Throw Stars at the Twilight

by AndroidPalindrome

Summary

Lorian, elder prince of Lothric, feels as if he has nothing and everything to lose all at once. The kingdom to which he was once heir is crumbing, the queen is rotting away in her chambers, and the king is neglecting his duties in favor of seeking godhood. The only bright and shining thing left in his life—his little brother, Lothric—is destined to be sacrificed to the First Flame at the age of eighteen, and Lorian is not sure he will survive his heartbreak in the aftermath.

In one last, desperate attempt to save the child he loves as his own, Lorian decides to take Lothric and flee from their home, seeking asylum in the one place where Oceiros would never be able to find them: the ancient fabled kingdom of Irithyll, protected and presided
over by the last True God in the Lordran.

How much can one decision influence an entire timeline? More than any man, or god, could ever foresee.

(Chapter 10: In which Gwyndolin and Lorian reunite with Lothric and Yorshka and discover Kuro and Wolf waiting for them as well. Crystal lizards are played with, announcements are made, and a well-meaning comment sends Gwyndolin into an emotional breakdown. This time, however, Lorian is there for him.)
chasing down light in the indigo

Chapter Summary

In which Lothric and Lorian search for salvation and instead find themselves face to face with unfathomable danger. How fortunate, then, that salvation finds them instead.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Are you cold, Lothric?”

The answer was yes—the answer was obviously yes—but the shivering child shook his head against Lorian’s shoulder and tightened his arms around his neck. “No, brother…I am fine. We can keep going.”

For a moment, Lorian considered his options, shrugging Lothric into a more comfortable position on his shoulders as he surveyed the landscape. It was white, completely white; the elder prince had been slogging through at least one foot of snow for the entirety of the day, maybe two at times, and large snowflakes continued to fall slowly, yet consistently, from the sky. It was nighttime, but it was strange; though the sun should have risen or set by then, it continued to be a clear, midnight blue sky dotted with clouds and sprinkled with stars. A half-moon hung stalwart in the sky, larger than Lorian had ever seen in the skies of Lothric, and the sight had entranced even his little brother for the first hour of their journey.

“I have never seen a moon so big and bright,” he’d whispered, craning his neck so far up that Lorian was afraid it would get cricked. “It is so beautiful. I like it better than the sun, I think.”

“You only say that because you burn easily,” Lorian teased, and Lothric huffed in mock annoyance, shuffling a little further up Lorian’s back so as to get a better look at the eternally twilit sky.

However, that had been several hours ago (how long had he been walking? Two hours? Three? It was hard to tell the passing of time when the sky never changed), long enough for their surroundings to have completely changed, shifting from mountainous terrain to a valley gated by snowy peaks and dotted with numerous pine trees. Lothric had started shivering long ago, despite Lorian having wrapped his little brother in two thick blankets on top of the gods-awful prayer garb the clerics had forced him to wear. The elder prince had been reluctant to stop so soon. Oceiros was surely scouring the entirety of the kingdom for them, and though Lothric and Lorian had at least a day’s worth of a head start, it didn’t hurt to be cautious given the frothing fanaticism of their father.

Though Lorian’s heart ached at Lothric’s palpable exhaustion and discomfort, he knew that he had to keep moving in order to keep them safe, and Lothric—despite his young age—seemed to know this as well. He had been chatty at first, telling Lorian little anecdotes from his lessons with the priests, and stories he’d read in the library, but he’d fallen silent when his shivering spread to his voice. Instead of asking Lorian to stop, the eight-year-old simply clung tighter to his brother, seeking out whatever body warmth he could find. Oh, if only Lorian hadn’t been wearing his suit of armor! The cold metal must have been miserable against his brother’s thin frame.
Lorian himself was beginning to feel the strain of the journey. His legs were aching from hiking through the snow for hours upon hours and, though his eyesight had held up admirably at the beginning of their journey, his vision was beginning to blur in the distance. A brief rest would do them both a great deal of good, he decided, and he quickly scanned for a safe place to rest. A cave carved into the nearby mountain caught his eye, and he once again shrugged Lothric into a more comfortable position before trudging his way towards the opening.

“There is an outcropping over there. We can gather our strength before setting out again.”

Lothric lifted his head up from where it was buried in the warmth of Lorian’s neck and blinked owlishly. “Is it safe for us to stop?”

“We are well on our way to Irithyll, and I made sure that Father wouldn’t discover our absence for at least a day, maybe two. A few moments of respite won’t jeopardize us.”

Being out of the wind—as gentle as it had been thus far—was no small relief, and Lorian immediately settled Lothric against the wall of the cave and moved to unsheathe his sword. Having a weapon singed with the Chaos Flame offered many fringe benefits; instead of having to make and tend to a fire, Lorian simply slammed the blade into the frozen ground beneath them. The small, barren space warmed almost instantly, and Lothric sighed in relief as he inched closer to their makeshift hearth.

“Do you think Mother misses us?” the younger prince whispered, holding his hands close to the sword to warm them up. “Surely she will have noticed we are gone by now, just like Father.”

“Does it matter?” The words came out far more bitter than Lorian would have liked, but he was far too tired and mentally strained to care, so he simply sighed and slid down the cave wall to sit at Lothric’s side.

It did not matter to Lorian that their mother would be affected by their absence, and he highly doubted that she cared much beyond the loss of her “prized demonslayer son” and the future Lord of Cinder. When it had just been Lorian in the household, his mother had at least made an attempt to be an active parent, though she’d showed no interest in pushing Lorian to do anything other than fight and bleed for the royal family. Then Lothric had been born and, while Lorian did not fault their mother for the incomprehensible physical and mental trauma she experienced from Oceiros’ foul experimentation during the entirety of her pregnancy, it remained a fact that she’d been absent at best from Lothric’s life from the moment he entered the world. The birth had transformed her into a pale figure that glided in and out of rooms like smoke in the wind; and though Lorian had pleaded with her in the beginning to help him take care of his little brother (because Oceiros clearly cared more for the concept of Lothric than the child himself), he eventually stopped asking, as the only answer he would receive was a blank stare.

No, though his thoughts could turn bitter at times, Lorian did not resent his mother for being traumatized by Lothric’s conception and birth, nor did he resent having to all but single-handedly raise Lothric, in the slightest. How could he ever resent the best thing that had ever happened to him? Deemed only good for fighting by his parents and advisors, Lorian had once lived only to obtain glory and protect his people, hoping to live up to his parents’ limited expectations and become a crown prince worthy of the kingdom. His father’s announcement that the queen was pregnant with the true heir to the throne wounded Lorian far more grievously than any battlefield injury and, as shameful as it was, he had been bitterly angry at that small, growing life in his mother’s womb. When it came time for the queen to give birth, Lorian made up every excuse to be away on a skirmish, not wanting to witness everyone in the kingdom celebrating his new irrelevance to the royal family.
Oh, how quickly his feelings had changed when he had returned to the castle the night of Lothric’s birth, with blood-spattered armor and soot smeared across his cheeks. Despite Oceiros’s crowing for weeks in advance of the celebration he’d planned for the arrival of the true heir, the castle grounds were strangely quiet, and Lorian briefly wondered if the child had been stillborn. It was a theory disproven the moment the elder prince stepped into the residential wing, where a tiny, warbling, frantic wail grabbed hold of his heartstrings and all but pulled him down the hall to the nursery.

Upon arrival, he found Emma rocking the smallest bundle he’d ever seen in her arms, flanked by four other nursemaid who were doing little more than wringing their hands in consternation. The High Priestess’s face bore an expression of fatigue he usually saw in his soldiers after a grueling battle, and the younger handmaids had tears in their eyes, all of which told Lorian that the little prince had been inconsolable for quite some time.

“Your Highness! You’ve returned much sooner than expected!” Emma turned to face him, and curtsied as best as she could while holding an infant. She said something after that but Lorian didn’t hear a word of it, far too transfixed by the tiny creature swaddled in black, gold-embroidered, cloth to pay her the slightest bit of attention.

Lorian knew he would never forget seeing Lothric for the first time. He had been so very small and so very frail, with thin limbs and even thinner fingers, and his bones were so delicate that the elder prince had been afraid he’d break them if he held the boy too tightly. His skin was pale and thin to the point of near-translucency, and small, silver scales were dotted all over his shoulders and neck. Though the infant had clearly been crying for quite some time, his cheeks held not a trace of ruddiness, and the blue tinge to his lips was a foreboding omen.

“May I hold him?” The words spilled out of Lorian’s lips before he truly registered them. Without waiting for the High Priestess’s answer, he stripped off his gauntlets and all but threw them to the floor in his haste, ignoring the wide-eyed ogling of the younger women as he held out his arms with an eagerness that blindsided him.

The moment Lothric was placed into Lorian’s arms, two things occurred simultaneously: the little prince nigh-immediately stopped crying, his screaming fading into the occasional soft sob and sniffling hiccup within seconds; and Lorian was overwhelmed by a wave of love so powerful and all-encompassing that it weakened his knees and brought tears to his eyes.

“He is perfect.” Lorian’s voice was filled with the tenderness that had ensnared him body and soul. Ignoring the utterly flummoxed looks on Emma and the handmaidens’ faces, he moved to cradle his little brother in one arm so he could stroke his head with the other, marveling at the softness of the platinum blonde hair against his calloused fingertips. “What is his name?”

It took Emma a few attempts to find her voice. “The king decided it would be Lothric, after the kingdom that he…he will one day rule.”

Emma’s voice was hesitant—knowing full well how displeased Lorian had been with Oceiros’ decision—but the elder prince found that he could no longer remember what he had been so angry about.

“Lothric,” Lorian breathed. Said child squirmed at the sound of his own name, his bright blue eyes opening for the first time to stare up at his elder brother, who greeted him with a smile so wide that it threatened to split his cheeks open.

“From this day onward, I—Lorian of the kingdom that shares your name—will be your unyielding sword. No harm shall come to you as long as I still draw breath, and though you have been born
into an uncertain world, know that my love for you shall be as eternal as the cycle of flame and
dark.” It was a solemn oath—made as much as a knight as an elder brother—and Lorian sealed his
vow with a kiss to the crown of Lothric’s head.

No, what his mother had given Lorian that day was a reason to live, for which he would be forever
grateful. She had given him a priceless gift that day, even if he—in his childish ignorance and
selfishness—had come so dangerously close to rejecting it entirely.

Though he held no ill will towards his mother, Lorian still doubted that she would ever worry over
Lothric’s disappearance past him being the future Lord of Cinder…let alone concern herself with
her oldest child.

“I suppose it doesn’t.” To Lorian’s immense relief, his little brother simply shrugged and turned
his attention back to the sword, not seeming to mind his brother’s uncharacteristically jaded
response. Then again, Lothric had always been far more mature and astute than many gave him
credit for. “Do you think we’ll ever go back there?”

A lead weight dropped in Lorian’s stomach. “I honestly don’t know, baby drake. Perhaps after
Father and Mother have died.”

Lothric hummed in thought as he rubbed his hands together. “That may take a while…after all,
Mother is practically a goddess in her own right, and Father may well turn himself into a dragon
yet.”

“Father’s more likely to kill himself in the attempt than actually become one.” Lorian didn’t even
try to keep the venom from his words. “As for Mother…well, we shall see, I suppose.” After all, it
had been only a week beforehand that Oceiros had brought up having another child in the near
future, and Lorian doubted the queen’s ability to survive another pregnancy like Lothric’s.

Strange…the thought of never seeing his mother or father again didn’t grieve Lorian in the
slightest. If anything, he felt immense relief at the idea; perhaps he truly was a failure of a son.

“Is it wrong of me to be glad that they’re gone?” It was eerie the way Lothric’s thoughts echoed
his own. Clearly Lorian wasn’t the only one thinking blasphemously. “I keep trying to feel sad…but I don’t. I think I’ll be happy as long as I’m with you.”

Lorian’s lips curved into a fond smile. “If such thoughts are wrong, then we are both terrible sons,
for I feel the same way.” He held his arms open, and Lothric immediately climbed into his lap, not
minding the jagged edges and uneven plating of Lorian’s armor in the slightest. “Irithyll is
supposedly the last growing kingdom in the Lordran; if the rumors are true, I believe we will be
able to live a happy and comfortable life there.”

Lothric rested his cheek on Lorian’s breastplate and closed his eyes, all but melting into Lorian’s
embrace. It was the only place where he’d ever truly felt safe. “There are probably miracles and
discoveries unknown to us in Irithyll. Perhaps we can find a cure for your eyesight.”

“And perhaps a cure for your pain.” Lorian’s crown clunked against the cavern wall as he tipped
his head back. “You could wear actual clothes, and if you feel well enough, perhaps we could
send you to school. You would be able to make friends at long last.”

“If you would like.” Lothric sounded doubtful, and somewhat dismayed, at the prospect.
Sometimes Lorian couldn’t help but fret over his little brother’s isolated and introverted nature.
Perhaps he would be more outgoing in a positive environment. “What will we do for money?”
“You let me worry about that.” On top of "kidnapping" the heir to the throne and spiriting him away from the kingdom, Lorian had also stolen as many gold pieces and jewels from Oceiros’ personal collection as he could carry; he’d dropped the heavy rucksack to the ground the moment they entered the cave. Hopefully it would be more than enough to start a new life—perhaps, even, enough to live comfortably for quite some time, as long as they were frugal. “If all else fails, I can get a job—a longshoreman, perhaps, or a laborer of some kind.”

“Or a knight.” A playful smirk spread across Lothric’s thin lips. “I believe you would be more than qualified for such a position, and if they ask for qualifications, you could simply show them your sword and regale them with the tale of demon fire.”

“You flatter me, little brother. As I said, we shall see what happens when we arrive; we first have to reach the city.”

True, the thought of Lorian resuming his knightly duties had crossed his mind, but it was tempered with the new and overwhelming realization that he was now the only person Lothric had left in the world. If Lorian were to join whatever army Irithyll possessed, and then fall in battle, Lothric would be by himself in a city he barely knew; sickly, scared, and alone. Before, when he’d gone on expeditions to the Old Chaos, he had been soothed by the fact that Lothric would be safe and looked after if he perished—if not by their parents, then by the myopic but good-intentioned Emma and her contingent of handmaidens. But now…now it was just the two of them, and the idea of possibly orphaning Lothric in the future chilled him more than the frigid winds of the Boreal Valley.

No. Lorian would not become a knight. He could act as a tactician, perhaps, or even a commander…but not a foot soldier. Not anymore. Everything and nothing had changed all at once.

Lothric, mercifully, didn’t seem to recognize the morbid thoughts crawling around his brain. It was times like that when Lorian was grateful that his brother’s unnatural perception was tempered by his young age.

“You need to stop being so humble, Lorian.” Said eight-year-old rolled his eyes before settling back against his elder brother’s chest. “You slayed the Demon Prince all by yourself, for Heaven’s sake. You are the most fearsome and talented fighter Lothric has ever seen, and even if Father cannot see it, you are also clever, intelligent, and resourceful.”

“And you, dear brother, are biased.” Nonetheless, Lothric’s praise—the likes of which he had never heard from his parents—warmed Lorian’s heart and dispelled the foreboding chill that had descended upon him. “I could be the court jester and your words would be just as glowing.”

Lothric seemed offended by Lorian’s words. “Do you think so little of me? That I would praise you if you did not deserve it?”

“No, no, Lothric.” Lorian rubbed the child’s back in a soothing manner. “I mean only that you love me so, and that when you love someone in such a way, you tend to view everything they do through a colored haze. I do not doubt that I am an above-average warrior, but probably not as great a one as you say.”

The younger prince seemed to consider Lorian’s words for a few seconds before huffing indignantly. “I swear, praise and compliments bounce off of you like arrows hitting a stone wall. I am not the only one who says such things, you know; you should hear the handmaidens go on about you—”

“As they are wont to do for any attractive knight they come across, let alone a prince—“
“— and what your own knights have to say. I have heard them laud over you many a time when you were not around to listen.”

“Lothric, I am their Knight Commander; I believe they are required by edict to praise me.”

“Oh, would you stop being so shamefaced already! You’re giving me a headache!”

Lorian couldn’t help but laugh at the put-out-upon look on Lothric’s face. “Forgive me, forgive me.” He wheezed, sliding his hand under Lothric’s hood so he could ruffle his hair good-naturedly. “You have to realize, I am still not used to compliments such as the ones you bestow upon me. I cannot help but feel somewhat… off-balance when you speak of me so.”

“Well, it is time to start getting used to it, because I only speak the truth.” Lothric’s bluster and annoyance quickly dispelled under Lorian’s touch, and the younger prince eagerly leaned into his brother’s hair-scratching, more cat than dragon in that moment. “...Lorian.”

“Yes, Lothric?”

“Will I…will I still have to link the fire?”

Lorian prayed that his crown hid the wetness that had suddenly bloomed in his eyes. “Only if you want to, Lothric.”

“If I want to?”

“Yes. Whatever you may do when you are of age, that will be your choice to make, and only your choice.” After all, that was the whole purpose of Lorian’s near-suicidal flight from the kingdom, wasn’t it? To save Lothric from a fate forced upon him. “I will forbid it, of course, until you are an adult, but after that…some consider linking the fire to be a good and noble cause, and willingly surrender themselves to it. If you do decide to become a Lord of Cinder of your own volition, then I…I will, of course, try to talk you out of it, but I will remain by your side no matter what decision you make.”

Even if I die of heartbreak in the process.

Lothric frantically shook his head against Lorian’s chest. “I don’t want to, Lorian.” The sounds of the wilderness around them—already muffled by snowfall—grew almost eerily silent at those whispered words. Lorian knew what a blasphemy it was to speak them—that voicing such objections in their old lives could only have led to terrible repercussions. They were as heavy as they were freeing. “I don’t want to link the fire. I don’t want to burn. I don’t want to die. All I want is to stay with you. Is that so wrong?”

A strangled, choked sound of relief forced its way out of Lorian’s chest—a sound bordering on a sob. “I don’t think that’s wrong at all, Lothric, because that is all I want as well.” He clutched Lothric as close as he possibly could without hurting his frail body. “I think—and this is just from what I’ve read and heard, but I think that is all a normal person should want. I used to think that Father was right…that I was selfish in my desire to spare you from the flame, but I’m starting to think that it is Father and the priests that are wrong. Not us.”

“Do you truly think so?” The tremulous and fragile hope in Lothric’s voice stabbed Lorian in the gut. “I tried so hard, Lorian—I tried to be excited about linking the flame, to see it as the honor and privilege everyone else did, but it just made me scared and sad. I used to ask questions, but I would be punished when I did, so I eventually kept them inside.”

Lorian’s heart dropped. “Oh, baby drake, how long have you been feeling this way? Why didn’t
“Not for long.” It was a rushed, hurried, and transparent lie. “I just…dear brother, you already worry so much about me, and I could see that discussing my future as a Lord of Cinder made you so terribly sad, and I…I did not wish to burden you more than I already have.”

“Trouble me? Lothric…!” The alarm in Lorian’s voice echoed throughout the small cave, and Lothric flinched at the sound of it, hiding his face against Lorian’s breastplate in shame.

“I’m sorry…” Lothric’s tiny, frightened voice made Lorian want to scream.

“No, no, Lothric, I am not angry at you…you have nothing to be sorry for.” The elder prince gently coaxed Lothric out of hiding and stroked his face in what he hoped was a soothing manner—well, as comforting as cold, metallic fingers could be. “I just want to know why you think you’re a burden to me. Did someone say something to you?”

Lothric tried to duck his head again, but Lorian gently took the child’s face in his hands and tilted it up to look at him. “It’s all right, Lothric. I won’t be angry, and no one is here to punish you for saying something wrong—you can be yourself with me. Always.”

The child bit his wobbly lip (unduly chapped, Lorian couldn’t help but note) and fussed with the fringe of his prayer robe as he waged a war within himself. Lorian simply stroked his hair and waited patiently for his brother to come to a decision. Words had been forced from his mouth his whole life, and by the Gods, Lorian would make sure his words were his own from that point on.

“…the priests and the scholars. And Father.” It took a good minute for Lothric to find his tremulous voice. “They would say things sometimes. More often in the past year. Sometimes they knew I was listening and sometimes they didn’t.”

“What sort of things?”

“That you were always exhausted from caring for me. That I was holding you back from being a good commander.” Lothric seemed to fold in on himself at the admission. “They told me how you would cry from exhaustion when I had a bout of illness and would keep you up all night…that you’d become more rebellious since my birth—even rejecting important events to care for my well-being—and it was ruining your status in the kingdom. They said I’d turned you from a fearsome demonslayer into a…a ‘wibbling wet nurse.’”

“Did they now?” It took all of Lorian’s considerable willpower to keep his voice level, which was quite the feat, given the white-hot anger beginning to burn through his veins. “What else?”

“The priests would tell me that you were a ‘poor influence’ on my mental state…that you were holding me back from accepting the mindset of a true Lord of Cinder. They even tried to convince Father to take me from your room and force me to sleep in the opposite end of the castle. Father refused, but he told me that…that if things continued the way they were…that I would lead you to ruin, and I should start distancing myself from you, because I was just going to die anyways and there was no point fooling you into loving me when I was destined to burn!”

Lothric’s tremulous voice had started out weak and whispered, but as he continued to speak, his volume rose more and more, to the point where he was all but shouting by the end. Tears were flowing freely down his face, and the last recollection seemed to drain the strength from him, for the eight-year-old almost immediately collapsed against Lorian after finishing, curling in on himself and weeping.
For the first time in his life, Lorian believed he could commit murder.

“Shhh…shhh…oh, baby drake, there is no need to cry.” Despite a rage he’d never before experienced stabbing through his veins like sewing needles, Lorian decided—as always—that his priorities lay with comforting his brother. “You did the right thing in telling me. You are far too young to hold such misery inside of yourself, let alone having to hear such words in the first place.” The elder prince rested his cheek on Lothric’s head as he rocked him back and forth. “I am so sorry, Lothric…if only I had known what was going on, I could have stopped it—“

“No, you couldn’t have!” Lothric’s voice was thick with tears and snot. “Father always spoke about how you were testing his patience and how he may have to do something about it! He would have killed you!”

“No, he wouldn’t have; don’t be silly.” Even as the words left his mouth, Lorian doubted them, and the cold nausea that settled in his stomach revealed the truth he could no longer deny: that his eldest prince, the one that was supposed to inherit the throne of the Kingdom of Lothric, had always been disposable to Oceiros.

Deep down, Lorian had always suspected such—even before Oceiros had announced their mother’s second pregnancy—but Lorian had always hoped that he could earn Oceiros’s love and respect with hard work and perseverance. He had commanded armies, rode with the dragonriders into battle, and slew demons the like of which mortal men could barely comprehend. Yet as much as he enjoyed being a commander and serving his people, he had always secretly hoped that one more victory, one more battle scar, one more Heir of Chaos vanquished, would finally move Oceiros to feel proud of him.

Even after Lothric was born, Lorian had held onto that hope, and he had been so sure after he’d slain the Demon Prince that Oceiros would finally see his worth. Yet when he had returned to the kingdom—limping with a wound that took a month to heal fully, exhausted, and brandishing a sword forever scoured with the Chaos Flame—Oceiros only had stock congratulations to offer; in private, he was as cold and distant as ever. Now Lorian realized that nothing he could have done would have been enough because, from the start, Oceiros had seen him as a failure on the path to achieving his true goal: producing an ideal, and immortal, all-powerful heir of Lothric. He held no special powers and, though he would inevitably live far longer than most men due to the godly blood that ran through his veins, he had far from the sterile longevity of dragons. He was solid, sturdy, and painfully average. Oceiros had no room for average in his goals.

In fact, Lorian realized with a sickening lurch, their father rejecting the suggestion to move Lothric to his own room and out of Lorian’s had not been out of generosity or some faint compassion in his heart. Though the king loved having an actual “child of dragons” at long last, his foul and unethical experimentation had produced a weak and high-maintenance infant, who had needed constant attention from the moment of his birth. He would not have died from neglect, true, but every child needed love and care to thrive. Yet Oceiros was more interested in the final result of his experiment than actually dealing with the consequences, and the handmaids and High Priestess had never dealt with a chronically ill child such as Lothric before. With their mother too withered physically and emotionally to take up the banner, it had been Lorian who had put down his sword and become his younger brother’s primary caretaker, which he had done willingly and with an eager and loving heart. It had not been an easy road in any way, shape, or form, but Lorian treasured every moment he spent with his little brother, and he cared for him without complaint and with nigh-boundless patience.

Oh, yes! How convenient, Lorian now saw, that Oceiros had found someone to shoulder the burden of Lothric’s existence! Now he was free to devote the entirety of his focus to the teachings
of Seath the Pale Drake, and planning Lothric’s "ascension" to a Lord of Cinder, instead of having to spend his energy on the messy aftermath of his decisions. Though Lorian had been a disappointment from the moment of his birth, the king had gotten an agreeable nursemaid out of his eldest child, and Lorian’s usefulness was entirely tied to keeping Lothric alive until the moment of his linking. In fact, not only had Lorian been used to raise Lothric when no one else would or could, but he had been used to keep the younger prince in line! It was now frighteningly clear that the priests, and their father, had used Lorian as a bargaining chip to make Lothric do whatever they wanted. Study hard, or you will not be able to see Lorian once he returns to the kingdom. Embrace your future as Lord of Cinder, or you will be moved out of your brother’s room and into your own, far away from the only true parent you’ve ever had. Suffer silently like a good and pious little lord, or you are sinful and ungrateful, and you will be taken away from Lorian for good.

No, Lothric hadn’t been named after the kingdom because he was the future ruler; he had been named Lothric because he was never meant to be a human being, only a symbol—a means to an end that only existed to propel the land and the Consumed King to eternal glory. Lothric was meant to be a concept, a tool, but never an individual.

By the gods, Lorian’s heart screamed in anguish, we were never children to Oceiros—only stepping-stones!

While Lorian grew more internally distressed at his most recent revelation, Lothric began to calm under his elder brother’s gentle ministrations, his sobbing giving way to quiet sniffing. He sat up just enough to wipe his eyes and nose with the sleeve of his prayer robe, and Lorian—snapping out of his haunted thoughts at this action—immediately batted Lothric’s hand away from his face and grabbed the corner of one of the softer blankets wrapped around his frail form.

“I can do it myself, Lorian,” Lothric grumbled.

“Not with that Chaos-damned outfit of yours, you’re not; your skin is far too tender to rub it with cloth that rough.” Lorian gently dabbed away the wetness from Lothric’s eyes while ignoring the eye-roll he received in return. “Once we get you proper clothing, you can rub your face as much as you want, but I wish you would hold off until that day comes.”

“I will do my best, Lorian,” Lothric relented with a huff. Lorian gave him a sympathetic pat on the head.

“You always do, Lothric. You always do.” He gave Lothric’s nose a quick poke and smiled at the unwilling giggle it elicited. “Now, no more worrying about the priests and Father, all right? Where you and I are going, we will never have to concern ourselves with them again; they will hold no power over us in Irithyll.”

Lothric peered curiously up at him. “Are you sure? Father is… determined.”

“That he is, but not even Father’s fanaticism can help him locate a city shielded by the last True God in the Lordran.” Just to make sure, Lorian took a moment to dip his fingers underneath the armor at his neck, sagging in relief once his bronze talons touched the talisman hanging from its chain. “We can, however, so we have more than outplayed him at this point.”

“Finally beating Father… that sounds nice.” Lothric yawned, drained from his emotional outburst and their long journey, and curled up against Lorian’s chest. “Dear brother, do you mind…?”

Lorian finished his thought for him. “Take your rest, Lothric. I will keep you safe.” He curled his hands protectively over Lothric’s thin body, remembering how his little brother had once been tiny enough to neatly fit into both of his palms put together. How he had grown!
“But what about you? You should rest as well…”

“It is never wise for two parties to sleep at the same time when travelling through the cold, even with the eternal warmth of my sword.” The knight ran his hand down the child’s back. “Tell you what—after you wake up, I can take a nap, and you can keep watch and wake me if something happens. All right?”

Lothric, already too tired to keep his eyes open, simply nodded against Lorian’s chest plate. He was asleep within seconds, face and rest seemingly peaceful for once (always a mercy for a child plagued with asthmatic lungs and chronic pain), and Lorian bent over to kiss the top of his head.

“Sleep well, dear brother…we have only a little farther to go before we’re free.”

“We will be going away, baby drake.”

Lorian was brushing Lothric’s hair after his bath—a cherished nighttime ritual for them both—so the little boy remained still and relaxed in his brother’s hold, though his voice belied his curiosity. “Away? A diplomatic visit?”

“No, Lothric.” Lorian gently teased a rat’s nest out of that damp platinum blond hair, careful to avoid any unnecessary tugging at his brother’s scalp; it was so very tender—much like the rest of his skin. “You and I will be leaving the kingdom for good.”

It was clear that Lothric was confused, but he waited until Lorian had finished brushing his hair before speaking up, turning in his elder brother’s lap to look up at him. “Lorian, I don’t understand…what are you trying to say?”

Lorian set the brush on the nightstand and sighed. “Lothric, if we were to leave the kingdom behind forever—to forsake our royal titles and all of our duties—and go live somewhere where Father could never find us, how would you feel?”

Lothric frowned and fidgeted his hands together nervously. “I…I do not know. Does such a place truly exist?”

“Yes, Lothric.” Lorian smoothed the child’s damp hair with his hands. “You know the stories Lady Sirris tells you—of Irithyll, the land of the Nameless Moon?” The younger prince nodded. “Well, she has given me a map, dear brother—a map that will allow us to find Irithyll ourselves. So we will be departing for the Boreal Valley in three days time.”

“And…and we will be staying there? Forever?”

“Perhaps not forever, but as long as it takes for Father to pass on…that, or to stop hunting for us.”

The child gnawed nervously on his lower lip. “Father and Mother will not know we are leaving?”

“No, baby drake.” Lorian gently cupped Lothric’s face in his hands and stroked his brother’s sallow cheek with his thumb. “I know this is terribly sudden, Lothric, but you and I…we cannot stay here. There is no happiness to be found in this castle, no joy, no life, and that is no way for you to live. Father grows more erratic and irrational by the day, and Mother is growing violent; I fear for your safety if things continue the way they are. If we go to live in Irithyll, though, we will be able to live normal lives. You can wear normal clothing, go to school, eat all of the foods that the priests say you cannot, and play with other children…all of the things you cannot do here. We can
“be happy there.”

“ We will not be princes anymore, then.”

“ No—to do this, we have to leave behind everything we have ever known. We will have no more
titles, no more servants, and no more duties. We will become commoners, but we will be free,
Lothric—free to decide who we want to be and what we wish to do!” Lorian grabbed Lothric’s
little hands in his own and held them tight. “You will no longer have Father or the priests and
scholars ordering you around and making your every decision. It will be scary, and very hard at
times, but so are all things worth fighting for! I only ask that you trust me—trust your elder brother
to do what is best for you...best for us.”

Lothric stared at Lorian for a long moment before turning his gaze down to their conjoined hands.

“ I will not become king, then.”

“ No.”

“ And you will no longer be Knight Commander.”

“ Correct.”

“ And we...we will be unable to bring anything with us, correct?”

“ We can take some things with us, but not much—only what we can carry.”

“ We will never see Mother and Father again.”

Lorian’s eyes grew hot. “ No, most likely not.”

“ Ah.”

Lothric was silent for a few seconds. Then, he slipped his hands out of Lorian’s own and moved to
wrap his arms around his elder brother’s middle, pressing his face into Lorian’s nightshirt.
Wetness bled through the thin cotton fabric.

“ Oh, I don’t care, Lorian!” Lothric’s voice was muffled and wavering. His bony shoulders
trembled underneath his robe. “ Wherever we go, whatever we do, I will be alright as long as I am
with you! I don’t care about being a prince or a king or a Lord of Cinder...all I want is for us to be
together! So I’ll follow you, dear brother, wherever you wish to go, whatever you wish to do...just
please, please let me stay with you! Please don’t leave me behind, Lorian! Please!”

Lorian’s heart shattered into thousands of pieces. He pulled Lothric close and cradled the back of
his head to his breast, rocking him gently.

“ Never, Lothric; I would never leave you behind.” Lorian’s voice took on the determined and
serious tone normally reserved for making inspirational and rousing speeches to his troops. “ You
are the other half of my soul, little one, and leaving you behind would be the same as putting my
head on the guillotine.” Lothric muffled a sob in Lorian’s tunic, who kissed him firmly on the
temple. “ Many things will change when we leave the kingdom, baby drake, but my love and
devotion for you will remain as eternal as the cycle of light and dark—and yours for me, I assume.
So I will stay with you, Lothric, until the day comes when you are older and have no need of me
any longer.”

“ Stop being stupid!” Lothric weakly beat his little fists against Lorian’s back. “ You’re always
thinking too hard about all of the wrong things! I will always need you, Lorian, so don’t you ever say anything like that again! That’s an order!”

A small part of Lorian was relieved at those words, and he laughed wetly against Lothric’s bony shoulder, feeling as if he would burst open from being so full of love. Was there a limit on how much the human heart could feel at once?

“As you command, Your Majesty.” With that, Lorian pressed his lips together and blew against the junction of Lothric’s shoulder and neck, making the boy squeal and squirm in his arms.

As Lothric slept, curled up on Lorian’s chest, the elder prince pulled out the map Sirris had given him and studied it intently, doing his best to estimate their position from the landmarks she had marked on the parchment.

Interpreting Sirris’ handwriting was difficult at best (thank goodness one does not require skilled penmanship to become a knight!), but while it took some squinting and page-tilting to make out the words, Lorian eventually determined that they were coming close to the river that acted as Irithyll’s western border. According to Sirris, if they followed the river a short ways north, they would come across a bridge that would only be visible to those wearing a specially charged talisman. Said talisman would also enable them to pass through the two translucent gates at the bridge’s entrance and exit.

*Whatever you do*, she had noted and underlined, *make absolutely sure that you are not being followed when you cross over. Secrecy is how the city has remained undisturbed for centuries. Prying eyes would only lead to problems.*

A chill ran down Lorian’s back as he read those words. Was it from the cold, or his nerves? As if on queue, a gust of wind rattled through the mouth of the cave, and Lorian tucked his free arm under Lothric’s legs to shift him further up his chest.

How was it that freedom could feel so close yet so far away? Only half a day’s journey…they could potentially be in Irithyll by what would have been the end of the day in the sunlit realm; but what if something happened along the way? What if Oceiros caught up to them earlier than expected? Had Lorian or Lothric let something slip, in their final days in the kingdom, that raised the king’s suspicions? He knew Lothric was not one to let his thoughts slip out unawares—even at his most tired and trancelike—but what if one of Lorian’s knights had noticed something strange about their commander’s behavior, and reported it to Oceiros? What if one of their father’s spies overheard his initial conversation with Sirris? What if Sirris, gods forbid, truly did intend to betray them?

*No.* Lorian shook his head with far more aggression than necessary. *If she had intended to betray us, I would have been stopped the moment I entered the dragons’ barracks. Only Sirris knows where we are right now. We are safe. We are almost to Irithyll. We will be free soon.*

Freedom…what was it like?

While Lothric may have had his destiny forced upon him the moment he was conceived, Lorian had had his life mapped out by the king and queen from the time he was a toddler, and the thought of who he might be, outside of their influence, was…jarring, to say the least. What would Lorian become now that he was no longer a prince or a commander? Lothric, at least, had the advantage of being a child still. From the books on childrearing Lorian had frantically read in the days after his little brother’s birth, he knew that it was far easier for children to adapt and overcome than it
was for adults, and Lorian was swiftly approaching twenty-nine years of age. How different would he have been without Oceiros breathing down his neck, and their mother tut-tutting him whenever he learned a skill that did not involve swordplay or tactics? For all the things Lorian knew he was useless at, the elder prince was confident in his skills as a knight and a military commander, and the thought of choosing another path in life had never crossed his mind until the reality of leaving the Kingdom of Lothric became unavoidable.

If he was to give up being a knight once they reached Irithyll…what could he be?

While Lorian was pretty certain he was useless at anything but fighting, planning, and dragon riding, he did enjoy working with his hands. He had always wanted to learn how to garden, and when Lorian had taken it upon himself to learn how to sew, knit, and cook basic staples after Lothric was born, the elder prince was surprised at how much he enjoyed all three activities. He was good with wyverns—or so they said—and he was fond of animals in general, especially frogs, crystal lizards, and turtles. He loved anything reptilian, really, including snakes. They were such misunderstood and maligned creatures, but they were simply doing their best, just like every other living creature in the world.

Lorian enjoyed reading, but could not do it very well. He had discovered after Lothric’s birth that he adored taking care of children—even when it came to the messier and more "unpleasant" tasks that came with the responsibility—but he hardly had the chance to be around other little ones. He could do basic metalwork and smithing, but only when it came to rudimentary repairs and upkeep for his armor and weaponry. He could navigate any political situation with the instinct of a salmon swimming upstream, and he had negotiated himself, his soldiers, and his kingdom out of many a sticky situation in the past…but what good would such skills do when he was no longer in a position to make use of them? Was he good at anything other than being a brute?

Lothric snuffled and shifted against his breastplate, and Lorian found himself smiling in spite of himself, setting the map on the ground so he could stroke his brother’s cheek with a bronze-covered finger.

As long as he could be a good elder brother, mother, father…he could live with being mediocre at everything else.

Lorian hadn’t even realized he’d fallen asleep until he woke to find Lothric sitting close to their makeshift bonfire, a scowl on his now-uncovered mouth as he angrily held one of the tin cans they’d brought against the flaming sword—as if he were cross that its contents were not warming as quickly as he would like. The child practically jumped out of his thin skin when Lorian coughed to get his attention, and he had to scramble to keep his grip on the cup, which nearly slipped out of his unwieldy hands.

“How long have I been asleep?” Lorian asked, once Lothric relaxed.

“A couple hours, I think. I woke up when you shifted in your sleep.”

“Ah.” Lorian rubbed the back of his neck in embarrassment. “I’m sorry, Lothric.”

“Don’t be. I feel just fine now.” The younger prince certainly sounded far peppier than he had before his nap, and Lorian noticed that his brother's hands were no longer shaking from exhaustion and cold. “I’m actually glad you woke me up. I wanted to make sure you actually slept instead of staying awake and worrying about all of the wrong things.”

The knight couldn’t help but laugh at the comment. “Ah, guilty as charged, I suppose.”
“You ‘suppose.”’ Lothric rolled his eyes and scooted closer to his elder brother. “Here, Lorian; I made this for you.”

As Lorian took the cup in his hands, his nose caught whiff of a familiar spicy aroma, and a smile spread across his face as he stared into the dark liquid. “You hate this type of tea.”

“It smells like the Grand Archives.” Lothric wrinkled his nose, making Lorian laugh again.

“Yet you brought some along with us?”

Lothric stared at Lorian as if he had just declared that fire was hot. “Of course I did. It’s your favorite. I did not know if we would be able to find some in Irithyll, so I wrapped some in a handkerchief and tucked it into my robes. I melted some snow to make it.”

Lorian struggled not to tear up. How was he so easily disarmed by basic kindness? “Thank you, dear brother. Have you had something warm to drink yourself?”

“Yes, before you woke up; I brought some sugar to melt with the snow.” Lothric watched with satisfaction as Lorian sipped his “old wax tea,” as he so disdainfully called it. “I can add some to your tea if you’d like.”

“No. Save it in case you need it.” Out of the corner of his eye, Lorian noticed the map he had set aside earlier, laid out on one of the flatter rocks near his sword. “Were you reading the map while I was asleep?”

Lothric nodded. “I think we are close…half a day, maybe. Are we going to follow the river to that bridge on the map?”

Lorian nodded and took a long pull of tea, sighing in contentment as warmth spread through his chilled limbs. It was the perfect antidote for what he called ‘armor bite’. “Do you have the strength to make it the rest of the way without stopping? Answer me honestly.”

“I think I would be able to ride on your back for a week straight, if it means getting away from Father.”

Lorian laughed until he snorted tea up his nose.

After finishing his drink and sharing some of the pastries they’d packed with Lothric, Lorian pulled his sword out of the ground, slid it into the scabbard on his back, and secured the bags of their belongings to his waist. Once he was sure the map was safely tucked down his neck and into his chest plate, he knelt down and allowed Lothric to climb onto his back, reaching behind himself to make sure the child was seated securely on his scabbard. Once Lothric had a good grip around his neck, Lorian stood and walked out of the cave, taking a moment to orient himself before resuming their trek down the valley.

As Lorian carefully picked his way down the snow-covered slope, Lothric resumed chattering, apparently having turned his focus onto all of the things he wanted to do once they reached their destination. When they got to Irithyll, he told Lorian, they would have to get a house. Not a big one, probably, but something just for the two of them, that they could decorate together. In all of the books he’d read, the bedroom had always been on the top floor of the house, but Lothric would prefer to have his own on the bottom since he wouldn’t need Lorian’s help to get to it so much. Of course, they could have separate rooms now, but the younger prince wouldn’t hate sharing Lorian’s bed if he absolutely had to, because Lorian was so warm and he always felt so safe to sleep next to, and it was also convenient when he woke up due to pain or asthma or fever or
coughing, which happened…quite a bit. Well, even if Lothric couldn’t sleep on his own yet, Lorian just *had* to get out and meet people and have his own life! He was twenty-eight, for Heaven’s sake! He needed to make friends and find someone his own age that could help him in all of the ways Lothric couldn’t.

Oh, and Lothric had been doing research on the climate and vegetation of the Boreal Valley for the past couple of days, and it would actually be quite easy to make a viable garden, as long as they used the right plants! A small one would be possible, right? Lorian had always wanted to try gardening, and Lothric would probably be able to help care for the plants in *some* ways, so it would be a project they could work on together. Maybe Lorian could finally keep the frogs he had a habit of rescuing from the most precarious of situations. A few cold-tolerant species lived in the Boreal Valley, so maybe they could get a small housing tank for them, like the ones Father had in his lab.

They could also have bookshelves, right? Lothric knew that there were most likely plenty of libraries in the city itself, but there was something about having books of one’s own that you could go back to time and time again, and—in Lothric’s opinion—a house always looked better with bookshelves. Well, no, he hadn’t actually been anywhere other than the castle grounds in his short lifetime. But he had read about what people did with houses in books, and nine times out of ten, they had several bookshelves in their houses. Why is that funny? You have a strange sense of humor, Lorian!

As Lothric alternated between planning out their new life and scolding Lorian for finding it humorous, the scenery around them slowly began to shift. The rocky crags that had closed in around the forest like a trap began to smooth and soften, becoming gently rolling hills, dotted with trees of their own, and the rocky ground beneath Lorian’s feet grew softer and more fecund as they continued their descent. As the valley began to level off into a riverbed, the snow began to thicken at Lorian’s feet, and it was at his mid calf level by the time they heard the rushing of the water.

Lothric—who had never seen a river in real life before—insisted on being let down to get a firsthand look, but Lorian waited until they had reached the riverbank proper before kneeling to let his little brother off. He didn’t think Lothric’s body would appreciate having to wade through a waist-high snow bank.

The river itself was mostly covered over by ice, but there were a few holes in the ice where one could see the rushing current underneath, and the ice seemed to break up close to a patch of rapids further downstream. Lothric kneeled at the riverbank and peered at the water through a hole in the ice, squinting as he tried to catch sight of any fish swimming by, and Lorian was content to leave him to his own devices as he took stock of their environment. Though the elder prince’s vision grew fuzzy at the limit of the horizon, he thought he could see lights through the fog in the distance, and he asked Lothric for a second opinion.

“Yeah, I can see it, too!” The child nodded vigorously. “Do you think it is Irithyll?”

“I do not know. I thought you were only supposed to see the city if you were wearing the talisman, and since you are not touching me right now, you shouldn’t be able to see it.” Lorian frowned in thought. “Then again, this is *you* we’re talking about. It would not surprise me if you had the ability to see through illusion magic.”

“Guess that’s another thing that makes me ‘special,’” Lothric grumbled moodily, using a stick he’d found in the snow to poke at some sort of empty shell on the bank. Lorian’s heart ached.

“Come now, Lothric. This is a good thing.” Lothric blinked and glanced up at his elder brother. “Think about it: if we were to get separated somehow, then we could meet in Irithyll. I would not
have to worry about you being lost in the valley.”

“Why would we be separated?” Lothric’s frown deepened.

“The first lesson you learn as a knight, little one, is to always anticipate and prepare for all outcomes.” Lorian knelt down next to Lothric and examined the flat shell he had found—some sort of freshwater clam, perhaps. “Would you like to take a few with us to make a necklace or talisman of some sort?”

Lothric’s expression brightened nigh-instantly—seemingly distracted from his prior thoughts—and he set about sifting through the shells on the riverbed, picking up and examining each one individually before either placing it in his hand or setting it back on the muddy shale. Once he had collected a large variety of shells in different shapes and colors, the younger prince tucked them safely into one of the inner pockets of his prayer robe before climbing back onto Lorian’s back, ready to begin the final leg of their journey.

As they continued upstream, the ground began to rise in incline, and Lorian found himself climbing up a surprisingly steep and snow-covered hill. Lothric had offered to teleport them to the top, but Lorian wanted his little brother to save his energy and declined, even if his calves were burning like Chaos fire once they finally reached the top. At least the lights in the distance were far closer than before, and Lothric spotted an old flat stump in a nearby clearing, on which Lorian all but collapsed with a sigh of relief. As Lothric milled about nearby, Lorian unclipped the backs of his boots and reached inside, massaging the tight and aching muscles of his legs. The pain abated with a few minutes of vigorous rubbing, but the tingling was slow to dissipate, and Lorian couldn’t help but feel concerned. He was more than used to numbness and needle-like pain in his legs after a long march, but this day of travelling was short and mild compared to the large mountain ranges he had traversed in the past, and his little brother weighed next to nothing. Why were his legs bothering him so? Perhaps it was due to the anxiety of the situation, or the heavy packs he wore at his waist, or maybe…

With another sigh, Lorian unclipped his side bags and set them on either side of the stump, deciding to massage his legs for a moment or two longer and wait for the strange tingling to pass. He could hear Lothric shuffling about nearby, and he was confident his little brother knew better than to wander off too far (not that he could go far, anyway, with his weak limbs and rheumatic joints), so he focused his attention on slamming his feet on the ground in an attempt to get his blood flowing.

“Ah. Much better.” The brief tension abated as the strange numbness passed, as quickly as it had come, and Lorian quickly set about fastening his boots back into place. “We should not have too far to go now. Lothric. Are you ready to—”

Something cold and wet hit Lorian in the head, and he all but jumped out of his armor in his haste to stand, frantically scanning his surroundings in search of his attacker. Lothric giggled, and Lorian reached up to touch the back of his head, feeling the remnants of snow clinging to his long hair.

“Got you!” Lothric cheered. Another snowball hit Lorian in the back, and the elder prince found himself grinning as he turned to face his "attacker," who had seemingly vanished in the scant seconds in-between.

“Lothric! You can’t just teleport in a snowball fight!” As much as Lorian wanted to scold Lothric for wasting his energy in such a precarious situation, his mischievous side ended up winning out, and he quickly knelt down to grab some snow of his own. “It gives you an unfair advantage!”

“Unfair?!” The little voice came from somewhere to Lorian’s left. “Says the man who is taller
Lorian ducked to avoid the snowball lobbed directly at his head. Was it just him, or was there a faint crackle of magic in the air?

“Lothric! You’re supposed to use your arms!”

“I have no upper body strength, Lorian!” Lothric’s voice was indignant, and Lorian couldn’t keep himself from laughing, tossing his own snowball at the pale face peeking out from behind a nearby tree. It caught Lothric’s cheek before he could move, and the little boy squealed in delight before clasping his hands together and vanishing in a flash of white light. Lorian sprang to his feet and looked around for his brother’s new hiding place, his abdominal muscles beginning to ache from laughing so much.

“All right, you little imp!” Lorian did his best evil cackle and scooped up some more snow, making a show of patting it into a perfect circle. He could hear muffled giggling to his right. “I’ll have you know that I was the reigning snowball fight champion for six years straight! No squire was able to overcome my impeccable aim and quick reflexes! Prepare yourself, foul vagrant!”

Another magically-charged snowball came zooming towards Lorian, clipping him in the arm as he rolled to dodge, and Lothric cheered and peeked through the snowy branches of a nearby pine tree.

“Yes! Prepare to relinquish your title to the true Lord of Snowballs, foolish knight!”

Lorian smirked and lobbed his snowball at Lothric’s head. As was the elder prince’s intention, the snowball whizzed just past the younger prince’s head, smashing against the tree trunk behind him. Lothric made a little “eep!” and teleported away before Lorian could ready another.

“Coward!” Lorian crowed with mock annoyance. He tossed his snowball in the air with mock confidence as he searched for his brother. “Come out and face me if you wish to take your throne!”

Nothing. Lorian caught his snowball and held it still.

“Lothric?”

An unnatural stillness settled over the clearing. It was as if the air had become a thick blanket, smothering the groaning of the snow-encumbered tree limbs and the chattering of the birds; even the sharp cracking of the river ice seemed muffled to Lorian’s ears. An equally thick sense of dread worked its way up the knight’s throat.

“Lothric?!” Lorian didn’t bother masking the concern in his voice. “Lothric, this isn’t funny! If you are trying to hide from me, then you need to come out—now!”

A strange sound filtered through the cotton-like fuzz in Lorian’s ears—viscous, feral, and unreal all at once. A lash of panic cracked through Lorian’s nerves, and the elder prince was unsheathing his sword and darting towards the noise before he even consciously realized it, springing through the thicket with a grace and swiftness that would have surprised all that knew him.

“Lothric! Lothric!”

Lorian crashed through the thicket like a battering ram and found himself on top of a small hill just adjacent to the riverbank. His frantic eyes soon caught sight of Lothric, huddled in a little ball at the river’s edge, but any relief Lorian felt was soon eclipsed by the utterly petrified look on his little sibling’s face. A large shadow seemed to have fallen over him, and his little brother seemed
paralyzed as he looked up at the source, both his prayer and makeshift blanket hood falling behind
him to reveal his wide, unblinking stare. He looked so small and frail in that massive shadow—his
little limbs trembling like a leaf caught in a gale—and the sight was so distressing to the elder
prince that it took him a moment to see just what Lothric was looking at.

What on—!

It was a monster—the kind of monster one typically saw in storybooks designed to scare children
into listening to their parents. Lorian had faced demons of every shape, size, color, and nature, but
he had never before beheld a surface creature of such a size. He had read the legends, of course—
of the Great Grey Wolf, companion of Knight Artorias the Abysswalker, that grew to be as tall and
long as a house, but the creature standing in front of his bother seemed abnormally stretched, with
four twisted, clawed limbs and a spine that struggled to break through its thick brown fur. An
unruly mane of matted brown hair stretched from crown to the tip of its elongated tail, and its snout
was as long and broad as that of a Catarinian crocodile, full to bursting with jagged, dragon-like
teeth and dripping with ichorous drool.

What could it possibly be? The only thing Lorian could compare it to were the many artistic
interpretations of Manus, Father of the Abyss, that he had seen over the years. Yet Lorian had
spied nary a trace of the Abyss in the surrounding area. Where could it have possibly come from?

The creature growled—a sound akin to the grinding of animal bones on a whetstone—and the three
red eyes that Lorian could see were fixed on the child trembling before him. His little brother
appeared a hen chick in the den of a starving fox, and Lorian found himself reacting without
conscious thought, picking up a nearby large rock with his free hand and hurling it at the creature
with all of his might.

“Hey! You!”

The rock hit the beast square in the forehead, and it immediately turned to face him, glaring up at
him with six glowing red eyes and bellowing in rage. Lorian’s stomach twisted at the sight of its
massive ribs jutting out of the fur of its chest.

Something is not right.

“Up here, you monster! Do you not think of me as far more substantial prey?! I certainly have
more meat on my bones!” Lorian readied his sword in both hands as he yelled at the top of his
lungs.

Now behind the creature, Lothric seemed to snap out of his petrification, and he looked up at
Lorian with frantic eyes. Lorian nodded at him—get away, I will handle this—and Lothric
quickly clasped his hands together and teleported out of sight, allowing his elder brother to focus
his full attention on the threat before him. Said threat did not seem to notice the flash of light that
signified the boy’s departure; its entire focus was now trained on the knight standing atop the hill,
and its claws dug into the frozen earth beneath it as it crouched low, preparing to spring into the air
and strike first.

Lorian was not going to give it the chance.

Though the greatsword in the elder prince’s hands was scorched with the fire of its greatest
adversary, a strange symbiosis had developed between the knight and the lingering trace of the
Demon Prince’s soul housed in the blackened steel. Flames engulfed the blade without a conscious
command, and Lorian quickly sprung off of the hill and plunged his sword down at the monster’s
head.
The thing leapt to the side at the last second, but found itself caught against the steep hillside, and Lorian’s greatsword sunk itself into its left side. The scream it emitted shook Lorian down to the marrow, and it quickly began to thrash back and forth in an attempt to shake him off, eventually moving to slam its side against the hill. Sensing its intentions, Lorian quickly wrenched his sword out of the meat of the monster’s ribcage, and dropped to the ground, rolling underneath it and springing to his feet before it consciously realized he was gone. The somewhat-solidified mud of the riverbank gave under Lorian’s bronze boots, and he quickly dug his heels into the earth to ensure he had enough purchase to move without slipping and falling.

Finally realizing that the knight was no longer on its left, the monster spun around with a speed that was more than a little impressive, its glowing red eyes constricting to the size of large beads once it caught sight of Lorian standing with his back to the river.

_That’s right_, Lorian thought, unable to keep a slight smirk off of his face. He tightened his two-handed grip on his greatsword. _You are angry with me, aren’t you? I interrupted your mid-afternoon snack. Go on! Attack me!_

As if in response to his silent taunting, the creature _screamed_ and charged, its massive claws tearing chunks off of the riverbed as fog and saliva poured from its mouth. Lorian’s smirk widened, and he quickly turned and swiped his sword into the shallow water at the bank, releasing a torrent of steam into the air. The monster shirked as it careened headlong into the makeshift smokescreen, allowing Lorian to nimbly sidestep his way out of its path. Though the steam also obscured his vision, he heard the beast pitch into the shallows, and he used that noise to guide the path of his blade.

Lorian felt his blade hit flesh, and he leapt backwards just as the monster lunged to counterattack, its jaws uselessly snapping at the air where he once stood.

_Only one of us has practiced fighting without sight, it seems._

The smell of curdling flesh met Lorian’s nostrils as he swung once more, and this time his blade appeared to catch on something solid at the end of its arc, presumably one of the monster’s large ribs. The prince gave a quick yank to free his blade, and there was a gruesome cracking of bone as the obstruction gave way, the creature wailing in pain as one of its large ribs was splintered at its base. He sprang backward as the creature dove at him, slamming its snout into the mud with enough force that Lorian felt the ground vibrate beneath his feet when he landed.

By then, the steam had dissipated to the point where he could see the creature’s eyes flaring in the mist, and Lorian could feel Lothric’s gaze on his back from his hiding place. As much as the elder prince enjoyed the thrill of a good fight, he knew that the risk to himself and his brother increased the longer it went on, so he decided it was time to finish the job.

With a yell, Lorian aimed his sword near the creature’s eyes and ran forward, thrusting the flaming blade into an area just left of what he assumed was the monster’s head. His estimated guess paid off, as he felt his blade plunge into the meaty area between the base of the creature’s neck and shoulder, and he braced his left foot on the upper part of the creature’s left leg, digging his right foot into the ground and effectively preventing the beast from moving forward or away. Lorian rammed his iron-inlaid heel into the creature’s left leg, and he felt his blade tear upward as the creature collapsed onto its left knee, blood spurting out of the wound before the heat could effectively cauterize its flesh. The position Lorian was in made it near-impossible for the monster to crane its neck back far enough to bite him, and though it tried frantically to stand, the fact that its left leg had been forced to the ground meant that its right leg was left slipping uselessly for purchase in the mud.
It was a foolproof trick Lorian had used many a time when hunting wild drakes with the kingdom’s wyvern tamers. If they were attempting to catch the creature alive, Lorian would use a long spear with a sedative smeared on its tip instead of a sword, and he would simply have to hold the wyvern immobile long enough for it to go slack or be drugged further into unconsciousness by the handlers. However, on those rare instances where a rabid or battle-crazed wyvern was a direct threat to the surrounding villages or the other dragonriders, using a sword instead of a spear ensured that, no matter how the wyvern struggled or the blade moved, it would be able to either incapacitate it or kill it: the blade would inevitably cut major blood vessels, nerves, the spinal cord, or even the heart itself.

Well, no matter how the death came about, a wyvern’s demise would be all but ensured once a blade was embedded in that specific spot between the neck and left shoulder, and Lorian assumed that this particular beast—as unnerving as it was—would be equally doomed.

“Go, brother dearest; go!” Lorian could hear Lothric cheer and clap somewhere in the background, and he couldn’t help but square his shoulders in pride before tightening his grip on the blade and digging his heel into the flesh of the creature’s left knee for purchase, deciding to drag the sword right and sever whatever blood vessels fed the beast’s brain.

The steam finally dissipated completely, and just before Lorian could twist the sword and pull, he saw the creature’s mouth open and begin to… spark?

Lorian froze.

That’s impossible. The elder prince watched—too stunned to remember how to move—as a storm began to coalesce in the creature’s gaping jaws. Only humans and god-kin have the ability to conjure lightni—

The creature fired, and Lorian screamed, the impossible being obliterated as every nerve ending in his body seemed to explode at once.

“Lorian!”

The elder prince could dimly hear his little brother calling his name, but it was hard to register anything outside of himself as his blood boiled and his throat seemed to fill with smoke, his heart clattering against his ribcage like silverware falling onto a stone floor. He had been hit with lightning spears before—it being a common spell in Lothric’s military—but it had always been while wearing rubber-lined training armor, and none of the kingdom’s human enemies ever made use of faith-based miracles and spells in combat. He had never before felt the sensation of every muscle in his limbs attempting to rip themselves off of his body and punch through his armor all at once. He had never before seen such stars explode in his head and eyes. It felt like having died and been reborn a thousand times in a blink. Dimly, Lorian marveled at the fact that he had found an experience even more unpleasant than being burned by demon fire, but the thought slipped away as soon as it had come like sand through his fingers.

Is this what dying feels like…?

While his hands maintained a death grip on the hilt of his sword, Lorian’s legs had spasmed and given out beneath him, allowing the monster to climb to its feet. It shook violently, and though Lorian wouldn’t have been able to make his hands release the hilt if he tried, the sword eventually slipped out the creature’s body, sending both Lorian and his weapon tumbling unceremoniously to the ground. The impact finally knocked the hilt out of Lorian’s fingers, but before he could even attempt to consider picking it up, he felt the creature’s hot breath on his face, and he didn’t need to open his eyes to know what was going to happen.
The creature clamped its jaws around his middle, and Lorian found himself screaming again, his eyes flying open and his hands instinctively flying out to claw at its face. Undeterred, it lifted the knight into the air and slammed him into the ground again and again—an action that would have been fatal had Lorian not been wearing his brass helmet. He felt the creature’s jaws puncture something deep inside of him, and Lorian suddenly found himself unable to catch his breath.

There was a flash of white light, and Lorian found himself falling to the ground as the creature screeches and stumbled backwards, watching—entranced—as a plume of smoke wafted from scorched fur on the side of its head.

“Let my brother go, you rotten, worthless, wretched thing!!”

Another white soul arrow slammed into the monster’s head, sending it careening backwards, and Lorian somehow found the strength and sensation to push himself up on his hands, nearly blacking out from both pain and his sudden inability to breathe. His limbs shook violently, but he forced himself to move as much as he could, reaching out a hand to grab his sword. He barely had the strength and coordination to move, let alone attempt to wield a weapon, but he had to protect Lothric. No matter what, he had to…he had to…!

There were little arms wrapping around his chest, helping to support him, and Lorian’s eyes—which had closed from the pain—snapped open. “No, Lothric…get away…run!” He weakly tried to push his brother off with his free hand. “Go to Irithyll…you have to leave me and go!”

“I am not going anywhere without you!” Lothric’s blue eyes were wet and wild, but his trembling mouth was set into a determined line, and he used strength Lorian hadn’t thought he possessed to haul his half-paralyzed elder brother close to a sitting position. “I would rather die than be without you, dear brother! So either we go to Irithyll together, or—!”

Before Lothric could finish his sentence, the creature finally rose back to its feet, and Lorian wanted to weep in anguish as it fixed its eyes on the boy. They had been so close, so godsdamned close, and he had only his worthless, pathetic self to blame! Why had he allowed himself to be distracted by its lightning attack?! Lothric had not yet learned how to teleport anyone other than himself, and if he refused to run and leave Lorian, then…

I could not even protect my brother in the end.

Lorian met Lothric’s eyes, and though the boy was clearly frightened, he simply tightened his grip around Lorian’s chest.

I am so sorry, Lothric. You deserved a better brother…a better family…a better life…

“ I love you, Lorian.” Lothric whispered. “ I love you so much. I’m so glad you were my brother over any other brother I could have had.”

No longer able to find words, Lorian simply sobbed and pulled his brother close, shielding him as best he could with his body as the creature slowly approached its prey. His only hope was that he would take to devouring Lorian first and allow Lothric the chance to escape.

I love you too, Lothric. I wish I could have done right by you.

Now merely a few steps away, the beast reared back, foam and drool spilling from its mouth as it opened its jaws wide—

—and screeched in pain as a large blast of purple magic slammed into it from the hilltop, ripping a bloody chunk of muscle, fur, and bone out of its left side and sending it tumbling over itself into
Lothric yelped in surprise, and Lorian instinctively tightened his arms around his little brother, his sluggish brain desperately trying to comprehend the fact that they were still alive. Though his vision was beginning to fade in and out, he could see the creature struggle to its feet, now bleeding profusely from its left side. It tried to charge at the hill, but the moment its claws touched the riverbank, it was struck by another violet-colored soul arrow, somehow larger and more potent than the last. Lorian could see the creature’s ribs disintegrate alongside the entirety of the skin and fat on its right side, leaving only ragged, hemorrhagic muscle behind. The beast fell on its front and slid, snout first, to a stop on the shore.

“Amazing…!” Lothric breathed, eyes now wide with wonder instead of fear, and Lorian silently agreed with his statement. Even their goddess mother had never demonstrated such power—!

Black spots danced in front of Lorian’s eyes, but he forced himself to stay awake, if only to make sure Lothric was okay. The creature had been mauled into a ragged and worn scrap of a living being, shuddering and moaning in pain, and it was bleeding so profusely that the shallows of the river were beginning to tint pink. It weakly lifted its head to look at the hilltop, and though Lorian’s gaze could certainly have been deceiving him, he could have sworn he saw its red eyes flash with what looked like recognition.

Its jaws opened.

“YooOoooOOoooooUrr MaaaAaaaaAAaajjjessstttyYY…”

Was Lorian hearing things, or were those words?

“heeeeeeeeeelp meEEeeeEEEe…”

Despite the buzzing in his ears and the strangely coherent mutterings of the monster, Lorian was still able to hear the sound of a bow being drawn in the direction of the hillside. It released with a sharp ping, and before Lorian could blink an eye, the sky above the creature darkened, and a torrent of small golden arrows began to rain from the thick clouds. They struck the creature in the hundreds, piercing through its thick, hair-covered hide as if it were paper—but while Lorian and Lothric were only a short distance away from their target, the arrows did not stray from the immediate area surrounding the creature.

With one last, blood-curdling cry, the beast collapsed into a macerated, arrow-riddled heap on the riverbank, blood seeping out of its hundreds of wounds and darkening the mud beneath it.

As its red eyes finally grew dark, Lorian found what strength he had leaving him, and he could not stop his weight from falling entirely onto his frail brother.

“Lorian!” Lothric scrambled out from beneath Lorian’s body before he was crushed, and as the edges of Lorian’s vision began to darken, he saw Lothric’s pale face appear above him. His face was so very damp and pained, and oh, how Lorian wished he had the strength to wipe away his tears! As it stood, he only had the strength to smile, and he managed to weakly squeeze the little fingers that wrapped around his hand. “Please, please hold on, dear brother! Just hold on and I’ll heal you right up—!”

“Wait.”

Another voice met Lorian’s ears—prim and genderless, with a soft firmness that was unusually soothing. There was a flash of bright golden light, and the stranger was suddenly at Lorian’s other
side, setting what appeared to be a long, golden staff on the ground as they knelt at the knight’s side.

Though it was becoming a struggle to even keep his eyes open—let alone see anything with them—Lorian did his best to make out the features of their unexpected savior. It may have been the pain and blood loss muddling his mind, but Lorian thought this apparent sorcerer was the most ethereal being he had ever seen: skin as white as clean snow, which contrasted dramatically with their black raiment; long hair seemingly made of moonlight itself, spilling over their shoulders and cascading down their back; and some sort of burnished golden crown that covered their eyes. What Lorian could see of their face was soft, delicate, and rounded, and as they took Lorian’s free hand in their own, the knight could feel soft, well-tended skin and manicured nails against his bloodied and calloused palms.

“Beautiful.” Lorian murmured before he could stop himself. Their savior’s thin lips briefly parted—making a small “o” shape—before flattening into a frown.

“That creature may have broken its teeth against thy brother’s armor when it bit him,” the figure calmly yet sternly explained to Lothric. “If thee heals him as he is, thou may seal a foreign body into his wounds, which shall only worsen his condition.”

“But he’s bleeding!” Lothric wailed, his grip tightening on Lorian’s hand. The elder prince gave it another reassuring squeeze, weaker than before. “There is no point in removing a tooth from his body if he bleeds out before you can do it!”

“Rest thy heart, little one; thy brother is not the first critically-injured knight to whom I have tended.” One soft hand pressed itself to Lorian’s chest while the other gently touched his forehead. “Brave knight, can thee hearest mine voice?”

Lorian nodded, his eyes falling shut as the last of his strength began to drain away.

“I am going to cast a healing miracle to stop thy bleeding. Once thee can safely be moved, I shall take thee and thy brother back to mine home and tend to thee.” A familiar, soft tingling ran through Lorian’s body, and he grit his teeth against the pain of his blood vessels knitting themselves back together. “Art thou the ‘Lorian’ of which the little one speaks?”

Another weak nod. “Irithyll…” Lorian’s voice was barely a whisper. “We have to…Irithyll.”

“How dost thee know of Irithyll?”

“Talisman…map…neck…” Lorian’s words were as fragmented as his scattering thoughts. “Sirris…”

“Sirris?” He heard the figure breathe. The hand left his forehead, reached under Lorian’s armor, and gripped the talisman. “How did thee gain hold of this necklace? Did it belong to Lady Sirris?”

He knows her. Hope filled Lorian’s heart. Even if he were to die on this riverbank, Lothric would still make it to Irithyll. His little brother would be safe. “Lothric…”

There were heavy, clanking footsteps approaching from afar. He was so tired…

“Lothric? Dost thee mean the kingdom?”

“Lothric…my little brother…” Darkness closed in around Lorian like a trap, but he forced his lips to move, knowing it may be his last act. “Please…take care of him…keep him safe, in Irithyll…do not…let him burn…”
Lorian’s mind finally went blank under the weight of oblivion, and as his thoughts unraveled at the seams and fell into nothing, the last thing he heard was his brother calling his name.

Chapter End Notes

Well, here it is: a project that came out of nowhere, grew wildly outside of my expectations, and has evolved into a monster that has consumed the entirety of my writing time. I hope y'all are ready for a wild ride of headcanons, world-building, tropes, trope breaking, veiled commentary on the fandom, and wish-fulfillment. So much wish-fulfillment.

This work would never have come into being without the help of my three friends and fellow writers: Monzi (on AO3), for screaming with me about characters she barely knows anything about and for helping me fine-tune my writing; Apostapal (on AO3), for being the quality we need in both the Overwatch and Dark Souls fandoms; and Iced-Blood (on fanfiction.net), who not only beta read this chapter, but helped me figure out just how the frick Gwyndolin talks. I highly recommend finding and reading their works, like, yesterday.

Tags, relationships, and characters will be added as the series progresses, and any triggering content will be warned about at the beginning of each chapter. Strap yourself in, folks, because both the series and this fic are gonna be a wild ride.
all around the world was waking, i never could go back

Chapter Summary

A child who was destined to burn. A knight who was destined to wither away. Their fates were written in blood and sealed with ash, yet they somehow ended up on a frozen riverbank far from home, chasing a hope as faint as morning starlight. What does it take to break the unyielding grip of a fate predetermined?

It starts and ends as all things do--with a choice.

Chapter Notes

Trigger/Content Warning: Non-graphic descriptions of physical and emotional child abuse; attempted self-harm; brief mentions of suicidal ideation.

Credits: Iced-Blood (on fanfiction.net), for writing a significant chunk of Ocieros' dialogue, and for coming up with Lorian's awesome nicknames. Couldn't have done it without you and your knack for epic dialogue, homeslice.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

If someone had asked Lorian why he came to his decision to take his brother and flee the kingdom of Lothric, he would have been hard pressed to name a specific instance as the one that tipped him over the edge.

In fact, it would take him years to piece together all of the factors that lead to that moment at midnight in his father’s garden, and they would take the shape of a patchwork quilt of numerous little incidents, stitched together to show the answer that had been evading him for eight long years.

In another timeline, one of those events may not have occurred, and the picture would never have come into focus. The elder prince would have reluctantly followed in lockstep with Ocieros’ whims until they became utterly unbearable, and he would have kept his misery at Lothric’s eventual fate locked inside until it ate him away like a worm in an apple core. Such was the way of the royal family of Lothric, as it had been for thousands of years, and how it should have been for thousands of years after.

Something changed, however, on the night Lorian realized he could take things no longer.

Was it his conversation with Oceiros about the state of Lothric’s clothing?

It had been the first time Lorian brought the subject up to their father, but the knight had tried so
many times prior to convince the priests to let Lothric wear something other than the holy garb that had swaddled him in infancy. Lothric had such tender skin, he would always say, and it scratches him terribly when he rubs at his face or has been keeling for a long time. Surely Lothric would be just as holy and magically gifted if he were wearing something other than that glorified burlap. If they insisted on him wearing robes like the clergy, perhaps they could simply get him softer ones, like those worn by the archbishop himself.

Said archbishop and his fellows would always push back, however, stating that those robes had been specifically blessed for his little brother. Besides, did suffering not bring one closer to truth? The most effective miracles are made and told by those that have known discomfort, and if Lothric was to be an immortal Lord of Cinder, they must ensure that he was as strong in spirit as possible. Comfort would simply lead to sin.

