbs my slumber?**”

Another door slammed, followed by another feminine voice. “By the gods, Noire, if you don’t shut up I am going to ram my lance right up your—”

The voice broke off and a third joined, lower than the others but still carrying down the stairway. “It seems to me rather counterintuitive to admonish such daybreak racket with even further cacophony, but considering it seems highly unlikely any of us will be returning to any form of slumber any time soon, I myself will cease any more reprobation beyond this point.”

Despite himself, Inigo found a grin spreading over his face. “Hello to you too, guys,” he called.

There was a moment of silence after his words, then a murmur and a quick scuffle before Kjelle appeared at the top of the stairs, flanked on one side by Noire and the other by Laurent. A beat passed before Kjelle crossed her arms, amusement coming to her features. “Oh, well look who the wyvern dragged in,” she drawled.

“Ah, and your fair tongue still as cutting as ever, I see, Kjelle,” Inigo replied.

“And your flattery just as obnoxious,” she shot back. “Not that I expected otherwise.”

Laurent cleared his throat, starting down the stairs. “It seems the outcome of our prior separation turned out superlatively,” he said. “Considering that between our two groups we have managed to reunite our entire company.”

Owain flailed a little, still entrapped by his mother’s embrace, and managed to smack Inigo’s shoulder with the back of his hand. “Help,” he gasped.

Inigo quirked a brow in his direction, shrugged, and turned back to Laurent. “Yup,” he replied. “Gang’s all here. With a couple… honorary new additions.”

Slightly behind him, Say’ri sighed. “Must you always be so dramatic?”

“Dramatic?” Inigo replied. “Owain is the dramatic one in the family, Say’ri.”

“Owain can’t breathe—Mother please—”

“Oh, you’re fine!” Lissa said, finally releasing him. “Quit being a baby!”

Robin let out a choked sort of laugh at that, while Owain stepped back and wheezed.


Say’ri tilted her head in response. “Aye? I am not what?”

“You exist?” Kjelle blurted. “What the hell? You’re actually real? No, I refuse to accept this—Inigo who did you pick up off the street to continue this joke—”

“...Huh?” Inigo said.

“Laurent!” Kjelle cried, rounding on the mage and jabbing a finger into his chest. She must not have been attempting to rein in her strength, because Laurent stumbled back a few steps from the onslaught. “You said the odds were INFINITESIMAL!”
“I am not sure if that was the precise word I used—” Laurent started.

“It was! I wrote it down! Do you know how much gold I had riding on this?”

“Uh,” Noire said in a quiet voice. “I’m just gonna go get Yarne and Nah.”

Inigo cleared his throat. “Ah… what exactly are we arguing about?”

Laurent sighed. “The potential exists that there was a betting pool between those of us who were not present for the Valmese campaign on whether those among the Shepherds who were there had decided to fabricate the story of your recent engagement—”

Severa burst out laughing. “Oh my gods, that is the funniest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“…Still confused,” Inigo admitted.

“They put money on the fact that you were too much of a hopeless buffoon to have convinced anyone to marry you,” Gerome said.

“Quite a bit o’ money, apparently,” Brady added.

Cynthia, meanwhile, put her hands on her hips and stuck her chin up. “Oh, come on, you guys, it’s sweet! It’s like a fairytale! Even Fate itself stepped aside and let it happen, because she died, you remember, but even death couldn’t overcome the depths of their love—”

“Okay, Cynthia, that’s enough thank you,” Inigo interjected, cheeks blazing.

“And actually they already eloped—“ Owain put in.

“**What?**” Kjelle cried.

“**Owain!**” Inigo said.

“—so does that mean you have to pay extra?” Owain continued.

“**It better not!**”

“Why’s everyone shouting?” came the high-pitched yet unmistakably grumpy voice of Nah.

“My poor ears,” Yarne moaned, as Taguel and manakete joined the other three on the top of the staircase.

Once more, Inigo raised his hand in a lazy wave and opened his mouth for another snarky greeting, then promptly closed it again as a loaded hush descended over the group. For the first time since that fateful day on Mount Prism—almost four years ago to the day for Inigo—all eleven of them were gathered once more.

*No,* Inigo realized as Laurent suddenly went white as a sheet and Yarne let out an incredulous gasp.

*All twelve* of them.

At the back of the lower group, hand-in-hand with his mother and practically vibrating with excitement, Lysander piped up, “Hi! Are you my aunts and uncles too?”

It was almost plain to see the dots connecting in the eyes of the five who hadn’t been to Valm—
glancing from Lucina to Lysander, then to Gerome, mentally comparing hair colors and calculating timelines. Kjelle let out a muttered expletive while Laurent’s brow furrowed, his lips moving as he whispered something to himself too quiet for the rest of them to hear.

“Lucina!” Yarne finally blurted. “You’re not—we thought you were extinct!”

Smoothly, Inigo interjected. “Yeah, you guys missed a lot over here. For one, Lucina’s not actually dead, bit of a surprise there. Also, Owain decided to procreate, and since we were on the subject a minute ago, yes I did, in fact, get married a couple of weeks past.”

A long moment stretched out before Lissa screeched, “Owain decided to WHAT?”

“...Whoops,” Inigo said. Say’ri pinched his bicep, drawing a yelp from him. “Hey!”

“‘Twas not your news to tell!”

“Yeah!” Owain said. “You ruined my epic reveal!” Robin sighed while Owain turned back to his mother. “Uh… surprise?”

He quickly stumbled backward, hands raised defensively as Lissa fully rounded on him. “Just what have you done, young man?” she yelled. “I’m way too young to be a grandma!”

“Wait, Mother, I’m not sure if that’s quite how the math works—”

“Not that you’d know,” Inigo added.

“JUST WAIT TILL YOUR FATHER HEARS ABOUT THIS!”

“By the way you’re yelling, he probably already knows,” Inigo interjected again helpfully, then squeaked as Lissa turned on him as well. “Hey wait—I had absolutely nothing to do with this, there’s no need to target me— Say’ri help—”

Almost absently, Severa crossed her arms, quirking a brow at the quickly-descending final five members of their company. “Yeah, there’s a lot to catch up on. We’re all gonna be here a while.”
Even if it had been two years since she’d last set foot in it, Robin’s room in the palace hadn’t changed—which felt oddly ironic, considering what had.

When she’d last stood in this airy room, she’d still been hunting for Odin—now, whenever he got around to finding her, Owain would be sharing said room with her. She hadn’t known of the future children’s plight, nor the outcome that would await them all again if they couldn’t manage to prevent it.

And that hadn’t been the only thing they’d learned on Carrion Isle, Robin realized, thinking for the first time in months of the mysterious hierophant who had worn her same face. Maybe Owain hadn’t been so wrong with his ‘evil twin’ musings.

“My name is Robin. Oh, and that was YOUR name as well, wasn’t it? What a strange coincidence…”

With a sigh, she put that thought aside, settling down at her desk—hardly visible for the paperwork already precariously stacked over the entire surface.

Some things, Robin thought, never would change.

The Shepherds’ meeting had gone from ten until just after noon, having left Robin just enough time to grab a plate of lunch from the kitchens before she started work, yet the afternoon sun blazed through the windows by the time the door clicked open again. She glanced up reflexively, pausing to press a hand to her temple.
“Hark,” said Owain, his voice surprisingly low as he shut the door behind him. “The master tactician of legend works tirelessly, nary even pausing for the necessities required by a body on this plane of existence. But fear not!” he continued, unceremoniously hiking himself up to sit on her desk. “Her adoring husband has come to rescue her from the monotony and offer fresh perspective.”

“You’re going to break that,” Robin muttered, swatting half-heartedly at his knee.

“Will not,” Owain said. “Ylissean construction is known throughout the lands for its unparalleled craftsmanship!” He coughed. “Unlike certain methods used to manufacture certain walls in certain lands across the sea.”

Robin stared at him, then pointedly shifted her gaze over to the door.

“Uh,” Owain said. “Robin, my heart? I’m right here.”

“You just insulted your cousin,” she replied. “I’m sure whatever cognitive connection you two share will alert him and any moment he will burst through that door with a series of particularly snarky comebacks.”

Owain stared at her owlishly, then said, “A psychic connection with Inigo is a terrifying thought indeed.”

“Oh, yes, I’m sure.”

“Anyway,” he said brightly, reaching over to thumb through her pile of papers. “How goes your grand strategizing?”

Robin sighed, leaning back in her chair and directing him to a specific pile of pages. “See for yourself.”

Owain scanned it, a set of frown lines appearing on his face as he read on. “Ooh,” he finally said. “That… is not a pretty set of numbers.”

“No, it really isn’t.” She sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Frederick made the right decisions, trying to get the populace into the cities where we can better protect them, but… so soon after the last two wars, we just don’t have the manpower we need against this many Risen. I’ll have to start sending the Shepherds out, in small groups, maybe… but even then it’s only an extra thirty-odd people… try to get everyone a few days off a month, get some sort of rotation going, but we’ll have to see how it goes…”

“Can Ferox not lend us anyone?” Owain interjected before Robin’s muttering grew so disjointed as to be incomprehensible.

She shook her head. “They took as many casualties as we did in Valm. Maybe more. Flavia’s already got her hands full without a west khan and the Risen are spreading farther north, too. They’ll have their work cut out for them just keeping their own people defended. I’ve thought of asking Say’ri, but…”

“She’d say yes though, wouldn’t she?” Owain pointed out. “For honor’s sake if nothing else, and there’s quite a bit more than nothing else.”

“Exactly,” said Robin. “Which is why I’m so hesitant to ask in the first place. Their role in the war was even longer and more devastating than ours, and there are Risen in Valm, which means bringing an army here is only going to leave them defenseless, and that’s without mentioning the
fact it would take them at *minimum* four months to get here and gods know where we’ll be by then.”

Owain, for once, stayed silent at that.

“Tell me,” Robin said a long moment later, “what happened after Grima rose.”

“It won’t come to that.”

“I just want to know. Maybe it’ll give me something to go on about whatever the Grimleal are planning now.”

Owain glanced away, a knot appearing momentarily on the side of his jaw before he spoke. “Uncle Chrom died in the initial battle,” he finally said. “You… er, that is, the other… er… Robin… went missing as well. Presumed dead, of course. From there, Grima went to Origin’s Peak, off the coast of Plegia. We—that’s the general we, by the way, I wasn’t even ten yet—tried to launch an assault on him there. Poured everything and everyone we had into it.” He finally glanced back, his face solemn. “I was one of the only one of us kids who didn’t lose at least one parent that day.” He looked away again. “Aunt Olivia passed away not long after that. Sometimes I wondered if she died of grief.”

“I’m sorry,” Robin said hollowly.

“We didn’t see much of Grima after that,” Owain continued. “Every so often we’d get a ship of refugees from Valm bringing word of destruction until even that stopped. There was nothing we could do—all the ships on our side of the sea that could have made the journey had been lost at Origin Peak. And just because Grima himself was gone didn’t mean we didn’t have Risen. When we started hearing that Grima had come back… Well, Lucina sent us looking for the Gemstones.”

“So he went to Valm first…”

“We never figured out why,” Owain said. “Other than it being easier. The only person we knew at the time could wield Falchion was Lucina, and she was stuck across the sea. And Valm had fallen apart in our timeline; Chon’sin had already fallen and Valm-the-country had never quite pulled itself back together after the end of the war. The irony is I almost think Walhart might have been able to put up a fight…” He trailed off, looking distant, as if trying to drag out some distant memory that didn’t wish to be summoned. “We did hear rumors one time of a man coming into Port Ferox, muttering about the Mila Tree and… Outrealms or something. Gah, I’d have to ask the others.”

Robin tucked that thought away for later and quickly refocused. “Well,” she said. “I suppose I really can’t ask Say’ri then, if we might need Valm as a last line of defense.”

Owain opened his mouth, as if to protest once more that Grima wouldn’t rise again—a potential that was still just as impossible to guarantee as it had been before—when another voice interjected.

“On that count, Robin, I believe you are incorrect.”

Before Robin could even muster the presence to chastise Owain for leaving the door ajar, Say’ri stepped through the opening, trailed by a chagrined Inigo. “I have nothing to do with this,” said the Exalt of his own time.

Say’ri shot him a scathing look. “You have everything to do with this,” she said flatly.

“Considering we spent half the trip discussing it.”
“Did you?” Owain asked—rather mildly, all told, though with a familiar note in his tone that betrayed he was mere moments away from turning the conversation into the regularly scheduled Royal Cousins Roasting Hour. “I thought you spent it— ow,” he said as Robin preemptively cut him off with a pinch on the arm.

“What were you saying, Say’ri?” Robin asked, her voice equally mild.

“I was merely reiterating the conclusion you will surely come to within the next few weeks and saving us all the valuable time,” the queen replied with a lift of her brow. “Is not our best—and mayhap our only—hope against Grima to open with a strike so overwhelming that the war is ended before it ever truly begins?”

“...Yes,” Robin admitted, slightly reluctantly.

“Then what reason have you to deliberately handicap yourself by ignoring a powerful and wholehearted ally?” Say’ri asked. “Guilt? Or indecision? I’ll not stand for either one, because I’m well aware the Grandmaster of the entire Ylissean League can do better than that.”

“I only mean,” Robin said quietly, “that I saw how your people fared after the last war. Can I take them away from their homes and ask them to join another so soon after?”

Say’ri fixed her with a long look before she spoke again. “You can and you must. Because the alternative is to wait and bring the war and Grima to their very doorstep.” She straightened, steel in her spine and power in her voice. “I am their queen, and I’ll not see that as long as I draw breath.”

After a moment, Robin nodded. “You’re right,” she murmured. “The best defence is a good offence, after all.”

“Aye,” Say’ri said. “And I’ve not doubt you’d have come to that realization sooner or later, but with the travel time in play I thought an intervention to our benefit. In the meantime, I left Chi’hiro under orders to rally what remains of our standing army. I imagine Valm will be more than reluctant to lend us their aid, but she is also to search out those soldiers that served under herself and Yen’fay whose lands have since regained their independence. It will take time, but if we can manage to hold off Plegia until mayhap autumn or winter…”

Robin nodded. “I’ll see what I can do.”

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The plan, in the end, was simple.

Frederick, Gaius, and Cordelia were to take leave of Ylisstol, searching the last Gemstone outside of Ylisse’s possession. Their mission was one of stealth—hence Gaius’s presence—with the ideal plan to locate and possibly retrieve Sable with none the wiser for their efforts. The rest of the Shepherds, meanwhile, scattered across Ylisse in groups of four or five, both putting up a front to leave Plegia believing another plan was in play and simultaneously providing relief to villages ravaged by Risen.

They could only hope the Grimleal’s plans would delay long enough for their distant reinforcements to arrive.
“The frets of this existence threaten to write themselves permanently across the artistry of your features,” Owain murmured in the dim candlelight of evening, a week after their return to Ylisstol and the night before their company was due to disband across the country.

“Well, at least something’s getting written,” Robin muttered from atop a pile of pillows, flipping through the pile of papers propped on her knees.

A furrow creasing his own brow, Owain dropped onto the bed beside her. “You don’t still doubt the efficacy of our recent planning?” he asked, leaning over to peer at the map currently at the top of Robin’s stack. His own name was scratched in tiny print beneath a village by the name of Strathmore, about four hours from Ylisstol. Inigo, Say’ri, Brady, and Cynthia were scrawled in equally small letters just beside.

Robin, on the other hand, was marked over a tiny doodle of the palace beside the word Ylisstol.

“No,” Robin said, leaning back against the headboard. Her unbound hair fell in loose waves over her shoulders, almost aglow in the candlelight. “They’re not ideal, but they’re the best we’ve got to work with.”

Owain cocked his head and shimmied closer. “Then worry not, my bride! For while your beauty is hitherto unmatched in this realm, I must admit such misery is a tad unbecoming.”

Robin snorted. “Not quite sure that’s what’s making me ‘unbecoming,’ but okay.”

“My heart,” Owain said seriously. “Whisper not such folly. The growth of our child has left you aglow with the radiance of dawn.”

A long moment passed before Robin closed her eyes and muttered, “We picked a terrible time to have a baby.”

“I don’t remember there being much ‘picking’ involved,” Owain pointed out.

Slowly, Robin opened one eye again. “A fair amount of sake, though.”

“...Now that part I do remember.” He paused. “Kind of.”

Robin almost let out a laugh at that—it was more snort than chuckle, but Owain decided to take it anyway. “You don’t suppose I’ll be horrible at it, do you?” she murmured.

“...Horrible at what?” Owain asked blankly.

“Being a mother.” Robin rolled on her side to face him, her gaze searching.

“No,” Owain said. “Why would you be?”

“I never knew my mother,” Robin pointed out. “Not that I remember, at least. And for all I know, maybe it’s better that way. I mean, if Validar really is my father...”

“If I promise not to turn into a megalomaniac agent of the god of chaos, will that help matters any?” Owain asked.

Robin gave his shoulder a halfhearted smack. “You know that’s not what I mean.”

Owain inhaled deeply. “Right,” he said, turning serious. “Well, my dearest, here is what I think. Clearly, you will be a tremendous mother—because parenting, you see, is a battlefield.”
This time, Robin barked out a genuine laugh, though it was colored with disbelief. “Is that supposed to be reassuring?”

“What? Of course! You—stop laughing at me, I’m trying to draw a comparison— you’re a master tactician, so clearly raising a child can be no comparison to your invincible prowess of strategies —“

“That is not the same thing,” Robin got out, wiping her eyes. When she finally caught her breath, she continued, “Thanks for the laugh, though.”

“Hmph,” Owain replied. “It was not my intention.” After a moment, though, his gaze softened. “Though I suppose, if it was so effective…”

Robin shook her head, the occasional ripple of laughter falling past her lips. “Get some rest,” she finally said. “You’re off to Strathmore tomorrow.”

Owain reached over to press a kiss to her cheek, then bent down to drop another on her belly. “Wish you were coming with me.”
For a while, Inigo’s world was almost peaceful. Sure, the sheer number of Risen in Strathmore and the surrounding territories was eerily reminiscent of nothing but his dead future, and they spent the majority of their nights either out under the stars or in whatever seedy inns would put them up, but all he could think was that every day that passed was another day they could prepare.

Spring spun on into summer until even that was nearly to its end. By mid-September, their little company daily awaited two pieces of news: when the ships from Chon’sin would arrive, and when Owain would be called back to Ylisstol to meet his child.

In the meantime, though, they had more immediate issues to worry about—like the Risen that had shown up in Strathmore with the dawn.

Inigo crept through the alleyway alone, his head beginning to ache with the strain of trying to see when the sun hadn’t yet risen high enough for its light to clear the tallest buildings. He held his katana aloft, his arm once more accustomed to its lightness even if a part of him did still long for Falchion.

A muffled sound came from ahead of him—the scuff of a boot, perhaps—and Inigo froze, scanning for the distinctive glow of twin vermillion eyes. The alley remained just as dim as it had been, though, leaving him to take a few more cautious steps.

This time, the strangled whimper that reached him was unmistakably human, and Inigo let out a soft sigh of relief. His eyes finally landed on a dark figure in the corner that he’d originally assumed was a pile of inanimate objects—too thin and waifish to be an adult, undoubtedly. The figure let out another squawk of terror at his attention, scrambling back against the wall.

“Hey, hey,” Inigo said gently, daring to lower his sword and holding his off hand to one side. “I won’t hurt you. Just a human here, see?” With one more cautious look to either side, he sheathed
his blade and crouched down. The figure finally met his gaze, revealing the pale, too-thin face of a girl no more than twelve or thirteen. “We’re here to help, my friends and I, see? The Exalt himself sent us.”

The girl’s eyes narrowed. “Did he?”

“Mnhmm,” Inigo replied. “Swear on my heart.” A touch of the suspicion on her face faded. “What’s your name, sweet?”

She hesitated a moment, then said, “Ella.”

“Ella,” he repeated brightly. “Lovely. Mine’s Inigo.” He stuck out his hand; she shook it with trepidation. “What are you doing out here by yourself, hm? Are your parents looking for you?”

She shook her head. “Haven’t got parents,” she said hoarsely.

A pang went through him and his smile turned sad. “Me neither,” he said, and decided not to delve into the complicated specifics of that particular situation. He quickly amended, “Is there anyone else looking for you, then?”

After a moment, she nodded. “My brother. Edric.”

“Right, then,” Inigo said. “How’s this, then? Let’s you and I go and find my friends, and then we’ll look for your brother so he knows you’re safe.”

Violently, though, Ella shook her head. “I—I can’t—” With a shuddering hiccup, she shifted her legs, a tear on her skirt falling open to reveal a gash on her thigh that had definitely not come from today’s skirmish and had just as definitely not been properly tended. “I can’t walk.”

The Inigo of the same age as this girl would’ve likely gagged at the sight and proceeded to panic; the Inigo of now, recently twenty-one, who had been through the end of mankind and two wars after that, merely noted the sight and came up with a few bitter potentials as to why the injury hadn’t been looked at. “Well,” he said, still forcing himself to keep his tone light. “Lucky for you you ran into me then, hm? One of my friends here is a healer. His name’s Brady. He looks a bit rough ‘round the edges, but he’ll fix you right up.”

After a moment, Ella slumped further back against the wall and gave a reluctant nod, while Inigo clicked over into settling logistics. The girl was certainly small enough for him to carry without a second thought, but if they ran into trouble he’d need his hands on his sword.

As if the universe had heard him, the sound of trouble came from the end of the alleyway.

Inigo spun toward the noise, katana already half-drawn before he caught a better glimpse of the silhouette and breathed a sigh of relief. “Say’ri,” he called in a low tone, hoping his voice wouldn’t draw in the attention of any nearby Risen.

“Aye?” came her quiet reply, her own sword—one of her katanas, not Amatsu—still held aloft. “Inigo?”

“Yeah,” he called back. “I’m just ahead of you. Come give me a hand, would you?”

“Fie, sometimes I think you need more help than a hand—” Say’ri started as she came into view. “Ah.”

“Thanks for that, love,” Inigo said dryly, though his tone held no irritation. “In all seriousness?”
They had no sooner dispatched the Risen occupying their current abode when word had come from a village to the south of a simultaneous attack—which meant Inigo, Owain, and Cynthia had had just enough time to tack up their mounts, leave Brady and Say’ri to the clean-up, and depart. By the time they had wrapped up that and started back on the trail north, nearly the entire day had passed them by.

A cold wind whipped up the path, harsh enough to ground Cynthia’s pegasus and leave her riding alongside the earth-bound equines. Inigo watched the leaves flip upside down with the promise of rain and bitterly regretted leaving his jacket behind when they’d set out.

“Is it the fifteenth?” he asked to the empty air.


He let out a sigh that was half relieved and half exhausted. “Because Say’ri and I rotate home the day after tomorrow. Thank Naga.”

“You don’t have to rub it in,” Owain said from Inigo’s other side.

“Someone put on his grumpy pants this morning,” Inigo teased.

“I barely had time to put on any pants this morning, my friend.”

“I didn’t need that mental image.”

Cynthia’s pegasus let out a snort, ruffling her wing feathers. “Me too, girl,” her rider said, pointedly rolling her eyes in the direction of her traveling companions.

A drizzle had picked up by the time they made it back to the village, leaving Inigo to turn up his collar and dream of hot baths and warm beds. No sooner had they put up their mounts and headed for their current inn, though, that they found Say’ri standing in the entrance. “Brady wished to see you as soon as you got in.”

Inigo bit back a sigh and resisted the urge to mutter Joy, trudging up the stairs without comment, the other three Shepherds on his heels.

“Hey,” he said unceremoniously, ducking into the room that had been serving them as a makeshift infirmary.

“Hey,” Brady echoed, his voice sounding as tired as Inigo felt. “Bad news. That girl you brought in this mornin’?”

“Ella?”

“Yup. No point beatin’ the bush. She’s got that damned healin’ hex on her.”

Inigo froze. Not again.

“I did what I could,” Brady continued. “Las’ I heard Tharja’s way up by the Longfort, but—”
“Wow!” a new voice interjected from around the corner. “I should come to the infirmary more often! There’s almost as much blood in here as there is out there!”

A beat passed. “—Henry was in Ylisstol,” Brady finished. “He’n Laurent got here ‘bout an hour ago. I’ll go’n send him out.”

Inigo ducked his head, feeling the ache of exhaustion settle even more heavily into his limbs. “We’re never getting rid of her, are?” Gods, if there was ever a time he wanted to go back and smack his seventeen-year-old self…

He couldn’t even bring himself to be surprised at the possibility of Nalia’s return—it had been something like ten months since he’d last encountered her, after all, and that would be more than enough time for her to return to the Ylissean continent. Just what she was doing, on the other hand, was a far more nebulous concept.

“‘Her’?” Cynthia asked blankly, settling into a spare chair.

“Nalia,” Inigo said with a sigh, mirroring the pegasus knight. “A dark mage we ran into before Valm. That little hex is apparently her handiwork.”

“‘A dark mage we ran into before Valm,’” Owain repeated with a quirked brow. “That you totally had a massive thing for.”

Inigo mirrored the gesture. “I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again: Emotional manipulation.”

Owain only snickered.

“Ooh, hang on,” Henry said, appearing with an almost effortlessly dramatic flourish that could have only managed to be more epic if he’d done it surrounded by a murder of crows. “Did you guys say Nalia’s done this?”

Inigo blinked at the mage. “Er, yes?” he ventured.

“Why didn’t anyone tell me that?” Henry demanded, looking rather put out.

“...Do you know her?”

Henry shot him a look that all but shouted Duh. “Yup! She showed up… oh… the spring after the Ylissean War?” Inigo had to pause at that, taking a moment to remember that Henry, a Plegian himself, wouldn’t very well call it the Plegian War. “Aversa took her on, I think. Nalia stuck to her like a scab on a wound, nya ha!”

“Aversa?” Say’ri asked.

“King Validar’s right-hand girl,” Henry said. “And King Gangrel’s before that. She’s a bit of a funny one… and that’s coming from me!”

Inigo ignored Henry’s self-directed jibe. “So Nalia’s basically been working for Validar for the entire time.” He leaned forward, leaning his elbows on his knees and pinching the bridge of his nose. “Wonderful.”

Brady reappeared, wiping his hands on a towel. “Ella’s better,” he said. “She ain’t fixed yet, but she’s better.”

“Yeeeelah,” Henry said. “Nalia’s gotten better. I remember Tharja making me check out this one
—” he jerked a thumb at Owain, “the first time, ‘cause it’s a pretty cool hex, really… could think of plenty of uses for it… Anyway! Yeah, Nalia’s gotten way better at making it stick. I’ve had a hex of a time getting it off… nya ha, hex, get it?”

“Yup,” Brady said, his tone nothing but regretful. “Got it.”

“So you’re saying,” Owain interjected, “that the better she gets at casting it, the harder it gets to take it off again?”

“Mm, yeah, pretty much,” Henry agreed. “Although if she’s really smart, and really wants someone dead, she’ll start channeling her life force into it…”

With how ominous that sounded, Inigo had no choice but to ask, “Which means…”?

“Means it’ll only break if she dies!” Henry replied cheerfully. “Pretty neat, huh?”

A beat passed.

“Well,” Inigo said. “That’s terrifying.”

“Aye, a moment, though,” Say’ri said. “Her last two targets—Owain and Jun’ichi—have made sense; on a personal scale, at the very least, and potentially to Validar’s benefit as well. But what might she have to gain by hexing a young girl?”

Silence settled over the group as they attempt to puzzle over that new angle.

“Ella!” Cynthia suddenly shouted, leaping to her feet. “Of course!”

A beat passed. “Ah… yeah…” Brady said slowly. “Of… course?”

Cynthia shot him a look, crossing her arms over her chest with a hmph. “Ella? Ella of Strathmore?”

When she continued to get nothing in return but blank looks, she huffed a sigh. “She was a pegasus knight! Er… will be a pegasus knight? In our timeline, you know? She died on Origin Peak, but she was one of my mom’s and Aunt Cordelia’s lieutenants before that.” She struck a particularly dramatic pose. “C’mon, you guys, she was a true hero! I can’t believe you don’t remember her!”

“Be that as it may,” Owain said slowly, “such glorious endeavors are still in the future here.”

“Yeah, exactly,” Inigo agreed. “Nalia couldn’t know about it unless one of us told her, and I’m fairly certain I never mentioned anything that specific.”

Cynthia almost seemed to visibly deflate. “Oh…”

“Maybe she’s targeting at random,” Henry suggested. “Like throwing internal organs at a wall to see which ones stick?”

“Er,” Inigo said. “I think you might be the only one that particular metaphor applies to.”

Henry shrugged. “Well, if you’re against having some good, clean fun with guts and blood…”

Before anyone could respond to that, the door creaked open once more. Laurent doffed his hat as he stepped through, his gaze quickly scanning the assembled group before landing, wide-eyed, on Owain. “What are you doing here?” the mage asked.

Owain blinked, glancing down at himself before back up at the mage. “Uh,” he said. “Sitting?”
Laurent shook his head. “I suppose I may be better served to ask: what are you still doing here?”

“...Still sitting?” Owain said.

Laurent gave an exasperated sigh, glancing at Henry with a look one could only gain by traveling back in time and finding oneself older than one’s parents. “Father, did you forget to tell him?”

“Ooh!” Henry exclaimed, holding up one hand. “Right! Heh. Sorry. All this cursing business was very distracting.”

“Tell me what?” Owain asked, his tone growing anxious.

“Robin went into labor shortly before we departed from the palace,” Laurent said, only pausing long enough for Owain to let out a squeak before continuing. “Kjelle and I were set to come relieve you anyway, though we were forced to adjust the original arrangement when we received word you had need for the knowledge of a dark mage. You and Inigo are to return to Ylisstol posthaste, since he was due to rotate home shortly already, while—Owain please calm down I have not finished explaining yet—while Kjelle will still return the day after tomorrow to relieve Say’ri as planned—Owain, hyperventilation is not beneficial to the task of returning home as swiftly as possible, nor to that of remaining conscious.”

“I should like to see you remain this calm staring in the face of coming paternity, Laurent!” Owain cried.

Inigo, meanwhile, merely let out a sigh, resigning himself to the fact he was never going to sleep again. “Ohhhkay,” he said, getting to his feet. “Owain, go fetch our bags, I’ll get the horses.”

After a beat, Owain nodded, knocking his chair over with the speed at which he scampered to leave.

Say’ri rose in a much more graceful manner, saying, “I’ll ensure he takes care to not destroy our room in the process. And preferably that he takes your pack instead of mine.”

Inigo let out a bark of laughter. “Yeah, that’d be helpful,” he said, bending his head to drop a lone kiss on her lips. “I’ll see you in a couple days.”

“Aye,” she said, returning the gesture twice more before she turned to go as well.

Inigo cleared his throat, trying to ignore the flush on his cheeks from such a relatively-muted but still very public display of affection. “Right,” he managed, voice still higher than he would’ve wished. “Keep us updated over here.”

“Naturally,” Laurent replied.

Henry waved cheerfully. “Tell Robin I hope she lives!” he called.

~~~

Dusk fell about an hour before Inigo and Owain arrived in Ylisstol; the storm that had been hovering on the horizon all day finally closed in as they reached the fringes of the city.

Owain, having alternated between chattering at a mile a minute and remaining deathly silent
throughout the trip, had to shout over the encroaching thunder as they wove through the capital. “Do you suppose it’s an omen that my offspring is to enter this existence in such tumultuous weather?”

“And omen that your kid’s gonna destroy the world, maybe,” Inigo replied dryly, summarily ignoring the offended look his cousin shot him.

Several moments more passed before Owain spoke again. “If I am the Scion of Legend, what would that make my progeny? The Scion of the Scion of Legend?”

“Scion Squared?” Inigo suggested.

Owain shot him an alarmed look. “I should hope my child isn’t square!”

Inigo looked as if he was resisting the urge to facepalm. “Right,” he sighed. “Heroes of legend can’t do math…”

Thoroughly soaked, they arrived at the palace and were directed with a swiftness that still wasn’t enough to content Owain. “Mother!” he cried, breaking into a jog at the sight of Lissa carrying a bundle of fresh blankets at the base of the staircase up to the royal apartments.

“Oh, good! You’re here!” Lissa said, having to rest her chin on top of the blankets to see her son. Panting, Owain began, “How—”

“She’s fine,” Lissa said. “They’re both fine.” She paused, offering a smile as Owain beamed. “It was pretty easy, as far as births go. Upstairs is a healthy mother and a healthy baby.”

Owain blinked, then said, “Can I see—”

“Go on,” Lissa said with a laugh. “You too, Inigo, I’m sure…”

The rest of his mother’s words drowned into background noise as Owain tore up the stairs three at a time.

At the doorway, however, he paused. While the overwhelming majority of him wanted to burst inside, a small fraction wondered if perhaps he ought to knock. Instead of doing either, he stood frozen, paralyzed by the knowledge that his child laid beyond the barrier in front of him.

“Well?” Inigo prodded, suddenly behind him once more. “Come on, I didn’t get half-dragged back here for you to stare at a block of wood, my friend.”

Owain swallowed, nodded, and reached for the doorknob.

The room ahead was quiet and dimly lit and it took a moment for Owain’s eyes to adjust. When they did, though, his gaze immediately focused on the bed in the middle of the room. Robin was propped against the headboard, half of her hair having escaped the ponytail that had once contained it, her face lined with exhaustion but her eyes bright.

A barely-visible bundle of yellow cloth in her arms.

Owain froze again. Inigo clicked the door shut behind them, seemingly content to hang back for the moment.

“Owain,” Robin said softly, then uttered four words that would forever shift the entire course of his life. “Come meet your daughter.”
His feet moved of their own accord, an irresistible magnetism drawing him across the room. “Daughter?” he managed, the word almost sticking in his throat.

“Yeah,” she replied with a choked sort of laugh. “And she’s perfect.”

Perfect, Owain decided shortly thereafter, was far too light of a word to encompass the being in front of him.

Icy gray eyes of the palest shade he’d ever seen regarded him with a look he could swear spoke of knowledge beyond the mere few hours she’d been in the world. Tiny tufts of blond hair rose from her head, too thin and wispy to reveal whether the shade would eventually trend toward Robin’s or Owain’s. The very smallest of pink hands reached for him as he neared, only to tangle in and tug on a lock of her mother’s hair instead.

“Oh,” Owain said, though really the word was little more than a glorified exhale. He perched on the edge of the bed, the world narrowing to nothing more than the three square feet surrounding him.

“I think,” Robin said thickly, “we picked the perfect name, don’t you?”

Owain could only nod, at last managing to whisper, “Hello, Ophelia.”