Finally, after yet another shouting match with the archbishop, Lorian decided to go straight to Oceiros on the matter. If the priests refused to obey the orders of the elder prince of the royal family, then they would most certainly listen to the king himself, and he doubted Oceiros had become so totally unreasonable as to not see the need for his children to wear clothes.

Ocerios agreed to speak with him on the matter over his evening tea (as if Lorian actually needed an appointment to see his own father!), and as Oceiros silently ate orange scones and drank black tea so bitter that the smell curdled Lorian’s stomach, the elder prince made his case, staring down at his crown resting in his lap as he spoke with as sturdy and stable a voice he could manage. He couldn’t afford to become tongue-tied in front of his father; it would simply remind Oceiros of his eldest son’s stupidity, and it would immediately invalidate whatever argument he was trying to make. It was fortunate, in the end, that he’d had so much practice arguing the subject with the priests over the years.

“Lothric has such a short life in front of him, Father,” Lorian finished, “and he is already so pained and weak in body. Why make him suffer further by insisting he wear only coarse cloth? Isn’t it both cruel and shameful for the future king of Lothric to not have clothing that fits his station?”

As Lorian patiently waited for his answer—far too afraid to look at his face for fear of provoking the increasingly emotionally labile man—he heard Oceiros drain the dregs from his mug and brush the crumbs off of his beard with his napkin. He stood, his heavy boots clomping towards Lorian, and the elder prince nearly jumped out of his skin at the feel of his father’s hand resting on his shoulder. It had been years since Oceiros had touched him outside of public events.

“You must remember,” he said, “that Lothric is not a prince in the traditional sense. Not truly. He is a Lord of Cinder. A dragon. He does not have the same requirements as we lowly humans. He will become a king the likes of which we cannot even comprehend.” Oceiros’ deep voice seemed to travel through his hand and rumble through Lorian like a small shockwave. “What may bring him fleeting and unnecessary happiness now will only hinder him once he ascends to his eternal throne. The more he enjoys this world, the more reluctant he will be to part from it, and the more he will suffer once he links the First Flame. I love him as well, my son, but it is for this reason that we must make his road as clear as we can. We must be sure that we do not, in our good intentions, do harm to him. For harm to our savior is harm to our kingdom. It is not only he, or we, who will suffer. Our people will suffer tenfold.”

The hand lifted off of his shoulder.

“I know how hard this must be for you, Lorian, but you must start divesting yourself of your attachment to Lothric. Not only does he not require such foolish and unnecessary feelings to distract him and brew indecision in his heart, but it is also a hopeless and futile practice at its core
—akin to a slave pining after a nobleman or a human falling in love with a True God. It will do neither of you good in the end.”

With that, his father strode from the room, leaving Lorian with tears in his eyes and a white-hot shackle of anguish and rage tightening around his throat.

Was it the incident with Mother?

The queen had spent the past eight years living like a ghost haunting the castle. Her pale skin and white gossamer veil flitted through the shadowed hallways and corners, offering only the briefest glimpses to the denizens of the castle, to whom catching sight of her turned into a bit of a game. She no longer ventured outside of the residential wing, and most of her time was spent in her personal quarters, where she drew and painted on good days and sat motionless by the curtained window on bad ones.

When his mother first came to Lothric after leaving the court of the Kingdom of Drangleic (where she had resided from the time Gwyn, Lord of Sunlight left to kindle the First Flame, until the giants came and decimated both the land and the monarchy), she had been revered as a goddess of bounty and fertility, and the teachings she brought of her dear friend, Gwynevere, Princess of Sunlight, sparked a medical renaissance in Lothric. As a babe, Lorian could remember sitting on his mother’s lap or at her ankles for hours at a time, watching entranced as she splashed incongruent colors on a canvas and then blended them into something miraculous and beautiful. Before Lothric was born, she was never without a sketchbook on her person, and Lorian loved to thumb through the pages and admire her sketches of royal visitors, flowers, and memories of centuries past.

In truth, while obligation was what instructed Lorian to love his father, he needed no such outside influence to love his mother. Oceiros had been distant with the eldest prince from the start, but his mother had loved and tended to him with an airy, distant affection that Lorian had come to classify as ‘godlike’. She carried him on her hip until he was old enough to walk, tended to his scraped palms and busted knees, read him bedtime stories until he was old enough to use a sword, and brought him sweets when he was sick in bed. Her kisses were dry and fleeting, but her smile was warm and gentle, and Lorian never once doubted that she loved him as much as she was capable. It had been a blessing and a curse to learn from an early age that everyone had a different capacity to love, and when one lived in a household as devoid of love and dysfunctional as that of the Lothric royal family, one learned to embrace what genuine affection they could find.

After Oceiros’ experiments and Lothric’s birth broke the queen's body and spirit, Lorian still visited her every day he was at home, bringing her sweets to entice her meager appetite and sitting with her in what he hoped was companionable silence. Sometimes they talked, but mostly Lorian talked at her, telling his mother about the events in the kingdom and stories of his little brother and father while she looked through him at something he could not see. Sometimes she asked him to read to her, but the words never failed to fall jumbled and twisted from Lorian’s tongue, and she inevitably lost interest before he’d finished the first page. She was his mother, though, so he continued to do what little he could for her.

On that particular day, his mother had felt well enough to paint, and Lorian sat at her side and watched as she smeared together jagged cuts of wet blood red, bitter Londor purple, and a sickly yellow pigment that reminded the elder prince of the jaundiced skin of a dying man. Her paintings were no longer miraculous or beautiful, but it was a good sign that she was practicing a once-
cherished hobby of hers, and Lorian felt his spirits lighten as he watched. He’d brought his mother a glass of milk and a strawberry tart, and she’d actually taken a few bites of it before returning to her work, while Lorian alternated between silently watching his mother paint what appeared to be some kind of flaming landscape and filling her in on the day’s events.

That new page he’d told her about last week, Siobhan—she nearly took Hemsley’s head off when he dared her to lift his great hammer and she ended up swinging it clear off the ground in her excitement. The construction of the Undead Settlement to the south is going as planned with the help of the local religious faction—something involving ‘deep worship’, whatever that is. Father has been holed up in the Grand Archives for the past few days and has basically left Lorian in charge of hammering out the treaty with the Kingdom of Hesok. Oh, just yesterday, one of the priests in charge of tutoring Lothric broke open a particularly dusty tome in front of him, and the poor boy ended up sneezing dragon fire all over the doddering old man’s robe! Oh, if only Lorian himself had been there to see it—the way his dear brother described Father Archibald’s jumping and flailing about was so very funny!

“Who?” His mother has asked once he finished laughing.

“Lothric, Mother.” Lorian sobered at the sudden chilliness of her tone.

“Who?” She asked again. She dunked her paintbrush in her water cup a little longer than necessary and used it to scoop up a glob of burnt orange pigment. She set the palette on the table and returned her attention to the canvas.

“Mother, you know who Lothric is…” Despite his confusion and growing alarm, Lorian tried to keep his voice as neutral as possible, not wanting to stoke whatever fire had been lit inside of her. “He is your son, Mother.”

The laugh she answered him with bordered on hysteria. “Oh, Lorian, you’re being so silly.” The violence with which she dragged the paintbrush over the canvas belied the lightness of her tone. “You know you’re the only son I’ve had.”

Lorian’s palms broke out with sweat inside of his metal gauntlets. Was this some kind of test? Though he stayed firmly planted in his chair, his eyes darted to the door, looking for a possible escape route. He wouldn’t need one, though…would he?

“I…I don’t understand what you are asking, Mother. We have spoken about Lothric before. You sometimes ask me about how he is doing. Why are you pretending that you do not know who he is?”

“I know who he is.”

“Then I don’t understand—“

“He is not my son.”

“Mother—“

The paintbrush punched through the canvas.

“He is not my son!”

The easel tipped over, the glass of water shattered against the stone floor, and Lorian was suddenly faced with his mother—the woman that raised him, nurtured him, taught him, loved him—lunging at him with her hands formed into claws. The elder prince caught only a glimpse of her wild eyes
before he found himself knocked out of his chair and onto the ground. Her thin hands were around his neck, and Lorian could only stare up at her in bewilderment, no longer able to recognize the person staring down at him.

“*You* are the only son I have!” An inhuman, banshee-like scream tore its way out of her heart-shaped mouth. “The only son! You have no brother, but you are always going on and on about that *abomination* — the thing that tore its way out of my body, the thing that ruined me — like he is one!” Lorian cried out as her nails dug into the flesh of his neck. “You love him! You love that abomination more than you love me! Why don’t you love me anymore, Lorian?! Why don’t you love me?!”

The next thing Lorian knew, his mother was being pulled off of him by two Winged Knights, and Gertrude was guiding him to his feet and helping him out of the room while demanding to know what Lorian had done to provoke her so. He couldn’t answer—could barely understand her—because all he could focus on was his mother screaming in the background, calling him a bad son, calling him a traitor, asking him what *that* monster had *that* she did not.

Lorian hadn’t visited her since.

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Was it when he overheard two of his knights talking?

It wasn’t uncommon for the Knight Commander to overhear his soldiers gibbering about something or other, with topics ranging everywhere from banal gossip, to intense political discussions, to even romantic pursuits (according to the various men and women under his command, Lorian himself cut an ‘impressive figure’, and his jawline was apparently the subject of much admiration and attraction, much to his confusion). However, while Lorian was used to overhearing discussions about himself (which he took with good nature), it was the first time he had heard them discuss his brother.

“Poor little thing is a sack of skin and bones.” Eloise had been sharpening her sword with a whetstone as she talked. “I can’t imagine what he’d look like without Lorian’s doting and care; the king does not seem to be involved outside of his studies and duties, and the queen is all but absent. I don’t think I’ve seen her once since I came here, and that was six years ago! Wet nurses alone cannot raise up a happy child.”

The knight she had been speaking to—Matilda—was leaning against the wall with her arms crossed over her chest. She scowled and huffed at the comment.

“‘The only reason I’m sayin’ this is ‘cause I know you’re on the level, but if the king an’ queen weren’t the queen an’ king, I’d ‘ave ‘em hung at the gallows myself. It’s downright criminal what they’ve done to the poor kid.”

In her shock, Eloise’s whetstone clattered to the floor, and she nearly ended up cutting herself on her own blade in her fumbling. “Matilda! You cannot say things like that!”

“‘Oh, come on, Eloise! You know ‘m right! As far as I’m concerned, Lorian’s the only one worthy of bein’ called lil’ Lothric’s parent; he’s practically been attached at the hip with the lil’ one since the day he was born, and *His Majesty* only seems to care about workin’ ‘im into the ground. An’ what does Lorian get for all of ‘is hard work? Nothin’! He doesn’t even get the firstborn’s right to
the throne! It’s more than a disgrace—it’s a sin!”

“ It’s not that I don’t agree with you, Matilda, but please…not so loud!”

Matilda rolled her eyes. “ Look, all ‘m sayin’ is that if my kid was destined to ‘ave a short life, I’d be spoilin’ ‘em rotten from the day he was born ‘til the day he died! I’d be showerin’ ‘em with so much love they’d get sick of it! But all Lothric gets from ‘is so-called parents is coldness! The thought of what’d happen to ‘im if Lorian wasn’t around makes me sick!”

The thought seemed to make Eloise shudder as well. “ Goddess of Sunlight forbid! Dragonkin and godkin he may be, but I doubt Lothric’s soul would survive a loveless and frigid life alone with the king! It is bad enough that he’s forced to link the fire no matter what he wants—“

“ Now who’s talkin’ ‘bout forbidden things!”

“ Oh, shut up!” Eloise waved her hand dismissively at Matilda. “ It’s just…it does not sit right with me, Matilda! Every other Lord of Cinder had a choice, right? They were adults and could say yes or no if they wanted to…but Lothric’s just a child! He has been expected to burn since he took his first breath!”

“ It’s a high honor.” Matilda’s voice dipped to become gravely somber. “ To link the flame is the greatest calling one ‘as. We should be envyin’ ‘im, not pityin’ ‘im.”

Eloise shook her head sadly and took up her whetstone once more. “ I know, Matilda, I know, but…it just doesn’t seem right. None of this does. I don’t know what to think about anything anymore.”

I don’t know what to think about anything anymore.

Well, even if those three incidents had shaken the foundations of Lorian’s world, the blow that brought the pillars down came the night Lorian made his decision.

That evening—as the sun hung low in the sky and the smell of cooking filled the air—the elder prince made his way back from the barracks, tired and sore from a border skirmish against an unusually unruly pack of hollows, and looking forward to seeing his little brother after a long day apart. Though Lothric had once spent the majority of his time under Lorian’s watchful eye, he had been declared old enough to begin “preparations for his ascension” at the age of six, so the majority of the younger prince’s day was devoted to pouring over tomes in the Great Archives and being cloistered in prayer with the priests. Not only was Lothric’s time being coveted by his father and the archbishops, but the kingdom had slowly begun to descend further and further into unrest due to Oceiros neglecting his kingly duties in favor of ‘scientific pursuits’, leading to Lorian and his men being sent to ‘put down’ disturbances and uprisings with increasing frequency. Such absences, of course, left Emma and the rest of the handmaids to look after Lothric in his stead.

Due to their growing time commitments and responsibilities, both brothers treasured the evenings more than ever. When Lothric was released from his studies, he would eagerly wait in Lorian’s quarters (which, for all intents and purposes, was his own as well) for his return, sitting on the large bed with his little legs kicking excitedly over the edge. The moment Lorian stepped through the door, Lothric—unless he was feeling particularly ill, weak, or pained that day—would launch himself at his elder brother, and Lorian would catch him without fail every time, laughing as he
spun his giggling little brother around and peppered his forehead and cheeks with kisses. It was easily the best part of the day for the both of them.

Instead of his usual greeting, Lorian was met with the sight of Lothric kneeling in front of the hearth, reaching his right hand into the roaring fireplace. A startled cry tore its way out of Lorian’s throat, and the elder prince immediately catapulted himself forward, falling to his knees next to Lothric and snatching those thin, talon-like fingers just millimeters away from the flames.

“Lothric!” Lorian could feel the blood draining from his already pale face to pool in his stomach. His heart fluttered like that of a panicked, newborn bird as he grabbed both of Lothric’s hands with his gauntleted own and clasped them close to his chest. “Lothric, what was that?! What were you thinking?!”

Silence. Lothric kept his head turned to the floor so that the hood of his prayer robe covered his features. His frail hands trembled in Lorian’s grip. Terror seized Lorian’s heart like a vice.

“This is serious, Lothric!” Lorian released the younger prince’s hands so he could grab his face and gently yet firmly force Lothric to look at him. His little brother’s haunting blue eyes were wide and frightened, and the dark circles around his sunken orbits seemed even darker and deeper than usual, making him look far older than eight years of age. “You could have been seriously hurt! You could have lost your fingers! Why would you do such a thing?!”

“I’m sorry, Lorian…” Had Lorian’s hearing not been as honed as it was, he would have missed his brother’s weak, whispered answer. Tiny tears began to pool in the corners of his eyes. “I won’t do it again…I promise…please don’t be mad at me.”

Lorian suddenly felt like crying himself. “Oh, no, baby drake, no…I am not angry at you. Shhhhhhh…” The knight released Lothric’s face and reached for the handkerchief he kept tucked in the waist plating of his armor. “You simply scared me, is all…I was afraid you would seriously hurt yourself.” He gently dabbed the tears from Lothric’s eyes while offering up as reassuring a smile as he was capable of in that moment. “Oh, dear heart, why were you going to stick your hand in the fire? Were you just curious? Were your fingers cold? Did a strange thought that you could not control compel you to do such a thing?”

Lothric sniffled and ducked his head once more.

“I won’t be angry, Lothric. I promise.”

“I don’t want to make you feel bad, Lorian.”

“I won’t, Lothric.” Lorian took his brother’s chin in his hand and tilted his face upwards once again. “Please, baby drake; you know you can tell me anything.”

There was a pause. Lothric worried his lower lip and his cheeks trembled from the effort it took him not to cry.

“I…I wanted to see what it would be like.”

The world around Lorian seemed to grind to a halt. “You mean…”

“The priests. They were talking about the First Flame…about how it would ‘scorch the sin from my soul and make me pure forever’, and I…” There was fear on Lothric’s face—such fear that Lorian had never seen before—and his frail shoulders shook with a repressed sob. “I wanted to see what it would feel like to be in the fire.”
“The First Flame is not the same as a normal fire.” Lorian’s voice was as dry and parched as if he had been walking in the desert for days.

“Are you sure? No one…no one has ever come back from linking the flame, so no one can say what it’s like for sure, right? I just…” Lothric shuffled forward until he could lean his body against Lorian’s chest. The elder prince could hear the ‘plink, plink’ of tears falling on his brass armor. “I thought I should start to get used to the feeling of burning…so it won’t hurt so badly when I become a Lord of Cinder. I am meant to be an immortal lord, so I should…I should get used to the burning, because I’m going to burn forever, right?”

I’m going to burn forever, right?

I’m going to burn forever, right?

I’m going to burn forever, right?

Those words echoed through Lorian’s head the whole night, even after he and Lothric had retired to bed for the evening, and Lorian could not remember how long he laid there and tried to sleep before surrendering himself to another night of insomnia. He got out of bed as gently as possible to avoid waking Lothric, threw on his training leathers, and carefully tucked the little prince in before heading out into the dark, airy halls of the castle.

There were often nights when Lorian couldn’t sleep: when bad dreams choked the air out of his lungs and soaked his body with sweat; when his anxieties over numerous things (the state of the kingdom, the state of their family, upcoming battles, the fading of the flame, Lothric’s fate) would bite at his ankles like starving rats and slither through his brain like worms; when he’d awaken in a panic because for a moment, he thought Lothric had stopped breathing, and it was only after he’d watched his little brother’s chest rise and fall for some time that he could even consider falling asleep once more. That night felt different, though, and not only because his heart simply refused to stop racing. Normally a quick walk through the cold stone corridors of the castle was enough to quell his anxieties and fears—at least, for a short time—but it seemed that the more he walked, the more his restlessness grew.

Without fully registering the deviation in his course, Lorian found himself in Oceiros’ personal garden, walking up the small stone bridge to the open seating area in the center. Though his father was a man of many faults, the elder prince always admired the king’s love and care of plants, and he learned much about gardening and agriculture from watching Oceiros water and dig and prune from the far away ramparts. His father never wanted assistance, oh no; he was very meticulous and precise about how he wanted his bushes sculpted and roses pruned (just as he was about his requirements for a suitable heir), and he coveted his private outdoor space the way a storybook dragon coveted beautiful maidens and treasure troves. Striking, splendidous, and secretive—those three adjectives accurately described both Oceiros’ garden and his style of rule.

Well, and strict. Oceiros did not allow anyone outside of those he invited into his garden, and when he did invite someone, it was to make them weed and lift the heavier ornaments and bags of dirt and seed. The few times Lorian had been allowed into his father’s private sanctum had been when calling him to attend to urgent matters of state. The one time he’d entered for personal reasons remained burned in his mind even as a grown man: he had been eight at the time, and he had used a break in his page training to visit his father, wanting to ask permission to pick a bouquet of roses
for his mother as a surprise. Though he could have easily asked a servant to pick some flowers on
the grounds, the rainbow of blooms Lorian could always see from the ramparts above the garden
seemed fresher and prettier than what you could find in the common gardens, and he had also
hoped to ask his father if he could join him in gardening from time to time. Lorian loved to work
with his hands, after all, and the thought of using them for growing rather than fighting appealed to
him even as a child.

Oceiros was less than amenable to the idea. His father had been worrying a patch of phlox when
Lorian found him, and when the little prince tapped his father on the shoulder, the man had spun
around and lashed out with the small garden rake in his right hand. Lorian had managed to put his
hands up in time to defend his face, but the clawed tool dug three large gashes into the back of his
left hand, and they had already begun to bleed by the time Oceiros realized he wasn’t under attack
by yet another rogue assassin. Instead of checking on Lorian’s welfare, however, the king grabbed
the eight-year-old by the shoulders and shook him so violently that the child was afraid his head
would snap off of his shoulders.

What were you thinking?!

Oceiros had bellowed, his ruddy face only centimeters away from
Lorian’s own, who had been too petrified to cry. Don’t you know not to sneak up on a king in his
private sanctum?! What are you doing here, anyway?! I did not give you permission to come here!
Are you too daft to follow even the most simple instructions?! Be gone—out! Out of my sight before
you make me sick!

At the recollection, Lorian couldn’t help but look down at his left hand, where the faintest traces of
the rake’s scratches remained to that day. He had been so upset by Oceiros’ behavior that he’d
locked himself in the storage room for the rest of the night; by the time he had been found by
Emma, the gashes had already begun to stiffen at the edges.

Lorian’s first battle scars—Gods, what a farce it was!

The memory of Oceiros only seemed to worsen the weight pressing down on Lorian’s shoulders,
and for the first time in his life, he was unable to pull himself together. From a young age, Lorian
had been forced to become an expert at stifling and shutting away all of his negative emotions—to
bottle them up and release them only when unbearable, and even then, only in private. At first it
had been to avoid disturbing the fragile equilibrium between himself and his parents, but after
Lothric was born, Lorian couldn’t bear the thought of compounding his little brother’s daily
unhappiness and discomfort with his own. There had been so many sleepless nights when Lothric’s
illness had flared—when none of the banal, ‘traditional’ remedies the handmaids and healers were
willing to provide could soothe him, and Lorian was forced to either swallow his tears of
exhaustion and worry or muffle them into his pillow. On occasion, he would even come up with
some excuse to seclude himself for a few minutes, just so he could steady himself where Lothric
couldn’t see. If Lothric had seen Lorian in tears, he would have believed his elder brother’s misery
was his fault, and it would have broken both of their hearts.

Lorian knew how to control his anguish. He knew how to hold it in until it was safe to express it.
He knew how to control himself. Yet that night, in Oceiros’ garden, he found himself crumbling to
pieces. The elder prince felt himself laid bare under the light of the moon—raw and aching and
vulnerable, as if flayed alive on a dissection table for all to see. The argument with his father; the
attack by his mother; the words of his knights; his dear, sweet little brother trying to burn himself
in the fireplace: it was too much. It was all just too much, and Lorian—the champion known by
his subjects as the Warrior Prince, the Demonsbane, the Firebrand, the Torchbearer—collapsed
onto a stone bench, buried his face in his hands, and wept like a child.

I do not know what to think about anything anymore.
The cold, bitter truth of the matter was that there would be no happy ending to his and Lothric’s stories. The truth of the matter was that Lorian had been teetering on the edge of despair long before Lothric was born, and it was only that bright, brilliant child that allowed him to see a future for himself at all. Yet Lothric was destined to die—to burn alive!—and Lorian knew he would die with him on that day. There would be no future for Lorian once Lothric—his little brother, his baby drake, his light and life—was made into kindling for that...that...that infernal flaming mechanism of death!

Oh, but Lorian had been breastfed on the truths of Gwyn and Kingseeker Frampt, much like every other child in the kingdom of Lothric! He knew that linking the fire was an honor, a privilege, and a literal world-saving sacrifice—an act that could instantly transform even the most wretched hollow into a lauded saint. Before Lothric’s birth, Lorian hadn’t even thought to question the necessity of kindling the First Flame, having been indoctrinated on the glory of the Age of Fire by both his father and the former loyal member of Lord Gwyn’s court that was his mother. In the days before the announcement of his mother’s second pregnancy, Lorian had even contemplated attempting to link the fire himself, knowing that it would be the only way he could make his existence worthwhile in the eyes of Oceiros. It would have been the only way to ever fully earn the love and respect he so craved from his parents, and his life—oh, his worthless, blood-soaked, burn-scarred life!—would have finally been worth something in the end. It would have been both a vindication and an end to the emptiness of his existence.

Then those brilliantly blue eyes opened for the first time, and as a tiny hand wrapped itself around Lorian’s index finger and held fast, the act that had seemed like an honor suddenly began to appear an abomination.

Matilda and Eloise were absolutely right. At least the Lords of Cinder in the past had been adults, and while they may have been influenced and coerced to link the fire in other ways, they at least had the capacity to choose for themselves. Lothric, however, had his destiny decided for him the moment he formed in their mother’s womb. Lorian had managed to shield Lothric from talk of his fate for the first six years of his life, but Oceiros and the priests had ruthlessly usurped his education soon after, and Lothric had since endured two years of grooming and ‘training’ on how to be a good Lord of Cinder. Only a child and forced into martyrdom—good Gods, once his father and the scholars got through with him, would his little brother even have the slightest idea that he could choose for himself when he was an adult?! Even if Lothric did decide to forsake the flame when he became of age, would Oceiros accept such a blasphemy to his name and reputation?

The image of his little brother being dragged kicking and screaming into the kiln flashed before Lorian’s eyes, which only served to worsen his weeping, his sobs growing powerful enough to shake his body nearly to pieces.

Oh, dear Lothric! Despite being born so small and weak, he was so incredibly large and powerful in spirit! He had always been so curious, and when he was still small enough to be cradled to Lorian’s body by a shock of cloth, he always insisted on having a view of the outside world and would fuss if Lorian tried to place his face to his chest or back. Wanting to foster this bright and beautiful new life in any way possible, Lorian developed the habit of reading to the infant every night (albeit slowly and clumsily), and when the elder prince realized his little brother could read on his own (far earlier than most children), he brought him as many books from the library and Grand Archives as he could. By the time Lothric was ready to begin his ‘official’ schooling, he could already read all but the most intricate tomes, and his vocabulary was far above that of your average cleric (much to Oceiros’ mystification—a thought which never failed to bring Lorian a ridiculous amount of satisfaction and glee).

Not only did Lothric love to learn in general (and was always eager to share his newfound
knowledge with Lorian, even though most of the things he spoke of flew over the elder prince’s head, but he enjoyed exploring, and Lorian was always willing to carry him around the castle grounds when his muscles ached and his joints were too rheumatic to bear weight without agony. He loved counting the tadpoles that swam in the pond and tracing the constellations with his fingers while watching the night sky from the castle ramparts. Though Lorian knew the priests looked down their noses at his insistence of letting Lothric learn ‘unnecessary and superfluous’ things, the elder prince had been Chaos-bent and determined to give his little brother some semblance of a normal childhood, so he made stick and paper puppets for him to play with, gathered fallen wyvern scales so he could make his own jewelry and ornaments, and stole materials from their mother’s studio so that the younger prince could finger-paint.

Lothric had clearly inherited their mother’s creativity, and though the child was fond of mischief making and pranks, he also possessed a kindness that was foreign to both their mother and father—a kindness and a soft, gentle heart. When he learned that the civilians living in the eastern province were going hungry from famine, he asked Lorian if they could pick fruit from the trees growing around the castle to give to them, and he made childish, handmade gifts to give to any knight that was injured in the line of duty and bedridden. “Father always says I am the holiest of beings,” his little brother said, “that anything I touch is blessed…so I’ll make each of the knights a talisman of their own so they can heal faster! If I can make you feel better when you’re hurt, dear brother, then I can make others feel better as well!”

Oh, he was such a talented, kind child!

What good would his kindness do, however, if it was destined to be snuffed out before it could flourish? What good was his brilliance if it would never be seen or appreciated? The priests and his father already frowned on Lothric learning of ‘worldly things’, and over the past two years of lessons, the light in Lothric’s bright blue eyes had begun to fade. There was a heaviness and exhaustion to his movements now—one that could not be attributed to his poor health and awkward body—and he no longer found joy in the tales of adventures and romance that he had once begged Lorian to read him every night. Though the younger prince had claimed he was ‘far too old to hear such childish tales’, Lorian knew better—knew that it was hard to hear of happy endings when you were not destined for one yourself.

The child he raised and loved was dying long before he was meant to link the flame, and Lorian felt himself fading away with him—felt his appetite diminish, his dreams worsen, and his ever-present anxieties double. Though the healers had always warned him that his eyesight would eventually begin to fade, the elder prince had noticed his vision beginning to blur in the distance far sooner than predicted, and Lorian could not tell if it was due to early progression of his disease or a manifestation of his breaking heart. His ribs had begun to poke through his pale skin, and though he managed to keep a smile on his lips and a cheer to his voice around his baby brother, the men under his command had begun to comment that he was growing increasingly dour by the day. “You seem so miserable these days,” one had said, “almost like how you were before the little prince was born!”

And why should Lorian not be? His little brother—his child—was destined to die at the age of eighteen, and there was nothing his Unyielding Sword could do to prevent it.

Or was there?

Lorian knew that he and Lothric were destined for misery as long as they remained in the kingdom. Sometimes in the dead of night, when Lorian sat watch over Lothric’s feverish sleeping, he would indulge in the most sacrilegious of fantasies—of taking his charge and going far, far away, to a place where Oceiros would never be able to find them. There were always several plans brewing in
the back of his mind—different avenues of possible distraction, diversion, and escape—but he had always considered them to be impossible dreams. As impossible as a slave falling in love with a nobleman, like Oceiros said, or a human falling in love with a True God. The fire needed kindling. Lothric was destined to kindle the flame. Lorian was destined to watch. There was no escape. No change. No future. No hope.

“No!” It took Lorian a moment to register the tear-choked voice as his own. “No! I… I refuse! I refuse! We cannot go on like this!” The elder prince held himself in a vain attempt to still his shaking. “We will not go on like this! I can die if I must, if it means Lothric’s happiness and safety, but Lothric…I will not…I cannot…I…I…”

*If Lothric’s survival means the death of the First Flame—*

“…I will protect him! Even if it means fighting the world!”

—and brings about an age of endless dark—

“I will not let them kill Lothric!”

—then let the fire flicker and fade.

It was like a hammer busting through a pane of glass. It was like a water jar finally cracking under the pressure of its contents. Lorian’s declaration punched the air out of his lungs more so than any blow in the past, and as he slowly realized the enormity of his decision, a massive tremor coursed through his body like a wave crashing against the shore. Yet when the elder prince regained his breath, he found that his tears had dried to nothing, and the tension that had been threatening to bow his shoulders and snap his neck had suddenly released. It was dizzying, frightening… freeing.

Let the Age of Dark come.

He had to run. He had to take Lothric and leave before the walls closed in around them further… but where was safe? Lothric, though regarded as strange and ‘old-fashioned’ by most of its neighbors, was one of most powerful and influential provinces in the Lordran. How far would Lorian be able to get before Oceiros sent the kingdom’s considerable military might and dragonriders after them? And even if Lorian was able to get away, where could they possibly hide? No other province would be willing to offer them asylum—especially not if their escape meant the possible end of the Age of Fire. Everyone wanted to link that damn flame, and everyone was afraid and cowed by the kingdom, so there was nowhere to go, nowhere to hide, nowhere to—!

An idea hit the prince like a lightning bolt.

No, that wasn’t quite true…there was one place in the Lordran where Oceiros wouldn’t be able to touch them.

Inspired and galvanized by a determination he had never felt before, Lorian stood and all but ran out of the garden, heading towards the barracks to find Sirris.

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Being the military power and hub of commerce that it was, Lothric was a popular stopover for sellswords and travelling knights from many different lands, all of whom inevitably wandered through the royal barracks at some point in their tenure. Sirris was one such person, though she had
more clout behind her name than most; her grandfather, Holy Knight Hodrick, was one of the most famous and decorated soldiers Lothric had ever known, and Lorian himself had trained under him when he was a young lad. Now retired, he continued to teach the new recruits on occasion, and his granddaughter, Sirris, had ostensibly come to Lothric to learn under him for a time. As a visiting knight, the laws of the land required her to enter Lorian’s purview for the duration of her stay, and though Sirris had been reluctant at first, she yielded after Hodrick reassured her and praised Lorian’s ability as both a knight and an instructor. At first she resided in her grandfather’s home and travelled to and from the castle on foot, but after a week of observing Lorian and the rest of the knights, she asked to move into the royal barracks so as to ‘better immerse herself in the Lothric style of swordplay’.

Two months had passed since then, and though Sirris always brought with her more questions than answers, the elder prince could not help but like and admire her. A pale, thin figure dressed in gauzy white and sparkling silver, she wielded her rapier with a grace Lorian could never dream of emulating, and the mysterious magic she used to enhance her blade sliced through hollows, demons, and feral drakes in an almost silky manner. For someone who had supposedly come to learn the finer points of swordplay, she was already a league above even the most seasoned knights under Lorian’s command, and she seemed far more interested in observing the comings and goings of the kingdom than honing her craft. Whenever Lorian ran drills, he knew he would always find Sirris leaning against a tree or the wall of a storage shed flanking the training grounds, standing silently stalwart over the proceedings. Rather than being annoyed by her standoffish nature, Lorian was relieved that he now had a reliable partner on whom he could demonstrate techniques without fear of endangerment, and she seemed to take her position as a glorified training dummy in stride.

It seemed that Lorian’s respect of Sirris’ abilities and his willingness to leave her to her own devices endeared him to her, for it didn’t take long after her arrival before she started making casual conversation with the elder prince, even though she shied away from socializing with the other travelling swordspersons. Lorian and Sirris had idled away many a lazy hour under the leaves of a flowering tree, and while at first he had been the one doing the most of the talking, Sirris had eventually begun to open up ever so slightly about herself.

Sirris had lost her parents in an accident when she was young and had been taken in by Hodrick and her grandmother, Marjorie, when she was just five years of age. Hodrick soon left to take up a position in Lothric’s Royal Guard, while she and Marjorie remained in their ‘homeland’, the nature of which Sirris was reluctant to elaborate upon. Sirris originally stated that she was from ‘the Sunless Realms’, but Lorian eventually got her to admit that she heralded specifically from the Boreal Valley to the north. When asked if she came from the legendary Irithyll—a fabled hidden kingdom presided over by a hallowed ‘Nameless Moon’—she simply smirked and said that she would have to kill Lorian if she told him. Frankly, Lorian was inclined to believe her, so he let the subject drop.

On occasion, Lothric would wander over to join them under the shade of the tree, and Sirris would regale the child with tales of cold, windswept mountains, softly falling snowflakes, and an eternal moon that lit up even the darkest of nights. A legendary covenant of knights presided there, she told the little prince, led by the last True God in all of the Lordran. Calling themselves the ‘Blades of the Darkmoon’, they skirted the shadows between worlds and hunted down the wicked and sinful, bringing back souvenirs of reprisal as proofs of a concord kept. Originally, the knights had been formed to punish those that wronged the gods themselves, but their mission had gradually shifted over the past several millennia. Humanity, being kin to the gods, was rife with sin, and those that wallowed in it with abandon—abusers of young and old, rapists and other such violators, thieves who stole for pleasure and murderers who killed without cause—were the preferred targets of the Nameless Moon, who sought to give closure and comfort to their victims as much as to balance the scales of justice.
As Lothric listened with his head resting on Lorian’s lap, Sirris would gently stroke his hair and tell him of the more notable deeds of this company: of the magistrate that had ordered a homeless little boy hung for stealing a loaf of bread and was found drawn and quartered a fortnight later; of the mother that struck her children with a hot poker whenever they misbehaved and was eventually found speared on said instrument of torture; of the rich nobleman that had been discovered dead in bed with a newly penned will leaving all of his lands and assets to the peasant girl he had raped and left pregnant and destitute; and of the selfish son that sent his elderly father to the workhouse and had a tragic accident involving a wood axe two days later. One particularly vile plot had involved a callous man that resented his crippled brother and openly planned on burying him alive to ‘get rid of the burden’. The poor brother had prayed to the Nameless Moon for help, and the callous man disappeared a week later, eventually being found entombed and asphyxiated in the hand-dug grave he had intended for his brother.

As Lothric delighted in her heroic tales of crime and punishment, Lorian began to suspect that Sirris herself was responsible for said deeds, though he did not voice his suspicions aloud. The elder prince had learned early on that Sirris was only forthcoming when she wished to be and not a moment sooner.

As usual, Lorian found Sirris at her regularly nightly haunt: sitting on the porch of the communal living quarters she was staying in and gazing contemplatively at the moon. One leg was pulled up and her right arm was draped over it casually, but when the swordswoman saw Lorian approaching, she sprung to her feet with a catlike grace Lorian would be jealous of in any other circumstance.

“Ser Lorian.” Sirris bowed respectfully to him and frowned when Lorian did not return the gesture. “Is something the matter?”

“I need to talk to you. Privately. Now.”

Lorian knew that Sirris disliked being ordered around without reason, but she must have sensed the urgency in his voice and seen the near panic in his eyes, for she simply nodded and allowed him to guide her towards a barren side path leading to the lower castle wall.

“Something is troubling you, Prince Lorian.” Sirris waited until they were safely away from all possible listeners to speak. Her hand rested gently on the hilt of her rapier. “Is it about the little prince?”

“Yes.” Lorian suddenly stopped in his tracks and whirled to face her. “You are from Irithyll, correct? Irithyll, the Sunless Kingdom.”

Sirris’ brown eyes grew wide. Her hand tightened on the hilt of her blade. “I—“

“I know!” Lorian cut her off far more loudly and harshly than intended. He winced and immediately continued in a lower voice. “I know that you…you do not wish to talk about it. Or cannot. I don’t know, I just—” He swallowed and begged his tongue to remain untangled, just this once, oh please just this one time.” Lothric and I, we, we stay—no! We cannot stay! Here! In Lothric!”

The hand dropped to her side. “You mean…”

“I will not let him burn!” The bugs in the thicket around them seemed to still at the exclamation. “I cannot—we cannot go on like this, Sirris. This…this…a child should not live like this! He not…he should not be assigned to die from the moment of his conception! I have to get him out, Sirris… I have to get him out before things get worse, before Father gets worse.” Lorian’s voice was raw
and shaking, and his tongue hung thick and heavy in his mouth, but he forced himself to keep talking. “I know that Irithyll remains hidden for a good reason, and that you probably cannot talk about it without being punished by the Nameless Moon, but we need… I need to know where it is, Sirris.”

Sirris’ face remained unintelligible.

“Please, Sirris. I am asking you not as a prince or a commanding officer, but as an elder brother… as a parent. I have to find a safe place for my child. If he stays here, he will keep getting sicker and frailer, and he will eventually be fed to the flame, and I…I cannot stand by and let it happen! You know what the king is like, Sirris; he will hunt us down if we try to flee. The only place that he would be unable to find is Irithyll. It is the only place where Lothric will be safe, where he can have a chance at a normal childhood, a normal life! I know how deeply you value your honor as a knight, but you must know that I would not be asking you to violate your vows if I had no other option!”

Silence.

“I implore you, Sirris.” Lorian didn’t register the tears falling on the burn-scarred skin of his cheeks. “Please, if not for my sake, then for Lothric’s… please tell me how to find Irithyll. Please.”

Seconds passed heavy in the air, and Lorian was just about ready to fall to his knees and beg when Sirris tipped her head back and laughed—a single gasping, heaving sound that nearly made the elder prince jump out of his skin. He stared down at her, utterly bewildered, as she pulled a handkerchief out of her silver skirt and handed it to him.

“Dear Prince Lorian…” Sirris’ normally sangfroid voice was thick with what sounded suspiciously like relief. “Since the second week of my tenure in this kingdom, I have been praying to the Nameless Moon that you would one day ask me that question, and it seems my prayers have finally been answered.”

Lorian stared at her, dumbfounded, as she placed the handkerchief in his right hand and closed his fingers around it.

“I have been meaning to tell you this, but my assignment in your kingdom has come to an end; I will be departing for Irithyll in a week’s time.” Sirris’ voice slipped back into its usual cool smoothness. “So you and little Lothric will have to be prepared to leave before me. If we depart at the same time, it will draw suspicion, and we need to be as discreet as possible. Will you be able to manage that?”

Despite Lorian’s numbness in mind and body, the tactician in him easily caught on to Sirris’ designs, and he nodded. “Yes.”

“I suppose you already have a… scenario planned for how you two will escape.”

“Yes.” A pipe dream—an idea Lorian had toyed with on a night when Lothric was spitting up blood and the priests insisted on prayer and tea being the only remedies. He could have never imagined that he would be putting his fantasy plan into actual use. “A dragon flight. Father has been pestering me for months to take Lothric for a ride on Alsanna, but I have been denying him up until now; he would be more than willing to allow a day trip.”

“You will be unable to fly her into the Boreal Valley. However, there are some mountains flanking the area that you should be able to land on without arousing unwanted attention; you will
have to continue on foot from then on out. I will mark a suitable landing location for you.”

“ How long should it take us to arrive on foot?”

“ A day, maybe two if the little one requires rest, but it should take you no more than three. I will draw you a map of the area and deliver it to you tomorrow.”

Finally remembering the handkerchief in his hand, Lorian quickly scrubbed the tears from his cheeks and handed it back to Sirris, blushing profusely all the while. Her laughter, though amused, was not mean-spirited.

“ You are too self-conscious, Ser Lorian. You should know by now that I consider you a dear friend, so please, do not feel the need to play the ever-stalwart prince when we are alone.” She slipped the handkerchief back into her skirt and pulled something else out. “ There is a glamour that surrounds Irithyll—a barrier designed to keep the city unseen and shielded from intruders. Only those carrying talismans blessed with moonlight magic can see the city and pass through its invisible gates.”

Sirris took Lorian’s hand once more and placed something heavy and cold into his palm. As she drew her hand away, Lorian could see that it was a large, burnished silver pendant in the shape of a crescent moon, with a pearlescent straight sword bisecting it neatly through the middle. A long, sturdy chain was attached to a small loop at the top, and as Lorian nervously placed the chain around his neck and tucked the pendant underneath his shirt, a strange feeling of serenity flowed through him. It was as if the comforting, soft cold of the metal itself was seeping through his skin and soothing his nerves.

“ What about you, Sirris?”

“ What I have given you is a spare that I keep on my person. One cannot be too careful in times such as these.” Sirris patted the cloth talisman hanging at her left side for emphasis. “ Once you arrive in Irithyll, seek out the Church of Yorshka; the lady of the church will take care of you from there. I will come to you when I arrive.”

“ Church of Yorshka…okay.” Lorian gave a curt nod. “ It will be cold there, correct?”

“ Not so much in the city, no, but I recommend bundling the little one up for the journey. The winds in the valley itself can be frigid.” Sirris turned and beckoned for Lorian to follow her back to the barracks. “ I shall have the map ready for you at tomorrow’s evening exercises. You and Prince Lothric must not act any differently than you usually do. Be as inconspicuous in your preparations as possible. Your father has eyes everywhere.”

A different sort of chill set into Lorian’s bones. “ I know.” A thought came to him. “ You said your ‘assignment’ in the kingdom was ending. You did not come here to study Lothric-style swordplay, did you?”

A knowing smile graced Sirris’ lips. “ Indeed I did not, but you already suspected as such, no?”

Lorian shrugged. “ Aye. That I did. However, you did not seem to be up to anything iniquitous, nor did you appear to be a spy. I had no place to pry otherwise.”

“ You are good-natured and trusting, Ser Lorian—perhaps too trusting. How do you know I am not to betray you both the moment you step foot outside of the High Wall?”

Lorian smiled bitterly. “ Dear Sirris, when you grow up as a member of the royal family of Lothric, you quickly learn what true deception looks like. You were secretive, yes, but you were clearly no
spy.”

“I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised at your description of the royal family, but I am saddened by it all the same.” Once they reached the barracks, Sirris turned back to Lorian and gave him a parting nod. “Until tomorrow, Your Highness.”

“Until tomorrow, Sirris of the Sunless Realms.”

With that, Sirris walked into the communal bunkhouse, and Lorian turned and made his way back to the palace, clutching the talisman under his shirt as the precious lifeline that it was.

True to her word, in the aftermath of the next day’s evening exercises, Sirris approached Lorian with a folded homemade afghan, knit with alternating bands of gold, blue, and black wool.

“A gift for the little prince.” Sirris smiled softly. “I have been writing my grandmother of you two in my letters, and she took it upon herself to fashion this blanket for him, since I mentioned how he chills so easily.”

Lorian’s heart squeezed at the thoughtfulness of the gesture. “Thank you, Lady Sirris; please send my fondest and most sincere appreciation to Lady Marjorie.”

As the afghan passed between them, Sirris’ eyes locked with Lorian’s, and the elder prince knew instantly that the promised map was tucked within the folds. She truly was a woman of her word!

“This is a precious gift, Ser Lorian.” Her brown eyes glowed a burnished orange in the fading sunlight. “Please do take good care of it. I will not have the time send it to my grandmother to be mended before I leave the kingdom.”

“I understand, fair Sirris. Please give my regards to Ser Hodrick when you return home this evening.”

It took less than two days for Lorian to make all of the preparations for their escape, and Lothric acclimated quickly to the idea of leaving behind their home for what could possibly be the rest of their lives, with the only time he fussed being when Lorian put a limit on how many books they could take. After they reached a compromise (and Lorian reassured him that there were probably quite a few libraries in the city proper), Lothric turned his attention to learning whatever he could about the Boreal Valley, pouring over scrolls and slipping geography books into his religious tomes when the scholars weren’t looking. He even made a list of all of the different beasts they could encounter and all of the different types of plants they could probably eat, and while Lorian doubted he would need the information, it gladdened his heart nonetheless to see his little brother so enthusiastic. Was it because he was genuinely looking forward to leaving, or did he simply trust Lorian enough to throw himself into his decision without regret? Well, either way, Lothric’s happiness made Lorian happy. It would have been doubly painful to have ripped the younger prince away from a home he dreaded leaving.
Convincing Oceiros to let him take Lothric on a dragon flight was also a comically easy affair. After all, the king himself had been insisting that Lorian should take Lothric flying on his drake since the boy turned five, going on and on about how the younger prince should ‘fully comprehend the majesty and magnificence of his heritage’. Lorian had always refused, saying that not only would the cold aggravate Lothric’s already sensitive lungs, but he also didn’t possess the strength it took to stay on the wyvern if it made any sudden and violent movements (and Lorian did not trust himself to be able to catch him in time). Oceiros would push, and Lorian—contrary to his nature—would push back. He would do many things for his father, but the elder prince had to draw a line somewhere, and jeopardizing Lothric’s safety was one he would not cross.

It had been a point of consternation between them for two years, but since Lorian had a history of yielding to Oceiros’ whims as a means of keeping the peace in the royal household, Oceiros did not see his eldest son’s abrupt acquiescence as anything suspicious. If anything, the king was smugly satisfied about the whole thing, and the cloying air of superiority that hung about him made Lorian grit his teeth and dig his nails into his palms.

“ It is about time that you started paying heed to my wisdom.” It was clear that Oceiros was referring to more than the dragon flight.

“ As you say, Father.” As much as Lorian wanted to scream in his face, he instinctively cast his eyes to the ground and nodded instead. It never did him any good to argue with Oceiros.

*He has no idea what is about to happen.* The thought struck him suddenly. *If we are lucky, we will never have to see this man again; he will become nothing more than a bad memory.*

It was fortunate that Oceiros turned around before he could see the smirk spreading across Lorian’s face.

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The day of their escape was clear, mild, and crisp. The fading sun was shining surprisingly brightly that day, but Lorian insisted on bundling Lothric in both a blanket and Sirris’ afghan before they left their quarters for the last time, knowing just how cold and biting the winds became once one took flight.

“ Will Lady Sirris be coming to say goodbye?” Lothric had asked, sighing happily and snuggling into his blanket cocoon so that only his eyes and the top of his head were poking out. The sight was a pleasant distraction from the butterflies beating against Lorian’s stomach.

“ No,” Lorian smiled softly as he knotted the ends of the blankets together. It would do no good to have them falling off mid-flight. “It would draw too much…attention, you see, to have her come see us off only for us to go missing. She did promise to meet us in Irithyll in around a week’s time, though.”

Lothric’s legs, which had been kicking excitedly against the side of their bed, suddenly stopped. “ So, we are…we are really doing this, then. Leaving.”

Lorian pursed his lips as he absentlly fussed with the blankets. “ Yes. We are.” He glanced worriedly up at Lothric from where he was kneeling in front of him. “Are you afraid?”

“ A little.” Lothric’s voice was slightly muffled by the fabric, but he didn’t seem particularly inclined to work the rest of his face free. Unsurprising, given his usual state of cold intolerance. “
Father’s not just going to let me go, you know. I’m too valuable to him—to everything.”

“I know, Lothric, but trust me in that we would not be leaving if I did not believe our safety was ensured.”

“I know that, Lorian!” Lothric shook his head vigorously. “I was just thinking, that…”

“Yes?”

“Well, if Father finds us—and he may not, but if he does—I know he will be angry at me, but I know he will not do anything to harm me. He needs me to link the fire…to become the eternal King of Lothric.” The child stuck his hands out of his makeshift blanket coat and folded his spindly fingers together in his lap. “But what will he do to you, Lorian? At the very least, he’ll make sure we’ll never see each other again, and at the worst…”

Father will kill you. It was a conclusion that Lorian had come to himself at the start of this venture. The elder prince nodded solemnly and turned his attention to fussing with Lothric’s hair, which was sticking out at all angles from underneath his prayer hood and makeshift cowl.

“I know, baby drake. However, I believe the benefits of our leaving Lothric far outweigh the risks of leaving—especially when it comes to you.” Lorian lovingly smoothed Lothric’s fine, soft platinum blonde hair with his fingertips—just as he had when he was a newborn. “You have to remember that I was raised as a knight, and I have faced death many a time before for far more petty reasons than this.”

“Like what?”

“Well, before you were born, I often found myself at a… loss as to what I was fighting for. There were times, of course, when I was certain that I was fighting for the good of our people—to keep them safe and protected from harm. But…”

“But?”

Lorian bit his lip and looked down at the stone beneath his legs. This was not a conversation he’d been expecting to have with Lothric—at least when his little brother was still so young. The child had sermons and stories of a dark world and a darker future force-fed to him by the king, the priests, and the scholars on a daily basis; the last thing he needed was for Lorian’s disquiet to burden his thoughts as well. Yet Lorian made it a point to be honest with Lothric—well, as honest as one could be with an eight-year-old—and the younger prince would be hurt if he suspected Lorian was lying to him. Every other adult in his life filled his ears with a constant stream of dishonesty, but Lothric was far too observant for his age to be fooled easily, and he had fostered a natural skepticism and distrust of adults as a result. He had told Lorian many a time that he was the only exception to that rule, so Lorian could not—in good conscience—risk weakening that precious bond. So what could he say?

“Lorian…” Lothric’s voice broke the elder prince from his musings. “You know you can tell me anything, right? Just like I can tell you anything.”

Lorian smiled in spite of himself. What a good child! “Ah, I know, baby drake. Thank you. I was simply trying to think of a good way to put it.” The elder prince resumed smoothing out Lothric’s hair as he set his thoughts into coherent order. It was always easier to speak once he formulated a plan in his mind.

“Well, you know that we have been fighting the demons for a long time, yes?”
Lothric nodded.

“You also know how Father always says that the Old Chaos is the greatest threat our kingdom has to face, then.” Another nod. “Well, two years before you were born, we began our official campaign against them. At first, I believed those words as well, but after we began fighting them…”

He trailed off.

“Lorian?”

“Ah, sorry.” Lorian shook his head and continued. “You have learned how the demons were created, correct?”

“Yes: when the Witch of Izalith attempted to recreate the process that gave birth to the First Flame, the Chaos Flame was born, and it quickly spread and grew out of her control.” Lothric’s voice was eager and confident—as it should have been, the pint-sized scholar that he was. “The Witch herself was transformed into a primordial life-form called the Bed of Chaos, and the city of Izalith was razed to the ground, forming the land we now know as the Old Chaos. It’s the Chaos Flame that rests inside the Old Chaos from which the demons were born.”

“Very good, Lothric! Better than the High Priest himself could put it!” Lorian beamed at Lothric, making him wiggle in both embarrassment and pride. “Yes, that’s exactly right, but there is one thing that the scholars may not have told you—something that we discovered during our first forays into the Old Chaos.”

Lothric’s eyes brimmed with curiosity. “Which is?”

“Well, what if I told you that the Chaos Flame is linked to the First Flame, and that as the First Flame fades, so does the Chaos Flame?”

Though the blankets covered Lothric’s mouth, Lorian could tell that he was frowning in that serious way of his that never failed to be endearing. He clicked his talon-like nails together as he thought.

“That…actually makes sense, when you think about it.” The younger prince finally nodded. “Is that what you found out when you first started fighting the demons?”

Lorian nodded. “It took us some time to figure out. At first, the resistance was as violent and bloody as we expected it to be; we were invading their homeland, and the demons were fighting passionately to defend it. It didn’t take long for us to notice, however, that something was…off. Different from the stories we had been told our whole lives.”

“How so?”

“There were small differences, at first. The numbers were fewer than what we were told to expect. The flames, though intense, were not nearly as overpowering as we’d been led to believe. Our suspicions weren’t confirmed, however, until we met Velya in the Smoldering Lake and learned how to communicate with her.”

“The stray demon that guards the gate over Farron Keep?” Lothric cocked his head. “I never knew you could talk to her. I thought demons couldn’t talk.”

“Not in the traditional way, no, but when we realized she wasn’t hostile, we were desperate to find a way to communicate with her. The historian travelling with us eventually realized that we could
communicate through visual concepts—pictures. We ended up actually using sticks to draw pictures in the ash around the coiled bonfire; I was coughing up soot for weeks afterward.”

Lothric giggled.

“... through this conversation that we learned about the plight that had befallen the demons.” Lothric’s head cocked even further to the right, and Lorian gave his right temple a little tap, not wanting him to risk pulling a muscle before a dragon flight. “It turns out that the Chaos Flame has been fading for quite some time, much like the First Flame, and we found out that whenever the First Flame was linked, the Chaos Flame grew stronger. And while we have to deal with the Darksign as humans, the demons have to contend with the fact that their life force is directly linked to the Chaos Flame. It is a phenomenon akin to...running out of food.”

“... the demons are...starving?”

By then, Lothric’s hair had been teased into some semblance of order, and Lorian began to tuck the stray strands behind his ears. “Yes. As the Chaos Flame fades, the cores that keep the demons alive begin to fade, and eventually they themselves are reduced to embers and ash. As their powers faded, the demons began to pull back from the rest of the world, attempting to conserve their energy. Of course, some demons still wreck havoc on human settlements, but it becomes a riskier proposition as the years pass.”

Lothric frowned, the gears in his head clearly turning at a rapid pace. “What did Father say when you told him?”

Lorian snorted in spite of himself. “What do you think he said? He was thrilled that the demons were going extinct—that it would make it far easier to wipe them out for good and ensure humanity remained safe forever. Our excursions to the Old Chaos were doubled after that.”

The younger prince was clearly troubled by Lorian’s words, and he turned his gaze down to his lap. “That does not seem...fair, Lorian. If the demons attack us, then I understand having to fight back, but if they are just minding their own business...”

“I agree. It was soon after that conversation with Father that I realized how...pointless our war was. I have seen hundreds of good men and women perish in lava and flame, and for what? To wage war against a race that is slowly starving to death? Defending our borders I can understand, but killing each other when there is no need to, it...” Lorian choked and cursed himself. He didn’t want Lothric to worry. “It was during those years before you were born that I did not know who or what I was fighting for. I felt less like a knight and more like a...a sellsword.”

A murderer.

Lorian finished tucking the last stray strands Lothric’s hair behind his ears and moved to sit next to him on the bed. The child immediately clamored into his lap, and Lorian wrapped his arms around him and rested his forehead on the crown of Lothric’s head, breathing in the smell of old cotton, liniment, and incense.

“I don’t think it was petty, Lorian.” Thin, bony arms wrapped around Lorian’s neck and held on tight. “You were still trying to protect the kingdom and do the right thing. You were doing your best, dear brother.”

Despite his self-loathing, Lorian couldn’t help but smile. “Thank you, little one, but words in the present cannot change how I felt in the past. You may rest assured, however, that I do not feel that way anymore.”
Lothric pulled back just enough to stare quizzically at his brother. “Why?”

“Why do you think, silly?” Lorian poked Lothric’s nose—making him giggle—and continued. “When you were born, I suddenly had something to fight for that was not an impersonal concept—like a kingdom or a moral I couldn’t really understand.” Or the unachievable goal of Father’s love and respect. “I mean, I always had goals I wished to achieve whenever I rode into battle—to keep my soldiers alive, to protect civilians, to solve the conflict with as little bloodshed as possible—and that has not changed. But when I went to confront the Demon Prince, just a handful of months after you were born, I realized that more than anything, I wished to return home to you. That wish has stayed with me, and has helped me become both a better knight and a better man.”

“You were a good person before I came along, Lorian, even if you don’t believe it yourself.” Lothric’s eyes were smiling, however, and he grabbed one of Lorian’s large hands in his two small ones. “I think I remember when you came home from fighting the Demon Prince.”

“Do you?” Lorian ran his thumb along the paper-thin skin on the back of Lothric’s hand. “You were very young when that happened—not even a year old.”

Lothric shrugged. “I cannot be completely sure, but I remember feeling very high up—like I was being carried—and watching you come through the main gate. Your armor was singed and your face was badly burnt. You were limping, and you looked so tired, but I called your name, and you smiled as if you weren’t hurt at all.”

The elder prince chuckled. “Maybe you do remember. My name was the first word you ever spoke, and hearing it made me forget the new burns that ran down my left side. You were far younger than most children are when they first speak, and I was so very proud of you…prouder than I felt having vanquished the Demon Prince.”

“Of course you would be, Ser Lorian—the most humble man in the Lordran.” Lothric huffed and rolled his eyes. “I remember Father yelling, too; was he there?”

Lorian snorted at the memory. “Oh yes. That yelling you heard was his outrage over your first word being my name. He thought it should have been something more ‘fitting’ and ‘proper’ for a future Lord of Cinder and King of Lothric. You know how he is.”

Lothric’s face became deathly serious. “Lorian?”

“Yes, Lothric?”

“I’m glad we are leaving, because if Father ever insults you in front of me again, I will be tempted to claw his eyes out.”

Though Lorian had invited Oceiros to come see them off (an act that was ostensibly an olive branch, but secretly a way to remove any possible suspicion of his ulterior motives), the king was nowhere to be found that morning, and the head scholar informed him that Oceiros had been immersed in his laboratory underneath the Grand Archives since the night before. Both Lorian and the scholar knew that when Oceiros entered one of his ‘moods’, there was no way of interrupting him without inviting his frothing wrath, and it was best to let the king burn out whatever feverish frenzy had grabbed hold of him and wait for him to emerge on his own. Given Oceiros’ ever-shifting moods, such a process could take anywhere from a day to a week, but Lorian found
himself gladdened by his abrupt absence for the first time in his life.

Not only did Oceiros’ seclusion remove the only obstacle between the two brothers and freedom, but it filled Lorian with a self-centered sort of elation to know he would never again have to compensate for his father’s growing incompetence. In the past, it had been he himself who would be forced to manage the daily affairs of running a kingdom while Oceiros was cloistered away, which always took precious time from his role as both Lothric’s caretaker and Knight Commander. However, after that day, the king’s dereliction of duty would no longer be his eldest son’s concern. It was a selfish thought, and Lorian briefly felt bad for being gladdened by actions that would inconvenience (and possibly endanger) others, but he thought of Lothric’s safety and steeled his resolve. Let the old man rot away amongst his potions and scrolls. The kingdom would just have to manage without Lorian from then on out.

After asking for a message to be sent to Oceiros informing him of the departure of his sons, Lorian tucked Lothric under one arm, grabbed the pack of stolen baubles he had filled earlier that morning with the other, and went to say goodbye to Emma. They found the High Priestess in her rocking chair by the grand fireplace, quilting what appeared to be a ceremonial garment of some kind, and she allowed Lothric to climb onto her lap when he inquired as to what she was crafting.

As she explained the finer points of sewing to the bundled child on her lap, Lorian began to feel guilty, and he briefly wondered if he should call the whole thing off. Emma, for all her unwavering faith and linear thinking, was dear to both the elder and younger prince. She had helped raise Lorian until he was old enough to mind his own affairs, and whenever Lorian was busy with his duties or on an expedition, she took care of Lothric with what appeared to be genuine affection and patience. She was as close to a grandmother as they were ever going to get, and to simply leave her behind with no explanation felt… wrong, somehow.

“And why are you so bundled up, little prince?” Emma stroked Lothric’s back as the child ran his thin fingers along her newly sewn seams. “Are you suffering from another chill?”

“We’re going on a dragon flight today!” Lothric beamed up at her. He apparently had no need of fake enthusiasm. “Lorian is going to take me up on Alsanna!”

“Is he now?” Emma’s eyebrows shot up in surprise, and she glanced over at Lorian, who rubbed the back of his head bashfully. “I thought you were against the idea of taking Prince Lothric on a flight.”

“Ah, well, you know how insistent Father can be…” Since Emma herself had witnessed the summer storm known that could be Oceiros’ temperament, it was an easy enough lie for her to swallow, and she nodded gravely at Lorian’s words.

“Aye. It is probably for the best that you humor him on that particular request, for both your sake and the little one’s.” She turned back to Lothric and smiled down at him. “You listen to your brother and hold on tight, understood?”

“Yes, Emma!”

“That’s my little lord.” Emma gave Lothric a pat on the back and winked conspiratorially. “Now, rumor has it that the cooks are baking pastries today; perhaps they will let you take some with you if you ask nicely.”

Lothric’s eyes sparkled. “Really?!” He turned to Lorian. “Can I go ask, brother? Please?!”

Lorian chuckled. “Of course you can, Lothric.” He gently lifted Lothric from Emma’s lap and set
him on the floor. “Do you feel well enough to walk there yourself?”

“Mhm!” The little boy nodded vigorously from underneath his fabric cocoon.

“Very well. Walk slowly and make sure they pack the sweets in a bag for us to carry on Alsanna. Do not exhaust yourself.”

“I won’t! Promise!” With that, Lothric shuffled out of the door and down the hallway, and both Lorian and Emma chuckled at the sight of the eager little bundle of wool and cotton.

“He looks like a wrapped sandwich!” Emma wiped a tear of mirth from her eye and picked up her quilting once more. “Like an old woman in a fairy tale that is about to give you a quest!”

“Lothric in his natural habitat.” Lorian shook his head. “That boy would live in blankets and pillows if he could.”

A companionable silence settled over them, and Lorian moved to sit in the chair opposite Emma, watching as the High Priestess resumed her stitching with a deftness delicate coordination he envied. He debated following Lothric to the kitchen, but he wanted his brother to have a proper goodbye with his surrogate grandmother, and it was important that Lothric seized whatever independence he could grasp. The elder prince was more than content to warm his armor by the fire and wait for Lothric to return with his delicious horde.

“I haven’t seen the little prince this excited in ages.” Emma’s voice broke Lorian from his thoughts, and he turned his gaze from the fire to the old woman rocking across from him. “He has been considerably more dour these past two years.”

“Can you blame him?” Lorian laughed mirthlessly and laced his bronze-clad fingers together in his lap. “He is a child being taught how to die properly, Emma. It is not exactly an uplifting process.”

Emma sighed sadly. “I questioned the king’s insistence that Lothric begin his training so young, but he was adamant that he begin his studies as soon as possible. I think he would have started him sooner if you had not intervened in his care.”

It was a sad sort of relief that Lorian felt at her words. Though they had butted heads many a time over Lothric’s care, the High Priestess was the staunchest ally he had in his little brother’s corner, and she seemed to prioritize Lothric’s wellbeing over their father’s whims. Perhaps she would be sympathetic when Lorian’s grand betrayal was revealed…

“It seems…unconscionable, does it not?” With nothing left to lose, Lorian decided to broach the topic that had hung heavy between them since the beginning, studying Emma’s reaction carefully. “All of the previous Lords of Cinder were adults who were able to make their own choice, but for a child to be schooled as one from birth…is there any choice in that?”

Emma sighed and tugged a stitch tight. “I have had the same thoughts, Prince Lorian, especially after seeing how heavy of the toll of Prince Lothric’s future role has taken on him. The sight of a child being forced into books and prayer instead of games and friendships is not an easy one to stomach.” She gave Lorian a knowing once-over. “It has not been easy on you, either. I have known you since you were a newborn, and though you may be able to hide it from others, your sorrow is as clear as the sun to me.”

Lorian smiled wearily and hung his head low between his shoulders. “You are right. I am distraught, Emma. I love him as my own, and seeing him sacrificed to the flame will be akin to
ripping my heart in two. I doubt I will survive long after his linking.”

Emma clicked her tongue sympathetically, set her unfinished project on the table next to her chair, and stood. Lorian heard her walk over to him, but he only turned his gaze to her when he felt soft, wrinkled fingers caressing his cheek.

“Listen to this old woman, Lorian, for she has seen much.” Her dark eyes were as warm as melted chocolate, and the elder prince suddenly felt like crying, wanting to bury his face in her warm robes and to feel the safety of those loving arms embracing him once more.

“I, too, love Prince Lothric as if he were my own kin,” she continued, “but he has a destiny greater than anything you and I can possibly comprehend. Whenever my faith in the king wavers, I remember the glorious future the little prince has as a Lord of Cinder, and I trust in his wisdom once more. Your father may be angry and short with you, but he is only doing what he thinks is best for the kingdom, and I do not doubt he has Prince Lothric’s best interests at heart. What your little brother is currently going through is an adjustment period. As soon as he acclimates to his new responsibilities, his heart will find contentment and pleasure, and he will embrace his destiny as all Lords of Cinder have in the past. He may be difficult at the moment, but as soon as he has gone through his ‘rebellious phase’, he will adapt and become a sweet, obedient, and good little lord.”

Lorian’s heart plummeted. “Ah.”

Emma’s hand patted his cheek, but while her touch had been comforting only a few seconds before, Lorian found the sensation made him nauseous.

“Besides, you are still very young, Prince Lorian. You will still be in the prime of your life when Lothric goes to the flame, and given that you are godkin, you shall have a much longer life than any human. There will be plenty of time for you to find a life outside of Prince Lothric. One day, you shall marry a wonderful woman, and you will have countless children of your own. All of your sorrow shall fade once you hear the patter of their little feet on your floors. The love of your own children shall eclipse any parental affection you may feel at the moment for Prince Lothric.”

The warmth of the fire seemed to fade, and Lorian felt as if he was breathing in frigid air, frosting his lungs and chilling his blood to viscous sludge. Emma’s hand was burning hot against his cheek, and Lorian pulled away from it with a jerk, an action that seemingly startled Emma.

“Prince Lorian—”

“Thank you for your counsel, Emma.” It was as if Lorian was seeing the woman for the first time in his life, and instead of the substitute mother of his youth, he found himself face-to-face with an empty, vapid crone. The heart that he had thought was full of love and care was a sweet fruit filled with a core of rot—the same putrid pus that Oceiros mixed up in his laboratory and injected himself with on a daily basis. Yet his voice betrayed none of the newfound coldness he felt towards the High Priestess. “I shall keep your words in mind for the future.”

Emma opened her mouth to speak, but Lothric chose that moment to return, carrying a burlap sack of freshly baked goods as if it was a crown meant for a coronation. His movements were slow and cautious—indicating that the brief trip had been enough to cause his joints and muscles to ache—but it was hard for Lorian to be too concerned after seeing the gleeful look in his eyes. If his mouth were uncovered, he would be grinning, and Lorian found himself grinning back.

“I take it your expedition was a success, young knight?”
“Yes, Knight Commander Lorian; I successfully retrieved the stolen croissants from the demons!”

“Valliant work, young squire.” Ignoring the flummoxed expression on Emma’s face, Lorian stood and walked over to Lothric, gently picking up the little boy and cradling him to his chest with his right arm. “Are you ready to go?”

“Yes!”

Lorian nodded and turned back to the High Priestess. “Say goodbye to Emma, Lothric.”

“Goodbye, Emma!” Lothric giggled and waved at the elderly woman, who slowly waved back, clearly shaken by Lorian’s frigid reaction to her words.

“Have a safe trip, Prince Lothric… Prince Lorian.”

“We shall.” Any doubts Lorian had over absconding from the kingdom had been banished by his edifying conversation with Emma. There was no home for them in the castle. “Until our return, High Priestess.”

Lorian strode out of the room before Emma could answer, and Lothric frowned up at his elder brother in concern, slinging the straps of the bag over his shoulder so he could wrap his arms around Lorian’s neck.

“Did Emma upset you, Lorian?”

“Oh, no, baby drake. She simply reminded me of why we are leaving.” It was only half of a lie. “Will you miss her, Lothric?”

“A little,” the child admitted, leaning his head against Lorian’s neck, “but I’ll be okay, Lorian. I would rather have you than her any day.”

Lorian kissed his head as they made their way to the courtyard. “You are irreplaceable, Lothric; never forget that.”

After leaving the castle, it was only a short walk to the dragon barracks, where Alsanna was perched and chewing on a barrel full of near-spoiling fruit. As he’d requested the night before, the wyvern was already groomed and geared for their departure, and her black, ivory, and royal blue scales were freshly polished and sparkling in the sun. She immediately looked up from her snack at Lorian’s whistle and gave a low screech in return, craning her long neck towards to the brothers as they approached.

“Hello, Alsanna.” Lorian greeted, smiling as his wyvern gave his cheek a long lick with her cold, scratchy tongue. “We will be taking Lothric up for a ride today. Be sure to fly carefully and steadily, alright?”

For one that (supposedly) lacked sentience, Alsanna never failed to understand her master’s orders, and she seemed to snort in agreement before turning her attention to the child in Lorian’s arms. She gave Lothric a gentle head-butt—making the little boy giggle and pat her snout—before giving his hooded head a lick of its own.
Alright, alright.” Lorian smiled and adjusted Lothric’s hood back over his hair. “Give me a minute or so to make sure the rigging is all set up, and then we will be ready to go.”

“Can I feed Alsanna while you work?”

“But of course!” At Lorian’s go-ahead, Lothric practically jumped out of his arms in excitement, making his elder brother laugh as he set him on the ground.

As Lorian examined the harness and saddle for tightness and wear, Lothric amused himself by hand-feeding Alsanna spoiling fruit, carefully picking the least mushy pears and apples out of the barrel and holding them out to her piece-by-piece. The wyvern was unfailingly patient with the little prince, and was even careful to tongue the fruit off of his hand before chewing, not wanting to risk biting off his little fingers. The elder prince couldn’t help but smile at the sight as he tightened straps and adjusted the bridle.

While most of the knights chosen to be dragonriders shared from a communal pool of wyverns, Lorian—as the firstborn of the king and queen—had been giving a baby wyvern of his own at the age of eight. She had just hatched from her egg when they met, and Lorian had cared for her as if she was a human child, giving her warm baths every night and feeding her meat paste that he’d pounded himself. The timid runt of the clutch eventually blossomed into a sleek, elegant, and graceful powerhouse—the only wyvern in the kingdom’s service that breathed crystal instead of fire—and she, like her owner, was known throughout the kingdom for her good manners. While many of the wyverns would hiss and snap at strangers, Alsanna was content to quietly study both the humans and her fellow drakes from afar, and she was patiently pliant and yielding while being tacked up.

So great was Lorian’s trust in Alsanna that, while most of the dragonriders and handlers would balk at the idea of small children associating with full-grown wyverns, he had brought Lothric to meet her when the child was just a week old. Lorian had been glowing with love for his small, delicate brother, and since Alsanna was the closest he’d had to a friend at that point in his life, he was eager for her to be a part of his little brother’s life as well. When Lorian presented the newborn to Alsanna—sickly, sallow-skinned, and swaddled in uncomfortable prayer cloth—the dragon gazed down at him with a look that the elder prince could have sworn was maternal and wistful all at once. She craned her long neck down until her head was centimeters from the infant’s face, and when Lothric cooed and reached up with his tiny hands to bat at her snout, she closed the distance to nuzzle his pale cheek. It was one of the softest scenes Lorian had witnessed in his life.

Since then, Alsanna acted as an unofficial babysitter whenever Lorian took Lothric to the barracks with him, and Lothric had spent many an afternoon playing with the wyvern, reading her books or making her large flower crowns. She bore each attention with good grace, and whenever Lothric napped, she would curl a wing over him protectively to shield him from both the sun and what seemed to be an endless throng of nosy onlookers wanting a glimpse of the ‘famous’ savior of the kingdom. The eight-year-old was as comfortable around dragons as a seasoned adult handler, and while Lorian still worried for what would happen when they took to the air, the elder prince knew Alsanna would do her best to make the flight as easy on Lothric as possible.

“We are going away, Alsanna.” Lothric whispered conspiratorially as he reached up to rub her snout. “Away from the kingdom for good. We will be going to Irithyll.” The child blinked and looked over at his brother. “Wait, will Alsanna be able to come with us to Irithyll?”

“I do not think so.” Now finished with his preparations, Lorian walked over to Alsanna’s front and rested a hand and the junction of her head and neck. “However, there are many mountains surrounding Irithyll, and wyverns such as Alsanna thrive in colder climates. I also heard rumor of a
large drake nest somewhere in the Boreal Valley; perhaps she will go there.” Lorian stroked the ridges above her eyes. “Unless she wishes to return to the kingdom and serve another.”

Though it may have been a trick of the light, Lorian could have sworn he saw Alsanna roll her clear white eyes.

“All right, no more dawdling; we have to cover as much ground as possible in a short amount of time.” Lorian reached down and gathered Lothric into his arms. “Remember, Alsanna—a slow and smooth flight.”

The wyvern snorted and flattened herself against the ground to allow Lorian to place Lothric on her back.

Once Lothric was sufficiently strapped in (with his legs secured to the saddle with training stirrups), Lorian sat himself behind the child and grabbed a wide leather strap he had prepared ahead of time. He wrapped it around their middles and secured it as tightly as he could without producing discomfort. That way, if Lothric began to slip, he would be less likely to tumble off of the wyvern.

“Ready to go?”

Lothric nodded and grabbed the pommel in front of him.

Lorian grabbed the reins and hesitated. For what may be the last time, he looked around the barracks where he had spent a great deal of time as both a child and a young man. He gazed at the silhouette of the Grand Archives, were Oceiros was muttering feverishly into his cursed scrolls, wax dripping into his eyes and splattering onto parchment. He saw the silhouette of the castle in the distance and thought of Emma sitting at her rocking chair in front of the fireplace. He thought of his mother locked in her room with the blinds drawn and the candles snuffed. He thought of Gertrude standing stalwart outside of her door and wondered—not for the first time—why her eyes were so similar to the queen’s. He thought of his knights in the lower barracks and hoped that they were enjoying their unexpected two-day vacation. Would his father send them to hunt their old Knight Commander down once Oceiros realized their disappearance? Who would be the one to take his place as their captain?

This is the point of no return.

Lorian’s palms began to sweat inside his gauntlets.

If you do this, there will be no going back.

The elder prince took a shaky breath and swallowed vainly against the taste of iron pooling in the base of his throat. His heart felt like it was hammering against his ribs. Not even the anticipation of his battle with the Demon Prince had made him so anxious.

You will never be able to come home again.

“Lorian?” Lothric’s voice was soft and unsure. “Are you okay?”

“Yes.” Lorian shook his head and bit the inside of his cheek to ground himself. No, there would be no returning to the kingdom, but had Lothric ever truly been a home? A home was supposed to make you feel safe, but when had the castle ever felt like anything other than a prison, or even a torture chamber? Had Lorian even known true happiness before his brother entered his life?

No, he realized with a sickening lurch. He had not.
We will make our own home, then, in a cold and gentle place.

With new resolve, Lorian gave the reins a light yank, and Alsanna took to the sky with a mighty heave.

Lothric yelped in surprise as they sailed over the ramparts and spires, but the brilliant smile on his face abated Lorian’s worries of him being afraid, and he eagerly craned his little body as far over the pommel as it could go to see over Alsanna’s long neck. The wind whipped the prayer hood and blanket cowl off of his head and tossed his hair into a nest of tangles that would be dreadful to comb out. Yet Lorian could not care less, because Lothric looked as bright, joyous, and shining as he had ever been, and for a blissful moment, his illness seemed to become nothing more than a memory.

“This is amazing!” Lothric yelled against the wind as Lorian directed Alsanna to fly one last circle over the kingdom that was once their birthright. He looked up at Lorian with eyes as wide as teacup saucers. “Everything is so beautiful up here, and you can see the whole kingdom from up here! Is it always like this?!”

Lorian could not help but laugh. “It is when one is not under fire from an enemy!” He kept one arm wrapped around Lothric’s chest and used his free hand to make Alsanna climb. She would need to be a bit higher to safely clear the mountain range. “Are you afraid?!”

“Why would I be?!” Lothric leaned to the right as soon as he caught sight of the ocean, and Lorian quickly adjusted his arm so that he remained securely in his lap. “Look, Lorian, you can see the entire cape from up here! Can you imagine how large the whole ocean is if the cape is that large?!”

“As I am not a seafarer, I would not know!” It was clear that Lothric loved the experience of dragon riding, and Lorian couldn’t help but feel a pang of guilt at having deprived him of such delight for so long. Perhaps Oceiros hadn’t been entirely misguided in his desire to have Lothric experience flight. “Be sure to take a good look at the kingdom, Lothric; it may be the last you see of it for a long time!”

“Oh, right! Well, goodbye, Mother! Goodbye, Father! Goodbye, Emma!” Lothric waved at the castle and the Grand Archives as they flew past them once more. “Goodbye, Kingdom of Lothric! I hope you do well while we are gone!”

Lorian’s arm tightened around Lothric’s chest. Goodbye, my soldiers, he thought to himself. If the time comes when my father’s consumption threatens the kingdom itself, I pray that you fast and fight for what is right, even if it means damnation and death. That is the path I must walk from now on. I hope you can forgive me for my betrayal.

Alsanna glided through the air as easily as a fish glides through water. She flew straight past the castle and over the peaks of the Firelink Mountains at its back. Below them was the secret path known only to the royal family, the High Scholars, and the Black Hands: a trail which began at the back of Oceiros’s garden, cut through the Cemetery of Ash, and wound its way up the cliffs to the shrine for which the mountain range was named. In another life, an eighteen-year-old Lothric would have been led down that path by a procession consisting of his father, the priests, and the High Scholars, and at the end of the road would be a cold, stone throne inside of a candlelit chamber, where his own ashes would have fallen into the pile of those of lords past. Yet from their height above the ground, Lorian could barely see the trail through the low-hanging clouds, and the shrine itself appeared so small and decrepit compared to the looming crematorium he saw so frequently in his nightmares. They flew higher still, and as the cliffs surrounding Firelink Shrine dropped into deep valleys shrouded in fog, the castle that once towered behind them began to shrink into the distance.
Finally, the Kingdom of Lothric finally vanished behind the crags and clouds, and neither Lothric nor Lorian looked back.

It was soon after—when they had finally reached Sirris’ suggested ‘landing zone’ near the base of a mountain that flanked the Boreal Valley, and Lorian was busy tacking down Alsanna so that she could fly freely—that they first heard the tolling of a bell. Lothric—who was sitting on a rock formation behind his elder brother and taking in the sights—seemed to freeze at the sound, and even Lorian paused to listen, half-stooped over with an ice-crusted stone in his hands.

“What on earth?” The elder prince muttered to himself. “I saw no towers up above. Perhaps a belfry was obscured from my view by cloud or tree.”

With a grunt, Lorian set the last rock over the pit he had dug to store his wyvern gear, in the hope of returning for it at a later date. After shuffling the stones about to make sure they looked as ‘inconspicuous’ as possible, the elder prince began to grab handfuls of snow, dusting them over the false cairn to give it the appearance of being long undisturbed. That way, if a wayward hunter or traveller came upon the structure, they would think it a hastily assembled grave and continue on their way.

Once the rocks appeared sufficiently undisturbed, Lorian dusted off his gauntlets and stood, turning his attention to Alsanna. Said wyvern was busy nibbling dead scales off of her wings, but she immediately ceased her grooming at the sound of Lorian’s whistle, turning her head to gaze down at her master.

“Alright, Alsanna; this is where we must part ways.” Lorian’s voice was mournful as he approached her, resting a hand on her side. “Once I learn the layout of the Boreal Valley, we can find a suitable place for a perch, but for now you must seek your own nest. I have heard from Sirris that there may be a mountain nearby that is a home to drakes of all sorts—just a rumor, but perhaps it would be a good place to start.”

Alsanna seemed to tilt her head in thought.

The bell was still tolling—surely, whatever time change or call to service it was meant to indicate would have finished by then!—and Lorian found himself wincing at the sound. The ringing was beginning to make his ears throb. “Well, I wish you good flying, dearest Alsanna. You shall be able to find us in the Boreal Valley. If there is trouble, I shall send up a flare; I can only pray you shall be in a position to see it.”

Once more, the wyvern seemed to roll her eyes, as if she was thinking her master an idiot. Of course I will be close by, her iridescent eyes gently chided, for where else would I have to go?

“Very well, then. Do as you may.” Lorian gave Alsanna a final pat before retracting his hand.

Alsanna lowered her head and gave Lorian’s cheek one last lick—as dry and fond as always—and stretched her neck to the sky. With a roar and a mighty beat of her wings, the wyvern took to the air, the gusts from her wing-beats kicking up the snow beneath her as she rose. She circled the mountain’s base once—calling out in what Lorian assumed was farewell—and took off towards the looming peaks in the distance.

The elder prince watched his drake until she vanished into the mountain mists, then sighed and
squared his shoulders. He did not have the luxury of standing around and mourning the loss of his childhood companion—not while the clock was ticking and Lothric shivered in the bitter cold of the Sunless Kingdom.

“Alright, Lothric.” Lorian stooped down and picked up the packs of stolen goods and pastries, slinging them over his shoulders. Why was that infernal bell still ringing?! “We shall have to make haste; I do not want you being out in the cold for too long, and we do not have much time before Father comes looking—“

“I’m sorry.”

The words died in Lorian’s throat. “Lothric?”

“I’m sorry.” Lothric’s voice was soft—so soft, that Lorian had barely heard him against the clanging of the bell. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

“Lothric?” Lorian whirled around and saw Lothric curled up in a little ball on top of the rock, with his knees drawn to his chest and his hands clutching the sides of his head. He was paler—paler than normal—and there was a hollow and haunted look in his eyes that shook Lorian to the core. “Lothric, what is the matter? What are you apologizing for? Are you alright?”

“I’m so sorry.” Lothric seemed to be looking past Lorian at something only he could see—just like their mother. His voice quivered as his hands began to shake. The bell kept ringing. “I’m sorry. I’m just scared. I don’t want to do this. Why is that wrong? I don’t want to be bad, but I’m scared.”

“Lothric…”

The bell clanged loudly, and Lothric screamed, eyes snapping shut. His hands tightened to the point that they were trembling, and his talon-like fingernails dug into the exposed skin of his scalp, threatening to draw blood. “I’m sorry! I know I’m bad! I’m weak! I’m malformed! I ruin everything!” Another ring—like a thunderclap—and he shrieked again, burying his face in his knees. “I’m sorry! I know I’m not fit to be a Lord! Please, just stop! I tried! I tried!!”

“Lothric!” Lorian sprang forward and gripped Lothric’s wrists, wrenching them from his head before they could draw blood. “Little brother, what has gotten into you?!” The elder prince could not keep the panic from his voice as he sank to his knees and pulled Lothric from his perch down to his chest. “Please, what’s wrong?! Tell me!”

“I don’t know! I don’t know!” Lothric wailed, slipping his wrists from Lorian’s grip and clinging to him as if he were a buoy in a stormy sea. “Everything hurts, Lorian! I just want to leave! Please, dear brother, let us go to Irithyll! I do not want to hear the ringing anymore! I cannot bear it! Please!”

Finally—thank the merciful gods above!—the bell ceased its tolling, and Lothric seemed to calm in the silence that followed. Assuming that the sound had simply overwhelmed his younger brother’s delicate senses to the point of distress, Lorian quickly wiped Lothric’s eyes with a corner of a blanket and set him back on the rock, making sure he had stopped shaking before turning his back to him.

“Alright, Lothric; rest your eager heart. Do you have the strength to ride on my back? There, that’s a good little drake; you are doing wonderfully.”

Once Lothric had his arms wrapped securely around Lorian’s neck, the elder prince stood and began to pick his way down what appeared to be an old hunting path, being careful to not slip and
fall in the process. He did not want to accidentally crush Lothric under his weight.

“ The gods are angry at me, Lorian,” Lothric’s voice was a whisper against his neck. “ I think I am damned.”

Lorian had no idea where Lothric’s words were coming from, but he knew exactly how to answer them. “ Even if you are, Lothric, know that I am damned with you. Wherever we go now, we shall go together.”

With those words, the two brothers descended into the valley below, the unknown settling around them like a shroud.

Chapter End Notes

Lorian: Hey Emma, I’m really depressed about the idea of Lothric burning alive, since. You know. I love him.

Emma: I understand, but get this--you can just replace your FAKE KID with your OWN KIDS one day. That will make you forget all about your little brother burning alive for eternity.

Lorian: ::throwing Lothric over his shoulder and climbing on his wyvern:: sorry but i have to leave right now immediately
slipping down a chain reaction

Chapter Summary

An unknown bell tolls for hours in the distance. Sulyvahn of Ariandel, Patriarch of the Deep and Lord Commander of Irithyll, is abruptly called back to the Cathedral of the Deep to handle an emergency. A mysterious beast appears to terrorize the citizens of the Sunless Realm.

As both the King of the Gods and the last True God remaining in the Lordran, Gwyndolin has seen much during the countless millennia of his existence, but even he finds himself thrown off-balance by the strange sequence of events. When a hunt for the monster that threatens his citizens ends with him finding and rescuing an injured knight and his miraculous little brother, the God of the Moon finds it difficult to believe that the circumstances are coincidental, and Gwyndolin finds himself faced with the daunting reality of a mystery that spans far beyond the borders of the Kingdom of Irithyll.

Well, first thing's first, there is the matter of his guests to which he must attend.

Chapter Notes

Trigger/Content Warnings: Non-graphic violence; non-graphic descriptions of injury and death; subtle creepiness (a.k.a. Sulyvahn) that may be disturbing to those familiar with emotional and mental abuse; implied child abuse; snake legs.

Credits: Iced-Blood, for giving me a lifesaving primer on Ye Olde English; my $350,000+ medical education, for allowing me to write semi-accurate medical jargon; the Dark Souls fandom wiki, for enabling me to fact check without having to replay Dark Souls 3 ten quintillion times.

Additional Notes: As stated in the character tags, the version of Gwyndolin portrayed in this story is genderfluid and uses he/his pronouns in the present, but he also utilizes she/her pronouns when describing his childhood self as a way to separate his present state from his childhood trauma and abuse. This compartmentalization is in no way, shape, or form meant to imply that his trauma stems from femininity. This is a femmephobia-free and TERF-free zone.

So yeah, enjoy the chapter!

P.S. Gwyndolin's appearance and outfit are based off of his torso in the Aldrich boss fight and the statues depicting his full likeness in Sulyvahn's boss arena.

P.S.S. Gwyndolin said trans and nonbinary rights.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
“You wish for me to perform an… autopsy on this beast?”

Gwyndolin calmly tilted his head to the side, carefully studying the expression of Doctor Heldane Allant, the High Healer of Irithyll, who suddenly appeared as if she would be sick. “Wouldst such a procedure be a problem for thee, Doctor Allant? I had presumed that dissecting corpses had become a mainstay in medical training throughout the Lordran. If thou art unable to complete the task, however…”

“Oh, no, no, the simple act of dissection is not a problem, My Lord!” Heldane quickly interjected. She paused to push her glasses back up her nose—a habit, Gwyndolin had noticed, she performed when nervous. “Myself and my medical school colleagues performed many a dissection in our studies, and autopsies are standard in my position!”

“A fact of which I am well aware.” Gwyndolin nodded once. “Which is why I am… perplexed as to the nature of thy reluctance. I reassure thee, the beast—“ The deity inclined his head towards the rectangular metal table to his left, on which the remnants of the creature he had felled were placed, covered with a white sheet to deter prying eyes. “—is most assuredly deceased. Thou hast no need to fear injury.”

“Oh, it is not that!” Heldane sighed in exasperation and wrung her hands together. “My Lord, I have never before questioned your wisdom, nor your orders—“

Is that not what thou art doing at this moment? Gwyndolin mused, reaching up to adjust the dark hood shading his face from view. Heldane had always been a proficient, intelligent, and thoughtful physician in the past, though, so the Nameless Moon decided to hear her out.

“—but, you see, Your Majesty…I have only ever performed dissections and autopsies on humans and godkin! Oh, there was that one time in medical school when the Head Physician got her hands on a pygmy corpse, but this —“ Heldane gestured dramatically at the covered corpse. “—is far from either of those things! Would not a veterinarian be more appropriate to perform the dissection?”

Ah…that was actually a fair point, and Gwyndolin could not help but internally praise his choice of High Healer. Heldane had always served himself and the kingdom to the best of her ability.

“I see thy point now, and would be inclined to agree with thee, were it not for the fact that this creature was able to conjure lightning.”

Heldane’s stern brown eyes widened to the size of teacup saucers. “That is impossible, My Lord.” Her voice came out in a whisper. “Only humans and godkin can wield lightning. Perhaps a few pygmies, but…”

“Art thou doubting events that I mineself have witnessed?” Gwyndolin raised an eyebrow, and Heldane hurriedly raised her hands, shaking her head with a vigor that displaced several tightly wound dreadlocks from underneath her white hood.

“No, not at all, oh Nameless Moon! It is just that this…this thing is far from all three of those creatures! It is impossible for a mere beast or animal to even conceive of wielding lightning!”

Gwyndolin folded his hands in his lap and waited patiently for Heldane to fit all of the pieces into place. The god watched as the doctor’s face cycled from perplexity, to consternation, and finally to alarm, all in a matter of seconds.
“My Lord…” Heldane’s voice was hesitant. “Are you saying that this creature…it may have once been…?”

“That is what I wish for thee to discover, Doctor.” Gwyndolin smoothed some wrinkles out of the pleats of his black robe as he spoke. “Either this is a new species of beast unbeknownst to even minescelf, or this creature bears some relation to human, godkin, or pygmy. Either way, it is imperative that we discover the answer, lest more of such creatures threaten the lives of Irithyll’s citizens.”

“Understood, oh Nameless Moon.” Heldane bowed low and straightened. “If I may suggest, however, that you allow me to enlist the assistance of a veterinarian before beginning the autopsy. Though it may have once been something else, a beast this creature became, and I am afraid I would miss crucial information with my limited anatomical knowledge.”

Gwyndolin inclined his head in agreement. “Dost thou have such a person in mind?”

“The sister of one of my old medical school colleagues is a skilled veterinarian of many years. She is currently serving in the court of Queen Lucatiel and Princess Shanalotte of Drangleic; if I send for her today, she should be here in a fortnight at most. There is no one in the Lordran more versed in creatures great and small than her.”

“And the body?”

“Easy to preserve with freezing miracles and embalming tonics. The creature’s flesh already seems somewhat resistant to decomposition, so we should have more than ample time to perform the dissection.”

“Very well.” Gwyndolin stood, adjusted the gauzy black and gold shawl over his shoulders, and bowed to Heldane. “Send the name of the veterinarian to mine quarters and I shall personally send for her tonight. I shall leave the rest in thy capable hands.”

“Yes, Lord Gwyndolin.” Heldane bowed in return—far more deeply than before—and only straightened as Gwyndolin turned to leave the morgue. As well versed in most things as the god was, the most advanced medical procedures were still beyond him, so he was forced to rely on Heldane and her compatriot from Drangleic to unravel the mystery of the creature’s origins.

“Ah, I was just wondering how the knight you brought in was doing, and if Doctor Watari requires my assistance in his care.”

“Rest thy heart, Doctor Heldane; while thy concern is most appreciated, Doctor Watari assured me that the patient would be out of surgery within the hour, and is doing quite well otherwise. However, I shall surely send for thee should an issue arise.”

“By your leave, My Lord.”

Heldane bowed once more, and Gwyndolin nodded before stepping through the doorway, leaving the middle-aged physician with the mangled corpse. As well versed in most things as the god was, the most advanced medical procedures were still beyond him, so he was forced to rely on Heldane and her compatriot from Drangleic to unravel the mystery of the creature’s origins.

How odd it all is! Gwyndolin pursed his lips together as he walked through the private passage leading from the basement of the city hall to the great hall. He reached out with his right hand and trailed his gloved fingers along the cobblestones of the wall. The ringing of that strange bell, the trouble at the Cathedral of the Deep that called Sulyvahn away, that strange creature’s presence on the outskirts of Irithyll, and those two brothers…is their timing truly coincidental?
The moon god sighed in exhaustion and rubbed his eyes with his left hand. Oh, how tired he was from it all! Though his latest bout of unexplained weakness had improved dramatically as of late, it had taken him a good majority of the day to track the creature down, and while he could cast spells for hours without tiring, physical activity remained as disagreeable as it had been in his childhood. It had taken quite a bit out of him to maintain the glamor of human legs for the duration of the expedition, and while Gwyndolin wanted nothing more than to drop the glamor and free the snakes, he knew they would disagree with the three upcoming flights of stairs to the surface. Alas, he would just have to hold on a little longer; it was far from the worst exhaustion the god had endured in his considerable lifetime.

_Besides, Gwyndolin mused as he braced himself for those Manus-damned stairs; there is the matter of our guests to tend to…_

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The strangeness had started the day before with the tolling of the bell. Though the city’s clocks were the primary demarcators of the cycle of night and day in Irithyll, there was still a faint lightening and darkening due to the fading sun outside of Gwyndolin’s influence, and it was during the early morning brightening when the bell began to ring in the distance.

While Gwyndolin had risen before dawn (as was his routine when not stricken with illness), the ringing of the bell had been loud enough to rouse Yorshka from her slumber, though she normally slept like the dead well into late morning. The crossbreed girl had eventually stumbled into Gwyndolin’s room an hour after the bell started to toll, clad in her favorite fluffy purple nightgown and carrying Ornifex in her arms. The newest crystal lizard to join her menagerie—demarcated from his fellows by a blue bow with golden polka dots wrapped around his neck—was wriggling and whining up a storm, and Yorshka had to keep a firm grip around his middle to keep him from working free from her arms and tumbling to the floor.

“Is that bell one of ours, dear brother?” Sleep was still thick in Yorshka’s voice, and she expertly shifted Ornifex to underneath her left arm so she could rub the crusts out of her eyes with her right. “I thought the Church of the Deep did not congregate so early…”

“I do not believe the bell is tolling in Irithyll.” Gwyndolin beckoned for Yorshka to stand next to him on the balcony outside of his window. “It is far too faint of a sound to be coming from the city itself, yet the ringing resonates as if one were standing next to the belfry…perhaps it is coming from a nearby province.”

“Well, whoever is ringing it, they need to cut it out!” Yorshka grumbled, shifting to hold the squirming Ornifex to her chest so she could wriggle her way under Gwyndolin’s arm. “Do they have no consideration for those still resting so early in the morning? Not even farmers and miners rouse this early! And the sound is upsetting the lizards so; they are practically tearing up the garden trying to get away from it!”

Gwyndolin chuckled and pulled Yorshka close to his side, not minding the low screeching of the crystal lizard in the slightest. It was practically the background noise to his life at that point. “Wouldst thou like me to track down the source and give them a piece of mine mind?”

“Yes please!” Yorshka huffed indignantly, burrowing the side of her face into Gwyndolin’s warm sleeping robe. “What else are gods good for if not to teach mortals basic manners?! Thou should hunt them down and make them replant the garden the lizards are destroying; it took me a year to
get those rose bushes the way I wanted them!”

“Perhaps thou should think twice before planting fine flowering bushes in an area where little lizards that destroy such vegetation are known to reside.”

“No you.”

“No you.”

Yorshka rolled her eyes at Gwyndolin’s snickering and gently smacked her tail against his snakes, three of which curled their heads around the offending appendage and held fast, hissing playfully.

“Well, regardless of the location of the offending belfry, it should not continue tolling much longer.” Gwyndolin hummed. He shifted his arm around Yorshka and grabbed the tip of one of the pink, scaly tendrils in her hair, twirling it in his fingers absentmindedly. “After all, how long could a call to worship possibly last?”

As it turned out, a call to worship could last a terribly long time, and the bell rang intermittently until the end of lunchtime. Yorshka even had to forego her usual duties at her church to corral the crystal lizards and fix up the garden behind the Cathedral of the Moon, and while Gwyndolin had no serious intention of seeking out whoever was ringing the bell and making them stop, the migraine he struggled with for the greater part of that morning made him wish he could. Alas, he had his duties as Irithyll’s political and spiritual leader to attend to, and he could not simply go gallivanting across the countryside in hunt of a wayward belfry.

As if that particular incident had not been strange enough, Sulyvahn had burst into Gwyndolin’s office on the top floor of the Cathedral of the Moon only a minute or so after the bell ceased to ring, looking as haggard as the god had ever seen him.

“Forgive my interruption, Lord Gwyndolin, but an urgent matter has come to my attention.” Sulyvahn had all but collapsed into one of the chairs seated across from Gwyndolin’s desk. “I am afraid I must away from Irithyll for some time.”

“Away?” In the two years Gwyndolin had known the corvian, he had never before seen Sulyvahn look so anxious, and the sight was enough to cause the god concern. He set his quill beside the inkwell, pushed the parchment he had been writing on aside, and rose from his chair. “What trouble has befallen thee, Patriarch Sulyvahn? Is there an issue with the Cathedral of the Deep?”

“Yes, in fact.” Sulyvahn watched Gwyndolin as he slithered around the desk to stand at his side. “I am afraid a great many of our parishioners and deacons have fallen ill—including poor Archdeacon Royce—and they require my guidance immediately.”

“But of course.” Gwyndolin knew how important both the cathedral and those that worshiped there were to Sulyvahn, and if their positions had been revered, the god knew that he would rushed home with utmost haste. “While thy presence shall be missed, thy flock is far more important than thy duties here, and I am sure Archdeacon McDonnell shall be successful in steering the parish in Irithyll during thine absence.”

“Thank you, My Grace. The Nameless Moon is ever just and merciful.” Though Gwyndolin did not think of Sulyvahn as particularly attractive, the way his gratefulness to and adoration for Gwyndolin lit up his bird-like features made the god’s stomach flutter all the same, and he found himself smiling back.

“Nonsense. Thou simply must go where thine attention is most required.” After a moment’s
hesitation, Gwyndolin reached out with his right hand, gently touching Sulyvahn on the shoulder. “When shalt thou depart?”

“Within the hour. I am not sure how long it shall take for things to resolve. I promise to send word as soon as I arrive and...assess the situation.” Sulyvahn smiled warily and placed his own hand over Gwyndolin’s. The moon god could not keep the flush off of his cheeks, and he quickly cast his eyes to the ground, his stomach doing yet another flip when Sulyvahn chuckled at the sight. “What I am saying is that I may be away for quite some time.”

“As I said, thou must do what needs to be done.” Gwyndolin let his hand slip from Sulyvahn’s shoulder as the corvian stood. He moved to pull it back to his side, but Sulyvahn grabbed it before he could do so, entwining their fingers together. Gwyndolin’s answering smile was a nervous one, but the god did his best not to let his discomfort show, knowing how much his naïve awkwardness frustrated Sulyvahn. “Know that we shall be eagerly awaiting thy return once thy flock has recovered.”

“I am glad for that.” Sulyvahn’s voice grew low and soft. “Are you sure you can manage without me, dear Gwyndolin?”

The diminutive did nothing to help the blush fade from Gwyndolin’s cheeks. “And why should I not be, Sulyvahn? As great a boon as thy presence has been in mine halls, Irithyll has managed without thee for several millennia, as have I.”

“Ah, for better or worse, I suppose.” The comment threw Gwyndolin off-balance, but Sulyvahn took no notice of the moon god’s distress, chuckling again and giving Gwyndolin’s delicate fingers a soft squeeze. “Try not to burn Irithyll to the ground while I am gone, yes?”

The tone was blatantly teasing, but Gwyndolin’s unease doubled at Sulyvahn’s jest, and the god could form no protest when the corvian tugged him close and wrapped his branch-like arms around him.

“No need to feel distressed, my sweet.” Sulyvahn whispered tenderly. “I shall return to you as soon as I am able.”

“Ah...as thou will.” Gwyndolin closed his eyes at the sensation of Sulyvahn kissing him on the head and did his best to bask in the flickers of warmth the action produced. “Thou should probably take thy leave and make thy preparations.”

“Ah, yes; I have taken enough of the Nameless Moon’s precious time as is.” Gwyndolin thought he detected a hint of exasperation in Sulyvahn’s voice, but the man was still smiling when he pulled away. “Please give dear Yorshka my regards.”

“Of course.”

With that, Sulyvahn took his leave, and Gwyndolin slowly slithered his way back to his chair and sat. As his snakes curled around one another in an attempt to self-soothe, the god rested his face in his hands and took deep, steadying breaths, willing away the emotional unsteadiness Sulyvahn tended to foster within him.

What in the name of the flame is happening today?

Despite the mounting unease that both the unknown bell and Sulyvahn’s departure had fostered in his heart, Gwyndolin easily drowned his cares in work. He had spent the rest of the day reading and signing documents, meeting with city leaders, and entertaining representatives from one of the
few outside kingdoms with which they were on speaking terms. Even the busywork of military appropriation and coordination (which he would be forced to manage during the absence of the Lord Commander) was more tolerable than expected, and Gwyndolin managed to finish his official tasks several hours ahead of schedule, which allowed the god more than ample time to hear and address the grievances of his people in the cathedral before dinner. After that, it was simply a matter of helping Yorshka finish up in the garden, which consisted of Gwyndolin brushing the last of the displaced soil into the flowerbeds while Yorshka arranged the crystal lizards into two even lines and gave them a thorough scolding.

Once the young crossbreed girl had finished ‘disciplining’ her pets (followed by giving each of them a warm hug and a kiss between the eyes, because she couldn’t bear leaving them for the night on such a bad note!), she and Gwyndolin returned to their quarters, where they ate a late dinner and discussed the strange events of the day. Three of the lizards—Ornifex, Vengarl, and Licía—inevitably meandered into the living room while Gwyndolin was giving Yorshka a late history lesson, and she occupied herself with trimming their nails while Gwyndolin told her of the history of the lost golden kingdom of Oolacile, which was a subject that never failed to make his eyes hot and his heart twist in emptiness. The god ended the lesson before touching on their experimentation with the Abyss (which was more for his sake than Yorshka’s), and after helping his little sister brush out her hair to avoid snagging the comb on her tendrils, Gwyndolin bade her good night and retired to his quarters to finally rest.

It was in the pre-dawn hours that Gwyndolin was awoken by the captain of the Silver Knights.

"Forgive me, My Liege, but there is a situation." Aishura bowed low in apology before continuing. "Several minutes ago, a woman came running over the main bridge, carrying her two children. They were covered in blood."

Twenty minutes later, Gwyndolin found himself kneeling in front of the distraught woman, who had collapsed in the Church of Yorshka and was being tended to by a healer. Her two children—one a newborn and one barely a toddler—were being looked over by a handmaid of the church and appeared unharmed.

"My...my wife an’ I, we ‘ave a farm on the outskirts o’ the city..." The woman was barely able to speak through her sobbing, and Gwyndolin reached out to take her hands in his own, hoping the action would offer a measure of comfort. "A-an’ the dogs woke us up by makin’ a fuss, so Lynn wen’ out to see what was goin’ on, an’ then I heard her screamin’, and the dogs were yelpin’, so I got the crossbow an’ ran outside, an’...oh Lynn! Lynn, why, why?"

The woman spoke of a massive creature, larger than any local bear or wolf, with thick brown fur and red, glowing eyes. Its jaws had been large enough to snap her wife in two when she had tried to protect the family’s dogs and cows, and she herself had barely enough time to grab their two children and hide in the corn crib before the monster found them. Bits of cornhusks were stuck to her thick blonde hair, and as she tearfully spoke of holding her wife’s torso in her arms as she passed, Gwyndolin reached up and gently brushed them away.

"Do you believe she is lying?" Aishura asked once the woman and her children had been escorted to the treatment hall.

"The poor woman’s nightgown is soaked red and tacky from the lifeblood of her beloved, and thou dares to accuse her of lying?" Aishura, normally the picture of stoicism, flinched backwards at the venom in the moon god’s tone. "The mayor of the western outskirts came to me yesterday and told me tales of numerous livestock struck down over the last fortnight—with even mighty bulls and stallions being found gored and emptied of offal in the early morning—and I believe that poor
farmer was the victim of such a creature.”

“But what beast could possibly tear a human in two?”

“That is what I intend to find out.” Gwyndolin replied coldly. “Pick two knights to accompany me to the outskirts and have them ready and at the western gates within the hour. I shall meet them there.”

Though the characteristic helm of the Silver Knights hid the expression on Aishura’s face, it was clear from her voice that she was surprised. “You wish to go yourself, My Lord?”

“Yes, I do. Dost thou have an issue with mine decision, Captain?”

The biting ice in Gwyndolin’s voice made Aishura shudder in her greaves, and she quickly shook her head, deciding to let her worries for the god’s safety drop. “No, Nameless Moon, of course not. I act on your will. Shall I wake Lady Yorshka and notify her of your departure?”

“That shall not be necessary. I shall tell her myself.”

It truly had been Gwyndolin’s intention to wake Yorshka when he returned to his quarters to fetch his weapons, yet a quick glance into her bedroom revealed that she was sound asleep and buried underneath a mound of blankets and three crystal lizards, her draconic snoring rattling through the room and bringing a smile to her elder brother’s face. Deciding to leave her to her slumber, Gwyndolin softly closed her door and retreated to his quarters, releasing his glamour and letting the snakes run free while he grabbed his catalyst, bow, and arrows. Though he briefly considered telling Aishura to notify Yorshka of his absence when she awoke, the moon god decided to pen a brief note to leave on her bedside table instead, if only to give his unusual legs more time to stretch before being forced back into an illusion of normalcy.

Finally, unable to avoid the inevitable much longer, Gwyndolin sealed the note with wax and stood from his desk chair. “All right, little rascals,” he mournfully addressed the six snakes shifting about nervously on the polished wooden floor. “Back into thy prison thou must go.”

The act of transfiguring his snakes into passing human legs was a sensation Gwyndolin could never get used to, even though casting the spell itself was as unconscious and easy as breathing by that point in his life. Within a matter of seconds, the six snakes had coiled around each other and morphed into the shape of two human legs, their bones cracking and shifting in place as they temporarily assumed an alignment that would facilitate bipedal movement. Gwyndolin grit his teeth through the brief discomfort and finished off the ‘parlor trick’ by casting an illusion of skin, covering the green, black, and brown scales with matte milky white. Though casting the spell in itself was easy, maintaining it took quite a bit of effort and energy, and Gwyndolin often found himself exhausted and unable to walk within a handful of hours.

Even worse, his excursion into the wilderness outside of the city’s limits would require him to don boots, and shoes of any kind would strangle the snakes and send needles of pain shooting up Gwyndolin’s jerry-rigged legs with every step.

“For mine people.” Gwyndolin grit his teeth as he forced on a pair of Gwynevere’s old leather hunting boots, trying to ignore the already palpable irritation of the snakes. “For mine people. For mine people. For mine people.”

After taking a minute or so to get used to the feeling of boots on his makeshift feet, Gwyndolin grabbed his weapons and left his quarters, stopping to tiptoe into Yorshka’s room and drop the note on her bedside table. The duvet had slipped off of the bed in the interim, so Gwyndolin took a
moment to pull the plush white cover back over Yorshka’s shoulders, trying his best not to disturb the squeaking crystal lizards as he tucked her in. Once he was satisfied that his sister would be warm and safe, Gwyndolin cracked the bedroom window open just enough to freshen the room, pressed a kiss to her exposed cheek, and exited as quietly as he’d entered.

“Check on Yorshka every hour until she awakes.” Gwyndolin asked Aishura when he encountered her in the main courtyard. “All thou needst do is look in and make sure she is safe, but take care not to rouse her. Thou mayst send a party in search of us if we have not returned by evening.”

“By your will.” It was clear that Aishura was still nervous about Gwyndolin heading out to hunt the beast himself, but she appropriately yielded to his authority on the matter, and Gwyndolin said nothing to reassure her. The last True God in the Lordran should not have to prove his ability to defend himself to anyone, let alone by a mortal whose one job was to obey his orders.

Who does she think she is—mine father?

At least the two Silver Knights that met Gwyndolin on the path out of the waterworks (two of the newer recruits that he had not yet gotten a chance to meet) said nothing contrarian about their mission. In fact, they seemed quietly excited, and they simply nodded at Gwyndolin’s declaration that they would scour the countryside until they found the beast and put it down. While Gwyndolin could handle himself, he said, he would need the help of the Silver Knights to bring the corpse back to Irithyll for study. They would start at the farm that was attacked and see if they could track the creature’s path from there.

It took only a handful of minutes of walking to find the small yet lovingly tended homestead in the western countryside. The wooden fence surrounding the property had been all but splintered by the beast, and a trail of footprints—clawed and as wide as Gwyndolin’s head—lead them on a winding path through the pastures and around the barn. The half-eaten corpses of the family’s dairy cows—at least twenty in total—were strewn about like rubbish, and they found the bisected corpse of the farmer, Lynn, lying between the barn and house. It was clear that her death—while quick—had been gruesome and painful, and Gwyndolin ordered the Silver Knights to dig a grave and bury her remains before proceeding onward. It was the least he could do for failing in his duty to protect the family from harm.

Behind the property, a trail of footprints led from the house to the wilderness, and Gwyndolin and the Silver Knights followed them as they wove through the trees and wound around rock formations. The perpetual layer of snow covering Irithyll made following the creature’s trail stupidly easy, and it was not long before they found themselves on the riverbank a few kilometers away from the city itself, where the footprints ended at the water’s edge. Given the jagged paths cutting through the icy river, the creature either swam across the river to the opposite side, or cut through the thin ice on the bank and swam further upstream.

“Find thy way across the river and check for any signs of the beast.” Gwyndolin ordered the knights. “I shall head further upstream on this side and check to see if I can pick up the trail once more. We shall each leave a trail of prism stones so that we may reunite once our search has concluded.”

The two Silver Knights simply nodded and turned to find a safe way across the river, leaving Gwyndolin at his leisure to climb the steeper ground next to the river and follow it from a higher vantage point. The snakes were already suffering in their confines; there was no need to traumatize them further by slogging through half-frozen mud.

As perilous as the situation was, Gwyndolin could not help but find the solitude of the snowed-over woods soothing, and even his legs seemed to ache less as he marched through trees and
crested the hills flanking the riverbank. The moon god found himself recalling a conversation he had with Aestus thousands of years in the past, when his brother was still the strong and mighty Heir to the House of Gwyn, and he himself was but a frail little girl hidden away from the world out of fear and disgust. His brother had returned from one of his long hikes, bearing a large bouquet of wildflowers for Gwyndolin, who had immediately set about weaving them into a crown with her small yet deft fingers.

“Why dost thou enjoy hiking through the woods so much?” Gwyndolin had asked.

“Why dost thou not enjoy hiking through the woods?” Aestus had countered, smiling good naturedly as he sat on a nearby bench in the main courtyard.

“Because it is dreadful!” Gwyndolin huffed and puffed out her cheeks. “The woods are full of mud and bugs and creatures that will give you diseases if they come too close! The snakes are always distracted and trying to bite at the rodents in the bushes, and it is hard to climb hills with them, so I always slip and fall and scrape my palms! I believe I would prefer the Abyss to the woods!”

“My goodness! Thank the Flame that Sir Artorias is not around to hear thee say such things!” Aestus had laughed in that booming, warm, and utterly loving way that was so uniquely him, and he moved to sit cross-legged next to Gwyndolin, taking the flowers in his hands so she could select them at her leisure.

“Ah, well, while I must admit that I have the privilege of legs more adaptable to such activities, I cannot help but find the forest calming. When I was younger, I would only venture into the woods when I was forced to hunt, and thou knowest how much I detest hunting during mine leisure hours.” Aestus untangled the flower stems as he spoke. “However, when I was slightly older than thee and struggling with how to deal with mine anger, Sir Artorias actually recommended going on hikes to soothe mine nerves. Not to hunt or fish or track, but to just…walk and enjoy mineself. ‘Nature is quiet’, he said, ‘and when thou art alone in nature, thou can touch places in thy soul that thou may otherwise be unable to reach’. I will freely admit that it is Sir Artorias’ advice curbed mine childish scuffles more than any of Father’s punishments.”

Gwyndolin remembered being fascinated by the idea. “So thou art saying that one can find oneself while alone in the woods? Even with all of the bugs?”

“Well, it certainly beats Father sending thee to thy room without supper, does it not? At least the bugs get a good meal out of the venture as well!” Aestus laughed at the disgusted look on Gwyndolin’s face and ruffled her hair with one of his large yet gentle hands.

In the years to come, Gwyndolin would reflect on the irony of remembering that moment when he did, for it was while in the grip of that bittersweet recollection that he heard Lorian’s voice for the first time.

The moment Gwyndolin stepped into the guest wing of the residential complex, he was greeted to the sight of the youngest brother (Lothric, the knight had said) glaring up at the two healers who had been assigned to assist Dr. Watari, who were staring down at the child with what the moon god considered to be a condescending amount of pity.
“I don’t understand!” Though he was not shouting (yet), the child’s voice was shaking with anger, and he was clenching his fists to the point of trembling at his sides. “You said the surgery was over, right?! So why won’t you let me see Lorian?!”

One of the healers—a man with bushy brown hair—raised his hands in a placating manner. “Like we have said, young man, your brother needs to rest and should not be disturbed. He’s been hurt badly—”

“I know! I was there!” The healer winced at the venom in the boy’s voice. “First you would not let me heal him, and now you won’t even let me see my brother?! Why do you think I would disturb him?!”

“I…” The other healer—a woman with blonde hair—tried to interject, but Lothric barreled on without caring, face red and breaths coming out in panicked wheezes. None of the three had yet noticed Gwyndolin’s presence.

“Do you think I am stupid enough to make a ruckus?! Do you think I would jostle him or be loud, or, or…!” The child gasped and stomped his foot for lack of any other way to express himself. “He’s my brother! You think I don’t know how to care for him?!”

Healer Blonde’s face began to crack with anger of her own. “Now see here—”

“No, you see here! I have been trying to tell you for hours, but you aren’t listening to me, just like everyone else!” The trembling had reached Lothric’s shoulders, and Gwyndolin was genuinely fearful that the sickly child’s mounting stress would cause him to collapse. “I’ve healed more injured knights in two years than you two have ever treated!”

“That is not possible—”

“You don’t know anything about what may or may not be possible! I’ve healed my brother’s wounds and burns more times than I can count! I have sat by his bedside when he’s been delirious with fever and pain! I know how to act around—!”

“Enough!” Healer Blonde’s voice cracked like a whip, and Lothric immediately fell silent, head ducking into the hood of his robe as he cried. “You have been nothing but an angry, intolerable, loud little brat since you arrived, and we have tried to be kind and reasonable, but I will not stand
for lying, do you hear me?!”

“...” Lothric weakly tried to speak up for himself, but Healer Blonde angrily stepped towards him, making the child stumble backwards and hug himself.

Gwyndolin’s blood boiled.

“ You have healed no one, you hear me?!” Healer Blonde continued, looming over the child like a giant, while Healer Brown watched with a smirk on his face. “ You are a child, and your place is to be seen and not heard, do you understand?! You are to let the grownups do their job and mind your manners, which you have clearly never been taug--”

“ Perhaps thou should learn self awareness before daring to lecture others, Healer, for thy words are more suited to be spoken to a mirror than to another living being.”

In any other situation, it would have been highly amusing to watch Healer Blonde and Healer Brown’s expressions fall from amused to horrified in less than a second, but Gwyndolin was far too infuriated to enjoy the sight. He finally stepped from the shadows and strode quietly and smoothly towards the group, and the moon god briefly found himself wishing he hadn’t stripped off his boots the moment he exited the underground tunnel; the sound of heels clacking against stone and thin carpet would have created quite the imposing ambiance.

“ N-Nameless Moon...” Healer Brown quickly spoke up for both himself and Healer Blonde, who had seemingly gone mute since Gwyndolin’s appearance. “ Please, I can explain--”

“ You are the Nameless Moon?!”

The interjection was soft and awestruck, and Gwyndolin’s attention was drawn from the quivering healers to Lothric, who was staring up at the god with eyes as wide as dinner plates. Ignoring the adults for the moment, Gwyndolin walked over to Lothric and knelt in front of him, smiling gently from underneath his hood.

“ That is correct, little one. I am Gwyndolin, God of the Moon and son of the Great Lord Gwyn, and I am the last True God in all of the Lordran.” He cocked his head to the side. “ Hast thou heard of mineself before?”
“Mhm!” A brilliant smile broke out on Lothric’s wet face, and he nodded his head with enough force to throw off his hood, revealing pale silver hair, sallow skin, and brilliantly blue eyes. “Lady Sirris told me stories about you—well, about you and the Blades of the Darkmoon! And my mother was a goddess in Lord Gwyn’s court before she came to Lothric!”

Now that caught Gwyndolin’s attention. “Was she now? May I ask her name?”

“Desdimonda! She was a goddess of fertility and bounty...I think. At least, that’s what Lorian’s told me about her.”

Desdimonda! Now that was a name Gwyndolin had not heard in at least a millennia. Though he had never closely interacted with many of the gods and goddesses outside of his direct family line, he remembered Desdimonda with surprising clarity, simply because he never saw her without an easel or sketchbook. A tall, thin woman, with long silver hair, heart-shaped lips, and eyes the color of black tea with milk; she was the only handmaiden that treated Gwyndolin with genuine kindness rather than pity, and he distinctly remembered her once asking if he had ever named his snakes. He thought Lorian and Lothric had looked vaguely familiar, but the moon god would have never pinned the resemblance to the name without the child’s help.

If Lothric and Lorian were truly Desdimonda’s children (which, given the resemblance he’d seen in Lothric, Gwyndolin was inclined to believe) then the two brothers were first-generation godkin. Not only that, but godkin descended from the old court…

“Thy brother is correct; Desdimonda was indeed a lesser deity of mine father’s court, and she was bosom friends with mine elder sister, Gwynevere. I had heard she had gone to Drangleic, though, after mine father cast himself to the First Flame.”

“She had, but after King Vendrick abdicated the throne, his court fell apart, and she made her way to Lothric and married my Father! I mean, that’s what Lorian told me, but he’s not a liar and he’s not stupid, no matter what Father says!”

At the reminder of his brother, Lothric’s eyes brimmed once more with tears, and Gwyndolin decided to leave his questions (of which he had many) for later.

“Shhh, rest thy heart, child.” Gwyndolin reached into his pocket and pulled out a handkerchief—one of the talismans he bestowed upon his favored knights, embroidered with gold thread and trimmed with lace—and handed it to Lothric. “Dry thine eyes and take deep breaths. From this day forward, mine halls are thy home, and thee and thy brother are now under mine aegis. So speak thy mind without fear of reprisal.”
“...okay.” Lothric sniffled. “Thank you, Your Majesty.” He dried his eyes and blew his nose, and Gwyndolin was both entertained and annoyed by the healers’ scandalized gasps. It was just a piece of enchanted cloth, for moonlight’s sake; it was not as if he could not cut, sew, and bless another! Humans were truly something else.

“Thou art most welcome, Lothric.” Gwyndolin shook his head when Lothric moved to return the handkerchief. “Please, keep it; thou mayst need it in the future.” The god glanced up at the healers and back at the child. “Now, please tell me of what is troubling thee, so I may do mine best to alleviate thy concerns.”

“My Lord, you see, this child--” Healer Brown took a step forward, only to stumble two steps back at Gwyndolin’s hidden yet still palpably frigid glare.

“I believe I have asked Lothric for his story, not thee.” Gwyndolin turned back at Lothric and smiled wanly. “Do not worry. I shall be quick to silence their tongues if they dare interrupt thee in mine presence.”

Lothric giggled and sniffled wetly.

“Well...when you saved us at the river, you said that the reason you did not want me to heal my brother is because there may be a foreign object in his wounds, right?”

Gwyndolin nodded, holding up a hand when he heard Healer Blonde take a breath to speak. She wisely quieted.

“Well, Lorian was taken into surgery to have those things removed, right? So I waited outside, and when the doctor came out to say Lorian was out of surgery, he said to wait a few minutes before I came in to see him. So I waited for at least half an hour!” Though Lothric’s voice started out timid and meek, he quickly gained confidence the more he was allowed to speak uninterrupted. “So I asked the healers if I could go in and see my brother, and they just said no, without even speaking to the doctor! So I told them that I could heal Lorian and that I’ve worked with healers before, and they told me to sit down and be quiet!”

“Did they now?” Gwyndolin’s voice was deliberately flat, and Healer Brown and Healer Blonde shivered in the periphery of his vision. Lothric nodded vigorously.
“They did! I swear upon my life that they did! They told me that I would just get in the way and make things worse, and when I tried to tell them otherwise, they called me a brat!” Lothric’s eyes filled with tears once more, and he angrily wiped them away with the handkerchief. “Then you showed up, and I...I... *please* let me see my brother! I just want to see him and know why you won’t let me heal him!”

“That is a reasonable request.” Gwyndolin concluded, and his heart lurched at the sight of Lothric’s eyes widening in surprise, as if the child had expected to be chastised further. The low simmer of anger in the god’s stomach roiled into a full boil.

“Alright, here is what we shall do, Lothric. Thou art going to go right through the door and see Doctor Watari, and he is going to tell thee what exactly he has done to treat thy brother and why, and thou can sit right by Lorian’s bedside for as long as thou desirest.” Gwyndolin gave Lothric a pat on the shoulder before standing, gritting his teeth at the feel of the snakes *screaming* in their confines. “I shall follow as soon as I have had words with these two healers. Is that acceptable?”

Lothric, still flabbergasted, could only nod quietly.

“Excellent.” Gwyndolin turned to stare down Healer Brown and Healer Blonde. “Step aside and let this young man see his brother. *Now.*”

Healer Blonde and Healer Brown all but stumbled in their haste to get out of Lothric’s way, and after one last unsure glance at Gwyndolin (who nodded encouragingly), he all but bolted through the doorway with a speed that Gwyndolin would have thought impossible with his frail legs. The poor thing was probably afraid that Gwyndolin would change his mind.

As soon as the wooden door closed behind him, Gwyndolin advanced upon the two healers, who had taken to petrified cowering by the doorframe.

“I shall make one thing clear to the both of thee, and I shall only say it once, so thou should do thy best to remember it.” Gwyndolin’s voice dipped cold and low to avoid disturbing those on the other side of the door. “I can do little to control how the majority of mine populace treat each other in private, but if there is one thing those that tend to the sick should know, it is that one should extend kindness to not only thy patients, but to those that love and care for them. Thy lot can treat thine own friends and family members however thou mayst please in the confines of law and respectability, but thou shalt not--under *any* circumstance--bully children in mine house. *Dost thou understand?*”

“He was lying, Nameless Moon,” Healer Blonde whispered. “You know that there is no way a
child that young and in such poor physical condition would be able to cast healing spells. He was just trying to manipulate us to---"

“Oh, I should know, should I?”

Healer Blonde clammed up as Gwyndolin took another step forward, ancient and looming and deadly in spite of his small stature and thin frame.

“Tell me, how long hast thou been in the profession of healing?” Gwyndolin’s voice was deceptively sweet. “Please, answer honestly, for I shall quickly find out if thou presumest to lie.”

Healer Blonde whimpered, leaving Healer Brown to speak for the both of them, visibly quivering in his white flats. “We...we are newly graduated, Nameless Moon. We graduated from the academy five months past.”

“Ah, so thou hast been practicing the craft for a little over five years, correct?” Two nods. Gwyndolin’s voice dropped all traces of congeniality and morphed back into the auditory equivalent of a cold snap.

“Well, while I am loathe to waste mine time and breath, allow me to nonetheless elucidate what I know of healing: mine eldest sister--Gwynevere, Princess of Sunlight--invented the healing spells thou hast been taught in thy classes. I was instructed in the healing arts from the moment I was able to string a spell together, and I practiced alongside mine sister and her handmaidens--the first documented practicing healers in all of the Lordran--as they travelled from one corner of the Lordran to the other to heal the sick and comfort the dying. For millennia upon millennia, I have been called upon time and time again to soothe with sunlight, change bandages, cut eschars, and plunge mine arms up to mine elbows in guts. The reason why Irithyll has become legendary for its advancements in medicine is because I mineself have sponsored the building of hospitals and medical schools, and I mineself have funded research into both mechanical and magical healing. So do not darest presume that thou possessest even a raindrop’s worth of mine own knowledge of healing.”

Silence. Healer Blonde and Healer Brown did not look up from their shoes.

“Now, just four hours ago, I witnessed that child--or, as thou hast dubbed him, that ill-mannered brat--teleport from a fair distance and cast Heavy Soul Arrows with naught but his bare hands.” At that declaration, Healer Blonde jerked her head up, eyes wide in shock.
“Yes, thou hast heard correctly; that child was able to cast one of the most potent magical spells ever penned without a catalyst. Now, with that new knowledge, art thou so certain that the child is lying when he speaks of his healing abilities?”

After a moment’s hesitation, Healer Brown shook his head, looking sufficiently mollified and humbled. Healer Blonde still appeared more embarrassed at having been caught than chastened, but she also shook her head in the negative, so at least she was wise enough to know when to yield.

“Now, let us suppose--for a moment--that the child was indeed lying. There is absolutely no excuse for how thou spoketh and treated him. As thou mayst have been told by the doctor, that little boy watched as his brother was nearly bitten in two by a true monster, but instead of treating this child--who has never before visited our city--with empathy and understanding, thou instead chose to exert thy supposed superiority. Thou hast not only disgraced the entire healing profession with thine actions, but by doing so in mine household, thou hast disgraced mine name and reputation as well.”

With those words, Healer Blonde began to cry, and Gwyndolin finally decided to show a modicum of mercy. It was clear, after all, that the two had gotten the point.

“However, thou art still young and new, and not beyond redemption and learning. Thou art both dismissed from thy duties in mine household as of today, but when I tell Doctor Watari of thine actions and words, I shall also give him mine recommendation that instead of being dismissed from thy jobs, thou shalt instead be given extensive training in bedside manner, especially when dealing with children. However, if I ever catch wind of either of thee acting in such a way again, thou shalt never be allowed to practice in Irithyll as long as I am regent. Have I made mineself clear?”

They both nodded.

“Very well. Thou art dismissed.” Gwyndolin nodded in finality. “Return home and think well on what has transpired today.”

“Yes, Nameless Moon.” The two whispered in unison. Gwyndolin turned to the door, and he immediately heard the pair turn and scurry away, all but running in their haste to escape his presence. Well, he supposed he could not blame them; the experience of being given a thorough tongue-lashing by a living deity was far from a pleasant one.

_I do hope they realize that it was their youth that saved them from a far worse punishment._
Gwyndolin shook his head in bemusement as he quietly opened the door to the guest room and stepped inside. _It would be terribly difficult to practice medicine without ears. Or limbs._
The first time Gwyndolin saw Lorian, it had been when he had followed the sound of shouting out of the forest and onto a hilltop next to the river, giving him a perfect vantage point for the fight between the man eating monstrosity and the knight. Tall, stately, and clad in armor of black-painted bronze and frayed blue cloth, Lorian had moved with a confidence and fluidity that Gwyndolin had not seen since Aestus was banished from their father’s halls—as if he knew how the beast would react before it did—and Gwyndolin had found himself entranced by the exemplary display of physical intelligence. The god had dashed onto the hilltop with catalyst in hand, ready to defend whoever was crying out, but as he watched Lorian create a makeshift smokescreen with his flaming greatsword, he found that the knight had the situation more than under control, so Gwyndolin had been content to simply observe and indulge in the nostalgia of watching a warrior in his prime.

That is, until the beast had conjured lightning in its mouth, and the entire situation changed in an instant. How could Gwyndolin possibly fault Lorian for being unable to react in time to avoid the blast? The god himself had been utterly astonished at the sight of the monster tapping into a power denied to all but the most faithful of humans, godkin, and pygmies, and if the child had not acted when he did to save Lorian from the beast, the stupefied god may have acted too late himself.

Once Gwyndolin had recovered from the sight of not only a beast channeling lightning, but of a small child appearing out of nowhere to cast one of the most potent sorceries ever created with his bare hands, it had been an easy enough matter to put the profaned creature down. It was only after that—when he’d teleported to the brothers’ sides—that he’d gotten an up-close at the knight that had nearly died to protect his little brother.

Though Gwyndolin had been far too busy trying to keep Lorian from the clutches of death to study the finer details of his appearance, it would have been impossible to not notice Lorian’s long silver hair, and the proud contours of his face were prominent in spite of the blood-spatter. Gwyndolin was more than used to blood and gore, but something about Lorian had made the god’s stomach clench in the most curious way, a twisting that tightened into something not quite painful at the knight’s ‘proclamation’.

Beautiful. What an odd word to use. Gwyndolin’s siblings had called him ‘cute’ and ‘regal’; the citizens of Irithyll and his other worshipers called him ‘resplendent’ and ‘heavenly’; and Sulyvahn—depending on his mood—called him either ‘sweet and lovely’ or ‘sullen and brooding’. Yorshka called him ‘beautiful’ on occasion, but she was his biased little sister, and Gwyndolin often called her beautiful in turn (for she truly was, far more so than himself). Yet Lorian—this knight that Gwyndolin had never before laid eyes upon—peered up at him through his strange, spiculated helmet and declared him beautiful in such an adoring voice. It had been the product of his blood loss and pain, clearly, but…
Had Gwyndolin—in his many millennia of existence—ever been called ‘beautiful’ by someone other than Yorshka?

Now that wondrously strange knight was lying unconscious in the large, opulent bed that had never been used until that day, in one of the residence’s many guest rooms that had also never been used until that day. Dr. Watari—a tall, older gentleman hailing from the Eastern Lands, who wore his long, gray-streaked curly hair in a ponytail and thick spectacles over his gentle eyes—was sitting at the side of the bed closest to the window, and he simply glanced up at Gwyndolin as he entered, nodding at the god in greeting before turning his attention back to the child sitting across from him in a comically large chair for someone his size.

Lothric, on the other hand, was far too focused on Dr. Watari’s explanation of Lorian’s condition to notice Gwyndolin’s arrival, and as Gwyndolin approached the opposite side of the bed, he noticed that the boy was clinging onto Lorian’s right hand with both of his own. The boy’s fingers were long, spindly, and tapered, and the god could easily see black veins pushing against white paper-thin skin whenever Lothric gave Lorian’s hand an extra squeeze.

*Hands that can act as catalysts...why do they look so similar to the talons of Seath the Scaleless?*

Though the resemblance was more than a little perturbing, Gwyndolin simply filed the observation away in the back of his mind, adding it to his ever-growing list of questions to ask at a more appropriate time. As Dr. Watari continued to talk, the god busied himself with finding a chair to sit on, making sure to move as quietly as possible to avoid disturbing the conversation.

“Now, when the creature bit your brother, its fangs pierced through his armor.” Dr. Watari gestured to the right side of Lorian’s chest, where a clear glass tube poked out from between the bandages. “Somehow, its teeth were long enough to pierce your brother’s lung, and we had to insert a glass tube to let the air drain from your brother’s chest. The lung will heal on its own in a week or so.”

Lothric nodded and clung to Lorian’s hand like a lifeline. “Why not just heal the bite? Won’t it hurt for Lorian to breathe while it’s healing naturally?”

“That’s the thing.” As the doctor tried to think of a way to introduce the coming topic as gently as possible, Gwyndolin grabbed the chair from the room’s wooden desk and carried it over to the bed, setting on the side opposite of the two. “We have found, over the years, that some wounds healed with healing miracles heal far...well, far more messily than when left to heal normally.”

Lothric blinked. “What do you mean?”
“Well, take the lungs, for example.” Dr. Watari coughed and removed his spectacles, wiping the lenses with a corner of his smock as he continued. “Some decades ago, the healers and physicians in Irithyll noticed that some persons who had their punctured lungs healed with miracles seemed to have difficulties in breathing for the rest of their life. Oh, only minor ones!” The doctor quickly added when he saw the color drain from Lothric’s face. “But enough to notice. So we received permission to autopsy the affected parties after their natural deaths, and we discovered that instead of the wounds healing with normal lung tissue, healing miracles caused the formation of scar tissue instead.”

“So? Lots of wounds scar up after they’re healed. What’s wrong with lung injuries doing the same?”

“The answer has to do with the way the lungs are structured. You see...” As the doctor put his glasses back on, he finally registered Gwyndolin sitting primly across from them, crossing his ankles and tucking them underneath the chair as he settled. Dr. Watari nodded in greeting, and the god gave a slow nod in return, gesturing dismissively at the doctor before folding his hands in his lap. It was a clear signal to continue. “See, compared to the skin, the lungs are made up of several different kinds of tissue...”

As Dr. Watari droned on about subjects that Gwyndolin already knew a fair deal about, the god found himself tuning out the physician’s voice, and he instead focused his attention on the injured knight. A peculiar curiosity took hold of Gwyndolin, and he found himself shifting his chair towards the head of the bed, wanting to get a better look at the man he saved on the riverbank. The child and doctor, mercifully, did not seem to notice.

*How can two brothers look both incredibly alike and incredibly dissimilar at the same time? Lothric and Lorian...*

With the bronze helm removed with the rest of Lorian’s armor, Gwyndolin was free to study the sleeping man’s face at his leisure, and he found himself strangely satisfied with what he found. While he had already been aware of Lorian’s fair skin, strong jawline, thin lips, and prominent cheekbones, the exposure and washing of his face by the healers revealed what appeared to be a mosaic of burn scars, carving deep and jagged swaths across the majority of the knight’s face. His nose was as strong as his jawline, broad and slightly crooked, which Gwyndolin chalked up to having been broken several times before. Thick silver eyebrows the color of his hair sat above deep, nearly sunken eye sockets, and as Gwyndolin watched the minute fluttering of his eyelids as he slept, he could not help but contemplate the color of his eyes. Would they be a clear and haunting blue like little Lothric’s, or a completely different shade altogether?

Lorian’s long silver hair appeared to have been washed with the rest of him, and it lay in damp
waves around his head, appearing a dark gray against the pillowcase. A stray strand had fallen across his forehead, and Gwyndolin reached up before he could stop himself, brushing it away before it could catch in his eyelashes.

*His sleep is peaceful. I wonder how much pain medication they had to administer. Or perhaps they simply applied sedatives to keep him unconscious. Oh, it does not matter, I suppose.*

Once Gwyndolin had mapped out the contours of Lorian’s face to his satisfaction, he allowed his eyes to travel lower, taking careful note of the burn scars running like a river down his long neck. Lorian’s legs and abdomen were covered by several thick blankets, but his torso and arms remained uncovered, save for the thick bandages that were wrapped around almost the entirety of his chest. His shoulders and chest were broad, but what Gwyndolin could see of Lorian’s musculature was deceptively lean, and his arms were strong without being obnoxiously massive. Though skin of his right arm was strangely unmarred, his left arm was striped with the same deep and old burn scars as the rest of his face and neck, and Gwyndolin could see burn scars spreading all the way down Lorian’s left collarbone before disappearing beneath the bandages. The god’s suspicions about the knight’s identity grew.

*Two brothers: one elder and wearing antique armor of high standing, covered with deep burn scars and brandishing a sword laced with demon fire; the other much younger and frailer, with ethereal eyes and draconic hands, and capable of things beyond common imagination. Without thinking, Gwyndolin touched Lorian’s hand with one of his own, feeling dense muscle and calloused skin through his thin silk glove. Two brothers, traveling through the wilderness in search of a hidden city, carrying naught but what is required to stay alive and start a new life. The younger named after the Kingdom of Lothric. The elder with one of Sirris’s talismans around his neck and a map penned in her hand tucked into his armor. The elder, who called me beautiful with nary a second thought, using what could have been his last breath to beg me to keep the younger safe...to ‘keep him from burning’.*

Gwyndolin trailed his fingers along the back of Lorian’s hand. He felt as if he would vomit.

*If the rumors are true...if mine suspicions are correct...then--*

“Oh, no, please, there is no need to cry!”

The panic in Dr. Watari’s voice wrenched Gwyndolin from his musings, and the god wrenched his hand away from Lorian’s as if bitten, setting it back on his lap before the others could see. Fortunately, Dr. Watari was far too busy trying (and failing) to comfort Lothric, who had huddled himself into a little ball and hid his face in his knees.
“Please, little one, there is no need to feel distress!” It was clear that Dr. Watari had not been expecting Lothric’s reaction. His eyes were wide with alarm and his hands hovered uselessly in the air as he did his best to placate the sobbing child. “I am sure you did nothing wrong--”

“Of course I did! I’ve been hurting people!” Lothric’s voice was muffled by both fabric and tears. “You said it yourself, didn’t you?! Healing miracles can cause scars in all the wrong places, and make blood vessels and organs grow back wrong, and cause pain that lasts forever, right?!”

“I--"

“That’s what you said!"

“Yes, yes it is!” Dr. Watari lurched backwards in his chair at the anger in Lothric’s voice, and he raised his hands in a placating manner as he looked over at Gwyndolin, his eyes all but begging the god for help. “That is a greatly simplified version of what I said, yes, but I did not say it to make you feel guilty, or to imply that your healing was misguided, I--”

“How did you intend for me to feel?!” Lothric was clearly not having any of Dr. Watari’s useless platitudes. “I told you that I--I’ve been healing soldiers returning battle since I was six, and then you tell me that healing actually hurts people, and...and...!” Lothric dug his face into his knees as if attempting to hide from reality. “I’ve healed so many soldiers and clerics and castle staff, and...and Lorian! Oh gods, I’ve been hurting Lorian...!”

By the time Lothric trailed off into uncontrollable sobbing, Gwyndolin had pieced together what had occurred, and it took every ounce of his considerable willpower to resist the urge to strangle Dr. Watari with his bare hands.

Instead of pulling out his pocket catalyst and smiting the doctor on the spot, Gwyndolin stood from his seat and rushed over to Lothric, giving Dr. Watari a withering glare as he placed his foot on the flabbergasted man’s chair and shoved it away. Once he had sufficient room to work, Gwyndolin knelt in front of Lothric and gently grabbed the boy’s hands, pulling them away from where they were clasped over his head.

“That is not true.” The gentle firmness in the god’s voice made Lothric look up from his knees, and Gwyndolin’s heart ached at the horror and anguish etched into his features. What had Dr. Watari been thinking?! Though the boy spoke and acted as if he was a little adult, it was clear that for all of his intelligence and advanced vocabulary, he was still a child of eight. Did none of the healers and physicians in the city know how to talk to a child?!
“It is true that there are some instances when miracle-based healing has unintended consequences,” Gwyndolin continued, soothingly rubbing the backs of Lothric’s hands with his thumbs. “However, I believe thou wouldst agree that having some lingering side effects from miracle-based healing is far preferable to Nito’s cold embrace, yes?”

By then, Lothric’s sobbing had calmed to wet sniffles, and he answered Gwyndolin with a shaky nod.

“Exactly. Now, from what thou hast told Doctor Watari and implied with thy words, thou hast only healed those who art severely injured or ill, correct? Knights who return from battle with gangrenous limbs, clerics whose brains are cooking from heatstroke, castle staff unable to breathe due to pneumonia...am I correct?”

Another shaky nod. Gwyndolin smiled encouragingly and squeezed Lothric’s hands.

“There are times, yes, where it may be preferable for a wound to heal naturally, or for an illness to simply resolve over time. However, it is clear that thou didst not have the luxury of time when it came to these cases, and the clerics that summoned thee didst so because of such. How could thou have possibly harmed thy patients when it is clear that thou art the only reason they lived?”

Lothric blinked and uncurled his legs from his body. “I...I guess I couldn’t have, could I?”

“Indeed. Also, what the good doctor has left out of his thorough explanation--” Gwyndolin gave Watari a blistering glance before continuing. “--is that there are many cases in which miracles heal more effectively than basic care. For example…”

Gwyndolin stood and gestured at the thick burns on Lorian’s chest. “Did thou use thy healing miracles on these burns?”

Lothric shook his head. “No. Lorian got the burns on his left side when I was a baby.”

“Ah, I see. Well, how about these burns?”

Gwyndolin gestured at the lighter burns on the right side of Lorian’s face and neck, and Lothric
slowly climbed down from his chair and climbed onto Lorian’s bedside, leaning over his brother’s body to see where the god was pointing.

“ Oh, yeah, I did those!” The pride in Lothric’s voice unwound the spool of tension in Gwyndolin’s chest. “ I think they were some of the first burns I ever healed…”

“ So thou were the age of six when this occurred?”

Another eager nod. Now curious himself, Dr. Watari stood from his chair to examine Lorian’s burns, though he kept as much distance as he could to avoid aggravating Gwyndolin further.