~~~

For a few days—a fraction of a moment, really, in the grand scheme of the universe—the world truly was quiet.

The inhabitants of Ylisstol Palace seemed to have gotten themselves into a long and unending game of “Pass the Baby,” to the extent it almost seemed like Robin and Owain had to fight for the opportunity to hold their own child. Ophelia herself didn’t seem to much mind the attention; she had not proved herself to be a particularly fussy baby, to the extent that Lucina had half-laughingly, half-bitterly admitted she wished Lysander had had a fraction of his second cousin’s mellowness at that age.

Now, on Ophelia’s sixth night of existing in the outside world and on the eve of Inigo and Say’ri’s return to Strathmore for another month, Robin had finally managed to lay claim on her own child again. A fire crackled brightly in the sitting room, lending a drowsy warmth to its occupants.

“I was quite partial to Morgan, myself,” Robin was saying to Say’ri. “Which would have worked for either sex, really, but Owain was so fond of Ophelia, so we agreed to relegate Morgan to a boy, and then I lost anyway.”

“She doesn’t look like a Morgan, though,” Owain insisted. “Truly, though, such a heroine of the ages could hold no other title but that which we granted her—”

“You’re just rubbing in the fact that your pick won,” Inigo interrupted.

Owain quirked a brow at him, his voice taking on a dangerous tone. “Well, my vaunted cousin,” he began. “Since you have recently deigned to submit yourself to the bonds of holy matrimony, you know what that means…”
Inigo paused, then ventured, “...What?”

Owain smirked and pointedly glanced at his daughter. “You’re next.”

Inigo squeaked, cheeks burning as he managed, “Er... maaaaybe?”

Say’ri only sighed at the helpless glance he shot her. “Deep breaths, my love. In due time.”

Inigo let out a breath of relief, then looked back at Owain and absently muttered, “I mean, more than likely your mother’s next, so...” Not technically true, he thought, since the younger Kjelle was due within the month and after her, Severa, Yarne, and Laurent were all earlier in the birth order than Owain, but...

A long moment passed before Inigo fully registered what he’d said.

“Wait—”

“I cannot believe you,” Owain said flatly.

“Wait—”

“You would stoop to the dishonor of your own most beloved aunt for the sake of a your mother joke?” Owain continued.

“I’m just pointing out,” Inigo began desperately, “that our younger selves are going to be born in less than a year, and you very often remind me that you’re older than me, and judging by the usual timeline of these things that would mean—Owain—Owain wait—Robin, either call him off or hand me your child so he doesn’t hurt me—Owain!”

“You are not going to use my daughter as a shield, Inigo!” Robin said as Inigo proceeded to leap behind the couch as if the upholstery could defend him.

Owain peered around the back of the couch, his arms crossed as Inigo continued to shoot him a sheepish look. “I will give you a pass on this singular occasion,” Owain finally said gravely. “Only because I do not wish Ophelia to witness such violence at her tender age.”

“She’s six days old, I don’t think it’s really witnessing—” Inigo started, then cut himself off. “Right! Violence! Can’t have that now, can we?” He straightened up, dusting his hands on his thighs.

After a beat, Say’ri sighed again. “You were right,” she finally told Robin. “We really did marry the both of them.”

“I warned you.”

“For the last time,” Inigo groaned. “You did not and cannot marry both of us because I am not sharing!”

“Whew,” Robin said with a laugh. “Someone’s awful vehement.”

“Hush,” Owain chided Inigo. “You’ll startle Ophelia.”

Inigo flung both hands out to the sides. “Since when are you the responsible one? The world doesn’t make sense anymore.”

Owain’s face actually turned serious at that. “Actually,” he said, “I wanted to ask you something.”
Inigo paused, sensing the tone shift. “Shoot.”

Owain shook his head, gesturing to the door. Inigo glanced at Say’ri, shrugged, and followed his cousin.

“What’s up?” he continued in a low tone as they stepped out into the hallway.

Owain seemed to take a moment to gather himself, then ventured, “If… if anything ever happened to Robin and I… You and Say’ri would take care of Ophelia, wouldn’t you?”

Though the thought revolted him to even think about, Inigo could only answer, “You really have to ask?”

Owain grimaced. “I mean, I know you’ll have to go back to Chon’sin and all that, but—”

Inigo cut him off. “No, I meant it as in ‘you shouldn’t have to ask, because of course I would.’” He paused. “On the other hand, all of this is moot, anyway, because heroes of legend don’t sacrifice themselves and leave their favorite cousins behind with their likely-to-be extremely exuberant offspring in the first place, right?”

Owain blinked.

“Say yes,” Inigo continued, “because if you do have the audacity to keel over on me, so help me I’ll march down to whatever afterlife you find yourself in and drag your sorry butt back here, all right?”

“Riiiight,” Owain said, a hint of amusement returning to his features. “Because even the gates of hell will tremble at the wrath of the great Exalt Inigo… or more likely, the obnoxious sniffling of Inigo as he whines for his beloved cousin back…”

“Shut up,” Inigo groaned.

“I know!” Owain continued. “You’ll just annoy them into bringing me back! An ingenious plan, my friend, I can’t imagine they’d last a week.”

“Never mind,” Inigo replied. “Just for that, if you die you’re staying dead.”

“Suuuuure,” Owain said with a grin, and the subject dropped.

For a few days—a fraction of a moment, really, in the grand scheme of the universe—the world truly was quiet.

Inigo could only wonder how long that moment would last.

End of Part 7
The Vision We've Lost (Part 8) Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

The Shepherds receive news of the location of the last Gemstone.

Chapter Notes

Last part, everybody... Weird thought. Finally, we're on to Grima. I'm imagining the final chapter count is going to end up somewhere between 100 and 105--I'll put up a final number when we get close enough for me to be more exact. Also--there is a fair likelihood of a couple more double-length chapters poking their heads in this part, depending on how hectic the scenes get and how easy they are to split.

Also: the "I was a birthday present" line is a reference to a Lissa/Lon'qu comic my roommate sent me LONG ago, and neither of us have been able to find it again since. If anyone knows what I'm referring to and can link me to it, you'll earn my eternal gratitude.

_Hypocritical, egotistical, don’t wanna be the parenthetical, hypothetical, working onto something that I’m proud of, out of the box, an epoxy to the world and the vision we’ve lost…_

Though the January morning had started out surprisingly balmy, the temperature was dropping quickly. The bustle of the Ylisstol streets warmed the air slightly, but Robin still tugged Ophelia’s hat further down over her head as Owain juggled the door and they stepped out of the shop they’d been in.

“We ought to head back,” Owain said, casting a wary glance at the gray-bellied skies, dropping snowflakes at a rate of perhaps only four or five a minute. “Before she gets chilled.”

Even as Robin nodded her agreement, the four-month-old in question gurgled happily to herself, reaching for a snowflake that had fallen almost within her grasp. “Careful,” Robin chided, as if Ophelia might understand her.

“Listen to your mother, tiny heroine,” Owain added as Ophelia continued to squirm. “She’s very wise.”

Ophelia cooed and reached for him.

“...Oh, all right, then,” Owain indulged, shifting her from Robin’s grasp.

“You spoil her,” Robin said.

“The daughter of the master tactician and the Scion of Legend deserves to be spoiled,” Owain retorted. “And you spoil her too.”
Robin sighed, though the sound was fond. “Guess we match in more ways than one.”

Owain beamed, glancing back at the jewelry shop they’d just exited a moment before they turned a corner and rendered it out of sight. *We can wait to match until we’ve got two gold bands,* he’d uttered—nearly a year ago, now, and it had taken him that long to save up for the wedding bands they had ordered moments ago. The time finally had come, though, even if it would be two more weeks before the custom order would be finished. “Guess so,” he replied brightly.

They fell into silence for a few minutes, making their way out to the wide road that ran from the western gate all the way to the palace. “It’s odd to think of your younger self being a few months younger than your daughter,” Robin finally mused, then chuckled to herself. “Timing’s a bit funny. I’m sure your poor father is getting an earful from the rest of the Shepherds… Vaike especially.”

Owain tilted his head. It was strange to think that when he was nearing the fifth anniversary of his return to the past, nearly half of their future company would be born in the year to come. The young Severa would be born by the end of January—Cordelia had had to return from her mission with Frederick and Gaius only a few months in—followed shortly by Yarne in March, Laurent in April, Owain in July, and Inigo in August. “I suppose it’s not exactly commonplace for one’s future child… to have a child… before having one’s… hang on, I confused myself.”

“Ah, Owain Dark can’t even string together proper sentences? Color me shocked. Besides, that’s not what I meant anyway.”

“You haven’t had a proper night’s sleep in about four months,” Robin corrected primly. “I haven’t had one in about eight, because your daughter figured out how her limbs worked quite early on and I dread to think what will happen when she starts getting the hang of them again.”

“Clearly my superior genetics have gifted her both physical aptitude and plenty of things to say about the world… at two in the morning…” Owain said with a sigh. “Wait, what do you mean that wasn’t what you were talking about? What else would the Shepherds be ribbing my father about?”

His face was so innocent she stopped for a moment, pondering under her breath, “...Should I tell him…”

“Tell me what?”

“Maybe not… no point scarring him for life…”

“Scarring?” Owain yelped, jostling Ophelia enough that she let out a muted cry. “What are you not telling me?”

Robin sighed, momentarily bringing her hand to her face. “I’m so going to regret this…” she said. “Okay. Owain, how long does it take for a baby to form?”

“Er… nine months, give or take?”

“Right. It’s right around forty weeks. So… how many weeks are there between your father’s birthday and yours?”

Owain paused. “It would be… just about…” All at once, his face went pale. “Wait.”

Robin sighed again. “There we go…”
A horrified wail escaped him. “I was a birthday present?”

“I mean, that’s one way of putting it.”

“Robin I could have happily lived my entire life without knowing this information!”

“I knew I shouldn’t have told you.”

Owain continued to bemoan such knowledge until Ophelia added her own squalling cry to the mix. He broke off abruptly in exchange for ineffective hushing.

Robin rolled her eyes, about to retake her daughter when the clatter of hooves forced her to look up. Coming down the main road at a brisk trot, a chubby chestnut followed after a long-strided bay.

Her heart leaping in her chest, she called out without thought, “Frederick! Gaius!”

The two riders pulled up short, dropping their hoods at the sight of her. “Lady Robin,” Frederick greeted with a tip of his head.


No point wasting time, though Robin rolled her eyes at the nicknames. “Have you found Sable?”

“We believe so,” said Frederick. “It seems to have fallen into the hands of King Validar. Though it makes little sense to discuss it without milord present.”

“Damn,” Robin replied, striding toward the palace. “Chrom’s in Themis right now. I’ll send a pegasus out for him.”

“And one to Strathmore,” Owain added, hurriedly falling in step with her.

“And one to Strathmore,” she agreed. “I won’t pull out all the Shepherds yet—it could be a feint on Validar’s part—but we’ll definitely need a company.”

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By evening, there were over a dozen Shepherds gathered in the council room.

Owain, Robin, Lissa, Olivia, and Cordelia had been in the palace already, as had Laurent and Lucina, the former having appointed himself as Robin’s lieutenant and the latter having stayed in closer proximity to her son rather than finding herself far afield with many of the other Shepherds. Inigo and Say’ri had arrived within hours of their summons; Gerome and Severa had been home on rotation, as had Sumia, although she had been the one sent to Themis to fetch Chrom, the last of the group to arrive. Miriel and Panne were technically on assignment in Ylisstol as well, though the mage had sequestered herself so deeply in the royal library she was scarcely even seen and the Taguel had vanished off to who-knew-where—apparently, the maternal instinct to isolate herself had run deeper than they’d realized.

“King Validar has extended an invitation,” Frederick said gravely to the assembled group. “He says Plegia has been guarding Sable, and now he wishes to return it to you.”

“Validar…” Chrom murmured.
“They sent word directly to us, Blue,” Gaius added. “Musta caught wind we were looking for it.”

“In any case, Validar asks that you visit him in person,” Frederick continued, “that he might personally present it. Perhaps needless to say, milord, but I don’t like this one bit.”

“Neither do I, Frederick the Wary,” Chrom agreed. “Neither do I. At best, it’s selfish political maneuvering when the world can ill afford it. At worst, our run-in with those Risen last visit was no accident…”

“I can almost guarantee you it wasn’t,” Inigo cut in.

Chrom nodded to him, then continued, “But we will meet with him. Send word at once.”

A murmur went around the table, finally broken by Owain. “Uncle… are you sure that’s wise?”

“No,” Chrom admitted, “but we may not have time to be certain… And my sister never refused a diplomatic gesture, no matter how foul-smelling. If Validar doesn’t give us the stone, he may at least reveal where it is.” He exchanged a wry glance with his Knight Commander. “Don’t worry, Frederick. I’m not walking into this blindly. We’ll make certain everyone is armed to the teeth.”

“Then the Fire Emblem, milord,” Frederick pointed out. “You ought to at least leave it behind.”

“Aye, on that I must agree,” said Say’ri.

“Unless that’s what Validar expects,” Chrom said, “and he comes to steal it with my best people away. No, perhaps it’s safest with me for now. We’ll learn the truth of Validar’s motives soon enough.”

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Lucina really hadn’t meant to eavesdrop.

It had taken almost another hour to work out the logistics of their plan before the council adjourned. From there, the Shepherds had trickled out and gone on their way—some to dinner, some off to bed for the early mornings that would surely await them. Not five minutes after she left, though, Lucina found herself standing in front of the council room’s door once more, pausing at the sound of a sigh.

“I know that face,” Robin said quietly. “‘Dueling with unpleasant thoughts,’ are we?”

Chrom gave a light chuckle that hardly held much humor. “You know me well, Robin.”

A long moment passed before the tactician asked, “Hey, remember when Lissa first brought me here? When I met all the Shepherds? And Sumia…” She broke off to laugh. “Oh, what a day… Actually, that’s my first memory, in a way.”

“Heh, I suppose so,” Chrom replied. “I wish all our memories could have been as joyful.”

“I know… So much needless bloodshed. So many days of pain and doubt and fighting… We would have never made it without you there to guide us, you know.”

“Funny. I was going to say the same about you.”
Robin laughed again. “I guess we really are two halves of the same whole, like you always said.”

Chrom sighed once more, his tone changing by the time he spoke again. “I’ve been reading more about the Awakening ritual. It seems whoever attempts the rite must brave Naga’s fire. If both body and spirit survive the agony, they are blessed with the dragon’s power. Otherwise, the candidate… dies.”

“What?” Lucina cried before she could stop herself. “No!”

Dead silence rang out from inside the council room.

“Er… that is…” Resigning herself, Lucina nudged the door open.

“Eavesdropping, young lady?” Chrom asked dryly.

“Forgive me, Father,” she offered. “I didn’t intend to… I only came back to fetch my coat, but… Father, must you attempt this?”

“It’s all right, Lucina,” said Chrom. “And yes, I’ll be all right, too. I’ll withstand Naga’s fire. I’m sure of it.” He paused a moment, then added, “I’ve already left far too much on your shoulders and Inigo’s to shirk on this now.”

Lucina nodded, doing her best to ignore Robin’s piercing gaze. Nearly a year had gone by since she’d been found now, and still she couldn’t quite help the feeling of something off about the tactician. “I’ll be going, then,” she said, tucking her forgotten coat to her chest. “Good night, Father.”

“Good night, Lucina,” Chrom said warmly, his words echoing in her ears long after she left.

She trudged up the stairs to the royal apartments, the day’s conversations replaying in her head. The candidate dies. As the words circled through her ominously, her feet carried her to Inigo’s door.

Inigo himself appeared only moments after she knocked, the first two buttons on his collar loosed and his sleeves rolled up to the elbows; his hair was a little mussed, in a way he would probably describe as ‘artfully tousled’ and what she would call ‘in need of a comb.’ “Hey, Luce.”

“Hello,” she replied, then fell quiet for a moment.

The silence stretched out so long that Inigo finally coughed and rubbed the back of his neck. “Uh… did you need Say’ri? She’s in the bath right now, so…”

“No,” Lucina said, hurriedly shaking her head. “I just wished to talk to you.”

“Oh,” he said. “What about?”

“A great many things,” she admitted. “Might we go for a walk?”

“Sure,” Inigo said brightly. “Two seconds.” He disappeared momentarily, the door swinging ajar in his wake before he reappeared, shrugging into his coat. “What’s up?”

Lucina eyed him sidelong for a moment, waiting until they had descended the staircase before finally speaking. “I want to know what happened,” she finally said. “In our world. I want to know what happened to Father.” When he didn’t answer, she continued, “That is the crux of it, isn’t it? His death was what lead to Grima’s resurrection and eventually the end of our world.”
“I suppose,” Inigo finally murmured. “I mean… Aunt Lissa can’t wield Falchion and you, Owain, and I were all of twelve and nine when it happened. By the time we finally could have performed the Awakening ourselves… Well, you up and died on us and took Vert with you.” He gave a fraction of a wry, self-deprecating grin. “And now we’re here.”

“So was Father ever Awakened?” Lucina prodded.

Inigo shook his head. “He was killed at the Dragon’s Table before ever managing to acquire the last Gemstone,” he said. The winding hallways finally gave way to the entrance to one of the side gardens, the chill night air giving them a biting welcome. “Which, if I remember, was actually Sable… Gods, I am not happy about the recent developments here.”

“Validar killed him, then?” Lucina asked. Once more, a long pause dragged out. “…Inigo?”

Inigo came to a halt and shook his head, hands shoved firmly in his coat pockets. “There were rumors—only rumors, let me clarify—that it was… a close friend who betrayed him, in the end. The way it was spoken of, I can only imagine…” He trailed off again, as if the words physically pained him to say. “That it was another of the Shepherds.”

“Then we must find out who!” Lucina said. “Surely you must have some idea—we’ll tell Father now and he’ll be able to stop them—send them away, or make sure they stay in Ylisstol—”

“Stop right there,” Inigo cut in. “For one, no I don’t have some idea. I’ve served alongside every single one of the Shepherds for a minimum of almost two years during the Valm War, and several of them longer than that. Not a one of them would do it, not of their own volition. Hell, for all I know the rumor was Plegian propaganda to get us to mistrust our own people. For another, I’d like to know who named you judge, jury, and executioner for a crime that hasn’t even been committed.”

“Has it not?” she demanded. “Our world still existed and the consequences of the actions taken there still apply—we both stand here the living proof of that. If we are to prevent it from coming to pass again then Father must be kept alive at all costs. If sacrifices must be made in the process…”

“Don’t,” Inigo said lowly. “Don’t talk to me about sacrifices until you have so much blood on your hands you can’t even count the people who left it there anymore.”Fixing her with a level glare, he continued, “You’re not talking about sending someone away anymore and I don’t even think you realize it.”

Lucina squared her shoulders, her voice rising. “I am not speaking of murder and I don’t care that you’re implying it.”

“‘At all costs’ covers a great many things, Lucina,” Inigo said. “And I’ve seen more of them than I care to recount.”

Lucina paused, inhaling deeply before saying, “I understand what you’re trying to say,” she said. “And I agree that we cannot act rashly on this matter. But if there is evidence… we cannot hesitate to take action.”

“When that time comes, I’ll be right by your side,” Inigo said. “But be careful. Sometimes the line we walk… is thinner than you might think.”

Lucina returned to her bed that night with her head much too full to sleep.
Robin stood in the middle of Ophelia’s recently acquired nursery in the last few dark moments before dawn, her nose pressed to the crown of her daughter’s head like she might never hold her like that again.

“My sweet little girl,” the tactician murmured, though Ophelia gave little more than a sleepy gurgle in response. She’d known, clinically, that having to leave would be next to impossible after having spent Ophelia’s entire short life with her in the palace, but now that the moment was upon her she couldn’t quite seem to make her arms let go.

“Hey. Robin?”

Lissa’s voice was quiet enough to leave Ophelia undisturbed, but still plenty to slice through the entire moment. “Yeah?” Robin said, forcing herself to look up.

“I think they’re all just waiting on you,” Lissa said, a little sheepishly. The light from the hallway beyond silhouetted her, her slight figure betraying the existence of a young second Owain for all that he wouldn’t be born until summer. Robin took another moment to curse the timing that had forced them to leave out five mothers-to-be among the Shepherds.

Robin cleared her throat. “Right.” With aching reluctance, she settled Ophelia back in her crib, smoothing a hand over her fine curls.

“You’ll be back before you know it,” Lissa said, her tone forcibly light.

“I know,” Robin sighed. “I’m trying not to fret, but… Just because I can’t bring her doesn’t mean I don’t hate to leave her behind.”

Lissa made an aggrieved expression at that. “Wait until you’re on the other end,” she grumbled.

“Fair point.”

Lissa’s face turned a fraction more serious as Robin neared. “Hey. Just bring everyone back in one piece, all right?”
Realistically, Robin should have said *I’ll do my best.* Realistically, if this went as terribly as its bitter potential held, there was the chance that *none* of them would be coming in one piece.

What she really said was “Of course.”

With all the suddenness of whiplash, Lissa beamed. “Great! I’ll hold you to it,” she said, abruptly flinging her arms around Robin’s neck.

Robin let out a startled laugh at her friend-turned-mother-in-law’s sudden affection. “Yeah,” she managed. “Well, if we’re lucky, then—” She broke off as something small, cold, and *slimy* dropped down the back of her neck. “Gah! Lissa!”

Lissa broke away, cackling madly as Robin scrambled to rid the frog from her shirt.

“Honestly! You haven’t aged a day since I met you!”

Still snickering, Lissa said, “But you’ll never be bored when I’m around!”

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“Dear gods above.”

In different circumstances, Inigo’s answering words might have been light—in these, they only hung heavy with despair. “I don’t think it’s the ‘above’ gods we have to worry about.”

Their company of eleven had seen the smoke over the horizon, but the destruction that awaited them in the village they had planned to stay the night in could only aptly be described by three words from Chrom.

“Search for survivors.”

The only sound that greeted them was the dull creaking of unsound, fire-eaten structures struggling to keep themselves upright, occasionally interspersed by the low crackle of flames that hadn’t quite extinguished themselves yet.

No murmurs of huddled survivors.

“They wiped this place off the map,” Inigo said when the Shepherds had regrouped, preparing to pitch their tents in a small hollow to the west in a vain attempt to offer themselves some shelter against the cold January air. “But what *for*? Even if they sent Risen in and didn’t leave survivors, I haven’t seen this sort of utter destruction at their hands since—” He cut himself off abruptly at the memory of just when ‘since’ had been.

“To send a message,” Robin said flatly, loosening the straps that held her saddlebags before swinging the packs off her mount’s rump and over her shoulders.

“I myself harbored the same suspicions,” Laurent admitted, one hand on Sassafras’s reins while the other pushed his spectacles further up his nose. “Validar could intend to cripple our morale through the display of such senseless carnage. Alternatively, perhaps this village served some interference with whatever strategy he soon intends to implement.”

“I would find ‘deliberate’ to be more alarming than ‘random,’” Say’ri said. “It may mean he has
the means to track our whereabouts, or that he managed to learn we had planned on taking our respite here.”

“I don’t suppose we might send word to Flavia?” Chrom said. “If there’s a potential our itinerary has been leaked, there might be an ambush where we plan to rendezvous.”

“Good point,” said Robin. “I’m on it.” She glanced at Owain, then said, “Can you get the tent up, hon?”

“With extreme pleasure!” he replied brightly. “Er… maybe with marginal pleasure. Er, perhaps not with pleasure, per se, but, uh, sure. I’m on it.”

“I’ll lend you a hand when we get done with ours, you goob,” Inigo said, rolling his eyes. “If you’re nice to me.”

“Inigo! When have I ever not been nice to you—”

“Approximately every hour of the day,” Inigo cut him off.

“I feel as though there is a phrase in this country referring to pots and kettles that could be apt at this particular moment,” said Say’ri.

Inigo stopped in his tracks to let out a gasp. “My love! Are you accusing me—your very adorable and doting husband—of perpetual rudeness toward my own kin?”

Say’ri lifted one brow and said, “Aye. ‘Twould be precisely what I am very accurately accusing you of.”

“I tease out of love! It’s done with the greatest affection!”

“And yet,” Owain said, “this excuse somehow does not apply to me?”

Inigo turned, pointed at his cousin, and exclaimed, “Exactly!”

“That’s hardly fair, my friend.”

“Sorry, did I imply it was?” Inigo shrugged. “Of course, I could always rescind my offer—”

“Ugh,” Owain said. “Fine. I’ll grant you an exception on this singular occasion.”

“Until the next time you want manual labor out of me, of course,” Inigo said with a wink.

“Perhaps.”

Inigo’s tone softened slightly, however, when he caught a glimpse of his sister staring blankly at the pile of canvas and poles in front of her. “You doing all right, Luce?” he asked, then prodded again when she didn’t answer, “Luce?”

“Mmm?” Lucina said, glancing up sharply. “Oh. Indeed.”

“Let me know if you’re not,” Inigo said.

“‘Tis a bit of an adjustment in the beginning, to be living in the rough as such,” Say’ri offered. “Especially at this time of year. I might lend you a hand if you have need.”

“Don’t trouble yourself,” a gruff voice interjected. Emerging from the falling dusk like the shadow
he seemed to perpetually resemble, Gerome hardly seemed to spare any of the rest of them a glance as he dropped to one knee at the heap that ought to become Lucina’s tent.

Inigo quirked a brow—surely the wyvern rider hadn’t had nearly enough time to piece together his own lodging for the night yet—and had hardly opened his mouth to respond when a firm grip caught his arm.

“Tis hardly the time for your usual brand of verbal sniping,” Say’ri whispered, the words so low she had to stand on her tiptoes for them to even reach his ear. A moment passed before she added, “Particularly not that which is about to be aimed in the direction of your brother-in-law.”

Inigo shot her a dirty look at that. “You just had to remind me, didn’t you?”

“At some point you’ll find you must come to terms with the fact,” Say’ri replied. “Twas their decision to make—not yours. Perpetually throwing such fits at the man your sister chose in a partner is liable only, I think, to one day succeed in driving away the both of them.”

Though his first instinct was to tell her just what he thought of that, the sobering truth of what she’d said quickly smacked him in the face. If the choice ever came—if they were one day so divided that Lucina was forced to pick a side between Inigo and Gerome—which way would she fall?

Inigo abruptly found that he didn’t have a clue. In the last days of their world, before they had decided whether to stay or go, on what side would Lucina have laid her loyalties? Inigo couldn’t even come to a conclusion on that; and that was regarding the sister he’d known and grown up with, not the new and sometimes utterly alien version of her that was across from him now, kneeling on the ground beside Gerome with a quizzical expression as he showed her how to piece together the tent.

On the other hand… while Inigo had admittedly spent very little time in the presence of Lucina and Gerome both since they’d returned to Ylisse, it was plain to see that had yet to settle back into even the steady friendship that had characterized their rocky teenage years, no less anything that had come along after that. Frankly, Inigo wasn’t entirely sure if Lysander even knew Gerome was his father, or what difference it made if he did. It seemed the former pair merely orbited each other like the sun and moon—occasionally sharing the same sky, the same space, but never truly coming together.

“If something about my presence alarms you,” Gerome said, “I’d prefer you said as much rather than merely staring vacantly. Preferably before you begin to drool.”

While Inigo was tempted for a moment to come up with a ridiculous and nonsensical retort—Gerome’s undershirt (invisible from that angle) being inside out, perhaps—but instead he merely shook his head quickly. “No,” he managed. “Sorry. Thinking.”

“And clearly you’re incapable of ‘thinking’ and ‘doing’ at the same time, huh?” Owain said.

“Oh, like you’re not one to talk,” Inigo shot back, beginning to unfold a length of canvas before his overactive brain got him into any more trouble.
In the mirror image of the night before, this time it was Inigo who came looking for Lucina.

“Hey,” he said after announcing himself and receiving her invite. He glanced around as he stepped inside her temporary lodging, continuing, “Nice job on the tent.”

“I’m afraid I can’t take much credit for it,” Lucina admitted, kneeling on the ground to sort through one of the packs she’d brought. “Gerome did most of the work. I can only hope I find some way to repay him sooner rather than later.”

“Eh, I wouldn’t be too concerned,” Inigo said with a shrug, shoving his hands in his pockets and crossing one ankle over the other. “He’d probably go move a mountain for you if you asked him.”

Lucina glanced up at that, looking at him oddly for a moment before ever-so-slightly shaking her head. “I’ll take your word for it,” she murmured. “What is it that you needed?”

He shrugged. “Just wanted to check on you,” he admitted. “You seemed a bit glum earlier. Thought you could do with some cheering up.”

She shook her head. “It’s all right, Inigo, but thank you.”

“C’mon now, Luce, we talked about the fretting,” Inigo said, his voice still deliberately cheerful. “I won’t have it. I’ll start on puns if I have to, and trust me I have plenty from when Henry was in Strathmore with us.”

“I’m really not in the—” Lucina began, only to be cut off.

“What’s it called when a cavalier’s horse misbehaves?” Inigo interjected.

“...What?”

“A knight mare.”

A long moment passed before Lucina sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose.

“No, huh?” Inigo said. “Although I will say, as the proud owner of a gelding for nearly the past five years, finding myself on a mare probably would be my version of a nightmare.”

“You’re exaggerating.”

“Luce, I do not have the slightest idea what possessed my wife to keep Dior,” Inigo said seriously. “And that horse is the most mareish mare I have ever encountered in my life.” She didn’t respond and he echoed her long sigh. “C’mon, work with me, would you?”

“Now is hardly the time,” Lucina said.

“Now is precisely the time!” he retorted. “In dark moments like this, you just have to keep grinning until you feel happy.”

Lucina glanced up sharply, her grip tightening on the edge of her pack. “A village was butchered, Inigo! Men, women, and children slaughtered! There are times when a person has no business smiling, no less to be so blithe as to joke it all away!”

Inigo straightened, his casual posture fading as he crossed his arms. “I had no intent to make light of what happened here,” he said quietly. “But making a martyr of yourself over it won’t do anything to bring these people back.”
“I do not consider it martyring myself to take a moment of silence!” she shot back. “However foreign that idea may seem to you!”

“Lucina—” Inigo started, only to be cut off with one final blow.

“Unlike you, my head is not filled with rainbows and sunshine,” Lucina finished flatly. “Sometimes I can only wonder why it seems like *you* have no memory of the dire straits it seems we will soon find ourselves again.”

Inigo’s arms fell back to his sides once more. “All right, Lucina, all right,” he managed in a soft tone. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to…” He trailed off, one corner of his mouth twitching a little before he finished, “I’ll see you later.”

Without waiting for a response, he ducked back out of her tent and into the acrid night.
The Vision We've Lost (Part 8) Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

The Shepherds make a quick descent into Mire Mage Hell.

Soon.

Inigo could almost hear the word, just as he had the last time he’d stared across the courtyard of Plegia Castle at the mountainous remains of Grima’s skull.

If he focused, he could almost still see the pale streak of his aunt’s hurtling form tumbling headlong through the sky.

“Here we go,” he whispered to himself, wishing the air wasn’t so still it felt as if the world itself was holding its breath in anticipation.

Fingers laced with his, squeezing hard. Inigo squeezed back, leaving his grip entwined with Say’ri’s, thanking the fact they’d chosen to come into the castle on foot rather than on horseback.

In addition to joining up with the three Shepherds stationed nearest to the Plegian border—Libra, Lon’qu, and Ricken—Flavia and her men had met them two days after they left Ylisstol, as planned, though they’d changed their meeting place to one city further west than originally decided. Now, the Feroxi company waited in last night’s camp, keeping safe the Ylisseans’ mounts for a quick escape in case the day’s negotiations went poorly. They had specifically looped south, nearly to the Dragon’s Table; in the second worst-case scenario, the remaining Shepherds were poised to gather there by late afternoon.

In the worst-case scenario, the combined armies of Ylisse, Regina Ferox, and Chon’sin would be joining them across the sea from Origin Peak.

“Fie,” Say’ri finally said, breaking the silence hanging over them. “The very size of it.”

A murmured agreement rang out over the group, gazes unavoidably drawn to the colossal skull.

“Do you suppose,” Owain ventured, “those are his true bones or just an effigy?”

“No idea,” Inigo admitted. “And frankly I’m not especially keen on hanging around to find out.”

After a moment, Lucina shook her head. “We cannot let that monster come back to life,” she whispered.

From the head of the formation, Chrom fell back slightly, dropping his hand to rest on Lucina’s shoulder. “We’ll stop him. I promise,” the Exalt said. “The future can be changed, and we’ve proven that already.” He glanced at Inigo, then briefly to Say’ri, before turning his gaze back on his daughter. “With all of us together, we can change the course of history. Whatever it takes.”

Lucina’s lips flattened as she murmured, “I want to believe that, Father…”

Inigo glanced away from the conversation, shaking his head slightly. He’d hardly spoken with his sister since their first night away from Ylisstol; it seemed two arguments two nights in a row
hadn’t boded well for whatever co-Exalthood they’d agreed upon months ago. For the moment, he thought butting heads on their myriad of differences could only do more harm than good.

At that moment, though, a sharp-looking Plegian soldier greeted them, exchanging formalities before leading them toward the castle.

And whatever destiny awaited inside.

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“Psst. Chrom.”

Robin’s words were so quiet that Inigo wouldn’t have overheard if proper decorum hadn’t placed him and Say’ri directly behind Chrom and his tactician. Inigo, meanwhile, was trying not to stare too obviously at where the Fire Emblem hung off his father’s arm; why did it have to be attention-drawing in the very worst of ways? “Trouble?” the Exalt whispered back.

“I saw armed soldiers hiding in the shadows as we were shown in,” Robin hissed back.

Chrom paused, his low voice grim as he answered, “Then it sounds like we have our answer already.”

The Shepherds—now numbering fifteen—fanned out as they entered the purple-carpeted expanse of the Plegian throne room. No sooner had they come to a halt when two figures emerged from the shadows: sallow-faced King Validar, flanked by a dark, buxom woman who could presumably only be Aversa.

“Well met, milord,” the latter greeted in a honeyed tone.

“Prince Chrom!” Validar greeted. “Welcome.”

Plainly on guard by such bright greetings, Chrom paused for a moment before saying, “…I was told you had something you wished to give me.”

“My, my!” Validar said, his tone still light. “No time for courtesy, milord? Such impatience… Do you really want it that badly? This concerns me. The Gemstones and the Fire Emblem can be such… treacherous artifacts. A fact Plegia and the Grimleal sadly know all too well…”

“Sadly?” Inigo snorted before he could think better of it. “I can’t imagine you’re actually referring to the first Exalt’s defeat of the fell dragon with the word sadly, are you?”

At once, Validar’s mild demeanor tipped up into a lethal smirk. “As a matter of fact, I am,” he said. “But despite your show of incredulity, you knew that already, didn’t you, intruder?”

Inigo froze, the hair on the back of his neck standing to attention. “Intruder?”

“Don’t play like you don’t know what I mean, boy,” said Validar. “We both know which among you shouldn’t be here.” The Plegian king’s eyes turned pointedly to Say’ri. “The dead and the unborn alike.”

Inigo hadn’t realized he’d been reaching for the hilt of his katana until he found a warm hand in the place of its familiar grip. “Steady,” Say’ri murmured, grasping the hilt of his sword for a moment
more before letting go. “Do not stoop to his level.”

“Or kindly do,” Validar put in. “Since you’ll be destroyed either way.”

All at once, any hope of peace in the atmosphere dissipated. “You wouldn’t dare,” Chrom snapped, his own hand dropping to Falchion’s grip.

“Believe me, I would.” In the blink of an eye, Validar retrieved his own weapon: a spellbook emblazoned with the six-eyed Mark of Grima on the cover. “Now give me the Fire Emblem!”

“You mad scoundrel!” Chrom said. “Ylisse will take this as a declaration of war!”

“So take it!” Validar shouted. “I will only ask one last time: give me the Emblem! Now!”

Chrom’s voice dropped dangerously low. “Never.”

“Then this parley is over,” said Validar. Drab-clothed forms appeared from the shadows at the edges of the room before their king bellowed, “Guards! Seize them!”

Almost faster than the eye could follow, Robin’s tome was out and open in her hand. “Bolganone!” she cried, the floor between the Shepherds and the Plegian king cracking open with a hot shower of magma. “Chrom, this way! Quickly!”

She signaled them down a darkened hallway. Her spell had only briefly slowed Validar’s guards, judging by the sound of pursuit behind them, and no sooner had they rounded the next corner did they find another company awaiting them.

“We have to get out of here, now!” shouted Chrom. “Cut down anyone who gets in the way!”

With the ease of a hundred battles fought together, the Shepherds fell into formation. The room they were in opened on two sides to the Plegian soldiers ahead—who took quick advantage of the opportunity to flank them.

“Laurent, can you block that side?” Robin called back.

“Affirmative,” the mage replied—the last clear sound any of them heard before the din of battle began.

A moment later, springing fully formed from the incantation still on Laurent’s lips, on the of the archways blazed into flame. It likely wouldn’t hold long once they continued to push forward, but for the moment it held back all but a stray, off-track Thunder spell that petered out as soon as it touched the fire.

“Impressive, my bespectacled companion,” Owain said. Laurent only nodded shortly in acknowledgment, already thumbing through his tome once more.

No sooner had their company grouped up to charge through the other entrance, however, did the air turn sour. “Owain!” Inigo shouted, instinctively yanking on his cousin’s arm. The motion sent them both tumbling back into the cold, plastered wall to the side.

A moment later, the hanging, creeping green blob of something exploded in the spot they had both been.

“Seven hells,” Inigo muttered, shaking his head to clear it as he forced himself back upright. Their frontline had finished off the first wave ahead of them, giving a moment’s respite for him to ask,
“What was that?”

He had scarcely finished speaking when another of the masses appeared, unceremoniously exploding a fraction too soon for Severa to get out of the blast zone. She let out a string of muffled curses; when the spell had cleared, a section of her sleeve a few inches in diameter appeared to have either burned or melted away, leaving red and blistered skin in its wake. “It smarts, that’s for damned sure,” she growled.

Inigo dared glanced out through the archway ahead of them, but from his limited vantage point, he could see nary a mage who could have cast the odd spell. “How did—”

With an enthusiasm perhaps not entirely appropriate for the situation, Laurent’s eyes lit up. “I must postulate those were Mire spells,” he said eagerly. “I have never had the fortune to observe one in practice, but judging by the appearance…” With a little too much force, he caught Severa’s hand, pushing his spectacles up his nose to get a better glimpse of her arm. “Indeed. This pattern of injury lends itself to the hypothesis of Mire spells.”

“But coming from where, exactly?” Frederick asked, peering into the next room as well.

“Mire can be cast without line-of-sight,” Robin said grimly. Her spellbook was still open and glowing in her hands as her eyes darted ahead. “It’s one of the only combat spells that can be—” She broke off to curse, scrambling out of the way as another of the aforementioned spells bubbled up next to her. “Good news is—without the caster being able to see, they aren’t especially accurate.”

“So,” Inigo clarified, “we can’t see the mages casting at us, so we can’t do jack squat to get rid of them, so we’re going to spend this entire battle trying to dodge freaky acid-bubbles while we fight the enemies we can see?”

“Pretty much, yeah,” Robin said.

Inigo shook his head, katana still at the ready as their tactician gestured them forward. “Fun.”

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Two-thirds of the Shepherds had some form of wound on them by the time they reached the last hallway awaiting them. The dry desert lighting shining in through the windows illuminated all of it —both the directly induced burns and blisters from the Mire spells themselves and the motley of other injuries that came from trying to get out of their way. Owain, unfortunately, had not suffered the least of those injuries—one of the Mire spells had splattered over almost his entire right side, thankfully missing his face but leaving so many pockmarks in his shirt he’d surely never be able to wear it again.

“Almost there!” Chrom called back to them, darting ahead to dispatch the last of the Plegian guards. “The exit is just—” He broke off, pulling up short. “Wait. Do you feel—”

Before he could finish speaking, a burst of golden light washed through the room, the distinctive rushing pop of a warping spell sounding mere feet from Chrom. No sooner had Validar solidified into existence did he send Chrom stumbling back with the ease of a spell prepped and cast before he’d even moved. “Run all you like,” the Plegian king said, again with a cruel smirk on his face. “You can’t escape fate. Don’t you know that?”
“Dad!” Inigo called, quickly echoed by Lucina’s own cry of “Father!” They were both pulled up short before either took more than a step, though, by a raised hand and a quick shake of Gaius’s head. Too far, the thief seemed to say wordlessly. You won’t get to him in time.

There was a subtle shift from the back of the line. Surely Validar would notice if either Robin or Ricken, at the front, readied a spell to dispatch him—but Laurent had ducked down behind Lon’qu, and was quickly flipping through his tome out of the king’s view. “Owain,” the mage murmured. “Have you your tome with you?”

Owain dared nod.

“Ready it. I may need your aid.”

“The Fire Emblem,” Validar said once more. “Give it freely, or it will be taken.”

Chrom finally straightened, his voice as defiant as before the battle. “Just try it.”

“On my mark, Owain,” Laurent continued lowly.

Validar, meanwhile, merely chuckled. “I won’t need to try anything. Robin!”

Owain froze.

Robin’s tome fell to the stone floor with a dull thud as her hands clapped to her temples; a soft cry of agony escaped her, her shoulders bowing under the weight of Validar’s machination.

“Robin?” Chrom managed in a strangled tone, pivoting on one foot to keep Falchion trained on Validar with one hand while he reached the other toward her.

“Seize the Emblem,” Validar said, “and bring it to me.”

“Nngh… No, I…”

“Leave her alone, villain!”

Owain stepped out from behind the other Shepherds, ignoring the look Laurent shot him for ruining whatever plan he’d had. A hard, boiling rage bubbled inside him—one he hadn’t felt since it had still been Robin’s borrowed spellbook in his hand instead of his own.

Which would have made his life significantly easier, as a matter of fact, considering the fact that his own tome didn’t have the spell he desired; it would still give him the power to channel it, of course, but without it written in front of him he’d have to cast the entire incantation by hand, from memory.

Fortunately, the one and only time he’d cast that spell was still seared in his mind with a perfect image of the throne room of Castle Valm. “Powers of night, lay Waste upon—”

And that was as far as he got, because with a silent flick of his wrist Validar sent Owain reeling, stumbling back into the nearest person—Inigo—with the shocking, spasming force of whatever it was that had just been cast on him.

“You okay?” Inigo managed, wrapping an arm around his shoulders as Owain gasped in a breath, barely nodded, and struggled to keep himself upright.

“Robin…” Chrom managed. The point of Falchion trembled, no longer quite remaining on Validar; but neither, it seemed, could the Exalt actually draw it on Robin. “What are you… doing…?”
Wordless, her back now ramrod straight, Robin came to a halt in front of Chrom.

Braced her feet.

Wrenched the Fire Emblem from his arm, spun, and handed it off to Validar.

Before any of the Shepherds could react, the Plegian king stepped back once more, tucking the black orb that was Sable into the shield’s last empty slot. “Well done, my child,” he praised. “At last, the Fire Emblem belongs to me. And with my Gemstone, it is complete. Now, to set the Table and perform the rite…”

“Damn you, Validar!” Chrom called, but his words came too late—Validar had already warped away once more. No sooner had he, though, did Robin come to with a gasp, resting her head in her hands once more.

“Ah! I—” she managed, before having to pause and suck in a breath. “What have I done?”

“Robin!” Chrom said, grasping her elbow. “We have to go!”

“Chrom, I’m sorry!” she blurted. “I don’t… know what came over me… I’m so sorry!”

“I know you are,” Chrom said, “but right now we need to focus on getting out of here!”

With a deep, shuddering breath, Robin finally nodded. “Understood.”

Owain hadn’t quite registered when he’d shrugged out of Inigo’s grip and stumbled across the gap; his arm landed a little more heavily across his wife’s shoulders than he’d originally intended, and hoped dearly that she didn’t notice. “Hey,” he managed. “It’s okay.” Every sense within him argued that this was not okay in any sense of the word, but for the moment he ignored them. “It’s okay. Are you okay?”

A long moment passed before she nodded, leaning against him for another breath before forcing herself back upright. “Right! Everyone, we need to move!”
Chapter Summary

We’re standing face to face with our own human race
We commit the sins again and our sons and daughters pay
Our tainted history is playing on repeat
But we could change it if we stand up strong and take the lead
When I was younger I was named a generation unafraid
For the heirs to come, be brave...

Chapter Notes

Alternate description: In which Inigo is still only about halfway down the slope of how bad his day is going to get.

Should I have held off on this chapter for another day or two? Quite probably. Did I want to? Not especially--doubly so considering I'm somewhat attempting to have this fic wrapped up the end of October so I can start the sequel off for NaNoWriMo and avoid having to roll any word count over. It's rather ambitious, especially considering I have three more HoS fics to write too, so I'm not going to guarantee anything, but we'll see how it goes.

“What I did… is unforgivable.”

Robin’s quiet words seemed to expand over the entire courtyard of Plegia castle, ringing and echoing in their ears long after the whisper itself had died.

“Enough of that, Robin,” Chrom replied in an equally soft tone. He shot a harried glance over his shoulder at the others, scanning the sandy expanse for any further pursuit. “Save your energy for helping us track him down.”

“No, I…” Robin glanced down at her feet, taking a shuddering breath. In her peripheral vision, she caught a pitying glance from Say’ri and a sympathetic shrug from Gaius; besides Owain, who hadn’t so much as let go of her since Validar had warped away, none of the other Shepherds would even dare meet her eye. “You have to leave me behind,” she finished.

“Hey.” Owain’s grip on her arm tightened, pulling her up short as he crossed in front of her path. His other hand went to her chin, raising her head to face him. “No one is leaving anyone behind, all right? Especially not our master tactician who is going to get us out of this mess.”

“He could use me again!” she hissed, casting a glance back toward the castle. The coast was still clear, which meant either they were experiencing a stroke of extraordinarily good luck, or that Validar currently had more important uses for his goons. “I can’t be trusted!” She took a step back, forcing Owain’s grip to slacken. “This cursed blood must somehow give… my father…” She nearly choked on the word, “dominion over me.”
“But he never had full control.” Chrom paused to face her as well now, while the other Shepherds exchanged uneasy glances amongst each other. “You can fight it, Robin. And if he expects you blindly obey, that might be the surprise we need.”

Robin shook her head. “Chrom, you… you put too much faith in me.”

Another voice chimed in, then, nearly bringing a tear to her eye—Frederick the Wary, who had so wholeheartedly fought her very presence among them nearly five years ago, only to throw himself just as wholeheartedly behind her now. “Get back on that horse, Robin,” the knight said gruffly. “You can’t give up now.”

“But you’re not listening! I told you, I’m not—”

“The deed is done, Robin,” Chrom said flatly. “But you can still try to undo the damage. It’s not too late.”

Robin took in a heaving breath. Owain reached for her once more, smoothing a hand from her temple to curl behind her ear. “All right,” she managed softly. “I’ll… I’ll try.”

“You need not fear, my love,” Owain whispered. “The entire legendary might of Shepherds both present and future stand behind you, you know.”

She glanced up at him once more, her voice slightly watery when she spoke again. “Validar won’t know what hit him.”

A careful grin etched itself on Owain’s face. “Exactly.”

~~~

Inigo had not stopped moving since they left Plegia Castle—for good reason, he told himself, because the moment he stopped moving he’d start thinking, and it was more than likely once he started doing that he was going to shatter into a million pieces on the ground.

At least he had something to keep him occupied; Chrom wanted their camp down and packed in an hour, which left very little time for dawdling indeed. Inigo’s own personal items had hardly left their bags, which meant his own packing took approximately two minutes to handle, but there were still tents to bring down, armor to organize, and mounts to ready. With care, they could make it to the Dragon’s Table in the early hours of the night.

As it was, he had a crate of medical supplies balanced on his hip, Maribelle’s barked orders still ringing in his ears as he strode through the quickly-tumbling remains of their camp. Returning to find the rest of the Shepherds ready and waiting had provided some small modicum of relief that Inigo struggled to cling to.

He had scarcely rounded the corner of a still half-erect tent when he caught a glimpse of his sister.

For a moment, he hesitated to say anything. There was a brief instant where she hadn’t seemed to spot him, though it quickly ended when she glanced up from wrestling with her own supplies to fix him with a guilt-stained look.

“Hey, Lucina,” he forced himself to whisper.
She paused, throat working for a moment before she started, “Inigo, I—”

“No, don’t worry,” he said quickly, hoisting his cargo into its designated spot before dusting his hands off and stepping back. “Just passing through. I won’t bother you, I promise.”

“Inigo, I actually wanted to apologize for before,” Lucina cut in quickly. “I meant what I said, but my delivery was… quite harsh. I appreciate your desire for mirth, but I cannot think now is the time.” She paused, then continued, “If you can agree to stop asking me to smile, I pledge never to yell at you again.”

“Sure,” Inigo said, feeling the corner of his mouth twitch ever-so-slightly. “No problem. Sometimes I forget everyone’s head isn’t stuffed with rainbows.”

Lucina shook her head. “Inigo, I didn’t—”

“Don’t worry about it,” he interjected. “Consider it dropped. I’ll be on my way.”

“Inigo, wait.”

Already two steps away, he paused and sighed. “Lucina, I really do not have the time. Is it important?”

He glanced back, finding her face once more veiled in a haze of guilt. A long moment dragged out; finally, she shook her head. “No, I suppose not.”

Inigo nodded sharply—ignoring the flash of pain that went through him from the yet unhealed patchwork of acid burns down his neck and left shoulder—and went on his way once more.

~~~~~~~~

Forty-five minutes passed before he exchanged more than half a dozen words with anyone else.

“Inigo! Inigo—fie, would you slow down for but half a moment?”

“I’m looking for my father,” Inigo replied without looking around. He lifted one hand to shield his eyes against the sun creeping steadily toward the western horizon, while he held the other out to reveal a scrap of parchment clutched in his fingers. “I’ve got a message for him from Flavia.”

Say’ri shot him a glance as she fell in step beside him, holding her own hand out a beat later. “Hand it here, then, and I’ll run it.”

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“Inigo,” she replied, not quite able to hide the irritation in his voice.

“You still need healed,” Say’ri said, her tone as sharp as his.

“I’m fine,” Inigo said, despite the fact he had to keep his injured shoulder slightly hunched toward his ear and he’d long ago given up on trying to turn his neck more than a quarter of an inch in either direction. He glanced down at the bloody rip in her pants over the outside of her left thigh and continued, “Have you gotten that looked at?”

“Inigo.” She turned in front of him, forcing him to a halt lest he run her over. “Under Lord Chrom’s orders we are not to depart until everyone who was in Plegia Castle is seen by a healer, so
if your intent is to single-handedly delay us with your own stubbornness then by all means do
continue to dig your heels in. And for the record, aye, I have had that looked at.”

Inigo stared at her for a moment more before ducking past her and continuing down the path again.
“Why’s he called that?”

“To ensure that all of us can be healed,” she replied tartly.

This time, Inigo froze without Say’ri’s intervention. “Please tell me you’re not saying—”

“Aye,” she said softly. “Ricken has been hexed, and we know for sure ‘twas while we were in the
castle, because he was healed without incident after our last skirmish.”

Inigo forced out a shuddering breath, then said, “Well, that explains why I haven’t seen Henry or
Tharja.”

Say’ri glanced away, looking as if she were debating the merits of whatever she was about to tell
him next. “Henry fears the prediction he made back in Strathmore was alarmingly correct,” she
whispered. “They’ve not been able to remove it.”

Inigo felt his stomach drop somewhere deep into the earth below them. “So it’s permanent.”

“Until the caster dies, aye.”

“...Gods damn her.”

Say’ri plainly didn’t need to ask which ‘her’ he referred to. Instead, she lifted a hand to his cheek,
whispering, “Inigo, I know you’re frightened… but Robin has a plan.”

“Did that plan include handing Validar the Fire Emblem on a silver platter?” he snapped in return,
regretting the words almost as soon as they passed his lips. He quickly shook his head. “I’m sorry.
I’m just...”

He trailed off, then, as a terrible thought crossed his mind.

“The way it was spoken of, I can only imagine... That it was another of the Shepherds.”

And which of the Shepherds have vanished in the same battle as his father, never to be seen again?
The same one they had just seen had to answer to orders beyond her control.

“Not a one of them would do it, not of their own volition.”

“Oh, gods,” Inigo whispered. His gaze had landed, unseeing, somewhere in the middle distance as
the revelation hit him with the force of a careening wyvern. “It was Robin.”

“What was Robin?” Say’ri asked, only to be soundly ignored.

And if Inigo had figured it out—Inigo, who had immediately started attacking the evidence at
every angle to find some place it didn’t add up, praying to any god who was listening that he was
wrong...

“If we are to prevent it from coming to pass again then Father must be kept alive at all costs. If
sacrifices must be made in the process...”

Then someone looking for it in hopes of finding it would likely have already guessed.
“Say’ri,” Inigo said, his throat almost too dry to form the words. “Have you seen Lucina?”

“Aye,” Say’ri said, her expression puzzled. “Not five minutes ago, on the west edge of camp, speaking with Robin.”

Inigo swore under his breath, fumbling his long-forgotten note from Flavia into his wife’s hand. “Go find my father, don’t worry about that message, just bring him to where you saw them, all right? And don’t stop for anything.” With that, he spun on his heel and took off at a dead run.

“Inigo, what are you doing?” she called after him.

“Praying to Naga I’m wrong!”

~~~

“Beg pardon, Robin. Might I have a word?”

Robin glanced up from the bag she had been digging through. “Lucina?” she asked. “I’m a bit busy at the moment, so unless it’s important…”

“It is,” Lucina said, a little too quickly, then added, “It’s about my father.”

A shadow crossed over the tactician’s face. “I see,” she murmured. She straightened fully, dusting her hands on her thighs. “What’s troubling you, then?”

“It’s…” Lucina paused, glancing at the bustle around them. “A matter to be discussed in private, I think.”

Robin, too, hesitated for a moment, then said, “All right, then. As long as it’s quick; we haven’t got time to hang around here.”

“Thank you,” Lucina said.

They ended up in a scraggly grove of trees hardly a few hundred feet of camp; the cover wasn’t much, but it shielded them from view. “Well?” Robin asked, slightly tilting her head to one side.

Lucina paused for a moment to gather her thoughts. “To speak of my father…” she began, “I must say first that I fear I disagree with him.”

“On what matter?”

“I believe you ought stay behind,” Lucina said. “That the… risks of your coming might outweigh the potential benefits.”

Robin glanced down, her lips thinning and her shoulders heaving in a sigh. “I know,” she said. “And I agree. We don’t know the extent of Validar’s control…” She shook her head. “But you know how Chrom is. Once he’s got the bit in his teeth he won’t let go and I can’t simply disobey an order from him.” In a quieter tone, she added, “And I don’t really wish to abandon the Shepherds for what may be our darkest hour, either.”

Lucina paused to ponder that for a moment before finally speaking again. “When I was in Chon’sin,” she said, “I had… the barest few memories left over. Little more than images, really, of
my friends and my family. My father was among them. Even then, all but devoid of myself… I
couldn’t help but yearn to know him better. And now that I do, I can see the world will be robbed
of a very great man.”

Robin offered her the edge of a smile. “I understand,” she murmured. “You love him. We all do.”
She glanced away, then said, “You must believe, Lucina, that no matter what Validar tries… I
would never allow any harm to come to Chrom, as long as I draw breath.”

Lucina squeezed her eyes shut with a pained shake of her head. “Then you don’t understand the
gravity of the situation,” she murmured. A flicker of unease rose and bloomed in her chest—as it
always seemed to in Robin’s presence.

“Then enlighten me. Now’s no time for secrets, Lucina.”

“I have discussed, at some length… the subject of my father’s demise with my brother,” Lucina
said softly. “And the evidence, however damning, is now clear.” She squared her shoulders, her
voice ringing clear and without hesitation. “In the future, you are my father’s murderer.”

“What?” Robin cried, the words ringing through the trees. “That’s insane— why would I kill…

She trailed off, then, eyes going wide.

“I was not certain myself, until now. I knew only that he had been killed by a close friend. But
today’s events make it clear. You are at Validar’s mercy. I suspect it’s he who forces you to take
my father’s life… and in this world, very soon. Perhaps even this very night.”

Robin steepled her hands together, pinching the bridge of her nose between her first fingers.
“Okay,” she whispered. “Okay, okay, let me think. Just… give me a moment, please.”

“You must stay behind,” Lucina insisted. “Perhaps even make haste back to Ylisstol, if you believe
it would help. I will bring the matter to my father and insist the same—”

“No,” Robin said, shaking her head. “No, I can’t. Now that I know… that’s a variable that I’m
aware of, that I can control… It’s something I can plan around…”

“You cannot risk Validar’s taking control of you again!”

“I must,” Robin said. Her eyes had gone distant now, one finger tapping a surely-quickening
rhythm against her lips. “It’s the only way I can make sure…” Her words abruptly trailed off, her
gaze quickly focusing again. “What… are you doing?”

“Robin, I… Please, forgive me…”

Falchion’s length blazed into a swirling mix of gold and copper under the setting sun. Lucina took
a moment to silently curse Inigo—that he’d known she’d resort to this long before she would.

“If my father is right,” Lucina continued in a halting tone, “then we can change our fates. If this
dark future is to be averted… sacrifices must be made…”

“Lucina,” Robin said, her tone low as she took one, two careful steps backward, her hands raised.

“I am sorry, Robin! I know this is murder… I know that…” Lucina sucked in a shuddering breath,
Falchion’s point beginning to tremble. “But for the sake of my father… and that of my son… and
that of a future with both of them in it…”

“Lucina,” Robin repeated in the same low voice one would use on a spooking horse. “Put it down,
okay? I promise you I’m going to figure something out, you just need to give me a minute to think through it. Don’t do anything you’ll regret.”

“Don’t make it harder!” Lucina cried, her eyes beginning to burn. “Don’t resist and… and your death will be swift and painless. If you hold any love for Chrom, then let this be done…”

Her gaze and her words both steady and unwavering, Robin replied, “I do love, Chrom, Lucina. But I cannot just let you kill me.”

Lucina finally nodded. “I understand,” she whispered. “Then draw your weapon. We will let battle have the final judgment.”

So hard with anger it sounded almost brittle, Inigo’s voice interjected. “We will do no such thing.”
Chapter Summary

In which the Shepherds struggle under the weight of an ill presage.

Chapter Notes

In other news, I have never written Inigo this gosh-dang angry in my entire life, and it was WEIRD.

Also: Yes, that is a final chapter count I've added. It's not completely set in stone yet, depending on how some of the scenes shake out, but it's close enough to be an estimate.

“What,” Inigo said, his voice flinty, “do you think you’re doing?”

A long silence had dragged out in the wake of his first appearance and another echoed it now. “Inigo,” Lucina finally said, Falchion not lowering despite the clear trepidation on her features at the fact he had his own sword drawn. “You must understand—“

“Oh, believe me, I understand quite clearly,” he shot back. “Startling as the fact may be, I’m not the idiot you take me for.” He strode across the grove, point of his katana unwavering until it had nearly clashed with Falchion’s own tip.

“Inigo,” Lucina repeated, her face ashen. “I only meant—”

“Only meant what?” he demanded. “Care to enlighten me? Do tell, was it the entirety of the conversation we had the other night that you missed or only the majority of it?”

“Perhaps it’s you who’s forgotten!” Lucina cried. “We agreed that we must act once there was evidence, and I find this damning evidence indeed!”

“We did! We agreed that we would act! Did you forget that part? Did you forget that we were to do this together? That you refused to take up the title that was rightfully yours, that you left it on me again after four damned years of struggling under it? You don’t get to have it both ways, Lucina! Either you’re the Exalt and you have to take all the shit that comes with it or you don’t get to go behind my back!”

“And what would you have said? Tell me your defense to weigh one life over millions! Tell me what excuse you have to take offense to that!”

“I’ll take offense to it if there’s an option that weighs no lives over millions!” Inigo finally managed one deep breath in that didn’t make him feel like he was going to explode. Robin was still behind him, entirely silent as the two duked it out, though he had to admit she’d completely fallen out of his awareness once he’d gotten going—until now, at least, when he abruptly realized she’d
covertly drawn her tome. “Do you want that on your head, Lucina? Do you want to be responsible for her death only to find out later it changed nothing? Because I sure as hell don’t.”

Lucina jerked her head up, Falchion following the motion. “And if it does change something? What then?”

Inigo hadn’t even noticed when he’d dropped into a ready pose—that he had automatically braced himself for this to come to blows, that by the way this had escalated it was entirely likely that it would—

“ENOUGH!”

Chrom’s voice echoed through the grove with all the force of an oncoming storm. Three heads snapped toward him at once, though his striding pace didn’t slow. Say’ri trailed slightly at his heels, her expression unreadable.

Inigo was the first to find his voice. “Father, you don’t—”

“Both of you,” Chrom snapped, coming to a halt in front of them with his arms crossed, “lower your swords.”

“But, Father—” Lucina began.

“Lower your swords!”

They had no choice but to comply.

“I can explain,” Lucina whispered.

“There’s no need,” Chrom said. “You’re not the only one who can eavesdrop.” The ghost of a joke rang in the air for only a moment. “Lucina, I know your heart is in the right place, but I trust Robin. You cannot shake my faith in her.”

“This is not about trust! She’ll be the death of you!”

“Robin and I,” Chrom said, “have held fast through good times and ill. We swore to be two halves of a greater whole. You underestimate the strength of those ties, the bonds we share. I believe in them more than some foretold ‘destiny.’” He paused, then added, “Is not the fact that Say’ri stands here among us proof enough of that?”

Inigo swallowed, for a moment flashing back to the nights he’d made himself so sick with worry that he could neither eat nor sleep, wondering what it was he’d have to trade to cover the cost of Say’ri’s life; if Fate would let it slide or if it would demand a life for a life.

It seemed to him now that he had been so terribly, extraordinarily lucky.

“Inigo,” Chrom finally said. “There is something I must remind you of as well.”

Not trusting his voice, Inigo only nodded.

“You are not the Exalt,” his father continued flatly. Inigo blinked, about to protest when he was cut off. “And neither is Lucina. I am. That is a burden you gave up the moment you came back.”

“It really isn’t,” Inigo replied. “Surely you must understand—”

“I understand that you are more than a little apt to martyr yourself for things outside of your
control,” Chrom said dryly. “And that both of you—” He glanced pointedly at Lucina, “—forget that the very strength in the ties we share comes from the fact that we will all face our future together. We can change things. We already have. And we will again.”

Another silence dragged out.

“I want no more talk of this,” Chrom finally said. “Is that understood?”

“Indeed,” Lucina said in a low tone. She glanced away, then added, “I would ask your forgiveness, Robin, but I cannot expect it.”

“I understand,” Robin said, her voice ringing clear for how long she’d been silent. “You needn’t speak of it again.”

“Thank you,” Lucina said. “I pray… that is, I trust the both of you will prove me wrong. And that this future will fall to pieces before your bond ever would.”

“It will,” Chrom said firmly, then looked to his son. “Have you seen a healer yet, Inigo?” he asked, all by the barest trace of alarm hidden from his voice.

“No,” Inigo admitted softly.

“Then go do so,” Chrom said. “We’re already running later than I wanted to be.”

“All right.”

“Inigo, I…” Lucina began as he turned to go, then trailed off.

The edge of a sardonic smile came to Inigo’s lips. “I get it, Luce,” he said. “I really do. I just have one question for you.”

“…Yes?”

He let the words echo, filling the clearing long after he turned on his heel.

“What the hell do you think you would have told Owain?”

~~~

Small blessing as it was in the grand scheme of things, Inigo had to breathe a sigh of relief when the burns on his neck melted away under Brady’s staff without remark.

Their camp was entirely packed now, the sun nearly below the western horizon. Around Inigo, the Shepherds had begun to gather their mounts, leaving him cursing how far behind he’d gotten.

The clatter of hooves reached him a moment later; when he glanced up, he found Say’ri approaching with Dior’s reins in one hand and Scottie’s in the other.

A surge of affection went through him, at odds with every other emotion currently warring within him. “Thanks, love,” he managed, taking the reins she handed him and swinging them over his dark gelding’s head. Trusting Scottie to stay put for a moment, Inigo turned, already bending down to give Say’ri a leg up.
“Aye,” she said, settling into the saddle and gathering her reins. Neither of them spoke again until Inigo, too, had mounted and nudged Scottie into an easy walk. Say’ri finally whispered, “Robin asked that we not speak of the incident with those who were not present.”