“ Now that is impressive— not just because of thine age, but because of how much lighter and less dense these scars are compared to the ones that were tended to by other healers.” Gwyndolin’s smile widened as Lothric’s eyes lit up with hopeful surprise. “ Now, as I was saying, some injuries heal better with healing miracles than when left alone. A burn is one such injury.”

“ Really?”

Gwyndolin nodded. “ When burns are left unhealed, especially those that run deep, they tend to form edematous bands of inflamed skin that can cut off the circulation of limbs, and—when located on the chest—even limit one’s ability to breathe. The hot gasses produced by most sources of fire can also burn one’s throat and lungs when inhaled, and we have found that when casting a miracle targeting burns, it heals those on the outside and the inside at once, regardless of the intensity or intent.”

“ Oh.” Lothric blinked and looked down at Lorian. “ Oh!” A wide smile spread along his face. “ So...so I was helping after all?”

“ More than simply helping, little one; thou were most likely the only shield standing between thy patients and Nito’s cold embrace.” On a whim, Gwyndolin reached out to rub the covered top of Lothric’s head, and was surprised at how easily the child yielded to the touch. “ In fact, I would darest to say that thou art as much of a hero as thy brother.”

“ No I’m not.” Lothric grumbled, ducking his head to hide his blush. “ Stop it. You’re starting to sound like Lorian.”
“Is that a bad thing?”

“No, but he’s always so humble; he never thinks the things he does are good or amazing, even though they are.” Lothric sighed in fond annoyance and pulled Gwyndolin’s handkerchief out of the pocket of his robe, angrily rubbing it against his eyes. “Sorry for being so upset.”

“No need to apologize, little one. I would have been upset mineself.”

Gwyndolin punctuated his sentence by glaring at Dr. Watari, who gulped and became immediately fixated on his shoelaces.

“...but there are times, right?” Lothric’s quiet question caught Gwyndolin’s attention. The little boy had settled into a cross legged position on the edge of Lorian’s bed and was holding his brother’s hand once more, staring down at it contemplatively. “Times when miracles might not be as good as just caring for the injuries without magic?”

“That is correct.” Gwyndolin could lie as well as any seasoned politician, but he refused to lie to Lothric—not when he had clearly been through so much hardship. The least he deserved was an adult’s honesty.

Lothric hummed and tapped his fingers against Lorian’s hand. “Do...do you think I could learn how to tell the difference? When to heal and when to not? I don’t want to accidentally make things worse when I’m trying to make things better.”

“Of course. In fact, I am sure that dear Doctor Watari would be thrilled to instruct thee on the subject...as soon as thy brother has recovered, of course.”

Doctor Watari opened his mouth to protest before catching the look on Gwyndolin’s face and snapping it shut. He nodded.

“Very well. I am glad everything is settled.” With that particular crisis averted, Gwyndolin turned his attention to more pressing matters. “Hast thou checked Lothric for injuries, Doctor?”

“Ah, yes.” Doctor Watari rubbed his head sheepishly. “None to be found, though I am somewhat worried about his poor physical condition...”
“I was born with it.” Lothric grumbled.

“Chronic ailments…” Gwyndolin hummed in thought and pressed a thumb to his lower lip. “Dost thou require any special medicine or care that we need to know of at this time?”

Though Lothric had clearly expected (and endured) many comments about his physical health in the past, the god’s question clearly threw him through a loop, and he could only blink in surprise at first.

“Oh, um...no, none right now. I don’t require anything regularly...only when I’m sick.” He released Lorian’s hand to pick nervously at his robe. “I mean, sometimes it’s hard to walk, because my joints hurt and I feel weak...but Lorian just carries me around. Or I just teleport.”

“Teleport?” Dr. Watari muttered in the background. Gwyndolin and Lothric ignored him.

“That sounds reasonable.” Gwyndolin watched as the doctor sat back down and rested his forearms on his thighs. Good. Hopefully he would remain quiet until spoken to. Lothric had been through the washing ringer and did not need any more unnecessary stress. “Now, when didst thou last eat?”

Lothric mulled over the question for a bit. “Sometime before we met on the river, I think. I’m not quite sure exactly.”

“Ah, I see.” Gwyndolin turned his attention back to Doctor Watari, who shivered. “I also believe I ordered thee to find this child some clean clothing. I understand that the surgery took some time, but since thou hadst the time to speak at length with Lothric about his brother’s condition, thou surely also hadst the time to fulfill mine request.” The god cocked his head to the side. “Is there any reason why thou didst not do so?”

“Well, you see, Nameless Moon…” Doctor Watari coughed into his sleeve and rubbed his face exhaustedly. “None of the healers that assisted me with the procedure had any children, and I myself have never married--”

“What does being married have to do with having children?” Lothric interjected. Gwyndolin ducked his head to hide his grin.
Doctor Watari gave the child a look. “What it means is that I never had the chance to have children, and since none of the healers had children themselves, that meant we had no ready access to children’s clothing.”

Gwyndolin quirked an eyebrow. “Ah, yes. If only there was someone nearby that had a child and, because of such, may still have some of her smaller articles of clothing stored away. Someone whom thou hadst explicit permission to send for if their assistance was required.”

“Ah, yes, well, we had thought of that, but Lady Yorshka’s clothing may have been inappropriate for him, given that she is a gi—”

“Do not finish that sentence if thou wishest to remain in mine employ.”

Gwyndolin’s voice cracked like a whip, and Doctor Watari immediately fell silent, staring down at his shoelaces once more.

“It’s okay…” Lothric murmured, drawing Gwyndolin’s attention away from his ire and back to the matter at hand. “I don’t need other clothes if you don’t have any. I’ve only ever worn my robe.”

The god blinked. “Surely that cannot be true.”

Lothric shrugged and held up a corner of his prayer robe for Gwyndolin to see. “These were my baby blankets, and since the priests blessed them specially for me, they decided to make them into robes. They’ve never offered me any other clothes, and when Lorian tried to get me new ones, Father and the scholars refused.”

It took a moment for the implications of Lothric’s words to sink in, and despite the tension between them, Doctor Watari and Gwyndolin shared an quick look of alarm. This child--sickly, tender-skinned, and easily chilled--was only allowed to wear prayer cloth?

“That is a shame. It seems rather...uncomfortable.” Gwyndolin extended a hand towards Lothric, and after the boy gave a nod of permission, he took a corner of the prayer robe and rubbed it between his fingers. He grimaced. “Horrifically uncomfortable. I am sincerely impressed that thou can stand to wear such a garment.”
“I dunno.” Lothric shrugged. “It’s all I’ve ever worn, I guess. Lorian said he’d buy me new clothes when we got here, but...I don’t know.” Worried blue eyes gazed up at the Nameless Moon. “The priests said my soul would be soiled if I wore something else, and that I wouldn’t be able to perform miracles anymore...is that true?”

Gwyndolin took a deep breath in and blew it out of his nose. Doctor Watari gnawed at his lower lip.

“What thou hast been told is absolute nonsense.” Gwyndolin made sure to put the entire weight of his godhood behind his words. “One’s ability to perform miracles or wield magic has nothing to do with the clothing one wears. Even if thy raiment had been blessed by mine own father, it would not allow thee to cast miracles if the power to do so was not in thy blood. Utilizing spells and miracles requires faith, intelligence, and a natural affinity for the craft, and none of those three traits are affected by the garments one dons. All those that say otherwise are merely feeding thee lies.”

Lothric grabbed the hem of his robe and looked helplessly at the fabric.

“Then why...why did my Father and the clerics and scholars say otherwise? Why did they lie?”

Gwyndolin bit his lower lip and glanced at Doctor Watari, who met his stare with an equally solemn one. Both of them had seen far too much in their respective occupations to not know the answer: because they wished thee to believe that thy misery was required. Because they did not wish for thee to long for better things.

“Perhaps they themselves believed such falsehoods.” Doctor Watari was the first one to speak, redeeming himself a great deal in Gwyndolin’s eyes. “Many are taught such tall tales by their parents and grandparents, and the stories are passed down as fact from generation to generation. The scholars and clerics that instructed you most likely did not know any better.”

Lothric seemed satisfied with the doctor’s explanation, and Gwyndolin sagged in relief the moment the boy’s attention was turned back to his brother, catching Watari’s eyes and mouthing a sincere ‘thank thee’. The doctor simply smiled and nodded knowingly. Humans were certainly full of surprises.

“...I kind of want to take my robes off and burn them.” Lothric grabbed Lorian’s hand once more and gave it a soothing pat. “But I think Lorian would like to see it, too. Do you think we could
just...put them somewhere until he gets better?"

“...We can most certainly do that.” Perhaps Gwyndolin could toss the robe into the back of his closet for the time being. “In the meantime, thou can make use of mine sister’s old garments until thy brother recovers, after which we can make arrangements for clothing of thine own.”

“...You have a sister?” Lothric’s eyes and voice were sparkling with curiosity, and Gwyndolin couldn’t help but chuckle, moving to sit next to Lothric on the edge of the bed.

“...Yes; her name is Yorshka, and she is mine younger sister. Though she is a crossbreed, she ages similarly to godkin like thyself, and we just celebrated her twelfth year at winter's end.” Mentioning Yorshka’s unusual heritage had been a slight gamble, but it more than paid off when Lothric gasped in delight, squeezing his brother’s hand in excitement.

“...Your sister’s a crossbreed? I’m a crossbreed, too!”

Gwyndolin glanced down at Lothric’s hands. Just as he’d suspected.

“...Well, I believe thou shalt have much to discuss with her when thou art finally introduced.” The god chuckled good naturedly and ignored the questioning look Watari sent his way. “...But before we go meet her, how about we find thee something warm to eat, and maybe draw thee a hot bath? Then we could meet with Yorshka at her church and have some tea while we wait for thy brother to awaken. Dost that sound good?”

Lothric bit his lip and nervously glanced away.

“...I shall not force thee to go with mineself if thou dost not wish to.”

“...No! It’s not that!” Lothric quickly shook his head. “...I do want to go with you, Nameless Moon, because you saved us and you seem so nice, and I want to meet your sister...but…”

It took less than a second for Gwyndolin to understand. “...Thou dost not wish to leave thy brother, correct?”
Lothric sniffed and nodded.

Gwyndolin gave Lorian’s sleeping face a long look. “When dost thou expect Lorian to awaken, Doctor?”

“Oh!” Doctor Watari jumped in his seat before relaxing. “It will take a few hours at least. He is a large and sturdy fellow, and it always takes a considerable amount of sedatives to keep men and women such as he asleep and without pain during surgical procedures. Perhaps sometime late tonight?”

Gwyndolin nodded and turned his attention back to Lothric, who looked the very definition of confliction as he stroked Lorian’s hand. The god was once more reminded of Aestus: of how little girl Gwyndolin would worry so when her brother returned injured from the battlefield, unwilling to leave his side for even a moment; and how it would always be dear Auntie Ciaran who would convince her to take her leave and get some rest. What was it that she always said--the question she would ask that never failed to sway the child goddess’s stubbornness?

Ah, yes.

“What would Lorian wish for thee to do?” Gwyndolin asked softly.

The child stilled at the question, and Gwyndolin was content to wait patiently for Lothric to gather his thoughts, no matter if it took a few seconds or a few minutes. What was time to a god?

“...he...he would tell me to take care of myself.” Lothric finally whispered. “He would remind me of how weak and tired I get when I go without eating, and he would tell me how he would worry more if I went hungry while waiting for me to wake up. He would want me to clean up and put on different clothes, and...and he would say that I couldn’t take care of other people until I took care of myself.” He snorted. “Then I’d remind him that he was a big hypocrite, and he would immediately say something like ‘do as I say, not as I do.’”

Gwyndolin’s smile turned slightly bitter at those final words. How many times had Aestus said something of that sort? Would Lothric and Lorian forever remind him of the brother who abandoned him who he lost all those thousands of years ago?

“Well, then, would it not be best to do what thy brother would say?”
Lothric nodded, then hesitated. “What if Lorian wakes up and I’m not here? Sometimes Father
would come in and take me from our bed while Lorian was asleep to run tests, and he would be so
worried about me when he woke up. I don’t want to make him anxious…”

“Well, there is a simple solution to that problem.” Swallowing down the question about ‘tests’ that
was on the tip of his tongue, Gwyndolin instead stood and looked to Doctor Watari. “Thou shalt
be here for awhile, correct?”

Doctor Watari nodded. “For the rest of the night, I imagine—or at least until our patient awakens.”

“Then here are mine orders: if minself and Lothric have not returned by the time Lorian awakens,
thou art to immediately send for me when he does. I do not care if mine own father somehow
ascends from the Kiln and requires mine attention: the moment those eyes even twitch, thou art to
send a messenger to find me with all haste. We shall either be in the private kitchens, in mine own
quarters, or in the Church of Yorshka.”

“Yes, Nameless Moon. By your will.”

Satisfied, Gwyndolin turned back to Lothric, who looked decidedly more comfortable. “Shall that
be satisfactory?”

After a moment, Lothric nodded. “Can I say goodbye first?”

“By all means. Watari, come here for a moment; there is something we must discuss.”

Watari gulped, looking as if he were about to face a firing squad, but he obediently followed
Gwyndolin to the opposite side of the room nonetheless.

“Nameless Moon, I sincerely apologize for earlier; the child was just so knowledgeable about
healing and mature, and I forgot his age—”

Gwyndolin raised a hand to stop his babbling. “I understand, Doctor, but for the sake of thy career
in mine kingdom, I hope to never hear of a repeat of today’s incident. Have I made minself
perfectly clear?”
“Yes, Your Grace.” Doctor Watari seemed to deflate in relief, and he bowed deeply to Gwyndolin, who bowed his head in return. “Is that all you wished to speak to me about?”

“No.” Gwyndolin looked over at Lothric, who had bent over Lorian so that he was nearly draped over his chest, whispering something in his brother’s ear. “Those two healers that were assisting thee earlier? One with blonde hair in a bun and the other with short brown hair?”

Doctor Watari frowned and followed Gwyndolin’s gaze. “Yes. What of them, My Liege?”

“When little Lothric wished to see his brother, they barred his entrance, and then belittled him and insulted him in the most horrible manner when he protested. They only ceased upon my arrival.” He held up his hand--again--before Doctor Watari could speak. “I do not wish for them to lose their credentials, Doctor; I only wish for them to receive specialized training on the handling of the friends and family members of patients. Empathy, bedside manner, how to alter one’s behavior depending on the situation.” He paused in thought. “Perhaps thou should also consider receiving such training, especially when it comes to dealing with children.”

“Ah...yes...” Doctor Watari chuckled embarrassedly and rubbed the back of his head. “I shall see to it that their training is modified, and perhaps...perhaps I shall consider reeducation myself.”

“As thou wish.” Gwyndolin watched as Lothric gave Lorian a long hug, kissed him on the cheek, and slowly climbed down off of the bed. “Art thou ready to depart, Lothric?”

“Mhm.” Lothric slowly ambled over to the god and the doctor, and Gwyndolin could not help but notice both the sluggishness in the boy’s movements, as well as the fact that he winced with every step. Reminded of his own childhood of chronic illness, Gwyndolin smiled empathetically and knelt down, holding out a hand.

“Would thou prefer to walk by mine side, or would thou prefer to be carried?”

Lothric hesitated, looking cautiously between Doctor Watari and Gwyndolin, almost as if he was expecting a trap.

“Are...are you sure you want to carry me? I mean, you’re a god, right? Isn’t that sort of thing beneath you?”
Gwyndolin could not help but laugh in surprise.

“Little one, thou wouldst be awestruck at the amount of mortals I have carried in mine time—from newborn babes to the wethered elderly. Carrying thou wouldst simply be a part of mine duties as both a god and a regent.” For once, Gwyndolin regretted the hood that covered his eyes, because he would have very much enjoyed winking at the boy. “Besides, thy brother is quite fearsome, and I would dread being subject to his wrath if I did not treat thee the way thou deservest.”

Lothric giggled in spite of himself, and after another moment of thought, he limped closer to Gwyndolin and held out his arms. “I bruise easily, so don’t worry if you see any after carrying me; it happens all the time.”

“I shall keep that in mind.”

With that, Gwyndolin gently took the boy in his arms and stood, adjusting him so that he was ‘sitting’ on his right while being held in place by his left. Despite the thick burlap-esque fabric he wore, Lothric was as light as a down-stuffed pillow, leaving Gwyndolin to wonder if his bones were hollow. The child sighed in contentment and sunk into the god’s arms, eyes drooping with exhaustion.

“Please take care of Lorian.” Lothric muttered, looking up at Doctor Watari. “We just have each other now, but that’s all we’ve ever had, really.”

The doctor’s face creased with sympathy. “I shall care for him as if he were my own blood.”

Gwyndolin hummed in approval and turned to the door. “Remember mine orders, Doctor.”

“It would be impossible to forget them, Your Grace.”

Once they were out in the hallway, Gwyndolin sighed and carefully adjusted his hold on Lothric, who had looped his arms around the god’s neck for support. “Am I holding thee too tightly?”

“No, it’s perfect...well, not as good as Lorian carries me, but close.”
While others may have been annoyed at the boy’s assessment, Gwyndolin could not help but feel flattered, and his tired frown slowly stretched into a small smile. “Thank thee heartily. I shall endeavor to perfect mine technique in the future.”

The snakes, mercifully, did not protest when Gwyndolin began to walk down the corridor. Perhaps they decided to let up on their complaining due to the nature of the situation, or perhaps they were simply too tired and pained to fret; the god was thankful either way.

“Thank you for saving us, Nameless Moon.” Lothric closed his eyes and rested his cheek on Gwyndolin’s chest. The deity’s heart throbbed with a sweetness that pressed on the boundary of pain, and he silently vowed to do everything in his power to protect the strange and lovely boy in his arms, even after his brother had recovered.

“Thou art most welcome.” An idea struck Gwyndolin as he looked out of the windows lining the hallway. “However, I am not sure if I like such formality coming from thy lips; perhaps thou wouldst not mind using a nickname to address mineself.”

Lothric twisted in Gwyndolin’s arms to peer up at him. “A nickname? What do you have in mind?”

Images flowed through Gwyndolin’s mind unbidden: of Aestus’s toothy grin and back-breaking bear hugs; of Gwynevere’s gentle hands running through his hair; of the entertaining tales that Filianore would spin on the fly; of the jolly laughter and soothing warmth of the brother he never knew but dimly remembered all the same.

“What dost thou think of the name ‘Lin’?”

“Lin?” Lothric mulled over the name for a few seconds before smiling brightly. “I think I can work with that.”

Chapter End Notes

Sulyvahn: It turns out I have an emergency to deal with at the Cathedral of the Deep that has NOTHING TO DO with a Lord of Cinder suddenly rising from the grave years earlier than expected and threatening to eat all of the worshipers.
Gwyndolin: Well, that is decidedly unfortunate, so feel free to take all the time thou needst to resolve the situation.

Sulyvahn, in the distance: Thank you, dear Gwyndolin! Hugs and kisses! Try not to fall in love with some ASSHOLE CHAD while I'm gone!

Gwyndolin: Farewell!

Gwyndolin:...

Gwyndolin: what the hell is a chad
i'll give them shelter like you've done for me

Chapter Summary

There is a large portion of Gwyndolin's past that he would like to forget: memories of a childhood that he would not wish on his worst enemy, of the siblings that left him behind, and of the Dark Sun he had been forced to become to survive life in the House of Gwyn.

In embracing his roles as both God of the Moon and King of the Gods, he has tried to put his childhood and young adulthood of solitude and suffering behind him, but this child from the Kingdom of Lothric is ripping open old wounds that had just begun to crust over. Yet Gwyndolin's past allows him to understand and reach out to Lothric in a way no one else can, so he will rip open his scars and struggle through the sea of memories, and perhaps he will find something worth salvaging in the neglected ruins of his youth in Anor Londo.

At the very least, he can give Lothric a warm meal and a shoulder to cry on, and maybe even find him some real clothing as well...

Chapter Notes

Chapter Warnings: Non-graphic descriptions of child abuse; non-graphic descriptions of mental dysphoria; non-graphic discussions of human sacrifice; Gwyndolin referring to his past self with she/her pronouns as a way to compartmentalize and distance himself from his childhood trauma; snake legs.

Credits: Iced Blood for proofreading this chapter; Monzi for screaming at me about characters she knows nothing about but adores all the same; and you all for reading and enjoying my work.

Contact Information: If you wish to talk to me more about this project, message me on Tumblr at reaper-apologist-andromeda, even if you don't have a Tumblr yourself. We'll work something out. I am always up to talk shop, answer questions, and just scream about these nerds that deserved better in general.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

By the time Gwyndolin had arrived at the kitchen reserved for the royal household, Lothric had fallen asleep, his head lolling on the god’s shoulder and cold nose pressed against his collarbone.

Since the city was in that curious lull between lunch and dinnertime, the surprisingly cozy space was devoid of staff, though they had apparently begun dinner preparations before going on break. The fire had been stoked to a low smoulder by the cooks—though it appeared close to going out—and several covered pots were already warming on the hearth. The pungent smells of garlic,
scallions, miso, anchovies, and soy sauce hung heavy in the air, and as Gwyndolin searched for a place to set Lothric, he caught sight of a colander of boiled eggs in the sink, a plate of sliced roast pork on the counter, and a large pan of fresh wheat noodles on the table. It seemed there would be Eastern cuisine for dinner that night.

For lack of better resting place for Lothric, the god decided to improvise and grabbed a stack of clean baking towels with his free hand, throwing them on the seat of one of the chairs surrounding the kitchen table. He then awkwardly grabbed the back of the chair and half drug, half carried it closer to the fire, somehow managing to avoid scraping its feet against the cobblestones.

Once the chair was close enough to the hearth to be comfortably warm, Gwyndolin arranged the towels into a little nest on the seat and gently laid Lothric down upon it, the boy immediately curling up and burrowing into the makeshift cushion. The orange hues of the firelight made the boy’s skin glow like a sunset, and as Lothric snuffled and shifted in his sleep, the hem of his prayer robe rode up his legs, revealing bony feet and long, thin toes. His trimmed yet pointed toenails were as incandescently crystalline as the tiny silver scales dotted along his ankles.

*Crossbreed indeed.*

Smiling to himself, Gwyndolin removed his gauzy black shawl and draped it over Lothric, tucking it around the boy so that only his head poked out. Gooseflesh immediately broke out on Gwyndolin’s bare shoulders, but the god ignored the sensation and set about gathering some firewood from the pile near the inner door, knowing that he would warm up as soon as he fed the fire.

Though Gwyndolin had an aversion to cooking derived from his childhood, raising an occasionally picky crossbreed child had kept his skills from growing rusty, and he was more than capable of putting together a meal that was mostly pre-prepared. Both the miso-based broth and the savory anchovy sauce were made in full, and there was already a cast-iron pot of clean water warming on the hearth, so all Gwyndolin had to do was boil the noodles and prepare the soup bowls themselves. The fire was roaring within a minute of adding the wood, and while Gwyndolin waited for the pots to come to a boil, he spent the time arranging two wooden bowls on the counter and rummaging through the ice box, finding a large bowl of cold water and a plate of pre-chopped vegetables ready for plating.

Once the water was boiling, Gwyndolin dipped out enough to make tea and used the rest to boil two portions of ramen noodles, rinsing them off in the cold water before placing them in the two wooden bowls. After that, it was a simple matter of ladling out an appropriate portion of broth and sauce, slicing up two hard boiled eggs, and arranging them along with slices of roast pork and chopped vegetables on top of the noodles.
When he had finished plating their meal, Gwyndolin cleared off a spot on the kitchen table and laid out two place settings—one with chopsticks for himself, the other with a fork and spoon for Lothric. The god poured each of them a cup of tea, set the bowls on the table, and finally forced himself to wake the slumbering child.

“Lothric…” Gwyndolin whispered, placing a gentle hand on the boy’s shoulder. Lothric immediately bolted upright, making the shawl slip off of his body and onto the floor.

“What?! Lorian!?” Lothric looked around bewilderedly before recognizing Gwyndolin. “Oh...for a moment, I thought it had all been a dream.” He yawned and rubbed his eyes. “Is Lorian awake yet?”

“No, unfortunately not. However, I have prepared a small meal for the both of us, if thou art still hungry.”

Gwyndolin gestured at the table, and Lothric blinked blearily before nodding, slowly slipping off of the chair and shuffling over to the table. The god quickly grabbed his shawl and shook it out while the boy was climbing onto his chair.

“What is this stuff?” Lothric’s nose wrinkled as he looked into the bowl. “It smells strong...but good. Is it soup?” He grabbed his fork and used it to poke at the egg slices.

“Somewhat. It is a traditional noodle dish from the Eastern Lands—the Kingdom of Kinon, to be specific.” Gwyndolin wrapped his shawl around his shoulders and moved to sit across from Lothric at the table. “It is composed of wheat noodles, which are boiled, placed into a premade stock, and topped with vegetables, meats, and egg slices.”

“Oh! Lorian’s been there before! He brought back some rice crackers that were really good!” Lothric set down his fork and picked up the spoon, holding it like a trowel as he dipped it into the soup. For a moment, Gwyndolin wondered why he hadn’t been taught how to properly hold eating utensils, then immediately berated himself once he realized that the boy’s excessively long fingers and rheumatic joints would make a ‘proper’ grip next to impossible.

“I am surprised that thou hast never had such cuisine before.” Gwyndolin grabbed his teacup and took a sip, gazing at Lothric over the rim. “Especially since thine brother is apparently well-travelled.”
Well, Lorian likes pretty much every kind of food, but Father doesn’t like Eastern cuisine. He always complained about how the food smelled like rotted compost whenever he came back from a diplomatic visit. Actually, Father distrusted any kind of food that wasn’t local to Lothric, and I wasn’t allowed to eat food from other cultures unless Lorian snuck it to me. Father always said food like this was ‘vile’ and ‘contaminated with unpronounceable poisons’, but I think it smells pretty good!” Lothric took a small sip of the broth on his spoon. His eyes widened. “It is good! It’s really, really good!”

Gwyndolin chuckled. “I am relieved. Please, eat as much as thou desirest; there is plenty more if thou wouldst enjoy seconds.”

“Mmm! Thank you!”

With that, Lothric set the spoon on the rim of the bowl and snatched up the cloth napkin Gwyndolin had set out for him, barely taking enough time to smooth it out on his lap before grabbing his fork and tucking in. Though he held his fork with the same basic grip as his spoon, his table etiquette was otherwise immaculate; not only did the boy chew with his mouth closed, but he wiped his mouth with his napkin after each bite, and he was careful to lean over the bowl when he ate as to avoid slopping liquid everywhere. It was more than a little impressive for a child his age.

Given the fact that Lothric had spoken at absolutely no length about his mother and father, Gwyndolin wondered if it had been Lorian that had instilled the child with such good manners, which was an endearing thought. Good heavens, it seemed like it was only yesterday that the deity had been teaching Yorshka her manners--showing her how to sip from a spoon without slurping and scolding her whenever she neglected her knife in favor of using her razor sharp teeth. It was a memory that made Gwyndolin smile, and as he picked up his chopsticks and began to eat, he made a mental note to compliment Lorian on a job well done once he was awake. It was the least he could do after wrongfully assuming otherwise just a minute or so before.

“Are those chopsticks?” Gwyndolin paused in lifting noodles to his mouth and looked at Lothric, who was studying the smooth bamboo utensils in his hands with a scholar’s eye. The god nodded. “I thought so! Lorian brought a pair back from one of his excursions, but they were black and polished, and he only ever used them when Easterners came to visit. He said they were too slippery to use normally.”

“Ah, that is why I prefer chopsticks made of unpolished bamboo to laquered wood; it allows one to maintain a sturdier grip on slippery food items. Like so.” Gwyndolin proceeded to slurp the bundle of noodles into his mouth far more loudly than normal. The desired effect was achieved, and Lothric laughed brightly, almost snorting broth up his nose.
“You’re as silly as Lorian!” Lothric was careful to finish swallowing before speaking. “I never thought a True God would be as silly as you are!”

Gwyndolin quirked his right eyebrow. “I certainly hope that was meant as a compliment.”

“It was, I promise!” Lothric popped a slice of egg into his mouth and chewed with delight before continuing. “Lorian always told me stories about all of the gods in Lord Gwyn’s court—stories that Mother used to tell before I was born—and they all sounded so stern and formal! When Lorian told me that a True God watched over Irithyll, I was afraid you would be cruel, cross, and callous, like Lord…”

Lothric abruptly trailed off and shoved a forkful of noodles into his mouth. A lancet of old anguish pierced through Gwyndolin’s heart, and he found himself glad that he had not yet removed his characteristic hood, if only because it hid the pain that split his expression like a thunderclap.

“Like mine father, yes?”

The child swallowed violently. After a moment’s hesitation, he nodded, looking as if he wanted to melt through the floor. “I’m sorry.”

“There is no need to be.” Gwyndolin absently picked at a piece of pork with his chopsticks and tried to figure out how best to respond to this situation. “I suppose Lady Desdimonda made mine father sound quite…strict.”

“I mean, from the stories that Lorian told me...yeah. Kind of.” Lothric pushed the noodles around the bowl with his fork. “But you aren’t mean at all. You talk to me like I’m a person and went through all the trouble of feeding me and taking care of me. Lady Sirris was right when she talked about how fair and just you were.”

Gwyndolin immediately seized on the opportunity to escape talk of his father. “Thou hast met Lady Sirris, then?”

“Yes! She was the one that gave Lorian the map and the talisman you found around his neck.” Lothric, too, seemed eager to change the subject. “I can tell you more after we eat, if you’d like.”

“I would very much enjoy that.”
A comfortable silence descended upon the pair, punctuated by the crackling of the fire and the clicking of utensils against their wooden bowls. Lothric went back to eating neatly yet voraciously, and Gwyndolin suddenly found that he, too, was surprisingly hungry. The god’s appetite always dipped during his recent bouts of illness—vacillating from nausea to the most meager of hunger pangs—so it was a good sign that he was appropriately famished after a long day’s work. Yorshka would certainly be pleased when he told her.

Perhaps, Gwyndolin mused as he twirled up another bite of noodles, the tolling of the bell was a omen of good things to come.

Lothric was the first to finish (with a sigh of satisfaction that seemed far too big to come from such a little body), and he seemed more than content to wait for Gwyndolin to finish his own ‘snack’, using the time to arrange his utensils in the empty bowl and fold his napkin into a variety of different shapes. By the time Gwyndolin had finally finished eating (cleaning his plate, which was a pleasant surprise as of late), the boy hand folded his napkin into what looked like a very sloppy and lopsided bird, which was most likely to closest he could get to actual origami with his cumbersome hands.

“Wouldst thou like seconds?” Gwyndolin asked, dabbing his lips with his napkin.

“No, but thank you very much for asking!” Lothric was grinning as he kicked his legs excitedly over the edge of the chair. A good meal and a brief nap had clearly done wonders to improve the child’s mood, and there was even a slight undertone of warmth to his skin, though it remained startlingly pale. “I can wait if you would like seconds, though.”

“That shall not be necessary; I am quite satisfied at the moment, and I shall have to save room in mine stomach for tea. Yorshka has discovered the art of baking as of late and tends to serve baked goods alongside our tea.” Gwyndolin did not miss the way that Lothric’s eyes lit up at the mention of sweets. “First, however, I believe we should get thee cleaned up and into more comfortable clothing. Does that sound like an acceptable plan?”

“Quite acceptable!” The faux-posh tone in Lothric’s voice made Gwyndolin snort in a rather undignified manner, and the child grinned in victory, draining the dregs from his tea and grabbing both the cup and the empty bowl as he slid from his chair. He moved to carry his dishes to the sink, but Gwyndolin stopped him with a raised hand, reaching to take the dirty dishes from him.
“Allow me. Thou art mine guest, after all.”

Lothric pouted but allowed Gwyndolin to take the dishes without protest. The god then grabbed his own cup and bowl with his free hand, and Lothric moved to sit on the chair by the fireplace, watching Gwyndolin as he rinsed the dishes and tidied up the kitchen table.

“You are really strange, Lin.”

Gwyndolin glanced over his shoulder at Lothric as he washed out a teacup with a soapy rag. “How so?”

“I dunno.” Lothric shrugged and rested his chin in his hands. “I just never thought a god would do their own dishes. Mother’s stories always made it seem like you were waited on by servants hand and foot.”

“That was the way in mine father’s court, yes.” Gwyndolin rinsed out the teacup with clean water and set it in the drying rack with the rest of the clean dishes. “However, I prefer to handle simple tasks such as this mineself, rather than making the servants run about like chickens with their heads cut off.”

Lothric hummed contemplatively. “So, do you always do your own dishes, then?”

“No, not exactly.” With the dishes cleaned and set out to dry, Gwyndolin soaked the dish rag in soapy water once more, ringing it out with a small grunt of effort. “If this were a proper meal or tea, for example, the servants would clean up instead. However, I often wander down here late at night for a snack, and Yorshka has taken to experimenting with different recipes. It is only proper that we clean up after ourselves in those instances.”

“Ah.” Lothric watched, entranced, as Gwyndolin wiped off the surface of the kitchen table. “Father would not have been caught dead doing his own dishes, or any sort of cleaning or mending, really. He thought lowering ourselves to commoner work would degrade our ‘noble souls’.”

“I see.” Gwyndolin hung the rag over the water spout and moved to put on his gloves, which he had removed to do the dishes. “Didst thou believe him?”

“No. I just thought he was being haughty and ridiculous. Besides, if a god can do his own dishes
without being ‘lesser’ and such, then why not a king?”

Realizing too late what he said, Lothric squeaked in alarm and clapped his hands over his mouth, and what color had returned to his cheeks drained away within seconds. The horror reflected in those blue eyes made Gwyndolin’s heart lurch, and he quickly threw on his gloves and walked over to the chair, kneeling on the floor in front of it.

“Lothric…” The god whispered. “Lothric, it is okay. I knew.” He reached out and gently pulled Lothric’s hands away from his mouth. “Shhhhh, it is alright, Lothric. Thou dost not have to hide thine identity from me.”

“Please don’t send us back.” The child’s voice was hoarse. His hands shook like leaves in the wind. “Please, please, please don’t send us back. I’m begging you, please, please--”

“Lothric--”

“--you don’t understand. Father will kill Lorian.” Lothric’s voice cracked as he spoke, his words crashing into and tumbling over each other like rocks in a landslide. “Father needs me. He needs me, but he doesn’t need Lorian, and he’ll kill him if we go back. Please, please, Lorian is all that I have. He’s all that I’ve ever had. He’s the only one that has ever loved me, and...and...” The boy’s chest heaved with his frantic, shallow panting. “You can send me back, but please, don’t send Lorian back home! I’ll go if you want--I’ll go home and...and...and study and be quiet and let people touch me whenever they want without being sullen, and I’ll be a good little lord who never complains and always does as he is told--!”

Gwyndolin could not stand to let him finish. He grabbed Lothric from the chair and pulled him close, and the boy seemed to all but crumple against his chest at the action, bursting into tears and clutching at Gwyndolin’s shawl with his spindly fingers.

How many times has this child wept today? Gwyndolin wrapped his arms around Lothric’s frail frame and curled around his body as protectively as he could, clucking his tongue in what he hoped was a soothing manner. The answer is ‘too many’. No one so young should be filled with such sadness and fear...and mine household has been one of the causes of his distress. ’tis completely and utterly inexcusable on mine part. He rubbed his hands up and down Lothric’s spine and took note of the curious protrusions he felt along its length.

Yet is it a greater distress that forces one to flee from what should be their home. How many times has Lothric been forced to shed his tears in silence and solitude?
Gwyndolin swallowed around the painful constriction in his throat.

*The answer is ‘too many’.*

There were dusty corners in Gwyndolin’s mind that he avoided whenever possible--corners that were thick with cobwebs, shadows, and still-pulsing scars. He knew that if he turned the wrong corner in his musings--if he dropped his guard for even a second--he would come face to face with the girl he would like to forget: a small, quiet, and sickly girl with a shoulder-length bob cut. A girl who was only ever allowed to wear dresses, even when playing outside--dresses of white gossamer and lace that touched the floor, even though the length hindered the sight and movement of the snakes ("Cease thy petulant whining! The less others see of those blasted serpents, the better!"

A girl who was forced to practice the cool blues and violets of her magic in private, since the other gods would think badly on the Lord of Sunlight for having a child so closely aligned with the Dark, and any unsavory rumors about the girl’s parentage would only bring turmoil to Gwyn’s house. A girl that was forced to wear a golden helm from an early age so as to avoid others seeing the serpentine shape of her eyes. A girl that wore a ring that moved her body in ways she could not control--a shackle that she could never remove, lest she invoke her father’s wrath.

That girl, like little Lothric, cried in solitude and silence.

Oh, there were times when she could and would run to her siblings or the Four Knights of Gwyn, and they would comfort and shield her as best they could with what little authority they possessed in Anor Londo. Those that truly loved the girl, however, were not always around when she needed them, and as the flame faded and Gwyn grew more desperate, they slowly began to fade from her life. Aestus was wrestling--unbeknownst to her--with his growing reluctance to continue their father’s genocidal crusade against the remaining dragons. Gwynevere was saddled with suitor after suitor after suitor as Gwyn tried to cement his power across the realms with marriage bond and birthing blood. Filianore’s dreams of becoming an author and architect were cut short when Gwyn sent her to the Ringed City as an offering to the Pygmy Lords, and though the Lord of Sunlight forever claimed otherwise, the girl knew her sister was never to return. The Four Knights--bless their souls!--did their best to be the family and stability the girl desperately needed, but as the flame faded and the threat of the Abyss grew, they were dispatched further and further away for longer and longer stretches of time.

Thus, the girl was alone, and she learned how to cry in quiet: to muffle her tears into her pillows at night to avoid disturbing the night-staff; to hide in the lilac bushes of the garden and savor what few moments she had without her father breathing down her neck; to immerse herself in the books of Seath’s library and escape into faraway lands, breathtaking conflicts, and passionate romances, both historical and fictional. She learned how to read the temperature of the room within a few seconds of stepping inside; how to dance around her father’s ever more unpredictable moods in whims; and how to play and win a game in which the rules were ever changing. She learned how
to survive and thrive in spite of an environment of constant fear, isolation, and distrust. She learned how to survive alone.

That girl was the Dark Sun, and by the gods, how the Dark Moon had done his best to erase her.

Yet despite his best efforts, she remained--darting through quarantined memories and lurking at the edges of his thoughts. As Lothric sobbed in his arms, Gwyndolin could feel the Dark Sun peering over his shoulder, marveling at how this strange, draconic child was so much like her in so many heart-wrenching ways. Yet Lothric was more fortunate than Gwyndolin had ever been, for he had a place to which he could run away. As much as Gwyndolin had wanted someone, anyone, to spirit him as far from Anor Londo as possible, there was no place in all of the known continents and realms where Gwyn’s influence had been unable to reach. Gwynnevere had talked once about how she would one day elope with Flann and take Gwyndolin with her to live with him, but they both knew that it was only wishful thinking; love--no matter how strong and enduring--had been useless against Gwyn’s will.

Over three millennia had passed since then, however, and things had changed drastically in the Lordran. The Lord of Sunlight was as good as dead--entombed forever in the Kiln of the First Flame--and Irithyll stood in the place of the city that had fallen to ruin in his absence, prosperous beyond measure and secluded from those that would rape, pillage, and destroy. Gwyndolin knew well of the rumor that it was a city solely for the descendents of gods--that he had been scooping up distant blood relatives of the old royal families in a desperate attempt to consolidate his power--but that could not have been farther from the truth. When Gwyndolin had finally emerged from his father’s false tomb and took his place as the rightful King of the Gods, he decided that the kingdom he would build would be a refuge for the lost and forlorn--a place where one could run to when they had nowhere else to go. The Blades of the Darkmoon acted as the hands of the Dark Moon, and they travelled through the countless realms and kingdoms of the Lordran, reaching out to those that cried for help in the night and expected no answer. Sometimes the matter would be resolved by murder, forgery, or intimidation, but there was many a time when the only or preferred solution was to seek a new home.

The Blades would come to them in the dark of the night and take them away before the morning’s light: children sleeping in squalor at dilapidated orphanages; abused spouses and children that had no family or resources to enable their safe escape; the disabled and ill that were treated as unsightly or lesser by those around them; the destitute that had lost everything to the hands of greed, injustice, bigotry, and war. Gwyndolin would reach out through his Blades and guide them to the Boreal Valley, and if those refugees happened to include an unusual amount of godkin, then the god was none the wiser. No matter if they were godkin, human, or even pygmy--they could all find a home in Irithyll, where they would be hidden, cared for, and protected by the last True God in all of the Lordran. The Dark Sun had been unable to flee, but the Dark Moon had the power to help others do what she could not, so he tore down the inescapable prison of his youth and rebuilt it into the impenetrable sanctuary of the girl’s dreams.

No one had been able to protect the Dark Sun, but Gwyndolin was no longer a child, and like hell
if the Dark Moon would let Lothric share the same miserable fate.

“Be still, little one, and hear me well.” Gwyndolin waited until Lothric’s sobbing had calmed before speaking. “I speak to thee not only as regent of the Sunless Kingdom, but as the last True God in the Lordran, when I say that I will never send thee or thy brother back to the hell from which thou camest.”

Lothric’s chest stuttered against Gwyndolin’s own at those words, and the little boy pulled his head back to gaze up at him, blue eyes wet and full of wonder.

“You...you won’t?”

“No, I shall not.” Gwyndolin smiled softly and reached up to brush Lothric’s bangs away from his forehead. “Even if I did not already suspect the kind of situation that drove thy brother to take thee and flee the kingdom from which thou art named, I could not—in good conscience—return thee to thy homeland without first ascertaining thy safety; and given what I have learned in speaking with thee, I believe that thou and thy brother wouldst be in grave danger if sent back to Lothric. I have therefore concluded that it would best for both thee and thy brother to henceforth remain in Irithyll under mine aegis. Does that sound reasonable?”

Tears streamed down Lothric’s face anew.

“Do you promise?” The child’s voice shook as much as his shoulders. “Please, if you mean what you say...then swear it. Swear that Lorian and I can stay...that we will be safe here. Swear it upon something that matters.”

Gwyndolin did not even hesitate. “I give thee mine word. Thou and thy brother shall not be returned to the Kingdom of Lothric unless thou both desirest to go, and if thy father one day discovers thine presence in Irithyll and demands thy return, he shall have it over mine corpse.” The god placed a hand over his heart. “I swear it upon mine divinity and...”

He paused.

Swear it upon something that matters.

“...and mine siblings.”
Lothric’s breath caught at those words. It was clear that he understood their significance.

“...okay.” The child wrapped his arms around Gwyndolin once more and laid his cheek on his chest. “Thank you, Lin. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.”

Gwyndolin felt like crying himself at the raw, unguarded gratitude and hope dripping from Lothric’s voice. Perhaps this child truly would be the death of him—but then again, there were far worse ways to perish. “Thou art most welcome.” He awkwardly supported Lothric’s body against him with one hand and he braced his other on the seat of the chair. “Now, hold on to me, alright? I think it is time we go and find thee something clean to wear.”

Lothric nodded and wrapped his arms around Gwyndolin’s neck as the god slowly stood up. “How many siblings do you have, Lin? I know about two of them—Lady Gwynevere and Lady Yorshka, right?”

“Correct. However, I believe Yorshka would be most cross if thou wouldst address her as a ‘lady’, so you have mine permission to forego titles when addressing her.” Gwyndolin gave one last glance around the kitchen to make sure everything was put into order before moving to ascend the steps out of the room. “As for mine siblings, I believe I have five, though there is always room for error.”

“Five?!” The gobsmacked awe in Lothric’s voice made Gwyndolin chuckle.

“Is that such an outrageous number to comprehend?” The snakes writhed with malcontent as Gwyndolin ascended the stairs to the main residence, but they settled when he gave them a very stern mental command to ‘buck up and be silent; being in pain is not the end of the world’. “Most of the royal couples I have known were almost desperate to have more than two children. Is it so very different in the royal household of Lothric?”

Lothric shrugged. “I don’t know. Father is really obsessed with creating ‘perfect heirs’, and Mother is supposed to be a goddess of fertility, but Lorian was an only child until I came along. He was twenty when I was born!”

Gwyndolin hummed thoughtfully. “That is quite a large age gap. What of any half brothers and sisters?”
“Well, I have heard the servants talking about my mother’s handmaiden, Gertrude.” Now that Lothric was free to speak of his life as a prince, he seemed far more relaxed and at ease than before... or perhaps he was simply warming up to Gwyndolin. “Everyone suspects that Gertrude was the product of an affair my mother had when Lorian was little. I asked Lorian about that once, but he doesn’t know either, since he was only two when this may have happened.”

“I see. Didst thou ever ask Desdimonda about it?”

Lothric seemed to shrink slightly in Gwyndolin’s arms. “I...I couldn’t. I have never met her before.”

Gwyndolin stopped at the top of the steps and glanced curiously down at Lothric. “What dost thou mean?"

“Well, at least that’s what Lorian says, but I think she was sick when she gave birth to me.” Lothric chewed the bottom of his lip for a moment. “No one really sees Mother these days aside from Gertrude and Lorian, but Lorian stopped visiting her all of the sudden in the summer, and he refuses to tell me why. I think they had a fight.”

That was... alarming, to say the least.

“Why art thou convinced that she was ill before she gave birth to thee?”

Lothric curled up slightly in Gwyndolin’s hold and avoided the god’s cloaked gaze. “Father is obsessed with dragons, and since I’m a crossbreed and Lorian isn’t, I think he did something to Mother while I was in her womb to turn me into dragonkin. I don’t want to ask Lorian, though, because talking about what happened before I was born makes him so terribly sad.”

“...I see.”

An innumerable amount of equally disturbing questions seemed to be clattering against the inside of Gwyndolin’s skull. However, he could tell that Lothric was growing uncomfortable with the topic of discussion, and the boy had already been through far too much distress over the past few days. So the god simply smiled reassuringly and continued down the hallway flanking the sitting room.
“Once we get to mine room, I shall draw thee a warm bath, and I shall find thee some suitable clothing while thou art washing up.” With a wink that Lothric could not see, Gwyndolin placed his hand on the wall at the ‘end’ of the hallway, and the little boy gasped in surprise as the wall glowed blue and slid up and away, revealing yet another staircase. “I believe I still have a few of Yorshka’s old garments in the back of mine closet, but I am afraid there will not be much of a selection until I can pull the rest out of storage.”

“No need to apologize! It will be wonderful to finally wear something other than this.” Lothric stuck out his tongue and picked at the offending prayer robe. “Lin?”

“Yes, little one?”

“How...how did you know who Lorian and I were when we arrived? Was it something that one of us said?”

Gwyndolin hummed. “Now that is a question that requires quite a bit of explanation. Where to begin?” The god stopped halfway up the staircase and activated another illusory wall, and he stepped through the now-revealed doorway into the residential wing, sealing the hidden passage behind him with his left hand. “I suppose the story starts with rumors.”

The child cocked his head to the side. “Rumors?”

“Yes.” As they walked down the hallway, Gwyndolin nodded in greeting to each of the Silver Knights stationed along the corridor, who gave their lord a small bow in return. “Though I do not have an exact timeline of events committed to memory, mine interest in the royal family of Lothric began close to eight years ago, when rumor spread of the eldest prince of Lothric vanquishing the infamously vicious Demon Prince.”

“He did!” Lothric’s entire demeanor lit up at the mention of Lorian’s greatest accomplishment, and he went from shyly hiding against Gwyndolin’s chest from the knights to practically wriggling with pride. “I was six or seven months of age when Father sent him to vanquish the Demon Prince, and not only did Lorian stop one of the most fearsome demons that ever plagued the Lordran, but he did it single-handedly! That is how he got those burns on his left side!”

“I see.” Gwyndolin nodded. “Did he also obtain his unusual sword during said incident?”

“Mhm! It used to be a regular Lothric Knight Greatsword, but it got scorched by the Demon
Prince’s Chaos Fire when Lorian plunged it through his core, and it’s been burning without fading ever since. Lorian can even control the flame to some extent!” The child’s eyes widened in thought. “Wait...what did you do with Lorian’s sword and his armor? I didn’t see them in his room.”

“Do not fear, Lothric; I simply sent thy brother’s sword and his armor to the blacksmith that services of mine personal guard.” Gwyndolin gestured at one of the knights for emphasis. “The Silver Knights have guarded the House of Gwyn since before the Age of Fire, and the blacksmith that forges and repairs their weapons and armor has been doing so for several millennia; I could think of no one more suitable than steadfast Aval to fix thy brother’s armaments.”

“Oh, okay…” Lothric frowned uneasily. “Do...do you think we can go see the blacksmith after we visit Yorshka? I mean, I’m sure your blacksmith is wonderful, but...that armor has been passed down through the royal family of Lothric for generations, and the sword is really important to Lorian. I just want to make sure they’re being repaired correctly.”

_Bless this child’s earnest heart._ “Of course we can. In fact, I believe Aval would be most appreciative of a visit; he is a solitary fellow that does not get much company outside of those that go to him for repairs, and I have been meaning to call on him for quite some time. I suppose thou hast given me a good excuse.”

The only bedroom chambers in use belonged to Yorshka and Gwyndolin, and whereas hers was in the middle of the hallway, Gwyndolin’s happened to be at the very end. With a nod, the god dismissed the Silver Knight standing sentry at the end of the corridor, and he dispelled the rune used to seal the bedroom door shut with his bare hand.

“As I was saying, as someone that has been around since the time before Chaos, I was most impressed at thy brother’s feat once I had it confirmed.” With a small grunt of effort, Gwyndolin swung open the heavy door with his free hand and walked into his chambers, immediately moving to set Lothric on his bed. “However, whenever I attempted to obtain an audience with thy father, mine envoys were met with either frigid denial or open hostility.”

“I am very sorry about that; Father is a bit of a recluse, and he distrusts other kingdoms a great deal.” Lothric scooted to the edge of the large bed and kicked his legs over the edge, taking in everything with his large, curious eyes. “Your room looks different than what I expected.”

Gwyndolin shook his head in amusement as he closed and locked the door. “I certainly seem to be full of surprises today. How did thou believest mine bedchamber would be designed?”
“Well, Lorian told me that Father’s bedchamber is decorated with gold and gems, so I thought the bedroom of a god would look the same.” The child grinned and pat his little hands on the thick comforter. “I like your room, though. It feels warm and safe.”

“I thank thee for the compliment.” Though the physical lock itself was sturdy as could be, Gwyndolin took the extra precaution of placing another sealing rune on the door, not wanting him or his guest to be disturbed. “Mine own father’s rooms were very cold and opulent, so when I had the freedom to decorate mine bedchambers as I pleased, I wished for them to feel welcoming.”

Gwyndolin, of course, did not mention the fact that he spent the first several millennia after Gwyn’s death keeping neigh constant vigilance at the man’s symbolic tomb, and that he only formally moved into Gwyn’s old bedchamber after the delivery of Yorshka’s egg twelve years prior. What mattered was that the moon god had apparently achieved his goal of crafting a quiet yet comfortable space of his own.

Though he had the ornate (and, frankly, tacky) gold embellishments stripped from the walls the, the stark white that remained was too similar to the color of choice Gwyndolin had been forced and coerced to wear as the Dark Sun, so he had the walls painted a soft gold color—one that warmed and shimmered when struck by the light coming in from the room’s floor-to-ceiling windows. The stern and formal white wood furniture had been thrown out and replaced with pieces carved from natural, lightly-finished wood, filling the space with elegant yet unpretentious curves and soft white cushions. The walls that were once decorated with artwork were now lined almost entirely by towering bookshelves stuffed to the brim with tomes, scrolls, and trinkets from distant realms and kingdoms. One such gift had been a rug depicting a star-filled, moonlight sky that had been knitted by Princess Shanalotte herself, which Gwyndolin had immediately charmed to be fire-resistant and laid in front of the fireplace directly across from his bed.

Even the bed set had been replaced, for while little Gwyndolin had always longed to sleep in what—at the time—was Gwyn’s improbably massive and plush bed, elder Gwyndolin had no desire to sleep in the same mattress where Gwyn once laid with his mother (as well as the mothers of his siblings). The replacement mattress was slightly firmer but just as large, and he had rejected Gwyn’s more simple bedframe in favor of a four-poster one, which he had draped with gauze colored the same twilight gradient as the curtains on the windows. Whenever Gwyndolin required silence and solitude before continuing on with his day, he would retreat to his bed and close the curtains around him, sealing himself into a makeshift bubble of soft, warm dark. The god would remain in seclusion until his breathing had calmed and the shaking of his hands had ceased, after which he would emerge from his bed, fix his hair and makeup, and return to his duties without a hint of anything being amiss.

The only piece of furniture that remained from Gwyn’s set was the large and heavy wooden desk that sat beside the window leading to the balcony. It would have been a shame, Gwyndolin thought, to incinerate such a fine piece of craftsmanship from Catarina. Besides, Gwyn had hated it when his children sat on the desk, and Gwyndolin took a great deal of pleasure of sitting on the edge whenever he pleased. He even occasionally took tea at the desk, which would have driven his...
Father up the proverbial wall.

Gwyn’s desk, however, was not the only antique from before the First Linking present in the room. As the god watched Lothric smooth the comforter with his spindly fingers, a strange, twisting ache formed in his chest, and he wondered how many time he’d done the same thing as a child sitting on his eldest sister’s bed. The peach-colored cotton sheets and ivory-colored duvet had once bedecked Gwynevere’s bed; the blue and forest green covers on the pillows had been hand-dyed and stitched by Filianore during her ‘crafting’ phase; and the red and yellow afghan draped across the foot of the bed had been Aestus’s blanket of choice whenever he napped in the sitting room.

Gwyndolin’s three elder siblings had departed long ago, but having their sheets, blankets, and pillows on his own bed made Gwyndolin feel as if they were still a part of him, even if it was likely that they did not think on him at all. A god as old as he could indulge in some silly sentimentality, could he not?

“Your bedsheets and pillows don’t match.” Lothric spoke as if he was reading his mind.

“They belonged to mine siblings.” Gwyndolin said simply. “Now, where was I in mine story…”

“At the part where you sent envoys to Lothric.”

“Ah, yes, thank thee.” Gwyndolin opened the door to the adjoining bathroom on the right side of the room and set about lighting the gas lamps inside. “Well, as time passed, I began to hear more rumors about thine kingdom. However, unlike thy brother’s victory against the Demon Prince, these new rumors were most disquieting.”

Lothric was silent for a moment. “What were the rumors?”

Gwyndolin lit the last lamp and sighed, brushing his hands off as he tried to think of how best to broach the subject.

“The rumors involved the linking of the First Flame.” Gwyndolin knelt next to the large bathtub and turned on the taps. He held his hand underneath the spout as he waited for the pipes to heat up. “Thy people are secretive and mostly isolated from outside kingdoms, but no matter the safeguards one may put in place to keep secrets, they inevitably end up trickling out. My Blades would meet the occasional expatriate from Lothric on their travels, and the stories they relayed back to me were disquieting.”
There was no interjection from Lothric. Gwyndolin bit the inside of his cheek as he adjusted the taps with his free hand.

“There was talk, little Lothric, about a king that was searching for greatness and immortality. Said king had supposedly gotten hold of research that I mineself had ordered the destruction of several thousand years ago; but apparently, mine attempt was unsuccessful.” Gwyndolin sighed and watched as the water from the tap spilled down the cracks between his fingers. “At first, they said, the king had attempted to make himself into a dragon with the research. That, of course, is none of mine concern; a fool is free to torture themself in any way they want. Two months ago, however, I received a version of the story different to which I was accustomed.”

Once the water reached a satisfactory temperature, Gwyndolin plugged the drain and leaned back on his ankles to wait for the tub to fill, shaking what water he could off of his left hand. He heard little footsteps padding to the open door and felt the sensation of a gaze on the back of his neck.

“Lothric, the story told to me was that that the King of Lothric had used his research to create his own dragon in the form of a child, and that said child was to become a Lord of Cinder when they reached adulthood.” At that, the god turned on his knees to look at Lothric, who was gripping the door frame with trembling fingers. “Art those stories true, Lothric?”

For a moment, the boy simply stared at him, blue eyes wide and searching.

“...yes.” The voice came out as a whisper.

Gwyndolin nodded and wiped his left hand dry on the skirt of his robe. “Art thou the child to whom the story refers?”

After a moment of hesitation, Lothric nodded, his lower lip wobbling along with his hands. Alone in the privacy of his bedchamber, Gwyndolin finally lowered his hood and stood, walking over to Lothric and keeling in front of him. He wanted the boy to be able to see the reassuring smile on his face in full.

“As ludicrous as such a tale sounded to mine ears, I could not--in good conscience--go without investigating such an appalling claim. I therefore sent one of mine most decorated and trustworthy Blades to investigate, knowing that she would have access to the kingdom’s inner workings through her father.”

“Her grandfather--Holy Knight Hodrick--was once the commander of Irithyll’s standing forces. After his retirement, he returned to the kingdom where he was born as an instructor, and I knew from our prior communications that he has the king’s ear on several subjects. He was able to use his position to grant Lady Sirris access to the Order of the Knights of Lothric, which is where I presume she met thee and thy brother, correct?”

“Lorian was the Knight Commander.” Lothric’s voice was dry and weak. “He and Lady Sirris became friends when she started helping him instruct the other knights. They would talk a lot under the trees in the courtyard, and I would sit with them sometimes.”

Gwyndolin could not help but wonder if Lothric’s unsteadiness was due, in part, to the moon god’s exposed face. Though his mouth and nose were ‘normal’, Gwyndolin’s eyes were decidedly out of place on a humanoid countenance, and the god had learned to hide them behind helms and hoods order to avoid provoking revulsion and uneasiness in others. While the eyes themselves were shaped like large almonds, his irises were two bands of gold and amber that blended together in the middle, and his black pupils were serpentine slits. His eyelashes were the same color as his hair, thick and ‘enviable’ (as Gwynere had once described them); but while his white brows were naturally full and pleasantly curved, they could not distract from the small, pearlescent scales that spread out from the corners of his eyes.

No amount of flattery and forced compliments could change the fact that Gwyndolin’s eyes resembled those of a snake. He could only hope that Lothric was not fearful of serpents.

“That would explain, then, why Lady Sirris sent me a missive two weeks past, requesting an immediate audience upon her return from Lothric.” Gwyndolin smiled wanly and tucked a stray strand of hair behind Lothric’s ear. “She must have been concerned for the welfare of both thineself and thy brother.”

Lothric smiled slightly at those words.

“She is lucky Father did not discover her true intentions. He becomes more paranoid and suspicious of those around him by the day, and he has a habit of publicly flogging and executing all those he accuses of spying, even if they are truly innocent. Lorian has worked in the past to help those falsely accused flee the kingdom before Father can have them arrested.” The boy’s hands dropped from the door frame as he relaxed. “Perhaps it was some of those escapees that told your Blades about my...my role.”
“Thou mayst be correct.” The more Gwyndolin heard of Lorian, the more he was inclined to like him, but he knew from personal experience that little siblings tended to see everything their elder siblings did in a rosy light. Lothric did not seem the type to exaggerate or deceive, however, even about his elder brother. “It is true, then? Does thy father expect thee to burn in the kiln?”

The smile faded from Lothric’s face, and he nodded nervously, kicking his bare feet against the floor. “When I turn eighteen. I was born to become a Lord of Cinder, and with the godly and dragon blood running through my veins, I will become a perfect and immortal King of Lothric when I do--the heir the house of Lothric has been seeking for centuries.”

It seemed as if the boy was reciting his lines from a book, and Gwyndolin could not help but frown, noticing that Lothric flinched when he did so. Oh, the god knew that reaction well, and it took all of his self-control to keep from growling in anger.

“Thou art not in trouble, Lothric. Mine displeasure is directed at thy father, not at thee.” Gwyndolin made sure to keep his voice as soft and level as possible. Lothric blinked and unclenched his hands from where they had balled up against his chest. “Thou art brave, strong, and kind in spite of the suffering thy father has inflicted upon thee, and I am in awe of thee.”

“How can you be so sure?” Lothric whispered.

“I know well of men like thy father, sweet one.” With a sad smile, Gwyndolin ran a hand along the top of Lothric’s head and stood, walking back over to the tub. The water level had risen nicely during their conversation, and after checking to make sure the water was warm without burning, he shut off the tap and stood to go to the linen closet.

“Thy bath is ready. I am afraid I do not have a step stool in mine room; will thou needest assistance climbing into the tub?”

“Yes, please.” There was a new uncertainty in Lothric’s voice, and when Gwyndolin turned from the closet with a clean towel and washcloth in his arms, he found the little boy thumbing the waist tie of his robe.

“Would thou like me to turn mine back while thou undress?”

Lothric gnawed nervously on his lip. “I mean, you’re going to have to help me in anyway, so
there’s no point…”

“Yet?”

What Lothric said next was unexpected. “...I look strange under my robe and I don’t want to scare you.”

Gwyndolin nearly dropped the towels he was carrying in shock. *The child...he has seen mine unusual eyes, surely, yet he is afraid of scaring me?* It was the one of the strangest, most bewildering things Gwyndolin had ever heard, and the god had to catch himself before he started to laugh.

“...child, art thou not scared of mine eyes?”

“ Oh, your eyes? They are different than most, yes, but I think they are really pretty.” Lothric’s words punched the air out of Gwyndolin’s stomach. “ But what I have under my robe is not pretty. Some of the handmaidens would call me ‘disgusting’ when they thought I couldn’t hear them.”

Gwyndolin blindly reached out and grabbed the door handle to the linen closet for support. He felt as if he was going to faint.

“ Lin?” Lothric suddenly grew concerned, and he took a few steps towards the shaken deity, as if wanting to be in a position to try and catch him if he fell. “ Is everything alright? Is the heat making you lightheaded? I can take a bath later if you need to rest!”

“ What? Oh, no, no!” Gwyndolin forcibly tore himself away from his memories and shook his head violently enough to whip his hair against his cheeks. “ No, dear Lothric, I am fine. It is just that…”

“ Yes?”

Staring into the boy’s blue eyes with his own amber, Gwyndolin came to a decision, and he took a shaky breath before releasing the door handle.
“To tell you the truth, little one, I have been hiding something quite unsightly from thee mine own.” At Lothric’s befuddled look, Gwyndolin set the towels on the small table beside the tub and gestured at his legs. “Dost thou see the way mine legs look now? It is because of a glamor I have cast. They look...quite different without.”

Lothric’s eyes glittered with curiosity, and he shifted closer to Gwyndolin so he could scrutinize the god’s legs, frowning in thought.

“...I thought I saw a strange aura around them, but I thought it was just because you are a True God.” He looked up at Gwyndolin. “What do they look like normally?”

“Art thou afraid of snakes, little one?”

The question made Lothric blink. “No. Lorian has kept several snakes as pets in the past, and I sometimes played with the little grass snakes that nested in the lawn of the dragon barracks. Why do you ask?”

Gwyndolin sighed and closed his eyes. “Thou shouldst step back. Do not be afraid to flee if I end up scaring thee.”

Despite his blatant confusion, Lothric stepped back until he was a meter apart from Gwyndolin, and the god braced himself for the boy’s reaction as he dispelled the magical bindings restraining his legs. The illusion of skin was the first to drop, and Lothric gasped in surprise as the six snakes that made up Gwyndolin’s legs uncurled from their forced positions and fanned out around him like an overly long skirt pooling on a floor. The needles of pain and discomfort that had been ripping up Gwyndolin’s spine all day faded into a mild ache, and the god could not help but sigh in relief, the contentment of the snakes washing over him as they stretched and wriggled their bones back into place. It always took a couple of hours for their skeletal structures to completely realign.

“Well…” Steeling himself for Lothric’s inevitable rejection, Gwyndolin set his jaw and slowly opened his eyes, fully expecting to see both disgust and horror on the child’s face. Instead of revulsion, however, the god was greeted by the sight of blue eyes all but overflowing with wonder and little hands clapped over sallow cheeks.

“Your legs are snakes?”

Thrown off by the astonishment in Lothric’s voice, it took Gwyndolin a few moments to register
the question, and he had to clear his throat before he could speak. “That...that is correct, yes. I was born with them.”

“That’s amazing!” Lothric let his hands drop from his face as he stepped closer to Gwyndolin. “Do they behave like normal legs or are they sentient?”

Gwyndolin was a sentient being that was well known for his quick tongue and diction, but as he watched Lothric approach and kneel to get a better look at the snakes, he found that he could not speak. The god was used to a world where the only beings that had ever looked upon his snakes without abject horror or morbid fascination could be counted on both of his hands, yet here was a child that seemed almost eager to have a closer look, even reaching out a hand before stopping.

“Oh, I’m sorry…” Lothric looked up at Gwyndolin with apologetic eyes. "Would you mind too terribly if I...touched one? Or...would that be rude?"

This wondrously strange child…

“No, I…” Gwyndolin blinked and shook his head. “No, I do not mind, little one. Just be gentle with thy touch; the snakes are always terribly sore after being restrained by the glamor for so long.”

“I can imagine; you yourself must be really sore as well.” Lothric once more reached his little fingers towards the snakes, who had all craned their heads forward to better study this strange new friend of their host. “So, are they sentient, or are they similar to normal legs?”

“Oh, yes, I did not answer thy question the first time thou asked. I apologize.” As Gwyndolin adjusted to the idea of an outsider not only tolerating his legs, but liking them (and a child at that; the god had been under the notion that children were especially frightened of snakes), the snakes relaxed along with him, and one even stretched close to Lothric’s outstretched hand. “They are not sentient, no, but they do tend to act differently around others depending on mine unconscious thoughts and feelings.”

As if on cue, the snake closest to Lothric’s hand flitted its tongue against the boy’s palm, sending him into a fit of giggling.

“That tickles!” Lothric stuck his tongue out of the corner of his mouth and stroked the snake’s head with two of his fingers. “I think it’s playing with me!”
A fond smile spread across Gwyndolin’s face. “It means I like thee very much.”

A hot pink blush spread to the tips of Lothric’s ears, and the god chuckled as the child ducked his head to hide the blush on his cheeks, though he continued to stroke the serpent’s head with all the softness of a feather.

“...spines.”

“What?” At first, Gwyndolin thought he was hearing things, but the fact that Lothric ducked his head lower made him think otherwise. “I am sorry, little one, but could thoust repeat what thee said?”

“...I…” Lothric gulped and ran his fingers along the upper body of the snake. “I have spines. On my back.”

“Oh.” Gwyndolin blinked. “Oh! Is that what thou believed I would find disgusting?”

“Yeah. Mostly. I have other things, too, like scales up my legs and along my shoulders and neck...and you can see some of my veins through my skin.” The child looked up at the god and bit his lower lip nervously. “But the spines are what seems to throw everyone off.”

Gwyndolin shook his head bemusedly. “Humans and godkin can be quite...strange when it comes to what they fear. Thou dost not have to worry about mine reaction, though; for one, it would be hypocritical for one that has legs such as mine to find the notion of spines off-putting.”

A tiny smile formed on Lothric’s lips.

“Secondly, mine sister, Yorshka, not only has spines on her back, but she also possesses a long, violet and pink tail that that is impossible to hide. She wears it as a badge of pride, really, and no one who lives in Irithyll bats an eyelash at the sight of it.”

“Truly?” Lothric glanced down at Gwyndolin’s snakes, then back up at the god’s face, and his eyes were so filled with hope that it made Gwyndolin’s heart throb. “Can I take my bath now? I would like to meet her as soon as I’m clean!”
The god could not hold back a laugh. "Of course. I shall go find something for thee to wear, but first, I believe thou requirest some assistance."

"Mhm!" After giving one last pat to the snake’s head, Lothric stood and turned his back to Gwyndolin, undoing the ties of his robe. Before the child disrobed, however, he glanced back at the god.

"Promise you will not think I am gross?"

An encouraging smile. "There are many words one can use to describe thee, child, but gross is not one of them."

Lothric nodded with determination—as if trying to convince himself of his resolve—and, after a moment’s hesitation, let the robe slip down from his shoulders. Now that the boy’s back was revealed, Gwyndolin could see the neat line of spines that he had felt earlier when carrying Lothric, as thin and (caudally) curved as an Eastern blade. Though the spines at the tailbone were as small as Gwyndolin’s little finger, they increased in size as they travelled up the child’s backbone to the base of his neck, ending with a spine as tall and long as Gwyndolin’s hand with fingers closed. The same silver scales speckled along Lothric’s ankles, shoulders, and neck covered the base of each spine, but the color shifted and darkened towards the tips, morphing into a shimmering turquoise that shone metallic in the light of the gas lamps.

"Different than most, yes," Gwyndolin smiled, "but I think they are very pretty."

Lothric snapped his face forward in an attempt to hide his blush. "Oh, hush."

After helping Lothric climb into his tub (an understandable necessity, given the child’s short stature, general weakness, and rheumatic joints), Gwyndolin left him to his own devices while he dug through his large closet in search of something for him to wear. While Yorshka had plenty of articles of clothing that she had grown out of, she and Gwyndolin had donated the majority of the articles to both their own churches and the Cathedral of the Deep, leaving only the more valuable and sentimental pieces behind. The pieces left behind had packed up and stored in the basement, but given how much time Yorshka had spent in Gwyndolin’s chambers through the years, he had hope that a few robes and dresses had been left behind in his own things. Unfortunately, while Gwyndolin’s wardrobe had never been extensive, he still had a couple thousand years’ worth of his own collection to wade through first.
It is ridiculous, really. Gwyndolin grumbled and cursed as he wrestled his way through the robes, dresses, and other articles of ceremonial garb hanging on the racks. Some of these I have only ever worn once--others I wish to never wear again. He pointedly averted his gaze from the worn white frock hanging in the back and instead began to rummage through a pile of Gwynereve’s old shoes that had collapsed. I should really give most of these things away...but what commoner would wish to wear such raiments? Well, I suppose I could give them to Yorshka one day, and Filianore will need something to wear if she ever returns from--

Gwyndolin nearly smacked his head against the wall in his haste to shake that particular thought from his mind.

Yorshka may wish to wear these one day. I shall keep them for her.

Finally--after Chaos knows how many minutes of searching--Gwyndolin found one of Yorshka’s old garments wedged in-between something shiny and red he did not remember ever wearing and something matte and green that he also did not remember wearing. It was a soft blue robe with silver snowflakes embroidered on its entirety, and the matching loose under-clothes had been hung up underneath, much to the god’s relief. Yorshka had been a little over six years of age when she’d last worn that particular outfit, but they would hopefully fit Lothric perfectly, given the boy’s slim and short stature.

As Gwyndolin exited the closet, the door to the bathroom opened, releasing a cloud of steam into the air.