A long moment passed before Inigo said, “Understandable.”

After another beat, Say’ri continued, “Did you wish to discuss it?”

“Not especially, no,” he replied in a clipped tone.

“...Aye, then,” she said, and they rode on for the Dragon’s Table in silence.

~~~

The Shepherds hid from the first two groups of Plegians they encountered, and they went unnoticed.

For the third group, they employed slightly less caution, yet still drew no attention from the crowd. As they neared the Dragon’s Table—and the eerily glowing columns of light sprouting up into the night sky from its location—Chrom finally dared ask, “All these strange travelers… what’s going on here?”

“Might it not be easier to merely ask?” said Say’ri. “They appear to be unarmed and of little threat to us.”

After a moment, Chrom shrugged at that. Owain, meanwhile—his demeanor painfully, blissfully unaware of what had so nearly happened barely an hour ago—urged Ada nearer to the closest group of Plegian travelers.

“Hark, adventurer!” he greeted. “Might I inquire the reason for your journey?”

“...the appointed… time… to the Dragon’s… Table… our prayers… Grima…” the man answered, his glazed eyes not moving from some fixed point on the horizon.

Owain paused. “Right…” he finally said. “I’ll just be… backing away slowly, then…”

No sooner had he spoken did they crest a dune and pull up short.

The approach to the Dragon’s Table was lined with a sea of bodies, people surging steadily forward toward the altar ahead. As the Shepherds watched, the group they had spoken to marched down the dune with mechanical monotony, joining the sea of the crowd.

“Gods,” Chrom whispered. “That must be…”

“Nearly all the Grimleal in Plegia,” Frederick confirmed. “A few of our scouts have just returned with such news. The people have been coming here for days now. Validar has been planning this.”

“Any idea what it all means?”

“Who can say, sire?” Frederick asked. “They speak only in gibberish and plod on as if possessed.”

“Damn,” Chrom said. “This destiny is stubborn business. Come, Shepherds! We make for the
Swirling sand hung in the night air, dropping visibility ever-lower. They had been forced to leave their horses behind once more just to carve a path through the people ahead of them. Finally, the Grimleal crowd thinned as the path to the Table narrowed ahead of them, until finally only two lone figures stood in front of the archway that led into the building.

“Validar!” Chrom shouted across the remaining distance.

“Fools!” the king bellowed back. “Do you know where you’ve come?”

“Return the Fire Emblem now and we can end this!” Chrom said, and received only a laugh in return.

“You would end this?” Validar demanded.

“Once and for all!”

“My dear boy,” Validar said, striding forward with Aversa at his side. “We already know how this story ends—you and I both! And yet you rush here… Are you so eager to meet the Fell Dragon yourself? Or perhaps your own fatal destiny—you would have that realized first?”

“To hell with your destiny,” Chrom snapped. “I’ll write a new ending.”

“So now you believe you can change fate?” Aversa cut in. “And here I thought your exalted sister had delusions of grandeur.”

His tone unimpressed, Chrom replied, “We’ve done it already.”

“Your victory over sad little Gangrel?” Aversa asked. “Or perhaps Walhart’s defeat? Those were meant to happen. They were preordained. You are just another fool in the motley, capering on the stage!”

“And what of Lady Emmeryn?” Frederick asked.

“You changed only the method of her death,” Aversa dismissed, her lips twisting up. “Either way, she was planted in the ground.”

“Then I would love to know,” another voice interjected, “what you have to make of the fact that I stand before you.”

“Say’ri.” Inigo hissed, his eyes wide with alarm as she summarily ignored him and stepped nearer to Validar and Aversa.

Aversa, meanwhile, merely fixed her gaze on Say’ri and replied, “And who’s to say your days aren’t numbered?”

“But Emmeryn’s death was Gangrel’s will,” Frederick interjected before anyone else could answer. “Not yours… not Validar’s…”
“You aren’t listening,” Aversa snapped. “All of this—every word and action—has been orchestrated. Gangrel held the Exalt in contempt, yes, so Validar and I used him. In life and in death. The king’s demise threw Plegia into chaos. It drove the people to Grima… Now their life force and rancor can be laid before the Fell Dragon en masse.”

Chrom paused, then said, “You couldn’t mean…”

She barked a laugh. “It is called the Table for a reason, you naive little man. It is where Grima feeds! The Grimleal have gladly offered themselves to him for ages. Even now, they pray for his return… Today the Table overflows with bounty and their prayers will be answered!”

“I will never allow that to happen!”

“But it already has happened in our future. This moment was set a millennium ago.”

“I will stop you!” Chrom said, his voice beginning to rise again. “And I will stop Grima!”

“Goodness!” Aversa said, chuckling. “Now you’re starting to sound like Walhart, the big bully. He intended to destroy Grima as well, you know. Our thanks, incidentally, for taking him off the stage for us.”

A sound of frustration rose in Chrom’s throat. “That’s why you gave us your ships and treasure but no soldiers… Get rid of Walhart, but keep the faithful Plegians for your god’s Table…”

“Aversa, it is time,” Validar interjected swiftly. “I must prepare.”

“As you command, Master,” Aversa said.

“Validar!” Chrom shouted after the Plegian king’s retreating form. “Validar!”

“Master Validar is not to be disturbed,” said Aversa. “But fear not. I’ve brought some friends to keep you entertained.” With a flick of her hands, the ground at their feet trembled, melted, and split.

A Risen emerged, then another.

“I think you might even know some of them!” Aversa continued as the Shepherds drew their weapons and more of the undead creatures began to clamber from the earth.

It was a very human woman, however, who strode from the shadows of the Dragon’s Table to stand the sorceress’s side—bereft of the mask she’d worn last time, her face was impossible to mistake.

Nalia.
The Vision We've Lost (Part 8) Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

An unexpected ally is potentially gained.

Chapter Notes

So, uh... we all knew that trying to finish this fic by the end of the month was hilariously overambitious, right? (Right?) Anyway, had some IRL stuff going on these past few weeks that kept me away (work shenanigans + had to finally put my slowly ailing childhood cat down), but now We're Back Again.

Also, if anyone wants to come hang out and hear weird headcanons/out of context previews/updates on fic progress/random facts of my life, I recently made a Twitter.

While Aversa fell back to cover the entrance Validar had taken, Nalia stayed put, letting the incoming wave of Risen envelop her. There was scarcely a moment for Chrom and Robin to begin barking orders before the first line of undead rose and broke upon the Shepherds.

Inigo, meanwhile, momentarily tuned them out. “Owain!” he shouted, looking out over their army for a moment before he was forced to turn and impale and encroaching lancer.

No sooner did he spin from that Risen, however, did he find a sword through the chest of another foe just to the left. “You called, cousin?” Owain said brightly, yanking his weapon free from its swiftly-disintegrating target.

The faintest of smiles landed on Inigo’s face before he jerked his head in Nalia’s direction. “We’ve got to get her out of the way before she starts hexing us again,” he said shortly.

With a fluidity that gave testament to nearly a decade fighting at each other’s sides, Owain ducked, giving Inigo just enough room to swing his own blade over his cousin’s head. “Indeed,” Owain said as he straightened. “What do you propose?”

“Something that will probably make your wife very cross with us,” Inigo admitted.

Owain hummed, pondering for a moment before letting out a sigh. “I suppose the risk of such wrath must be borne for the sake of the greater good,” he finally said. “Do elaborate.”

Inigo rolled his eyes, deciding to forgo ‘elaborating’ for a lilting, “Cover me!”

Owain barked a laugh and charged after him to Robin’s shouted “Hey!”

Another wave fell before them, downed before their weapons could make fatal contact with their intended targets. The sounds of the Ylissean line grew softer even as the growls of Risen grew thicker.
“Inigo!” Owain called, darting behind one of the sandstone walls dotting the courtyard. Without an explanation, Inigo followed, shoring up the chokepoint that Owain had already found.

“You okay?” Inigo asked, nudging at his cousin in the brief respite their cover offered them. Owain nodded, but it was a short, clipped gesture, one designed to expend as little energy as possible. Inigo, too, could feel the wear and tear of the previous battle catching up with this one, though he had little choice but to ignore it.

Owain nodded again, but this one was more decisive, a call to arms rather than a confirmation. Wordlessly, Inigo ducked his head in the direction of the nearest opening in the wall, holding up three fingers and then quickly dropping them.

On one, they both surged forward once more, only to find themselves crashing into air and going down in an unceremonious tangle of limbs.

Coughing, Inigo struggled back upright, belatedly seeing the shimmer of some dark spell in the opening they’d attempted to pass. “The hell?” he managed, casting a wary glance around for any stray Risen.

Owain did the same, eyes narrowed as he approached the opening. Slowly, he approached the barrier, coming forward with his hand raised until it came to an abrupt stop in midair. “Huh,” he said. “That’s new.” He stepped back, raising his sword in a swing—it, too, bounced off, sending him staggering a few strides backward.

“Uh,” Inigo said quickly as Owain seemed to note that, then went reaching for his spellbook. “Uh, Owain, I’m not sure what you’re planning on doing but it seems like a really terrible idea from where I’m standing—”

Tome open in his hands, Owain paused, then said, “...Yeah, probably.”

Inigo let out an incredulous sort of half-laugh, half-snort at the fact that his cousin had been in all possibility a few moments away from blowing them both up, then rather hurriedly turned his attention back to the problem at hand.

Namely, the figure approaching from the other side of the barrier.

“Well,” Inigo said, his katana still drawn despite the current futility of the gesture. “I shouldn’t be surprised.”

“Hello, boys,” Nalia said coolly.

A long moment passed before Owain said under his breath, “Doomed Philanderer of Legend.”

“Literally did not ask,” Inigo muttered back.

Owain gestured wildly. “You didn’t need to ask! This is entirely your fault! Because someone couldn’t control their hormones!”

“Okay! For one, no it is not entirely my fault! Also, why won’t you let me live this down?”

Owain gestured wildly again. “Gee, I can’t imagine!”

“Well,” Nalia said dryly, “I feel as though I never left.”

Both boys whipped back around to face her. “Well?” Inigo said. “Planning on doing something? Or
maybe just passing out again?”

Her face pinched together at that. “Gods, but you are annoying,” she said. “I’d almost forgotten.”

“Careful, he might take that as a compliment,” Owain said.

“Oh, hush,” Inigo said before his eyes narrowed. “Seriously, though, are you going to do something, or…?”

A small spell flew from her fingertips—some tiny variant on a Wind spell, perhaps—flying true until it smacked soundly against the barrier and ricocheted off into the night. “I can no more harm you at the moment than you can harm me,” Nalia said. “I only wished to talk.”

Inigo snorted, not bothering to put up any pretense that he believed her. “Maybe when you stop hexing people. Take them off and then maybe we’ll talk.”

For a moment, Nalia almost seemed chastised. “I might, if I could.”

Inigo held back a snort, exchanging another glance with Owain. “Right,” he said. “We’ve got to kill her to get rid of it, don’t we?”

“So I’ve heard,” Owain answered grimly.

“Wait,” Nalia said, a note of genuine panic seeming to come to her voice. “That’s not true. Well, it is true, I think, that’s she’s putting her life force into it at this point, but…” She cast a wary glance over her shoulder. “It’s not me. I’m not doing it.”

A long moment passed. “Well, isn’t that convenient,” Inigo said.

“I know,” Nalia said, seeming almost truly repentant. “And I can’t imagine you’ll really believe me, but… is Henry still with you? If you’d just let me talk to him, I’m sure he’d tell you what I’m saying is true.”

Thoroughly disliking the fact that her words seemed to be quite successfully working their way under his skin, Inigo said, “And what reason would we have to do that? You’ve been a part of all this—” he gestured to the temple around them, “for the last few years, so even if you aren’t specifically the one hexing us, why should that change anything? And why even bother asking?”

She glanced away. “Because I don’t want to be… ‘part of this’ anymore.”

Apparently having realized Inigo’s sudden softening, Owain elbowed him, muttering, “Hey.”

“Boys!” came a familiar shout before anyone could speak again. “Duck!”

It wasn’t obvious exactly what spell Robin had cast at the barrier—especially not from their sudden position flat on the ground—just that it did a fair bit more damage than Nalia’s cantrip had. By the time the air had cleared, there was no shimmer in the air between them.

“Can’t leave you two alone for three seconds, can we?” Robin said as she strode into the clearing.

Say’ri let out a soft snort. “Fie, I thought you’d learned that long before now.”

“I will have you know that we both fared perfectly well for nineteen years before either one of us submitted to the matrimonial joining of souls—” Owain began.

“And how many times did you almost die in those nineteen years?” Say’ri cut in.
“To be fair, we still almost die now,” Inigo said. “Like, a lot.”

“Case in point,” Robin grumbled. Tome aglow once more in her hands, she fixed her gaze on Nalia.

“Wait,” Inigo said, and regretted the words almost the moment they came out of his mouth.

“...Inigo,” Owain began. “You’re not seriously thinking—”

“I don’t know what I’m thinking, all right?” Inigo snapped back. “I just—I…” He trailed off.

“Well, Henry is here, isn’t he?”

Three very unimpressed gazes turned on him.

“Would an act of good faith change matters any?” Nalia asked quietly.


Nalia nodded, sending a glance back toward where Aversa was—or, more accurately, where Aversa had been. “Aversa wouldn’t leave Validar before he was ready, even with her wounds. His preparations are complete. Do you think you’ll get through all these Risen in time?”

Before anyone could answer, a blast of purple magic shot from her hand—yet passed through their assembled company without harm. The Risen surrounding them, however, fared quite a bit worse; the Shepherds began to cast around puzzled glances as their foes melted once more into the earth they’d sprang from.

Once the field had silenced, Nalia’s only word was, “Sufficient?”

“...Well,” Robin said after a long moment. Finally, she shook her head. “Henry!”

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The hall to the Dragon’s Table only seemed to grow darker and eerier by the moment. As the walls narrowed and the ceiling closed down on the Shepherds—minus Henry and a handful of others who had agreed to stay behind and keep watch on their unlikely ally—Chrom finally murmured, “Are you ready, Robin?”

The tactician didn’t answer for a long moment. “First I have a favor to ask,” she finally said.

“As long as it’s not a request to leave you behind,” the Exalt said, in a tone which booked no argument.

“It’s not,” Robin said, shaking her head. “Though I did consider it. I can’t hurt you if I’m not there in the first place... But I can’t run from Validar forever. And if I’m going to overcome him, my best chance is with you by my side.”

A smile tugged on the corner of Chrom’s lips. “That’s more like it.”

“But therein lies the favor,” Robin said, casting a wary glance over her shoulder before she finished. *Please, gods, don’t let Owain hear me say this.* “If Validar does somehow gain control over me... Promise me... Promise me you’ll cut me down.”
Chrom shot her a gaping looking, all traces of good humor gone, though he thankfully kept his voice as low as hers. “You can’t mean that. You can’t ask that!”

“I’ll resist him with all that I am,” Robin whispered, her tone carrying a hint of resignation that she fought to bury. “I promise you. But there are other people involved here… too many people to ignore.” She fixed him with a stern gaze. “You have a duty to protect them as well.”

She watched her old friend’s throat work for a moment in the dim before he finally admitted, “You’re right. The words burn my tongue, but you’re right.” He paused. “But you mustn’t let Validar seize control! Whatever the cost. Whatever it takes!”

“…I’ll try,” Robin said. “You know I will.”

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For once, Inigo’s father didn’t even have the chance to call out his enemy’s name before Validar answered.

“Chrom,” the Plegian king said. “Come to witness the glorious culmination of your failure? How nice. I have the Fire Emblem, and the Dragon’s Table is set for a feast. I will return Grima to this world!”

“You’ll destroy the world!” Chrom shouted. “Our children have seen it!”

“Then I pray today’s spectacle lives up to their nightmares!” Validar roared.

And with those words, it finally clicked—as if Inigo hadn’t known it from the day Frederick and Gaius had returned, hadn’t suspected it from the day word had reached them all the way in Chon’sin.

By the time the sun rose again, his future would either be averted for good, or it would doom them all again.

“The Awakening ritual is not only for Exalts and Naga, you know,” Validar continued. “With it, I’ll arouse Grima. The fell dragon only needs a mortal vessel, which you so kindly brought along…”

“…Oh, gods,” Robin whispered. “He means me.”

“You ken quickly, Robin. That’s my girl.”

“I am no such thing!” she snapped. “I would die first!”

“Or he will,” Owain added darkly.

Ignoring the both of them, Validar continued, “You carry my blood—the blood of the Fell Dragon. His soul slumbers within you. And now the time has come to awaken you both.”

A long moment passed. “…What?” Robin said hoarsely. “I’m Grima? I’m the Fell Dragon?”

A hushed gasp from Lucina wasn’t quite drowned out by Validar’s next words. “The Grimleal have worked for generations to create someone like you… A vessel worthy of our master. Simply
having Grima’s blood in your veins is not enough… My father was not worthy, nor was his father before him. Even I was not able to accept Grima’s most sacred gift. But you? You had all the makings. You were perfection!”

“No,” Robin said, taking a careful step back. “No, I…”

“If you damnable mother hadn’t been seized by weakness and fear… She betrayed us—stole you from your crib, and fled with you in the night!” Validar continued to ramble. “I know naught of your life thereafter, but all that matters is your return! That you are here is proof of your purpose! It is why you still draw breath!”

“You’ve proven nothing but your own madness,” Chrom snapped. “Robin, we are going to stop this. This can be stopped. You can be stopped!” he finished, directing the last to Validar.

The king only barked a laugh. “You may have killed me in some future past, but I am stronger this time! With the power of the Dragon’s Table flowing through me, I am unstoppable.”

“You’re not the only one stronger this time! Right, Robin?”

When Chrom got no answer, Owain’s face began to turn toward ashen. “…Robin?”

“Nng…”

“Stay with me, Robin!” Chrom said, reaching a hand toward her. “You’re not beholden to this fiend! You can fight it! We’ve all seen how strong you are! We’ve seen what you’re capable of! Don’t let him shake your resolve!”

“C-Chrom,” she whispered. “I… I don’t know.”

“Enough!” said Validar. “This sorry display ill befits the heir to our master’s power. And you, Prince—your sad poem sounds lovely, but it will not alter destiny.”

“It’s no poem.”

After her earlier shakiness, Robin’s flat words rang all the louder through the room. “...Pardon?” Validar said.

“They’re more than just words.”

The king shook his head. “Be still now, my daughter…”

“My life did not begin with you,” Robin continued, striding forward. “It began the day Chrom found me in that field. I have been all over this world, and I have helped change it—for the better. I have fought and laughed and bled with my friends and my family, and that is what matters! The ties we forged, the bonds we share—they are of a power greater than Grima!”

Validar snorted. “A ludicrous idea, as you will know better than anyone soon enough.”

“We do agree on one thing,” Robin said, drawing her tome. Chrom strode to her side, Falchion already in hand; Owain quickly did the same, only half a step behind. “My life so far has all been in preparation for this moment—when I kill you or die trying!”

Validar chuckled. “You have your father’s courage, but your mother’s judgment… Very well, pup! Come! Do your worst! Come at me with all you have! There is no damage I can do to your body that the Fell Dragon cannot repair!”
With a flick of his hand, Validar sent another barrier of the same kind Nalia had used stretching across the room, snaking through the Shepherds until it had cut Chrom and Robin off from the rest of them. Owain, hardly a few steps behind the Exalt and the tactician, had to pull up short lest he end up bouncing off it. A sound of pure offense rose in his throat, though Validar was speaking once more before Owain could begin to complain.

“So long as the dark barrier stands, no other soul can reach us. You must face your grim fate alone!”

“Do you so fear me, villain?” Owain shouted across the barrier. “I cannot blame you, only call you out for your cowardice—surely not even your infernal god could save you from the wrath of Owain Dark when the better half of his very soul is at stake—”

“I love you too, honey, but maybe another time?” Robin called back.

“Another time?” he yelped back, affronted. “There is no other time—”

“Heads up, Swordhand!” said Gaius, giving Owain just enough time to spin and dodge out of the way of an approaching Arcfire spell. Without warning, one by one, Grimleal emerged from the shadows of the Dragon’s Table.

The third and most decisive battle of the night had fallen upon them.
Chapter Summary

In which something bad happens, followed by something good, followed by something VERY bad.

Chapter Notes

So, uh, remember when I said I wouldn't be updating in November? Well, funny story.

Basically, between the community and sheer effort going into NaNoWriMo, I've found my fire for this story again--it's been going REALLY well. (At least regarding my passion and happiness regarding my content--I'm technically a bit behind on my word count, but hey, I sure am having fun.) I actually just finished chapter 96 today, which was a double chapter hot on the heels of 95 also being a double, if that tells you how well things are going. So, yeah, I couldn't resist giving this one to you guys, despite previous statements to the contrary. (But I'm fairly sure there shouldn't be any complaining about that...)

You're one of us, Robin, and no ‘destiny’ can change that.

Robin let Chrom’s words echo, a well of strength to draw from, a reminder of the path she would choose to walk with dying breath, a comfort that was only outweighed in satisfaction by his next sentence.

“Now let’s kill this dastard and be done with it!”

Validar, meanwhile, only let out a cold laugh at Chrom’s words. “Robin, why insist on these games? You only delay the inevitable,” he said, his tone terrifyingly reminiscent of a father chiding their wayward offspring. “And besides, the alternative? Have you considered what happens should I fall? These followers of Naga will spurn you now that they’ve learned what you are. Kill me, and you incur the wrath of the Grimleal, as well. Would you truly chose to be so utterly alone?”

So utterly alone?

“Humans are weak, pathetic creatures. Your ‘bonds’ with them will bind you. You are destined for a greater purpose! The greatest purpose!” The Plegian king paused, spell hanging uncast in the air as his tone seemed to turn almost pleading. “You are to be a god!”

Robin, meanwhile, only shook her head. “Not your god—not today.”

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Validar fell.

“This isn’t over... damn you BOTH!”

Purple fire, coming too quickly—Chrom’s in the way— 

Hurts!

Gasping for breath; Chrom’s safe, Validar’s still.

“Are you all right? That’s the end of him. Thanks to you we carried the day.”

Vision red, veins in her eyes blurring...

“We can rest easy now. At long last...”

Power gathering at her fingertips...

“What’s wrong? Hey, hang on!”

Chrom jerked. Staggered back. Fell to his knees.

“This is not your—your fault. Promise me... you’ll escape from this place... Please, go...”

And he fell still.

Just as she remembered.

~~~

“Dad!”

Movement. Color. Sound. The world had faded into a swirl of it, with only Inigo’s own anguished shout ringing above the rest of it.

With a wheezing groan, Validar pulled himself indomitably to his feet. “With the five Gemstones in hand, my magic knows no bounds. Do you see now, my daughter? Human bonds are leaves in the wind. They offer you nothing.”

Robin didn’t respond, still staring motionlessly at Chrom’s unmoving body. Even Owain’s soft, plaintive call of her name went unanswered.

“No no no,” Inigo said, only to realize the words had probably fallen past his lips a dozen times more than he’d registered. If someone bothered to ask him who he was speaking to, he doubted he could have answered. “This isn’t... we were supposed to... This had to change...”

Five astonishing, impossible, beautiful, worthless years in the past crashed down on him all at once.

“Everything we did,” he managed, each syllable dropping like a weight from his tongue, “meant nothing.”
“The hell it did!”

Inigo’s awareness stretched back out to include the rest of the Shepherds, for the most part as they had been when the battle had been won and then so quickly lost.

With one impossible exception doing nothing less than swaggering into the room.

“Khan… Basilio?” Inigo ventured, his senses asserting the identity of the new arrival even as logic defied it.

“Don’t you go putting any stock in this destiny hogwash!” Basilio said as he continued to stride forward, even going so far as to shake his finger in Inigo’s direction. “Let the dead whine about their fate! As long as I draw breath, I choose to keep fighting—that’s what life is all about!”

“But I—I thought—” Inigo exchanged a glance with Owain, whose own dismay was beginning to give way to confusion. “We all thought you were—”

“Worm food, back in Valm?” said the khan. “It almost went that way. But I scraped by, thanks to you.”

“...I don’t…” Inigo said blankly, shaking his head.

Basilio shrugged. “Once I took a couple hits from Walhart, I knew he was too strong for me. Normally pride would’ve had me dead before I’d even thought twice about it—but your warning gave me the courage to be a coward! I played dead like a big, bald opossum!” He broke off with a guffaw, then sobered. “It wasn’t hard. In truth I almost was dead. You boys saved my life.” His gaze flicked between the cousins. “Had you not said anything, I’d have stood my ground against that monster and died on the spot.”

Before Inigo could muster the eloquence to answer, an unwelcome introduction came in the form of Validar. “This… does not… matter! If you didn’t die there, then you can die here!”

Once more, Basilio only barked a laugh. “You’re no Walhart, snake eyes! Not as strong, or even as clever… For example: you still haven’t realized you’ve been tricked!”

Validar’s eyes narrowed. “...What?”

“Robin predicted everything that would happen here,” Basilio said. “She saw it in a dream. Saw this very fight with you.”

“If you think—” Validar snarled, stepping forward.

“Guess what else was in the dream?” Basilio continued conversationally. “The five Gemstones. When she learned what they were, Robin saw what fate had in store. She knew Chrom couldn’t bring the real Gemstones here to Plegia—that would be like swinging a big, juicy steak right in front of destiny’s choppers!”

Validar snorted a laugh, his arms crossed. “A worthy bluff, Feroxi fool, but ridiculous all the same. I’ve had your merry little band watched since Carrion Isle. Your every move! So I know Robin hasn’t touched the stones—she hasn’t been near them!”

“You watched our party, yes,” said Basilio. “The members your men knew about; the live ones. But they weren’t watching dead men, were they?” His smirk grew. “They weren’t watching me.”

Validar’s sallow face seemed to turn an even more sickly shade of gray. “I… No, that’s not…”
“Heh, looks like it might be finally starting to sink in…”

“That is not possible! These have to be… they must be…”

“Why? Because of… destiny? Pah ha ha! Robin had your destiny beat the day we took Fort Steiger, when she came up with this plan, a damned year and a half ago! The expression on your face… it makes all those long nights in hiding worth it!”

“Wait,” Owain said under his breath, catching Inigo’s arm in a too-tight grip. “Wait, but that means —”

“Damn you!” Validar shouted. “Damn you to all the hells! None of this matters! Chrom is dead! Your fates sealed! Grima will—”

The room fell silent, but for a long, wheezing cough from the other side of the dark barrier.

“…Eh?” Validar said, turning back to his original foes, only to be met by a blast of lightning from the still stone-faced Robin. As the sorcerer bent double, the third figure slowly, carefully collected himself from the heap on the floor he’d been in.

“Father!” Lucina cried, her voice ringing over the room.

Coughing again and bracing a hand over his chest where he’d been struck, Chrom stood upright once more. “Robin… spared me… weakened her magic… just before the strike…”

Still, the tactician herself said nothing; beside Inigo, however, the wave of relief from Owain was practically palpable.

Validar’s face twisted into a wordless snarl. “Damn you all, and your stones!” he finally cried. “I won’t need them to kill you!”

Chrom shook his head at the king, in the manner of a father dealing with a petulant child, and said, “Ready to end this, Robin?”

Finally, Robin’s face turned up in a smirk. “Let’s do it.”

Alarm had turned into true panic on Validar’s face at that flat statement; the king skimmed a hand over his spellbook, but not to fire back. Instead, his body shimmered, fading with the tell-tale glow of a warping spell.

“Oh no, you don’t!” Gaius called over the din. With a flick of the thief’s wrist, a shiny silver knife sailed toward the king, striking home at the last moment. Validar vanished only for a moment, reappearing across the room a heartbeat later.

“Owain!” Inigo shouted, though the words were hardly necessary. The Plegian king had appeared only feet away from them, turning his twisted visage into a scowl.

“Impudent meddlers,” Validar spat, his weapon raised once more. “You have failed to change the future at every turn. What makes you think this time will be any different?”

Really, the only way Inigo could answer that was a bark of laughter.

“Have I failed?” asked the son of an Exalt who yet lived, the champion of the surviving west Khan, the husband of a queen who had defied her own death. “Have I really?”
No one was quite sure who struck the final blow.

One moment, Validar’s mutterings had risen to a fevered pitch. “F-fools, destiny cannot... be... unraveled... No, NO! Wrong... all wrong... Why, why would you squander your birthright? Robin, my daughter…”

And the next moment, under the entire onslaught of the Shepherds’ might, Validar had fallen to his knees, then to his face, and rose to move no more.

Chrom was the first to bring a ragged cheer, still unsteady on his feet but with a grin bright enough to bring down the building. “We did it!”

His words brought Inigo up short, three simple syllables that did so little to encompass the magnitude of what had just happened. We did it.

Had they done it?

When Say’ri had found her way back to his side, he couldn’t say, but at that moment he found his own incredulity reflected in her features. As a matter of fact, he could see notes of it in every face surrounding him, though admittedly hers was a fair bit closer than any of the others—

Inigo’s katana fell to the ground with a clatter as his arms went to her waist automatically. A brief thought flitted through his head, ridiculous in concept for all that it could actually might not be that far from the truth—would he ever have to raise that sword for the same purpose?

Their future was won, and the peace to come secured.

A soft pop was the first and only indication that thought was wrong.

“You,” Robin said lowly, her voice nothing less than a threat.

Inigo snapped away from Say’ri, one hand still lingering on her side as he struggled to catch up with the fact that a seemingly identical voice was the one to answer the tactician.

“You may have altered the course of history, but not its destination,” said the newly arrived figure, still swirling with dark magic as she lowered a cowl identical to Robin’s own—only to reveal a face identical to Robin’s own.

“Oh,” Owain said softly, his eyes brimming with recognition. Inigo took a moment more to catch up before he remembered the broken, half explained tales he’d heard of the night the Shepherds had been on Carrion Isle, the hours before his own identity had been abruptly revealed.

The Plegian hierophant?

“What do you mean?” Robin demanded of her alternate, striding forward.

“It is still written that Chrom died here at your hands,” said the other, tone nonchalant as her gaze followed the motion, the only hint that she recognized the threat. “Or, perhaps to be more precise... mine.”

“Who are you, really?” Chrom asked.
The hierophant let out a sigh, rolling her eyes. “I told you, I’m Robin.” The smallest of smirks tugged on her features. “The Robin that murdered you and became the avatar of the Fell Dragon, Grima.” Ignoring the murmured reaction to that, she continued, “When these children of yours decided to come back in time… I came with them.”

For a moment, Inigo found himself back in the woods, in the middle of a twisted family reunion during which he only narrowly averted the disaster of overtly coming on to his aunt before immediately being thrown into his first battle of the past.

And when they had all assumed Lucina had died—when they had never seen Grima’s avatar again—

Some poor Plegian soul, I suppose, Inigo had said to his father on a ship to Valm, trying to explain the specifics of their future past.

Gods, had he been wrong. How wrong they had all been, to presume Robin dead in the same battle that had claimed Chrom’s life so long ago, when it had been she who had claimed it in the first place.

In the present, the future Robin let out a sigh, leaving Inigo to assume their own Robin had said something he’d missed. “I can be so daft sometimes,” the avatar said. “It’s really quite simple. I am you. Our only difference is the decisions we’ve made. Those vivid dreams you have—those are my memories. We share those memories because we share the same heart… Grima’s heart.”

“The—the headaches,” Robin said roughly. “The voices… it was you!”

“Your recollection begins the day I entered this world. I intended for us to unite then, the first moment I found you. But your heart was still too weak to contain Grima’s power… the shock of my attempt wiped your memory clean.” The avatar shrugged. “I knew if history was rewritten, Grima would never be resurrected—and I, in turn, would cease to exist. So I had to step in, now and again, to keep my future secured. Like when Validar was killed in his attempt to assassinate Emmeryn… But that is the past, now. We have our future past to think of. All that remains is for you to become Grima, as I did. Then you and I will become as one, and we can reclaim my power.”

“We are not yet the same?” Robin asked softly.

Another indignant huff. “You were supposed to choose godhood over your pathetic band of servants,” said the avatar. “But if you’ll not claim the sacrifice at the Dragon’s Table… I will claim it in your place!”

“What?” Robin cried, taking a startled step back as a miasma of black, red, and purple began to swirl around her alternate.

The response was a mad cackle, light growing brighter as the purple began to overtake the other colors. “The Fell Dragon and I are one! And though my journey through time as diminished my power… the life force here shall renew me!”

“OUT!” Chrom shouted over the roar in the air. “Everybody out!”

His words took a moment to spur the rest into action, a wave taking a moment to build before crashing into the shore. “Got!” Inigo echoed, unsure exactly the moment his katana had found its way back into his hand but thankful of the fact nonetheless.

Finally, the wave broke, feet pounding on stone as the Shepherds charged the way they’d come. Still, for a moment—just a breath—Inigo glanced back at the swirl of light coming from the avatar,
wondering if it really was too late, if there was any chance he could stop it now—

It seemed Lucina had had the same thought, because she, too, had paused, meeting his eye from across the room and the glowing maelstrom swiftly enveloping it. Falchion glinted violet in her grasp; perhaps hers was the hand it always had belonged in.