“I’m finished, Lin!” Lothric poked his head out of the crack in the door and grinned toothily at Gwyndolin. “Is there a way I can brush my teeth as well?”

“There are spare tooth cleaners and cleaning paste on the bottom shelf of the closet. Thou shouldst be able to reach them, but if not, do not hesitate to call for me.” Gwyndolin raised an eyebrow. “How didst thou get out of the tub by thyself?”

“I teleported! I heard you cursing and stuff through the door and didn’t want to bother you.”

An embarrassed flushed crept up Gwyndolin’s neck. “Ah. Mine apologies. I should be careful to watch mine tongue around thee.”
“It’s okay! Lorian says a lot worse when he thinks I can’t hear him!”

With that, Lothric retracted his head and shut the door, leaving Gwyndolin to snicker and shake his head in bemusement.

After brushing off as much of the dust and the cobwebs as he could, Gwyndolin spent a few minutes airing out the garments on his balcony, and he had just finished laying the clothing out on his bed when the bathroom door opened once more. Lothric emerged, wrapped head to toe in the thick white towel Gwyndolin had laid out for him, and his face lit up at the sight of the outfit.

“Are...are those really for me?”

“Indeed.” Gwyndolin nodded and gestured at the robe and undergarments. “They may smell stale, but they are clean and comfortable, and they should fit thee comfortably. Dost thou need help dressing?”

Lothric shook his head. “No. I’ll be okay. Thank you for asking.”

“Very well. I shall clean up the bathroom whilst thou change.”

As Gwyndolin walked into the steamy room, he heard Lothric all out behind him. “I cleaned up as much as I could! Sorry if I made a mess.”

“I am sure thou art fine, little one, but I appreciate thy consideration.”

To Gwyndolin’s pleasant surprise, Lothric had done an admirable job of cleaning up after his bath, despite how tired and sore the child must have been after his ordeal. The tub had been drained and the bath products lined neatly up on the side, the floor had been mopped up with the bath mat, and the child had even located the wastebasket and thrown away the teeth cleaner he had used. All the god had to do was lay out a clean bath mat and toss the dirty and wet linens down the laundry chute (which had been too high for Lothric to reach).

Once he finished tidying, Gwyndolin turned his attention to Lothric’s discarded prayer robe, which had been folded up neatly and laid on the edge of the wash basin. The god removed his gloves and set them to the side before picking up the offending garment, wincing at the coarseness of the fabric beneath his bare fingers. Though he had suspected as such when he first had a good look at
the boy, a closer examination of the ragged robe showed thick seams holding together patchwork pieces of black, gold-embroidered fabric, showing how it had been altered to fit Lothric as he grew from a sickly newborn into a sickly child. Good heavens, so much lazy effort was spent to make the swaddling cloth fit the child, even though it would have been far simpler to bless a different garment for him to wear!

*It is not even that strong of a blessing!* Gwyndolin frowned at the garment as he held it up to the closest gas light. While he could clearly sense the holy magic that had been woven into the threads that made up the original swaddling blanket, it appeared as if the same care had not been taking with the cloth they had used to enlarge the garment, resulting in what may have once been a powerful enchantment being dampened and diluted. It was a mixture of care and carelessness that made Gwyndolin dizzy.

A sudden sharp tingling in the god’s fingers made him wince, and as he lifted his right hand off of the fabric, Gwyndolin was stunned to see that the coarse fabric had actually cut his index finger. The sight of a small droplet of blood dripping down his finger sent a shiver down Gwyndolin’s spine.

*I was correct. This is no ordinary cloth.* The taste of molten iron pooled on the back of Gwyndolin’s tongue. *This is a celice.*

A celice: a piece of fabric designed specifically to rub and cut into soft flesh. A piece of fabric designed to inflict pain and discomfort upon holy men and women seeking to be closer to whatever deity they worshipped. A piece of fabric that inflamed the skin of those that wore it and bloodied the knees of those that knelt upon it for extended durations of time.

The ‘holy’ men and women of the Kingdom of Lothric had wrapped a *newborn* in a celice. The King of Lothric had intended for his youngest child to wear a celice for the entirety of his short life.

*They wanted this child to suffer.*


“Oh, yes, everything is fine!” Gwyndolin took a deep breath and willed his limbs to stop shaking. “I shall be right out! How dost thine outfit fit?” He wiped the blood off of his finger with a face towel, slid his gloves back on, and tucked the prayer robe underneath his arm.
“It is...okay, I think!” Lothric’s voice sounded mystified. “It is soft. Really soft. I never thought clothing could be this soft.”

“I see. Go stand in the light so that I may see thee properly!”

“Okay!”

When Gwyndolin emerged from the bathroom, he saw Lothric standing in the patch of light shining upon Shanalotte’s rug, staring at his outstretched arms with a look of utter bewilderment. Though Yorshka’s robe was slightly too long in the arms and the skirt for someone of Lothric’s size, it still fit him quite nicely overall, and the mystified way with which Lothric examined his new outfit made Gwyndolin want to cry.

This is the first time he has ever worn something soft.

“Thou art quite fetching in that garb.” Gwyndolin’s grin felt like it would split his cheeks, and he quickly walked over to the nightside next to his bed, opening the top drawer and pulling out his sewing box. “Allow me to shorten the hem and sleeves before we depart; it shall take only a few minutes.”

“Okay.” Lothric watched as Gwyndolin knelt down next to him and opened the box, pulling out a needle and a spool of blue thread. “Do you want me to take the robe off?”

“That shall not be necessary. Just hold thine arms out and keep still. I do not wish to stick thee by accident.”

With the practice of someone that has raised a child from infancy, Gwyndolin threaded the needle and got to work, rolling up Lothric’s sleeves so the cuffs touched the bottom of his wrists and pinning the fabric into place.

“How dost thou feel about thy new clothing?”

Lothric hummed and watched Gwyndolin with interest as the god swiftly stitched the cuffs into place. “I do not know, really. I mean, it feels far nicer than my old robe; I can move about more
easily, and it is so soft! It just...feels weird. It is like I am wearing a blanket.”

Gwyndolin hummed and tightened a stitch with more force than necessary. “Art thou comfortable wearing such a garment?”

“Oh, absolutely!” Lothric grinned and examined the cuff of the sleeve that Gwyndolin had finished. “I think I just have to get used to it. It is strange, but...it is a nice strange.”

“I am glad to hear it.” Gwyndolin smiled demurely as he set upon Lothric’s other sleeve. “Wouldst thou be interested in wearing shoes or slippers?”

“Ummm…” Lothric frowned, and Gwyndolin could hear the sound of his claw-like toenails scritching against the rug. “I guess I could try some on, but other than the strips of blanket Lorian wraps around my feet when it is cold, I do not believe I have ever worn shoes before.”

Of course thy family never gave thee shoes. Gwyndolin bit the inside of his cheek and kept silent.

Once the hem and sleeves had been shortened, Gwyndolin returned the sewing box to the nightstand before venturing once more into the closet, digging through Gwynevere’s abandoned shoe pile in search of slippers or cloth house shoes. A few minutes of digging uncovered a pair of wool slippers that his eldest sister had worn when she was younger, but when Lothric moved to put them on, his pointed toenails ripped right through the toes.

“Sorry…” Lothric whispered.

“Do not be. Mine sister has a similar struggle with her own feet. She prefers to be barefoot most of the time, and as for mineself, well…” Gwyndolin gestured at the snakes, who were writhing gently on the ground. “Who needest shoes when one possessest snakes?”

Lothric snickered as he took off the ruined slippers and handed them to Gwyndolin, who tossed them into the back of his closet without a second thought and closed the door. He would have to do a thorough ‘spring cleaning’ at a later date.

“Art thou ready to go and meet Yorshka?”
“Yes, please!” Lothric held up his little arms and waited patiently for Gwyndolin to scoop him up. It astonished the god that the child weighed so little compared to Yorshka at his age; despite Gwyndolin’s noticeable frailty when compared to Lorian, he was able to easily support Lothric in the crook of his left arm while leaving his right free. “Thank you for carrying me, Lin. I’m sorry for causing so much trouble.”

“Thou hast caused me no trouble at all. It is common decency to help those that are in need.”

“Father would say otherwise, but he was wrong about a lot of things, I think.”

Gwyndolin’s arm tightened around Lothric. “He certainly was.”

Unbeknownst to the average denizen of Irithyll, all of the city’s major structures (including the city hall, the main hospital, the Church of Yorshka, the Cathedral of the Moon, and the base of Anor Londo itself) were connected by a series of underground tunnels, all of which originated from underneath the royal residence. It had been a precaution constructed by Gwyn before Gwyndolin had been born; not only did it allow diplomats and prisoners to move in and out of Anor Londo without being seen, but to act as an emergency escape route for his family if the City of the Gods was to ever fall under siege. Every year, like clockwork, Gwyndolin would take a torch and walk the entirety of each tunnel, inspecting the walls for structural stability and ensuring that the exits remained unobstructed and hidden.

Learning to walk the tunnels by oneself had been a rite of passage in the House of Gwyn, and though Gwyndolin had eschewed a majority of his father’s poisonous and outdated traditions, he decided early on that Yorshka would learn to do the same. When the crossbreed girl started walking, Gwyndolin wasted no time in showing her how to access and traverse the underground pathways, repeatedly leading her through each corridor and exit until she could navigate them in her sleep. Her first lessons had been on which tunnels lead to the outskirts of the city and which to take depending on the emergency and time of year, and it was only after Gwyndolin was certain that Yorshka knew where and how to flee in a crisis that he showed her how to travel to other areas of the city. When she turned ten, he began to lead her through the tunnels without a torch, showing her how to use her ears and sense of touch to navigate through the pitch black corridors. Once she grew confident enough to travel the dark by herself, Gwyndolin began to ‘race’ her above ground to see who reached a location first, and he would take her to the city proper and buy her a treat whenever she won.

It had long since turned into a one-sided contest--with Gwyndolin having to teleport to have even a remote chance of keeping up--but he still took Yorshka out for sweets every time she inevitably beat him. Not only had it become a cherished ritual between the two of them, but Gwyndolin wanted to make sure that Yorshka never forgot how to run for her life if the worst were to happen,
even if it meant leaving him behind.

Though the torches in the tunnels tended to burn out if left unattended, Gwyndolin had made sure to light them during his earlier trip to and from the hospital, so the gray stone corridors were still brightly lit for the journey to the Church of Yorshka. Lothric, it seemed, had no aversion to enclosed spaces, and half of the questions he asked Gwyndolin during the brief trip had to do with where the tunnels led and how they were constructed so deep underground? Did they have to dig the passageways by hand, or did they use their ‘god powers’ to hollow out the earth itself? Why did Lord Gwyn spend so much time digging tunnels with which to leave Anor Londo when he could simply teleport wherever he wished? Did Gwyndolin ever have to use bricks and mortar to repair any cracks or could he use his magic instead?

The other half of the questions had to do with the snakes, which Lothric seemed fascinated by, given how he barely took his eyes off of them as they slithered along the stone floor. Could they slither faster than humans and godkin could walk on two feet? Could he climb stairs or hills with them? Could Gwyndolin see through the eyes of the snakes as well as his own? Would he still be able to use the snakes to walk if they were all blindfolded? What about their mouths? Did they have to eat? Could they bite people on command? Did they ever bite someone when Gwyndolin didn’t want them to? Do the snakes have names?

Gwyndolin had been so busy answering Lothric’s litany of questions that he almost missed the illusory wall leading to the Church of Yorshka, though he quickly realized his mistake before he could make a fool of himself in front of his young guest. A wave of his hand dispelled the wall, revealing a darkened storeroom filled to brimming with bags of grain, root vegetables, and raw cloth. Not wanting to cast another glamor just to climb the tall ladder leading to the top floor, Gwyndolin simply teleported to the exit, emerging from the dusty warehouse into the small rear courtyard of the church.

“Though the true name of the church is the Church of the Branching Yew,” Gwyndolin explained as he walked, “its priestesses took to calling it the Church of Yorshka after mine sister, since they would watch her for me when I was attending to my duties in the Cathedral of the Moon. When she turned ten years of age, Yorshka wished to begin serving our people, so I asked the priestesses if they would be willing to let Yorshka take up some responsibility in the church, and they readily agreed. She performed so admirably in her duties that, as a twelfth birthday gift, they officially appointed her as matron of the church. Mine sister’s role as such is limited due to her age, but she has taken a shine to the position, and both the priestesses and the parishioners are impressed by her work ethic and kindness. Some have even taken to calling her a goddess because of it!”

“You sound like Lorian does when he talks about me.” Lothric muttered. “Do all elder siblings talk about their youngers like the sun rises and sets at their feet?”

“Only the decent ones.” Gwyndolin quipped, ruffling the child’s hair playfully as he growled. “
As I was saying, the church mainly caters to refugees and newcomers to the city, but they are also known for providing assistance to citizens that are struggling with money, food, or housing.”

Lothric’s eyes widened. “Oh! So that is why Lady Sírris told us to go to the Church of Yorshka when we arrived! She said to ask for the matron of the church and that she would help us! I thought they just named the church after your sister because she’s a goddess!”

“Ah, yes...I suppose she is.” Technically. Gwyndolin ignored Lothric’s questioning stare as he slithered to the church’s side entrance. That was one topic of conversation he did not wish to entertain.

As per usual, the pews of the church were crowded with citizens and newcomers alike, being tended to by the white clad priestesses of protection and new beginnings. Some were passing out hot drinks to the civilians; some were tending to the injured and ill, who were lying on cots or sitting around the coiled bonfire; and some were simply talking to the parishioners and newcomers about the nature their troubles and how best to meet their needs. Gwyndolin soon caught sight of Yorshka at the front of the church, clad in the white dress and veil that the priestesses affectionately called her ‘saint’s garb’ and carrying a covered wicker basket, handing out what appeared to be little loaves of sweet bread that she must have baked earlier.

“Nameless Moon.” A petite, dark-skinned priestess approached Lothric and Gwyndolin, bowing her head in greeting. Though she wore white like the other priestesses, her long robe was made from cotton instead of muslin, and her long white cotton veil covered all but the fine bones of her face.

“High Priestess Fidda.” Gwyndolin nodded his head in return. “Dost thou mind if Yorshka is released from her duties early? I require her assistance in tending to an urgent matter.”

“Not at all. The priestesses and I can manage without her, but even if we could not, your will comes before our wants.” Fidda eyed the child in Gwyndolin’s arms curiously. “Will she be able to return to her duties tomorrow?”

“Most likely not. She will return to the church when she is able, but it may not be for some time—perhaps in a week or two.” Gwyndolin could feel Lothric shift uneasily under Fidda’s gaze.

“By your will.” She nodded once more and gestured at Lothric. “Are we to care for that child?”
Lothric’s little hands gripped Gwyndolin’s shawl like a vice, and the god gave him a reassuring squeeze.

"Thine offer of assistance is most appreciated, but this child is under mine care, and he shall be residing with mineself and Yorshka for a time."

Fidda’s eyes widened. “Ah. I see. Apologies for my presumption.”

“Apologies accepted. Now, mine sister…”

“Ah, yes. One moment.” Fidda took a few steps down the center aisle towards the front of the church and cupped her hands around her mouth. “Lady Yorshka! The Nameless Moon requests your presence at once!”

Though she was in the middle of handing out bread to a group of children, Yorshka’s head snapped up at the mention of her brother, and a large, toothy grin spread across her face when she caught sight of Gwyndolin by the altar. She quickly passed off the basket to the eldest child of the group and all but ran down the aisle to meet him, her tail whipping the legs of the pews as she passed.

“Dear brother! Thou hast returned!” Yorshka held out her arms--planning on greeting her brother with a leaping embrace--but dropped them the moment she saw the child in Gwyndolin’s arms. Her pace slowed to a brisk walk.

“Gwyndolin, who is this?” The crossbreed girl came to a stop in front of her brother and peered curiously at Lothric, who averted his eyes. “Is this child the reason for thine excursion outside of the city?”

“Ah...this is a conversation that should be had in private. Come, Yorshka.” Gwyndolin gestured for Yorshka to join him as he walked towards the staircase behind the altar, and the girl said a quick goodbye to Fidda before following her brother, her talons clacking against the stone floor as she trotted after him.

“Brother, what in the name of Flame is going on?”

Gwyndolin put a finger to his lips, looking over his shoulder at the crowd behind them, and Yorshka made a small noise of understanding. Gwyndolin slowed his pace so Yorshka could
ascend the steps in front of him, allowing the girl to unlock the door to the tower with the key she wore around her neck. He waited until she locked the door behind them before speaking.

“Yorshka, may I introduce thee to Prince Lothric, youngest son of King Oceiros and heir to the throne of the Kingdom of Lothric. Lothric, may I introduce thee to mine youngest sister, Lady Yorshka of the House of Gwyn.”

Yorshka’s eyes popped open in surprise.

“Prince of the Kingdom of Lothric?” A million questions danced in Yorshka’s eyes, and it took her a moment to decide which to ask first. “Is...is he the reason thou departed without a word this morning?”

“In a sense. I met both he and his elder brother--Prince Lorian--while I was hunting the beast I mentioned in mine note. Prince Lorian was injured by the beast and is recovering in the guest wing.”

“What...?” Yorshka opened and closed her mouth a few times. “What of the King and Queen of Lothric? Are they here as well?” She frowned in concern as Lothric flinched at the mention of his parents. “Has something terrible happened?”

“Prince Lothric and Prince Lorian were forced to flee their kingdom under duress.” Gwyndolin chose his words carefully. “They shall be staying with thee and I for the foreseeable future.”

“I...I see.”

Yorshka swallowed and turned her attention to Lothric. “I...though I am most perplexed by the situation, it is still a pleasure to meet thee, Prince Lothric.” She smiled uncertainty at the child, who did his best to match her expression.

“It is nice to meet you too, La--” The child caught himself. “Yorshka. You can just call me Lothric if you’d like. I do not believe I have the right to be called a prince anymore.”

Yorshka blinked. “Thou...dost not have the right? What on earth does that mean?”
“It is...a long story.” Lothric bit his lower lip and looked up at Gwyndolin, who gave him a reassuring smile.

“A long story?” Yorshka huffed and crossed her arms across her arms. “And am I to have a chance to hear this long story? Or shall I simply be forced to guess the histories of the guests that have come to reside in our home without mine knowledge?”

Gwyndolin’s shoulders shook with repressed laughter.

“Oh, Lothric and I are more than willing to tell thee the story, but we shall require something in return. A payment in tea and scones should be sufficient to loosen our lips.”

At the mention of scones, Lothric’s face lit up like a morning sunrise, and Gwyndolin’s mouth twisted with the effort it took not to laugh.

“Tea and scones? Truly? After making me worry for thee the entire morn?” Yorshka scoffed, rolling her eyes in mock annoyance. “Oh, very well, Gwyndolin. Thou art lucky I love thee so.”

With that, Yorshka flounced past Gwyndolin as dramatically as she could, making sure her tail thwacked playfully against his snakes as she went.

_That I am, Yorshka._ Gwyndolin could not keep the fond smile off of his face as he watched his sister ascend the stairs to the top of the tower. _That I am._

Chapter End Notes

Gwyndolin before meeting Lothric: I suppose I shall have to care for this child until his brother recovers. Perhaps give him a hot meal and get him into some proper clothing...at the very least, it shall be a temporary guardianship. I shall not become attached nor soppy over someone I barely know.

Gwyndolin after meeting Lothric: I have only known Lothric for two hours, but if anything were to happen to him, I would kill everyone in the Kingdom of Lothric and then myself.
Chapter Summary

There are a few things Yorshka already knows about Lothric: that he is a crossbreed, like her; that he adores cream and honey in his tea, like her; and that he loves his elder brother very much, like her. What she cannot fathom is the nature of the world and the man that created him, given that the origins of Lothric's story began long before her birth, with a scaleless dragon, an old wizard, and a Chosen Undead.

Gwyndolin remembers, however--no matter how much he would like to forget. The God of the Dark Moon cannot change the past, but with the product of his family's sins staring him in the face across the table, he knows he will do everything in his power to change Lothric's predestined future. No matter what it takes.

Two siblings and their wondrously strange guest have afternoon tea. A doctor makes a horrifying and unexpected discovery in the morgue. A knight awakens in a strange new land and demands answers. It seems that fate--like time--is convoluted in the Lordran.

Chapter Notes

Important Announcement: I will be out of my home country and on vacation from the 18th of March through the 5th of April. As such, there will be no updates on the fic during and shortly after that time period, but I hope to be back to a more regular schedule soon after!

Chapter Warnings: Implied child abuse and neglect; clinical descriptions of injuries; non-graphic autopsy and dissection imagery; snake legs.

Credits: Iced Blood, for giving this chapter a good once-over and for helping flesh out later parts of the story. You're the best, bro.

As a gift for Yorshka’s twelfth birthday, the priestesses of the Church of the Branching Yew had worked alongside Gwyndolin to renovate the unused room at the top of the building’s spire, turning it into a private workroom that would allow the crossbreed child to exercise her creativity and independence in a safe and secure environment. Since then, the tower had become Yorshka’s private sanctuary, where she would practice her arts and crafts, read, and work on the lessons Gwyndolin would give her to do when he was too busy to teach her himself. Despite the messier antics she could get up to (including pottery, cooking, collaging, and self-defense practice), Yorshka was diligent about keeping the space clean and tidy, since she enjoyed having her brother, friends, and other visitors over for afternoon tea on a regular basis.
One of the most enjoyable aspects of visiting Yorshka’s sanctuary, Gwyndolin found, was that as Yorshka’s youthful exuberance and curiosity flitted from one art style or subject to the next, the decorations on the walls would shift with her interests. As Gwyndolin reached the top of the spiraling staircase with Lothric in his arms, he saw that Yorshka had turned from watercolors to papercrafts in the three days since his last visit; the pink-painted stone walls were covered top to bottom with intricate snowflakes and convoluted geometrical patterns, and origami animals and flowers hung from the ceiling on thin pieces of twine secured with putty. A fire was roaring in the hearth, and though the wooden shutters covering the four large ‘doors’ had been flung open, the enchantment maintained by the glowing blue runes above each doorway kept the cold and wind out and the warmth in.

“Please, sit down, both of thee!” Approaching the hearth, Yorshka picked up a long and thin stick resting on top of the mantle and stuck it into the flames, pulling it out as soon as the tip was lit. “I shall put the kettle on to boil as soon as I have lit all the candles. Dost thou have any preference when it comes to tea, Lothric?”

“Um…” Lothric’s blue eyes were wide as they studied every inch of the space. “I don’t like the taste of cinnamon, but I am fine, otherwise.”

“Excellent!” Yorshka grinned at the child before turning her attention to the moon god “Any preference, dear brother?”

“Aha, I suppose I shall take oolong, as usual.” As he spoke, Gwyndolin approached the small round table in the center of the room and pulled out one of the chairs, setting Lothric upon the cushion as gently as he could. “Dost thou require any assistance, Yorshka?”

Yorshka huffed and set her left hand on her hip, holding the makeshift firestarter in her right hand like a war banner. “Did I not tell thee to sit? So sit! I know how tired thou must be after thy trek through the country in search of a bloodthirsty beast this morn!”

Gwyndolin shook his head bemusedly as he pulled out a chair next to Lothric. “Art thou truly sour about that? I left thee a note, did I not?”

“That is true, but thou should have woken me nonetheless!” Yorshka rolled her eyes before moving to light the room’s numerous candles. “Why, thou should knowest that I had half a mind to go after thee! Running after a maneater with naught but two Silver Knights at thy side...thou wouldst have never let me do such a thing!”

“Yorshka, in case I have to remind thee, thou art but twelve years of age, and I am swiftly
approaching five millennia.” The snakes coiled neatly around the legs of the chair as Gwyndolin smoothly lowered himself into the seat. “Besides, even if I had wished to put mine twelve-year-old sister in mortal peril--\textit{which I did not}-thou knowest how slow thou art when forced to rise early. And prickly.”

“Am not!”

“Yorshka, the last time I attempted to wake thee before the sky’s lightening, thou knocked me off mine feet with thy tail and bruised mine side.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, that was an \textit{accident}!”

Gwyndolin snorted. “Mine point still stands. Thou art truly at thy most draconic in the early morn: difficult to rouse and easy to provoke. I am simply lucky that thou hast never blown fire in my general direction.”

“Thy luck will soon run out of thou dost not stop embarrassing me in front of our guest.” Yorshka finished lighting the candles atop of the shelf of crafting supplies and huffed. “Well, regardless of mine...\textit{petulance}, I would appreciate it if thou wouldst awaken me to inform me of thy departure in the future. I promise I shall not swat thee with mine tail or snap at thy hand.”

“I shall do mine best.” Gwyndolin pulled the hood off of his head before looking to Lothric, who was still looking around the room with fascinated eyes; it was almost as if he was attempting to memorize the look and location of every nook and cranny. “However, there was no need to worry for me this morn; the elder prince had the beast all but slain by the time I arrived.”

“Elder prince?” Yorshka paused in the middle of lighting the last of the room’s candles (which were sitting atop of a squat bookshelf, nestled in the sloppy yet whimsical baked clay holders she had made herself). “Oh, yes, thou didst mention two brothers! Prince Lorian, correct?”

At the mention of his brother’s name, Lothric all but jolted out of his seat, blinking up owlishly at Yorshka and Gwyndolin.

“We were simply speaking of this morning’s events.” Gwyndolin gently reassured the child. “I was reassuring Yorshka that I was not in any danger from the maneater, since thy brother was so adept at fighting the beast.”
“He really was, wasn’t he?” Lothric’s face lit up with admiration and adoration. “I had never before seen my brother in a real fight, but he was just as amazing as everyone said; he wouldn’t have needed your help at all if it hadn’t surprised him with its lightning!”

“Lightning?” Yorshka blew out the firestarter and propped it against the side of the hearth. “I thought only humans, pygmies, and godkin could produce and wield lightning. How can a beast wield lightning?”

“That is what we shall find out. We shall be performing an autopsy on its corpse as soon as a specialist arrives from Drangleic.” Gwyndolin folded his hands on the table. “If it is any consolation, I was quite impressed by thy brother as well.”

“Really?” Lothric blinked. “Wait, were you watching us, Lin?”

“Somewhat.” Gwyndolin snorted as Yorshka looked up, startled, from where she was ladling water out of the room’s storage jar and into the cast iron kettle hanging over the fire.

‘Lin?’, she mouthed at Gwyndolin, mouth gaping open to an almost comical degree. Gwyndolin smiled and nodded reassuringly at her before continuing.

“I was tracking the creature when I heard Prince Lorian shouting, and when I went to investigate, I found him in the midst of combat.” The god glanced down at Lothric, who was rubbing the cuffs of his new robe between his fingers. “Did thou and thy brother stumble across the creature in thy journey to Irithyll, or was it giving chase?”

“Ah, well…” Lothric’s cheeks flushed. “We were stopping to rest at the river, and, well...it was the first time I’ve ever been able to play in snow, so Lorian and I got into a snowball fight. But...but I couldn’t walk well in the snow, so I was teleporting around, but I accidentally went too far and ended up rolling down the hill next to the riverbank. The beast was already down there, having a drink, and when he saw me…”

Lothric trailed off, eyes growing damp.

“It was not thy fault, Lothric.” Gwyndolin rested a comforting hand on the child’s back. “That creature would have most likely hunted the both of thee down as soon as it heard thy voices or caught thy scents. If anything, it is mine own fault, for not having dealt with the creature before it could hurt thy brother.”
“Besides!” Yorshka piped up helpfully from where she was pulling teacups, a teapot, and saucers out of a white hutch. “How couldst thou have expected to find such a thing? I could scarcely believe the description Captain Aishura gave me when I awoke and went to find mine brother! No beast of that size and nature has ever before been seen in the forests of Irithyll! If dear Gwyndolin did not know of its existence, then there was no way thou and thy brother could have known, either!”

“I...I suppose.” Lothric sniffed and pulled out the handkerchief that Gwyndolin had given him, wiping his eyes before they could overflow. “I’m sorry I keep crying, Lin; I just can’t seem to stop…”

“Thou hast been through an ordeal, Lothric--one that began long before I met thee on the riverbank. Tears are to be expected.” Gwyndolin brushed his fingers against Lothric’s cheeks before turning his attention to Yorshka. “Lothric and Lorian had to flee from the Kingdom of Lothric due to threats against their lives. They were on their way to Irithyll when I came across them.”

“How did they even know of Irithyll’s location?” Yorshka was clearly puzzled, but she did not look up as she arranged the teaset on its metal tray. “I know thou sent Lady Sirris to the Kingdom of Lothric a month or two ago, dear brother, but surely she would not break her vows!”

“She did indeed break her vows, but it was for a vaillant and noble reason, and she will be commended upon her return to the kingdom.” Lothric relaxed at Gwyndolin’s words, and Yorshka finally stopped her fussing and turned to stare at her elder brother, face creased with confusion. “Yes, yes, I know what I have always told thee about the need for secrecy, but the risk Lady Sirris took was more than justified in mine eyes.”

Yorshka cocked an eyebrow and crossed her thin arms across her chest.

Gwyndolin looked down at Lothric. “Do I have thy permission to share what thou hast told me?”

After a few seconds of thought, Lothric nodded, taking his lower lip between his teeth. Gwyndolin nodded and looked back at Yorshka.

“Thou must never share what I am about to discuss with thee outside of this room unless given explicit permission by mineself or the brothers. Understood?”
“Yes, Gwyndolin,” Yorshka whispered, clearly concerned. “On mine blood and honor.”

“Very well.” Out of the corner of his eye, Gwyndolin watched as Lothric slid one of his hands towards him on the table, clearly seeking comfort but being far too uncomfortable and nervous to ask. The god closed the distance and enfolded it in one of his own.

“Lothric was born to become a Lord of Cinder.” Gwyndolin tightened his hand around Lothric’s as the boy drew his legs up to his chest. “He was supposed to be sacrificed to the First Flame at the age of eighteen, and the King of Lothric, Oceiros, was grooming him as such. Lothric himself had no choice in the matter.”

Yorshka’s mouth dropped open. The color drained from her already pale cheeks.

“You mean...they were to kill him?” She whispered hoarsely. “The King and Queen of Lothric gave birth to a child just to...to burn it alive?” Gwyndolin nodded gravely. “But...but why? Why would any parent do such a thing? It...it makes no sense!”

“The House of Lothric has always strived for perfect heirs.” Lothric’s wavering voice cut through the air like a sharpened knife, and Gwyndolin and Yorshka turned their heads to look at the child, who was seemingly trying to burrow his head into his robe. “They all longed for immortality and everlasting power but had never been able to obtain either...so Father made me to be immortal--both dragonkin and godkin.” His little hands trembled like leaves in the wind. “To become a Lord of Cinder is to become a part of the fire from which all life originated, and since I have the blood of the archdragons running through my veins, Father believes I would be able to both survive the Linking and maintain my sanity. I would become the perfect heir--one that transcends humanity and becomes the eternal lord of both our kingdom and the First Flame itself.”

Yorshka and Gwyndolin’s eyes met for a long moment. From the horrified expression on Yorshka’s face, it was clear she had come to the same conclusion as her brother.

“Oceiros intended to make thee...a god.” The crossbreed girl’s voice was trembling as much as Lothric’s hands. “No, not only that...a dragon, but also...something beyond god and dragon.”

Lothric stared down at his knees. “I...I suppose. I had not thought about it in that way.”

The kettle began to whistle, and Yorshka reached behind her to pull its hook off of the fire, never
taking her eyes off of the two sitting at the table.

“Would it even be possible, dear brother, to survive the Linking?” Her incandescent eyes locked once more with Gwyndolin’s serpentine ones. “Thou art the only one to mine knowledge that has visited the Kiln and returned…”

Gwyndolin shivered and released his grip on Lothric’s hands to pull his shawl closer around his shoulders. The action was sudden, and Lothric pulled his face away from his knees to look up at the god, curiosity dancing in his eyes.

“Ah...when the Flame began to fade in the years after mine father’s linking, another journeyed to the Kiln to link the Flame…and in the brief time the path to the Kiln was open in the aftermath, I decided to journey there minself. I had known the second linker—the Chosen Undead, as we have called them in legend—and I wished to see if anything...remained.”

_Her name was Hadiya. She had journeyed from a land far to the east after her wife was taken to the Undead Asylum; Hadiya had hoped to free Clarissa and return her to her senses, but she became Undead herself in the futile attempt. Dark skin, dark eyes, and long black hair—her fists were her favorite weapons, and they were as strong as her sense of justice and gentle heart. She served as one of mine Blades in the months before the Linking, and when she eventually realized mine deception with the illusion of Gwynevere, she did not react as others did—with frothing words and furious blades. When she entered the tomb, I had expected her to attempt to put those strong hands around mine throat, but she instead wrapped her strong arms around mine back and held me close. It was the first time I had been embraced in hundreds of years. ‘You have been so lonely,’ she had said, ‘and—oh, cruel fate—I shall have no choice but to leave you alone again. I am sorry.’_

_I could not stand the thought of her being alone in the Kiln, with only the dark and what was left of Father for company, so I ignored Frampt’s warnings and went to see if mine friend was still there._

Lothric cocked his head to the side. “And?”

Gwyndolin swallowed.

_Withered hands around mine neck and eye sockets as black and deep as bottomless pits. Yet at the last second, she released me, and told me to leave with a voice I barely recognized. ‘Do not look back,’ she had howled, and I obeyed. There was nothing more to see. I was alone._
No, little one--there was nothing of mine father and the Chosen Undead left. Their bodies may have remained, but their souls, their hearts...there was nothing of value that survived. The Flame had burnt them away from the inside out.”

Lothric shuddered.

“What of Lothric’s dragon blood, though?” Yorshka frowned deeply and clasped her hands to her chest. “If he truly is kin to the archdragons, then his immortality may be quite different than the immortality of a god, and he may react to the Flame far differently than anyone who has linked it before. Dragons cannot go Hollow, can they?”

Nor can gods, Gwyndolin thought bitterly, yet there was nothing left of mine father in the empty husk I found in the Kiln. If that was not Hollowing, then what was it?

“That’s what Father always says.” Lothric nervously drummed his talon-like nails on the white tablecloth as he spoke. His knees remained tucked to his chest. “He always talks about how the dragons existed long before the gods themselves, so if anyone were to be strong enough to withstand the Flame, it would be those who are dragonkin.”

“But...but how can he be so certain?” For want of something to do instead of gaping at her guests, Yorshka grabbed the heavy iron kettle from the hearth and began to fill the teapot. “If no dragon or dragonkin has ever linked the First Flame, then how did King Oceiros come to the conclusion that dragon blood would make one immune to its effects?”

“Seath.”

Yorshka nearly dropped the kettle at the suddenness of her brother’s declaration, but she quickly recovered her grip and finished filling the teapot, demonstrating a surprising amount of physical strength for such thin arms.

“Seath?” Lothric’s eyes widened in realization. “He was the one that wrote all of the research Father uses...how do you know of Seath?”

A bitter smile spread across Gwyndolin’s lips.

“Seath the Scaleless was an archdragon that betrayed his fellows and allied with mine father in the
war against his kindred.” Flame and dark, he would have given anything to have never spoken or thought of Seath again, but fate was rarely so kind. “ As a reward, mine father not only awarded him a dukedom, but he also bestowed upon him a fragment of his own Lord Soul. Seath had a great archive built within Old Londo--the city which we now call Irithyll--and began to conduct experiments into sorcery, biology, and immortality. On the surface, Seath’s research was benign, and mine father never cared to dig deeply into his pursuits. However, without our knowing, Seath’s research grew into dark, deep places...places where one should never venture.”

“What sorts of places?” Yorshka asked as she arranged a variety of pastries on a large plate.

Gwyndolin watched her for a moment as he tried to decide just what he could tell a twelve-year-old and an eight-year-old about the atrocities Seath had committed under the royal family’s noses. It was a failing of which the moon god was far from proud.

“If I were being generous, I would call the true nature of Seath’s research ‘horrendously unethical’, but mine feelings for the Paledrake are far from kind.” Gwyndolin looked down at Lothric and saw that, unsurprisingly, the child was hanging onto his every word. He would have to choose his next words carefully. “ Seath would send out his channelers to kidnap humans and godkin to serve as ‘test subjects’. It was near the time of mine father’s linking of the fire when Gwynevere’s handmaidens began to go missing, and when the Chosen Undead stumbled upon the archives in their quest to obtain Seath’s Lord Soul, they found the handmaidens ... transformed. Unrecognizable.”

“How horrible.” Lothric whispered. “ Was there nothing you could do for them?”

“I am afraid not. They were far beyond help by the time the Chosen Undead led me into the archives.” Gwyndolin picked the wrinkles from his gloves and tried not to think about the creatures with serpentine bodies and tentacle hair that were huddled in their little alcove. As soon as the pisacas recognized the god, they had eagerly swarmed around him, wailing for relief in a garbled language Gwyndolin could not comprehend. He could still feel their cold tentacles wrapping around his forearms, and the look on Hadiya’s face as she stood at the doorway to the alcove was burned into his mind; the moon god had never before seen his friend look so heartbroken, even when discussing her dearly departed wife.

‘Is there anything that can be done,’ she had asked when they were alone, ‘or should we simply put them out of their misery? I shall end their suffering if you wish.’

To which he replied: ‘Nay, Hadiya. It was mine family’s duty to protect the handmaidens from harm. It shall be mine hand and mine alone that will release them.’

Gwyndolin screwed his eyes shut and hid his trembling hands in his lap. Lothric frowned and exchanged a worried look with Yorshka.
“Lin?”

“A...I am all right, Lothric; I was just remembering some rather unpleasant things.” Gwyndolin swiftly collected himself and opened his eyes, smiling reassuringly at both children. “As I was saying, after discovering Seath’s atrocities thanks to the actions of the Chosen Undead, I ordered all of the Pale Drake’s research destroyed, his remaining channelers imprisoned, and the archives demolished. Despite my best efforts, however, it seems that his research survived and somehow fell into the hands of the King of Lothric.”

A flame of recognition flickered in Lothric’s eyes. “Maybe it was the Crystal Sage? I heard that she was the one responsible for the creation of the Grand Archives, where Father conducts most of his experiments and research.”

“Perhaps. I had heard of one such sage joining forces with Farron’s Undead Legion several decades past...” Gwyndolin smiled at Yorshka as she carried the tea tray over to the table. “Mayhap we should continue this discussion another time, if only so Prince Lorian can participate as well; I cannot imagine him being uninterested in his younger brother’s origins.”

“You’re probably right. Father was so secretive about everything...I myself only ever saw Father’s lab when he brought me down for tests, and it was so dark that I could never see much. Even Lorian could only ever pull breadcrumbs of information from the scholars.” Lothric trailed off as Yorshka set the silver tray on the table, and he shifted so that he was sitting on his knees, propping his hands on the table’s edge and leaning forward so he could better examine its contents. The child’s eyes lit up. “Wow! Did you make all of this yourself, Yorshka?”

“I did, actually; I have been practicing my cooking as of late.” The crossbreed girl giggled in flustered delight as she set a glazed celadon teapot, a small pitcher of cream, and a jar of honey on the center of the table. “I had quite a rocky start at first, but the cooks have allowed me to sit in on lunch and dinner preparations, and the local bakers that supply bread to the Church of the Branching Yew have even given me lessons!” As she talked, Yorshka set a matching teacup and saucer in front of both Gwyndolin and Lothric, each piece glazed to match the teapot. “Art thou allergic to any fruits, nuts, or grains, Lothric?”

Lothric shook his head. “My stomach struggles a little with milk, and smells can overwhelm me when I’m feeling sick, but I love cream in my tea...and honey, too!” He clasped his hands together and gasped with delight as Yorshka poured oolong tea into his cup. “Emma and the other handmaidens never let me have any, though; they say too much will make me sick and fat.”

Yorshka’s brow furrowed. “Sick and fat? But thou art...”
Gwyndolin quickly coughed and shook his head when Yorshka turned her gaze to him. She closed her mouth and nodded. Lothric, mercifully, was too busy pouring a generous amount of cream into his cup to notice the troubled looks on the siblings’ faces.

_He acts as if he rarely has access to such basic staples, yet he is not only the prince of a prominent and wealthy royal household, but their supposed savior._ Gwyndolin smiled weakly at Yorshka as she filled his own cup with tea. He tended to take his hot drinks plain and strong, but he wasted no time in grabbing the honey pot, pushing it over to Lothric.

“Have as much as thou wouldst like. We are generous with honey and cream in this household.” _And contrary to what the ‘handmaidens’ have instructed thee to believe, cream and honey would do thee a great deal of good, given thy state of near-emaciation._

Despite Lothric’s blatant excitement, he nonetheless remembered to say ‘thank you’ as he took the honey pot, and he was careful to not spill any of the sticky substance on the table when he removed the dipper.

As the child drizzled an ample amount into his cup, Yorshka set the plate of baked goods on the table before abruptly turning back to her food cupboard, leaving Gwyndolin wondering just what she was up to. His question was swiftly answered, however, when she returned with yet more pastries. As Lothric stirred his tea, she stacked even more baked goods on the serving plate, only stopping when the the tower of treats was close to toppling over.

“I have to throw many of these away, since they are so close to becoming stale,” Yorshka’s voice was deceptively nonchalant as she set the empty plate back in the cupboard. “So feel free to enjoy as many as thee can stand! And when thou art full, thou can take what is left to Prince Lorian, so that he may enjoy them as well!”

“Really?” Lothric finally looked up from his cup and gasped at the sight of the large pile of scones, cookies, and sweet rolls. “There are so many! Are...are you sure? I saw you feeding some of these to the people downstairs, and I do not want to force you to have to make more, or to take food away from those that need it..”

“Nonsense!” Yorshka beamed as she returned to the table and began arranging the rest of the utensils. She set a small plate and fork at each setting, and though she and Gwyndolin tended to enjoy their baked goods plain, she made a quick trip to the icebox and returned with a jar of clotted cream mixed with strawberry preserves that she kept for unexpected guests. “As I said, many of these will simply have to be thrown out tomorrow, and I refuse to feed mine subjects stale bread! Thou shalt actually be doing me a great service by polishing them off so they do not go to waste!”
Gwyndolin knew full well that Yorshka had baked all of the goods two days before (since she used her elder brother as a taste tester before handing them out to the churchgoers), but it did not take a scholar to understand her motives, and the moon god felt his eyes growing hot as he watched Yorshka set the jar and a butter knife directly in front of Lothric. How had someone as frail and wretched as he been blessed with a sister so lovely and good?

I am proud of thee, he mouthed to her when she caught his eye, and the crossbreed girl flushed deeply at the compliment.

“So, Lothric…” Gwyndolin waited until Yorshka was sitting down before speaking. “Thou wishes to speak to Yorshka about being a crossbreed, yes?”

Lothric nodded vigorously as he snatched a large currant scone from the top of the pile. “That’s right! I am the only crossbreed that I have ever known, and though Father wishes to make himself a dragon, he has not succeeded in doing so yet!” After a moment of hesitation (and a slightly guilty look at Gwyndolin, who simply smiled reassuringly), he also took a large sugar cookie and a chocolate-and-hazelnut-filled croissant and set them on his plate. “I did not expect I would meet another dragonkin when we arrived in Irithyll!”

“Well, thou art in luck!” Yorshka grinned as she stirred honey and cream into her own tea (though in lesser amounts than Lothric). Her razor sharp teeth glinted in the candlelight. “I have heard of some crossbreeds in the past that possessed wings, but thee and I seem to lack those; we do have scales, though! And claws!”

“And teeth!” Lothric matched Yorshka’s toothy grin with his own, making her gasp in pleasant surprise.

“Oh! Dost thou have any advice on how to keep thy teeth from cutting thy tongue and mouth when thou art asleep? A dentist attempted to file them down in the past, but it was such a painful process; I cried and could not chew for days!”

“Right? It is the worst! Father used to file my teeth, too, but Lorian started refusing to take me to the dentists or scholars to have the procedure done. So he would have to wait until Lorian was out on an expedition before having mine filed.”

Yorshka flinched in sympathy. “Even though it caused thee pain? Why would he continue doing such a thing?”
Lothric shrugged as he spread a thick layer of clotted cream and jam on his scone. “Father wanted me to be presentable when we received visitors. A lot of pilgrims would come and visit from the kingdoms with whom we were still on speaking terms, and he would have my teeth and nails filed before they arrived, so he had to eventually schedule visitors around when Lorian was absent.”

Just like how Father refused to let me out in public unless I was hiding mine snakes. Gwyndolin grimaced and took a large gulp of tea to mask his discomfort.

“Well, that is most onerous.” Yorshka stuck out her tongue as she tore a piece off of her own chocolate croissant. “Dost thou have a tail?”

“No, but I do have spines on my back!” Lothric took a bite of his scone and chewed appreciatively, waiting until he had swallowed before continuing. “I like your tail a lot, though! The colors are really pretty!”

“Oh! Thank thee very much!” Yorshka grinned and reached beneath her chair, holding up the tip of her thick tail for Lothric to see. “Its purple and pink scales match those on mine body, and I even have pink, scale-covered tendrils in mine hair!” She dropped her tail and grabbed one of the tendrils in her hair instead, leaning forward across the table so Lothric could get a good look. “They grow out of mine head like hair, but they feel sensation and pain, so I can neither cut nor style them. They are quite apt at recognizing changes in air pressure, though; Gwyndolin believes that there may be similar appendages on dragons that allow them to detect changes in the weather!”

“That would make sense!” Lothric’s eyes sparkled as he craned his head over the table and studied the tendril. “Could...could I touch it? Just for a moment?”

“Of course! Just...do not stroke it. They are horrifically ticklish.”

Gwyndolin smiled over the rim of his teacup as he watched Lothric reach out with one of his thin, talon-like hands, petting the offered tendril as if it were a sick and timid puppy. Frankly, the moon god had been worried about how well the two would get along when they first met. Yorshka--though she was a kind, sweet, and generous girl--was energetic, rambunctious, stubborn, and a tad bossy (as were most children of her age and standing, he supposed). Lothric, on the other hand, seemed like the type that was introverted, quiet, and shy even when not in the midst of a incomprehensibly stressful situation, so Gwyndolin had feared that Yorshka’s...well...Yorshkaness would overwhelm Lothric or cause him to retreat into himself. However, it seemed the opposite had happened, and Lothric almost seemed to soak up Yorshka’s energy as she chattered about how annoying it was when her tail smacked into door frames and knocked over furniture.
This is a most excellent turn of fortune. Gwyndolin finally reached out for a scone of his own and split it apart. He would eat one half during tea and wrap the other in a napkin to save for when his blood sugar dipped later on in the day. Lothric and I get along well, and Yorshka and Lothric seem to be on the way to becoming excellent friends already. As long as Lorian shows himself to be the kind, honorable, and upstanding fellow Lothric makes him out to be, I believe it will be easy to transition into cohabitation with the brothers.

The scone stopped halfway to his lips.

Cohabitation? I certainly am getting ahead of mineself today, it seems; I have not even spoken more than a few words with Ser Lorian!

Yet the thought of having these two near-strangers live with him and Yorshka in the big, airy, empty manor pleased Gwyndolin more than it should have, and the moon god felt strangely raw and shaken at the realization. He bit into his scone with enough force to make his front teeth click.

I am being silly. I am sure Lothric and Lorian would prefer having their own place to live...why am I even entertaining this notion? Yorshka and I are quite happy as we are, and I am not sure how Sulyvahn will feel if he returns from the Cathedral and finds two strangers--

"Brother?"

Both Gwyndolin and the snakes jumped at Yorshka’s voice. The god coughed and looked sheepishly at the two children, who were staring at him in confusion. “Ah, mine apologies...I was lost in thought. Didst the two of thee ask me something?”

“Ah- hem! ” Yorshka cleared her own throat and huffed. “I was just asking if you were truly going to eat only half of a scone! Again! ”

“I like scones. They are mine favorite.” Gwyndolin knew full well that Yorshka was not complaining about the fact that he always partook in scones, but he feigned ignorance all the same, ignoring his little sister’s annoyed glare as he filled his teacup once more. “Dost thou truly wish to kick up a fuss about this in front of our guest?”

“I know thou dost not wish to discuss this, but thouneedest to eat more, brother!” Gwyndolin could not help but feel guilty when Yorshka dropped her mock annoyance in favor of honest
concern. Of course she was going to do this in front of their guest, most likely because she felt her brother did not take her worries seriously otherwise, which was decidedly not true. “Thou were bedbound just two weeks past, and yet thou still pick at thy meals, and thou never finish thy plate at dinner! Thou art going to fall ill again at this rate!”

Lothric’s brow furrowed as he looked between Yorshka and Gwyndolin. “Have...have you been sick, Lin? Are you feeling okay now?”

“I am feeling fine, thank thee very much.” Gwyndolin’s mouth pursed in displeasure, and he gave Yorshka a disapproving look, who merely met his scolding glare with one of her own. “I have been...struggling with illness over the past year or so--one that tends to wax and wane at random. While it is true that I was quite weak some days past, I currently feel better than I have in months, and I even ate lunch with little Lothric before coming to see thee.”

Yorshka blinked in surprise. “Thou...thou didst?” She looked at Lothric. “Is it true?”

“It is!” Lothric nodded vigorously and grinned at Gwyndolin. “Lin made me ramen for much, but he also had a big bowl of it himself, and he finished it all, too!”

“Oh... oh! That is wonderful!” Yorshka’s pale face wilted in relief before lighting up with a brilliant sort of joy. She was as ecstatic as if she had been given a gift, and Gwyndolin’s annoyance ebbed away at the sight; he had not realized just how much she had been worried by his poor physical condition as of late. In fact, it was probably one of the reasons she had been so sore at his little ‘dalliance’ in the countryside earlier that morning; she had probably feared that the activity would be too much for him in his current state. “Thou hast no idea how much that pleases me! Thou shalt have to repeat the performance at dinner tonight, dear brother, if only so I can see it with mine own eyes!”

“I...I shall do mine best.” Gwyndolin smiled weakly and took another sip of tea. “However, if thou wish for me to have an empty stomach for dinner, thou shalt have to forgive me for eating only one half of mine scone.”

“Oh, I suppose that is acceptable.” Though Yorshka attempted to sound put-out, it was clear that she was still delighted at the supposed positive turn in her brother’s health, and she smiled around the rim of her teacup as she took a drink. Gwyndolin’s gut twisted into guilty knots, and he made a silent promise to make it up to her in the future, even if it meant trying to eat when the smell of food made him nauseous.

Aestus and Gwynevere, too, would worry for me in such a way. I suppose to a return to the poor
physical condition of mine childhood can only mean the return of the nigh-unbearable emotions it would provoke.

It was Lothric’s turn to speak. “Have you always fallen ill easily, Lin, or has it only been over the past year?”

The almost tangible interest in Lothric’s voice made Gwyndolin smile in spite of his miserable thoughts.

“Ah, well, while mine most recent illness may seem atypical to most, I was quite sickly when I was thine age. I can remember spending a great deal of time as a child being bedbound and forbidden to venture anywhere cold and damp, and though Father sent many healers to mine bedside until his sacrifice to the First Flame, mine condition did not improve until I reached adulthood. I suppose I simply ‘grew out’ of the worst of it.”

Lothric’s face lit up. “You were just like me!”

Gwyndolin chuckled. “Indeed, little one. It seems we are quite alike.” 

Even in the most unpleasant and unsavory of ways.

“That is not something to celebrate!” Yorshka scoffed and playfully rolled her eyes. “Oh, well; I suppose there are worse ways to bond with others. I am simply pleased that my brother’s appetite has recovered and that I have made a new friend in the span of a day!”

Lothric frowned. “You...you think I’m a friend? But we just met!”

“So?” Yorshka giggled and hid her hand behind her mouth. “I find thee smart and charming, and thou seemst to already have mine brother wrapped around thy little finger, which says quite a bit about thy likeability and character! Besides…”

Yorshka dropped her hand and grinned as widely as she could, her deceptively small and heart-shaped lips parting once more to reveal a wide mouth full of gleaming, razor-sharp teeth.

“...thou art the first crossbreed I have met, and we dragonkin should stick together, should we not?” The girl closed her lips and took another sip of tea. “So yes, I consider thee a friend, and I hope we will become quite good friends as time goes on! That is...only if thou wishest to.”
There was a moment of silence as Lothric bit his lip and looked down at his plate.

“I...I have never had a friend before.” His talons picked at the cuffs of his robe. “I mean, Lorian is and always will be my best friend, but I have never had the chance to make friends with other humans and godkin my age. Father would not permit me to leave the castle grounds, and he would never let me play with the children of the castle staff, since they could ‘contaminate me with all sorts of vile things’. I was only allowed brief interactions with the children of visitors, but it was always when the adults were around, and I think they were frightened of me.”

Gwyndolin’s throat constricted painfully around itself. The meal he’d eaten only hours before soured in his stomach.

“Well, I do not think thee are alone in that…” Gwyndolin heard Yorshka’s words as if they were being filtered through water. “I mean, my dear brother encourages me to be more sociable with children my age, but they tend to be intimidated by my status or unnerved by my draconic apparence. But since thou art also godkin and dragonkin, we can meet each other on equal footing, can we not?”

“I mean, you are the sister of the last True God, and I’m only the child of a lesser God. But I definitely see your point and agree otherwise!” Lothric’s face brightened like the sun peering in through storm clouds. “I...I may not know how to be a good friend yet, so please be patient with me, okay?”

“Thou must be patient with me as well!” Yorshka’s laugh sounded like tinkling bells. “Then it is settled; from this point onward, we shall learn how to be friends together!”

Lothric nodded eagerly and grinned. “Friends! Just...not best friends, okay? I mean, Lorian is my best friend already, so…”

“And mine brother is also mine best friend, so I do not have a problem with such a thing; perhaps we could become second-best friends eventually!”

“That sounds great!”

As Yorshka and Lothric sealed their newfound friendship with a toast, Gwyndolin clenched his hands together in his lap and closed his eyes, trying to even out his breathing before the children
Go away. He could feel the Dark Sun standing just behind his right shoulder, peering at him with those damnable sad eyes, and it made him want to scratch the skin off of his arms. Thou art not wanted here. I am not thee. Not anymore. I have moved on from thee. Still she remained, and Gwyndolin wasted no time in taking the memory and shoving it back into the darkest corners of his mind, wishing more than anything that he could throw her to the Abyss where she belonged. I am better than thee. Thou art disgusting, pathetic, and pitiable and I am none of those things. Get out, get out, get out!

The sensation of being watched finally faded, and Gwyndolin released the breath he didn’t realize he had been holding, opening his eyes and smiling weakly at the sight and sound of Lothric and Yorshka discussing ways to deal with scale shedding. The crossbreed children, mercifully, seemed not to have noticed his moment of weakness.

Yes. I have moved on. The diciness in Gwyndolin’s stomach had faded along with the memory, and the moon god found himself surprisingly famished in the aftermath. Though he had planned on eating only one half of his scone, Gwyndolin found himself polishing off both halves as he listened to Yorshka and Lothric debate the best way to trim talons, even grabbing a second one from the platter (much to his little sister’s delight). The Dark Sun is dead, and the sooner her ghost departs from mine mind, the better.

Lothric suddenly trailed off mid-sentence as a sight from one of the archways caught his eye. “What is that building?” He pointed one of his taloned fingers at the majestic cathedral just a few meters away from the tower. “Is that connected to the large cathedral in the center of the city?”

“Oh, no! That, dear Lothric, is the ancient cathedral of Anor Londo!” Yorshka seemed more than content to let her brother eat while she delivered a small history lesson. “When Father Gwyn first established the Lordran, he built a grand cathedral to house the Court of the Sun, around which he build the city of Old Londo to house the Silver Knights, lesser gods, and godkin. After Father cast himself to the First Flame, the gods left Lordran and departed for other lands, leaving Gwyndolin as the only True God remaining in Anor Londo.”

Lothric frowned and turned his head to look at Gwyndolin. “You were here all by yourself?”

“Not at first.” Gwyndolin swallowed a mouthful of tea before speaking. “The Silver Knights remained loyal to mine family even after Father’s death and Gwynevere’s departure, and Ser Ornstein the Dragonslayer and Smough the Executioner remained in Anor Londo for some time to act as mine guards. Eventually Ornstein departed to search for mine elder brother, and though Smough remained in the cathedral, I found him quite an... unpleasant conversation partner. Even now we only interact when forced.”
Lothric’s frown only seemed to deepen. “You have lived here for centuries, though...didn’t you have anyone to talk to?”

“After Ornstein’s departure? No, not truly, but I did not mind.” The god lied. “Especially not after the city was re-established and Yorshka was born. It is almost impossible to be lonely when a rambunctious and precocious dragonkin is constantly getting into trouble.”

Yorshka stuck her tongue out at Gwyndolin. “Thou enjoys it! Do not lie!”

“I never said I did not.” Gwyndolin snorted and picked up his second scone. “Though Anor Londo is no longer open to public access, it remains the location of the Silver Knights’ armory and training grounds, and the best blacksmith in the Lordran continues to work there as he did during its heyday.” The god gave Lothric a wink. “Said blacksmith is the one repairing thy brother’s armor...perhaps we could pay him a visit after tea.”

“Oh, yes, please!” Lothric shifted in his chair and craned his neck so he could have a better look at Anor Londo through the archway. “It looks so big, even from this far away...I cannot imagine how large it is up close!”

“Wait until thou seest the elevator that will take us there!” Yorshka added conspiratorially. Lothric’s eyes widened.

“Elevator? There’s an elevator?” The boy looked up at Gwyndolin with pleading eyes. “Can we ride on the elevator?! Please?! I have never been on one before!”

Gwyndolin could not help but laugh. Yorshka was right; the moon god had only known Lothric for half a day, and the little prince already had the most powerful being in the Lordran wrapped around his finger. “Of course we can. In fact, though thou cannot see it, there is a path leading right from one of the tower’s balconies to the elevator; we can take that if thou art not nervous around heights.”

Lothric shrugged. “Well, we flew into the valley on Lorian’s wyvern, so I think I will be okay.”

Yorshka’s cookie stopped halfway to her mouth. “A wyvern?”
“Yep! Her name is Alsanna, and Lorian’s had her since she was born, back when he was my age.” Lothric’s little legs kicked against the chair as he spoke. “A majority of Lothric knights ride wyverns and drakes into battle, but because he’s royalty, Lorian got his own wyvern instead of having to use a ‘communal’ one. We flew her here from Lothric, but there wasn’t a place where she could perch, so Lorian released her to find a new home. He can still call her with a flare if he needs to!”

Gwyndolin hummed and looked out of one of the archways at the blue horizon. So he had heard the distant calling of a dragon while on his balcony the night before...

“Alsanna?” Yorshka chewed thoughtfully and swallowed. “Would her name happen to be derived from the legend of Eleum Loyce?”

“It’s one of Lorian’s favorite stories! He read it to me a lot when I was little, and I still ask him to read it for me sometimes, if only because we both enjoy it so much!” Lothric’s voice took on a dreamlike quality as he talked. “The noble and good Sonam the Iridescent, who originally hailed from the land of Forossa and strove to not repeat the mistakes of his homeland, and the ethereal oracle Alsanna that emerged from the blustering snow to become his wife. The only thing we do not like about it is how tragically it ends, but it is not like we can change what happened in reality.”

“Mine own brother has told me that story many a time—as have Queen Lucatiel and Princess Shanalotte of Drangleic whenever we see them in person!” Yorshka seemed blissfully unaware of her brother fixing her with an inscrutable stare as she spoke. “I even have two crystal lizards named Alsanna and Sonam! Perhaps I can take thee and Ser Lorian to meet them once he has recovered!”

Lothric blinked. “Crystal lizards? As pets?”

“Indeed! In fact, I have named all of mine after the historical figures of Drangleic...that, and the people Queen Lucatiel and Royal Scientist Xander tell me of; in their stories!” Yorshka held up her fingers and began to count. “Let me see...there are the ones named after the castle staff and the residents of Majula: Ornifex, Vengarl, Licia, McDuff, Saulden, Maughlin, Shal quoir, Rosabeth, Carhillion, Lenigrast, Chloanne, Gilligan, Cale, Straid, and Melentia. Then there are those I have named after the old monarchs of legend: Gryth and Elana of Shulva, Nadalia and Eitri of Iron Keep, Nashandra and Vendrick of Old Drangleic, and Alsanna and Sonam of Eleum Loyce.”

Lothric’s eyes were as wide as the saucers on which their teacups sat. “Twenty-three crystal lizards! Where do you keep them all?! And aren’t they notoriously vicious and territorial?!”
“Only when they are hungry or threatened!” Yorshka scoffed. “It is hard for them to find edible titanite, elemental gems, and crystallized souls in the wild—what, with every warrior in the Lordran farming their habitats for such things! Once one has them on a plentiful and regulated diet, they are as docile as any river turtle...though they are more mischievous and fiesty than one would initially assume!”

“Well, that is all well and good, but where do you keep them?”

“Once I started rescuing the poor things from the warriors that hound them like flies on carrion, dear Gwyndolin helped me construct a nice habitat for them in the garden behind the Cathedral of the Moon—one with plenty of plants, fresh water, and obstacles with which they can amuse themselves. It also enables me to keep an eye on them and protect them from any suspicious and sneaky ore traders that try to prey upon them!” Yorshka sighed. “Unfortunately, the little troublemakers burrow and worm their way out of the garden more often than I would like, but at least they seem content to only wander about the cathedral and our residence.”

“Yorshka’s crystal lizards have practically become staples of worship at the Cathedral of the Moon.” Gwyndolin finally broke his gaze away from his sister to look at Lothric. “At least five of them will inevitably wander in during the daily service, but mine worshipers seem to delight in their presence; they let the lizards crawl up their skirts and pant legs to sit in their laps, and the children adore playing with them during long sessions. Some of mine parishioners even consider them signs from the gods, and when a crystal lizard pays specific attention to one parishioner, they often see it as a sign that their prayers have been answered. I do not have the heart to tell them otherwise.”

Yorshka giggled. “Wouldst thou like to go meet them after we visit Aval in Anor Londo?”

The expression on Lothric’s face switched from pondrous to conflicted in the blink of an eye. “I mean, I would _like_ to, very much so...but…” His hands reached for the napkin in his lap. “I am so very thankful of all of the kindness being shown to me, especially from the rulers of Irithyll, but…” The child’s talons dug into the cloth as he wrung it nervously. “…I would like to go back to my brother as soon as I make sure his armor is being treated well. I know he is still asleep, but...I am sorry if I am being difficult or inconvenient—”

Yorshka and Gwyndolin shook their heads simultaneously.

“I would feel the same way mineself if it were mine brother injured.” She smiled softly at Gwyndolin and laid one of her hands on his own. “We shall have plenty of time to show thee around Irithyll and Anor Londo once thy brother has improved.”
Gwyndolin nodded in agreement and gave Yorshka’s hand a quick squeeze before pulling it away. “Well then, let us finish our tea quickly so we can run to Aval and return to Lorian as soon as possible.”

The snakes curled tightly around the legs of his chair and hissed miserably at the idea of having to move again so soon, but Gwyndolin gave them a stern mental reprimand, and they reluctantly uncurled and pooled on the floor. Little miscreants.

“Besides,” Gwyndolin mused as he picked up his teacup, “it would be far more enjoyable if Lorian were around to tour the city and meet the lizards...and if he truly loves scaly creatures as much as Lothric claims he does, then it would be nothing less than rude to leave him out of the introduction, yes?”

Lothric nodded and grinned around a mouthful of scone.

The first thing Lorian realized when he came to was that he was in pain, but not nearly as much as he had been before he lost consciousness; the sharp, tongue-numbing agony had been reduced to aching bones and an intense hot throbbing in his left side. The second was that he was lying on the softest bed his back had ever rested upon. The third was that he heard two voices at his left side.

Unfamiliar ones.

“How is the patient’s condition?” A deep yet feminine voice with an accent that Lorian had never heard before. Was it native to Irithyll?

“Surprisingly well, considering what he endured in the field.” A gentle and masculine voice with an accent characteristic to the Kingdom of Kinon in the east. “One would have expected far more internal injuries after a bite wound such as his--or at least a few broken bones from being slammed about in the creature’s jaws.” A sigh, the sound of fabric rustling, and a wooden creak. “Yet outside of the rib directly above the bite wound, he has no broken bones to speak of--only bruising on the back and neck. The only real dangers to his life were pneumothorax and exsanguination.”

“Have those resolved?”
“Unusually so. Other than a bolus of fluids before and after surgery, he has required no fluid resuscitation, and his blood pressure remains in a normal range for someone of his height and stature. I also managed to decompress his chest cavity before it could cause any undue strain on his heart; I shall leave the chest tube in until it stops draining, after which we shall allow the lung to heal on its own. It should only take three to four weeks, but given how quickly his body is bouncing back, it may be as soon as two.”

I have always healed fast, Lorian mused as his sluggish brain slowly roused back to life, though I am curious as to why they did not simply allow Lothric to heal me from the start.

Lothric.

Lorian’s consciousness slammed back into him in a rush, and it took all of his willpower to resist the urge to spring from the bed, not knowing what kind of situation he would be entering into as soon as he revealed that he was awake. Thankfully, the two persons at his bedside did not seem to notice the clenching of his jaw and the tightening of his eyelids, as they continued speaking as if they were the only ones in the room.

“I am surprised he has not woken up yet.” The feminine voice remarked. The masculine voice barked with laughter.

“You would not be surprised if you knew how many sedatives I had to pump into him to keep him unconscious. Knights tend to be very resistant to pain and sleep potions, and when you have one of his size and constitution, you need close to what you would give to a horse to knock them out!”

Lorian would roll his eyes if he were not teetering on the brink of an anxiety attack. Clearly the owner of the masculine voice (who he assumed was a doctor) did not know of how quickly godkin metabolized even the most potent of potions. Then again, there was no way for the doctor to know that Lorian was godkin, was there?

Good. At least our identities are safe. But where is Lothric?

As the doctor and the other person continued to chat about this and that, Lorian desperately tried to keep his breathing smooth and level, and he turned his palms into the mattress so that they would not see them sweat. Given Lorian’s last memories before his awakening—beautiful moonlight hair and a soft face, Lothric’s panicked screaming, acrid breath and tortured howls—he could only conclude that he was in Irithyll. Where in Irithyll, though? A hospital? A church? Someone’s
Lorian’s breath hitched in spite of his best efforts. Given the sounds he had heard so far, it seemed that the two chatty medical professionals were the only other people in the room, and he could not even feel Lothric’s distinct aura against his own or ‘sense’ his presence in the back of his mind. Where was his brother? Where was his brother? Where was his brother?

“I shall take my leave, Dr. Watari.” The feminine voice met Lorian’s ears once more. “Do you require anything?”

“Oh, no, nothing for now.” The masculine voice—which apparently belonged to a Dr. Watari—chuckled reassuringly. “I doubt the patient will awaken before nightfall, so I should have a quiet time of it for a few hours, as long as his condition does not decompensate. Just make sure to be nearby in case I need you.”

“Of course.”

There were soft footfalls walking away from the bed, and then the opening and closing of a wooden door, leaving Lorian and Dr. Watari alone in the wood. Despite every bit of Lorian’s being screaming at him to get up and look for Lothric, the knight commander bided his time, waiting until he heard Dr. Watari stand from his chair and walk away from him before opening his eyes.

The first sight Lorian was greeted to was the brown and gold-trimmed fabric of the canopy hanging above his bed, lending credence to the theory that he had been taken to a private residence in Irithyll. The white cotton sheets were as soft as the feathers of a baby chick, and the down comforter was encased in a brown and gold duvet, keeping his body warm in spite of his state of partial undress. The brown walls glowed warmly in both the faint light from the room’s two windows (with brown curtains drawn) and the marble fireplace directly across from the bed. A tall, older gentleman with long, gray-streaked black hair in a ponytail was sitting on one of the plush chairs in front of the fireplace and reading a book. Given the long, white coat he was wearing, it was not difficult to figure out that he was Dr. Watari.

There was no sign of Lothric. Lorian swallowed violently and began to look around for his sword. Though his armor was nowhere to be seen, his greatsword was leaning against the wall to the left of the bed, smouldering gently in its dormant state. The knight reached out with his mind and ‘touched’ the consciousness lingering within the sword. The Demon Prince was restless.

Lorian sat up as quietly as he could and held out his left hand towards the sword. *Come to me.*
The consciousness stirred, and the sword seemed to launch itself off of the wall and towards the bed, the hilt landing squarely in Lorian’s palm. The loud noise made Dr. Watari yelp and jump in his seat.

“What in the name of the Flame…?” The book he was reading dropped to the floor as Dr. Watari sprang to his feet and turned towards the bed, clearly worried about something having gone wrong with his patient. The sight of Lorian sitting up in bed with greatsword in hand made him freeze.

“You…” The doctor’s voice was suddenly dry and shaking. “You are not supposed to be awake yet.”

“So I heard,” Lorian replied dryly. His grip tightened on the hilt of his sword as he dug its tip into the floor on the left side of the bed. “Where is my brother?”

Dr. Watari finally seemed to regain his wits and raised his hands in a placating manner. “I understand that you are very disoriented and confused right now--especially since you are coming off of sedation--but I assure you that there is nothing to be concerned abo--”

Lorian’s eyes narrowed, and before the doctor could finish his sentence, the greatsword was suddenly engulfed in flames. The Easterner gulped and stumbled backward.


Dr. Watari’s eyes were as wide as dinner plates. He did not speak.

The flames intensified. “Where is my--!”

“Healer Amana, could you come into the room, please?”

It was Lorian’s turn to be cut off as the doctor called out. Within seconds, the woman he had been talking to earlier burst into the room, and one of her hands flew up to cover her mouth.
“Doctor, what in the Dark Moon is--?!”

“Healer Amana.” Dr. Watari’s voice, though tremulous, was calm and level. “Please find the Nameless Moon and inform him that the patient is awake and wishes to see his brother as soon as possible. You shall find them at either the Church of Yorshka, the royal residence, or Anor Londo.”

Amana blinked. “I do not think I should leave you alo--”

“Amana--”

“Should I call the Silver Kni--?!”

“Now, Amana.”

The doctor’s voice lashed out like a whip, and the healer immediately turned on her heel and bolted out of the room, slamming the door with enough force to shake the portraits on the walls. Watari sighed and rubbed his face before turning his attention back to Lorian.

“The Nameless Moon took it upon himself to care for your brother while you slept. I assure you that he can be in no safer hands than those of the last True God in the Lordran. So great was your younger brother’s concern that His Grace ordered me to send for them immediately as soon as you awoke.”