“Come on, you two!” Chrom called through the din. With a start, Inigo realized the room had emptied of all but the three of them and the avatar still slowly but surely being consumed.

Neither one of them argued.

No sooner had they scrambled down the steps from the altar did the purple fire burst from the windows, exploding outward and upward with a shattering blast. The others had gathered just outside—safe, perhaps, or just a convenient target—as the last three pounded forward, steps too slow and distance too far.

Inigo had scarcely hit the bottom of the last staircase when Chrom shoved him sideways, tugging Lucina’s arm hard enough that all three of them went down in a heap to the side of the path. He had no need to protest—the hair on the back of his neck stood up as lightning struck from the gathering clouds above just where they’d all been a moment before.

Sweat-slick, he forced himself back to his feet. The rest of the Shepherds were almost within reach now—Say’ri, Owain, Gaius, Robin, Severa, Gerome, Lon’qu, Frederick, Basilio, the rest—their faces blurring together into one panicked, frantic illusion of safety.

The roar came, as loud and long as he remembered, shaking the earth until Inigo’s very bones jarred from the sound, all semblance of sanctuary, and victory, and life itself falling to pieces in its wake.

Inigo didn’t need to look, yet he found himself doing it anyway.

The Fell Dragon rose into the sky, all horns and wings and black as death itself, towering above the Dragon’s Table until the altar itself and all who stood beneath it were dwarfed in its shadow.

“...All right,” Chrom said, his words deafeningly quiet over the ringing left in the wake of Grima’s bellow. “Now what?”

“Grima…” Lucina breathed, glancing between the two of them as if one of them had a brilliant answer to the sudden paradigm shift glaring at them from the skies above with six blood-red eyes.

Inigo had none.

“Gods help us.”
“The terrible size of it… gods! For once the legends spoke true. We can’t face him, not in a straight battle—he’d kill us all!”

Inigo distantly noted Frederick’s words and the other disbelieving murmurs flying through the air, though he found his attention more poignantly focused on remaining upright. Surely the horror he saw in the faces around him was reflected in his own, but nothing made it past his lips.

“If only we still had the Fire Emblem…” Chrom said. “We could ask Naga for her power… then we’d at least have a chance.”

But Validar took the Fire Emblem, and who knew where it had gone from there?

Black spots danced in Inigo’s vision, clearing slightly at the soft, lilting tone in Robin’s voice that her future self seemed to no longer possess. “What, you mean this Fire Emblem?”

Gazes snapped toward her as she let her cloak fall to the stones at their feet, leaving her bare-armed and revealing the shining gold of their salvation.

After a blank moment, Chrom finally said, “What? But… how?”

“I stole it from you once, remember?” Robin said lightly. “The least I could do was steal it back.”

Chrom barked a laugh, reaching forward to clap the tactician on the shoulder. “Robin, you sly cat. You never cease to amaze!”

“Sometimes I try,” she said in an airy tone. “Let’s put this back in the hands it belongs in, yeah?”

Still shaking his head, Chrom shouldered the Emblem as Robin shrugged back into her cloak. “Now,” he said, tone sobering as his eyes landed on Inigo. “The Awakening.”

“Mount Prism,” Inigo answered, his voice steadier than he’d imagined it would be. “There’s a temple there… It’s where we came back in time from. I think I could still find it.”

“All right, boy, that’s nice and all, but Mount Prism is on the other side of the continent,” Basilio pointed out. “It’d take you ages just to get there, no less get back again.”

“We’ll have to fly,” Robin said curtly. “A few of us can go by pegasus and wyvern—enough of a force to defend ourselves, if it comes to it—while the rest can meet the armies at Origin Peak. If we’re smart we can make it back in a few days.”

“A few days…” Basilio murmured, stroking his chin. “Well, beats the alternative. All right, then.
Take who you want and Flavia and I will lead the rest until you get back.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Chrom said. “Who are we bringing?”

“You, obviously,” Robin said dryly. “Anyone who can fly: Sumia, Cherche—damn, Cordelia’s still at the palace—Gerome, Cynthia, Nowi… As many of the kids as we can, in case they know something we need…”

“You won’t be able to stop most of us coming,” Severa pointed out, her arms crossed in a dare for Robin to argue with her.

“Figured as much,” the tactician replied.

“All right, then,” Chrom said, casting one more wary look at the shadowed sky. “Let’s get going.”

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If breaking camp earlier had been hectic, splitting up now was nothing short of chaos.

“Inigo!” Robin said, her words muffled by the night wind as she juggled the reins of two Feroxi griffons who didn’t seem to be in the mood to play nice with each other. “Can you—”

Without waiting for her to finish, Inigo ducked in and snagged one set of reins, coaxing the creature from its evident foe. He said nothing, merely flashing her half a sympathetic smile as they started toward where the rest of their group was gathering.

“You okay?” Robin asked under her breath, in a tone that said she wasn’t any more ‘okay’ than he was.

“Well,” he said. “You know.”

A soft sigh escaped her. “Yeah.”

“Robin!” came a shout. “Hey, Robin!”

Robin twisted as Henry came darting up between the griffons, panting slightly as he slowed. “What is it?”

“Right, so I know you’re leaving and stuff,” said Henry, “but I thought you’d want to know about Nalia.”

“What about her?” Robin asked.

“She’s telling the truth. Those hexes aren’t being cast by her.”

“Hex es?” Inigo asked with alarm.

“Yeah,” Henry said, looking at him as if he’d said something particularly daft. “There’s Ricken, and—and…” He trailed off, as if drawing a blank on the name. “Whoever the other one was. You know, the two from earlier, and now Kellam from this last one.”

Inigo certainly hadn’t heard about two from earlier, and it seemed Robin didn’t know of the third
either. “You’re sure?” she asked.

“Yup! Super sure.” Henry paused, rubbing the back of his neck. “But, uh, there’s another funny thing, too.”

“And that is…?”

“Well, see, I’ve definitely seen the mage who is casting them before,” Henry explained. “It’s really familiar. But, well…”

“Yes?”

“I’d say they’re being cast by you.”


“Nah,” Henry said. “I even let Nalia look at it and she doesn’t know either.”

“You what?” Inigo yelped.

“We were supervised!” Henry exclaimed, as if that made everything better.

Robin shook her head. “Has she actually been… helpful?”

“Yeah,” Henry said brightly. “So what’cha want me to do with her?”

After a moment, Robin shrugged. “Keep her, I suppose, at least until we get back. We can’t exactly just let her go.”

“Kay!” said Henry, and without further adieu, he wandered back in the direction of Basilio and Flavia’s company.

When he had gone out of earshot, Inigo shook his head, continuing in the direction they’d been headed in before the dark mage had caught up. “Ricken and Kellam…” he murmured under his breath, mostly to himself.

Why did that seem so important?

It hit him in a moment.

“It was in yesterday’s battle, in our timeline, that Ricken and Kellam both laid down their lives.”

Was it coincidence that the two he knew of who had been hexed were two who had been long dead by this point in the timeline? And who was the third?

He supposed, at that point, they had slightly bigger issues to worry about.

Just under half of the Shepherds had gathered around a scattering of flying mounts of varying species, pairing off in twos and threes to each animal. Inigo passed his reins off to a waiting Severa, finding Say’ri waiting to the side with a black-coated pegasus in hand.

The pegasus pinned her ears at his approach—likely in response to little more than his sex—leaving Say’ri to lay a hand on her dark neck.

“Er,” Inigo said, hoping to keep the trepidation out of his tone. “Love, have you… ridden a pegasus before?”
“When I was younger,” she said, gathering the reins before boosting herself into the saddle. “‘Twas a few in the palace when I was in my teen years. ‘Tis been a minute, but—are you planning on coming or not, Inigo?”

After a moment, he shook his head, deciding that of all the ways he could probably have died that day, an ornery pegasus was not quite how he’d imagined going as he settled himself behind Say’ri.

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An hour or so remained before dawn when they finally stopped just over the Ylissean border, rest sorely needed after the night behind them even if the illusion of safety offered by familiar territory would do them little practical good.

They hadn’t bothered to put up tents, which would be little more than a way to make themselves visible and an utter waste of time when they only planned on resting their mounts for a few hours. After the struggles Lucina had had over their trip to Plegia, not having to wrestle canvas came as a small but still ridiculous relief.

The deserts of Plegia had thankfully faded back into the forests of Ylisse, meaning Lucina didn’t have to go far to seek out a modicum of privacy. She ducked behind a tree just out of earshot from their impromptu camp, leaning against the trunk and pressing the back of her leather-gloved hand to her mouth.

_Grima._

What it was about the Fell Dragon that had sent her reeling back into her own past at full force, she couldn’t have said, but that it had. Staring up at such a creature, Chrom and Inigo all but speechless beside her, Lucina had, abruptly, gone plummeting back into the last moment of her own life she had ever lived.

“I’m so glad to see you all safe,” she’d murmured, standing on the roof of the slowly crumbling Ylisstol palace, scarcely able to stand upright with the weight of relief on to her shoulders to see Gerome, Laurent, and Severa standing before her once more.

There had been more than relief, of course. Unlike the other fragments Lucina had managed to piece together over the years, this latest memory was as clear as any she’d made since waking on a beach in Chon’sin. The solace she’d felt had been balanced just as heavily with anxiety—for her brother and cousin yet to return, for the others of their company and their still incomplete efforts, for the child she carried that she had only so recently learned of at that point.

But now, at long last, she could remember those last moments in her world, of Grima’s appearance—of Robin’s appearance, she knew now. Some blank moment still stretched out, a swath of black somewhere between the final taunt of _And now it ends!_ and when she had woken on a shoreline twenty years in the past. How long it was, she couldn’t say; how she had arrived in the past at all when the latest edition to her memory seemingly ended in her own death, she couldn’t say either.

“Lucina?”

The voice was low and searching, gruff enough that she knew it immediately. “I’m here,” Lucina called back under her breath, peeking back from around her tree.
The clank of armor greeted her even as its shade of jet blended into the trees. “You should not have left without saying,” Gerome said, coming to a stop just by her right elbow. “At a time like this, people will worry.”

“Sorry,” she said, leaning her head back against the cold bark once more. “I needed some space to think.”

A beat passed. “I see,” he said. “I will leave if you wish.”

She shook her head, a little too quickly. “No,” she whispered. “No, I… stay if you want.”

Another beat. “Very well,” said Gerome.

For some reason she couldn’t quite predict other than the sheer enormity of the day catching up to her, that answer sent a harsh, choking sob tearing from her throat. “Are you even capable of refusing me?” Lucina demanded, straightening to fix her gaze on his.

Though she could scarce see his face—only the lower half of his face really showed in the pre-dawn light—it was plain to see Gerome take a moment to process her words. “Why do you ask?” he finally said.

“Because I need to know!” she said. “I need to know that if the path I aim to take is the wrong one that someone will bother to…”

She trailed off, shaking her head. Inigo had done more than bother to and she had repaid him with both insult and injury. If he hadn’t intervened on Robin’s behalf, would Lucina have gone through with taking her life? What good would it have done them, when now she knew of the plan that had kept Chrom alive and had only been thwarted by another version of Robin entirely?

“Perhaps it doesn’t matter now,” Lucina said, shaking her head. Seemingly misinterpreting her words, Gerome said, “I always believed that our coming here was a fool’s errand. Surely no man could stop fate.”

She nodded, for once about to agree with him when the next words came entirely unexpected from his lips.

“Perhaps I was wrong.”

“You say that now?” she asked. “When Grima looms above our heads and our best laid plans have fallen to pieces?”

“I say that now,” he corrected, “when I see what has been changed. And when I remember that against all logic… My Exalt yet leads me.”

Lucina shook her head again, for some reason knowing those words had brought the same disgust to her a lifetime ago. “I’m no Exalt,” she whispered. “No one worth following.” Before Gerome could protest, she continued, “When I was in Chon’sin… I wished for nothing more than someone else. When it was just Lysander and I, for so very long… All I wanted was for someone to guide me. To say when I was making a mistake… And yet, now, I am supposed to be someone who might lead?”

“...I cannot say,” Gerome began after a long moment, “that I am one worthy to guide you.” He turned toward her, laying a hand on her far shoulder. “And if you do not wish for me to follow… then I might—and I would—stand at your side. For as long as you desire.”
Slowly—painfully slowly—he bent his head towards hers. She had more than ample time to refuse him, and for a moment she nearly did. Still, some selfish part of her had been waiting so very long for him to kiss her she couldn’t quite bring herself to deny it.

When they broke, though, Lucina shook her head. “Why?” she whispered. “Why now?”

Gerome gazed at her, his expression masked and unreadable. “After all this time,” he said, “you ask me that?”

“Yes,” she said flatly. “The last time we did this… what had we to lose? Naught but our own lives and our own hearts. But now? Think of your son and think for his sake.”

Gerome seemed to weigh his words for a moment. “Would you rather me out of his life? I would do as such, if you asked.”

She shook her head. “No,” she said. “I merely wish… I need to be certain of this before anything happens. I need us both to be certain.”

“I am certain,” he said. “My feelings for you have never changed. Only my ability to act upon them.”

Lucina drew in a breath, closing her eyes briefly. “Then take that off,” she said, gesturing to his mask, “and kiss me properly.”

He did.

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Cold tugged at her, barely abated by the winter-bare trees surrounding them. The Shepherds dared not even light a fire, for fear of signing their own death warrants with a flaming beacon to their location.

Still, their group had gathered into a loose semi-circle, in the same way they would have around a fire. Under other circumstances, that same formation had beckoned with stories and laughter, a promised respite from reality in the shape of an eclectic batch of soldiers practically closer than their own kin.

Now, though, there was none of that. There was no laughter; no one seemed to even dare raise their voice above a murmur. Never even in the worst depths of the Valm War had Say’ri seen her comrades in such serious straits, but for once she could hardly blame them.

Gaius sat conversing lowly with Cherche and Sumia, while Severa seemed to almost orbit the conversation, as if not quite daring to interject. Nowi and Nah were across from Brady and Cynthia, the usual friction between manakete mother and daughter nowhere to be found. Laurent and Kjelle had settled off a little away from the rest, the knight’s head on the mage’s shoulder—just when had that happened? Say’ri wondered—while Chrom, Robin, and Frederick were the farthest still visible, their voices just barely audible from their place at the fringes.

It seemed everyone else had taken the chance for distance, because the only other figure in the group was a very lost looking Owain.
Said lost-looking swordsman glanced up sharply at her approach, a brief glimpse of hope tugging on his features before it was just as quickly concealed. “Ah,” he said, theatrical effect muted but still very much present. “Hark, my noble cousin-in-law.”

“Is that a relation one actually keeps track of in your country?” Say’ri asked.

“Well, if you’re me,” Owain replied. “In fact, I could recite you a hundred distantly related names of my own noble lineage, as far back as five times removed from my own self—” He broke off. “Er, but you probably don’t really care about that, do you? Besides, you are rather married to my best friend, and I think he’d be a bit miffed if I didn’t keep track of you.”

“‘Tis certainly not far off from the truth,” Say’ri admitted, settling cross-legged in the damp dirt beside him. “Though, speaking of Inigo…”

“I’m not sure where he is if that’s what you’re asking,” Owain said.

“Fie, really? I thought surely by this point the two of you shared some sort of psychic connection…”

Owain snorted. “A concept I have already dismissed as both preposterous and terrifying,” he said. “Can you imagine my having to deal with all his self-esteem issues even more than I already do? Such horror might even go so far as to rob the world of my own unending depths of confidence! His incurable insecurity would batter around in my brain until it consumed me as its next victim, and thus forever deprive the world of my musings!”

“…Well, then,” Say’ri said. “Perhaps you have put more thought into this than I.”

“Well, I have known him for the entirety of his existence,” Owain pointed out. “Also… we may have tried to establish such a mental rapport at a more tender age, before such wisdom that I just bestowed had fully taken root…”

“And how, exactly, did you go about attempting that?”

“…We might’ve banged our heads together a few times more than is prudent…” Owain admitted.

After the wringer they had gone through that day, the snort of laughter that escaped Say’ri was entirely unintentional and more than a little undignified. “Aye, I can see it now, too,” she said, wiping her eyes. “Tell me, did you jump in the air to attempt it, or merely charge at each other at full speed…?”

Grumbling, Owain said, “I think I’ve told enough, thank you.” Once she had sobered a little, he admitted, “I really don’t know where he’s gotten off to, though.”

“Aye, I believed you the first time,” Say’ri said. “But you looked as though you needed the company as well.”

Owain let out a soft sigh that said more than words could have. “To be fair, my own beloved does have a few more pressing issues on her time right now…”

Say’ri gave a hum at that; while Owain wasn’t exactly wrong, she couldn’t help but wonder if her friend had decided to take a class in avoiding life’s problems from Inigo. Quietly, she shook her head, rather glad Lucina had taken her leave from their grouping; of all that had happened in the past few hours, it seemed Owain was still unaware of half of it.

“Perhaps we ought remind them they need rest as much as the rest of us,” Say’ri mused, peering
Once more at Chrom, Frederick, and Robin. “Though I cannot be sure just how much luck would be on our side on that endeavor.”

“At this moment? Probably not very much,” Owain said.

Despite herself, Say’ri hummed her agreement to that before forcing herself back to her feet, ignoring the protests of battle-weary muscles. Some piece of her thought to offer him some parting platitude, but all that rose to her lips fell flat. Finally, she simply said, “Good night, Owain.”

“Good night, Say’ri,” he replied. “Fare thee well on your daring search for my wayward cousin.”

Another soft puff of laughter escaped her. “Daring search indeed.”

As it was, her daring search came to fruition only a few minutes later. The murmur of voices, plainly a conversation not to be eavesdropped upon, had steered her away from who she assumed to be Lucina and Gerome and had, incidentally, turned her down the path she sought.

The woods sloped down as Say’ri continued, briefly opening up as a currently half-frozen stream carved its way through the trees. For the first moment, she thought the figure perched a few feet from the edge was little more than a broken tree stump, and had nearly turned away before the moonlight shifted just enough to prove her wrong.

She hardly dared announce her approach; her footsteps would give her away as it was, and the air felt almost too thick to break with words. A long moment passed in which he had to have heard her, yet Inigo made no move to greet her but for the barest tilt of his head in acknowledgment, still facing the stream with his back to her.

It was then the scent of spirits hit her, sharp and burning. Where he’d gotten it from, she hadn’t a clue, but on tonight of all nights Say’ri could hardly find it in herself to be surprised.

She finally paused a foot behind his right shoulder, peering down at the empty bottle loosely grasped between Inigo’s knees. “How much have you had?” she ventured, wishing the wait for the answer hadn’t filled her with quite so much dread.

“All nearly enough,” Inigo said dryly. “Of course, by that I’m referring to the fact I can still hold a coherent thought in my head, so take that as you will.”

“This hardly seems to be the place to find oneself in a black-out stupor,” she pointed out gently.

“Mixed blessing this was all I could get my hands on, then.” He shifted, setting down the bottle they spoke of off to the side before returning his hands to clasp over his knees once more. “From one perspective or another, at least.”

Say’ri found she had no answer to that; not a verbal one, at least, so instead she merely dropped a hand to his shoulder. Inigo flinched immediately from the contact, leaving her to withdraw—but not before she caught an unrelated shiver through layers of clothing that clearly weren’t doing their job.

Shaking her head, she dropped the blanket in her arms around his shoulders. “The more things
change, the more they stay the same, aye?” she murmured, for a moment drawn back to a night long ago under the boughs of the Mila Tree. “‘Tis a wonder you’ve not keeled over from hypothermia of all things at this point.”

A choked sort of sound escaped Inigo as he drew himself deeper into the blanket. “I’ve come close,” he said. “We were all lucky to have Yarne around. Taguel make better heat sources than you’d think.” He shook his head. “It’s funny… the things you think of, when… When everything…”

“I know,” she said softly, settling on the ground beside him.

“You don’t have to stay,” Inigo said. “I’m not very good company right now.”

“I didn’t ask you to be.”

The next thing out of his mouth was a ragged sob, followed by a broken, “I’m sorry.”

“‘Tis not your fault, Inigo,” Say’ri said.

“But I—” He broke off, fisting a hand in his hair. “I told you… promised you we’d build a life together. That we’d… And now it’s all gone.”

“…Mayhap,” Say’ri said. “Mayhap not. All cannot be lost when we yet draw breath, can it?”

“How can you say that?” Inigo demanded. “How can you look me in the eye and know where I came from and say that?”

“…Inigo—”

“Because that’s exactly what happened! Every day I looked around and I saw nothing but death and all I could do was wonder to myself why I had the audacity to still be alive! You don’t have a clue what that’s like so don’t sit there and tell me about hope while I’m wondering if I should’ve bothered to come back here at all!” He drew in another sharp breath, then added in a low tone, “At least I would’ve saved myself five years of worthless effort.”

Say’ri glanced away, having to force her next words out through her suddenly thick throat. “If you have such a desire to slap me in the face, I’d rather you merely did so.”

Her words seemingly brought Inigo up short as he shot her a puzzled look. “What are you talking about?”

“Would you dare speak such a thing to Khan Basilio?” she asked. “To your own father? To the others among us who would be buried in the ground at this moment were it not for the fact that you returned to this time? Or is it only my life you count as a ‘worthless effort’?”

Inigo sighed, scrubbing a hand over his face. “Say’ri, that’s not what I meant.”

“‘Tis what you said, though! Do you truly think ‘twould have been better for you to lay your life down at sixteen? That you would rather be dead simply to have spared yourself the effort? I have lived more in the time since I met you, Inigo, than I could have dreamed of five years ago. Does that mean so little to you? Do you expect me to simply roll over and give up simply because there is a chance I might fail?”

Inigo curled up tighter on himself, burying his head in his hands. “I’m sorry,” he mumbled. “I really didn’t mean it like that. I just… I’m just so tired.”
“I know,” Say’ri murmured. “I know.” She drew closer, discarding any pretense of personal space that had been. “And if this is truly to be our end, aye, then I will take it, for I know that I have learned, and laughed, and loved; and knowing that we very much did build a life together, a happy one, for however long or short it may be.”

There was a pause before the world became little more than a reckless tangle of limbs as Inigo seized her. She hardly caught a glimpse of his face before he buried his head on her shoulder, dragging her down until she was all but sitting in his lap, the odd shuddering breath rocking through the both of them.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered yet again. “I’m sorry, Say’ri, I’m… if I could fix this…”

“Shh,” she said, lips brushing against his hair as she spoke. “We are both here, now, and that is what matters. Just think of tonight.”

She hadn’t realized the echo of a long-ago promise—just tonight—until he tilted his head to meet her lips, and the vehemence of such a gesture rather abruptly led her to the conclusion that those would be the last sane words spoken between them for the rest of the night. And truly, she had little complaint on the matter when his grip kept her secure and the heat of his kisses staved off the cold better than any fire might have.

His right hand trailed from her hip to her thigh, abruptly sending any such pleasant thoughts flying out of her head with a jolt of pain.

A harsh curse usually more at home on his lips than hers forced its way into a broken kiss, leaving Inigo to send her a heavy-lidded but still puzzled glance. Say’ri bit her lip, struggling to force out a sentence that could hope to absolve her.

Inigo, meanwhile, fingered at the still blood-stained rip in her leggings, his touch far gentler than it had been a moment ago as he dipped under to graze the bandaging beneath. “I thought you had that healed,” he said, his tone just flat enough to tread the line between questioning and accusing.

Say’ri pointedly kept her gaze on where her own hand was settled on his shoulder, then said softly, “I believe that technically I told you I had it looked at, which is not quite the same thing.”

A long silence stretched out before Inigo swallowed hard enough for her to hear. “So,” he said, “I’m going to ask you something, and I really, really want to you to deny it.” He shifted beneath her and finally managed, “Please tell me you weren’t the other person who got hexed in Plegia Castle earlier.”

With a sigh, Say’ri said, “I suppose my answer to that would depend on whether you’d prefer the truth or what you want to hear.”

Inigo shivered again, meeting her eyes once more as he raised his hand to her cheek. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I thought you had enough to worry about.”

“Gods know that,” he said dryly, before sobering once more. “At least tell me you’ll stay back with the healers.”

“I’ll do no such thing!” Say’ri said.

“…Say’ri…” he said. “I just want… If something were to happen to you, and you couldn’t be healed…”
“‘Tis a risk I take every time I step onto the battlefield, hex or no,” Say’ri said. “As do you.”

“There’s such a thing as *unnecessary* risk,” Inigo said, his tone pleading.

“And there is such a thing as the need outweighing the risk,” Say’ri said. “You’ll not change my mind, so unless you have more drastic measures you wish to invoke… Which would likely not end very well for you, I might add.”

He shook his head. “No,” he whispered. “No. Just… promise me you’ll be careful.”

“Between the two of us, I am not usually the one who winds up throwing themselves headfirst into danger without pausing to think it through,” Say’ri pointed out.

“…Touche,” Inigo admitted.

She shifted her weight, tilting her head slightly as she dropped her gaze pointedly to his lips. “Now,” she said. “I seem to remember you starting something…?”

With a long inhale, he answered in an equally low tone. “I do seem to remember that, too.”

The first rays of dawn broke with the promise of a new day as their lips met and melded once more.

Only time would tell how many dawns the world had left.
Chapter Summary

Robin has a plan, Lucina learns the truth, and the author spiraled into the depths of a truly depressing AU on this AU whilst writing this chapter.

Naga’s altar stood as tall and stately as Owain remembered.

A few hours shy of two days after Grima rose, they had landed on the base of Mount Prism, somehow unchanged since the last time and last time line the children had seen it. The place almost seemed to feel, oddly enough, as immortal as Naga herself.

Despite the similarities—down to the advance guard of Risen at the foot of the mountain—it seemed this time had an entirely different feeling to it than their last doomed visit. Perhaps the fact that all they needed now laid at their fingertips had something to do with it.

Chrom shot one last wary look back at their company, Falchion in hand and the Fire Emblem on his arm, before striding up the stairs of the altar without an ounce of hesitation in his manner.

“Hear me, Naga! I bear proof of our sacred covenant! In the name of the exalted blood, I ask for the divine dragon’s power! Baptize me in fire, that I may become your true son!”

A breath passed; and then, in a moment, with the same startling suddenness as a timeline gone by, the goddess appeared.

Chrom made a startled sound in the back of his throat, then quickly shouted back, “I’m… I’m all right!”

“Be welcome, Awakener,” said Lady Naga, her tone warm. Unlike the last time, when she had spoken to Inigo privately, she let her voice carry to the entire group. “Your heart has been tested and deemed worthy. Cleansed in my fire, your desire has proven to be the stronger.”

“Then you will grant me the power to defeat Grima?” Chrom asked, then added, “The power of a god?”

“Yes,” said Naga. “But know this: I am no god.”

“But milady… you are the divine dragon.”

“So do the sons of man name me,” said Naga. “But I am no creator. I possess not the powers of making or unmaking. And neither does Grima. Neither of us bears the power to destroy each other utterly.”

“Then what power can you grant me?” Chrom asked.

“With my blessing, thou may draw forth Falchion’s true might. The blade of the Exalts shall again strike like the dragon’s fang. Your strength will then be my equal.”

Chrom paused, seeming to weigh his words. “But not strong enough to destroy Grima?” he
Naga shook her head. “Alas, Grima cannot be slain. Sleep alone can be your victory, just as your ancestor put the Fell Dragon to sleep a millennium ago. But you must weaken him first—only as the final blow can my power be used to bind his.”

Owain spoke before he had even realized it; despite how very cool this entire thing was, there did seem to be one glaring issue with the situation. “Is there no way to destroy him for good?”

Naga fixed her gaze on him and he resisted the strange urge to shudder. “There is, perchance, a power that could end Grima,” she mused. “However… ‘twould be his own.”

“He has to slay himself?” Owain ventured.

“Yes. And never would he do so by his own volition. He seeks only to add to his power, and set ruin upon the world.”

“So we can only put him back to sleep…” Robin murmured to herself, in the tone she used when plotting through a problem at six different angles at once.

“Correct, Fellblood.”

The tactician glanced up sharply, her face paling. “Then you know my lineage,” she said softly.

“You possess power not so different from my own,” Naga replied.

Chrom shook his head. “We must find some way to break this unholy cycle!” he said. “We can’t just keep putting Grima back to sleep every few centuries! Otherwise we merely will his vengeance on our descendants.”

“That’s true,” Robin admitted. “But…”

“…But?” Owain said.

“The other me claimed the dragon and I are the same, yes?” she said. “If I strike the final blow, he’d be killed by his own hand…”

Chrom laughed, stretching back to clap a hand on her shoulder. “Ingenious! Naga? Will it work?”

The goddess took a long moment to answer. “Perhaps,” she finally said. “But there will be consequences. Grima’s heart and Robin’s are inexorably linked. Dragon and man can no longer be separated. Therefore, slaying Grima would also cause the end of Robin’s life.”

Her words hung in the air for a moment. “Well,” Owain said—rather nonchalantly, he thought, all told. “That’s that off the table, then.”

No sooner had he finished speaking, though, did Robin let out a soft breath and murmur, “I understand.”

What?

“There is… a chance you could survive,” Naga said. “But it is small indeed. You have bound your heart to many others in this world. If those bonds prove strong enough, they may yet keep you in this reality. But I would not give you false hope—not even a thousand human friendships could surpass the dragon’s grip. In truth, you would almost certainly cease to exist.”
“Robin would cease to be?” Chrom said, while Owain still struggled to put the syllables together to say the same. “No. We’ll find another way.”

“Chrom, wait,” Robin said. “You’re not thinking clearly. Think about what your sister would have wanted.”

“Emmeryn would have never asked you to do this!” Chrom snapped.

“What is one life,” Robin shot back, “when weighed against millions?”

“Stop it!”

Owain’s shout echoed and died on the marble of the altar, leaving silence in their wake. He swallowed hard, stepping forward.

“You can’t… you can’t just…” He sucked in a breath, surprised at how shaky it ended up being. “What about Ophelia?” he finally whispered. “Would you… would you really just leave her, without her mother, just to—” He cut himself off again as his voice rose to unpleasant levels. “Promise me,” he finally managed. “Promise me you won’t do this.”

“Owain…” she whispered, ducking her head. He finally came within arms’ length of her, dropping his hands to her arms just as she spoke again. “You’re right. You’re right. I’m sorry.”

Owain’s shuddering breath of relief almost drowned out Chrom speaking again. “We swore to stand by each other, remember?” the Exalt said softly. “There has to be another way. We just have to find it, all right?”

“All right,” she repeated, looking up once more.

“You will have your time to deliberate,” Naga said. “There is little time, but enough to rest. I will deliver you to Origin Peak upon the morrow.”

“You can do that?” Inigo asked.

Naga’s tone was almost amused when she answered him. “I brought you back in time, young Exalt, and that is what surprises you?”

Inigo didn’t have a response to that. “All right, fair point,” he conceded.

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Though they had done without on their journey until then, the elevation and temperature of Mount Prism left them with no choice but to risk tents and a fire that night.

“You know, love,” Inigo said conversationally as he heard the tent flap open and fall shut behind him. “I’ve been thinking that we ought—ah.” He broke off as he turned from unrolling his bedroll. “You are not my wife.”

“’Fraid not,” Robin said, pausing awkwardly in the entrance with a tome clutched to her chest.

“Did you need her?” Inigo asked, getting to his feet. “Because if you’re not her I’m honestly not entirely sure where she is.”
“No,” Robin said quickly. “No, I… actually need to talk to you.”

“All right,” Inigo said. “Sure.” He paused, then, taking in the protective hunch of her shoulders and the shadows under her eyes. “Hey,” he added in a low tone. “You doing all right?”

He hadn’t expected his words to draw out a deep, wracking sob from her frame.

“Hey,” Inigo said again, crossing the distance between them and hovering his hands over her shoulders. “Hey now. Deep breaths, okay?” When she sucked in a deep inhale, then nodded, he continued, “There we go. We’re all a bit of a mess right now, aren’t we?”

“Yeah,” Robin said, the word wobbling before a watery laugh escaped her. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but frankly, I really expected you to freak out a little bit more than that.”

“…Now that you mention it, I feel like I should have,” he admitted. “Apparently a much sauver version of Inigo decided to take over for a second there.”

“Should figure out how to get you to do that on a regular basis,” Robin said.

“Probably, yeah,” Inigo admitted, rubbing the back of his neck. As a long moment dragged out, he finally said, “So…”

“So…” she echoed, then sighed and extended the spellbook that had been clutched to her chest. Giving her a questioning glance, Inigo took it. “Er… correct me if I’m wrong, but isn’t this Owain’s?” he asked.

“It is,” Robin said. “And before we go any further… I need you to promise you will keep this completely secret from him. You… you cannot tell him, all right?”

“…Okay…” Inigo said, drawing the word out and wondering if he was going to regret this.

“Swear to me?”

“I… yeah, all right, if you’ll tell me what it is.” He glanced down at the tome in his hand, seeing half an inch of parchment extending out from under the cover. Just what was this about?