The tension in Lorian’s shoulders dissipated ever so slightly, though he kept his wary gaze trained on the doctor as he walked back to the chair next to the bed, and his hand remained tight on the hilt of his flaming sword. “How long have I been asleep?”

“Five hours.” Doctor Watari sighed and sat heavily in the chair, radiating weariness. “You were in surgery for two and resting for three. Your brother, as I said, has been in the care of the Nameless Moon ever since you came out of surgery.”

Lorian’s brow furrowed. “Was Lothric hurt?”
“No, merely worried about you, and quite exhausted. The Nameless Moon mentioned finding him something to eat and allowing him to wash up.”

The flames on the sword began to fade. “The extent of my injuries?”

“A generalized bruising, blood loss, a fractured rib on the left side, and a punctured left lung.” Watari’s voice took on the tone of someone discussing the weather. It seemed like he no longer had the mental energy to be perturbed by the sight of an angry knight with a burning greatsword. “You currently have a glass chest tube inserted in your left side to drain the air from your chest while the hole in your lung heals. Please do not move around too much until it is removed; I doubt you wish for me to have to remove shards of glass from your chest cavity.”

A chest tube? Lorian easily hoisted his sword above the bed and transferred it to his right hand so he could feel his left side with his left. Sure enough, he could feel the rounded edges of a tube sticking out between his fourth and fifth ribs, just barely jutting out of the skin. The opening seemed to be covered with some sort of gauze, and Lorian hummed thoughtfully as he examined himself, idly trailing the tip of his left index finger along the rim.

“You can wield a greatsword with one hand.” Dr. Watari’s voice was weak.

“An astute observation.” Lorian rolled his eyes and turned his attention back to the other man. “Who are you?”

“Kazuo Watari of Irithyll, a doctor of physical medicine. I had my schooling and honed my craft in my homeland of Kinon before being invited to practice in Irithyll by the Nameless Moon himself.” The doctor’s shoulders sagged heavily underneath his baggy white coat. “Will I have the privilege of knowing your name as well?”

“I would be highly surprised if my brother had not mentioned my name.”

“He did, yes, but it is only fair to expect my introduction to be met with your own. Manners and all of that.”

Lorian gritted his teeth. “Lorian. I’m a knight.”

“I can tell.” Dark, spectacled eyes fell once more on the greatsword. “Lorian of where?”
“A place that is none of your business.”

“Given that your brother’s name is Lothric, would I be correct in assuming that you both originate from the kingdom of that name?”

Lorian glared stonily at the older man.

“Should I take your silence as a ‘yes’?”

The knight’s gaze hardened into titanite. Dr. Watari sighed and removed his glasses.

“Serves me right, I suppose, after what happened earlier. Perhaps this is some sort of divine retribution.” The older man took a corner of his jacket and began to clean his lenses. “Very well, I shall be silent...but allow me to at least inquire as to what brought you and your brother to Irithyll in the first place.”

“Our reasons for coming to Irithyll are the same as where we are from: absolutely none of your concern.”

“Well, at least you gave me a verbal answer for that one.”

Lorian’s jaw tightened. “Has anyone ever mentioned that you have terrible bedside manner?”

Dr. Watari chuckled mirthlessly as he held up his glasses up to the light of the window at his back.

“Approximately two hours ago, in fact. Why do you ask?”
Yorshka decided—as she watched Aval and Lothric interact—that she liked her new friend quite a bit.

Though he was considered elderly for a giant (being only a few decades younger than her dear brother), Aval was second only to the legendary Andre in his prowess as an armor and weaponsmith, and advanced age had done nothing to dull his faculties or unsteady his hand. Though Aval was notoriously introverted and quiet, he seemed to have taken a shine to the curious prince from the Kingdom of Lothric, much as he had when he first met Yorshka. Lothric was currently perched on Aval’s shoulder, and his thin arms were wrapped the giant’s neck for stability as he leaned as far forward as he could without losing balance, watching Aval as he hammered away at the breastplate of Lorian’s armor. Occasionally he would ask the blacksmith a question about what he was doing, and Aval seemed more than happy to indulge Lothric’s curiosity, especially since the boy asked only ‘yes’ or ‘no’ questions. Between her normally reticent brother and the even more reticent giant blacksmith, Yorshka could not help but wonder if Lothric had some sort of innate ability to endear him to all that he met, no matter how reticent or antisocial.

Well, like she had room to talk; she’d known the little prince for all of thirty minutes before deciding that she would be willing to take an arrow for him.

With a bemused shake of her head, Yorshka stood from where she was leaning against the archway to Aval’s workshop and stretched her arms behind her back, sighing in contentment as her spine cracked. Aval had already completed his inspection of Lorian’s sword, and her brother had agreed to Lothric’s request to deliver it to Lorian’s bedside, assigning the duty to a Silver Knight that was departing to patrol the city. While the sword had been unscathed by the brothers’ encounter with the strange maneater, Lorian’s armor had not been so lucky, and Aval had informed Gwyndolin and Lothric that it would take three days for him to pound out the dents and seal the puncture in the chestplate. The giant had been more than willing to let Lothric observe some of the repairs, but while the boy seemed almost enthralled by the pounding of iron against bronze, Yorshka was far less interested in such things.

Fair enough; she had been meaning to interrogate her brother over the events of that morning, and it seemed as if the perfect opportunity had presented itself. Yorshka had more than enough faith that Lothric would stay out of trouble while she went to find her own elder brother.

Having dreaded the idea of searching the entire cathedral for Gwyndolin, Yorshka was pleasantly surprised to find her brother sitting on the top of the grand staircase leading from the elevator to Anor Londo, his snakes curled up contentedly on the stairs below him as they warmed themselves in the unfiltered sunlight. With a toothy (and relieved) grin, Yorshka plopped herself down next to Gwyndolin and rested her head on his shoulder, her tail moving to curl around his lower back.

“Hello,” Gwyndolin hummed, eyes never leaving the mountains in the distance as he lifted a hand from his lap to card through Yorshka’s long hair. The girl sighed and snuggled closer.
“Hello, brother.” Yorshka let her eyes drift shut as she basked in Gwyndolin’s ministrations. “It seems thou hast had a busy morn. I certainly did not expect today’s turn of events.”

“Nor did I,” Gwyndolin agreed. Yorshka noted that her brother did not sound overly upset over the situation; if anything, his aura seemed to radiate serenity. “I am truly sorry, Yorshka, for having worried thee. I know thou hast been concerned for mine health and welfare as of late, and I want thee to know that I take thy concerns seriously, and I shall do better in the future to inform thee of mine... rashier decisions.”

“Thou hast better.” Yorshka snorted, lazily cracking her right eye open to peer up at Gwyndolin. “I am touched that thou did not wish to disturb mine comfort, but imagine how I would have felt if thou hadst not returned from thy excursion, and I would have woken hours too late to assist thee.”

“In mine defense, I did not wish to be pummeled by thy tail.” Gwyndolin snickered and grunted of mock discomfort as Yorshka punched him lightly in the side. “But I shall awaken thee from now on, if thou wishest...which means no complaining about being tired for the rest of the day when I do.”

“I am twelve, Gwyndolin; not five. I shall not throw a tantrum if I get less than eight hours of sleep.”

Gwyndolin cocked an eyebrow. “Eight? How about fifteen?”

Yorshka punched him again. “Not everyone can run on the fumes of rest like thee.”

“Yes, yes.” Gwyndolin smiled down at Yorshka before returning his gaze to the horizon. The girl followed his eyes to the tallest peak in the distance and frowned.

“Thou always stares at that one mountain when we come up to Anor Londo, Gwyndolin; what art thou trying to see?”

“Oh, nothing.” Gwyndolin shrugged in that way he always did when he did not wish to talk about something. Yorshka decided to let the subject drop.
“So,” she switched topics, “why didst thou bring the knight to our guest chambers instead of the hospital? Would that not have been the more appropriate course of action?”

“Oh? Ser Lorian?” Gwyndolin blinked as if snapping out of a trance and slowly turned his head to look at Yorshka. “To be honest...I do not quite know mineself. I freely admit that it was a split-second impulse that drove me to lodge them in our home. Perhaps I finally wanted that part of the guest wing to have some use. Perhaps I did not wish for Lothric to have to sit in a cold and sterile room as he waited for his brother to awaken.” The moon god craned his head backwards to peer at the doorway to Aval’s workshop. “Regardless of why I made mine decision, I am most glad that I did; Lothric is an absolute delight.”

“He truly is!” Yorshka beamed up at Gwyndolin. “I have never been able to talk with another crossbreed before--but more than that, I think I would wish to be Lothric’s friend even if he were not dragonkin! He is smart, passionate, and polite; and mine heart aches at the thought of his parents deciding that he was worth nothing more than to be glorified firewood!”

A haunted look flashed through Gwyndolin’s eyes. “Aye, that he is, and we have already sacrificed too much talent and promise to the Flame as is. I shall not sit by and allow a child to be groomed from birth to burn.”

Yorshka hated that look in her brother’s eyes more than anything; it always meant that he was sinking down into memories he would rather forget--memories that he had not shared even with her. She leaned up to kiss him on the cheek, wanting him to know that he was loved and no longer alone. Gwyndolin’s lips curled up at the corners.

“We shall not let such a thing happen on our watch!” Yorshka announced, sitting up straight to stare determinedly into her brother’s eyes. “If that Oceiros is so determined to link the First Flame, then he should do it himself, not throw his child to the wolves just because he is a coward! Adults that are unwilling to give their lives for their children should not be parents in the first place!”

Gwyndolin chuckled fondly and leaned down to affectionately tap his forehead against Yorshka’s. “Well said, dear sister. Thou shalt make a fine Company Captain one day.”

Yorshka flushed. “Oh, hush.”

The sound of stone grinding on stone made both Yorshka and Gwyndolin jump, and the siblings immediately turned their attention to the grand elevator, watching in confusion as the contraption spun down towards the main access.
“I wish the Silver Knights would refrain from using the public elevator!” Yorshka frowned and crossed her arms over her chest. “It must be a new recruit that does not yet know how to access the private lift! Captain Aishura and Vice-Captain Telos should really do a better job of showing the new knights around Anor Londo!”

“While I would agree with thy conclusion in any other circumstance, I do not believe it is a naive knight.” Gwyndolin rose to full height and beckoned for Yorshka to stand. “I asked Dr. Watari to send a message when Ser Lorian awoke. I believe this is the message we are waiting for.”

“Oh, Lothric will be ecstatic! Not only that, but I shall get to meet Ser Lorian at last!” Yorshka’s tail thwapped against the marble stairs in excitement. “Wouldst thou like me to go fetch him?”

“Please do.” Gwyndolin nodded and pulled out his pocket catalyst. “I shall go and meet our visitor mineself.”

As Gwyndolin teleported to the base of the stairs to wait for the elevator to rise, Yorshka turned on her heel and dashed to Aval’s workshop, her tail whacking against the marble doorways as she went. Thank goodness she did not have a great deal of pain sensation in that particular appendage!

“Lothric!” If there had been a doorway to the workshop, Yorshka would have burst through it in the most dramatic way possible, but her tone of voice was more than enough to make Lothric and Aval jump. “A messenger from the city has arrived! I believe thy brother is awake!”

Lothric gasped. “Lorian?!”

“Yes! Gwyndolin has gone down to meet them, and I suggest we should do the same!” Yorshka had to quickly run over to Aval and hold up her arms to keep Lothric from simply jumping off of the giant’s shoulders and onto the floor. “Do not hurt thyself! Here; I shall carry thee, just like mine dear brother did!”

“Are you sure I won’t be too heavy?” Despite his weak protests, Lothric quickly shimmied around Yorshka’s shoulders so that he was riding on her back, his frail arms shaking from where they were wrapped around her neck.

“It is hard to be too heavy for a crossbreed—even one as young as I!” Yorshka puffed out her chest in pride as she spoke. “Besides, thou art surprisingly light; I have carried baskets of linens that are..."
“Blame my Father for how he made me,” Lothric grumbled, tightening his arms around Yorshka’s neck and shoulders as he peered up at Aval. “Thank you for taking care of my brother’s armor, Ser Aval. Would you mind terribly if I came up to visit you tomorrow?”

The gentle giant shook his head in amusement. “No worry. I be here when you come. Visit anytime.”

“I thank thee, Ser Aval!” Yorshka reached her arms back to heft Lothric further up her shoulders. “I hope thou continues to have a pleasant day! Please send myself or mine brother word if the armor is completed before we have a chance to come back!”

“Of course!” Aval called as Yorshka quickly turned and dashed out of the door. “I help anytime!”

Yorshka was probably running much faster than she should have on such tall stairs and with such a frail child on her back, but Lothric seemed to not mind in the slightest, merely slipping his arms closer to her shoulders to avoid impinging on her air supply as she trotted down those seemingly endless stairs.

“I hope Lorian is not terribly worried about me,” Lothric whispered into Yorshka’s ear. “Sometimes Father would take me in the middle of the night down to his lab to run tests and experiments, and since Lorian sleeps like the dead, he would never wake up. I could have called for him, but...Lorian was always so tired, and I knew Father would be rough and angry with me if I said anything.”

Yorshka had never met King Oceiros before, but if she by chance ever met the man in the future, she would certainly not hesitate to take her tail to his knees. “What sorts of tests would he run?”

“Not terribly awful things...well, at least while I was conscious. Just blood draws and scale samples and the like.” Lothric tucked his face into the juncture of her neck and shoulder, but even with his voice muffled and soft, the crossbreed girl could hear his words as clearly as a thunderclap. “Sometimes, though, I would wake up achy and groggy on the examination table. Father always said I just fall asleep, but I had no memory of actually falling asleep, so…”

Yorshka gulped and nearly stumbled on the steps before catching herself. “I see.”
“Well, anyway, sometimes Lorian would wake up before Father returned me to bed, and it would always cause a shouting match between our father and him. I think he always worried that I would never come back up from the lab one day.”

It is no wonder, given what I know of thy father, that Ser Lorian was so anxious when thou were alone in his clutches. Yorshka swallowed as she hefted Lothric further up her back and quickened her pace. She did not want Lorian to have to feel such fear from that moment on.

As they approached the platform leading to the elevator, Yorshka could see that Gwyndolin was speaking to not only one, but two persons who had arrived on the elevator. Yorshka easily recognized one of the visitors as Amana, a young healer who volunteered a great deal at her church, and who seemed unusually pale and nervous as she watched Gwyndolin speak to the second visitor. Yorshka had never before seen the older man to whom her brother was speaking, but given his uniform of white linen garments and brown oilcloth apron, it was clear that he was an employee of the city morgue. For a moment, Yorshka feared that Lorian had passed away during Lothric’s short absence, but then she remembered that the morgue was where her brother had ordered the Silver Knights to deliver the corpse of the beast he had slain that morning.

As Yorshka thudded down the stairs, Gwyndolin turned to face her, smiling wanly at his sister and her passenger.

“Ah, Lothric, I have just received word that thy brother has awoken and is most anxious to see thee.” The moon god gestured at Amana, who still looked as if she had seen a ghost, and who bowed a little too stiffly at Yorshka as she moved to stand next to her brother. “Healer Amana shall take thee to him with utmost haste.”

Lothric’s face brightened as if it were a sun peaking through storm clouds.

The god then turned his attention to his sister. “Yorshka dearest, prithee, couldst thou accompany Lothric to his brother’s bedside on mine behalf? I have urgent business in the morgue to which I must attend. I shall join thee when I am finished.”

Yorshka cocked her head to the side. “Is something the matter?”

“Ah, no...Doctor Allant has merely discovered something about the beast that she wishes to show me with utmost haste.” Gwyndolin turned his attention back to the mortician, who seemed far more interested in watching the god’s snakes laze about on the sun-warmed marble platform than participating in the conversation. “Shall we embark for the ground floor together?”
The mortician snapped out of his reptile-induced trance and nodded. “Ah, yes, yes.”

As was custom, the two mortals let Gwyndolin go first, followed by Yorshka and little Lothric. Once everyone was safely onboard the large stone contraption, Gwyndolin slithered over to the large lever at the top of the spiral staircase and beckoned for Yorshka to follow him.

“Dost thou have the strength to push the lever, Lothric?” Gwyndolin gestured to the lever.

Lothric’s face somehow grew even sunnier. It was almost blinding in its brilliance. “I would love to, but…” The boy chewed his lip before turning his head to look at Yorshka. “Would…would you mind helping me push the lever, Yorshka?”

The crossbreed girl’s heart melted. “Not at all, Lothric! Here, allow me to let you down…it is not a difficult lever to push, actually; it is far more daunting in appearance than in operation. Even Gwyndolin dost not have any issues with operating the elevator!”

A look of mock offense spread across the moon god’s face as he watched Lothric scramble off of Yorshka’s shoulders. “And what is that supposed to mean, dear sister?”

“It means that thy strength does not reside in thine arms.” Yorshka replied coyly as she gripped the handle of the elevator, allowing Lothric to reach up and wrap his hands around the part of the lever between her grip. “Now, on the count of three: one, two...three!”

With that, Yorshka and Lothric gave a mighty heave (well, as mighty of a heave as a frail child that could barely reach the lever could muster), and the tower began to groan and shift. Lothric watched—hands clasped to his chest in wonder—as the entire staircase began to twist and descend. After only a few seconds, the tower began to slow in its descent, and Yorshka allowed Lothric to climb onto her back as the lower platform lined up with the entrance to the main residence.

“Willst thou return in time for dinner, brother?” Yorshka queried as the elevator ground to a halt.

“We shall see.” Gwyndolin shrugged. “Until we meet again, little Lothric, and may it be sooner rather than later.”
Lothric nodded. “Try not to take too long! I know Lorian will be most anxious to meet you!”

A faint smile crossed Gwyndolin’s lips. “As am I to meet him.”

With that, the two groups diverged: Gwyndolin and the mortician turned to the right and made for the nearest entrance to the underground tunnels; and Yorshka, Lothric, and Healer Amana made their way towards the guest wing of the residence. Though Amana had been the one sent to fetch them, she fell into step a few paces behind Yorshka, knowing both her place and that the crossbreed girl would know where to go. After all, the winding and airy corridors of the semi-ancient structure had been Yorshka’s playground for the past twelve years.

True enough, Yorshka didn’t even need to think consciously about where she was going; which was good, since her attention was focused on making sure her fatigued friend didn’t slip off of her back or become terribly jostled during their trek. Her taloned feet clicked along the marble floors at a brisk pace, and despite Amana huffing and puffing behind them, she did not slow her pace until they approached a door in the guest wing guarded by a pair of Silver Knights. Yorshka could hear two voices coming from behind the closed door: one, the voice of Doctor Watari—the personal physician of herself and Gwyndolin; the other, a deep, firm, and stern voice that had Lothric accidentally scratching Yorshka’s shoulders and back in his haste to climb down.

“Lorian! That’s Lorian! He’s all right! Bend down, Yorshka; *bend down!*”

The crossbreed girl could not fall to her knees fast enough, and Lothric ended up tumbling to the floor from at least a half a meter in height, landing with a visceral thud that made Yorshka wince. The little boy did not seem to mind, however, for he was instantly on his feet and bolting through the door with a speed that should have been impossible for someone his height, health, and stature. “Lorian! *Lorian!*”

The second voice cried out, and there was a rustle of cloth and bodies, and the sound of something heavy and metal clanking on the floor. Yorshka could hear Lothric sobbing (along with what sounded like the second voice), and she found herself pushing her way past one of the Silver Knights that tried to bar the path, giving the knight a glare that could have set them on fire.

“*Move. Now.*”

The Silver Knight almost tripped over themself obeying her wish, and Yorshka held her shoulders square and her head up high as she walked through the door, giving her movements as much of a royal ‘flounce’ as she could. The *nerve* of some of their soldiers!
When Yorshka entered the room, she first saw Dr. Watari standing next to the fireplace, looking both haggard and amused all at once. Her eyes then fell to be bed, where Lothric was being embraced by man who was the definition of tall and stately—so much so, in fact, that she would have a hard time believing he and Lothric were siblings if not for the similar silver of their hair, which hung long around the elder’s face and down his back. With the hair and the way his upper body was curled protectively around Lothric, Yorshka was unable to see the elder prince’s face, but she could see the burn scars running up the left side of his body. She shivered.

*What could have given him such horrible scars? They must have been so painful…*

“Lady Yorshka.” Dr. Watari approached her side as she watched the two brothers reunite. “Where is the Nameless Moon?”

“Mine brother was called to the morgue by High Healer Heldane. He shall return when his business is settled.” Yorshka glanced up at the doctor, who was wiping his brow with a handkerchief. “Did the beast give him those burns?”

“Prince Lorian?” Watari muttered, turning his head to stare at his patient. “No, Lady Yorshka; those burns are years old—at least seven or eight, from what Prince Lothric told me during our brief introduction.”

“Ah.”

Yorshka’s attention was easily drawn away from the doctor and back to the brothers. Lothric had his arms wrapped around Lorian’s neck and his head resting in the crook of Lorian’s shoulder, saying something soft and indiscernible in-between his sobs. Lorian stroked Lothric’s back with one hand and cradled him close with the other, and when he lifted and turned his head to look down at his brother, Yorshka finally got her first good look at the elder prince’s face. Even from a distance, the girl could still make out a strong jaw, a broad nose, angular cheekbones, and more deep burn scars—almost as if someone had used a hammer and chisel to carve them into his skin. His eyes were screwed tightly shut, and even while standing on the opposite side of the room, Yorshka could see fresh trails of wetness coursing down his cheeks.

*I am intruding.* The thought struck Yorshka as she watched Lothric and Lorian clutch each other somehow tighter, weeping and speaking in a language that seemed to be all their own. It was something intimate and tender, and here she and the doctor stood, gaping and gawking like onlookers at the site of a disaster.
“Shall we leave them, Dr. Watari?” Without waiting for an answer, Yorshka walked over to Dr. Watari and linked her arm with his, gently yet firmly guiding him towards the door. The doctor, though confused, did not resist.

“But you just arrived, Lady Yorshka.” The doctor winced when Yorshka gave him a harsh ‘shush’ and lowered his voice accordingly. “Did you not want to meet your new guest?”

“There shall be plenty of time to meet Ser Lorian in the coming days. There is no need to rush.” Besides, Yorshka could recall numerous moments between herself and Gwyndolin that were similar to what Lothric and Lorian were sharing at that moment, so the least she could do was grant them a courtesy that she herself would have liked to be given “I am more concerned about thy constitution, Doctor, for thou dost look ever so exhausted. Thou shouldst sit down and have some tea before thou falls over!”

Dr. Watari chuckled and shook his head. “It is all a part of my job, even if this one has been more...interesting than others. However, I am never one to turn down an offer for tea, especially when it is offered to me by the Lady of Moonlight.”

“Excellent! Then we shall simply go down to the next room and allow these two to reunite in peace!”

When the pair reached the door, Yorshka allowed Dr. Watari to leave the room first, taking a moment to look back at Lothric and Lorian. The younger brother had pulled back far enough from the elder to gaze up at him, and though tears were still streaming from Lothric’s eyes, he seemed happy in a way that had been out of reach during their tea and the trip to Anor Londo. His spindly hands gripped Lorian’s wrists as he chattered about something Yorshka could not discern, and Lorian seemed to be listening intently, his soft brown eyes never once leaving Lothric’s face. The look in the knight’s eyes as he gazed at his little brother was similar to a look Gwyndolin had given her many a time—as if the person in front of them was the center of their very universe—and Lorian’s large hands reached out to cup Lothric’s face as if it were a priceless and sacred treasure.

Yorshka smiled to herself.

Even though they had never before interacted, the crossbreed girl decided—as she watched Lothric and Lorian interact—that that she liked her new friend’s elder brother quite a bit.
When Gwyndolin arrived at the room in the morgue where the beast’s corpse was stored, he found Heldane hunched over her desk in the corner, head in her hands and white uniform splattered with dark red streaks. The god could see that the once pristine white sheet that was covering the monster’s corpse was now similarly stained with blood.

“Doctor Allant,” Gwyndolin greeted as he slithered towards Heldane’s desk.

“You were correct, My Lord.”

Gwyndolin stopped just short of Heldane’s chair. There was something disturbed about the woman’s tone that the moon god did not like. He wondered if she bore a similar expression on her face.

“About what, Doctor?”

“The beast was once human.”

Gooseflesh broke out along Gwyndolin’s arms. “Art thou certain?”

Heldane sighed and dropped her hands from her face.

“There is a small table to the right of the dissection table.” The High Healer slowly pushed herself away from her desk and stood with an agony that Gwyndolin could feel in his muscles. “Please uncover it.”

If it were any other situation, Gwyndolin would have scolded the doctor for her lack of decorum in the face of her god, but something heavy and dark in her voice made him hold his tongue. A quick glance revealed the location of the table in question, and Gwyndolin wasted no time in crossing the room and removing the white sheet thrown over the top, clutching it in his right hand as he found himself peering into the contents of a metal bowl.

Gwyndolin gasped. The sheet slipped from his grasp and pooled onto the floor.
“Before freezing the beast, I took the liberty of performing an initial survey of the body--marking down injuries and notable anatomical features and the like.” Dimly, Gwyndolin could hear Heldane walking over to him, but found himself unable to react. “It was during a round of light palpation that I felt what seemed to be a foreign object embedded into one of the creature’s ‘toes’ on the right front paw, where its ring finger would be located if it were human. After examining the opposite appendage on the beast's left front paw, I discovered a similar foreign object, and I took it upon myself to remove both toes from the body and dissect them.”

Heldane stopped somewhere to Gwyndolin’s left.

“TThe one on the left came from the left toe. The one on the right came from the right toe.”

Slowly, shakily, Gwyndolin reached out and picked up the leftmost ring with his right hand. Its band was thick--crafted from what seemed to be bronze or gold--and grooved with intricate and symmetrical patterns that he could only fully appreciate when holding it up to the light. A large, round, black gemstone was set in the center of the band, held in place by a small circular frame made of a dark alloy and etched with tiny lines. Though the gemstone initially appeared to be a solid black, a closer examination of the ring revealed a gradient of lighter and darker black, starting as an almost gray color at the periphery and darkening into pitch black at the center.

_An eye_, Gwyndolin realized, his snakes writhing in sync with the anxious twisting of his stomach. _It looks like an eyeball._

“The rings seemed to have been on the creature’s ‘fingers’ for a long time,” Heldane continued, watching as Gwyndolin set the leftmost ring back on the table and moved to pick up the one on the right. “It is as if the beast had been wearing the rings when its bones began to widen and elongate, and when the rings refused to yield, the bone simply grew over and around them, forming a ring-like ‘band’ that I could easily palpate underneath its fur. Removing them required some diligent work with a chisel and handsaw.”

Gwyndolin gnawed his lower lip as he held the rightmost ring up to the light. The band itself was carved with different designs, and while the leftmost ring was undecorated aside from its bizarre gemstone, the rightmost was covered with what seemed to be copper droplets of different sizes. The gemstone itself--and its disturbing gradient--was nigh-identical to that of the leftmost ring.

_It is as if they are siblings--different enough to be unique, yet similar enough to be inseparable._
“Are there any other items on the monster’s body?” Gwyndolin finally spoke.

Heldane shook her head. “None that I could detect during my cursory examination. I will know more when the veterinarian arrives from Drangleic and we perform a thorough autopsy.”

The doctor pushed a few sweaty dreadlocks away from her face and watched as Gwyndolin picked up the leftmost ring from the table with his free hand and placed it next to the other on Gwyndolin’s right palm. “What should we do with them?”

“Thou shalt be doing nothing with them, Doctor Allant.” Gwyndolin’s voice cut through the room’s stale air like a scalpel through flesh. “I shall take these rings and study them mineself. Thou shalt tell no one of the existence of these rings and make no note of them in thy report. I shall have no other mortal so much as looking at these rings, dost thou understand?”

Heldane blinked. “As...as you command, My Lord, of course. But...may I inquire as to the nature of your caution?”

A bitter, lonely smile seemed to tear itself along Gwyndolin’s face.

“Didst thou sense the powerful enchantment that lingers on these rings?”

“Aye, that I did.”

Gwyndolin slowly turned to study the doctor from underneath his hood. “And what dost thou think is the type of magic used to enchant these rings?”

Heldane frowned and studied the rings clasped in Gwyndolin’s right hand.

“I was thinking...a dark infusion, perhaps, or a hollow enchantment.”

The doctor’s frown deepened as Gwyndolin shook his head. “Then...then what is the source, Nameless Moon? Do you even know what it is?”

Oh, Gwyndolin knew quite well of the magic that had been used to enchant the rings. He had only encountered it once, and it had been when he had been teetering on the awkward edge between childhood and adulthood, but it was a sensation—a feeling—that he would never forget. The sound of the slick as it dripped from Artorias’ armor and puddled onto the floor beneath the table on which his body had been laid. The tacky texture of the ichor between Gwyndolin’s fingers when he
brushed them against Artorias’ lips. The sight of those awkward and gangly limbs twisted and withered by a starvation that did not stem from a lack of food. The purple color of the veins he could see in Artorias’ eyes before Auntie Ciaran closed them for the last time.

Gwyndolin’s hand clenched around the rings with a strength that surprised him.

*How could I ever forget what killed dear Uncle Artorias?*

“This magic, Doctor Heldane, is that of the Abyss.”

Chapter End Notes

Dr. Demon's-Souls-Reference: My Gods, the creature was wearing rings! And what a strange aura they radiate!

Gwyndolin: That is no ordinary magic, Doctor!

Dr. Demon's-Souls-Reference: Then what could it be?

Gwyndolin: Only one such force could have been used to enchant these rings...the Abyss!

::the wall breaks apart as someone charges in like the Kool-Aid Man::

Gakekeeper5000, ignoring the bewildered screaming of the room's occupants: Are you IMPLYING that the Deep and the Abyss are the same thing? It's a shame that the author of this story cares so little about the intricacies of Soulsborne, because the lore of DS3 makes it OBVIOUS that those two extremely similar forces are completely different, as I will prove with this six-thousand word essay--
Lorian had never intended on meeting the last True God in the Lordran. The moment he and his brother stepped foot in the Sunless Realms, he had planned on leaving behind everything they used to be, living quietly, nondescriptly, and safely under the unknowing aegis of Gwyn's last born. Perhaps a glance at the being in a city parade, or a peek into their chapel during services--nothing more.

So what is he to think when he awakens to find said deity watching over him in a far more literal way? Gwyndolin is everything that Lorian had been taught a god was not: kind, gentle, good-humored, and so very enchanting in every possible way. The elder prince is far too plain, far too tongue-tied, and far too unremarkable for such a being to give him the time of day, but Gwyndolin seems to find him interesting, and even seems to go so far as to consider him a potential friend.

Friends? With a True God? It is a good thing that Lorian is nothing if not adaptable.

Lorian woke the second time to the smell of lilacs.

It was such an odd fragrance for the room of a wounded man. Lorian, during his lengthy career as a knight, had lain on many a cot in many a makeshift hospital, sweating out fevers and biting down on leather straps as the healers dug their fingers into his wounds. Sickbeds always smelled of the worst stuff: of liniment and ointment; of pus, gangrene, and seepage; of ash and burning flesh; of necrotic tissue and rotting bodies. Never, in Lorian’s life, had he smelled flowers in a healer’s care,
and the sensation was bizarre enough to rouse him from what had been a deep and restful slumber. Were the windows open? Was there a garden outside? Had someone brought in flowers?

As Lorian blinked up at the brown canopy of the bed and forced his brain to crawl into wakefulness, he felt Lothric tucked underneath his right arm, not having moved since the two fell asleep together shortly after their reunion. He could feel the gentle rise and fall of the boy’s chest against his arm, and Lothric’s cheek was soft where it rested on his shoulders, his little nose puffing warm air against his sweaty skin. The elder prince could feel the softness of the younger prince’s new clothing against his bare side, and it was enough to make tears well once more at the corners of his eyes, though he blinked them away before they could become more.

Soft clothes...Lothric was wearing soft clothing for the first time in his life. Lorian was not sure if he was dreaming, but if he was, it was a dream from which he never wanted to awaken.

The smell of lilacs was still there—a smell more potent than the actual flower but less potent than perfume—and Lorian tightened his arm around his brother and twisted his head as quietly as he could on the pillow. Lothric had always been a lighter sleeper than he was, and Lorian wanted to avoid disturbing him if at all possible. The poor child needed his sleep after the events of the past two days.

We both do, really. Lorian was still aching and exhausted, but he was far more alert than when he had woken up the first time, and he knew he wouldn’t be able to sleep until he found the source of the scent.

It did not take a great deal of searching, for when Lorian turned his head to the right, he immediately caught sight of a figure at his bedside. The knight’s breath caught in his throat.

The sorcerer that rescued us on the riverbank! What are they doing here? I did not see them in the room when I first awoke...

The stranger seemed far too absorbed in their book to realize that Lorian was awake, and as selfish and unfair as it was, the elder prince was glad to have an uninterrupted moment to better examine his savior. Their spiculated golden crown was nowhere in sight, and instead of the black raiment they had been wearing on the riverbank, the stranger had changed into a pleated royal blue robe with long bell sleeves and a wide silver cinch at the waist. The hands that held the book were as soft and smooth as Lorian remembered—with neatly polished and trimmed nails that would have put even the most refined women in the Court of Lothric to shame. Their skin was as pale as Lothric’s, but there seemed to be a strange... etherality to the stranger’s--as if it was radiating moonlight. Or perhaps Lorian’s eyes were acting up more than usual.
Mirage or no, the picture it made was a pretty one, and Lorian could not help but shimmy as quietly as he could up his pillow to get a better look.

The stranger’s hair, too, seemed to possess the same subtle glow of his skin—almost as if it truly was crafted from moonlight instead of dead cells. Soft and regal, it tumbled down the stranger’s upper back and cascaded over their shoulders, and after they used an immaculate hand to turn a page in the book, they reached up and pushed a stray tendril behind their ear. The sight made something strange and tight pull in Lorian’s chest, so the knight quickly turned his attention to the stranger’s face, which was not at all what he had expected. What parts of the face he had seen from below the crown were the same—soft jawline, rounded chin, thin lips, and delicate nose. Yet with the crown gone, the stranger’s eyes had been revealed, and Lorian suddenly found himself staring at the eyes of a serpent. An outer band of gold and an inner band of amber blended together to make the stranger’s irises, and instead of the round pupils of a human or godkin, the stranger’s possessed pupils shaped like vertical slits.

Like a snake, Lorian realized, struck mute and dumbfounded by how much those serpentine eyes contrasted with such a human face. Their eyebrows were white and pleasantly curved, and the eyes themselves were the size and shape of large almonds; in fact, other than the rings of tiny, iridescent scales surrounding said eyes, the rest of the sorcerer’s face was completely and utterly human in appearance. The only words Lorian could think of to describe it were “genderless” and “divine” and, with a jolt that caused his heart rate to spike, the knight realized that his savior was the one of the most beautiful things he had ever seen—second only to when he first laid eyes on Lothric.

Why the eyes, I wonder. Lorian frowned in thought as he looked at the stranger’s long, milky neck before moving his gaze back down to their hands. No sign of any scales, other than the ones around their eyes, which increased the knight’s curiosity by tenfold. Their ears are humanlike, they lack widespread scales, and their fingers are not talons. If they are a crossbreed, then they are the most understated crossbreed I have ever met. Granted, I have not met many--

Lorian was distracted from his thoughts by a strange hissing noise. As he had when trying to find the source of the lilac scent, he quickly scanned the room for any sign of an animal or a boiling kettle, then looked back at the stranger when he could find no evidence of either. The sorcerer seemed to be sitting quietly, and their lips were closed, so where…?

Another low hiss. Lorian found his gaze drifting to the right side of his bed, and though it took a good few moments, his erratic eyesight finally made out something against the brown bedspread.

The elder prince’s mouth dropped open.

A snake!
No, not just a snake—six snakes; six brown and green snake heads lying on the very edge of the bed, staring up at Lorian with their round little eyes as if he were some sort of engaging novel or gripping performance. After the strangest staring contest Lorian had ever held in his life—with the knight blinking dumbfoundedly at the serpents all the while—the third one from the right hissed and flitted its pink tongue at the prince. Lorian had to blink a few more times to make sure he wasn’t dreaming.

_Snakes...what are snakes doing here?!

It took a few seconds, but all of the pieces of the strange puzzle—the snakes, the stranger’s serpentine pupils, the scales around their face, a lack of dragonlike features—eventually clicked into place. Lorian shifted his head to the right—just enough to get a glimpse of the stranger below their torso—and was amazed to see the bodies of the six serpents extending from the bottom of the stranger’s long robe.

_Snake legs. The stranger had snakes for legs._ Lorian’s mind flashed back to those moments before he passed out—when the stranger approached him after teleporting to his side—and he could distinctly remember hearing bipedal footfalls. However, the sorcerer had shown that they possessed an exceptional amount of magical power and aptitude, and Lorian had heard of the most powerful of wizards and witches being able to alter their bodies at will. Perhaps the stranger had cast some sort of glamor in order to walk like a human, which actually made sense, given the hilly terrain of the area where they had met. It would have been quite difficult for snakes to traverse the muddy and snowy hills and banks of the valley.

_Snakes for legs. Remarkable._ Wonder bubbled like a hot spring in Lorian’s stomach, but while he was sorely tempted to reach out with his free hand and pet the snakes, he managed to resist the urge. Not only would it show the stranger he was awake, but it would be a violation of their bodily autonomy, and he would be no better than the nobles and visitors that would gawk and paw at Lothric as if he were an animal on display at an exhibition.

Snake legs. Serpentine eyes. Hair the color of moonlight. Soft hands and soft skin and a face that could only be described as _heavenly_. There was a strange emotion filling Lorian’s lungs and pushing its way up his throat as he continued to gaze at the neigh-empyreal figure before him. They were stunning and striking, distinguished even in the act of reading a book, and so breathtakingly—

“Beautiful.”

The stranger jumped in their chair and barely managed to catch their book before it dropped onto
the floor. Lorian was confused at first, but when the stranger turned to stare at him with wide eyes and flushing cheeks, the knight finally realized that he had said the word aloud.

“ I…” Lorian’s tongue suddenly felt as if it was tied in a knot. “ I…um…”

“ Thou art…” The stranger’s mouth closed, opened, then closed again. At least Lorian was not the only one at a loss for words.

For a moment, the two simply stared at each other, gaping like fish and blushing up a storm. It wasn’t until a few seconds of silence had passed that they began to speak--at the same time.

“ I am so very, very sorry, you have no idea how--!”

“ I did not realize that thou hadst awoken-- !”

“ That was so incredibly inappropriate and--!”

“ No, no, thou dost not need to apologize! I took no offense--!”

“ I just saw you at my bedside, and you were reading, and I did not wish to disturb you--!”

“ I wished to meet thee properly when thou hadst awoken, so I volunteered to sit for the healer--!”

“ And then I saw the snakes--!”

A frightened, mortified gasp. “ Oh, flame and dark, I should have applied my glamour before entering the room! I sincerely apologize if mine snakes have bothered or disturbed thee--!”

“ No! No, no!” Lorian quickly sat up (gently, though, to avoid disturbing Lothric and the tube in his chest) and began to wave his hands. “ No, I was neither disturbed nor bothered; I quite like snakes and I find yours fascinating!”
The stranger’s flush bloomed from a tomato red into an angry burn. “Ah, I...I...well, regardless, I know that thou wouldst not have said such a thing under normal circumstances, since thou art still under the influence of sedatives and painkillers, and I am clearly not--!”

“That is not what I meant!”” For all of the times Lorian had been at a loss for words—or simply could not force them out in a coherent matter—he suddenly found himself speaking without conscious control. “I would not have said such a thing under normal circumstances, because it is inappropriate and most likely unwanted commentary, but you are beautiful! I do not want you to think you are not just because I apologized for having said it without permission or prompting!”

Silence. The figure’s mouth was agape as they stared at the knight, posture as rigid and still as the dead, and Lorian found he could not watch them without wishing to smother himself with his pillow. He turned his gaze to his lap in mortification, gripping the sheets draped across his legs with his left hand and wrapping his right arm around Lothric. At the very least, Lorian was glad that his little brother was still sound asleep; he did not think he could stand the shame that would have come from the younger prince witnessing such an unbecoming moment!

“Thou art the first one to have ever called me beautiful.”

For a moment, Lorian thought his mortification had been strong enough to produce auditory hallucinations, but a glance up at the stranger confirmed otherwise. The sorcerer—who had, just a minute or so before, appeared so regal and untouchable—seemed to have pulled into themself, and the way they gazed down at their hands and gnawed their lower lip seemed to radiate shyness and vulnerability. The snakes had disappeared from the bedside during this brief and frenetic exchange of dialogue, but Lorian could hear them hissing below the bed, and he could not help but picture them curled anxiously around the legs of the chair.

“...other than mine younger sister, I mean,” the stranger added in a voice lower than a whisper.

For the second time in his life, Lorian was overwhelmed with a tenderness that he could not explain, and he found his shame eclipsed by the need to comfort.

“You are.” Lorian’s own voice was timid and unsure, but with the way the stranger wrenched his head up to stare at him, it felt as if he was shouting the truths of the gods in front of a sermon. “I...I truly regret having said so in such an inappropriate situation, but I see you as beautiful, and I...I know I would be saying the same if I were not injured and clouded by medication. That...that is all.”

Other than one brief verbal stumble, Lorian was proud with how his words translated from his
tongue to his brain, especially when the disarmed look on the stranger’s face slowly morphed into something soft and unguarded. A small smile crossed those thin lips, and Lorian suddenly found himself glad that he had complimented his savior, despite the accompanying humiliation.

“Thou art honest and good of heart.” Lorian heard the sound of the snakes uncurling from the legs of the chair as the stranger spoke. “It seems that Lothric’s glowing words about thee were not the exaggerations of a loving brother after all.”

“Lothric?” Lorian blinked. “You have spoken with my brother at length?”

The stranger’s eyebrows shot up. “I have indeed...did he not tell thee of our meeting?”

“I...” In all honesty, Lorian did not remember; he had been so exhausted and relieved to have Lothric safe in his arms, wrapped in soft clothes and away from Oceiros’ clutches forever, that he and his brother had fallen asleep after only a few minutes of rapid fire exchange. All he remembered Lothric mentioning was of how the Nameless Moon took care of him while the elder prince had been asleep, and how said True God—even though he knew the truth about their identities and why they had fled to Irithyll—had sworn on the most sacred of things to keep them safe from both Oceiros and the First Flame. It had been all that Lorian had needed to hear at the time, and he and Lothric had been so very tired...

“I do not think so.” Lorian said hesitantly. “We were both so exhausted physically and mentally that we fell asleep after a brief reunion. While he did discuss his meeting with the Nameless Moon, he did not mention meeting the sorcerer that saved us on the riverbank, although I am sure he would have told me of you as soon as he woke up.”

The sorcerer blinked. “I...I see.”

“I hope you aren’t terribly offended.” Lorian rubbed the back of his head bashfully. “My brother has had a very trying experience these past couple of days...and I am sure the surprise and excitement of interacting with the last True God in the Lordran pushed everything else from his mind.”

For reasons Lorian could not fathom, the sorcerer suddenly appeared bashful, even going so far as to hide their mouth behind one of their bell sleeves. It was a gesture that brought forth memories of the various noble women that streamed in and out of Lothric Castle, and Lorian found himself flying into damage control, assuming that their embarrassment was due to the misunderstanding unwittingly germinated by his younger brother.
“However, in case Lothric forgot to do so, allow me to offer my most sincere and heartfelt thanks for your rescue on the riverbank.” As Lorian spoke, he watched as the stranger dropped their hand from their mouth and blinked at him bewilderedly, as if awakening from a deep dream. “I cannot...I cannot...it is hard for me to find coherent words at times, but I am certain that--had you not intervened when you did--both myself and my brother would have perished in the beast’s jaws. Even if I had died from my injuries in the aftermath, I would have expired knowing that my foolish and boneheaded mistake did not cost the life of the one most dear to me, and I have only you to thank for that.”

“Thou art far too hard on thyself, Ser Lorian.” The stranger’s awkwardness had vanished as quickly as it had come, and the refined, regal air they possessed before Lorian’s imprudent declaration settled over them like a shroud. “Whilst thy words possess an element of truth, the fact of the matter is that I nearly failed to react in time to save thee both, so disarmed I was by the beast’s impossible abilities.”

The knight could not help but shudder at the memory of the creature’s lightning coursing through his body. “I can still scarce believe my own memories; if you had not just confirmed what had happened on the riverbank, I would have wondered if it had been a hallucination. The beast...it truly wielded lightning, did it not?”

“Yes.” The stranger nodded solemnly. “Rest assured that the beast is soundly deceased, and its body has been transported to the city morgue for a thorough autopsy, so as to confirm why a mindless maneater can wield a power possessed only by the most faithful of sentient beings.”

-- YooOoooOOoooooUrr MaaaaAaaaaAAAajjjessttttyyYY...heeeeeeeeeeelp meeeEEEEEeeeeeEe... --

The expression on Lorian’s face must have changed drastically at the recollection, because the stranger frowned in concern and scooted his chair closer to his bedside, the snakes making the sound of sand grinding against wood as they propelled them forward. Once the stranger was settled, all six snakes peeked their heads over the edge of the bed once more, flitting their tongues in interest as they observed Lorian.

“Is something troubling thee, Ser Lorian?”

“I do not know.” A strange claminess settled in Lorian’s palms as he wondered whether or not to share his disturbing thoughts with this kind sorcerer. The unignorable nausea churning in the pit of his stomach finally forced his hand. “It...it may have just been blood loss and my head being knocked about by the beast...but before you delivered the killing blow, I could have sworn I
heard...heard it speak.”

The stranger took a sharp intake of breath.

“ It...spoke?”

Lorian lifted up his free hand in an apologetic gesture. “ I know, I know, it is ridiculous...and I was so close to unconsciousness when I heard the words...it probably was just the lack of air and blood loss playing tricks on--”

“ What did it say?”

The words froze halfway out of Lorian’s mouth. A strange chill seem to have descended on the room, heavy and thick, and both the frigid stiffness and the look in the stranger’s eyes made the knight shiver. He was not afraid of his strange savior--not at all--but there was something about the look in those serpentine eyes that alarmed him.

“ It...it called you ‘your majesty’,” Lorian finally forced out, “and it asked you for help.”

The stranger shuddered.

Something was wrong. Something was dreadfully wrong, and Lorian found himself curling his arm more firmly around his fragile brother, adjusting him gently so that his head was lying in his lap. Lothric merely burrowed his head in the sheets covering Lorian’s legs and began to snore softly.

“ What is it?” Lorian kept his voice low and soft, both for Lothric’s sake as well as the stranger, who had stiffened as if they were in pain. Even the snakes seemed tense and morose from where they rested on the edge of the bed. “ Do you...you don’t think it truly spoke, do you?”

For a long moment, the stranger simply stared at Lorian with those alluring and intimidating eyes, and the knight commander suddenly felt as if he was undergoing some sort of test. But for what? As nervous as he was, Lorian did not press the issue further, and he focused on finger combing Lothric’s hair while he waited for the stranger to speak.
“...there is something about the beast we must discuss.” Lorian jumped slightly when the sorcerer finally spoke. “ However, it is not a subject for polite company...especially in the presence of little ears.”

Lorian caught on immediately. “ I understand. Then it shall wait for a time when we are alone.” He stroked his fingers along Lothric’s sallow cheek and smiled softly. “ My dear brother has been through far too much distress in his life. He does not need to have more nightmares than he already does.”

“ Nightmares?” The stranger pursed his lips. “ Of what?”

“ Many things.” Lorian shrugged helplessly as he stared down at his brother. “ Things he only tells me of on occasion. It is not hard to guess what he dreams of, however, when they cause him to cry out in the night. Flames. Darkness. Loss. Isolation. Not even my presence can keep them at bay...his dreams are some of the only things I cannot protect him from.” A painful knot crawled its way up the knight’s throat, and he bent over to kiss Lothric on his exposed cheek, ignoring the pain that shot through his left side at the action.

“ I am not surprised.” The stranger smiled sadly as he watched Lorian sit up straight. “ Little Lothric has experienced events no child should ever witness and shouldered burdens no child should bear.” They folded their delicate hands in their lap and worried at their bottom lip. “ Not even a brother as loving, devoted, and stalwart as thee could have protected him from the whims and wishes of a king so consumed.”

A spear of panic pierced Lorian through the heart.

“ How do you know of our father?” His voice was raspy and horrified, and he instinctively moved to shield Lothric from the stranger’s view with both arms, already calculating how best to reach his sword while in such a vulnerable position. “ Lothric said he only discussed such things with the Nameless Moon. How do you know of our story? What do you want from us?” The knight’s breath began to quicken as he paled with his still sluggish brain to *work faster*. “ Did you follow us from Lothric? Is that why you were there to save us? Did Father send you to get rid of me and take Lothric back by force?”

The stranger had opened his mouth to answer when there was a knock at the door. They coughed to clear their throat and frowned apologetically before answering. “ Ah...yes...thou mayst enter.”

The door creaked open, and Dr. Watari bowed at the doorway before entering, moving to stand at the foot of the bed before turning to the stranger...and bowing once more.
“Ah, Nameless Moon, I apologize for my delay. There was an urgent case at the hospital—a severe crush injury that required multiple hands.” The doctor kept his head dipped respectfully as he addressed the sorcerer. “Was there any difficulty while I was absent?”

Lorian’s brain ground to a halt.

“No, none at all.” The stranger—no, not a stranger, this has to be some sort of sick joke—nods curtly at the doctor before turning his gaze back to Lorian. “Ser Lorian awoke only a few minutes ago...although, in mine urgency to speak with him, I completely forgot to ask to how he was feeling.” They smiled apologetically and gently and no, no, Lorian did not just call the last True God in the Lordran ‘beautiful’ and accuse him of being a spy sent by his father, did he? “How art thou feeling, Ser Lorian?”

Lorian opened and closed his mouth like a fish gaping on the dock. The not-such-a-stranger, much to the knight’s surprise, seemed to grow even more embarrassed. Why should they feel embarrassed, though? If this was not some horrible joke, Lorian had just...he had just...

“Ser Lorian?” Dr. Watari looked confusedly between the pseudo-stranger and his patient. “Lord Gwyndolin? Is everything alright?”

Gwyndolin. Lin. Lothric called the Nameless Moon by that name when describing them. Oh, gods, what have I done?

“F-f-forgive me.” Lorian could not keep his tongue from stuttering as he finally mustered enough words to answer. “I am...am...well...am well.” Flame and dark, the knight couldn’t even feel mortified about his tongue tying up again; all of his humiliation was already in use. “Much...better...since I last woke up. Yes. Better. Much. Less pain. Just...just tired.”

“I...I see.” Dr. Watari seemed to be as confused as the words tumbling out of Lorian’s mouth. “That is...good, I suppose.” The Easterner pursed his lips before turning back to Gwyndolin. “Forgive me, Your Grace, but have I missed something important?”

“Yes, thou hast, but it is by no fault of thine own.” Gwyndolin waved his hand dismissively and adjusted his chair so that he could better address Lorian. “Actually, thou hast arrived at a most inopportune time. Wouldst thou be willing to depart once more?”
Dr. Watari blinked and laughed nervously. “Ah, I will gladly do so, but I would like to first examine the patient for my own peace of mind.”

“Fine. Yes. That’s fine.” Though he was speaking to the doctor, Lorian was unable to take his gaze off of Gwyndolin, who was gnawing at his lower lip and petting the head of one of the snakes that was resting on his lap. There was a True God sitting vigil at my bedside.

“Ah. Um. Yes.” Dr. Watari seemed to understand that he was intruding upon something private, so he wasted no time in pulling out his bag and flicking the clips open, pulling out a wooden stethoscope, a small bottle of iodine, a roll of gauze, and a pair of metal forceps. “This will only take a moment, I promise.”

Lorian had always been nervous around doctors (for the ones his father had in the royal employ had been unnerving at best and terrifying at worse), but as Dr. Watari busied himself with listening to Lorian’s heart and lungs and checking his pulse with the aid of his pocket watch, he found himself unable to focus on the discomfort of being poked and prodded. Oh no, the former knight commander was far too busy stroking Lothric’s hair and eyeing the nearest window, wondering if there was a way he could get out of bed and fling himself out of it without waking his brother. I have disgraced myself in front of the last True God in the Lordran. I have insulted the honor of the king who is the only barrier standing between my brother and our father. Yet despite all evidence pointing to how Lorian should have been thrown out on his ear for his blasphemy, said True God seemed only slightly less mortified than himself, almost as if he himself was taking responsibility for the incident. Which was...what sort of god was Gwyndolin?

Momentarily distracted from his shame, Lorian ignored the doctor prodding at the wound in his side in favor of looking over at the Nameless Moon, who seemed to be fussing with and cooing at the snakes resting their heads on his thighs in an attempt to give the doctor and his patient some small measure of privacy.

How many stories had Lorian been told of the Old Gods and the Court of the Sun? Though it had been years since Desdimonda had shared her memories with her eldest son, Lorian could recite almost all of her tales from memory, and he had done so almost every night with Lothric since the night of the younger’s birth. Gods of sunlight and lightning and rage: who flooded cities filled with innocents; who ordered the imprisonment and murder of the undead, Hollowed or no; who committed genocide on an entire species of sentient beings; who banished and exiled some of their children for disagreements and sold the others to foreign lands as political fodder. When Lorian thought of the Old Gods, he had always thought of the imposing statues of Gwyn scattered about the grounds of Lothric Castle—a god that his father had always claimed represented all that he wished to become. Strong, ruthless, shrewd, and heavy-handed—a force that no one could resist and a name no one could besmirch, even thousands of years after his passing.
When Lorian had been young, Oceiros had tried to shape him in Gwyn’s image—to make his son into the hardened, masculine paragon of war that could lead thousands against all who opposed or threatened the Kingdom of Lothric. It was for that reason that Oceiros had trained Lorian in the art of battle from the moment he was old enough to hold a sword, and when he turned ten years of age, the king had all but ordered the former Knight Commander, Hodrick, to take him on as a page, determined to make his firstborn into the warrior that the scholar king could never himself become. It was fortunate indeed that Lorian seemed naturally suited to hard labor—tall, strong, dexterous, and clever on the fly—but, tried as Lorian might, he could never become close enough to Gwyn for Oceiros’ satisfaction. Whereas Desdimonda portrayed Gwyn as cold, strict, calculating, and unmerciful, Lorian himself was ‘as soft as one of those blind maidens from Carim’, according to Oceiros.

As much as the elder prince tried to harden his heart, Lorian could not stop himself from embracing kindness when he could: playing with the children of the lords and ladies that came to visit the court; comforting the pages and confronting the knights that abused them so; weaving flower crowns for the handmaidens when idle on the training fields; and tending to both injured animals and the wyvern hatchlings whenever he had spare time. When he was assigned to be Knight Commander after Hodrick’s retirement, he thought Oceiros would at long last be satisfied. However, the iron fist the king wished for Lorian to exercise on his soldiers was more of a firm and guiding hand, and Oceiros would forevermore lament that his elder son was ‘as weak in heart as he was stupid’. It was Oceiros himself that started calling Lorian a ‘simpering governess’ when he began caring for the child that Oceiros himself brought into the world. The perfect heir—an Old God for a new age—was to remain an elusive dream.

When Lorian first learned of the Nameless Moon, he had imagined them as someone much like the Lord of Sunlight he had been taught to both love and fear from birth, but he had never expected to meet them when he arrived in Irithyll. Lorian’s hope had been to simply leave their old lives behind and start anew, transforming themselves into simple commoners under the protective and unknowing gaze of the last of Gwyn’s line. Yet here was the Nameless Moon in the flesh—and he was nothing that Lorian had been taught to emulate and respect. If Oceiros thought Lorian to be ‘as soft as a maiden’, then what would he ever think of Gwyndolin: who was glowing and pale as the moonlight he represented; who smelled of fresh lilacs and polished his nails; who trekked through the wilderness on foot in hunt of a beast; who personally waited on a child he had no obligation to care for; and who sat at an injured knight’s bedside without anything to gain? It was a form of divinity that was as foreign to Lorian as life without a sword in hand, and yet…

Why am I more in awe of the god in front of me than I ever was of the god that was his progenitor?

“There we go!” Dr. Watari’s exclamation ripped Lorian from his musings. “I’ve cleaned and repacked the area around the chest tube with gauze; as long as you don’t jostle it too much, you should heal enough to have it removed in a week or so.”
Given how quickly I heal...probably two or three days. Lorian raised an eyebrow but did nothing more than nod.

“I thank thee, Doctor Watari.” Gwyndolin gently shooed the snakes off of his lap as he addressed the doctor. “Now, if thou hast no further duties here to which to attend…”


“Doctor.” Lorian nodded in return. Part of him did not wish for the doctor to leave, but part of him was itching to throw the man out of the room, not wanting anyone else to witness how much of a complete and utter dunce he could be.

The moment the door closed behind the doctor, Gwyndolin turned his full attention to Lorian, and he had opened his mouth to speak when Lorian cut him off.

“My Lord, prithee, would you mind handing me my sword? I would call it to me myself, but I am afraid I would wake my brother in doing so.”

Gwyndolin blinked. “I…” The god glanced at the sword leaning on the wall next to Lorian’s bed, smouldering like fading coals in a fireplace. “Why ever wouldst thou require thy sword?”

“So I can use it to stab myself in the face.”

For a long moment, Gwyndolin simply stared at Lorian, and the knight despaired at the thought of having shoved his foot into his mouth yet again. Before he could open his mouth to apologize, however, the Nameless Moon suddenly tilted his head back...and laughed.

Of all of the things Lorian had expected to see upon arriving in Irithyll, the sight of the last True God in the Lordran breaking into peals of snorting laughter was one that would have never contemplated in a thousand years, and the knight could only watch--gobsmacked--as Gwyndolin slapped a hand over his mouth and nose in an attempt to stifle the sound. It was a futile effort, however, the god’s shoulders shook along with his abdomen as he attempted to instead bottle the mirth inside of himself. It was ‘ungodly’. It was ‘unflattering’. It was…

Lovely.
“Ser Lorian, please!” It took a minute for Gwyndolin to regain control of his faculties, and his voice seemed to be full of small, effervescent bubbles when he finally stopped laughing. The deity swiftly dropped his hand from his face and used its bell sleeve to dab the tears from his eyes. “Thou shouldst be well aware that someone with divine blood running through their veins cannot die from such a mundane injury!”

Lorian was unable to keep the grin from cracking through his lips. “You are correct, Nameless Moon—but the pain would distract me from my own idiocy for at least five minutes.”

Another ugly snort escaped from Gwyndolin’s nose, and he quickly slapped his hand over his mouth once more to prevent others from escaping, his pale cheeks blushing as red as ripe tomatoes.

“Prithee, Ser Lorian, I beg of thee...the muscles of mine abdomen shall surely rupture if thou continuest on in such a way!”

“Ah, but you are even more godly than I, so such an injury would only afflict you for a matter of seconds as opposed to five minutes.”

It was strange—just a few moments before, Lorian had been ready to fling himself at Gwyndolin’s feet and beg his forgiveness. Now casual banter was falling as easily as spring rain from his lips, and though Lorian would be cursing himself for being so casual with a god in any other circumstance, the sparkle in Gwyndolin’s heterochromic eyes and the mischievous smile playing across his face demolished all of his built up anxiety.

“Yes, perhaps thou art correct, but we run the risk of waking little Lothric if we continue as we are.” Gwyndolin uncovered his mouth, finished blotting the wetness from the corners of his eyes, and dropped his hand back to his lap. “Allow me to apologize, Ser Lorian.”

Lorian frowned. “Apologize? To me? Whatever for?”

“I realized that thou didst not know of mine true identity early in our conversation, but I chose not to correct thee, and mine decision has caused thee a great deal of stress.” The blush—which had begun to fade from the god’s pale cheeks—returned at full force, and Gwyndolin glanced away with an expression Lorian could have sworn was shamefacedness. “It was...enjoyable, I must admit, to have a conversation with someone without the intimidation and reluctance mine position tends to foster in others. I have not had such an experience in hundreds of years...but mine pleasure came at thine own expense, especially when it led thee to panic over mine identity. I can only hope
that thou shalt forgive me for mine moment of weakness.’”

Lorian made a little noise of displeasure and shook his head, his long hair whipping against his cheeks. “I understand, Nameless Moon, and there is nothing to forgive in my view. I should have connected the dots between Lothric’s ‘Lin’ and your knowledge of our situation, but I did not. In my defense, I have just woken up, and my head feels...muddled, still.”

“Doctor Watari had to give thee several large doses of painkillers and sedatives to keep thee under during thy surgery.” Gwyndolin nodded solemnly. “Regardless, I too believe that there is nothing for me to forgive, so if thou art willing to let bygones be bygones, I shall do the same...under one condition.”

The elder prince’s relief was quickly replaced with dread. “Which is?”

“I found that I did not like Lothric addressing me by formal titles, and I find myself similarly uncomfortable with thine usage of them...from this point onward, when it is in private, thou must not address mineself as ‘my lord’, ‘Nameless Moon’, or anything of the sort.”

Lorian chuckled nervously. “I am afraid that I do not feel comfortable enough to do as my brother and call you ‘Lin’.”

The moon god smirked. “Then how about thou addressest me as ‘Gwyndolin’? Wouldst that be acceptable, Ser Lorian?”

Lorian felt like laughing hysterically as he nodded his head. How had his life come to that point? “Only if you do not call me ‘Ser Lorian’ when we are alone. If you are to be simply Gwyndolin, then I shall be simply Lorian. Agreed?”

“Agreed.” Gwyndolin nodded and extended a hand towards Lorian. “I am Dark Moon Gwyndolin, son of the Great Lord Gwyn, and I am the King of the Gods and the Sovereign of the Sunless Realms. It is a pleasure to make thine acquaintance.”

“The pleasure is all mine.” Lorian took Gwyndolin’s hand and resisted the urge to kiss its back; after the conversation they just had, he was sure Gwyndolin would scold him if he performed such a subservient gesture. “I am Lorian, eldest child of King Oceiros and Queen Desdimonda of the Kingdom of Lothric, and former Knight Commander of Lothric’s Standing Forces.” He gave Gwyndolin’s hand a small squeeze before releasing it. “I trust you have already met my brother:
Lothric, youngest child of King Oceiros and Queen Desdimonda, and Heir to the Throne of the Kingdom of Lothric.”

“I have indeed. He is nothing less than a delight.” Gwyndolin smiled softly down at the child, and the elder prince watched in awe as the god reached out with one of his flawless hands, stroking the boy’s hair as one would a timid fawn. The sight made Lorian’s heart swell with a pleasure that bordered on pain. “Lothric has informed me that thou art the one who has raised him from infancy, and--as an elder sibling that has also had to raise their younger from birth--allow me to state that thou hast performed a more than admirable job.”

It was Lorian’s turn to blush. “You have only known Lothric for a few hours, My L-- Gwyndolin.” How strange it was to speak the name of a True God so casually! “How can you be so certain? Perhaps Lothric is a little terror when not exhausted or stressed. Perhaps he never minds and throws tantrums when asked to clean his room.”

“I would stake the entirety of mine kingdom of the complete falsehood of those statements.” Gwyndolin removed his hand from Lothric’s head and placed it on his lap. The snakes, meanwhile, had slithered back up from the floor and were resting their heads on the side of the bed once more, watching Lorian with six pairs of beady black eyes. “Not only was Lothric as polite and sweet as could be, but he had impeccable table manners when we ate lunch, and he even attempted to clean his dishes himself before I stopped him. He also took the time to straighten up mine bathroom after taking a bath, even though his limbs were fatigued and his joints were sore. The only time I saw him forego manners and consideration was when he was concerned for thy welfare, and as one who witnessed said event, trust mine word that he was more than justified in his outrage.”

Concern began to pool in Lorian’s stomach. “What happened? Lothric did not mention anything to me...was he hurt? Did someone threaten him? Was there--”

Gwyndolin held up his hand and Lorian immediately snapped his mouth shut.

“Rest easy, Lorian; Lothric was simply kept from thy bedside by two newly graduated healers with an inflated sense of self-importance. They did not appreciate the fact that Lothric is not a meek and mute child and attempted to put him in his place with scalding words and physical looming. I was quick to put an end to that nonsense and personally ensured that such a thing will never occur again.”

Though the frown remained on Lorian’s face, his shoulders relaxed ever so slightly, and he resumed his stroking of his brother’s hair. “It seems I have to thank you again. Your assisting him and defending him...I am sure it meant more to Lothric than you know. You see...all his life...the adults in his life have been...”
Lorian trailed off, desperately searching for words and fitting them into place before daring to speak, and he feared that Gwyndolin would find him as slow as Oceiros did. The god, however, seemed more than content to wait for Lorian to pre-assemble his sentences. The snakes lounged on the comforter and lazily flicked their tongues in the air.

“Lothric was a symbol to most.” The elder prince finally said. “He has told you, yes, of how he was made to be a Lord of Cinder by our father?”

Though Lorian wholeheartedly trusted Lothric’s word that the Nameless Moon was sympathetic to their cause, it was still a relief to see those serpentine eyes narrow and those delicate hands tremble with serene yet potent anger. Gwyndolin nodded.

“Well, while it was a...closely guarded secret to all but a few trusted outsiders, everyone in the kingdom knew of the perfect heir that would immolate himself for their sins.” Lorian himself was unable to keep his voice from cracking with disdain. “From the day he was born to the day of our departure, my brother had to live with everyone in the castle--from the servants to the guards--gawking and gaping at his every move. When the few nobles and foreign heads of state that Father was on friendly terms with came to visit, they would want to see the ‘miracle child’ that Father so crowed on about. So he would have me bring Lothric to the main hall, and I would be forced to...to stand there, like some sort of court jester or handmaid, and watch as these strangers poked and prodded at my brother as if he were some sort of...of souvenir, or trinket.”

For a moment, Lorian had to close his eyes and breathe, not wanting his volume to climb to the point where it woke Lothric from his nap. Gwyndolin simply smoothed his skirt and waited patiently for the knight to continue.

Finally, Lorian was confident that he could trust the tone of his voice, and he spoke once more. “They would stroke Lothric’s hair and pull up his sleeves and the hem of his robe to examine his talons and scales. They would grab him by the chin and squeeze it until he opened his mouth to show them his fangs. Some would even reach their hands down the back of his robe to feel his spines. At first, Lothric would wriggle and cry and beg them to stop, and I was able to whisk him away when he got too upset. However, when he turned six years of age, our father and the scholars began to school him in the ways of faith, healing, and martyrdom. During the first audience after his studies began, Lothric tried to pull away from someone pulling on his hair, and Father took him out of the room before I could intervene. When Lothric returned, the...the look in his eyes…”

Lorian screwed his eyes shut and tried to steady his breathing.

“He bore it all after that. Silently. Sullenly. Within the span of a day, the child that once eagerly
struck up conversations with strangers and servants alike would huddle in the corner and only speak when addressed. When picked at by visitors and the members of Father’s court, he would simply stare at the ground and allow them to move his limbs like a limp rag doll, and he would no longer whimper at the feeling of cold hands on his skin. Emma--his wet nurse--and our father were oh so thrilled. ‘What a good little lord he has become,’ they said! ‘So very obedient and mindful of adults! If only all children could be this mollified!’”

The words scratched and tore through Lorian’s throat like rusted nails against skin. Without bothering to look Gwyndolin, the elder prince buried his face in his hands and hunched over like a wounded man, shoulders quivering like drawn bow strings as he tried to wrestle his emotions back into submission.

So lost was Lorian in his attempt to bottle his anguish that he did not hear the sound of the chair being pushed away from the bed. There was a soft slithering against the rug, followed by the bed dipping slightly to the right, but Lorian did not register that Gwyndolin had moved to sit beside him until he felt a gentle yet firm hand on his shoulder.

“lt was not thy fault, Lorian.” Gwyndolin whispered as urgently as he could without disturbing the sleeping child in Lorian’s lap. “Thou were as much of a prisoner in that household as thy brother.”

“I should have stopped Father.” Lorian tried to shrink away from Gwyndolin’s hand--and his kindness--but the god’s grip remained firm. “I have killed demons with my bare hands and wrestled unruly wyverns into submission, and yet you expect me to believe that I was truly powerless in protecting my own brother?”

“Yes, I do, because it is the truth.” Gwyndolin’s hand slid to the back of Lorian’s neck and laid there, as cool and calming as moonlight. “From everything that Lothric has told me about thee and of what I have heard and seen of thee in our brief meetings, I would stake mine life and divinity on the fact that thou didst the best thy could for thy brother in the system in which both of thee were trapped. Lorian, what dost thou think would have happened if thou hadst openly defied thy father in such a brazen way? A man so erratic...so selfish...so manipulative?”

The air in Lorian’s lungs felt scalding hot. “I…”

“Thou wouldst have been imprisoned at best.” Gwyndolin’s tone left no room for argument. “Or sent away on a suicide mission, never to return. At worst, thou wouldst have been assassinated or executed, and Lothric would have been left with no one. I can assure thee that thou didst more good in biting thy tongue and comforting Lothric in the aftermath than thou wouldst have pushing thy father and getting thyself killed in the process. In a scenario such as that...I believe Lothric would have been better of dead than living in a cruel and loveless world.”
“Don’t!” At the last moment, Lorian remembered that Lothric was still asleep, and he morphed his exclamation into muffled bark halfway out of his mouth. “Please, I beg of thee, do not say such things! I cannot bear the thought!”

“I shall stop saying such things only if thou ceasest in thine attempt at self flagellation.” The hand on Lorian’s neck remained where it was, but another slid its way through the cage Lorian had constructed with his own hands and grasped his chin, firmly tugging Lorian’s face to the right. “Look at me, Lorian.”

Lorian did. Oh, how he did not want to, but he did! The knight had expected to be faced with an expression of disdain and disgust, but the hard line of Gwyndolin’s mouth suggested passion instead of pity, and those gold and amber eyes flared with more light than Lorian had ever seen coming from the fading sun.

“Thou hast journeyed far, Ser Lorian, and now I want thee to hear mine voice.” The hand that gripped his chin moved to cup his left cheek, and the hand lifted off of the knight’s neck to cradle his right. “I have known thy brother for less than a day, yet I can tell thee with utmost confidence that he is one of the most bright and brilliant beings I have ever encountered in mine lifetime.” The corners of the god’s lips turned ever-so-slightly upward. “That child shines with a light that would have made mine father look pale in comparison, and the only reason that light was not snuffed out by thy father is because thou—with no outside prompting or incentive—took it upon thyself to become the keeper of that flame. The goodness in that boy exists only because of thee, and such a fact should bring thee the greatest amount of pride, not shame.”

“I should have taken him away sooner.” Lorian’s words came out in a hoarse whimper. “I should not have let it go on as long as I did. I should have taken him and run a long time ago.”

Gwyndolin’s answering chuckle was a bitter and miserable thing. “Where couldst thou have possibly gone, Lorian? Much about the Kingdom of Lothric has remained a mystery to me, but despite its climate of isolation and xenophobia, there is no doubt in the minds of all that live in this realm that Lothric is the second most powerful of the kingdoms in the Lordran...though, I must admit, I am somewhat biased with mine number one choice.”

Despite the gravity of the conversation, Lorian could not help but chuckle at the last statement, and the crick in Gwyndolin’s lips morphed into a faint yet genuine smile.

“Well, regardless of which of our kingdoms is truly the most powerful, the fact remains that Oceiros has more than enough power to hunt down those that he truly wishes to find. I am sure thou hast imagined, many times in the past, what would have happened if thou hadst attempted to
abscond with Lothric before learning of Irithyll’s location.”

Goosebumps crawled up Lorian’s arms and neck. He felt as if he would vomit. “I have. Oh, Gwyndolin, I have.”

The god’s thumbs stroked Lorian’s strong cheekbones, leaving cool trails in their wake. “It would have been a loss thy father could have never borne. I am not sure of what techniques Oceiros used to create thy brother, but given Lothric’s words to me and the fact that he is a crossbreed while thou art not, I can imagine that he had some hand in moulding Lothric into his ideal image. A Lord of Cinder--a savior touted in every nook and cranny of the kingdom before he had taken his first breath--and the elusive perfect heir that thy bloodline has been grasping at since its inception. An immortal heir--a god and archdragon all in one--that would be able to link the Flame and retain their sanity in the process. With thy brother, Oceiros had neigh limitless power at his fingertips, and if thou hadst tried to take that away from him…”

Lorian swallowed.

“He would have found us. Eventually.” Lorian’s heart thudded in his chest as he imagined, for not the first time in his life, the inevitable ending of such a story. “Before meeting Sirris, there was nowhere in the Lordran where Father’s hands could not reach. If I had left, he would have hunted us. Pursued us relentlessly, on foot and on wyvern, and when he finally caught up to us…”

“…he would have slaughtered thee like a lame horse.” Gwyndolin finished, dropping his hands. “And Lothric would have been left to fend for himself in a world where no one saw him as anything but a means to an end. Thou didst everything thy could, Lorian, but attempting the impossible would have been signing both of thy death warrants.”

Those words should not have affected Lorian as much as they did. In all of the fantasies of fleeing that he had entertained since Lothric was born, they all reached the same tragic conclusion--with Lorian drawn and quartered and Lothric whisked back to his studies, fasting, and praying as he waited for the day of his sacrifice. Yet hearing such finality from Gwyndolin--the purest form of divinity in the flesh; an ancient being brimming with thousands of years of knowledge and wisdom--made the knight commander feel as if he had been flung off of a wyvern’s back mid landing. A gasp punched its way out of Lorian’s throat, and the elder prince quickly clapped his hands over his mouth, glancing down at his brother to make sure the noise hadn’t roused him.

“Wouldst thou like me to carry Lothric to another room?” Gwyndolin whispered. Lorian squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head.
“I do not wish to be apart from him.” The tears he refused to let fall seemed to migrate to his voice. “Not yet. Not after everything that has happened. Not after everything that could have happened.”

Though he knew Lothric would be embarrassed if he ever found out about it, Lorian gently picked his brother up from his lap and cradled the child to his chest with his right arm. Lothric grumbled and shifted in Lorian’s hold, pressing his left cheek into the soft space between Lorian’s right shoulder and clavicle as he reached out with his right hand, anchoring his talons in the bandages wrapped around his brother’s chest before falling still. Gwyndolin failed to lift his sleeve in time to cover his smile.

“In that case, we shall have to be careful to keep our voices down, especially when discussing such... engaging topics.” The Nameless Moon watched as Lorian reached behind himself with his free hand and grabbed his pillow. “Dost thou require any assistance?”

“Oh, no, no! Thank you, but I am fine!” The words came out much more pressured than Lorian had intended, but he could not help it; it was enough for the last True God in the Lordran to care for his brother and sit at his bedside, but if Gwyndolin actually took it upon himself to rearrange his pillow, Lorian would probably implode from the awkwardness of it all. “I just wish to lean back so there is less strain on my left side. Please, not do...no, do not put yourself out on my behalf!”

Mercifully, Gwyndolin did not seem to notice the stumble in his words, simply watching with a raised eyebrow as Lorian propped the pillow against the headboard and shifted himself backwards.

“I can see where little Lothric learned his sense of self reliance.” The god waited until Lorian was settled comfortably against the headboard to speak. “Thou art not used to having the assistance of others, correct?”

The question hit home in a way that made Lorian uneasy, but he did his best to find an answer regardless, reaching out with his free hand to grab the bedcovers and pull them over himself and his brother.

“It is not that I am not used to it.” Lorian avoided Gwyndolin’s gaze as he tucked the blanket around Lothric’s body. “I was a prince, remember? Servants and housestaff were common.”

“Thou speakest as if thou art no longer a prince, even though thine right to the throne didst not cease to exist whenst thou departed the kingdom.” Gwyndolin slowly slid off of the bed and back into his chair, and Lorian suddenly found himself colder than before, even though he was covered up to his lower chest. “Also, thou knowest full well that I was not referring to servants and...
housestaff; thy basic needs may have been tended to, yes, but what of truly important matters?"

“Truly important?”

“Thou hast raised thy brother by thyself, hast thou not?”

Lorian was silent for a long moment. In the House of Lothric, such a question would have been a blatant trap, but something about the Dark Moon’s posture and tone seemed to radiate careful honesty.

“When I was born, I was raised by the handmaidens and the High Priestess, Emma, as was custom for children born to the regents of Lothric.” Lorian’s speech was steady and deliberate as he carefully chose his words. “While Mother was present a great deal more than previous Queens of Lothric had been in the past, mine Father maintained the precedent of minimal involvement with the rearing of a child; I would only ever see him in the evenings when I was very young--if at all--and he did not start taking a personal hand in my affairs until he began instructing me in tactics and warfare.”

Gwyndolin hummed in thought. “Desdimonda was always the most tactile and affable of mine sister’s handmaidens--especially when it came to children. I am not surprised that she decided to take more of an active interest in rearing thee.”

Something slick crawled its way up Lorian’s throat. “You knew my mother.”

“Yes; she was…” Gwyndolin’s eyes darted to the side. “She was kind to me, while others were cold. It was not until Lothric told me her name, however, and that she was a goddess of fertility and bounty that I could pinpoint the resemblance.” The god continued to glance out the window as he folded his hands in his lap--over, and over, and over. “Lothric told me she grew ill after giving birth to him.”

Lorian exhaled one long, shuddering breath. There were so many secrets he had been forced to keep for all of these years--so many stories and suspicions bubbling below the surface--and he was surprised of how eager he was to let them spill from his lips in the presence of the Nameless Moon.

*Besides, the elder prince mused, he has noticed that I am not a crossbreed. He will wonder about the differences between myself and Lothric. He knows that giving birth to a crossbreed is impossible without dragon blood. It is better for him to know now than to discover it at the most*
“Mother’s pregnancy with Lothric was troubled from the start.” Gwyndolin’s eyes drifted back to Lorian as the man spoke.” Father was in the throes of his research back then, and he...Mother told me, in the letters she sent, that Father and the scholars were resorting to ‘drastic means’ to maintain the pregnancy. The next I saw her, it was after she had given birth to Lothric, and she...she was not the same. Not anymore. She was...unable to care for Lothric the way she cared for me.”

Gwyndolin’s gaze fell to his lap. Lorian could have sworn he saw wetness in the god’s eyes.

*He knew my mother,* Lorian realized. *He was fond of her. He may have even loved her.*

“Gwyndolin.”

Both the Nameless Moon and his snakes jumped at the sound of Lorian’s voice, and they looked at the knight with equally puzzled gazes, to the extent that it was almost comical.

“Would you like me to continue with my story. About raising Lothric?”

Gwyndolin blinked away his perturbed expression and nodded, though the snakes continued to look bewildered. “Yes, please, continue.”

“Well, even with Father’s interventions, Lothric was born very weak and very frail. He could fit within both of my palms put together when he was a newborn.” A wistful smile crossed Lorian’s face at the memory. “He was a...a *challenge* that the handmaidens had never before faced. I had been a happy and easy-going sort of infant, but Lothric...he would cough so hard that his lips and cheeks would turn blue, and he run fevers higher than even Emma had ever seen in a child. He would be seized with bouts of colic that would not abate for days, and he was so prone to cold, and so prone to pain...”

A look of nostalgia crossed the Dark Moon’s face. “I was much the same when I was a babe. Chronically asthmatic and cycling between fever and chills. I was lucky, I suppose, that I grew out of the worst of it.”

Lorian chuckled. “Lothric has grown out of some of it himself, but there are some things that will never go away; his joints will always be rheumatic, his limbs always weak, and his constitution...”
always prone to cold and sickness. His skin will be prone to scratching and bruising and his lungs will tighten when breathing in heavy dust and pollen. He will never be able to walk far and for long, and his fingers will forever be unwieldy.”

“Thou dost not seem to mind such things.”

“Why would I? He’s perfect.”

Lorian had expected Gwyndolin to meet his adoring smile with the looks of incredulity and disdain others had given him before, but the Nameless Moon appeared...oddly satisfied, actually. Satisfied and fond...of what, though? Lothric? Himself? No, surely not the latter.

“I take it that many others have been blind to that fact.”

“From the moment of his birth.” Lorian swiped his thumb across Lothric’s brow. “Most in the castle seemed to view him as an object at best and an inconvenient pet at worst. Even poor Emma and the rest of the handmaidens, though they tried to raise him as they raised myself and the kings and queens that came before us, were clueless when it came to handling a child with disabilities. He had feeding difficulties when he was young, and whenever a particularly bad bout of illness would strike, he would cry inconsolably for hours. They were used to children who were more ‘low maintenance’, like I myself had been, and they eventually...gave up on him.”

“Leaving it to thee.” Gwyndolin’s lips pursed in displeasure, but Lorian knew that the displeasure was not directed at him, and he felt a great deal of satisfaction at the fact.

“To be honest, when I first held Lothric in my arms, I knew I wished to help care for him. I can remember--in the days after his birth--rocking him with one arm while reading books on the rearing of children with the left, and when words on paper failed me, I asked the handmaidens for advice. The elder ones--like Emma--refused to teach me, saying that such tasks would ‘degrade my station’, but the younger ones seemed to empathize with me and instructed me on the basics. Much of it, though, was me just...listening to Lothric and doing what felt right. Is it like that for other babies--that they will tell you what they need as long as you are willing to try and understand?”

Gwyndolin smiled and shrugged. “Perhaps. It was the same for minself when I was raising Yorshka, but like thee, mine younger sister is mine only true experience in child rearing. Mayhap thou and I were lucky with the siblings with which fate graced us.”
“*Mayhap.*” Such an old-fashioned word felt strange falling off of Lorian’s tongue. When he was growing up, the elder prince watched how his pedantic father would use ostentatious words and old-fashioned syntax in conversations with everyone, from the loftiest king to the lowliest peasant. Oceiros claimed to have been brought up with a ‘classical vocabulary’ to all who asked, but Lorian had been witness to many a time before an audience or party when his father would scour through dictionary after dictionary, memorizing and muttering overblown words until they could be mistaken for coming ‘naturally’ to him.

It was during one such ‘practice session’ when Lorian vowed that he would *never utilize anything* but the common tongue. The way the prince considered it, words were no good unless as many people could understand them as possible, and he struggled too much with words as it was. Oh, how many screaming fights had Lorian gotten into with Oceiros over his ‘uncouth diction’? How many times had Lorian been forced to listen to his father railing on about how his first son was a ‘useless buffoon’ and a ‘complete and utter imbecile’ for using contractures in official dialogue? It had stung at first, but Lorian soon became used to Oceiros’ constant belittlement, and the knight commander took solace in the fact that, while his words may scatter out of control in his sentences, at least others would understand what they meant.

It was so different when Gwyndolin used them, for it was the tongue in which the god was raised, and it was clear that his speaking in the old dialect had nothing to do with putting on a performance. ‘Mayhap’ did not sound shallow when it came from the Nameless Moon’s mouth, and much to Lorian’s surprise, nor did it sound false when coming from his own. In fact, using it was almost... *fun*.

“After awhile,” Lorian continued, “some of the handmaidens even grew to be *resentful* of how I cared for Lothric. When I first met him after he was born, he stopped crying the moment he was placed in my arms, despite having been wailing without recourse since exiting our mother’s womb. Such a trend continued into the future; while there were inevitably times when my presence was unable to soothe him entirely, Lothric would always grow happier and calmer when I was near, and there were numerous times when my touch seemed to be the only contact he would accept. Believe it or not, some of the handmaidens felt as if he were doing it on *purpose*, and they grew to hate both my brother and myself as the months passed. Most of the handmaidens eventually resigned or were dismissed for attempting to take out their frustrations on Lothric. By the time he turned two, only Emma--the High Priestess--was left of the original contingent assigned to wean and raise him.”

“On purpose…” Gwyndolin’s lips pursed in displeasure. “How in the world would an infant purposely go out of its way to *manipulate* a wet nurse?”

“Only the gods would know…” Lorian snorted. “Then again, I am in the audience with a god at this very moment, and even *he* does not know. So I suppose the question shall forever remain unanswered.”
Gwyndolin flushed. “Oh, hush.”

Lorian quickly snapped his mouth shut.

“Oh, I was not **serious!**” A slender hand shot up to cover the god’s mouth once more. “Honestly, Lorian, if thou art on a first name basis with mineself, then try not to speak to me as if I am some lofty higher power.”

A silver eyebrow quirked upwards. “But...with all due respect, you **are** a lofty higher power, Gwyndolin. As someone who has only ever interacted with the gods in the form of his mother, how should I know when to take your words as those of ‘Gwyndolin’, and when to take your words as those of the ‘King of the Gods’?”

The hand dropped, but the god’s bemused smile remained. “Trust me, Lorian; I shall make it perfectly clear when the situation calls for thee to see me as a god and king instead of a friend.”

*A friend.* Goosebumps washed over Lorian’s bare shoulders as the word echoed in his head. A friend. The last True God in the Lordran had just called Lorian a friend. Had he truly meant it?

Gwyndolin was staring at him as if nothing had happened, but didn’t friendship require more than one solid conversation with someone to develop? It was not as if Lorian was not immensely enjoying his time with the god (which he **was**, surprisingly), but why choose someone such as Lorian as a friend? Gwyndolin was the last True God in the Lordran, the Regent of the Sunless Realms, and the King of the Gods. Lorian was...well, he had once been a prince, but the knight was certain that Oceiros would have his name stricken from the family line as soon as his betrayal was discovered (if it had not been already), and the title of Knight Commander of Lothric’s Standing Forces would be erased along with it. So who was Lorian other than a nobody? All he could hope to become was a simple knight or--lacking any other notable skills--a hard laborer. Yet the last of the pure divinity was sitting before him--graceful and wise and charming and so very **beautiful** -- and, for some unknown reason, said god was regarding the washed up warrior before him as a friend.

Did Gwyndolin not have far more interesting friends than he? How much had Lothric boasted about Lorian’s feats and accomplishments while he slept? Had his little brother--in his adoring effusiveness--somehow given the Nameless Moon the wrong idea about his brother’s character? Gwyndolin knew that he was no longer an ‘official’ prince, yes? It was not that Lorian would not mind being Gwyndolin’s friend, and he would be honored if Gwyndolin truly saw him as such, but of all of the people in the Lordran and beyond to choose, why--
“Lorian.”

It was the concern in Gwyndolin’s voice, more so than the whisper, that drew Lorian’s attention. “Ah, yes, Gwyndolin?” The knight blinked repeatedly as he studied the god, who seemed to be studying him as well. “Is something wrong?”

“Thou art shaking, Lorian.”

“Ah.” It was only then that Lorian realized his arms and shoulders were trembling, and the painful, prickling sensation that preceded numbness was spreading from his fingertips to his elbows. The last thing Lorian needed was to have a panic attack in front of Gwyndolin, so he screwed his eyes shut and did his best to calm his breathing, which had begun to come in quick puffs.

“I am fine.” Lorian answered after a few moments.

“Art thou certain?” If anything, Gwyndolin sounded more concerned than before, which was the opposite of what Lorian wanted. “Perhaps I should send for Doctor Watari…”

Lorian opened his eyes and smiled weakly at Gwyndolin, whose worried frown looked far too hard on such a soft face. Those heterochromic eyes seemed to shimmer in the cool light of the windows.

“It is…it is not a condition with which Doctor Watari can assist, I assure you.” Mercifully, the feeling was starting to return to Lorian’s fingers in the form of splinters of pain, and the knight winced slightly as he shook them out. “Sometimes my…worries get the better of me. The spells come and pass quickly.” Most of the time.

Those shimmering eyes widened slightly in understanding. “Ah. I see.” The corners of Gwyndolin’s mouth relaxed ever so slightly, though he still seemed disquieted. “I suppose I must apologize again. Mine questions and chosen topics of conversation have caused thee even more anxiety than I could have imagined.”

It was hard to not be thrown off by how readily the last True God apologized--especially when the one he was apologizing to was brought up in a household that believed the gods were beyond accountability. Lorian could not help but wonder how Oceiros would react if he witnessed the God of the Moon apologizing for anything--let alone caring for children and snorting in laughter.
“There is no need to apologize, Gwyndolin.” Once the feeling returned to Lorian’s fingers in full, he adjusted his hold on Lothric and shifted himself so that he was sitting as close to the headboard as possible. Sitting with his back as straight would, hopefully, arouse his drowsy brain. “You have every right to ask me questions; after all, Lothric and I are...quite unusual guests, I should say.”

“All the same, we shall have plenty of time in the future to discuss the events that brought us to this point, so there is no need to overwhelm thee from the start.” Gwyndolin smiled softly. “Besides, I have been asking all of the questions, it seems. Thou shouldst have an opportunity to inquire about mineself and mine household in turn.”

Lorian blinked. “Ask...you questions, Gwyndolin? Are...are you sure?”

Gwyndolin snorted yet again. “Lorian, if I was not sure, I would not have said what I said.”

“Oh. Yes.” It was Lorian’s turn to flush. “Well...let me think…”

Gwyndolin waited patiently and with good humor, teasing smirk on his face and hands folded neatly on the book in his lap, as Lorian studied the god and tried to figure out just what he could and should ask such a being. As someone who had waded through countless awkward and trite royal introductions and conversations in his life, Lorian thought he knew how to navigate small talk quite well—but conversing with the most powerful being in the land? Could he even employ the same strategies?

“Do your snakes have names?” Lorian wanted to punch himself in the face the moment the words came out.

Gwyndolin had clearly not expected that question, and the god rocked back in his chair in surprise, eyes popping open as he stared at the knight. The snakes, on the other hand, seemed pleased to have been inquired about specifically; all six of them hissed and wriggled in unison from where they rested on the side of the bed.

“I’m sorry.” Lorian wanted to die. “I did not mean to--”

“As thou just said to mineself, thou hast nothing to apologize for.” A delicate hand reached up and rested at a loose fist against his collarbone. The shock was seemingly wearing off, and rather than being offended, Gwyndolin looked pleasantly surprised. “That is just...it is not the first question others ask about mine snakes--especially during a first meeting.”
“If I have offended you--”

“Hello, Pragma.” Lorian smiled and nodded in greeting at the snake, who bobbed its head back in turn.

“Thou wiltst be able to tell who Pragma is from the black stripe on her snout. She is also quite reticent, so do not take it personally if she shies away from thee; she is even shy around mine sister.” Gwyndolin pointed to the next in line. “This is Philiautia, but thou mayst call her ‘Tia’ for short. It is easy to recognize her, since--as you can see--she is missing her right eye.”

“Oh! She is, isn’t she?” Lorian examined the closed right eyelid and depressed socket of the snake. “Was she born this way, or…?”

“An accident when I was young. She grew quite timid and fearful in the aftermath.” Gwyndolin did not seem to want to elaborate, so Lorian did not press the issue. “Next is Storge. Storge seems to be fond of children--especially mine sister, Yorshka--and his snout is entirely green, aside from the brown patches of scales.”

“They look somewhat like freckles.”

“That is what I thought mineself!” The god’s pleased smile was a treasure that Lorian wished to lock in his memories for the rest of time. “Storge is followed by Ludus; she not only has the biggest head of the six, but possesses the only head that is completely brown in color.” Gwyndolin made sure said snake was not paying attention to him before raising a hand to his mouth and whispering in a conspiratorial manner. “Ludus is also fond of gnawing on the skirts and pant legs of those I am fond of, no matter how much I protest, so mine apologies in advance.”

Lorian could not keep himself from smiling. “I shall keep that in mind.”

Satisfied, Gwyndolin gave Ludus a pat on the head before turning his attention to the snake second from the right. “This troublemaker is Agape. As you can see, Agape’s snout is covered with scars and bare patches, because he has a nasty little habit of attempting to wrap himself around a
person’s ankles, and then hisses and acts mortally offended when he gets stepped on as a result!”

Unaffected by his master’s scolding, Agape lazily flitted their tongue at Lorian, who snickered in response.

“I shall do my best not to step on him myself if such an event occurs.” Lorian reached out and gave Agape a small tap on the head, and the snake coiled up and hissed at the knight in annoyance, making Gwyndolin chuckle. “And the last snake?”

“Philia.” Gwyndolin smirked at the questioning look on Lorian’s face. “Which is why I tend to call Philiautia ‘Tia’ instead of her full name.”

Lorian nodded. “Makes sense.”

“Philia likes to rub against himself against the feet and ankles of others—though, unlike Agape, he does not go so far as to attempt to ensnare them.” Gwyndolin gently cupped Philia’s face in his hands and stroked his thumbs over the reptile’s facial ridges. “He is also fond of Yorshka and likes to play-fight with her tail when given the opportunity. Though his colors are similar to Storge’s, it is easy to tell him apart from the others, simply because…” Gwyndolin held up Philia’s head so Lorian could see the large red spot between its eyes. “...of his unique birthmark.”

“I think I’ve got it.” Lorian worried his lower lip before he began pointing to the snakes himself. “This is...Pragma.”

A grin broke out on Gwyndolin’s face. “Correct.”

“Then Tia, Storge, Ludus, Apa...Agape, and...”

On a whim, Lorian reached out and booped the snake held between Gwyndolin’s thumbs. “Philia.”

Philia flicked his tongue in happiness.

“Correct.” Gwyndolin’s grin was as brilliant as the sun that was his heritage.“Thou art quick on the draw, Lorian.” He released Philia, who immediately went to recline next to his fellows, bathing
in the moonlight streaming through the windows and onto the bed.

The knight chuckled and shrugged his shoulders. “As you well know, when one has to entertain
nobles and dignitaries from all over the Lordran, it is vitally important to memorize their names as
soon as possible, lest you accidentally spark some sort of trade disagreement or war.”

“Indeed.” Gwyndolin snickered.

A brief yet comfortable silence settled between the two as Lorian pondered what to ask next. As he
mentally sorted the possible questions into different piles, his eyes fell repeatedly to the snakes,
and he made sure to internally recite their names at every glance.

“Tell me of your sister.” Lorian finally decided upon. “Her name is Yorshka, correct? Lothric
spoke very fondly of her—which is remarkable, given how suspicious he usually is of children. He
even called her a friend.”

The god’s entire demeanor lit up at the mention of his sister.

“Yes, her name is Yorshka, and she is mine adopted sister. She just turned twelve years a few
months past.” Lorian could not help but admire the way pride and love radiated from Gwyndolin’s
face and voice. “Didst Lothric happen to mention that she is a crossbreed?”

Lorian’s brain jolted like a carriage on a rough road. “He...he did not! Is she a crossbreed? Truly?”

“What did I not just say to thee a few minutes ago? That when I say something, I mean it?”
Gwyndolin chided gently. “Yes, Ser Lorian, mine sister is a crossbreed. Her egg was delivered to
me fifteen years ago, and when it hatched three years after its arrival, I was there to witness it and
hold her in mine arms. I have been devoted to her ever since.”

The Nameless Moon’s voice was so soft, so tender, that it made Lorian’s chest throb with the
sweetest of pains. “I am sure Lothric was most delighted to finally meet another crossbreed, yes? I
hope he did not overwhelm her with questions; he can be chatty and effusive when excited.”

“Oh no! Not at all! Yorshka had just as many questions for thy brother as he had for her, for little
Lothric is also the only crossbreed that she ever encountered.” Gwyndolin hesitated--eyes darting
shyly to the side--before speaking again.
It is actually funny, howst thou mentioned Lothric’s difficulty in making friends his age, because while I try to give Yorshka as many opportunities to interact with children her age as I can, the mortal and godkin children that inhabit Irithyll are often...too intimidated by her appearance and status to engage her in long-term conversation or play, so thine arrival in the city is…” The god swallowed nervously. “…a blessing, if I may say so mineself.”

* A blessing. The Nameless Moon just called our presence in Irithyll an actual blessing. *

“ If our presence in Irithyll is a fraction of the blessing to you and Yorshka as is to Lothric and I,” Lorian’s voice was thick with emotion, “then trust me when I say that I am humbled and honored that it is so.”

Gwyndolin’s shy smile grew sturdier. “ Perhaps thine arrival shall be a boon beyond thine expectations.”

“ Perhaps.” Lorian shrugged; he felt quite small all of the sudden, and he was not quite sure he wanted to figure out why. “ Is Yorshka a goddess like yourself?”

“ That is…” Gwyndolin gave a shrug of his own. “ Forgive me, Lorian, but that is a question with a convoluted answer that may not be much of one at all. It is also an intensely personal one that I am not ready to share--not even with mine dear sister.”

“ I understand.”

“ What I can tell thee, however, is that she is the Heir to the Sunless Realms, and her official title is the Lady of Moonlight. I have presented her as a goddess from the moment I announced her birth, and when I entered her name into the legal record, I entered it as mine direct kin--which, consequently, makes her the direct kin of Gwyn. To all those that lives in the Sunless Realms--as well as the kingdoms and domains with which we interact--she is a goddess on par with mine blood siblings. Does that answer thy question?”

Lorian nodded. “ Very much so. Given the magic she seemed to work on Lothric, I consider her to be no less divine than thyself.”

Gwyndolin fell into a bout of snickering and hid his face with a bell sleeve until it resolved.
“Yorshka is,” The god continued with a voice as mirthful as his laughter, “a creative, lively, and rambunctious child, who sleeps for fifteen hours a day and tries to hit me with her tail when I attempt to wake her before the fifteenth hour. She does her chores before I ask and, since her tenth birthday, has taken up the role of Matron of the Church of the Branching Yew, which has lead to its parishioners and priestesses to call it the Church of Yorshka.”

Lorian’s eyes widened in realization. “I thought her name sounded familiar! That is where Sirris told me to go when we arrived in Irithyll! It appears our paths would have crossed no matter what we encountered on the riverbank.”

“That is what little Lothric said.” Gwyndolin nodded. “The Church of Yorshka is where those who are new to Irithyll, are victims of an unexpected disaster, or who require extra assistance in daily needs go to find assistance. Yorshka’s duties are limited due to her age, but she has gone above and beyond the call of duty many a time, and I have heard nothing but wonderful things about her performance both inside the church and out. That said, as precocious as she may be in many ways, Yorshka is still a girl of twelve, and she--like most children her age--can be bossy and far too forceful with what she wants and believes should be done. She also cries when she grows too frustrated and despises the subject of geography.”

“Lothric adores geography. Perhaps he would be willing to assist her in her studies.”

“If he can get through her stubbornness and hard-headed determination to do everything by herself, then by all means, he is welcome to it.” Gwyndolin leaned back in his chair and tapped his fingers along the hardcover of the book in his lap. “She excels in arts and crafts, and switches to a new artform or medium every other week or so; her most recent fancy has been papercrafts. She has also taken to cooking and baking as of late, and while I am entirely too biased about the matter, her breads and pastries are quite scrumptious.”

“Lothric said that they were quite delicious--as good as any pastry you could get from the royal bakers back at home. He brought me a scone and croissant to eat once I feel hungry enough.”

Gwyndolin flushed at the praise as if it were his own pastries being praised. “Ah, well, yes...I am not sure about equating her baking with that of a royal pastry chef, but I certainly...certainly hope her scones meet the high expectations your brother has set for her.” He cleared his throat and shifted awkwardly in his seat. “Let me see, what else...over the course of the past six years, Yorshka has adopted twenty-three crystal lizards.”

“Twenty-three?!” Lorian’s astonished exclamation was met with yet another laughing bout from Gwyndolin. “Where in the Lordran does she keep them all?!”
“At the building where those devoted to mine worship gather—the Cathedral of the Moon—there is a scenic garden and courtyard that span from behind the cathedral to the rearmost part of the royal residence. Yorshka and I converted the area into what is essentially a large, free-range pen for the lizards, which is where they are content to spend most of their time. Inevitably, however, a few will find their way into the cathedral and the residence, but none have ever managed to escape into Irithyll proper. Yorshka tends to their needs daily: making sure they have plenty of water and food; grooming each lizard in one small aspect every single day; disciplining them in the most ineffectual way possible; and playing with them in between her daily duties and ventures. She even came up with the clever idea to wrap a ribbon of a different color and pattern around each of their necks as a way of identification. It was quite ingenious—especially since she was only six years of age at the time.”

The grin on Lorian’s face felt like a stupid one, but by flame and dark, he found himself beyond the point of caring. “It sounds like Yorshka has her work cut out for her.”

“She does, but she handles it with an admirable amount of aplomb; her determination and enthusiasm are contagious.” A pause. “And I believe I have been rambling on about mine sister for far too long and sound like quite the braggart. Mine apologies.”

The grin remained stubbornly stuck on Lorian’s face. “No need to apologize. After all, I could go on about Lothric for hours if you gave me the opportunity.” The knight’s eyes drifted to the book in the god’s lap. “May I ask another question?”

“Of course.”

“What are you reading?”

“Oh, this?” Gwyndolin held up the book so Lorian could read the title. “It is a narrative nonfiction novel: Of Flame and Deep Waters: A Romanticized Account of the Fall of Heide. It was apparently penned shortly after the kingdom’s collapse by one of its knights, but the story was lost for thousands of years, until it was rediscovered, edited, and published by a stone-trader named Chloanne. The name of the original author is lost to the ages.”

Curiosity piqued, Lorian sat up a little straighter against the headboard, taking care to not jostle Lothric out of his slumber. “Heide? I have heard tales of its still wandering knights...but most of what I have heard of Heide has been speculation. Are you certain that the account is not a work of fiction?”
“As one who not only visited Heide during the height of its glory, but is also well acquainted with both the original manuscript and the one that discovered it, I can assure thee that this book is the only factual account of Heide’s history that has been discovered to date. Unfortunately, while the book is popular in the Sunless Realms, the Eastern Lands, and the Kingdom of Drangleic, it is next to unheard of in the rest of the Lordran. After all, one must have firmly established diplomatic relations before the exchange of goods and culture can occur, and Drangleic is still finding its stable footing after a century of disarray. The only reason the Eastern Lands have access to the book is through our publication trade.”

“No book like that would have ever been published in Lothric.” Lorian leaned forward—well, as far as he could with a glass tube in his side and a child in his arms—and studied the tome’s red, gilded cover. “As you yourself said just a few minutes ago, we are a notoriously isolationist and xenophobic kingdom, and access to foreign books is restricted at best. The only outside tomes Father allows are those that further his research.”

Gwyndolin hummed in thought as he glanced between Lorian and the book.

“Wouldst thou...like for me to read it to thee?”

Lorian choked.

“I...um…” He reached out with his free hand, grabbed the full glass of water sitting on the bedside table, and drank its contents in one go. “Yes. Um. I mean. If...if you want to, yes, I just…” He attempted to set the glass back on the nightstand and ended up all but slamming it on the surface. “Only if...if it is not too much trouble, of course.”

*Well done, Lorian, you flaming idiot.*

Mercifully, Gwyndolin did not comment on the elder prince’s verbal fumbling, only chuckling to himself as he opened the book to the first page and began to read.

Gwyndolin, as it turned out, was an excellent storyteller.
As the sky gradually began to darken from a dusky early twilight to a deep midnight blue, Lorian watched and listened--entranced--as Gwyndolin weaved together a tale of drama, honor, betrayal, and romance. Given his own difficulties with reading and translating written words to speech, Lorian had an appreciation for storytellers and bards on principle, but he found the Nameless Moon to be a particularly engaging tale-teller the likes of which he only saw in taverns and inns on expeditions. Gwyndolin seemed to know just when to alter his voice for the situation on the page: deepening and weighing down his tone during dour moments; adding a spark and a lit to his words during particularly interesting or high-paced scenes; and knowing just when an exclamation of shock or confusion best fit the dialogue. Even during long periods of exposition, the god would use enunciation and shifts in pitch to make even the most droning details ear-catching, and Lorian found himself enthralled by the parts in the book where he himself--struggling to wade through words and letters that would shift and mix into a muddled haze--would have simply given up and stopped reading.

Perhaps he learned his oratory skills from his millennia of existence. Perhaps it was a skill honed from reading to Yorshka. Either way, Lorian found himself adding ‘master storyteller’ to his ever lengthening list of things he liked about Gwyndolin, and the elder prince lost count of the hours as he fell deeper and deeper into the creation and collapse of the mysterious seaside kingdom of Heide.

Lorian was not sure how long he had been listening to Gwyndolin read, but by the time Lothric’s shifting snapped him out of his trance, the sky outside was considerably darker than it was when Gwyndolin began. Said deity paused mid-sentence as Lothric groaned and attempted to sit up, and he closed the book and set it on the ground while Lorian shifted his brother in his arms, moving the child into more of a sitting position as he blinked and blearily rubbed his eyes.

“Welcome back, baby drake.” Lorian smiled down at Lothric and pressed a kiss to the top of his head. “Was your sleep restful?”

“Mmmm…uh-huh.” Lothric rubbed his face against the bandages on Lorian’s chest before looking up at his elder brother. “Did you sleep well?”

“I did.” Lorian brushed a few errant strands of hair from Lothric’s face. “I have been awake for quite some time, however; your friend ‘Lin’ was reading a most interesting book to me before you woke up.”

“Lin?” For a moment, Lothric was clearly confused, and he reluctantly pulled his head away from where it was resting against Lorian’s shoulder to look around the room. It took the child a moment to fully register Gwyndolin’s presence, but when he did, he gasped in delight. “Lin! You’re back!”
Before Lorian could stop him, Lothric had tumbled out of his arms, and the elder prince watched in alarm as the younger prince all but flung himself into Gwyndolin’s arms. For one bone-chilling, sickening moment, Lorian was terrified that Lothric’s forward actions would anger the god, but Gwyndolin simply laughed and tightened his arms around the frail child in a gentle hug, quickly shifting him so that he was sitting securely on his lap. Lorian nearly grew light-headed from his relief.

“Hello to thee, too, Lothric.” Gwyndolin smiled warmly at the child in his lap as his snakes, seeing that their position was likely to soon change, reluctantly slid down the edge of the bed to the floor. “Were thy dreams sweet?”

“I did not have any dreams...at least, I do not think I did.” Lothric hummed in thought as he looked at his brother. “Did I have any dreams, Lorian?”

“None that caused a physical reaction, no.” Lorian felt like he would explode from joy at the sight of Gwyndolin lightly stroking Lothric’s back. To think the child in front of him was the same one who had become so distant and cold towards adults over the past two years! “Gwyndolin has been here since I woke up. We have had quite a pleasant time getting to know one another.”

“You have?” Lothric’s blue eyes widened in excitement, and both Lorian and Gwyndolin laughed as the child scrambled out of the god’s lap and back onto the bed, with Gwyndolin making sure he did not fall through the small gap in between. “You should have woken me, Lorian! I wanted to be the one to introduce you to Lin!”

Lorian’s cheeks felt as if they would split apart from the force of his grin. “My apologies, Lothric, but you desperately needed rest.” He once more wrapped Lothric in his arms as the boy crawled back onto his lap. “Tell you what; when Lady Yorshka comes to visit, you can be the one to introduce me to her. Fair?”

“Fair, but don’t call her ‘lady’ when she comes; she hates it when people are overly formal when it isn’t necessary.” Lothric turned so that his back was pressed to Lorian’s chest, allowing him to divide his attention between his elder brother and the god he already adored. “Well, what do you think of Lin, Lorian? Do you think you can be friends?”

Friends.

Though that very question had nearly caused Lorian to have an anxiety attack only a few hours before, the elder prince found the answer coming to him before he could take another breath, and he found his chest tightening once more with a tender and painful sweetness.
“Yes, Lothric.” Lorian locked eyes with Gwyndolin and mirrored that perfect smile with his own imperfect mouth. “In fact, I believe we already are.”

Chapter End Notes

Lorian: I have never been attracted to anyone in a romantic or sexual manner, so I doubt I will ever fall in love, or if I even WANT to fall in love. My brother comes first in my personal life and I don't think a person exists that would accept the care and attention he requires from me. I'm not very lovable anyways.

Gwyndolin: I have also never been attracted to anyone in a romantic or sexual manner and ALSO do not think I'm very lovable. I also grew up in a household where marriages were miserable political arrangements and, thus, am willingly engaged to someone I do not love for the promise of both religious unity and affection.

::they meet::

Gwyndolin:...

Lorian:...

Gwyndolin and Lorian, simultaneously: what the fuck is this
the world seemed to tell me that i have a plan

Chapter Summary

If there is one thing that Gwyndolin has learned in his many years of existence, it is that one should not ignore the designs of fate. If he had not met Lorian and Lothric on that riverbank, then he would have never discovered the terrible fate of his missing Outrider Knights: to be transformed into mindless beasts and set upon the populace they had sworn by blood to protect; he would never have come to the realization that while Sulyvahn may be his soon-to-be fiancee, it was time for his tenure as acting Lord Commander to come to an end; and he would have never had the perfect replacement practically fall into his lap, clad in bronze armor and brimming with embarrassing yet refreshing honesty.

No, the god is not one to brush aside the whims of fate, though the grief he will receive from Sulyvahn as a result will be legendary. It is time for a changing of the guard, and though Lorian deserved to be the prince that he was, the least the god could do is to make sure his considerable talents are finally appreciated...no matter the cost.

Gwyndolin makes a plan and visits two old acquaintances. Two dragon children find each other in their dreams. Lorian awakens just in time to meet Yorshka and learn a dark truth.

Chapter Notes

Chapter Warnings: Discussion of past kidnapping; discussion of temporary character death; implied emotional (domestic) abuse; implied gaslighting; snake legs; a crossover some Soulsborne purists will find inexcusable because they don't know how to have fun.

Special Thanks: Monzi, for surviving and being amazing in the world's shittiest situation; Iced-Blood, who still pushed through and read this chapter in spite of the hell time he's been having recently, and without who this story would have never happened. I love both y'all nerds.

PS: This chapter is dedicated to Guenhwyvar 'Guen' Castro--a proud, noble, graceful, and loving beast that had the great fortune to be the lifelong and constant companion of one of my best friends, Iced Blood. I never got a chance to meet the amazing creature, but I know he was one heck of a good kitty, and that he will be forever loved and missed. Rest easy, little panther; I hope your afterlife is just as amazing as the life you left behind.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ever since he was a babe, Gwyndolin had experienced a great deal of difficulty sleeping; if he did not have trouble falling asleep, then he would have trouble staying asleep. Sometimes exhaustion
and illness would aid him in finding slumber; other times, they would cause his sleep to be even shallower than normal. Traditional sleep aids—such as lavender, herbal tea, and cooling the room—would only work on occasion, and while medicinal sleeping would succeed in knocking Gwyndolin out if strong enough, the grogginess and drowsiness he felt upon waking would leave him feeling even more fatigued than before.

While the Nameless Moon would welcome the invention of a sleep aid that would allow him the relief he desired, he had long since given up actively hoping for such a thing, and he instead did his best to make do with what sleep he could get. Cat naps during the day helped, as did simply lying in bed at night and resting, with or without accompanying sleep. He would scatter drops of lavender oil on his bedsheets and pillow case, drink cups of lukewarm chamomile tea, and spend many a pleasant hour reading books.

There were times, however, when the full or waxing moon would make him far too restless for such restful remedies. On nights such as those, Gwyndolin would walk the corridors and tunnels of the city he’d built, or—if he felt particularly daring—he would activate his glamour, wear a hooded cloak, and stroll along the snowy streets of Irithyll. Sometimes the god would even stop at one of the tea salons that stayed open throughout the night, and he would order a cup of oolong tea and sit at one of the tables outside, sipping it as he watched equally restless and sleep-deprived mortals strolling through the streets.

Gwyndolin liked to imagine the sorts of lives his citizens were living as he watched them milling about: the portly man clad in a hand-stitched plaid overcoat and using a long wooden catalyst as a walking stick, humming a folk song native to the Protectorate of Delsid; the two little girls walking down the street holding hands, wrapped head to toe in mittens and scarves, giggling about an upcoming trip to the beach just on the southern edge of the Sunless Realms; the tall woman wearing spectacles and a hat topped with a large red pompom, a rucksack full of books slung over her thin shoulders, and her hands cupped around a warm paper-full of still-steaming roasted chestnuts; the middle-aged, rail-thin man in a long, well-loved wool overcoat, red-cheeked and beaming in spite of the pronounced limp on his right side, which was easily explained by the ice skates slung over his shoulder. City guards and Silver Knights would walk by frequently—torches lit and weapons sheathed—and none of them would recognize Gwyndolin underneath his thick robes and hood.

The Nameless Moon preferred it that way—preferred the brief anonymity afforded to him by his insomnia, a rare moment of peace when he could simply exist as himself without being anyone’s brother, parent, leader, or god. Solitude when surrounded by people was a surprisingly pleasurable thing, and even if Gwyndolin could wave a catalyst and magically fix his sleep cycle, he could not help but be glad for the places his sleeplessness drove him to tread. Those journeys calmed and settled him when nothing else could.

On the night of Lothric’s and Lorian’s arrival, Gwyndolin’s sleeplessness drove him down one of the quieter side streets in the artisanal district, clad in a deep violet wool cloak that he had found by chance during his earlier closet-rummaging. That night was unusual, however, in that Gwyndolin
was completely and utterly exhausted. Though he had sufficiently recovered from his illness before going on the hunt for the beast, the excursion had been exhausting on a physical and mental level, and the god even had to keep himself from yawning when leaving Lothric and Lorian’s room that night. Yorshka had never reappeared to meet the elder prince, and Gwyndolin had found her asleep on the couch in the sitting room upon his return from the guest wing, surrounded by a veritable blizzard’s worth of paper scraps, and covered with six crystal lizards using her as a scaly bed. The excitement of the day had seemingly come upon her unawares while she was making a gift for Lorian, and Gwyndolin decided that she looked far too peaceful and comfortable to rouse. Thus, the Nameless Moon dutifully cleaned up the scraps, arranged the intact designs and supplies in a neat pile on the tea table, and covered his sister and the lizards with a warm afghan.

Gwyndolin had wanted to go to bed himself—wanted to simply bury himself in his sister’s sheets and his brother’s blanket and sink into one of those rare instantaneous and dreamless slumbers that he so coveted. The god knew himself, however, and he knew he would be plagued with restlessness and nightmares if he went to bed with the encounter with the beast running through his mind. So Gwyndolin pulled out the cloak he had found when looking for an outfit for Lothric, pulled some warm wool slippers on over his glamoured feet, and left a note for Yorshka on the tea table with her art supplies. A quick detour down to the kitchens led to the remains of the night’s ramen being split between, and wrapped into, two leather pouches, which Gwyndolin strapped to the cinch at his waist; he then tucked his heavy coin purse, handkerchief, and catalyst securely between the cinch and his robe. Once he was satisfied that he had everything he needed, Gwyndolin made his way through the darkened tunnels, emerging in the storehouse next to the Church of Yorshka for the second time that day.

*It called you ‘Your Majesty.’*

Those words looped through Gwyndolin’s head as he made his way through the winding streets. Around and around they went—like wool twisting into yarn on a spinning wheel—and no matter how desperately he tried to outrun them on his sore legs, the words clacked along with the heels of his boots against the cobblestones.

*It called you ‘Your Majesty.’*

Oh, if Lorian had been any other being, Gwyndolin would have doubted the truth of his words! After all, the knight had been battered about by the beast, and he had been delirious with blood loss and lack of breath by the time Gwyndolin intervened. If it had been any other mortal who’d shown up on his doorstep, the god would have wondered if they had simply hallucinated the words on the edge of unconsciousness—or had, perhaps, even dreamed them up in an opium-induced sleep during surgery.

Yet Lorian...there was something about Lorian…
It called you ‘Your Majesty’...and it asked you for help.

Gwyndolin liked to believe that his years spent mired in cutthroat courts and manipulative monarchies had made him an excellent judge of character. He could read even the most cunning of liars, pick apart the slightest bit of hesitation in one’s words, and detect the slightest bit of uncertainty in speech. He rarely trusted, if at all, and it was a monumental task for one to earn it. Good heavens, Sulyvahn had only been in Irithyll for two years, yet it had taken him a year to earn Gwyndolin’s complete confidence, and the other for Gwyndolin to have enough confidence to tentatively accept his proposal of courtship and future marriage. It was true, now, that Sulyvahn held his complete confidence...but he was such a rarity that, while Gwyndolin did not love him in the traditional sense, he held the corvian close to his heart all the same. He could count the still-living beings in whom he had absolute faith on two hands: his siblings were on the list, of course, as was his dearest Yorshka; yet before the events of that day, there had been only four sentient beings outside of his family that he could trust without hesitation.

It had only taken twenty-four hours, however, for that number to jump to six.

Though they looked so very different and had such different temperaments, one personality trait that Lorian and Lothric both shared was their complete lack of guile. It was not even that they were unable to lie or put on an act; it was clear to Gwyndolin that the brothers simply did not want to lie—that they had grown up in a court of liars and manipulators and chose not to continue to the cycle now that they had escaped said environment. It was clear that Lorian himself had doubted what he had seen and heard (something that, Gwyndolin feared, had become commonplace in the House of Lothric), but given both the character of the knight and what Gwyndolin had learned from the preliminary autopsy results on the beast, the Nameless Moon had no reason to believe that Lorian’s ears had deceived him.

Yet, in believing in Lorian’s words, Gwyndolin found himself face-to-face with a horrific reality that he could scarcely bear to contemplate.

It called you ‘Your Majesty.’

For months now, Gwyndolin had been faced with a curious mystery that he had been unable to solve: the Outrider Knights tasked with patrolling and guarding the border of the Sunless Realms had started going missing without a trace—neither returning to Irithyll for scheduled check-ins, nor having been seen with the mayors and governors of the outlying provinces they had been sent to protect. It had been a contentious point between himself and Sulyvahn of Ariandel, Acting Lord Commander of the Standing Forces of the Sunless Realms, and it was a failing of the Patriarch’s that Gwyndolin had been unable to forgive; how does one lose the knights under their command, not once but over and over again?! Sulyvahn simply believed they had abdicated to other lands, and
Gwyndolin countered that he himself had picked only the most loyal of his soldiers to become Outrider Knights, and while some Outrider Knights had decided to leave Irithyll for the lands on the outskirts, they had always made sure to report back to Gwyndolin and ask for his blessing beforehand. If they had voluntarily left, Gwyndolin had asked, then why were their family members and friends just as confused as the Nameless Moon? Why had every single vanished knight been reported missing by concerned loved ones? Why had they not sent word to those that would worry for them?

Sulyvahn had countered that Gwyndolin was overreacting; that he was always seeing molehills as mountains, and that he had a nasty tendency of jumping to hasty and unfeasible conclusions. While Gwyndolin had conceded that he did indeed possess such an unseemly flaw, he refused to believe that the disappearance of some of the Sunless Realms’ best warriors was his seeing things that weren’t there, and he had begun secretly searching for a candidate to replace Sulyvahn as Acting Lord Commander. While he had been grateful for the corvian voluntarily stepping in to fill the position after Holy Knight Hodrick’s retirement, it had become clear to Gwyndolin that the Patriarch did not have the mindset for the job, nor the ability to successfully juggle being the Patriarch of the Deep and the Lord Commander all at once.

However, the Nameless Moon knew that replacing Sulyvahn would not bring the missing Outrider Knights back, and he had poured countless resources and as many Blades as he could spare into an extensive search that had proven fruitless. It had led to many a sleepless night of worry for Gwyndolin, who did not like the fact that his citizens had started vanishing into thin air, and who could not escape his feelings of guilt for having failed to protect them as a god and a sovereign should. For the life of him, though, he could not figure out where the missing knights could have gone!

...Until that day, when Gwyndolin had come to the sickening realization that the reason his search has been unsuccessful was because he had sent his Blades in search of men, not monsters.

*It asked you for help.*

Though it would take a far more rigorous autopsy to determine the true identity of the monster, Gwyndolin was willing to stake his life on the hypothesis that the beast had once been an Outrider Knight. After all, not only was it wandering in the area around Irithyll, but it knew who Gwyndolin was, even though he had not been clothed in the “religious” outfit he wore in public. The only ones who knew Gwyndolin outside of the hood and cloak were those whom he had met with personally, and those persons were limited to his Blades, the Silver Knights, and those he personally vetted for the position of Outrider Knight. It was only during those audiences that Gwyndolin wore the golden sunset crown that he had crafted to replace the sunlight crown of his youth, and the fact that the god—on a whim—had chosen to wear it on the hunt had been surprisingly fortuitous. The monster knew him beyond the god that appeared in the Cathedral of the Moon and the sovereign that made public speeches and appeared in parades, and since Gwyndolin had long held the habit of keeping methodical track of the location of each of the Blades of the Darkmoon, he knew that all of his covenant members were where they were supposed to be. That left the Silver Knights and
the Outrider Knights, and since the Silver Knights never had any cause to leave the city limits, the only possibility remaining for the monster’s identity was that of an Outrider Knight.

*It called you ‘Your Majesty’ and it asked you for help.*

Gwyndolin cursed under his breath and ground his teeth together as he stalked down a side alley. Curse Sulyvahn and his lackadaisical approach as Acting Lord Commander! As unfair as it was—Gwyndolin knew logically that there was no possible way Sulyvahn could have predicted the capture and transformation of the Outriders by some unknowing being or group—the god could not help but stew over the fact that, had Sulyvahn bothered keeping stricter tabs on where and when the knights were stationed, they might have potentially identified the malevolent force before the situation spiraled out of control. As it was, there were over a dozen Outrider Knights unaccounted for, and Gwyndolin could not help but wonder how many of them had been transformed and let loose onto the unsuspecting populace. How many Outrider Knights were now nigh-mindless beasts? How many of his citizens were at risk? How many citizens of the outlying kingdoms and realms were at risk?

Against Gwyndolin’s will, his brain began to ponder what such transformation from man to beast would entail, and the god nearly stumbled to the ground at the gruesome and gory images his imagination produced. The Nameless Moon wanted nothing more than to double up and vomit right then and there, but he refused to risk such a humiliating public display, so he swallowed down the nausea and kept walking.

*Sulyvahn has to go.* Gwyndolin all but ramrodded his thoughts onto another topic. *He may remain commander of the Outrider Knights—since he has spent more time training them than he has the standard forces—but he can only do so under the supervision of a capable Lord Commander, for he is unsuitable for the job.* The thought of the Patriarch’s reaction to his demotion upon his return to Irithyll made Gwyndolin groan, but he clenched his fists at his sides and kept his resolve steadfast. *Sulyvahn’s role as Lord Commander was always meant to be a temporary one—a fact I made clear to him from the start—and as much as I appreciate his willingness to step in and help me during a trying and overwhelming time, it is time for a more fitting party to permanently take up the mantle.*

Alas, there had been no one in the Sunless Realms that had been qualified enough to replace Sulyvahn, let alone fill the shoes of Holy Knight Hodrick of the Sunless Realms. Yet while that fateful day had brought more than its share of trials and tribulations to Gwyndolin’s doorstep, it had also all but dropped a fitting Lord Commander at his feet, and the god was not one to ignore such blatant designs of fate.

*Lorian was personally instructed by Holy Knight Hodrick himself.* A smile, unbidden, formed on Gwyndolin’s lips. The nausea settled from a stormy sea into a calm lake. *From what I had heard of the Kingdom of Lothric before his arrival, he was a kind, steadfast, and unparalleled Knight...*
Commander—a leader praised by every expatriate mine Blades have met—and if his skill in tactics is as exemplary as the skill he showed today in combat, then I could not think of a more fitting Lord Commander. Besides, I refuse to allow Lorian to be punished for putting his younger brother above his royal position, and his talents—if the rumors are true—would be wasted as a layperson.

The god nodded in greeting at a couple walking past him on the street, who smiled and returned the gesture without a second thought. If only they knew who they had just passed on their way home!

I shall have to test Lorian, of course—see his abilities with mine own eyes. Gwyndolin knew just how to do it, too, and the queasiness in his stomach was replaced with a bubbling excitement at the thought. It will have to wait until he has recovered, of course, but I cannot afford to wait for Sulyvahn’s return before doing so. The longer the standing forces go without a proper Lord Commander, the more at risk they will become, especially if whatever is poisoning the Outrider Knights begins to spread to the interior of the Sunless Realms. I can only hope that Sulyvahn will forgive me for the horrible shock he will experience upon his return!

Fortunately for Gwyndolin, despite his deep musings, his jerry-rigged legs knew exactly where to go. A right turn down a common street and a slip down a narrow side alley later (for the sake of privacy), the god found himself on one of the main streets of the Kinon area of the Easterners’ district, and his steps took him back to raucous bars and the occasional far more subdued late-night teahouse. Given the lateness of the hour, most of the stores and marketplaces had closed for the evening, and the establishments that remained open catered specifically to restless youth and civil workers coming off of the evening shift or onto the night shift. A group of dockworkers huddled around a ramen stall, chatting and laughing animatedly as they slurped their miso-flavored noodles, and a group of teenage girls were crammed into one of the benches lining the street, picking at some freshly sauced and roasted So-yuen style barbecued pork as they engaged in some sort of lively debate about the most clandestine ways of poisoning a person. Gwyndolin could have offered his own suggestions on that subject, but he was unsure of their ultimate intentions, so he simply continued down the street after a lingering look. It did not matter, really; as long as their intentions were good and honorable, he would wish them well all the same.

Though Irithyll was well-hidden amongst the kingdoms of the Lordran, Gwyndolin made it a point of cultivating amicable relations with the realms outside of the boundaries of his father’s lands, and some of his most successful diplomatic and trade partnerships had been with the numerous nation-states that made up the amorphous “Eastern Lands.” As such, Irithyll had become home to many an Eastern immigrant looking for a change of climate or a new life, and transient workers would drift between the continents on the tides of changing seasons. The “Eastern District” was an informal name for the section of the city in which most Easterners decided to settle, yet the area itself was split into a myriad of cultural “centers,” where persons from the same nation-state would work, play, and live in semi-familiarity. The area Gwyndolin had found himself in was where a majority of those from the Kingdom of Kinon—temporary workers, expatriates, visitors, and diplomats—would take up residence, set up shop, or simply search for the familiar comforts of home. Despite the lateness of the hour, the air was thick with not only the sound of the diverse dialects of Kinon, but the distinctive smells of Kinonese food and drink.
There was once a time when Gwyndolin would have ducked into any teahouse that was empty and quiet for a cup and some peace of mind. That had long since changed, however, and the Nameless Moon found himself seeking out the same specific teahouse he had been visiting for the past one-and-a-half years. It was a smaller, yet popular, establishment near the northmost end of the main street, where the crowded and modern houses of an urban city scattered into the rustic and homey cottages of a fishing village, and the cobblestone road would soon terminate at the small cluster of warehouses and fisheries adjacent to the docks. Before the Everblossom had opened its doors, the dockworkers, longshoremen, and fishermen that worked on the river would have to travel a ways into the city to enjoy traditional Kinonese teas and wagashi, so the chashitsu had become a local staple almost immediately after it first opened its doors.

Offering the owners a plot in such an “undesirable” location had been a calculated move on Gwyndolin’s part but, for all of the god’s failings, he could at least pride himself on knowing the capital of his kingdom like the scales on his snakes, and he knew that the teahouse would be meeting the long-standing needs of some of Irithyll’s hardest workers. The Nameless Moon had been right, of course; money was soon flowing through the Everblossom like the waters of the Boreal River, and while other teahouses and restaurants had tried to capitalize on the teahouse’s success, they had dried up or been driven out almost as soon as they had set up shop. After all, the Kinonese were a loyal people, and such loyalty was neither earned nor shaken easily.

While the Everblossom would sometimes close after lunch, Gwyndolin could see that the light on in the teahouse, and the hand-painted sign hanging on the sliding doorway read “open” in bright red characters. As quiet as a whisper, the god slipped through the unlocked gate and entered the garden surrounding the chashitsu, all but tiptoeing down the stone path leading to the porch. Though it was still early spring, the Boreal wisteria, twined around the trelices and support posts of the teahouse’s patio, were already in full bloom, and the frosted blue blossoms seemed to shimmer in the light of the open windows. While Gwyndolin prefered the smell of lavender and lilacs, he could not deny that the scent of Boreal wisteria was pleasing in its own right, and he paused at the edge of the patio to take a few appreciative breaths.

Once the god had bathed his lungs in the almost fruity fragrance, he crossed the patio and peeked through one of the windows flanking the front door, checking to see if there were any other patrons inside. Only one of the owners was present, and Gwyndolin smiled to himself as he slid the front door open and walked inside, releasing his glamour as he went.

While most of the “reputable” chashitsu in the central Kinon District leaned more towards the “formal” tea ceremony, Everblossom had found great success in combining both the casual model of a bar and restaurant with the traditional style of chanoyu unique to the region of Kinon from which the owners hailed. Half of the main room was divided into low tables with cushions for sitting, whereas the other half was taken up by a long countertop and tall chairs, allowing patrons a choice as to their style of dining. The sliding door behind the countertop lead to the kitchen, and a door at the back lead to a series of smaller ‘private’ tea rooms, where private gatherings and formal ceremonies would take place.
The salon’s only occupant—a man in his late twenties to early thirties, clad in his usual outfit of brown hemp shirt and leggings, brown boots, and long red coat—was sitting at the countertop, sipping a still-steaming cup of tea, and he turned to look at Gwyndolin has he entered. His face was handsome and haggard all at once—coarse and brown from long exposure to the elements, with quiet and observant brown eyes—and a small white swath seemed to cut through the left side of his black topknot, the color seeming to spread into the skin of his left temple before bleeding into the skin around his left eye.

“Gwyndolin-sama.” The man nodded in greeting at the god, who paused at the doorway to let his snakes extend and stretch. “It has been some time.”

“Not terribly long, Wolf; both thou and Kuro visited during mine illness a few weeks past, remember?” Gwyndolin sighed and smiled exhaustedly at the memory. “I do not suppose thou hast any tea left?”

“This is a teahouse.” As usual, the shinobi gave the answer in a deadpan voice that could indicate either sarcasm or genuine honesty, making Gwyndolin snort. “Miko-sama prepared a new sweet for the customers today; I believe there are a few left, if you would like to try.”

“I would love to.” Gwyndolin glanced towards the door leading to the side patio. “Would it be possible to sit outside? I believe the fresh air would do me a great deal of good, but if thou hast already brought in the cushions and tables—”

“Kuro asked me to leave a table outside. He had a feeling you would be coming to see us today.” Wolf sighed and hopped off of the barstool with a tired sort of grace. “I will bring the tea and the sweets out shortly.” A beat. “I would like to join you, if you do not mind.”

“Not at all; in fact, I would have requested thine presence if thou hadst not offered it.” With that, Gwyndolin turned and slithered towards the outside door, enjoying the soft and cooling sensation of the snakes sliding on the tatami mats. He could hear Wolf opening and closing the door to the kitchen and found he could not keep the smile from his face.

*It has been almost two years*, yet Wolf is still referring to Kuro as “Miko-sama.” *I suppose some things shall never change.*
While Gwyndolin had long been in the habit of avoiding personal involvement in the affairs of those who came to Irithyll, there had been two recent exceptions to that unspoken rule, with Lothric and Lorian being the most recent incident. One-and-a-half years before, strange dreams of a pale child from a far-away land had led Gwyndolin to order Sirris—one of his most decorated and dependable Blades of the Darkmoon—to a small seaside village on the eastern border of the Sunless Realms. There, she had joined forces with two Outrider Knights—Karam, a dancer who had become a knight after an injury prematurely ended her career, and who had recently become engaged to Sirris; and Vordt, Karam’s adoptive brother and constant companion—and freed the child from the clutches of a group of bandits and unscrupulous officials from Kinon’s Interior Ministry. At first, it appeared to be a case of human trafficking across international borders, but the very fact that Gwyndolin had dreams of the child had led him to meet them face to face once they were brought to Irithyll.

It did not take the Nameless Moon long to learn that the child, whose name was Kuro, was the only survivor of an ancient clan that had been driven to the brink of extinction by other Kinonese clans who sought the power of their “heritage.” Though Kuro possessed no draconic features at all, Kuro was no less a crossbreed than Yorshka, and the draconic blood running through his veins granted him the immortality that Seath the Scaleless had once so desperately coveted. Unusually, the immortality of those of the Dragon’s Heritage could be passed to others by way of an oath, which led to centuries of them being hunted, captured, and tortured by those who wished to use their powers in the name of their own greed and grasping for power. After the deaths of his parents, he had been adopted by the Hiratas—a cadet branch of the rogue nation of Ashina—and had been put under the protection of a rogue shinobi known as Wolf. During the short time Kuro lived at the Hirata Estate, he and Wolf had grown close, and they had planned on fleeing from the continent of Kinon altogether in order to escape from those seeking to use Kuro for their own gains.

Unfortunately, the night that the Wolf snuck out to the city to obtain tickets for their passage on the ship to Lordran was also the night that agents from the Interior Ministry made their move, leading a group of bandits to the Hirata Estate to capture Kuro for themselves. The entirety of the Hirata Estate was razed—the bandits raping and pillaging without any regard for human life—and while the Hirata family fought valiantly alongside their guards, servants, and workers to protect their young ward, it did not take long for them to be cut down by both the shinobi and the shinobi hunters enlisted by the Ministry. Though their actions bought enough time for Kuro to hide in the temple hidden below the Hirata Estate, he was soon discovered by the legendary shinobi known as Lady Butterfly, who wove a web of traumatic illusions in an attempt to make Kuro willingly bestow his gift of immortality to her.

Before she could succeed, however, the Wolf—who had returned to the estate only to see it burning to the ground—burst into the temple and stood between his ward and Lady Butterfly. The ensuing fight between Wolf and his old teacher—whom he faced down without even a moment’s hesitation—led to Lady Butterfly’s death, but when Kuro emerged from where he had been hiding, he found his shinobi prone and dying on the ground, having apparently been stabbed in the back at
the fight’s conclusion. Desperate to save the only person left in the world who truly loved and cared for him, Kuro ended up breaking his most personal and sacred vow: to never pass the “curse” of the Dragon’s Heritage onto a mortal. Almost immediately after Kuro had performed the rite, the temple had been stormed by the Ministry’s agents, and he had been ripped away from Wolf before he could see if he had been successful in saving his life. Leaving the fallen shinobi for dead, the Ministry agents decided that the best way to flee the ensuing wrath of Isshin Ashina and his grandson and heir, Genichiro, was to briefly transport and hold Kuro in the Sunless Realms—with whom the Interior Ministry was on friendly economic and political terms—and keep him there until the Ashina clan had given up their pursuit and they could safely transport him to the seat of the shogunate.

Though Kuro did not know the exact details of what the Ministry had planned to do to him in order to obtain the Dragon’s Heritage, both he and Gwyndolin knew that nothing good would come of Kuro being sent back to Kinon, so the Nameless Moon had allowed the child to stay in the guest wing until he figured out the best way to go forward with the situation.

Fortunately for both Kuro and Gwyndolin, the answer soon came in the form of the Wolf, who all but crashed through the royal household several days after Kuro’s arrival in search of his charge. Though the act of raising him from the dead had caused Wolf to lose most of his memories from his time at the Hirata Estate, he had been driven by a burning desire to protect the lord he barely remembered, and he tracked the remaining bandits to the fishing village on the border, where they—fearing for their lives and unwilling to fall on the sword for the Ministry—had shoved a talisman in the hand not holding that sword and directed him to Irithyll. It had been a simple matter of Gwyndolin using his powers to cure Wolf’s amnesia, and after he and Kuro had reunited in full, they came to the decision that, with their home destroyed and their home country literally out for Kuro’s blood, they would be settling in Irithyll indefinitely. After Gwyndolin learned of Kuro’s love of making sweets and his desire to open a teahouse, he had located a vacant property for he and Wolf to set up shop, and he assisted them with both construction and living expenses until they began making enough money to survive.

Since them, Gwyndolin had taken to visiting the Everblossom whenever he could, and both Wolf and Kuro would visit the royal residence from time to time (much to Sulyvahn’s chagrin, who did not approve of Gwyndolin being so “flippantly casual” with his citizens, and who was constantly frustrated by Wolf’s ability to scale the walls and seek out the god himself whenever the patriarch tried to bar the way). Yorshka and Kuro enjoyed playing together whenever they had the opportunity, and Wolf had even taken it upon himself to teach Yorshka basic swordsmanship, which the girl had taken to with her usual boundless enthusiasm and hard-headed persistence. Though Gwyndolin knew he would eventually have to choose between his political relationship with the Interior Ministry and Kuro’s asylum, it had so far been easy to play mum whenever Kinonese diplomats came to visit, and when the day of decision came...well…

Gwyndolin sighed as he settled on one of the cushions surrounding the one low table on the side porch. In accordance with Kuro’s “prediction,” a small brazier had already been lit and set on the side closest to the door, and the snakes slithered and curled around their host so that their heads were resting as close to its heat as possible.
Gwyn would not have offered Kuro and Wolf shelter in the first place, Gwyndolin reflected, gazing up at the star-speckled sky and perpetual moon of the Sunless Realms. In fact, Gwyn would have immediately alerted Kinonese officials as soon as he learned of their status as fugitives, and he would have personally seen the pair thrown on the first boat back to the continent. It truly was a shame, then, that Gwyndolin had the nasty little habit of doing the exact opposite of what his father would do in any situation. A shame. Truly.

Gwyndolin was disturbed from his musings by the sound of the door sliding open, and he turned his head to see Wolf stepping onto the patio, balancing a tea tray on his free hand with the impeccable coordination of his trade.

“Apologies for the wait.” Wolf grunted, setting the tray on the table before settling himself across from Gwyndolin, choosing to sit cross-legged on the cushion instead of kneeling. “I wished to check on Lord Kuro first.”

“I suppose he shall not be joining us?”

“The Divine Heir has been struggling with allergies for the past week. The coughing leaves him tired.” As Wolf spoke, he placed a teacup in front of Gwyndolin and filled it with a strong green tea that smelled of honey and lime peel. “Though this morning was slow because of your proclamation, the evening was filled with those wanting to talk to as many other people as possible, so he took his bath and went to bed as soon as the last customer left.”

“Ah, mine apologies.” The proclamation, of course, had been Gwyndolin’s announcement that a man-eating beast was on the loose near Irithyll, and that the citizens of both the inner city and the outlying regions should stay home if at all possible until the threat had been dealt with. The god had not wanted any further loss of life on his watch.

“You did what had to be done,” Wolf said simply, filling his own cup before setting the teapot to the side. He pulled two plates off of the tray—one of white mochi, the other of egg-brushed buns made of rice flour—and set them in the middle of the table. “I had actually promised to take Kuro hunting this morning, but we decided to stay at home instead, and I helped him work on his new sweets.”

“Which are?”

Wolf set the tray to the side before pushing the plates towards Gwyndolin. “Left is daifuku. Right
is Qinjiang-style sweet buns. It’s the filling that is unique.”

“Hmm.” Gwyndolin picked up one of the filled mochi with his right hand and gave it a soft squeeze, appreciating the soft texture and firm spring underneath his fingertips. “Is it good?”

“Of course it is.” Wolf raised an eyebrow. “It is delicious.”

“Of course.”

With that, Gwyndolin took a bite out of the mochi, eyes widening at the sweet and tangy burst of flavor against his tongue. “It is...strawberry...and persimmon?”

“Yes. We stewed them together with some honey and lemon juice. The persimmons came off of the boat from Kinon yesterday.” Wolf watched with quiet satisfaction as Gwyndolin all but devoured the rest of the daifuku. “You like it?”

“I love it.” With an eagerness that would have embarrassed him, had the wagashi been any less delectable, Gwyndolin picked up one of the sweet buns and slowly tore it in half, admiring how the yellow and pink filling shone like a polished stone in the soft light of the gas lamps surrounding the porch. He popped one of the halves into his mouth and was seconds away from licking his fingers before remembering himself.

“You are doing better today,” Wolf commented as Gwyndolin swallowed.

“Am I?” Gwyndolin picked at the soft corners of the other half of the bun in his hands.

“It’s rare to see you eat so eagerly. Even when Kuro and I came to visit while you were ill, you only picked at the rice porridge we brought, even though you said it was delicious.”

“It was delicious. I just could not stomach anything at that time.” Gwyndolin chuckled before popping the other half of the bun in his mouth, eyes fluttering appreciatively as the sticky persimmon and strawberry filling coated his tongue, and he pointedly ignored the amused look on the shinobi’s face as he ate.
“I have been active, today, is all.” Gwyndolin made sure to swallow before speaking. “I had quite the eventful morning, and I believe I have finally fully recovered from my most recent bout of weakness, so my appetite has increased as a result.”

“Not just that.” Wolf watched as the god picked up his teacup and took a long sip. The shinobi had made the brew just as the Nameless Moon liked it—plain, fresh, and strong—and he was pleased to see his shoulders relax as he drank. Gwyndolin more than deserved whatever peace he could find. “There is a lightness to your expression that I have never seen before.”

Gwyndolin set his teacup back on the table and chuckled humorlessly. “I cannot imagine why—not after what I have discovered today.” He filled his teacup and took another long drink. “That maneater I hunted down today...it was once a human being.”

Wolf’s eyes widened.