With one final, steadying breath, Robin said, “Thank you.” Skimming a hand through her hair, she met his eyes once more. “I have a favor to ask of you,” she murmured. “And I’m sorry—I really am sorry, Inigo… but you’re going to hate it.”

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Frost crunched under her boots and her breath hung visible in the slowly lightening dawn. Behind her, the Shepherds’ camp began to stir into wakefulness, but none followed Lucina.

The altar stood before her, dark and imposing, achingly familiar even when she could never remember stepping foot there before the previous day. Even in her timeline, she thought, she had never been—Inigo had led them there after her supposed demise.

Lucina stepped inside, eyes following the light of torches ever-burning. She paused just a few strides inside; why had she come, anyway? Surely Lady Naga had more important things to worry
about than the pestering questions of an amnesiac former Exalt.

“If you have query of me, my daughter, then you may ask.”

Lucina jumped, spinning on her heel to find the goddess standing in the doorway she had just come through. “My apologies,” she said quickly. “I didn’t wish to disturb you.”

“You do not disturb.” Naga stepped forward, her ethereal glow radiating through the room. “And if you did, I can hardly consider your cause invalid.”

“You know what I have come to ask, then?” Lucina whispered.

“You wish to know how it is you came to this place.” Naga tilted her head slightly. “Would you accept the answer that I sent you, as I did your brother?”

After a long moment, Lucina shook her head. “I don’t think so,” she said. “Not when there’s so much else missing… How I escaped Grima, why I lost my memory…”

“...Very well,” Naga said. “I will explain to you the whole of it. But know, my daughter, it is a difficult tale; it is the mistake I made in telling it that first cost you your mind.”

Lucina swallowed, thinking of the life she had clung to so dearly in the absence of the one leading up to it; the birth of her son, her comrades in Chon’sin, reuniting with a family she could scarcely remember… “Would it do so again?”

Naga shook her head. “I know, now, what wrong I committed. I shall not repeat it.”

“All right,” Lucina said. “Then I wish to know.”

“Very well,” said Naga once more.

And the tale began.

“There are other worlds than these,” Naga began. “Other worlds where Grima has risen from his slumber. In some, he was defeated. In others, he was not. In some, my daughter, you returned to the past, as you have now, and defeated him alongside your father. In others, you slew him in your own world, and rebuilt in his wake, and became the Exalt yourself in truth. In the world you came from, I believed ‘twould follow the course of the latter.”

“...Wait,” Lucina said. “So there have been… other versions of me? Other versions of all of us?”

“Indeed,” said Naga. “More than you might count. The universe is a vast and unknowable thing.”

Lucina lifted a hand to her mouth, pressing her knuckle absently to her lips. No wonder such knowledge had held the potential to fry her mind, she thought. “Go on.”

“The branch that would decide the greater path such a world might take—whether you stayed, or whether you returned in time—would be determined at two points. One would be set at the moment Sable was, or was not, found. If it was, the other would be on the day you last spent in your future,” Naga said. “On that morning, your company would be in possession of all five of the Gemstones. On that morning, you had a chance of victory. And on that morning, Grima would or would not choose to launch an attack on your brother.”

For a moment—only an instant—Lucina thought she saw a bridge falling into a chasm, severed on one side.
“If he did, then Sable would be lost once more in the ensuing battle. Knowing you could no longer be Awakened, Grima would not bother to challenge you thus. You would appeal to me, and I would hence use the remaining four Gemstones to return you in time. If he did not, then you would receive all five, and be able to defy him openly when he turned upon you. Your victory was not assured, but it would not be impossible.”

“There was a battle,” another voice interjected softly. Lucina shot a startled glance over her shoulder, just in time to see Inigo emerge from the shadows of the archway. Just when he had appeared, she couldn’t have said, and some sisterly part of her thought to scold him for eavesdropping. “There was a battle that day… but we didn’t lose Sable. When we made it to the palace, we were missing Vert.”

“Indeed,” spoke the goddess. “For on that day, you made a different choice. That morning, you gave your Gemstones to another.”

Inigo blinked. “Brady,” he whispered. “I gave them to Brady. And we sent him away from the fight, which meant…”

“Which meant we still had all five,” Lucina whispered.

“And Grima came early to your appointed meeting—before the others arrived, and before you held the power to defeat him.”

“Then…” Lucina began. “Then I should have died that day.”

“Indeed you ought have,” said Naga. “But as Grima’s physical form was not present—only his Fellblood avatar—I was able to transport you away, as I will transport you to Origin Peak this very day.”

“But the others that were there said they both vanished,” Inigo pointed out. “Lucina and—” He paused, as if stumbling over their foe’s true identity. “And the avatar.”

“As I took them both,” Naga said. “Her body is still human, however corrupted Grima’s power has left her, and thus I still hold some degree of power over her. But had I left her in Ylisstol, Grima would have turned upon the rest of you, and destroyed you. I had hoped that by holding you both at Mount Prism, my daughter, it would leave enough time for the rest of your company to arrive, and for you to be properly Awakened, and for you to defeat Grima. I brought you thus to a realm of another kind, where time does not flow quite the same; there I explained to you this, that you would be ready in an instant when the time came. But there it was that I showed you too much, in my attempt to expound upon the other worlds in which this had come to pass. Your mind fractured; had it continued, such knowledge would have consumed you unto death.”

“So you had to take away my memories,” Lucina whispered, her voice hollow.

“I had little other choice,” said Naga. “‘Twas all I could do to spare your life. Such an act, though, was not without cost. Without your sense of self, your convictions would not have withstood the Awakening.”

“Which meant that our timeline was doomed,” Inigo said.

Naga gazed at him. “It may have yet had hope,” she said. “Once you arrived, you might have been Awakened in her stead. Grima could have yet fallen to you, and the world which remained would have looked to you, instead, as their Exalt in truth.”

Inigo blinked. “They… what?” He shook his head. “You’re sure that’s not, um, wishful thinking?
Because that really feels like wishful thinking."

"I glimpsed the potential," said Naga. "It was without guarantee. Should you have won the battle, you would have reigned, and been regarded by your subjects with the same admiration as the very first of your Exalted name."

A spark of something odd came to Inigo’s eyes. "Wait," he said. "Really?"

The goddess nodded, but before she could continue, Lucina spoke. "If that was the case, why did you not do as such? It seems as though it would have been easier than sending us back in time."

"I did so upon your request," said Naga. "For when I examined the potentials, I told you what I had seen." She fixed her gaze back on Inigo. "Though your reign would be well-regarded, ‘twould also be short. Perhaps ten years, no more than fifteen. I know not the specifics, whether you fell in defense of your people, or whether you took your own life. You would not marry, nor have a child; you would be succeeded by your cousin, and his children after him."

That revelation seemed to suck all the air out of the room. "I see," Inigo said, his tone painfully neutral. Lucina, however, caught a glimpse of the naked horror sitting behind his features; gods, but he would have been miserable.

"When I told you as such, you asked for the alternative," Naga said to Lucina. "‘Twas to use Vert’s power to send you back in time, and to return Falchion and the Fire Emblem itself to the moment I had stolen you from; when your brother would come to me upon this mount, I would do the same with them. You would wake with no memory but for a vague impression to find those who haunted your dreams." She looked back to Inigo. "And you would lead in her stead until the day came you reunited."

"As we did," Lucina murmured.

"Had the avatar not escaped, and followed you through time..." Naga seemed to sigh. "Your future now would already be won."

After a moment, Lucina asked in a soft tone, "Will they ever come back? My memories?"

"In time, some may," said Naga. "Perhaps even all, barring those which needed erasing in the first place. Or perhaps they may not." Before either of them could inquire further, the goddess’s gaze fell to the middle distance. "The time approaches. The Grimleal begin to stir. Return to the others, my children, and I shall spirit you to where your army awaits you."

She vanished without waiting for an answer.

A long moment passed before either of them spoke. "Well," Inigo said. "That was... interesting."

"Indeed," Lucina said. Finally, she glanced over at him. "What are you doing here?" she asked.

Coloring a little, Inigo shrugged. "I saw you headed this way. I wanted to talk."

"...Funny," Lucina said. "I was hoping I might speak with you."

A glint of something hopeful came to Inigo’s face. "Well," he said. "I am right here."

Lucina gathered herself, drawing in a breath. "I’m sorry," she said. "You were right. I ought not to have done what I did and I ought not to have gone behind your back to do it."
Inigo rubbed at the back of his neck. “I’m sorry, too,” he said. “For everything… for being a jerk to you, for constantly pestering you to smile…”

“For that, it is I who needs to make amends,” she said. “I could not see it before, but… a smile is a powerful thing.”

He let out a soft laugh. “And I think yours counts for double, Luce.”

Echoing him, she replied, “Thank you, Inigo.”

“...By the gods,” Inigo said. “Finally, she smiles!”

Lucina shook her head, her lips still tugging upward slightly. “Thank you,” she said again. “I had quite hoped… that we might make amends before we faced today.”

Just like that, the almost-cheery mood dissipated, Inigo’s face falling. “Yeah,” he said. “Speaking of…” He nodded toward the entrance.

“Inigo, wait.”

Hardly having even turned away, Inigo glanced back at her. “Mm?”

Without conscious decision, Lucina’s fingers began working at the buckle on her hip, loosening Falchion’s sheath. Wordlessly, she extended it in his direction.

His mouth dropped slightly ajar, throat working for a moment before he spoke. “Luce,” he finally said. “Luce, I can’t—”

“Please,” she said. “I’ll find another.” When he still shook his head, she continued, “At least just for today.”

After a moment, Inigo finally extended his hand. “Okay.” Once Falchion was safely strapped to his hip, he sucked in a breath and nodded. “Let’s go,” he whispered.

Lucina wondered—as they descended the temple’s steps shoulder-to-shoulder—if the divine sword had really quivered the moment it passed from her grip to his, or if it had merely been her imagination.
When the world stopped spinning, the western shore of Carrion Isle greeted them.

Though the sun had risen over the top of Mount Prism, it had yet to grace the horizon of Plegian soil. Mist clung to the land, while ships were packed so thickly across the shoreline the black velvet sea was hardly visible between them, bearing banners of Ylisse, Ferox, and Chon’sin alike. It seemed most of the soldiers had deigned to sleep on their ships; when Naga dropped the Shepherds off on the shoreline, only a relative handful of tents were dotted over the land. Across the sea, just barely visible on the horizon, the shadow of Origin Peak stood stark against the slowly lightening sky, aglow itself with flames licking over its peak.

Even at the distance, six glowing red eyes were just barely visible at its summit, ever-watching.

“You must be swift, Awakener,” Naga said. “Grima’s servants await you across the sea, and they will harry you until the very last. You must reach the dragon before it is too late.”

Grima’s silhouette shifted visibly across the stars; when Naga had finished speaking, the Fell Dragon let out a roar that echoed even across the space between them.

“He senses my presence, as I do his,” said Naga. “Listen carefully. The Fell Dragon has a weakness on the nape of his neck, but that weakness will be guarded by his servants. I will remain here, and watch the battle; when the time comes, I can send you onto the dragon’s back, but the rest is in your hands.”

“Then please, milady, and as soon as you can,” said Chrom. “We would ask no more of you.” He straightened his shoulders, staring out across the ocean before adding in a lower tone. “Everyone, make ready. One way or another, this ends today.”
“...Mother?”

“Ini?” Olivia turned, her face lighting up at the sight of him. “Oh, Ini, you’re back already?”

Though his mother’s voice held nothing but relief, Inigo’s own was filled with anxiety. “I thought you were in Ylisstol,” he said.

“We came when we heard,” she said softly. He opened his mouth to protest, though she continued before he could. “Don’t fret, Ini dear. I’ll be with the healers.”

He let out a breath. “Good,” he said softly, then added, “It’s kind of weird to be worried about myself when I’m not even born yet.”

Her answer to that was a quiet laugh. “I’m sure,” she murmured, then added, “And how are you?”

Inigo’s breath caught. “I’m—” His voice stuck, leaving him shaking his head. “I don’t… I don’t know.” Quickly, he said, “I should go. We don’t have much time.”

“Inigo,” Olivia said softly, laying a hand on his shoulder. “Whatever happens today… I’m so very proud of you.”

He found, abruptly, that he couldn’t answer that.

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“Well, well, back again already. Thought I’d be rid of you for at least a few more days.”

Inigo spun toward the shadow cast from the nearest ship, Falchion already flying from its sheath on instinct and feeling just as at home in his hand as it had when he’d given it up a year ago. “What are you doing here?” he said in a low tone.

“Enjoying the ocean breeze,” Nalia said dryly. After a moment, she sighed and rolled her eyes. “You’re acting like I’m out here by myself—or something.”

“...Er,” Inigo said, because at first glance she did seem to be by herself—and at second and third glance, too. “Oh,” he finally said. “Hello, Kellam.”

“Hello, Inigo,” the knight said with a tip of his head. “Don’t worry. You’re not the first person to worry there’s no one on guard duty... You’re about the sixth, actually.”

“Ah,” said Inigo. “I suppose that makes me feel better.”

Kellam paused, then let out a soft sigh. “I’ve only been on duty for half an hour...”

“It also does make escaping rather difficult if one can’t see one’s captor,” Nalia added in a bored tone, seemingly examining her nails. “That should make you feel better, too.”

“Escaping, huh?” Inigo said. “Is that the plan, then? Rather interesting, considering you basically
surrendered yourself.”

“I’m considering all my options,” she replied. “And taking the path with the highest chances of survival.”

“Really,” Inigo said. “And those paths led you to hiring disgruntled ex-soldiers as assassins and hexing teenage future pegasus knights…?”

Nalia finally glanced up with a smirk tugging on her lips. “Considering said actions were completed with the direct intentions of making me as useful and non-disposable to Validar as possible… yes, indeed. But, see, eventually, my usefulness to him was going to run out… At which point my best bet became to throw myself at your mercy. Which, admittedly, was a whole lot easier than I first thought.”

Inigo shook his head. “If I had time, I could tell you a thousand things wrong with that, but I’m afraid I’m a bit busy trying to save the world.” He paused, then added, “But, honestly, there is some part of me that pitied you.”

“Save your pity,” she replied, returning to the investigation of her hands. “There will certainly come a day when I’ve outlived you, and I won’t need it then.”

Inigo didn’t answer that other than to shake his head and continue toward the ship he’d been heading for.

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“Robin!”

Owain’s voice bounced off the walls of the ship, echoing further than they had any right to. From halfway up the stairwell leading up to the main deck of the ship, Robin couldn’t help but cringe.

“Robin,” he repeated breathlessly, pounding up the steps after her. “Have you seen my spellbook? I can’t find my spellbook.”

Robin winced again, praying he didn’t notice. “Isn’t it in your pack?” she asked, only barely keeping her tone carefully neutral.

Vehemently, Owain shook his head. “I thought maybe it got mixed up in yours?” he ventured with a boyish look entirely at odds with the battle soon to fall upon them. “But I don’t know where you —”

“No,” Robin said a little too quickly, turning back up the staircase. “I’m sure I would have noticed if it had, and I don’t have time to go look.”

“I know, that’s fine,” he said. “I just don’t know what you’ve done with your stuff, if you tell me I’ll run and have a peek—”

“It’s not there, okay, Owain!” she snapped. “I’m sorry you’ve lost track of it, there isn’t time to go and look, you’ll just have to make do with your sword!”

A long silence stretched out, during which Owain made no move to respond besides a painfully
“Sorry,” Robin said in a soft voice, pinching the bridge of her nose as they emerged into the meager sunlight above deck. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to snap, I’m just…”

“I know,” Owain said quietly. With a sigh, he glanced toward the horizon. “Perhaps it is more fitting, anyway, to face the Fell Dragon with keen blade… Swordplay was the first of my passions, after all…” He trailed off, then cleared his throat. “Right! First we return Grima to his sleep of eons, then we find my hallowed tome, then we return to Ylisstol and tell the sweet Ophelia how her illustrious parents helped save the world. It is a plan indeed, my bride!”

With effort, Robin managed to choke back the faintly strangled sound rising in her throat, not quite daring to meet the eye of her husband. “Right,” she finally said. “Sounds good, dear.”

~~~

The battle began before they had even made it off their ships.

Two ships back from the front, Inigo stood on a deck packed so tightly with soldiers there was hardly room to move, watching Origin Peak grow larger in the glimmering dawn. Grima yet floated above, his servants—living and undead like—lining the shoreline in too-thick rows.

No one spoke as the battle crept closer; not Say’ri to Inigo’s left, nor Lucina to his right—or even Owain on the other side of her—nor the other half a dozen Shepherds scattered among the soldiers of this particular ship. Instead they stood, and watched, and dared not voice even the softest of whispers.

Steady now, breathe, some small voice in Inigo’s subconscious whispered; whether his mind had tried to comfort him with the voice of his wife, or his sister, or perhaps even Naga herself, he couldn’t have guessed.

And the ship to their left blew up.

Muffled cries echoed around them, followed by the unspoken instinct to duck and cover. Had there been Shepherds on that ship? Inigo wondered as he crouched beneath the railing, and found he couldn’t remember the answer.

“Loose!” came a call from a few ships over, repeated down the line until a veritable spray of arrows was heading for the shore and the Grimleal’s front line. Archers stood, fired, and dropped back in well-practiced formation from every deck, giving cover as the ships practically run aground on the shores of Origin Peak.

“We’ll go on this next wave!” Chrom shouted, his voice coming from far nearer, clearly directed to the occupants of their own ship rather than the army at large. “Make ready!”

“Say’ri,” Inigo whispered, almost against his best judgment.

“Loose!”

Say’ri didn’t need to answer, nor have time to when he pressed his lips to hers and prayed she could understand the words he hadn’t time to tell her.
I love you. I need you. Be safe. Come back to me.

“And go!” Chrom shouted, hardly a moment past his last order as the archers laid down covering fire once more.

And somehow, it worked.

Ice-cold water splashed around Inigo’s feet as he landed, already ducking out of the way of an errant Fire spell. The shoreline was growing thicker with friend and foe alike by the moment, and he scarcely had time to get his legs back underneath him before he was tangling with a fanatic general.

Falchion fit to his hand as it had always meant to, though, piercing through armor without hardly slowing and catching a sorcerer on the backswing. Another push, another thrust, and Inigo was out of the water, solid ground beneath him once more as the next rocking boom of another ship going up sounded from behind him.

No time to think, though, no time to dwell and mourn those already lost in the opening minutes; he spun to catch an axe heading for his open flank and found Say’ri there already, katana shoved straight through the chest of her foe. Above, a feral cry sounded, then resounded again almost a hundredfold as a spearhead of wyverns rose and then dove into the fray.

And higher still, louder and longer in every possible way, Grima himself echoed their call.

~~~

How long they’d been fighting when it happened, Inigo couldn’t truly say; just that the sand had given way to dirt and rock beneath their feet, that they had lost too many people and even yet the armies never seemed to truly thin.

But somewhere—just behind him and slightly to the left, in the space he’d gained pushing back a terribly talented swordsman—there was a tiny, muted sound. A soft little gasp, one he had no right hearing over the din of battle, one some subconscious voice told him he’d heard before.

For the briefest moment, as he finally ran through his foe and gained an inch of respite, he thought of Walhart.

The next heartbeat he realized just why.

He had spun back, Falchion already keen on its next target only to find none. Somehow, the tide of battle had drifted just north of them, which meant he was about to have one hell of a run over open ground to catch back up—

Say’ri.

The scene registered slowly, in pieces, then all at once. Say’ri had been with him for the entirety of the fight, to one side or perhaps just behind, and now was no exception. Unlike before, however, now she stood stock-still, her last foe unmoving at her feet, her gaze fixed somewhere in the middle distance, and—

Blood.
“Say’ri,” Inigo gasped out, just barely managing to keep Falchion from slipping out of his suddenly-numb grip as he surged across the distance between them. “Say’ri, gods, Say’ri—”

Her own sword clattered to the ground just as he caught her shoulders and he scarcely had a moment to begin to catalogue what had happened—gash in her thigh, likely from the gory axe laying a few feet away, long and deep, *far* too close to significant avenues of blood supply for comfort—before she dropped in his arms with such suddenness he only narrowly avoided losing his grip completely.

“Hang on, I’ve got you, I’ve got you,” he managed, just barely lowering her to the ground with some semblance of grace. No sooner had he done so than he scrambled for his coat, ignoring the grit of battle coating him in favor of getting something resembling pressure on that wound. He shot one panicked glance up, back toward the battle, eyes locking onto the first friend he saw with a hollered “LUCINA!”

“Inigo,” Say’ri whispered, in a terrifyingly breathy tone that seemed to say it wasn’t the first time she’d tried to get his name past her lips. “Inigo, I—”

“Shh, shh, it’s okay,” Inigo managed, despite the fact that it was very much not okay, and he had hardly had his coat pressed to her leg for a minute and already a damp, red patch was beginning to reach his fingers.

*Dear gods, he was going to lose her.*

“Stay with me, I’m here,” he said, and the words nearly choked him. “Say’ri, please, please—”

“Inigo!”

His head whipped around—Lucina had heard him, evidently, and was coming at a sprint. Owain, too; though it seemed he’d gotten a slightly later start, his longer stride quickly put him ahead of the eldest of the royal cousins. He all but skidded to a halt, dirt still grinding beneath his boots as he dropped to the ground.

Inigo dared not move for fear of losing the pressure Say’ri’s wound so desperately needed, and the only thing that came out of his cotton-dry mouth was a sharp, desperate “Help.”

*Tell me I’m wrong.* Inigo pleaded mentally. Owain was the son of a healer even if he’d never taken to it himself, he’d been their second-best well of medical knowledge when Brady failed them, and surely there was something he could do—

Instead of answering Inigo’s silent cry, though, Owain straightened up, for some odd reason reaching for his belt buckle as he all but barked at Lucina, “Put pressure.”

Lucina obliged, her own hands falling on top of Inigo’s. “Neither one of you has a staff, do you? I’m sure we could—”

“She needs a real healer,” Owain cut her off, his earlier actions making a touch more sense as he slid his belt under Say’ri’s leg, looping it into a makeshift tourniquet. “I might be able to do a little, yeah, but only enough to hold her until—”

“You can’t,” Inigo gasped out from under the weight of an entire wyvern sitting on his chest. “They can’t, she’s got that—got that damned hex on her—”
A shadow crossed over Owain’s face. “Still a better shot than we’ve got here.”

Inigo dared glance up and across the battlefield, watching the lines shift, meld, and come apart once more. Even if there was a potential they could get across that line, it would take two of them to carry Say’ri—and the one person alone who remained could never hope to defend them well enough—it might still take them the better part of an hour to get back to one of the Ylissean ships in hopes of finding a healer whose main tools would be ineffective.

So truly, what Owain was saying that she had no chance with only the three of them, and even if she had three times that under the care of a proper healer…

_Thrice nothing was still nothing._

“...Say’ri,” Inigo choked out once more, daring to take one of his hands of her leg—Owain had added his own grip to the mix anyway—to reach up and tangle in her hair.

“Inigo,” she echoed weakly, her palm clammy as she reached up to catch his hand.

And the weight of it hit him all over again—every moment of the Valm War building up to the day they’d challenged Walhart, every breath he’d spent terrified of losing her, every day he’d begged and pleaded to some higher power for a miracle—

“And who’s to say YOUR days aren’t numbered?” Aversa had asked, just a handful of days ago, as if she’d known.

Only so much the worse now, Inigo realized as “Say’ri, love, my darling,” fell in an endless and unstoppable stream past his lips. So much the worse when he’d thought he’d won, when he’d dared let himself think of a life beyond, when he’d lived with her and loved her and married her and oh gods now he had Chon’sin to think of, how could he ever hope to carry that for her—

“Move.”

The voice was low enough that it took a moment to pierce through Inigo’s panic at the fact that suddenly their best alternative was Say’ri dying in his arms.

A hand landed on his shoulder, though, forcing him to straighten with a jump. “Move, Inigo,” Gerome repeated, his expression as unreadable as ever.

“What are you—” Inigo began, though the words came through such a heady gasp as to be almost indecipherable.

“What does it look like?” Gerome all but snapped, rather unceremoniously elbowing Inigo when further commands to budge over were ignored. “I can get her to a healer under two minutes. Owain, give me a hand.” With that, he shifted his grip to Say’ri’s shoulders.

Owain nodded, tying the sleeves of the makeshift bandage that was Inigo’s coat into a knot before hurriedly scrambling to lift Say’ri the rest of the way. Minerva—gods, how had Inigo missed that? — crouched only a few feet away, bowed low to the ground.

“...I…” Inigo whispered, and found his voice entirely abandoned him before the next syllable. If there was a chance— barely a chance, but a chance nonetheless—

And a much higher chance he would never see her again.

“Say’ri,” he got out one final time, his throat burning while he stayed still crouched on the ground
where she’d been.

It was Lucina’s hand who landed on his shoulder then, strength in her warrior’s grip. “Godspeed, Gerome,” she said under her breath.

And with a crouch and a spring, Minerva took flight.

The next breath burned his lungs, cold and hollow. Don’t think, some voice told him. Don’t think, just stand and fight, you can’t stop now, whatever it takes—

Try as he might, though, Inigo couldn’t quite force his limbs to move.

A hand appeared in his vision, then, extended for his own. “Come on, Inigo,” Owain said gently. “We’ve got to go.”

Somewhere over the buzzing in his ears, Inigo caught his father’s voice over the din around them. Though he couldn’t quite make out the words, some part of him realized Time to go.

Time to end it, one way or another.

Finally, Inigo forced himself to grip Owain’s hand, feeling like little more than dead weight as his cousin hauled him back to his feet. They stayed clasped for a moment, neither moving nor daring to break eye contact.

It always would have come to this, wouldn’t it have? Falchion in Inigo’s grasp, Owain at his side.

The Fell Dragon’s call came once more as the ground faded beneath their feet.
Chapter Summary

“There’s a burning inside that’s brighter than this fire
I’m more than a survivor...
Watch me fight like a warrior, watch me rise up like a champion
I’m coming for you
Knock me down, I’ll be back for more
Nothing can stop me, I’m the champion
I’ve been waiting for you...

Chapter Notes

In which the author has been planning this since the very beginning of the story dang near two years ago and is still very, very sorry.

The first thing Inigo did upon landing on Grima’s back was to very nearly pitch forward onto his face.

The black scales of the dragon’s back rolled beneath their feet, like the rocking of a ship in a storm amplified by a hundred. How could they fight if they could hardly stand?

When he finally managed to get something resembling balance back, Inigo dared look around. Sixteen Shepherds appeared to be all Naga had been able to bring, and he scanned through them quickly. Owain, having evidently recovered his balance as well, had gotten himself just to Inigo’s left, while Lucina still stood to his right. Kjelle was the nearest next, her familiar armor glinting in the strange, high-altitude light. Gaius and Severa weren’t far away either, hardly the only father and child pairs since both Frederick and Cynthia and Henry and Laurent had come along as well. Vaike had joined them—somehow—and they seemed to have at least one healer in Maribelle, while Lon’qu had returned to stand once more at the side of Basilio.

And Chrom and Robin, of course, stood at the forefront.

No sooner had Inigo regained his bearings, however, did the ringing voice of Grima’s avatar resound. “WRETCHED SONS OF NAGA... YOU WILL BE DESTROYED.”

Chrom muttered something then, quickly answered by Robin, but Inigo didn’t have time to make sense of their words before he found himself plastered against the dragon’s back once more.

Just what had sent him there, he couldn’t quite be sure—a spasm went through him as he tried to sit up again, not at all unlike the aftermath of catching a particularly nasty Thunder spell but for the fact that it didn’t end. Finally managing to lift his head, Inigo found he was far from the only one with such an issue.

With a groan and a heaving breath, Chrom managed to pull himself into a half-seated position.
“Wh-what… what manner of magic…”

“Magic?” Basilio barked, and a long moment passed before he spoke again. “That was a… damned… catastrophe…”

Entirely unaffected, the avatar strolled forward, finally pausing just before her double. “And so it ends, Robin. See how frail these human bonds of yours are? How short lived? How pointless? You have all thrown your lives away, and the result is the same!”

Peering upwards, Robin spat, “We’re not dead yet!”

“Details, details,” the avatar replied, waving her hand absently before letting out a sigh. “But yes, I suppose it’s time I got you all off my back, so to speak. Permanently.” A cruel smirk twisted her features. “No, you don’t want this, do you?” she cooed to her younger self. “You do have a choice, you know. It doesn’t have to be this way. You can still save all your friends… Become one with me, and we shall spare their lives.” A beat passed. “Refuse, and watch as I rend their flesh from their bones!”

For a moment, Inigo could just catch a glimpse of their tactician’s torn expression. “I…”

“No, Robin!” Chrom said, then broke off with a wheezing cough. “Don’t… do it…”

The avatar ignored him, though, clapping her hands together. “Now! I will have your decision. Will you save these… worms? Will you join me and become a god?”

“…Do you think me a fool?” Robin said lowly. “You’ll kill them anyway!”

The avatar sighed. “…Well, of course I would. I only thought you might want to leave your comrades with a heroic, selfless image. But so be it! Leave them with the final memory you were their undoing!”

Without further word, but for a cry from Robin herself, they both vanished.

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When Robin opened her eyes once more, she found it made little difference. Blackness surrounded her—walls, sky, and ground—interrupted only by her broken reflection.

“…Where am I?” she managed, though her mouth felt almost too dry to form the words.

“Where your god wills you to be,” the avatar replied. “Now if you will excuse me… I have come fleas on my back to take care of.”

The distorted image of her own self turned away just as Robin managed to scramble back to her feet. “No! I won’t let you!”

“You still dare resist me?” the avatar demanded, spinning back. “Then perhaps I should end you first!”

Without so much as a tome to channel through, a blast of purple fire burst open at point-blank range.
The world fell into a sea of black, and yet awareness never left.

The last five years—the years that had been Robin’s life, truly, for what had come before mattered little now—zipped through her head in a matter of moments, from *There are better places to take a nap than on the ground, you know*, through the agonies of the last battle that laid behind them mere moments ago.

“Right!” she could almost hear. “First we return Grima to his sleep of eons, then we find my hallowed tome, then we return to Ylisstol and tell the sweet Ophelia how her illustrious parents helped save the world. It is a plan indeed, my bride!”

And back she went—to the stormy night of Ophelia’s birth and Owain’s disbelieving “Daughter?” to the hot springs of Chon’sin, and “I’ll keep your memories safe. I’ll stay by your side, memorizing each and every one.” Back further still to the backwoods of Valm with an incredulous “You like my face?”

“You are the hero, Robin, and I am the mere mortal who is left standing in your shadow, gazing up at greatness I could never hope to attain.”

I’m sorry, she wanted to say, though her cracked lips didn’t move and Owain wouldn’t have heard her even if they had.

She had no final strategy. No cards left to play.

“...ve to…. ...ack!”

_Huh?

“Yo… ha… fi… back! ...ghting!”

Was that a voice?

“Fight ba…! ...have to keep… ...ing! Fight back, Robin! You swore to do so, remember? Now keep your damn word!”

“C-Chrom?” Robin finally managed, lifting her head. “Chrom! Chrom, I can hear you!”

“What?” the avatar said. “No! You are mine now! The dragon’s grip cannot be broken!”

In contrast to Grima’s words, though, another voice broke through. “I know it would take more than this to stop you, milady!”

*Frederick!*

And a third, slightly stuttering but immediately recognizable. “A-answer us, Robin!”

*Lon’qu!*

“On your feet, soldier!” came Vaike. “Don’t make ol’ Teach give ya a lecture!”

“Up and at ‘em, Bubbles!” said Gaius. “One dragon ought to be a piece of cake!”

“Get up right this instant, or suffer a swift smack of my parasol!” Maribelle cried.

Henry’s familiar laugh preceded his words. “I know the darkness is warm and delicious… but too much of a good thing is just as bad!”
“If you don’t come back, I’m never going to forgive you!” Severa threatened.

“This is a test,” Kjelle put in, “and by the gods, you’re gonna pass it!”

“Come on!” Cynthia cheered. “You can do this! You need to fight with us!”

“Pull it together, lass! Death is overrated, believe me!” said Basilio.

“It is inconceivable that our rollicking adventures might end at this juncture,” Laurent said, so clearly Robin could picture him pushing his glasses up his nose as he spoke.

The next voice was softer but just as genuine. “You have earned my trust, Robin,” Lucina whispered. “Now return to us!”

A long pause came before she heard Inigo, his tone laced with guilt. “I can think of nothing worse than dying alone,” he murmured. “...No, seriously, I can’t.”

And, finally, one more came.

“Heed not the dark’s eerie call, my love,” Owain said. “Summon forth the strength inside you!”

With that last assurance, Robin surged back to her feet. “I can hear them! I hear my friends!”

“Stop this at once!” the avatar cried, a note of genuine panic seeming to come to her voice. “Silence those wretched voices! You are all powerless! Frail! Insignificant! You are nothing!”

“Return to us, Robin!” Chrom bade once more. “Your bond with us is stronger than even the Fell Dragon’s might!”

“Chrom!” she cried back as the black around her began to fade to gray, then white. “I’m coming, Chrom! Hold on!”

Between one blink and the next, even the white faded into the landscape of the Fell Dragon’s back.

No sooner had Robin’s vision cleared did another light shine, this one not quite as blinding. “Children of man, take my power!” said Naga, her proximity to Grima leaving her form even more ethereal than usual. “Rise, now, and face the Fell Dragon!”

As soon as the goddess spoke, the avatar blinked into existence once more, her face twisted with scorn as she took her place on the nape of the dragon’s neck. “Come, then! Return to me, for we are one and the same!”

Robin didn’t bother to answer, merely glancing out over the assembled Shepherds until she had caught the eyes of the two she sought the most. Owain had nothing less than unrepentant relief written across his face, but it was Inigo’s gaze she truly looked for.

Despite the distress in his expression, he met her eyes and gave one tiny, bitter nod.

Without another moment to dawdle, she turned back to the avatar. “Come on, Chrom! I’ll cover you!”

Chrom shot her a grin, lifted Falchion, and roused their Shepherds with one final call. “As one!”
Robin wasn’t sure what point in the battle, exactly, the tears in her eyes had spilled over her cheeks; but at some point they had, and now she wiped her coat sleeve across her face between spells in some attempt to clear her vision.

Between the spots in her vision, she saw Chrom dart through the opening she’d left him, Falchion held aloft.

The avatar raised her hand to strike while the dragon twisted backward, mouth opening with an ear-shattering roar. Still, Robin could see her counterpart’s lips move in time to fire off a spell that met the avatar’s own in midair with a rocking explosion.

Her ears stopped ringing just as the avatar staggered back from the blast, just in time to hear Chrom call back to her as he surged forward.

“Now, Robin! This is our chance! I’m going to finish it!”

A heartbeat passed.

“Wind,” she murmured, and aimed the spell at Chrom.

It hit just as his leading foot touched the ground, only enough force to send him off-balance and a handful of steps sideways. It gave her the room to maneuver, though, the space to step into the spot he’d occupied.

“...Robin?” Chrom said, in a tone that said he didn’t quite seem to comprehend what he was seeing. “Wait, what—”

“What... what are you doing?” demanded Grima.

Whatever Robin had expected to come out of her mouth, a perfectly even voice hadn’t been it, yet the words that escaped her lips were quiet and measured. “For once,” she began, “I’m glad you and I are the same. Now I can give my life to protect those I care for.”

Panic.

True, genuine fear sparked in the eyes of a god.

“You would not dare!”

“I would and I will. The evils you would visit on this world are unthinkable. Perhaps I would not live to see it... nor my daughter, or her children... but someday they would. And I cannot allow that. And in some way, I—we share the blame. It’s only right that we meet our end together.”

“No... NO!”

“THORON!”

When the white in Robin’s vision had cleared, the Fell Dragon’s head had fallen limp, wings still, body in a free-fall so fast that perhaps only magic was keeping their feet planted. Grima’s avatar, too, had begun to fade, torso already see-through and limbs nonexistent.

“Robin! No!”

Chrom staggered forward, then, reaching for her shoulders.
His hands passed through her.

Robin supposed, then, fighting back the hysteria bubbling up in her throat, that there was no turning back now.

“Thank you, Chrom,” she still managed to whisper. “For… everything. Tell the others… my last thoughts were of them…” Her breath hitched. “And I love… love you all…”

Her eyelids were suddenly too heavy to keep open.

_May we meet again_, she thought, unsure if the words actually made it past her lips, _in a better life._

“Robin!” Chrom shouted again, his words growing fainter by the moment. “No! Ah, gods, _no!”_”

Another voice came, too far to be Chrom, too near to be from whatever awaited her on the other side. “ROBIN!”

_I’m sorry, Owain._

_I’m sorry…_

And then there was nothing.
The Vision We've Lost (Part 8) Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

I've been looking for a way to bring you back to life
And if I could find a way then I would bring you back tonight
I'd make you look, I'd make you lie, I'd take the coldness from your eyes
But you told me, if you loved me, let it die
And you left me more dead than you’ll ever know, when you left me alone...

Chapter Notes

Soundtrack is finally up to date, and I would really, HIGHLY recommend checking out the main song for this chapter, because boy does it make it even worse.

Between one heartbeat and the next—somewhere between a swing of the sword and Grima’s bone-rattling death keen—Inigo knew.

It took Owain a moment longer.

Still he turned, two seconds too late to change anything, and the look emblazoned upon his features never quite would leave Inigo’s memory.

“ROBIN!”

Though the moment was passed, never to return, Owain still sprung forward as if he could hope to undo the inevitable.

Fatalistic preparation had served Inigo well, though, and Owain had scarcely made it two strides before his cousin all but came down on top of him.

“Let go —Inigo let go of me—”

Can’t, won’t, and promised all rose to Inigo’s lips and subsequently died, drowned out by another frantic call of “Robin!” just before Owain’s elbow unceremoniously collided with Inigo’s face.

A muffled curse escaped Inigo as he was forced to relinquish his hold and stagger back. When he could focus his gaze once more, ignoring the ringing in his ears, the aerial landscape above the Fell Dragon’s corpse had faded back into the rocky ground of Origin Peak.

Whether it was from the abrupt scenery shift or the sudden dislodging of his cousin was impossible to tell, but Owain finally froze, gaze fixed to the point on the horizon Robin would have been had she not vanished before them.

“No,” he finally whispered, the word little more than a squeak. “No, no, no—she wouldn’t—she promised—”
After a painfully long moment, though, Owain sucked in a deep breath and, startlingly enough, seemed to center himself.

“Okay,” he said, mostly to himself. “She wouldn’t have… if she knew she wouldn’t… so she must have found a way to come back.”

Inigo sniffed, absentmindedly wiping away the blood dripping from his nose while he tried to figure out if it was better to tell his cousin the truth or let him come to the conclusion on his own. Before he could get the words out for either option, though, Owain spun back.

“Right?” he said, his gaze locked on Chrom. “She must’ve— and didn’t have time to tell us—so we have to go find her!”

His voice hung for a long moment.

“...Right?” Owain whispered again, the harsh, plaintive syllable hanging in midair.

Chrom finally seemed to come back to his senses, taking in a deep breath before scrubbing a hand over his face. “Right,” he echoed flatly. Then, with a little more life, “Right! Shepherds, those of you who are still able-bodied—”

Owain didn’t wait for him to finish the sentence, turning on his heel and darting down the coastline of Origin Peak.

“Wait!” Inigo called after him, sending a harried glance between his cousin and the rest of the group. “Dammit, Owain, just—”

Upon realizing Owain was liable to completely ignoring just about anything at that moment, Inigo let out a sound that was somewhere between a growl and a sigh and forced his tired limbs back into motion.

“Owain,” he repeated breathlessly once he’s caught up to his cousin’s harried pace. “Can you just wait for one second—”

“I can’t wait!” Owain burst out, still pushing forward even as his feet scrabbled over the rocky shoreline. “Inigo, what if she’s hurt, what if she’s—”

Inigo let out another quiet sigh and realized there was no point trying to tell Owain the truth when, at that moment, it seemed his brain was simply refusing to accept that alternative.

So Inigo followed.

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They carved a seemingly nonsensical path over the island, mostly in silence but for when Owain would pause, call for Robin, and perhaps dart off to search some dark cranny in the echoing wake.

Doggedly, Inigo trailed after and tried not to think. Unfortunately, he seemed to be failing rather spectacularly at the latter.

Despite the pounding ache in his head, no tears had fallen from his eyes. Whether the reality hadn’t truly set in yet or if his heart was simply too tired to feel anything but numb, he didn’t know.
Of the choices he’d made that day, he really hadn’t a clue which was the worst.

Had it been blind optimism, he wondered, or merely cowardice that had let him send Say’ri away in what had almost undoubtedly been her final moments? In another world—one where she was healable—he could have risked such an action, but in reality, he could only wonder if he’d simply been too afraid to watch her die.

Some fragment of hope still welled in his chest, too small to do him much good. They had spent the better part of an hour on Grima’s back when Say’ri had been looking at minutes at best. The math, quite simply, didn’t add up.

At some point, he supposed, the numbness would inevitably give way to agony. Just where he’d go from there, he didn’t know.

As the sun began to creep lower on the horizon, Inigo finally ventured, “It’s going to start getting dark soon.”

Owain didn’t answer.

“We ought to head back,” Inigo tried again. “We’re not equipped to keep looking after sundown.”

Still no answer.

Inigo bit back a sigh, scrubbing a hand through his hair. He couldn’t exactly blame his cousin—Naga knew he’d be doing the same if their positions were reversed—but he was tired, and hungry, Owain wasn’t the only one with a gaping hole in his heart, and all Inigo really wanted in that moment was the space to grieve in peace.

“Look,” he finally said. “If you want to keep wandering around in the dark then go right ahead, but I’m going to legitimately pass out if I don’t get something to eat soon so at least promise you’ll drag my sorry behind back to camp when that happens, all right?”

Owain finally turned, a painfully blank expression on his shadowed face. Inigo buried a wince at the belated realization of just how harsh his words had been.

“Hey,” he said, forcing a pained fraction of a smile to his face. “Maybe someone else has found her by now, yeah?”

A glimmer of hope came to Owain’s face that only succeeded in tripling the weight of the guilt hanging off Inigo’s shoulders. “Yeah,” he said, already turning back toward camp. “Yeah, maybe —”

Inigo didn’t mention the fact that surely if that were the case they would have gotten word by pegasus within minutes, and followed once more.

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Surprisingly enough, Severa was the first to greet them. “Gawds, you two look worse than the day we got lost in that swamp.”

“We agreed never to mention the swamp,” Owain said dully, with none of the vehemence that
statement usually warranted. Quickly, he added, “Has anyone—”

Severa cut him off with a quick shake of her head. “Not yet. Chrom and a couple others are still out looking, but...” She trailed off when his melancholic expression fell even further. “Hey,” she said, her tone shockingly gentle as she exchanged a wary glance with Inigo, then looked back to Owain. “Your mom was looking for you, actually.”

Something in her posture told Inigo *Take a break*, and he let out a grateful half nod for even a temporary relief from his cousin’s gloom, if only for an hour to begin sorting out his own.

“Really?” Owain said, perking up slightly as if Lissa would bestow some unforeseen secret upon him. As Severa took him by the elbow, Inigo took the chance to duck in the opposite direction.

Owain, surely, would not be left alone that night.

Inigo, on the other hand, wanted nothing else.

Someone—and Naga bless whoever they had been, he thought fervently—had taken the liberty of setting up tents, and he wandered through the camp until he found his own. Still no tears, though, as he paused just inside and gazed at the two packs sitting innocently in the center.

The compartmentalization he’d forced himself into, though, didn’t seem to break even when there was no longer a matter of life and death at stake. He let out another, quiet sigh and started a search for clean clothes.

One hasty scrub of the grit from his body—it was far too cold for a proper bath—and a change of attire later, he yet stood motionless and unfeeling once more.

They had won, he realized, quite possibly for the first time that day and with a force that nearly drove him to his knees. Grima was well and truly dead, never to rise again, their future secured for those to come.

*But at what cost?*

A second question, more open-ended, stalked at the heels of the first.

*Now what?*

Inigo did his best to ignore those thoughts, finally shrugging into his coat and pulling the hood low over his head in some attempt to abate the questions and condolences that would undoubtedly await him in the outside world. For the moment, what he needed was closure; one last glimpse, one final goodbye to that which he had managed to love and lose before he began stumbling blindly forward into whatever lay ahead of him.

(*Closure, he thought, being the one thing he might have that his cousin would never be afforded.*)

Unlike the usual sprawling tent, this time the healers had commandeered the even larger space of one of the surviving ships. Inigo was torn between alarm at the sheer volume and the realization that this might be the last time for the foreseeable future he’d be worrying about the fallout from a battle.

At long last, navigating through the maze and luckily avoiding the attention of any of the Shepherds’ healers, he found himself in a room that was little more than a closet, covered in wood on all sides and the floor swaying ever-so-slightly beneath his feet from the waves below.
A single, pale form occupied the cot in the center, and still Inigo did not break at the sight of her.

“Say’ri,” he breathed, almost wishing for the terror and the sobbing that had come with the last time he thought her dead. Even that would have been better than the quiet, pulsing ache that pervaded his limbs with the only sensation he could feel.

He thought to apologize, or to beg for her return, even knowing that neither option would do either of them any good. What he did do was cross the narrow space between them, unable to help stretching a hand out, fingertips brushing her hair with quiet reverence.

“My love,” he whispered, and that time the words did catch in his throat, just for the barest of moments. He smoothed his hand over her forehead, trailing down to rest on her shoulder before his lips moved to follow in its wake.

Without warning, her hand reached up to catch his, and Inigo very nearly died himself.

Bent over her as he had been, he had nothing resembling balance at the involuntary jerk he gave. Despite his best efforts—and with a squeak that came closer to a shriek—he found himself sprawled momentarily on the floor.

He ignored the bruises to both his rear and his pride, though, eyes drawn helplessly to meet a warm gaze that held exhaustion and amusement in equal measure. “Ah,” Say’ri said, her voice harsh but lilting. “An excellent impression of a seven-year-old girl, if that happened to be your intent.”

With a watery laugh that almost ended in more of a bray, Inigo said, “If you outlive me it’s because you took ten years off my life just now.”

Say’ri hummed thoughtfully, her tone dry when she spoke again. “I did not realize I looked quite that frightful, but aye then.”

“I thought you were dead.” The words came out as a plaintive whisper, and now tears began to gather in the corners of his eyes, relief washing over him with a strength that would have brought him to the ground had he not been there already. “I thought… I… Say’ri.”

Whether the burden of his relief outweighed that of his grief or whether the latter had simply laid the path ahead of the former, Inigo didn’t know, but the dam finally broke, driving him back up and into her arms with the first sob of many.

Say’ri spoke when he finally quieted, having abandoned his shoes in favor of all but crawling onto the narrow cot with her. “I take it we won, then.”

Inigo nodded against her shoulder, still sniffling.

Finally, she added with a murmur, “And how?”

He swallowed, only managing “Robin—” before he had to cut himself off and try again. “…Robin—she—”

“Sacrificed herself.” Her words were soft but final. “Didn’t she?”

Another nod.

In a tone tinged with heartbreak, Say’ri whispered, “I thought she might.” Shifting back so she might fix her gaze with Inigo’s, she added, “And what of your cousin?”
Inigo shook his head, lips drawn into a thin line as he shot a glance at the ceiling. “I don’t think he…” he began. “I don’t think he believes it.”

A long moment passed before she said, “Mayhap she’ll come back.”

Oh, how he wanted to believe that—how he wanted to think that Robin might be afforded the same miracle as Say’ri, that Inigo might hope to be absolved of the mantle of guilt hanging off his shoulders and be spared the empty, haunted look he feared Owain’s eyes might well carry for the rest of his life. “Maybe,” Inigo said softly, the lone word without conviction. “I should probably —” he started again, before breaking off and rubbing the back of his neck. “I might go stay with him tonight. If you’re okay.”

“Aye,” she said. “I cannot imagine I’ll be spending the night anywhere other than here, anyway.”

Inigo’s breath hitched, shifting to press his hands to her cheeks. “You are okay, aren’t you?” he asked seriously, his gaze fixed on hers.

Say’ri’s eyes fluttered shut, a soft sigh escaping her before she said, “Aye. Barely, but aye.”

“You’re sure?” At her nod, he added, “What happened?”

She took in a deep breath, saying, “Mayhap… under especially dire circumstances, a certain healer who had himself grown up under dire circumstances might have been willing to engage in more unorthodox methods of healing.” Her eyes flicking back open, she continued, “Such as cauterizing an open wound the old-fashioned way and praying it bought enough time to break the hex that he might heal that wound.”

Inigo blinked, pausing for a moment before he realized that the old-fashioned way, in all likelihood, would translate to with fire. “Gods, love,” he whispered. “Well, I suppose between this and what I learned this morning I owe Brady a really spectacular birthday present, don’t I?”

“This morning?” Say’ri asked blankly, leaving Inigo to realize both how long ago this morning had been and that she hadn’t yet had the chance to learn of his and Lucina’s discussion with Naga.

He shook his head. “Story for another day.” After a moment, he said, “I’m sorry. I—if I could have —”

“I am alive, Inigo,” she said, catching his hand again. “That is what matters.” She paused, then added, “And it is more than can be said of some today.”

Inigo nodded, let out a shuddering breath, and realized he had no answer for that.

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When he made it to Owain’s tent, he found ‘guard duty’ seemed to have been turned to Cynthia, who was sitting on the ground just outside the tent with her left arm in a sling.

“Hey,” Inigo said in a low tone, trying to keep his voice from carrying through the thin layer of canvas that was all that stood between himself and his cousin. “You all right, Cyn?”

She nodded, pigtails bouncing as she awkwardly attempted to scramble to her feet until Inigo
offered his hand and managed to haul her up with her good arm. “Yeah,” Cynthia said, mirroring his prior volume. “I didn’t… I mean, I didn’t want to leave him alone, but I thought I might be smothering—”

“It’s all right,” Inigo said, casting a sidelong glance at the tent flap and dropping his voice even further. “I’m going to stay with him tonight. Go get some rest, all right?”

With that, he ducked inside.

It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the dark enough to make out any more than the barest outline of Owain’s huddled form. When they finally did—revealing his head buried in his knees and his arms wrapped around his calves—Inigo almost wished he still couldn’t see.

Just because his world had abruptly re-righted itself, he realized, didn’t mean Owain’s had.

Or ever would.

“Hey there, old friend,” Inigo said aloud, crossing the space between them with ginger steps.

Owain didn’t so much as twitch.

“You’re not asleep, are you?” Inigo added softly, crouching down.

He got the barest shake of a head at that.

Wordlessly, Inigo dropped to the ground to sit beside his cousin, just close enough to press their shoulders together, praying he had a fraction of the intuition Owain had always shown during Inigo’s darkest moments.

It could have been a minute or an hour before Owain reached up to scrub a hand through his hair, speaking but not straightening. “She promised,” he finally said, the words hollow. “She promised me she wouldn’t…”

He trailed off, as if Inigo ought to have something to say that might fix everything. When he didn’t, Owain glanced up at long last, his eyes shadowed and bloodshot.

Even I’m sorry stuck and died in Inigo’s throat.

Owain dropped his head to his cousin’s shoulder, and wept.
The Vision We've Lost (Part 8) Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

The future’s headed for the past, full of sparks that couldn’t last
So hard to find this place, so hard to catch that flame
Now that you fell into me, hit me like a melody
Everybody says that nothing ever lasts forever
So I’m hanging on tight trying to keep it all tied together
How do we make this heart beat on and on?

It took them a week to make it back to Ylisstol. No sooner had they arrived, though, had Chrom and Owain immediately departed for Southtown, in hopes that perhaps Robin had appeared in the same field she had been found in so long ago.

Their trip might have been a little less alarming had they deigned to tell anyone before they departed.

One panicked retrieval mission later—with the sheepish admissions that they both thought the other had taken care of the whole ‘informing everyone about their plans’ aspect, a handful of Shepherds had made the trip to where it all began.

They had returned empty-handed. And when they had, Owain had retreated to his room, and had thus remained for no less than a solid forty-eight hours. As far as Inigo knew, his cousin hadn’t even bothered to visit Ophelia.

Perhaps hadn’t bothered was too strong of a word, given the circumstances, he thought. But on the other hand…

Ophelia, it seemed, had already lost one parent, and he was going to be damned if she lost the other.

Trying to figure out just how he was going to accomplish that left Inigo staring at his empty plate for far longer than he needed to, slightly slouched in his chair as he pondered. He’d ended up in one of the smaller, more casual dining rooms the palace offered for meals that didn’t involve state functions or other formalities, and he’d risen late enough that morning that he’d had the room entirely to himself. He’d left Owain alone for the past few days, too caught up in his own guilt, grief, and lingering thoughts of Now what? as the realization that his entire life goal from the past twelve years and two timelines had, inconceivably, been accomplished.

He’d woken that morning with the resigned thought that he’d procrastinated long enough, and that something had to be done, yet there he sat rearranging the last few crumbs of his breakfast with the tines of his fork and wishing the task ahead hadn’t fallen to him.

The door opened slightly, jerking Inigo from his introspection. “Hello?” he said, half-rising from his seat in an attempt to glimpse the arrival past the door swinging in the wrong direction.

He needn’t have made the effort, though, because a moment later Gerome appeared in the opening. For once, he had no armor, wearing only the simplest of white shirts and dark pants, though his
omnipresent mask was still in its traditional place. “Good,” he said, his tone slightly grudging. “It’s you.”

“What’s up?” Inigo asked, forcing the words to be light as he got to his feet.

Gerome held out a small wooden box, perhaps half the size of an especially thick novel. “This just arrived,” he said flatly. “Since Owain is currently… secluded… I thought perhaps your hands would be the next best place for it.”

Puzzled, Inigo took the extended offering, then felt his heart drop at the small tag hanging off the side of it, emblazoned with an unfamiliar but easily recognizable brand of a jewelry store in Ylisstol. “Their rings,” he breathed, the words rasping at his throat.

He dared not actually open the box, afraid of sullying the wedding rings Owain had spent a year and a half saving for, only to have them arrive at what might qualify as the worst possible point in time.

“Do you think I should even give them to him?” Inigo wondered, not sure if he was actually looking for an answer on whether the mere presence of the box in his hand would do more harm than good.

Surprisingly enough, though, Gerome answered after a moment. “Considering I doubt you would actually value my opinion on the matter, I have no cause to actually voice it.”

Inigo glanced back up, only to find Gerome already turning on his heel. “Hey, wait.”

Gerome didn’t answer, but he did pause.

Inigo rubbed at the back of his neck, weighing his words for a moment before he spoke. “I never thanked you,” he finally murmured. “For what you did. In the battle. With Say’ri. You… you saved her life. And that means a lot. To both of us. So… thank you.”

A long moment passed. “Well,” Gerome finally said, glancing back. “After personally meeting the last woman you thought to couple yourself with, I thought the sheer blind luck you had with your current partner was unlikely to be repeated and I ought to spare us all from who you next thought to bring along.”

Inigo couldn’t help but let out a bark of laughter at that. “Glad to know my checkered romantic past did so much good. I’ll have to remember that for the next time I get in trouble about it.”

Another silence descended, during which Inigo thought back, dryly, to his learning of the fact that Nalia had taken the chaos of the battle to make her escape into the unknown, and decided he honestly didn’t care too much where she ended up. With any luck, their paths might never cross again.

“Hey,” Inigo finally said again. “I know we haven’t always gotten along. Or… ever gotten along, really. But I do owe you. And, well, I’m guessing one day Lucina will get fed up and bash our heads together if we can’t at least pretend civility, and we both know how much fun that would not be, so…” He stuck a hand out. “Truce?”

Gerome didn’t move immediately, and when he finally did it was to let out a sigh. “I suppose, with all that we have managed to change in this world, one more change cannot hurt.” He grasped Inigo’s hand, giving two firm shakes before adding, “But never ask me to be your ‘wingman’ again.”
“Fair call.” Inigo grinned. “I’d say take care of my sister, but I’m sure she’d rough you up worse than I ever could if you didn’t, so…”

Gerome snorted, though shockingly enough the sound seemed almost amused. “You speak as though that isn’t a painfully low benchmark to begin with.”

“Hey now, I’m currently the one in possession of the divine blade of legend that happens to be over a thousand years old, if you care to remember. Also, Gerome, was that sarcasm? Have I been rubbing off on you? That’s incredibly impressive.”

“No,” the wyvern rider said flatly, though somehow there still seemed to be the tiniest edge of mirth to his words. “It was intended as a genuine insult.”

“Mmhmm. I’m sure it was. Well, whatever you tell yourself that helps you sleep at night.” Inigo’s lilting tone faded, however, as he glanced once more at the box in his hands, his mood dropping and his voice mirroring it. “I suppose I should… take care of this,” he finally said.

“Indeed.”

He looked up again, then said, “And seriously. Thank you. I owe you one.”

“Please do not mention any more about the matter,” Gerome said with a sigh. “The thought you of ‘owing’ me anything is nearly as terrifying as the reverse.”

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In the end, Inigo did take the rings—as well as the other, far more damning possession of Owain’s he’d been keeping track of. Once he’d made it up to his cousin’s room, he set both of them on Robin’s desk—or the desk that had once been Robin’s, he thought with a pang—then doubled back and got the door rather than risk upsetting the tray in his other hand.

The room was painfully dark, so much that Inigo could hardly make out anything besides an Owain-shaped lump under the blankets. “Hey,” he said after a long moment of letting his eyes adjust, making the haphazard guess that his cousin probably wasn’t actually sleeping. “Brought you lunch.”

Another silence descended, finally broken by a mumbled “‘M not hungry.”

“So I’ve heard,” Inigo replied, forcing a note of cheer into his tone as he crossed the room. “Which is why I happen to be under orders from a certain lovely aunt of mine to make sure you eat something, lest she take such matters into her own hands.” When he got no answer, Inigo sighed. “C’mon, Owain, we both know your mother. I’m the nicer alternative here.”

Even now, he half-expected Owain to immediately launch into a spiel about such a ‘nicer alternative;’ Inigo had given him such an easy opening to start poking fun at him, after all. Yet his cousin didn’t rise to the bait.

Inigo thought that fact might have been the most alarming of all.

“Well,” he said, once more forcing his voice bright. “If you’re not eating, have you learned how to photosynthesize? Because you’re definitely not going to have much luck with that in here. Also,
it’s freezing.”

With that, he set down the tray, moving to the nearest window and throwing back the curtains. “Inigo,” Owain whined, curling tighter under the covers—though not without sending his cousin a petulant look.

“Seriously,” Inigo continued as if he hadn’t heard, moving to the next window. “I think the winter we spent in Chon’sin was warmer than this room. Except the week that Gaius proposed, maybe. Are you going to help me get a fire going or are you just going to sit there?”

Evidently, from the dirty look his cousin continued to shoot him, the answer was the latter.

“All right, fine, I’ll just single-handedly save you from hypothermia, no need to thank me.”

Finally, Owain sat up, leaning back against the headboard with his arms resting on his knees. “What are you doing?” he asked with a sigh.

“Single-handedly saving you from hypothermia, aren’t you listening?” Inigo said. “Or at least I will be once I can see. Goodness, that’s better.” He paused at the last window, hands on his hips as he surveyed his handiwork.

Owain sighed again, sinking deeper back under the covers as his words came haltingly. “I… appreciate… that you…” He trailed off. “But I really, honestly just want to be left alone.”

*I’m sure you do,* Inigo thought, hoping he didn’t let on just how much that thought terrified him. Instead of voicing that, though, he turned back toward his cousin and said flatly, “Your daughter misses you.”

The way Owain straightened left Inigo wondering if anyone had even dared mention Ophelia’s existence since their return. “Do four-month-olds have a concept of missing people?” Owain finally asked, carefully.

“Considering her nurse has informed me she’s cried more in the last two weeks than the entire rest of her life combined, I’m going to guess yes,” Inigo replied.

There was a pause before Owain answered, “Then I imagine it more likely that she misses her mother.”

“Don’t you dare try to shirk this,” Inigo said, surprising himself with just how hotly the words came out. “Don’t you *dare.***

Owain finally sat up properly, the circles under his eyes and the shadow along his jaw showing clearer now that the room had some light to it. “What are you—”

“Don’t,” Inigo said, the word coming on a ragged breath he was forced to catch before he could speak again. “You are all she has left. Okay? Don’t just… just sit up here and forget that.”

When another moment passed without a response, Inigo found himself speaking again before he even fully realized just why the situation had hit him so hard.

“Do you remember,” he said, rather hoarsely, “what happened to my mother?” Even now, knowing Olivia was alive and well a handful of rooms away from him, the memory of his nine-year-old self watching her health fail ever-so-slowly in the wake of his father’s death left him shuddering.

“There was a Risen—” Owain began, rather blankly, before Inigo cut him off.
“It wasn’t the Risen, Owain. It was never the Risen.” Inigo did his best to ignore the sudden burning in his eyes, then finished, “Anything you want. Anything you need. I will be there. Just please don’t… don’t make me go through that again. And don’t make her go through that.” He forced a wobbly smile, then added, “The gates of hell will tremble at my wrath, remember?”

“…At your whining,” Owain corrected, which was quite possibly the closest thing he’d made to a joke since Origin Peak.

“If I’ve gotta do what I’ve gotta do…” Inigo said, then cleared his throat. “Right. As I’ve already mentioned, this is all a moot point with the whole hypothermia risk at the moment, so…”

His heart eased for a moment, only to clamp tight again as he forced his eyes away from Robin’s desk.

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Lucina had not quite expected to be the one placed in charge of Ophelia’s ascent to her father, but it turned out that even now her cousin’s child was still a quieter baby than her own son had been, and she couldn’t bring herself to complain about it.

Ophelia’s nurse had sent her along contented—fed, changed, and in all probability a few minutes away from a nap. Not that such a thing didn’t make sense, but it still rang oddly when Lucina thought of the fact that Ophelia hadn’t even had a nurse until her parents had abruptly left for Plegia. Now, it was almost as if she had to be prepared to see her own father.

Pushing that thought aside, Lucina shifted Ophelia more firmly to one side, raising her other hand to knock on the door. She got no answer, and tried again; a moment later, she reached for the doorknob and found it twisted easily under her hand.

Owain was actually up and dressed now, an improvement from what she’d heard from Inigo earlier, though he was in dire need of a shave and the hair on top of his head had been overdue for a trim since before they’d even left for Plegia—now, it was beginning to show thick curls reminiscent of his mother’s.

His expression, though, was the most alarming part of the picture: oddly vacant, not at all like the distant look he sometimes got when he was so deep into whatever fantasy of his that occupied him he seemed to be thinking too many thoughts at once. Now, it seemed more like he wasn’t thinking any thoughts.

He did glance up sharply, though the movement was a few seconds delayed. “Oh,” Owain said. “Hi.”

“Hello,” Lucina said, followed by a squall from Ophelia.

Owain’s face seemed to grow even more unreadable at that, swirling into an odd mix of bitterness and affection that finally culminated in a soft, “Hello, tiny heroine.”

Ophelia babbled in return, her formerly sleepy eyes suddenly wide and bright.

Slowly, Owain rose from his perch on the side of his bed, his manner almost trance-like as he closed the distance and reached for his daughter. Lucina obliged, handing her over and taking a
step back as Owain shifted the baby to his shoulder, resting his cheek against Ophelia’s silky wisps of golden hair.

He murmured something Lucina couldn’t make it, and she cleared her throat for want of something to do. “Oh,” she said mildly, turning away from the show of emotion and finding her attention landing on Robin’s desk. “You found your spellbook, then.”

It took a moment for Owain to respond and she kicked herself for even opening her mouth. “No,” her cousin finally said. “I still haven’t…? Oh.” He stepped over to the desk, still bouncing Ophelia slightly, his lips pulling into a frown as he caught sight of said spellbook laying quite innocently on the wood. “That’s odd.”

“Did you leave it here the whole time?” Lucina asked, fighting back an inappropriate snort of laughter. Trust him to have forgotten it in Ylisstol.

Owain paused, then shook his head. “No, I couldn’t have. I had it when we were in Plegia, and on Mount Prism. It was only right before…” He trailed off, Origin Peak hanging unspoken. “…that it went missing,” he finished softly. “But then how is it…?” He shifted Ophelia again, sliding his free hand down the cover before turning open the thick leather binding, oddly propped open as if it held more than it ought to have.

Greeting him was a stack of thin, off-white parchment, separate from the tome’s own pages.

Owain stared at them for a moment, then worked to untie the loop of ribbon binding them. Letters. The first was marked simply Owain, the rest all addressed to Ophelia, though each of those had a number after it.

“Is that…?” Lucina whispered.

“It’s her handwriting,” Owain replied in a strangled voice, seemingly unable to even so much as voice the name Robin. “But I don’t… are these for her birthdays?” he asked aloud, holding up the last letter, dubbed Ophelia—18.

“…Maybe?” Lucina ventured, peering over them herself. “But then how did they get here?”

All at once, Owain’s expression hardened, some realization catching up to him that she hadn’t quite made yet. “Take her, would you?” he said flatly, once more adjusting Ophelia. “I have to go.”

“Yes,” Lucina answered automatically, arms held out for her second cousin once more. “But what are you—”

Owain glanced back, giving her another look so cold it nearly made her shiver, and spoke only one word.

“Inigo.”
Inigo was alone.

Owain didn’t know where Say’ri happened to be at that moment and he did not especially care. Some small part of him recognized it was probably a good thing, her absence, but it didn’t make much impact on the rest of his conscious thought.

Inigo was alone in his room, and he jumped when Owain had come in without knocking, and now he was pasting on a smile that was brittle and so dammingly fake.

“Hey,” he said through that sham of a grin, looking for all the world like the same cousin who had watched his back since they had been too young to understand life’s cruelties. “You’re up. Good to see.”

Owain did not answer for a long moment. Inigo’s smile slipped, just the tiniest bit, the faintest glimmer of panic showing in his eyes.

“You knew,” Owain finally whispered. “You dastard, you knew.”

This time, it was Inigo who didn’t speak.

“Because you’re the only one who could have put it in my room, aren’t you?” Owain continued, the words almost conversational except for the vitriol with which they were spoken. “Which means you’ve had it the whole time, haven’t you? Since—” He spat the last two words, “Mount Prism.”

Finally, Inigo had the decency to let his expression fade into genuine apology. “Yes,” he whispered hoarsely. “She gave it to me the night we spent there. For safekeeping. She was afraid that… when she… you might do something rash.”

“Yes I would have done something rash!”

Inigo flinched at the outburst, turning his gaze to the ground. “I tried to talk her out of it, gods, you have to know I tried—”

“You tried?” Owain demanded. “You’re going to admit to me that you knew what she was going to do and all you can do is stand there and say that you tried, Inigo?”

“What else was I supposed to do?” Inigo asked, glancing up again, only to be cut off by his cousin once more.

“You should have come to me! Like I would have done for you!”
“I couldn’t just—she made me swear not to tell you, Owain—”

“So what? Then you should have gone to Uncle Chrom! You should have gone to Khan Basilio! To someone! To anyone! You should have shouted it from the gods-damned rooftops! Robin sacrificed herself on some bloody noble ideal and normally I’m all for that but this was my wife, Inigo, and you knew she was going to do it and you sat back and you LET HER DIE!”

“How could I not have?” Inigo shot back, his voice finally rising to match Owain’s level. “Do you think I wanted to? Do you think that it hasn’t haunted me every moment since? Do you think I’m happy about it? She did it because she had to, and I let her because I had to, because this was our one and only chance in the whole of human history to put that monster down for good so that our great-great-grandchildren don’t have to live through the hell that we did and I hate it, I hate that it was our only choice but Robin did the right thing and dammit so did I!”

A long silence dragged out in the wake of his outburst, Owain’s next words achingly soft in the aftermath. “Don’t you dare,” he whispered. “Just stop. Don’t act like there’s some cosmic balance between us where only one of us gets to be happy and the other has to be miserable and warp yourself into thinking that I’m being selfish.”

“Maybe there isn’t,” Owain said, then added flatly, “Maybe there is.”

At long last, Inigo held his hands out, managing, “I don’t know what you want me to say.”

The answer was harsh—harsher, maybe, than even Inigo deserved. “I don’t know if I ever want you to say anything to me again.”

Inigo took in a sharp breath at that, not quite managing to disguise it if that had been his intention. “Owain,” he said, a note of desperation in the syllables. “Owain, I—”

“I have loved you like my brother since before I could speak,” Owain said. “I think I’ve loved you more than I could have loved a proper sibling. I have killed for you, and I would have died for you, without a moment’s hesitation.” He shook his head. “But this? Do you expect me to forgive this?”

“I don’t—” Inigo started, then broke off with a soft but suspiciously watery gasp. “I don’t know, Owain, okay, I know you’re angry with me, but—”

“Don’t. Just don’t,” Owain said, not even realizing the echo of his cousin’s words until they’d been spoken. “Angry does not begin to cover it.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s much too late for that.”

A long moment passed, finally broken by Inigo’s trepidatious, “So now what?”

“Now, you go back to Chon’sin and you live your life, while I figure out how the hell I plan on piecing mine back together,” Owain said. “And despite our mutual circles, considering the distance soon to span between us I think it entirely likely our paths will never cross again.”

Inigo didn’t seem to have an answer for that.
“And so much the better,” Owain muttered, before turning on his heel and striding from the room.

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Say’ri hadn’t had to ask why she’d found Inigo, sobbing, in the immediate aftermath of that discussion, even if she had so expertly coaxed it out of him once he’d calmed down.

Nor had she had to finish her sentence a handful of nights later, laying in bed beside him, whispering to the dark. “We’ll need to—”

“I know,” Inigo had answered softly. Even as the ever-present Now what? lingered, the first step of many would not be taking place in Ylisstol.

Say’ri had chartered them a ship to Chon’s in the next morning, to depart three days hence.

“I suppose,” she said, seated facing him on one of the window seats in their room, tea in hand as Ylisstol’s white winter light washed over them, “we ought to go about discussing a wedding.”

Inigo hummed, nodding absently as he gazed out over the courtyard, then belatedly replied, “Wait, whose wedding?”

Say’ri sent him that familiar, bemused look, one eyebrow quirking at him over the top of her teacup. “Ours, mayhap?”

“We already had a wedding,” Inigo said. “You do remember that part, right?”

“A wedding attended by all of three people, of which no one is aware of but for a handful of Shepherds? Aye, I’m sure that will go over wonderfully to the public eye when we start having children. Nothing could possibly be read as scandalous about that, clearly.”

Inigo let out a small snort. “Point taken.”

When he didn’t say anything further, she shook her head and changed the subject. “Lucina and Gerome are returning to Rosanne.”

“Are they?” Inigo asked mildly. “He still have that cottage up there?”

“Aye, as far as I know. ‘Twill be nice, I think, to have some of your family on the same continent.”

“Mm.”

When that avenue of conversation unceremoniously shut down as well, Say’ri cut to the heart of it. “He’s still not speaking with you, is he?”

Inigo didn’t need to ask who ‘he’ was. “You didn’t hear him, love,” he murmured, his gaze still fixed out the window at some distant point on the palace grounds. “I don’t think he was joking about never wanting to see me again.”

“He’ll come around.”

“Will he?” Inigo mused, wishing the words didn’t feel like a knife to the heart. “I wish I had your confidence.” He paused, then said, “Ah, there are going to be people at this wedding of ours, isn’t
there?"

A beat passed before Say’ri answered, “‘Tis a wonder you can follow the thread of your own thoughts half the time, no less expect anyone else to.”

“And yet still you try, my love,” he replied, with the closest thing to a genuine smile that had graced his face in days. With his free hand, he caught hers and brought it to his face, pressing his lips to the knuckles.

Peace, he thought, and the very word boggled his mind. After all this time, and all they’d been through, they’d bought their peace.

I suppose we just have to face down our troubles until we win our fight and bring them to an end, he had said, so long ago now.

Then we get to try our hands at peace, Owain had replied, and the mere thought of it now brought a pang to Inigo’s heart.

He lowered his hand once more, eyes darting back out the window for want of somewhere for them to land. “I may go for a walk,” he murmured.

“Aye,” said Say’ri. “‘Tis nicer than it has been.” She paused, then added in a lower tone, “Do you want for company?”

He hesitated, then finally shook his head. “No. But thanks.” With that, he drained the last of his tea, patted her knee, and slid from the bench.

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In the frosted gardens that he’d roamed countless times in his younger years and a handful again in this world, Inigo stood, and watched, and wondered just what his life had become.

Hands shoved deep into his coat pockets, he wandered without aim. Some part of him really, truly could not believe the events of the past weeks—had they really beaten Grima, had Robin really had to sacrifice herself to do it, and had he really, truly lost his best friend for good thanks to his own involvement in the matter?

Inigo rounded a corner and pulled up short, a familiar, fiery head of hair coming into his line of set. “Sev,” he said automatically.

Severa glanced up, giving him a lazy wave from the bench she occupied, tucked under wide-boughed trees that were all but naked for the winter. “Hey.”

Inigo hesitated for a moment, fiddling his hands in their pockets, then ventured, “Mind if I join you?”

Severa shrugged, which seemed to be as ringing of an endorsement as he usually got from her, so he dropped to the bench beside her.

They sat in silence for several moments before either one of them spoke. “So,” Severa finally said. “Heard you’re leaving.”
“Yeah,” Inigo said. “Two days from tomorrow.”

“Figured you would be.” Her gaze still facing forward into the garden rather than at him, Severa continued, “Some of us are thinking of joining you.”

“In Chon’sin?” Inigo asked, leaning back a little. “I mean, not that we’d mind, but… I didn’t expect it.”

“Maybe not strictly Chon’sin,” Severa said. “Maybe just Valm in general. I dunno. I think… a lot of us just need the space. With all the little ‘us’s’ running around. Mom just had me… or, er, Serena,” she corrected, stumbling over the name of her younger self that was similar enough it was bound to cause issues down the road. No one had dared mention such a thing to Gaius or Cordelia, though. “And by the end of this year, there’ll only be a couple of kids left to be born. Kjelle was saying she didn’t want to intrude, and Brady’s talking about leaving the priesthood, and you’re off to go do all your royal crap, so…” She shrugged again. “We’re never quite gonna be the same group we once were, are we?”

Inigo looked to the distance, thought of a pair of once-inseparable royal cousins who were no longer on speaking terms, and shook his head. “Not really, no.”

Severa drew in a deep breath, straightening her shoulders. “Still. Beats the alternative of being back in the hell of our world, I guess.”

“…Yeah,” Inigo admitted. “For the most part.”

Resting her chin in one hand, Severa tapped her elbow with the other hand. “Well. I’m staying here, for now.”

“Are you? I thought you just said you were worried about being around Serena.”

“I didn’t say that, I pointed out it was a common sentiment at the moment,” she corrected. “Anyway. Someone’s got to stick around and look after your lump of a cousin. At least to make sure Ophelia doesn’t get her hands on a tome and blow us all up while her dad’s not looking.”

As frighteningly possible as that thought was, Inigo didn’t dwell on it long before his mind went in a different direction, back to an admission that, once discussed, had never been mentioned again. “Severa,” he said, his tone at once gentle and urgent. “Severa, he won’t—”

“Don’t start,” she said. “I know he won’t. And for your sake, I’m going to pretend you didn’t say that, because otherwise I’d have to admit you’d think that low of me, that I’d move in on a… widower, I suppose, so. I know. I’m over it. And that’s not why I’m doing it. Got it?”

After a moment, Inigo nodded, dutifully repeating, “Got it.”

Severa nodded sharply. “I just mean that… Owain needs someone there. Normally that’d be you, but you’ve gone off and decided you want to go run a country on another continent, so that’s a bit out of the question.”

“Yeah,” Inigo said, trying not to think of other reasons why that would be out of the question.

“Anyways, I’m the next best thing,” Severa said, tossing one twintail over her shoulder. “And that’s the only time you’ll ever hear me admit that I’m inferior to you in any matter, so jot that down, too.”

“Got it,” Inigo said again, one corner of his lip twisting up into a semblance of a smirk.
Severa tilted her head, fixing her gaze on him properly for the first time in the conversation, only she managed to do it with her usual look of judgmental disdain. “Stop worrying about it!” she commanded. “You’ll frown and get wrinkles and I can’t be seen associating with ugly friends, all right?”

“Oh, am I your friend? Really, Severa, I’m flattered! Here I thought I had been eternally relegated to the minor position of your favorite verbal punching bag.”

“Oh, shut up.” She pointed at him, fire in her eyes, and said, “You’re not even my favorite verbal punching bag.”

Inigo turned a pleading gaze of his own upon her. “I’m hurt, Severa. Wounded to the core.”

“Yeah, you’re wounded somewhere, all right.”

He let out a sigh, admitting, “I’m not going to win this discussion in any way, shape, or form, am I?” he asked.

“Nope,” she said, popping the ‘p’ and finishing, “Get used to it.”

Inigo supposed he had a lot of things in his life that would need getting used to in the months and years to come.

Chapter End Notes

A note: this is actually the next to last chapter (omg). 102 will be the final chapter, and 103 will be a postlude in the style of the in-game endings. The current plan is to post BOTH of those at the same time on New Year's Eve, so make sure you don't skip directly to the postlude and miss the final chapter.

Now, where to from here? Well, I'm currently on a mad dash to wrap up the last two Heart of Stone fics, which should be posted over the next few weeks. (Now's a great time to catch up on that series if you haven't read it yet, since they tie into the coming sequel as well.) But, speaking of the sequel...

Believer is going to pick up three years from the end of Whatever It Takes and cover the story of Fates--well, a very AU story of Fates, that is. Inigo and Owain (or Laslow and Odin, I suppose) are still going to be the heart and soul of the story, though they're going to be joined on center stage by Corrin and Leo. ("What path are you doing to follow, Doc?" you ask me. I cackle and say "Yes." In all seriousness, this fic has gone under the nickname of "my Conrightlation AU" haha.)

Anyways, I expect to start posting that at some point in January, possibly February. I may take a little break in there just to have some time off and catch up on other things, but I am RIDICULOUSLY excited for it so I can't imagine I'm going to hold off on it for long.
Chon’sin greeted her monarchs’ return with the first beginnings of spring, though the teaser of the season quickly faded as the teeth of late February’s winter dug back in to stay.

By the end of April, though, spring had come in truth, the air finally warm rather than crisp and pink-blossomed cherry trees in full bloom throughout the entire city.

Inigo stood on a balcony, gazing out over palace gardens that were so very different from the ones in Ylisstol, and thought he might have liked the view more if he could have enjoyed it from his own room.

He had been banished—banished, from his own room—the night before, under the strictest orders of basically every female he was related to that he was not to set foot in it again. His immediate family and a handful of other Shepherds had arrived in Dai’chi at the beginning of the week, and they had been having quite the lovely time, really, until the true reason for their visit had drawn near.

Evidently, trying to convince his so-called friends that he and Say’ri had already been married, notably for over a year, had done little to absolve him of being forced to adhere to certain ridiculous traditions that prevented him from seeing her in the hours before their wedding.

Really, the entire thing was ludicrous.

With a huff, he leaned across the railing. In the end, he’d been ousted to one of the guest suites—which was, of course, perfectly nice, but it the principle of the thing, he thought. Granted, the entire thing was a great deal more lavish than he wanted, upon the insistence of the grand council and whatever other nobility they couldn’t afford to offend with a snub.

Perhaps, Inigo thought, if he were smart he could steal away a moment with his bride.

He took his care up to the fourth floor—surely at this early hour she was bound to be alone, wasn’t she? It was an hour far earlier than he usually deigned to rise, for sure, simply thanks to sheer inability to sleep, but the problem with that was it left him with far too many hours to fill before that evening.

Inigo paused just in front of Say’ri’s door (which was his door as well, he thought to himself snidely). In the early morning light, it was almost easier to see which of the panels along the wall was a slightly darker shade than the others, the one that hadn’t seen as many years of sun as the rest. It was the one Owain had jumped through just after they first arrived in Dai’chi, Inigo thought, with the wispy edge of a laugh rising and dying in his throat.

That’s my wall.

Technically, it WAS your wall.
Inigo shook that thought from his head, nudging the sliding door down its track and finding the room far brighter than he had originally expected it. Before he could take more than a single step in, though, he was greeted by the patter of tiny feet and an excited cry.

“Uncle Inigo!”

Inigo let out a peep, hardly having a moment to puzzle out Lysander’s presence before another voice, far sterner, came on his heels.

“Nope! Out!”

“Luce,” Inigo whined as a four-year-old attached himself to his leg. The response to that was a wave of laughter from both his wife and his sister from around the corner.

“Uncle Inigo,oo,” Lysander repeated, turning a beseeching gaze upward.

“Yes, hello Lysander,” Inigo said, crouching down to his nephew’s level.

“I’m bored,” the boy announced.

“I imagine they’re being boring in here, yes,” Inigo agreed, pitching his voice to carry. “With… whatever it is they’re doing.”

“‘Tis called ‘getting ready,’ my love,” Say’ri called.

Inigo pulled an expression that must have been comical, judging by Lysander’s snickering reaction.

“We have eight hours, darling.” Would they have this issue next week, he wondered, when Say’ri was to be coronated properly as queen?

“Yes,” Lucina said, coming around the corner while she wiped her hands on a towel. “Which means you have eight more hours of staying out of here. Shoo.”

“Luce,” Inigo tried again.

“No. The puppy dog eyes stopped working on me when I became a mother.”

Inigo paused, then said, “I’m not sure they ever worked on you, actually. What are you even doing?”

“Getting ready,” Lucina deadpanned.

Inigo shook his head, turning his gaze back to Lysander. “Baffling, aren’t they, your mom and your aunt?” At Lysander’s blank expression, he amended, “Confusing. ‘Baffling’ means ‘confusing.’”

The boy’s face lit up with a vehement nod. “They’re baffling,” he agreed, then without a pause to warn for the change of subject, he continued, “Can we go for a walk?”

Inigo had hardly directed a querying look at Lucina before his sister said, “Please, take him. It’ll keep the both of you occupied.”

With a huff, Inigo rolled his eyes, though the gesture was good-natured. He rocked back on his heels a little, still crouched, the edge of a smile coming to his face. Sometimes it still shocked him just to look at her when he’d spent so long believing her dead, and at that moment it struck him once again what a miracle it was that Lucina was standing not ten feet away from him.

He’d given Falchion back to her again, in the end.
It hadn’t been from his own sense of inferiority, this time—no, at this point he realized that some part of Falchion would always be his, just as some part would always be Lucina’s and some part would always be Chrom’s, counting all the way back to the first of its wielders. His reasoning this time was, quite simply, far more practical: Inigo was about to be spending a great deal more time in the public eye, Falchion itself was famously recognizable, and trying to explain how he had a carbon copy of Ylisse’s divine blade would have proved far too complicated without divulging the details of a dead timeline remembered only by a dozen. Lucina, on the other hand, had plans to retire to the rural backwoods of Wyvern Valley, where she would have no such issues.

Inigo glanced down at his nephew, wondering for the first time if perhaps Lysander might prove to be their future Falchion’s next wielder, then straightened up and held a hand out to the boy. “Right, then,” he said brightly. “Let’s go take a walk.”

Lysander had gleefully latched on to the chance to drag his uncle hither and there through the castle gardens, while Inigo had done his best to steer them away from the effusive noble guests visiting for the evening’s events, and eventually they had sequestered themselves away in a nook behind one of the gazebos and fed scraps to the garden cats. Still, it was hardly noon by the time they returned, and even when depositing his nephew back under the watchful eye of his mother, Inigo had not been allowed to so much as glimpse Say’ri.

Which meant he still had hours to kill before he even so much had to get ready, even if he was planning on doing that rather earlier than necessary, because he’d been under the impression he was supposed to have help getting dressed on an occasion like this and that thought was mortifying enough to have left him looking for a way out of it, and he’d eventually decided the best way around it would be to simply be already dressed by the time said servant showed up to help.

The point was, though, that Inigo had far too much time on his hands and he still hadn’t figured out a way to spend it.

He was currently in the process of wearing a path through the floor of his guest room when the sound of potential salvation reached him: a knock, so tentative he first thought he’d almost imagined it until it came again a little stronger.

“Come,” Inigo said, spinning back to face the door, only to find his relief suddenly outweighed once more by anxiety as sudden, worse potentials flashed through his mind. It wasn’t some guest come to make small talk, was it? The door slid back by inches while he began to regret not pretending to be in.

The face that entered, though, had been so low on the list of potentials that Inigo hadn’t even considered it.

A long moment passed in which neither of them spoke, while Inigo struggled to draw a breath into his lungs and force himself to comprehend what he was seeing.

“Hi,” Owain finally said.

“Hi,” Inigo echoed automatically, thinking of the time when speaking to his cousin had been more natural than breathing and how, now, he had scarcely been able to force that single syllable out.
Breaking eye contact, he managed, “I, um… Sorry, I just wasn’t expecting you.”

“Yeah,” Owain said. “I figured.”

Searching for something to say—anything, really—Inigo managed to blurt, “How’s Ophelia?”

“Good,” Owain said a little too quickly. “Good. She’s a bit mobile now, which is… rather terrifying, really, especially on a ship, but—well. Yes. She’s good. We’re good. She’s with Severa now.”

“Severa’s here?”

“We just docked about two hours ago,” Owain said, then pulled a disgruntled expression. “Uncle Chrom had to convince the palace guards we weren’t nefarious evildoers.”

Despite himself, the faintest warmth bubbled up in Inigo’s chest—‘nefarious evildoers’ was the closest he’d heard to proper Owain-speak since they’d been in Plegia.

Before Inigo could say anything, though, Owain spoke again, something resembling panic in his face. “We didn’t miss it, did we?”

“Miss what?” Inigo asked blankly.

“Your wedding.”

Flabbergasted, Inigo opened his mouth twice before any words came out. “No,” he managed. “It’s in about four hours.”

“Oh,” said Owain. “Good. That’s good.”

“I didn’t know you were planning on coming,” Inigo blurted.

A long moment passed where Owain glanced down, lacing his hands together. “I wasn’t,” he admitted softly. “I really wasn’t. Even went so far as to watch everyone else get on the boat to come here.” He sighed. “And then I… I made some comment, I don’t even remember what it was, just that it was… terribly bitter. Severa walked up one side of me and down the other. Told me that I was coming whether I liked it or not because someday I’d get over myself and regret missing it. ‘Course, by then we had to wait for another boat, and…” He shrugged. “We just got in, like I said.”

“I see,” Inigo said, his voice painfully neutral. Was that it, then? Owain had come because Severa had made him?

As if he could read his mind—as if they were still as beautifully in sync as they had once been—Owain added softly, “About three days ago I realized she was right.”

Inigo’s breath hitched.

Then, like a dam being broken, the words spilled out all at once. “I’m sorry,” Owain blurted. “I shouldn’t have said a quarter of the things that I said to you, I shouldn’t have taken it out on you, I shouldn’t have acted like I was the center of the universe and that I was the only one who got hurt. I don’t know why I… and you have every right not to forgive me,” he hurried to add. “I just… I finally realized… I lost Robin,” he admitted, his voice painfully hollow. “And I was so torn up by that I didn’t even realize that I turned around and lost you too.”
A pained choking sound rose in Inigo’s throat, drowning out any words he could have tried to speak.

“I understand if you don’t want me here,” Owain whispered.

“Of course I want you here, you utter imbecile.” Hastily, Inigo wiped a hand over his eyes before coming to the realization it wasn’t going to do any good. “You stupid, daft, idiot, I don’t even have a best man because I couldn’t bear to choose anyone else.”

“So the position’s still open, then?” Owain asked, only to break off with an abrupt oof as Inigo surged forward and flung his arms around him.

“Oh, just shut up,” Inigo mumbled.

“Heh. Scarcely have I returned for two minutes and already has that familiar phrase entered the conversation.”

“Because you always bloody deserve it.” Inigo finally pulled away, wiping at his eyes again and half-expecting to hear something along the lines of ‘the world needs to hear my ingenious words of wisdom!’ The fact that that didn’t come was testament to just how broken Owain had been and likely still was.

Instead, his cousin merely shrugged and changed the subject. “Come now, your bride may be rather put off by the prospect of you showing up at the altar waterlogged.”

“Luckily for me, I think she’s used to it by now,” Inigo sniffed. He paused, dreading the answer a little bit before actually asking the question. “Well… I’m assuming you’ll head back to Ylisstol when everyone else does, then?”

Surprisingly enough, though, Owain shook his head. “I thought I might stay here for a while. Maybe find a place to rent in the city. If you… don’t mind.”

“I mind,” Inigo said flatly. “I mind very much.”

“...Oh,” Owain said, his face falling.

Inigo, meanwhile, rolled his eyes and crossed his arms. “There are going to be several dozen guest rooms opening back up once the wedding and the coronation are over, and you’re talking about renting a place in the city? Be realistic.”

“...You’d want me to stay?” Owain whispered.

Inigo shot him a look that very plainly said Well, duh.

“Well, all right then.” He paused, then added, “You really wouldn’t mind? With Ophelia and all?”

“I would mind only if you went somewhere else, all right?” Inigo said. “I mean… I am a little surprised you’ve decided to move to Dai’chi…”

“I have a reason.”

“Oh?”

Owain glanced away, arms crossed loosely over his chest. “I was talking with Uncle Chrom a lot after you left,” he admitted. “About what Naga said. How that… if our bonds were strong enough, Robin might come back.”
“Oh,” Inigo said again, not entirely sure what else he ought to say.

“How,” Owain continued, “we realized… we don’t have any idea where she might come back. It could be anywhere in the world, you know? And what if she does, and she can’t get word to us? So Uncle Chrom and the other Shepherds are going to watch Ylisse, and what’s left of Plegia. The khans are going to keep an eye out in Ferox. But that leaves all of Valm, doesn’t it? Sure, Lucina and Gerome are going to be in Rosanne, and I know Brady and Cynthia are going to stay on this side of the sea, maybe Laurent and Kjelle too, and…” He trailed off. “So I’m going to search Valm. As best I can, I mean, with Ophelia in tow… and I’m not going to start right away, I’ll at least wait until she doesn’t need a wet nurse anymore, and…”

Owain trailed off, his next words painfully quiet.

“You think I’m mad, don’t you?”

Inigo shook his head, but apparently the gesture hadn’t been convincing enough.

“I should grieve,” said Owain. “And move on.” His words were flat, plainly repeated from elsewhere, and Inigo had the sudden urge to deck whoever had first given it to him to repeat. “But I can’t. I just… I can’t, Inigo. Not when I know she might come back. And I’ll spend my whole life searching for her, if I have to.”

“I’ll help,” Inigo said. “Of course I will, you know that. I’m not sure how… mobile I’ll be, really, I’m sure I’ll be a bit tied to the palace for a while, but… any way I can help, I will, all right?”

The faintest edge of a smile came to Owain’s lips. “Thanks.”

“Always.”

A bit of a silence dragged out before Owain rubbed at the back of his neck and asked, “So… I feel as though I should probably know this by now… and if I’m to be staying here, I feel as though I really ought to... what exactly is your title to be now?”

“Well,” Inigo said, “if our positions were reversed, and I was the one from the Chon’sinian bloodline, then I’d be emperor and Say’ri would still be queen. There’s some law that keeps her from being empress, though, which is ridiculous and I’m going to figure out how to change that at some point, so she’s still the queen. Since I’m not of the royal line, though, my outranking her would be… rather bad.”

“...So you’re...?” Owain said, with a hint of the childish bounciness that had so often inhabited his manner before.

“Prince consort,” Inigo said, with a bit of a shrug. “She thought it would bother me, I think, but it really doesn’t. Actually, it puts me back at the beginning, in a way. Back to the only title I ever really wanted.” He paused, letting the words roll off his tongue. “Prince Inigo.”

“Prince Inigo,” Owain repeated musingly. “Indeed, not quite the same ring as ‘Exalt Inigo,’ but I deem it suitable.”

“I should hope so, since that’s what I was called for my first sixteen years,” Inigo said.

Owain cocked his head to one side, his tone abruptly shifting. “Well then, Prince Inigo of the Indigo Skies, Former Doomed Philanderer of Legend and Current Consort of a Surprisingly Human Woman—”
“Seven hells,” Inigo muttered.

“—I will now take upon my solemn duty, as your newly-appointed best man, to help clothe you with the garments for the occasion of your matrimony.”

Aghast, Inigo took a step back. “I am a grown man and I can dress myself, thank you very much!”

“There’s a reason most people seek assistance with such attire, cousin. It’s notoriously difficult, if not impossible, to successfully robe one’s self properly within all the layered finery of fabrics.”

“What, you think I can’t beat the odds?”

“No.”

Inigo gasped.

“...What?”

“You actually said one word where only one word was required? Who are you and what have you done with my cousin?”

“Would you hush so we might get on with this?” Owain asked.

Inigo rolled his eyes. “After I ask one question. If your ship only docked two hours ago, how did Say’ri know to plan this?”

“Oh, she didn’t,” Owain said breezily. “But she is very adaptable. It lessens the risk of you showing up with something on backward—” He had to dart sideways before he could finish, a sound between a shriek and a laugh escaping his lips as Inigo chucked the nearest pillow at his head. “Fiend! I’ll have you for that!”

“If you put another hole in my wall, I’m rescinding my offer of housing you,” Inigo warned, then had to duck himself as the pillow came flying back. “Dammit Owain!”

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And then, more quickly than the waiting had dragged on, the worst of it was over—not that Inigo could ever consider marrying Say’ri, even for the second time, ‘the worst of it,’ the pomp and circumstance required this time definitely qualified.

He’d survived the eyes of Chon’sin’s nobility, and to his relief he hadn’t passed out; Owain, at his side, had taken to muttering various ramblings under his breath as they waited, which had proved distracting enough to Inigo every time his knees started to wobble. Perhaps their relationship wasn’t quite where it had been for the rest of their lives, but at that moment it was enough.

Say’ri had come, then, just as the waiting had become unbearable, and Inigo had quite suddenly not had eyes for anything else.

And so, at sunset, under the cherry blossom trees in the dying days of April, Chon’sin’s queen married her prince for the second time.

They had a moment to breathe after the fact; however scripted the entirety of the event was, a few
minutes to themselves had been written in, and Inigo intended to take advantage.

He’d led them to the gazebo where they’d wed the first time without even consciously intending it. It was just near enough to the beginnings of what would be the reception that they could hear the murmurs of the crowd, but far enough to not be disturbed.

“Have I mentioned,” Inigo said, lifting their linked hands to press a kiss to the back of hers, “that you are quite possibly the most gorgeous thing I have ever seen?”

“Only possibly?” Say’ri asked with a tilt of her head.

“Sorry,” he said, lips quirking. “I meant ‘definitely.’”

She chuckled at that, nudging him a little as they walked.

They fell silent once more, hands still joined as they reached the back of the gazebo. Inigo, gazing out over the water, found himself murmuring, “When all else is lost the future still remains.”

“Aye?” Say’ri asked, peering at him.

Inigo shrugged. “It’s what the writing on Falchion translates to. I was just thinking… It’s been five years since I came back. Not quite to the day, but close enough. And that day… when I left it all behind and came falling out of the sky… I never imagined I’d end up here.”

“I’m glad of it,” Say’ri said.

“Me too.” He shrugged. “Well, at least we’ll be out of the public eye for a few days at least. Until the coronation.”

“Then the real work begins,” Say’ri said dryly.

“Indeed,” Inigo said.

They stayed silent for a moment, watching the last glimmers of sunset burn over the water before the first strains of music began to reach them.

“We ought to head back,” Say’ri said.

“Oh, I’m sure,” Inigo agreed. “But first, if you would… My love, may I have this dance?”

A full-throated laugh escaped her at that, even as she was already turning to face him. “Fie, so long as you promise not to spin me over your head.”

“Well, I suppose,” Inigo said, sounding greatly put upon.

He closed his eyes as they began, yet by the end he found his gaze fixed on a point up the garden path, one lone figure wandering at a distance. By the time Inigo’s feet had stilled, he could recognize Owain, lips moving in words indecipherable at that distance, a bundle in his arms that was likely to be Ophelia.

Say’ri followed his gaze, her lips moving as if to query before deciding better of the fact.

“Do you suppose she’ll come back?” Inigo murmured.

“One can hope,” she whispered in reply.
“Then…” Inigo paused, weighing his words as they fell from his lips, as if getting them right was of tantamount importance. “Until she does… We’ll just have to fight for our peace. The peace Robin sacrificed herself for.”

He looked to Owain and Ophelia, and thought of Lysander, and of children still to come.

“Whatever it takes.”

FIN
Whatever It Takes (Postlude)

Chapter Notes

So... here we are. I want to say thank you to every one of you that's read this story, whether you've left kudos or commented or simply enjoyed it. Looking back, I'm amazed to see how far this story has come, and how much my life has changed in the process of writing it; it's by far the longest period of time I've spent on one story, and even though this is the end of Whatever It Takes, it's far from the end of this universe.

Until next time, and here's to 2020.

-Doc

Gerome and Lucina were married (again) and settled down near Wyvern Valley. While her husband never minced the few words he had to say, Lucina understood. The two built a happy life, and were soon blessed with a second son. They often played host to the other future children, and all who entered their home were greeted by Falchion, prominently hung above their mantle.

Brady left the priesthood, settling in Valm as most of the other children, and decided to become the world's scariest violinist. His original rondos only further ensnared the heart of his beloved Cynthia, who insisted he play them everywhere he went as a sort of theme song. He told her, half-jokingly, she should marry him if she wanted to make such decisions for him — to his surprise, she immediately agreed.

Though content in their currently unwedded partnership, Laurent, longing to meet his mother's intellectual standards, offered to take Kjelle on an expedition around the world. As she, too, valued self-discovery, they were said to be nearly inseparable — not to mention a fearsome force to withstand if anyone dared cross them.

Yarne, Nah, and Noire were the only three children to remain in Ylisse. Noire stayed with her mother as her assistant, perhaps to act as a buffer for her infant self or perhaps finding solace with the woman who brought her into the world. Yarne tried desperately to find a safe haven after their battles were done, while Nah endeavored to steer them all out of trouble, cautioning others away from the mistakes that led to the future return of Grima.

After Robin's death, Owain tried settling down in Ylisse but ultimately set off on a lengthy quest across Valm to “stay his sword hand;” only a few of his closest friends knew his real motivations for the journey. Unwilling to let him drown in his grief, Severa tagged along, though she nagged him mercilessly. Baby Ophelia was a perpetual light in both their lives, though her presence was often a severely complicating factor on their “epic” quests.
Upon returning to Chon’sin, Say’ri worked tirelessly with the other dynasts to secure a peaceful future for the Valmese continent. Though the people took a while to warm up to their new prince consort, Inigo was ever ready with a smile or a solution when trouble started to brew. With the war over, he turned his attentions towards less devastating arts — the former Exalt was more than content to support his wife’s rule from backstage.

Those who knew the true tale could only agree that theirs was a love worth crossing the bounds of time.

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