“How do you know?” The warrior’s voice came out as a hoarse whisper.

“We found rings on the creature’s ‘fingers’ during the initial examination of its corpse.” Gwyndolin’s long fingers clung tightly to the teacup, attempting to soak up the warmth radiating through the glazed porcelain. “Human rings. The creature could wield lightning, which only godkin, humans, and pygmies have been able to do, to date. And it spoke.”

Wolf’s own teacup paused halfway to his mouth. “Spoke?”

“Yes. It recognized me—asked for mine help.” The fruity sweetness clinging to Gwyndolin’s tongue was quickly overwhelmed by the bitterness creeping up from his throat. “It recognized me with mine crown on, Wolf.”

“Which means?”

“The only ones that have seen mine crown outside of mine inner circle have been the Outrider Knights.”

Realization dawned on Wolf’s face. “The same ones that have been going missing as of late?”
“Yes.” Gwyndolin swigged down the last of his tea, relieved when the pleasant bitterness of the liquid washed away the acerbic taste of sick. “I do not know if the other missing knights have met the same fate, but given we have been searching for them for weeks without any trace, I cannot help but fear the worst.”

“Either transformed or dead…” Wolf muttered grimly, sipping deliberately at his own cup. “I can only hope that the rest of your knights perished—quickly and painlessly.”

Cold needles pricked their way up Gwyndolin’s arms and neck. “As do I.”

“How many are still unaccounted for?”

The needles stabbed their way down Gwyndolin’s back. “Nineteen.”

Silence. Wolf cast his eyes down to the cup resting in his hands.

“...I am sorry, Gwyndolin-sama.”

“Do not be.” The god shook his head back and forth, his hood falling down as he did; he did not bother to pull it back up over his eyes. Of the six “mortals” Gwyndolin could trust unconditionally, the Wolf was one of them. “Though it would violate Sulyvahn’s purview, I am tempted to immediately recall the Outrider Knights to Irithyll, at least so that we may properly assess the threat.”

“Do it, if you believe it is right.” Wolf’s reply was instantaneous. “You are the god of this realm, Gwyndolin-sama, not Patriarch Sulyvahn.”

A wry smile crossed Gwyndolin’s lips. “I am already appointing a new Lord Commander while he is attending to the emergency at the Cathedral of the Deep. I am reluctant to rub even more salt into his proverbial wounds be seizing more of his authority.”

*That* detail seemed to pique Wolf’s interest, and the *shinobi* he set down his teacup before leaning forward, resting an elbow on the table. “A new Lord Commander. Is it the injured knight you carried into the royal residence after returning from your hunt?”
Gwyndolin startled, nearly dropping the daifuku he had just picked up. “How didst thou know of Lorian?”

“Lorian? Is that his name?” Wolf leaned backwards and loosely crossed his arms across his chest. “One of the fishmongers, whose son is apparently a Silver Knight, was going on about how you and several of your men had gone to hunt the beast. I figured that you would use the most remote exit to slip out unawares, so I made up the excuse of wanting to fish something up for dinner to go to the marshlands surrounding the western gate.”

“I see.” The Nameless Moon took a deep breath and bit off another chunk of mochi. “And what didst thou see, loyal Wolf?”

“The God of the Moon crossing the ‘abandoned’ western accessway, carrying what appeared to be a child in his arms, bundled up so that I could not see. Two Silver Knights following, one carrying an injured knight in bronze armor, the other dragging the corpse of some large creature a few paces behind. Oh, and there were several nice trout swimming about; I managed to catch one and grilled it for dinner.”

Despite his annoyance in having been spied on, Gwyndolin could not help but laugh at the bit about the fish, and he rolled his eyes as dramatically as possible to let the slightly uneasy shinobi know that he was not in trouble (then again, even if he were, the Nameless Moon doubted Wolf would care overly much).

“Sulyvahn is going to run thee through one of these days if thou keepest sneaking in unannounced.”

“He is welcome to try.” Wolf took a sip of tea and scoffed. “Do not worry about Sulyvahn. If you feel that you must act, then act. Gods should not worry about the opinions of mortals when they believe they are right.”

A snort. “Thou art not the one that shall be married to him in the future.”

Wolf glanced at Gwyndolin from over the rim of his cup. “Have you decided, then?”

“Somewhat.” Gwyndolin shrugged. “Though he is still courting me, Sulyvahn has already broached the topic of wedding preparations, and I can honestly find no reason to refuse such a union.”
“Do you love him?”

“He loves me. He takes care of me. That is all I require.”

*It is all I can hope for.*

It seemed as if the temperature dropped several degrees as Gwyndolin spoke, and he found himself shivering from both the cold and a strange sort of unease, pulling his shawl tighter around his shoulders. Seeing his guest’s discomfort, Wolf adjusted the heat of the brasier and reached out to crack open the sliding door, allowing the heat from the inside to wash over the two of them.

“I thank thee, Wolf.” Slowly, Gwyndolin’s shivering faded into the faintest of tremors, and draining his cup of tea seemed to banish the last of the chill from the god’s body. Wolf immediately moved to refill his cup.

“Will you call the Outrider Knights back to Irithyll, then?” he asked.

After a moment’s thought, Gwyndolin nodded, drumming his manicured nails on the lacquered surface of the table. “I shall send out riders in the morn to guide them back to Irithyll with utmost haste. I shall also write Sulyvahn to inform him of mine decision in advance, though I shall keep the reason vague, just in case a stranger or outside power intercepts the letter.”

“Will you also tell him of the injured knight who will take his place?”

Gwyndolin snorted. “I believe such news is better handled face-to-face, dost thou not agree?”

Wolf made an expression that was halfway between a grin and a grimace. “Yes, I believe so.”

The roiling in Gwyndolin’s mind seemed to calm at the decision, and he began to mentally sort out the logistics of such an operation. Wolf stoked the charcoal brasier and grabbed one of the *daifuku* for himself, picking at it with mild interest. It appeared that Wolf was also chewing over something tenuous, and as soon as Gwyndolin assembled the wording of his order and came up with answers to the possible questions the couriers would ask, he would gladly offer the *shinobi* his ear in return.
“...I think that should be all.” Wolf was halfway through his mochi when Gwyndolin finally spoke, the god using the snakes to “push” him forward on the mat so that he was only a few centimeters from the edge of the table. “Dost thou have anything to ask mineself in turn?”


Gwyndolin’s mouth pursed with worry. “Is it serious?”

“...Is it serious?” Wolf parroted to himself under his breath, anxiously twisting the daifuku in his hands, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. “Kuro has been acting strangely lately.”

“How so?”

“Quieter. More morose. Eats less at meals.” Wolf glared at the warped remains of the sweet in his hands before biting it angrily in half. He chewed and swallowed with enough force to pulverize an unshelled walnut. “I believe he has been talking to someone lately...someone he does not tell me about. I am worried about what they are saying to him.”

“Art thou sure?”

“He has been visiting the Church of the Deep as of late.” Gwyndolin seemed taken aback by Wolf’s words, and he could not but rock back slightly as the shinobi continued; he reached out a hand to brace himself on the porch. “That in itself would not be unusual, since he has been visiting your own church since we arrived; he has always been fascinated with religion.”

“Understandable, given his background,” Gwyndolin chose his words carefully. The two-year alliance between the Religion of the Moon and the Religion of the Deep was still tenuous, and if something malignant within Irithyll’s branch of the Cathedral of the Deep was harming Kuro, then he would have to act carefully. “Hast thou attended services with him?”

“Only the first few times. Afterwards, he said he wished to attend alone, since he ‘did not like forcing me to attend services that made me uncomfortable.’” A blush of humiliation bloomed on Wolf’s cheeks. “I am willing to attend services at your cathedral to see you and Yorshka- dono. I have no such incentive to tolerate the archdeacons at the Church of the Deep.”
“I understand.” Gwyndolin smiled reassuringly and nodded. The religions practiced in Irithyll were quite different from Wolf’s own faith—a loose mix of two different spiritual systems native to Kinon. The god did not begrudge him for his discomfort. “I know thou hast asked him without success if anything untoward has happened at the Church of the Deep, but hast he given thee any indication as to who might be making him feel such a way?”

Wolf shook his head. “Kuro simply says the subject matter takes ‘time to digest’, but every time he returns from a service, he seems to fall into a depression, one that reminds me of…” Wolf trailed off, swallowed, and continued. “He used to recover his mood within several hours, but it has been taking him...longer, as of late, and I am at a loss as to what to do. Gwyndolin-sama, he did not react in such a negative way when I was attending services with him, so I am certain it has to be something other than the sermons that is burdening his spirit.”

Gwyndolin nodded, a ripple of anxiety shooting up his spine and making him tremble in its wake. Yes, he would have to proceed carefully, but he could not let such a claim go without proper investigation—not when it came to the welfare of a child. “I shall send one of mine Blades in secret to attend services at the church. I shall notify thee immediately of the results.”

Although Wolf’s posture remained as stiff and alert as ever, it was not hard to miss how his eyes darkened with gratitude, and the lines of stress etched around his mouth seemed to fade ever so slightly. “Thank you, Gwyndolin-sama. I am in your debt.”

“Nonsense.” Gwyndolin waved his hand dismissively. “Thou wouldst do the same for mineself. Besides, even if mine investigation turns up nothing, I shall address these concerns with Sulyvahn upon his return. If anyone can identify and quash any unsavory behaviors in the church, it is the patriarch himself.”

Wolf’s left eyebrow quirked towards his stark white hairline. “As you say.”

Before Gwyndolin could reply, the sound of gently jingling bells met his ears, and whatever he had been intending on asking slipped from his mind.

“It appears someone is awake.” Gwyndolin could not help but smile at the softening of Wolf’s expression as the sound of the bells came closer.

“Ah, so it does. I had a feeling Miko-sama would not let you depart without coming to say hello.”
The twinkling of the bells stopped at the sliding door, and a small, pale hand reached out to slid the door open completely. Said hand belonged to a sleepy child, aged ten to twelve years, with soft brown eyes and a long black bowl cut that reached mid-neck. After confirming that his protector and “auncle” were outside, he stepped out of the teahouse and onto the patio with far more dignity than most noble-born adults possessed, dressed in a puffy yukata that was two sizes too big for him. The sight was more effective than any heater at banishing the lingering chill from Gwyndolin’s bones.

“Hello, Kuro.”

“Hello, Gwyndolin-dono.” It was clear that Kuro had just woken up; he brought up his left hand to cover a yawn as he walked over to the table, his bare feet shuffling against the bamboo planks. A scant, fond smile crossed Wolf’s face, and he immediately shifted to the side of his own cushion and opened his right arm, allowing Kuro to pillow himself against his guardian’s side. The bell charms tied around the boy’s wrists twinkled as he settled into a comfortable slump. “Lothric told me you would be coming. He said you were saving leftovers for us.”

Though Gwyndolin was well-aware of Kuro’s ”otherworldly” insight and powers of premonition, the mention of Lothric threw the god through a loop nonetheless, and Kuro giggled demurely as the god opened and closed his mouth like a fish thrashing about on dry land.

“How…” Gwyndolin’s lips were suddenly dry, and he had to wet them with his tongue before he could continue. “How dost thou know of Lothric?”

“We spoke with each other while we slept. We met on the hill of sakura trees and clouds that I always see in my dreams. It was the first time anyone else had shown up, and he was just as confused as I was, but we ended up talking for what felt like days...though, I suppose it was only a few hours in reality.” Kuro blinked sleepily up at his loyal Wolf and smiled when the shinobi brought his right arm around Kuro’s form, holding him softly yet protectively against his side. “He told me of his home and his family and how how he came to Irithyll. We believe that it was the close proximity to each other that allowed us to find each other in our dreams...as if we were astral projecting while we slept.”

“Hnn.” Wolf nodded as Kuro sank further into his side. His right hand adjusted itself so it could card its fingers through the child’s hair. “Gwyndolin-sama was just about to tell me about Lorian. Is he the knight that accompanied him to Irithyll?”

Kuro nodded. “Lorian-dono is Lothric’s elder brother. They were princes in a neighboring kingdom, but Lothric was to meet with a horrible fate when he became an adult, so Lorian left behind everything to bring him here for protection. From what Lothric says, he is a wonderful warrior and a loving guardian...just like you, Wolf.”
If Gwyndolin had not been riding on a wave of amazement at both Kuro and Lothric, he would have laughed at the surge of tomato-red coloring on Wolf’s cheeks, even though the shinobi quickly coughed and ducked his head in an attempt to hide his embarrassment.

“I…” Wolf’s voice seemed to break around the edges, not only from embarrassment, but from a fragile sort of tenderness. It was clear that Kuro’s words touched him more than he was willing to admit in front of company. “I see. Yes.” Another cough. “Gwyndolin-sama was telling me that he planned on making Lorian-dono the Lord Commander of the Sunless Realms. Do you approve of such a choice?”

Kuro turned his head from where it was pressed against Wolf’s side to smile at the pleasantly-flummoxed deity. “If Lothric’s words are as true as he believes them to be, then yes, I think his elder brother would be an excellent choice. Far better than the Patriarch.”

“Oh, Sulyvahn does his best, I suppose.” Gwyndolin rolled his eyes in mock annoyance, heart swelling at the delighted little giggle this produced. “Regardless, dear Kuro, I would greatly appreciate it if thou didst not inform Lothric of mine designs. I still have to properly vet Lorian for the position, and I do not want him to get his hopes up or, Flame and Dark forbid, get his brother’s hopes up unnecessarily.” A beat. “Though, I believe as you do, that Lorian will make an excellent Lord Commander. He is more than qualified for the position as is.”

“I shall keep my lips sealed.” Kuro’s eyes drifted shut once more as he leaned his cheek into the familiar softness of Wolf’s red coat. “I have invited Lothric to come to the teahouse to meet me in person once Lorian-dono has recovered. We are both eager to meet, but he feels so tired, and I don’t want to exhaust him further. Do you think Lorian-dono will let him come?”

“I do not see why he would object.” Gwyndolin smiled and met Wolf’s eyes, and both adults shared a quick nod of agreement. “I am sure I can help arrange such a meeting once the time comes.”

“As will I.” Wolf half-barked, half muttered, a strange sound that made both Kuro and Gwyndolin laugh.

“I am grateful.” Kuro used one of his billowing yukata sleeves to dab the tears of mirth from his eyes before speaking again. “Did you bring leftovers, though? Lothric said you were setting some aside to take to two other people later on in the night.”
“Oh! Yes! I almost forgot!” Marveling at the empyrial power brimming in both children (and the various sweet and mystifying ways they put it to use), Gwyndolin reached over to his right side and untied the pouches hanging from his cinch. “We had ramen tonight for supper, and I thought I would bring the remains for both of thee to try, as a way to test for...accuracy, so to speak.”

“Do not get your hopes up.” Though his words were dismissive, Wolf reached out and took the pouches from Gwyndolin without command and handed them to Kuro, who had seemingly pulled chopsticks from his sash in anticipation of a late night snack. The boy must have taken a detour to the kitchen before coming outside. “You can have yours now, Miko-sama, but I will save mine for tomorrow.”

“As you will, as you will.” Kuro shrugged nonchalantly as he dug into one of the leather pouches with his chopsticks. He pulled out a slightly soggy portion of noodles and vegetables, popped it in his mouth, and chewed for at least twenty seconds while Wolf looked on in amusement and Gwyndolin looked on with bated breath.

Finally, the Divine Heir swallowed, a thoughtful frown on his face as he silently contemplated the food. He took a swig of broth from the pouch, swirled it around his mouth several times, swallowed, and pondered some more.

“Better than before.” Kuro concluded with the finality of a judge. All of Gwyndolin’s breath left him in a rush of relief and satisfaction. “It still needs improvement, however. Would you like me to make a list of suggestions to give to your cooks?”

Gwyndolin snickered and buried his face in his hands. “Oh, for the love of Flame and Dark, yes. Will the Kinonese cooking from my castle ever satisfy you completely, Lord Kuro?”

“It truly is better, Gwyndolin-dono!” Kuro frowned and glared up disapprovingly at Wolf, who was trying and failing to stop himself from chortling. “It is, Wolf!”

“As you say, Kuro-sama.” The shinobi’s shoulders seemed to shake harder than before, and all the man could do was bring up his free hand to cover his mouth, barking in laughter as Kuro elbowed him in the side.

“It is! The flavors were just somewhat unbalanced—too strong in some areas and too weak in others!”
“I believe you, Miko-sama.”

“The royal cooks can’t improve unless someone explains to them what they’re doing wrong!”

“Of course, Miko-sama.”

“Wolf!”

Gwyndolin had to keep an undignified sound from sputtering through his closed lips as Kuro reached up and took the sides of Wolf’s coat in his hands, shaking the battle-hardened veteran with one of the most indignant looks the god had ever seen in his considerably long lifespan. No wonder Wolf was powerless to suppress his laughter; how could one possibly withstand such an adorable onslaught?

“Yes, Kuro, I would very much like a list to give to mine cooks.” Gwyndolin was proud of the straightness of his expression when he spoke, though it nearly fell apart when Kuro turned his face to look at him, because by the gods those pouting cheeks were precious. “However, I am thinking, at this stage in the game, that it may be best for thee to visit the residence one evening and give a personal instruction.”

Kuro huffed and “angrily” plopped his face against Wolf’s ribs. “That wouldn’t be nearly as fun, though! Although…I would like to cook with Lothric some day, and it would be fun if Yorshka could join in as well!”

Wolf, having recovering from his decidedly unprofessional bout of laughter, began to once more card his fingers through Kuro’s hair. “It is good to see you making friends at long last, Miko-sama.”

Kuro seemed to stiffen under Wolf’s touch.

“Do...do you think Lothric would like to be friends with me, Gwyndolin-dono?” For once, the Divine Heir’s tone of voice reflected the youthful uncertainties of his physical age, and he nervously reached out and gripped at the hem of Wolf’s coat. “He says he would, but...is he just saying it to be nice, or does he mean it?”

Many uncertainties plagued Gwyndolin that night, but as he reached out to gently cup Kuro’s free
“Oh, dear Kuro, thou hast nothing to fear.” Gwyndolin’s smile was as gentle as the smell of the Boreal wisteria weaving up the walls of the teahouse. “There is not a universe that exists where thineself and Lothric art not meant to be friends.”

Though Lorian had been greatly reassured by his conversation with Gwyndolin the night before, he had still been in a state of disbelief when he had finally fallen asleep for the night, as if everything that had happened—his and Lothric’s literal and figurative flight from their home, the encounter with the beast, his meeting with the very definition of divinity—had a surreal sheen to it. It had all happened so quickly—far more quickly than Lorian had anticipated—and he had expected to find himself hallucinating while bleeding out on the riverbank when he finally woke.

None of that happened, of course; for when Lorian woke the second time, a mixture of faint sunlight and eternal moonlight was shining through his eyelids, and there were two youthful voices chattering about in excited whispers near what seemed to be the foot of the bed.

“If you wake Lorian up, I’m going to kick you in the tail!” Hearing Lothric’s voice made Lorian confirm that yes, his little brother was no longer in his arms, but he was still safe. It made the knight relax once more.

“Oh, thou art welcome to try—thou and thy twiggy little legs!” The second voice was foreign to Lorian: feminine, young (perhaps slightly older than Lothric, but not by much), and sweet, yet playfully chiding. There was an undercurrent of steel and passion to the second voice, though, and Lorian found himself with the image of a sharp blade concealed in a silk pillowslip. “Besides, I can slam mine tail into solid rock without feeling the slightest twinge, so I doubt thee wouldst cause me any misery with a mere kick!”

Soft yet strong, and with syntax and sentence structure reminiscent of the old tongue, Lorian mused. It must belong to Yorshka, Gwyndolin’s younger sister.

“I do not care if your tail can rend metal in two—it will still hurt like the flames of Chaos itself if I smack it with a Heavy Soul Arrow!” Though Lothric was all but hissing with annoyance, it was clear that he was trying to keep his tone as quiet as possible, and Lorian was proud of his little
brother’s self control. “Lorian was badly injured yesterday and needs his rest! He can eat when he wakes!”

“But breakfast will get cold!” Yorshka whined, forcing Lorian to quickly muffle a laugh against his pillow. “A sick body will gain no sustenance from a cold meal!”

“I do not think food ceases to be nutritious just because of a change in temperature!” Lothric countered.

“But cold porridge is so gross, Lothric—even with milk and fruit added to it! Dost thou want thy poor, injured elder sibling to be forced to imbibe on slimy, thick, cold porridge?”

“I will have you know that Lorian actually prefers porridge when it’s cold, so it would actually be better to wait until his breakfast is cold before waking him up!”

“He does?!” Yorshka sounded so adorably scandalized that Lorian could barely stand it. “How can he stand that awful texture?! Cold porridge tastes like pond scum feels! I had no idea your brother was so peculiar!”

“He is not peculiar!” Lorian heard one of his brother’s little feet stamp on the ground and wondered if it was possible to die from bottling up too much laughter. “He just got used to the taste while on expeditions! There’s nothing wrong with liking cold porridge over hot!”

“Wouldst thou say the same thing if thou witnessed someone eating raw pond scum?!”

“There is a drastic difference between pond scum and cold—!”

At that point, Lorian feared that if he tried to keep silent any longer, the muscles of his gut would literally split open. So the knight allowed himself to laugh as he slowly pushed himself into a sitting position.

“I must admit that I have never tried eating raw pond scum before.” Lorian’s voice was still scratchy from sleep, but he must have been coherent enough, given Yorshka’s embarrassed giggle. “However, I once witnessed one of my knights attempt to cook it on a plank like one would dry seaweed. As you can probably guess, the end result was nothing like seaweed, and the knight was running back and forth from the woods for the rest of the day.”
As Lorian’s eyesight slowly came into focus (with the help of rapid blinking and rough rubbing), he wondered how long it would take his eyes to adjust to the unique light sources of the Sunless Realms; after all, gas lamps and perpetual moonlight were quite different from torches and fading sunlight. Perhaps, he mused, a light profile that was both clearer and more muted would be better than the one he grew up with; that said, the knight knew better than to hope that such a simple thing would improve his vision. After all, the congenital condition that had been running in the line of Lothric for centuries was one that could be neither stopped nor slowed, and even the brightest of lights would have been powerless against such a deep-set and gradual decay.

At the age of ten, Lorian learned that he would lose his ability to see all but the closest of objects by the time he reached his forties, and while his father would have raged and railed against the inevitable, the elder prince instead chose to embrace it. How many times had he been asked—by servants, knights, and civilians alike—why he wore his crown so that it covered his eyes? The answer Lorian gave was always truthful—that he wished to learn how to fight and navigate without sight—but he always framed the answer as a personal challenge he had decided to undertake for his own amusement.

The truth was that one morning, when the elder prince was fifteen, he woke up to his vision blurring at the edges and realized that he had three options: to pretend it wasn’t happening, like his father; to lie down and feel sorry for himself; or to learn to do without. It had only taken an hour of wallowing in self-pity for Lorian to decide on the third option, and though it had taken at least five years to get used to the crown obscuring his vision, Lorian had come to the point where he could even close his eyes underneath his helm and function without anyone noticing the difference. It did not mean that Lorian would not occasionally be overcome with misery over his impending blindness, but it was easier to dig himself out of those occasional pitfalls knowing that he would be able to function just fine without his eyesight, and that such a disability would not necessarily hinder his prowess as the knight he was born to be.

Well, muted light or no, Lorian would be able to manage just fine in the Sunless Realms. The fuzziness faded away after a few extra seconds of rubbing, allowing Lorian to clearly see his brother standing at the foot of the bed, clad in a soft red and gold robe that was slightly too long for him in the arms and skirt. The knight could not have imagined a better start to his morning.

...Well, not being injured would have been a preferable state of being, but that was beside the point.

“Lorian!” It was clear from Lothric’s voice and face that he was torn between happiness at his brother’s awakening and unhappiness as his “premature” rousing, but he nonetheless scampered over to the side of the bed, and Lorian shifted towards the middle to allow his little brother to climb up. “I’m sorry, Lorian; Yorshka made you breakfast this morning, but you were still asleep, and I did not want her to wake you! You need to rest to recover from your injuries!”
“Don’t worry, Lothric; it was the light that woke me up, not you and Yorshka.” It was mostly the truth, and the look of relief on Lothric’s face was more than worth the “sin” of a small white lie, in Lorian’s opinion. “Besides, I do not think I could sleep more if I tried; it is only the glass tube stuck in my side and the fact that you would worry that are preventing me from trying to get up and walk around.”

Lothric visibly deflated. “I’m sorry…I don’t mean to be a pain.”

“I never said it was a bad thing, Lothric. Knowing me, I would probably rupture my lung again if you left me to my own devices.” Lorian smiled gently at his brother and reached out to cup his cheek. “Did you sleep well, baby drake?”

Though Yorshka had not moved from her place at the foot of the bed, Lorian’s trained sense of hearing meant that he could still hear her whisper “baby drake!” in the voice of one faced with an astonishingly adorable kitten or puppy, which made his impending blindness just a little bit more tolerable.

“Stop worrying about me. I’m not the one that got bitten and shocked by a monster.” The ease with which Lothric melted into the affectionate touch belied his petulant words. “But yes, I did sleep well, though I’ve been awake for an hour or so. I read some more of the book Lin left us while you slept.”

“Ah! Was it good as what we heard last night?”

“It was. I can read it to you later, if you’d like.”

“Since when have I ever turned down an offer for you to read?” Lorian nodded, his smile widening as Lothric leaned up to kiss his cheek. “Before that, though…isn’t there someone you wished to personally introduce to me?”

“Oh! Right!” Lothric’s eyes widened at the reminder of the third person in the room, and he quickly scrambled back off of the bed and shuffled over to its foot, where Yorshka was waiting with a laden breakfast tray in her hands. “Lorian, I would like you to meet Yorshka—Lady of Moonlight, Matron of the Church of the Branching Yew, and Heiress to the Sunless Realms. Yorshka, this is my elder brother, Prince Lorian of the Kingdom of Lothric!”

“It is a pleasure, Lady Yorshka.” Lorian greeted the girl with a smile and respectful nod, not
wanting to risk breaking the tube in his side by attempting a sitting bow. The gesture was a small and casual one, but Yorshka seemed to appreciate it regardless, given the vermillion blush that tinted her cheeks.

“T-The pleasure is all mine, Ser Lorian.” Yorshka grinned with a mouth full of pearly-white dragon fangs and did her best to curtsy while balancing a full tray of food in her hands. “However, I must insist that thee simply addressest me as ‘Yorshka;’ I only accept visitors and strangers calling me ‘Lady,’ and since thou art the elder brother of mine newest friend, I believe such formalities are unnecessary...wouldst thou not agree?”

Lorian’s own smile broadened. “I agree, but if I cannot call you ‘Lady,’ then you must not call me ‘Ser.’ Lorian is Lorian, okay?”

“Oh, well...if thou sayest so!” For some reason, the blush on Yorshka’s cheeks seemed to deepen, and she nearly tripped over her own feet as she walked over to the side of the bed. What ever could have been bothering her?

“I must sincerely apologize for not making thine acquaintance last night, Se—Lorian.” Despite the slight tremor in Yorshka’s voice, the hand she used to reach out and clean off the bedside table was steady, and the tray was securely balanced between her remaining hand and her chest. “Yesterday was quite eventful for both mineself and mine dear brother, and when I went back to the residence to work on...mine...mine studies, I ended up falling asleep in the sitting room. I thought the least I could do is make thee breakfast as an apology.”

“You don’t have to apologize.” Lothric seemed bewildered by Yorshka’s strange behavior, but he chose not to address it as he shuffled over to the opposite side, climbing back onto the bed. “Lorian and I were pretty tired ourselves. We managed to stay awake until after dinner, but we fell asleep right after Lin left us for the night.” The little boy pressed himself against his brother’s uninjured side and watched Yorshka place the tray on the cleared table. “Will Lin be coming to see us later?”

“I am certain he will.” Yorshka smiled at Lothric and stuck her tongue out of the corner of her mouth. “For once, my brother seems to be sleeping in like a normal person, but I am sure he will come to visit after he wakes up and gets dressed.”

Lorian raised an eyebrow. “Is Gwyndolin an early riser?”

“Obscenely early.” Yorshka rolled her eyes as she transferred two bowls of porridge and a large bowl of fresh berries from the tray to the table. “Gwyndolin has always had trouble sleeping, even when ill, and he will often be up and about several hours before the lightening of the sky. I suppose
his ‘adventure’ on the outskirts wore him out more than I realized...then again, he had his glamour on for a terribly long time, and the spell does exhaust him so.”

“Ah, yes.” Lorian remembered Lothric mentioning something about Gwyndolin being a similarly sickly sort the night before, but it was both difficult and disquieting to imagine such a force of nature being laid low by illness. Though the Nameless Moon was small and thin in frame, it was clear to the knight that the core of his being was far stronger and far more durable than newly-forged Mirrah steel, and even Lorian—renowned throughout the Lordran for his physical and tactical prowess—was in awe of his resolve and magical aptitude. To think that someone in the world existed with a strength equal to or more than that of his little brother!

“It’s a shame that Lin thinks he has to wear his glamour so much. I think the snakes are sweet!” Lothric’s eyes lit up as Yorshka set a small pitcher of cream and a bowl of brown sugar next to the bowls of food. Brown sugar was not as delicious as honey, but it was a close second. “Don’t you, Lorian?”

“I agree, Lothric; they are very sweet and refined.” Just like their host.

The thought came to Lorian’s mind unbidden, and he quickly turned his attention to Yorshka in a desperate attempt to escape whatever the hell that was, studying the girl as she arranged two steaming mugs of tea and a plate of assorted pastries in the rest of the spread. Though the girl was as pale and thin as her elder brother—with arms that would look almost unnaturally long if she were any thinner—it was not difficult to see that she was his sibling in name only. Whereas Gwyndolin’s own facial features were soft and rounded, Yorshka were far more pronounced, with a sharp jawline leading down to a softly pointed chin and up to defined cheekbones. A sun-shaped corona of pink, blue, and white scales radiated outward from her “normal” blue eyes, and though the knight at first thought it a trick of the light, it seemed that there were several pink-and-violet scaly tendrils intermixed with her long brown hair. Her fingernails were far more gently tapered than Lothric’s own talons, and her long pink and white tail swished lazily on the carpeted floor as she worked, ruffling the skirt of her pink and yellow dress with every swipe.

With as much subtlety as possible, Lorian craned his neck so that he could better see the floor, and was rewarded with a glimpse of bare feet and pink talons. Feet just like Lothric’s...though my brother possesses no tail, and I would guess that she does not share his spines. The differences between crossbreeds are fascinating...

Though Yorshka insisted that she had already eaten, it did not take a lot of persuading from Lothric and Lorian to convince her to join them for breakfast, and she sat and ate several pastries and chatted with the brothers while they enjoyed their own meal. Lorian had already expected to like Yorshka, given that Lothric himself was a good litmus test for whom he liked and disliked, but the elder prince was still surprised at how quickly he warmed up to the crossbreed girl. Like Gwyndolin had told him the night before, his little sister was rambunctious, creative, lively, sweet,
and kind. Yorshka’s bossiness did shine through several times—such as when she ordered Lothric to not use all of the cream on his own porridge, with him snitling back that he and his elder brother were her guests, and she could simply ask a servant to bring them some more cream if she wanted more herself—but it was not the sort that indicated obnoxiousness and ill-manners; rather, it seemed to be the fond ribbing between older and younger siblings that were closer in age than himself and Lothric, which made Lorian tear up once he realized how close the two children had become in just a day and a half.

Regardless of Gwyndolin’s feelings on the brothers, Lorian hoped that the Dark Moon would allow Lothric and Yorshka to continue playing with each other even after they left the royal household, for the elder prince knew how badly the younger’s heart would break if he had to leave behind the first non-familial friend he had ever made.

Once they were finished with breakfast, Yorshka began to stack the dishes back on the tray, and she gently “shooed” away Lothric’s hands when he reached out to help. The moment she finished setting the tray of dishes on the coffee table in front of the fireplace, there was a soft yet firm knocking at the door, and Yorshka quickly wiped her hands off on her half-apron before answering.

“Brother dearest!” Yorshka barely waited until the door was fully open before throwing her arms around Gwyndolin’s neck, who laughed as he embraced her in return, his arms wrapping around her back as his snakes wrapped around her legs. “I was wondering if thou wouldst ever awaken! I am not used to waking up before thee!”

“I promise I shall not make it a habit.” Gwyndolin replied lightly, kissing the top of Yorshka’s head before releasing her. “I see thou hast been tending to our guests.”

“Yes! I made everyone breakfast!” Yorshka bounced backwards to allow Gwyndolin to enter the room. “If I had known thou wast awake, I would have saved some pastries or porridge for thee.”

“No need, Yorshka; I have had mine usual breakfast before coming here.” Gwyndolin smiled and winked at his sister, who giggled and locked her hands behind her back, rocking slightly on her bare heels as he moved to slither past. “Good morning, Lothric, Lorian. I hope both of thee had a pleasant slumber.”

“We did!” Lothric chirped. “Lorian slept a little longer than I did, but that was to be expected, given his injuries.”

“Of course.” Gwyndolin stopped at the head of the bed and lightly rested his right hand on one of
the bedposts. “How art thou feeling this morning, Lorian? Is thy pain under control?”

Lorian gulped. “Ah, um, yes...I am far better than I was yesterday, and I have not required any pain medication since my surgery. I usually recover—recover—recover far more quickly than most, so is...that is not surprising.”

The elder prince did not mean to stammer—he truly did not—but he found himself floored by the realization that no, it had not been the influence of painkillers and sleep medications that made him see Gwyndolin as beautiful; the god seemed to look even lovelier in the daylight compared to the gas lamps of the night before. Though Yorshka had made a comment over breakfast that her brother only ever wore robes and dresses that were royal blue or black in color, Gwyndolin had seemingly drifted from the norm that morning, wearing a long forest green dress with a wide silver cinch similar to the one he had worn the night before. Though Lorian had only seen Gwyndolin in two (well, technically, three) outfits thus far, it was not hard to notice that both the green dress and the blue robe were similar in that they had square-cut necklines, long bell sleeves, and long flowing skirts, with little to no extra adornments.

*Gwyndolin likes to be comfortable yet dignified.* Lorian’s mouth suddenly felt as dry as the sands of Carthus, and he grabbed and drained the last of the milk from his glass, hoping that his neck was not as red as it felt. What was wrong with him? Was his wound infected? *His clothing choices have been elegant, loose, and modest, and he likes to have his long garments secured at his waist. Understated yet refined—Gwyndolin’s garments fit well who he is as a person, and what a person he is—*

“Lorian?” Lothric’s confused query yanked Lorian from his thoughts, and he quickly finished swallowing the last of his milk and passed the glass to his brother, smiling apologetically.

“Ah, sorry, Lothric...it felt as if I had a frog in my throat all of a sudden.”

Lothric frowned and reached for his own half-full mug of tea, passing it to Lorian with a look of concern on his face, who took it with an embarrassed yet grateful smile. “You shouldn’t exert yourself so much yet, Lorian. I know you heal faster than most, but...”

Oh, of all the blasted things to cause his brother worry! “It was not that, baby drake, but I promise I will take it easy until the doctor says it is no longer necessary.” After draining Lothric’s mug of tea, he passed it to his brother and turned his attention back to Gwyndolin, smiling wanly. “Ah, speaking of which, will Dr. Watari be coming soon?”

“Ah, about that...apparently, one of the good doctor’s friends has come down with a mild illness,
and he asked Dr. Watari to teach his classes for him at the medical college.” Gwyndolin ruffled Yorshka’s hair before moving to sit at the chair she had been using at Lorian’s bedside. Almost immediately, the six snakes poked their heads up and rested them on the edge of the bed, hissing at the knight in greeting. “Didactics take place in the morning, so he will be unable to tend to thee until lunch; I reassured him that I would make sure thou didst not explode into a fountain of blood over the course of the next four hours.”

Both Lorian and Lothric snickered in amusement while Yorshka rolled her eyes.

“Oh, that reminds me!” Yorshka’s eyes widened and she snapped her fingers. “Brother, Lorian, wouldst either of thee mind if I took Lothric back to mine quarters for a bit? I pulled some of mine old clothing out of the basement for him to wear, and I wish to measure him properly so that we can have some proper garments made for him.”

Lorian and Gwyndolin looked at each other and nodded.

“I do not see an issue. Actually, there is something that I wished to discuss with Lorian in private.” Gwyndolin glanced over at Lothric, who had started nervously picking at the duvet with his talons. “I promise that it has nothing to do with thine presence in Irithyll or thy tenure in mine household. Thou hast nothing to fear.”

Lothric yelped and shook his head. “Oh, n-no! It’s not that! I trust you, Lin; I really do!” After a few seconds of gnawing on his lower lip, the little boy looked up at his brother with wide, worried eyes. “Will...will you be okay while I’m gone, Lorian? I mean, it’s a silly question; of course you’re going to be okay! You don’t need your annoying little brother around to hover over you like a—”

“None of that, Lothric. I understand,” Lorian shushed, placing his index finger on Lothric’s lips. “There is nothing annoying about being concerned about the welfare of your only family; if our positions were reversed, I would probably be far more anxious about separation.”

Lorian’s heart lurched at sight of the weak and wavering smile spreading like a new dawn across Lothric’s face. The elder prince gave the younger prince a lingering kiss on the forehead before continuing.

“I will not force you to go if you do not want to, Lothric, but I assure you that I will not move from my bed while you are gone. Besides, I do not think the residential wing is terribly far from this guest wing, correct?”
Yorshka nodded eagerly.

“Our rooms are only a section away and a floor above! It is only a five minute walk if Gwyndolin and I use our personal passage!” Yorshka’s eagerness to calm and reassure his brother made Lorian fall just a little more in love with the older crossbreed. “Actually, Lothric, I am working on a secret project so to speak, and I could greatly use thy help.”

Lothric blinked and relaxed his grip on the duvet. “R-really? My help?”

“Yes! I started on it last night, but I am afraid I am at a loss, and it is something I want to be truly special, since it is...well...a gift.” Yorshka not so subtly glanced over at Lorian, and Lothric’s eyes widened in realization, his mouth forming a little “o.”

“I see! Yes, I could certainly help with that!” It was as if a switch had flipped in Lothric’s mind, replacing his anxiety with excitement, and his eyes gleamed with mischief as he grabbed Lorian’s hand.

“You and Lin will call me, right? If you need me?”

“Of course we will.” Gwyndolin smiled and winked at Lothric, making him giggle into Lorian’s palm, and Flame and Dark, it was a good thing that one’s heart could not rupture from adorable, or else Lorian would have dropped dead on the spot. “If anything changes about Lorian’s condition, thou shalt be the first person I send for, even before Dr. Watari.”

“Okay!” Lothric dropped Lorian’s hand and wrapped his arms around Lorian’s neck, squeezing his brother with all of his meager strength, who embraced him far more gently in return. “I will be back by lunch, Lorian! I love you!”

“I love you too, baby drake.” As soon as he said Lothric’s nickname, Lorian heard Yorshka squeak and clap her hands over her mouth, and he hid his grin in Lothric’s shoulder. “Have fun with your new friend, and please, do not worry overmuch for me. I have seen worse days.”

“Yes, but you have also seen far better.” With a huff of fond annoyance, Lothric released his brother and carefully shimmied off of the bed, trying his best to not jostle his still-sore joints. Seeing the stiffness in the child’s movements, Yorshka met Lothric halfway around the bed, and he only hesitated for the briefest of moments before climbing onto her offered back.
“We shall return in a few hours, dearest Gwyndolin!” Yorshka chirped as she stood back up, making sure that Lothric was secure on her back before heading towards the door. “Do not hesitate to call if you need anything!” After opening the door, the girl paused in the doorway, and she looked over her shoulder at Lorian with a grin. “Never fear, Ser Lorian; I shall take good care of thy little brother!”

“I don’t need to be taken care of by you.” Lothric muttered, weakly smacking Yorshka on her head, who simply laughed and shrugged him into a more comfortable position on her shoulders.

Something tight loosened in Lorian’s chest. “I have no doubt that you will, Lady Yorshka.”

With a giggle from Yorshka and a “Goodbye, brother!” from Lothric, the two crossbreed children finally exited the room, the door closing behind them with a little more force than necessary.

Once they were alone, Gwyndolin turned in his chair so that he was facing Lorian, the snakes inching forward ever so slightly on the mattress. One in particular moved closer than the others, raising their head a few centimeters off of the bedspread, and Lorian immediately reached out to pet them.

“Hello, Ludus,” the knight greeted, stroking the snake’s brown snout. Ludus hissed in delight and pressed his head into Lorian’s touch. Gwyndolin beamed.

“Thou rememberest their names!” Honestly, if Lorian had possessed any doubts of Gwyndolin’s godly heritage, they would have been obliterated by the positively sunlike glow of his smile.

“Of course I do.” Lorian cupped his palm around Ludus’ head and clicked his tongue as he would with a wyvern hatchling. The serpent’s head seem to heat up against his skin. “They are important to you, but even if they weren’t, they are gorgeous creatures all the same.”

Though it may have been Lorian’s eyesight playing tricks on him (which, at that point, was a possibility), he could have sworn the other five snakes looked on him with approval in their beady eyes, and even Ludus gave his hand a soft bop before resting himself back on the duvet.

Gwyndolin’s smile went from a bright noonday sun to an early and gentle sunrise, and for all that is sacred and holy, Lorian, do not say anything. Do not open up your mouth. Do not open up your
“That dress looks beautiful on you, Gwyndolin. The color compliments you well.”

*I hate my brain. I hate it so much.*

Before Lorian could start to will himself into melting into the mattress, Gwyndolin actually laughed—no snorting, like the night before, but a shimmering, bell-like sound that the former knight commander would lock away and listen to on dark and lonely nights. Also, while the god ducked his head in a weak attempt to hide his blush, he did not move to hide his mouth as he did the night before. Both of Gwyndolin’s hands remained in his lap, and as Lorian waited for the god to finish laughing, he could help but wonder how soft they would be to touch.

Ugh. If Lorian had been able to physically punch his brain without causing permanent damage, he would have done so without a moment’s hesitation, because *really*. Did that monster knock his head against the ground with enough force to obliterate what little filter his honesty possessed? *Quit it.*

“Watch out, Ser Lorian.” The voice Gwyndolin finally found was a teasing one, and though he still seemed somewhat flustered by the knight’s words, Lorian was relieved to see only delight in those heterochromic eyes. “Keep up such words and I fear I may become used to such flattery.”

Lorian shrugged. “I simply say what I mean, Lord Gwyndolin, though I normally have more... *tact* than this.” He cocked his head as he studied the god sitting across from him. “Did you mean what you said last night?”

“About what?”

“About never having been called beautiful? It is not that I do not believe you, it is just that I find it...hard to believe.” *Because you are. You are the most beautiful sentient being I have met in my life.*

“Ah.” Gwyndolin’s cheeks, newly white, pinked once more. “It is not as if I have never been complimented, Lorian, but it is just...well...” He held out his hands as if gesturing to himself. “Not many look upon mine form and features and consider them *beautiful*. Not even mine betrothed has ever said such words—though he has called me ‘sweet’ and ‘lovely.’”

Those words threw Lorian through a loop. “*Betrothed*? I did not know you were engaged! Allow
me to offer my most hearty congratulations, Gwyndolin!"

Perhaps Lorian truly was seeing things, for while the smile remained in full-force on Gwyndolin’s lips, it seemed to become more... nervous at Lorian mentioning the god’s fiancé. Those smooth hands laced themselves together in that forest green-covered lap.

“Ah, well, while it is not official as of yet, I have been in a courtship for the past year, and the man courting me—Sulyvahn—sees no reason why we should not move forward with a marriage.” Gwyndolin began to twiddle his thumbs as he continued. “I, myself, cannot find many reasons against such a match, so I am inclined to agree with him.”

“‘Inclined?’” Lorian’s eyebrows shot towards his hairline. “Do you even want to get married, Gwyndolin?”

It was the wrong thing to say—every fibre in Lorian’s being screamed that it was the wrong thing to say—but other than the smile on Gwyndolin’s face going from “possibly nervous” to “deeply uncomfortable” in the blink of an eye, the god showed no offence over such a forward comment.

“I...I must admit, Lorian, that the idea of marriage makes me quite nervous.” The smile disappeared altogether as Gwyndolin took his lower lip between his teeth. “As your mother has surely told you, marriages in mine father’s court were not the joyous occasions experienced and referred to by mortals.”

Lorian had indeed heard tale after tale of the numerous contrived and chaotic marriages of the Court of the Sun, the most chaotic of which had apparently been the four marriages of Gwyn—or, as Desdimonda had called them, “four entirely different tempests trapped in four entirely different teapots.” No wonder poor Gwyndolin seemed so soul-arrow-shy at the idea of getting married himself!

“She has, indeed, which is why you should not progress with a marriage unless you can do so without regret.” The words were as impulsive as ever, but for once, Lorian found himself with the ability to stay silent—and chose not to do so. “I have heard of engagements that have lasted for decades. As a god, you can wait for centuries if you would like, so there is no need to rush while you are still uncertain.”

Gwyndolin chuckled and shrugged. “I am not sure if Sulyvahn has centuries. Corvians may be long-lived, but I doubt they have the longevity of godkin...though I must admit, I am not too familiar with the species.”
Nor was Lorian. *A corvian? I never thought I would meet one in my lifetime.* There were many rumors about the so-called “children of Velka”—who fled from a multi-kingdom genocide into a frigid painted world—and sightings of the crow and tree-like beings were rare enough to be the stuff of urban legends. To think Lorian would have a chance to meet a corvian in the flesh!

“If you have to wait that long, then perhaps it is a sign that the marriage was never meant to be.” Gwyndolin seemed...startled by Lorian’s statement, as if he had never before thought of the situation in that light. “And if corvians happen to have lifespans similar to that of godkin, then you will be married for a long time, yes? It is another good reason to make sure you wish to face that future without regret.”

Gwyndolin was silent for a long moment, lacing and unlacing his fingers over and over, and Lorian wrestled the desire to hold the god’s hand into submission before it could take hold.

“I shall...keep that in mind.” Gwyndolin’s voice was slightly louder than a whisper, but he seemed less uncomfortable than he had a few seconds before, and his thin lips were pursed in what seemed to be thought. “I thank thee, Lorian, for the advice. I do not have many with whom I can discuss such things...if at all.”

It was Lorian’s turn to blush. “We are friends, are we not? It is the least friends can do for each other.”

The discomfort vanished from Gwyndolin’s face as he chuckled. “Indeed, Ser Lorian.”

The knight suddenly remembered something Gwyndolin had said earlier. “You said you wished to discuss something with me today?”

“Ah, yes.” Gwyndolin startled at the reminder, and he reached into the right pocket of his dress and rummaged around, pulling out a small velvet pouch the color of fresh ink.

“Thou wishest to know more of the beast that attacked thee yesterday morn, correct?” Gwyndolin held out the pouch, and after a moment of hesitation (there was an undercurrent of something dark and deep in the god’s voice), Lorian reached out to take it. His fingers brushed against Gwyndolin’s as he did, and the knight’s breath caught in his throat, not only at the feel of cool, silky skin against his own roughened fingertips, but at the sensation of something opaque and overwhelming seeping into his palm. He suddenly felt as if he would faint.
“I warn thee, Ser Lorian, for thou hast stumbled into the midst of a great and terrible unknown.”

Chapter End Notes

Preemptive Q&A to Avoid Unnecessary Review Whinging:

Q: Why did you decide to incorporate Sekiro into your universe, AndroidPalindrome?
A: Because I wanted to. Soulsborne broke, Sekiro Souls woke.

Q: Don't you know that Sekiro takes place in the Sengoku Era of feudal Japan? There's no way you could incorporate that verse into the Dark Souls verse!
A: Not with that attitude you can't. Also, shockingly, you'd be surprised how easy I can incorporate a game with elemental magic, crossbreed children, and death and rebirth mechanics into...a game series with elemental magic, crossbreed children, and death and rebirth mechanics. Use your imaginations.

Q: The inclusion of Kuro and Wolf was way too abrupt!
A: What do you want me to do--go back and rewrite the six chapters of 100,000+ words that I wrote BEFORE Sekiro was released? I am going to be starting a medical residency in June and have to prepare to move all of my things four and a half hours away in two weeks. I literally have better ways to spend my time.

Q: UNTAGGED SEKIRO SPOILERS
A: The game's been out since March. It's halfway through May. You would be surprised at how much I DIDN'T spoil.

Q: I don't want to read about the Sekiro characters!
A: Then either skip the parts they're in or stop reading. No skin off my back.

Q: Will you eventually be covering the Sekiro story in this series?
A: Eventually. We still have at least two or three sequel stories to go through after this one before we even get CLOSE to a full-on Sekiro crossover. This is still a Dark Souls story first and foremost, so if you're not a fan of Sekiro, rest assured that 99.9% of the storylines in this series will be Dark Souls-based.

Q: Wait...does the title of this chapter really come from a Moominvalley song??
Me: I was not immune to the magic of Snufkin/Moomintroll.
**Chapter Summary**

If there is one thing that Gwyndolin has learned over his nearly five millennia of existence, it is that while one can make all of the plans they want, it is the unplanned that will give one exactly what they need.

It was the unplanned that brought the Chosen Undead into his life--freeing Gwyndolin from the web of manipulations woven by Gwyn and Frampt. It was the unplanned that brought Yorshka's egg to him twelve years past--which not only forced Gwyndolin from his father's empty tomb, but saved him from a life of suffocating loneliness that he had not known he was living until she was born. And it was the unexpected that brought Lorian and Lothric into his life--a chance encounter that had not only saved the Outrider Knights from the most dire of fates, but may have delivered the perfect Lord Commander right to his doorstep.

Ten days have passed since the arrival of the twin princes at Irithyll, and with Lorian finally released from his sickbed, Gwyndolin has planned out the ideal method to ask the eldest to become the new Lord Commander of the Standing Forces of the Sunless Realms.

A valiant attempt, but as Gwyndolin continues to discover, nothing with Lorian ever goes according to plan.

**Chapter Notes**

Author's Note: I RETURN. It was quite a long delay, I know, but that happens when you start medical residency and move to a completely different state. I will do my best to make sure the updates come more frequently, but again--medical residency. Promises are for those who don't have heavy and erratic work schedules.

Trigger/Content Warnings: Implied gaslighting and emotional abuse (thanks, Sulyvahn); implied and mentioned child abuse; snake legs; snake legs; a bunch of past traumas and hang-ups keeping Gwyndolin and Lorian from realizing that they just need to kiss already.

Thanks To: Iced-Blood, for continuing to be the practical co-author of this fic and for spicing up the chapter title (which Florence + The Machine would understand, I'm sure); Wade, for continuing to be the best friend, beta, and writing fan that an overly detailed Dark Souls fanfic writer could ask for; Nette, for knowing next to nothing about Dark Souls but reading and enjoying all of this extensive nonsense anyways. I love y'all.

No Thanks To: Future Press and Amazon, who announced that the 'Dark Souls Trilogy Compendium' would be delayed literally on the day it was set to arrive, even though they had known for the past two weeks that the shipment of books was stuck in US customs. I personally blame Jeff Bezos for being awful at everything.
Ten days after the arrival of Lothric and Lorian in Irithyll, Gwyndolin awoke in his room just before the lightening of the sky; he blinked away the remnants of a dream that shook his heart, yet slipped from the fingers of his memory when he tried to piece together the “why.”

Though Gwyndolin was no stranger to dreams, nightmares, night terrors, and everything in between (including the occasional prophetic dream that he was never able to figure out before the indicated event occurred), it seemed as if he’d been having an unsettling dream every week for the past year-and-a-half. Worst of all, he would never remember what they were about; only that they made his breath catch in his chest like a fish in a net, and his heart hammer like Aval’s tools on his anvil. As swift as a summer’s breeze and as thunderous, yet fleeting, as the wingbeats of an archdragon; whatever his nightly episodes involved—nightmares, premonitions, or whatever—they never ceased to make him feel as if his brain and heart had been trampled by a titanite demon in the morning.

It would be better, Gwyndolin thought to himself as he slowly sat up in bed, to know of a nightmare’s contents if only so one could possibly prevent from having them in the future. Some nightmares, the god knew, were due to repressed memories, or chronic stress, or anxiety over a particular person, relationship, or event. Yet for the life of him, he could not figure out which of these things were triggering his night sweats. His relationship with Sulyvahn was stable outside of the occasional rocky patch; Yorshka was growing and thriving as expected; and Irithyll continued to be as peaceful and prosperous as it had been before the nightmares had begun.

So why? Gwyndolin growled in frustration as he rubbed his eyes with the heels of his palms. Why do I keep dreaming of the same sinking feeling?

A knock at the door broke the god from his troubled musings, and he glanced at the section of the violet and midnight-blue bed canopy that hid his door from view. “Thou mayst enter.”

Though the silk canopy obscured Gwyndolin and his bed completely from view, he could still hear the maid crack the door, as if peeking in to make sure her liege was completely hidden. Once she was certain, the door was pushed open completely, and Gwyndolin could tell from the faint rustle of fabric that she was bowing.

“Good morning, Nameless Moon. I have brought your breakfast.”
“My thanks. Prithee, place the tray on the table in front of the fireplace and open the curtains.”

“As my Lord wishes.”

The faint clattering of china against the silver tray blended with the clacking of the maid’s boots as she strode across the floor.

“How is the weather this morn?” Gwyndolin made sure to keep his voice cool and light, even as he muffled a little yawn and stretched his arms behind his head. As his dear mother used to say, divinity was “half in the blood and half in the behavior.” It would not do to be sleepy and sloppy in front of a mortal.

“Mild, Nameless Moon, with clouds to the south and a gentle breeze. There may be snow today...or rain, depending on the heat.” There was a slightly louder clatter as the maid set the platter on the table.

“Ho-hum. Any events during the night or messages for mineself?”

“All was calm. No word of any new attacks, thanks to the bravery of Your Grace.” Gwyndolin listened—fingers steepled in his lap and snakes writhing in lazy coils underneath the blankets—as the maid arranged the spread on the table. “A messenger from the Cathedral of the Deep arrived just an hour ago, bearing a letter addressed to Your Grace from the patriarch. I brought it on the breakfast tray.”

“Good. Set the letter on the desk and inform the messenger to remain in the residence. I shall be sending him back to the parish with a reply before the day is done.”

“As you will.” There were more footsteps as the maid crossed the room to the desk. The faint rustle of muslin heralded the opening of the curtains. “Do you require anything further, my Lord?”

“No. I thank thee for thy service. After delivering mine message to the courier from the Cathedral of the Deep, prithee, seek out Captain Aishura and Vice-Captain Telos in the barracks of Anor Londo and inform them that I require their presence in mine chambers as soon as they have completed their morning orders. Thou mayst return to thy duties once thy task is complete.”
“As you command, Nameless Moon.”

“That shall be all. Blessings of the moon upon thy journey.”

There was a small intake of breath. “Oh, thank you, Dark Moon. I am unworthy.”

The maid’s voice made it sound as if Gwyndolin had dumped a pile of gold on her lap instead of saying a simple blessing, and the deity found himself—as he always did after one of these interactions—awed and shaken by the effect his words could have on his people. All he had done was bade her the traditional farewell of the Faith of the Moon, but to this young housemaid who had never before entered his chambers, it was a personal benediction.

Sometimes Gwyndolin’s divinity seemed a distant reality—especially when Sulyvahn was around to “bring him down from his golden clouds,” as he’d once put it—but the encounters he had with the housestaff that were assigned to bring him his breakfast every morning slapped him across the face with his godhood. To the average mortal, Gwyndolin’s passive parting message was a blessing, even if that had not been the original intent.

(In all honesty, Gwyndolin had never been confident in his ability to bestow blessings and manufacture miracles, and he was still on the fence about whether or not it could be done at all. For Gwyndolin’s siblings had never answered his prayers. His parents had never answered his prayers. His aunts and uncles and cousins had never answered his prayers. How could the gods—even the purest and rawest of the pantheon—answer the prayers of mortals when they could not even answer their own?)

Still, for the sake of his people, Gwyndolin was willing to pretend.

“Thou art as worthy of mine blessing as any other.” His chiding was gentle, yet firm. “What is thy name?”

Another gasp. “Y-Yazmin, My Lord. Yazmin of the Land of Obsidian Sands. I came to Irithyll with my young son a fortnight ago and gained employment in the royal residence a week past.”

The god pursed his lips into a worried line. A child? Yet her voice sounds as if her own adulthood has only just begun...
“A good and fitting name.” Gwyndolin did not need to be able to see the maid’s face to tell that her cheeks were as red as a blistering sunburn. “Now, be on thy way; I do not wish for thee to be scolded by the head maid for any presumed tardiness. Blessings of the moon upon thy journey...and that of thy child.”

Yazmin made a sound that was half breath, half sob, and Gwyndolin could hear her clap her gloved hand against her mouth in an attempt to stem her sounds. “T...thank you, o’ Dark Moon! May your light shine upon this plain forevermore!”

There was the quick click-clack of boots as Yazmin—swiftly, yet with a steadiness that was unusual for someone so awed—made for the door. There was the sound of the heavy wooden door being forced open and closed, but Gwyndolin waited until he could no longer hear the sound of her footsteps in the hall before he commanded his snakes to grip each side of the canopy; they revealed the dawn-soaked room, bit by bit, until the silk was bustled against the posts closest to the head of the bed.

*Miss Yazmin handled herself with a great amount of composure,* Gwyndolin mused, not hesitating to stretch himself and his snakes in full with the bed curtains out of the way. *Most of the newcomers to mine quarters stumble and sutter all over themselves. Some even burst into tears. Perhaps I shall request that she continue the task of bringing mine breakfast.*

Perhaps, too, he could one day meet her son—or at least learn why she came to Irithyll in the first place. Every one of his citizens had a story, and while Gwyndolin knew it was impossible to know them all, it would not hurt to learn the life of this peculiar maid.

Nodding to himself, Gwyndolin climbed out of bed and slithered to the breakfast tray, ignoring the food in favor of pouring himself a cup of oolong tea. His first order of business would be to read Sulyvahn’s letter (and perhaps think of a reply, though he often found himself taking a frustrating amount of time to compose written responses to his fiancé, even the most banal of memos). Then he would wash and dress before taking his breakfast and, if he were lucky, Telos and Aishura would arrive before he had finished eating and save him some time.

This particular day was not one for dawdling. Lorian was being “released” from the guest wing this morning, and not only did Gwyndolin wish to be the first one outside of his brother to greet Lorian, but he had promised to give him a tour of the residence and Anor Londo as soon as he was cleared by Dr. Watari.

*After which...*
The parchment scroll Sulyvahn preferred over folded letters rested neatly on the desk, and Gwyndolin took his time in arranging his teacup and saucer on the dark wood surface and settling himself as comfortably as one could in the chair, relishing in how its unyielding back pressed his own into a soothingly straight line. After enjoying a long sip, the god replaced the teacup on its saucer before grabbing the letter opener resting nearby, breaking the wax seal holding the scroll closed. He unrolled the parchment and began to read.

Dearest Gwyndolin,

As promised, I am updating you on the status of the cathedral, though it took me quite some time to find a moment to write! I would not have bothered with such tedious formalities if it were anyone but you.

As Archdeacon Royce reported in his initial missive, some peculiar and insidious illness has stricken those of the outlying Farron Protectorate and the Undead Settlement being established by the royalty of Lothric, and it saddens me to report that a great many of the ill have already sunk into the dark, deep waters. Until we have determined the cause of the epidemic, we are burning the bodies to prevent contamination of the groundwater, and we have assigned only the undead to prepare the bodies and tend to the sick. We are optimistic, however, that the illness is confined to only the outlying regions of the parish.

All the same, I fear my absence shall be longer than I had anticipated—at least until poor Archdeacon Royce has either recovered or perished from his illness—though his health seems to be on the upturn, which is a relief! As soon as I have a firmer grasp of the situation, I should be able to send you a tentative date of return.

I must admit, I worry for you in my absence, My Grace. I have heard about your leaving the city walls to battle some strange manner of demon (and I do hope you feel inclined to share the details of said event in your reply), and really—what a reckless and feckless action on your part! While I am deeply admiring of and amazed at your devotion and willingness to protect your people, I must caution you about risking your life with such carefree abandon, especially given the recently poor state of your health. The decision is yours in the end, of course, but I would have counselled you far differently had I been present. You are the last True God in the Lordran, my dearest, which makes you all the more rarefied and valuable in this day and age. It would be an absolute disaster for all in the Lordran if your occasional impulsiveness led to your demise.

Ah, but I don’t mean to lecture you, especially when you are on such a higher level than myself! I simply worry for the health and well-being of my intended. Forgive this old corvian for loving
thee too deeply and truly!

I will count the hours until we reunite, lovely Gwyndolin, and I hope that you will be doing the same. I eagerly await your reply.

With utmost affection and reverence,

Sulyvahn of Ariandel

By the time Gwyndolin finished the second paragraph, the feeling of dread that had begun during the first had filled his stomach, and he felt a strange sense of exhaustion as he finished. Well, maybe not that strange; he knew from the start that Sulyvahn would have taken issue with his leaving the city to confront the beast directly. He knew Sulyvahn loved him, of course, and meant well in both his capacity as his adviser and his capacity as a courter; Gwyndolin’s life was highly precious, after all, and he could understand the corvian’s nervousness when it came to the god exerting himself in such a way so soon after recovering from illness. Honestly, though—sometimes Sulyvahn felt more like a nagging father than a romantic partner!

None of the Silver Knights would have been properly equipped to handle that beast, Gwyndolin mused, running his fingers along the elegant cursive of Sulyvahn’s handwriting. They would have been taken off guard—just like poor Lorian—and I would not have been there to save them. It was for the best that I handled the matter myself...even if Sulyvahn cannot see the situation as such.

To be fair, how could he, when Gwyndolin had waited for Sulyvahn to open communication before writing the corvian himself? It was too tenuous, Gwyndolin mused, to explain the details of the event in a letter that could easily be intercepted. With the Cathedral of the Deep being as close to Lothric as it was, Gwyndolin would not have been surprised if King Oceiros had not sent his men there in search of his sons, and the god could not—in good conscience—risk the safety of Lothric and Lorian in an effort to keep Sulyvahn up-to-date on Irithyll’s affairs. He would tell him everything, of course...but it would be best to do so in person.

Besides, Sulyvahn has far more pressing matters to attend to in his own realm of expertise; I would merely be adding unnecessary weight to his already formidable workload if I were to tell him of the beast and the Outrider Knights. I shall share only the barest of details in mine reply—and I will say nothing of the brothers until Sulyvahn returns to the city.

Nodding to himself, Gwyndolin grabbed a piece of stationary and uncapped a bottle of ink, deciding to compose his reply before seeing to his bathing and breakfast. If Aishura and Telos showed up before he was done, well...they would just have to wait.
In fact, when Gwyndolin heard a tentative knock on his door halfway through his composition, he initially assumed that it was indeed the Captain of the Silver Knights and her second.

Yes?” the god called without looking up from his parchment.

There was a cough.

“Ah...um…” Gwyndolin jolted—his quill almost falling out of his hand—at the sound of Lorian’s nervous voice. “Forgive me, Gwyndolin, but Dr. Watari had to leave immediately after his final exam, and Lothric had not yet returned from breakfast with Yorshka, so…”

Gwyndolin choked and fumbled in his haste to set his quill in the inkwell. A few drops of black splashed against the right sleeve of his dressing gown, but the Nameless Moon found himself uncaring, knowing that Lorian possibly seeing a few ink stains on the cuff of his nightgown was nothing compared to the sight of the blood splattered all over the prince when they first met.

“No, no, it is all right, Lorian!” While he may not have cared about ink stains, Gwyndolin suddenly found himself flustered at the idea of Lorian seeing him in such an unkempt state. But the thought of asking the knight to wait or leave did not once cross his mind. “Prithee, allow me a few moments to compose mineself.”

“Ah...did I wake you?” Lorian, to his credit, sounded as rattled as Gwyndolin felt. “Please, there is not need to put yourself out on my behalf. I can simply return to the guest room and wait.”

“Thou shalt do no such thing.” Gwyndolin’s tone was firm as he slipped on his white silk robe and secured it with a gold belt at his waist. “Thou hast been confined to that room long enough.” The god quickly checked his reflection in the mirror and cursed at the sight of his bed head. “Did the good doctor send thee to mine door?”

“No...well, not directly.” Gwyndolin could hear the sound of Lorian stepping back from the door, and he quickly set about running his fingers through his hair, not wanting to make Lorian wait longer (and grow even more self-conscious) by running to the bathroom for a thorough brushing. “I actually first knocked on your sister’s door after checking the kitchen, but there was no answer, so I...I thought maybe Lothric and Yorshka would be with you.”

“Ah, no! No, the children are most likely at the Church of Yorshka; mine sister mentioned last
night that she had several duties to complete before midday.”

Satisfied that he was presentable at the very least, Gwyndolin slithered back over to his desk and sat down, bidding the snakes to curl around the chair’s wooden legs in an attempt to appear calmer than he felt. “Thou mayst enter.”

“...Are you sure?”

“Yes, Lorian, I am sure.”

“Ah. Right. Sorry…”

Gwyndolin sighed and folded his hands in his lap as he heard the heavy wooden door open with an ease he hadn’t heard in years (for only Aestus, Gwynevere, his father, and the Four Knights had ever been able to manhandle that heavy monstrosity like a normal door). The sound of metal shifting and clattering against itself and the stone floor piqued the god’s interest, and he found himself turning around in his chair earlier than anticipated, watching with surprised eyes as Lorian shut the door behind him.

“Oh, thou art in thine armor!”

Lorian blushed self-consciously and adjusted the helmet he held underneath his right arm. “Ah. Yes. I thought it might make Lothric feel better if he saw I was recovered in all conceivable ways...that, and I wished to...to...to ascertain the nature of your blacksmith’s repairs.”

“And? Art thou satisfied?”

“Very.” Lorian’s voice and face depicted a happily awestruck man, and he looked down at his free arm and legs as he twisted his limbs from supine to prone, as if checking for something. “I have never seen such deft and thorough repairs. Ser Aval even got rid of the nasty squeaks and creaks that have plagued my suit since the day I donned it for the first time! I have never moved in it with such ease.”

On top of the basic repairs involving welding, hammering, smoothing, patching, and moulding, Aval had seemingly decided to tend to the armour’s cosmetics with as much attention as the structure. The old and smudged black that had once stained the bronze had been completely
scrubbed away, and the old blacksmith had even taken it upon himself to polish the suit from pauldron to sole, morphing Lorian from a weary and formidable knight into a commander that gleamed as golden as his heart. The old, tattered waist cape had even been replaced with a swath of new royal blue fabric, long enough to swish airily around Lorian’s ankles whenever he moved.

Even Lorian’s helm had seemingly been touched-up. Though the strangely obfuscating helmet was currently tucked underneath the elder prince’s arm, Gwyndolin could see that it had been cleaned and polished as well, and the more crooked of the spiculations had been bent back into place.

_When Lorian places that crown upon his head, Gwyndolin pondered, will he appear as a sun or a flame? I am not sure I like the idea of him symbolizing either._

Flames faded, after all, and the sun inevitably set every night. Gwyndolin prayed to the forces beyond his control that Lorian would escape those equally miserable fates.

“Thou art truly a vision to behold in thine armour,” Gwyndolin said with utmost seriousness and honesty, his heart fluttering in a strange way at the sight of Lorian ducking his head to his flustered face. It served him right after all of those “beautiful” comments! Now he would know what it felt like to be praised so unexpectedly! “I did not have a chance to see it properly at our first meeting. Wouldst thou mind terribly…?”

Lorian shook his head, his long, freshly washed hair flowing like dark molten silver in the thin light from the window. “Not at all. I am told that it was an antique that has been passed down in the House of Lothric since its inception...though I never bothered myself with learning its history. It has protected me in many battles, and that is all that matters in the end.”

“I would tend to agree with thee.” Gwyndolin rose from his chair and slithered to stand a few feet in front of Lorian. His serpentine eyes thoughtfully scanned the knight’s body from head to foot, then back up again, then back down again. “However, the style and method of its forging is one that I have not seen in several thousand years, so I cannot help but feel curiosity.”

Curiosity, yes, but...something else. Something that Gwyndolin could not quite put his finger on. Perhaps he was simply fixated on how different Lorian looked now that he was healed and clad in the uniform of his birthright and profession.

When Gwyndolin first saw Lorian, he was impressive, certainly—but Gwyndolin had been “high” above him on a hilltop. Then Lorian was injured, and _then_ he had spent the past week bedbound, where Gwyndolin had visited him every day and talked with him for hours. Now that Lorian was strong and standing upright (in full armor, nonetheless!), Gwyndolin found himself struck by just
how strong and tall he was when they were both on even footing. Godkin tended to lean on the
taller side, and the more “pureblood” godkin were, the taller they tended to be. Gwyndolin, though
on the slight and small side for a True God, was just slightly shorter than taller humans when his
snakes were at their lowest “station.” Lorian, on the other hand, needed no such “serpent elevator”
as Yorshka called it) to loom over most living beings. The eldest heir of the Throne of Lothric was
at least two meters in height, if not more, and Gwyndolin only came up to the top of Lorian’s
sternum when his snakes were at their normal station. Even if he raised himself up to his highest
(well, the highest he could go without falling off-balance and/or looking utterly ridiculous),
Gwyndolin would barely be able to look Lorian straight in the eye, but he may fall a few
centimeters even below that!

Lorian was indeed the very definition of tall and stately, but far from being overly lanky, the man’s
broad shoulders and the lean, yet tightly packed, musculature of his limbs were a perfect
compliment to the pre-Linking style of his armor. In fact, when trussed up in his full military
regalia, Gwyndolin found himself reminded of how Gwynevere had appeared the few times she
had donned her own suit of armour: sturdy, limber, and—dare he say it— statuesque, with a honed
lethality that they carried like a dagger concealed in a belt.

Gwyndolin suddenly felt as if his heart was being torn in two by a pair of massive hands—one
being his admiration of Lorian’s deadly elegance, and the other being his thousands of years of
longing for his elder sister—and he cast his gaze to the ground in a vain attempt to keep Lorian
from seeing his stricken expression.

“Are you alright?” Lorian’s voice was soft and, before Gwyndolin could respond, he felt a
bronze-clad hand rest on his shoulder with a gentleness the god had never before experienced from
anyone outside of his family. He took a sharp intake of breath.

“I am fine. Just...remembering.” Gwyndolin smiled weakly up at Lorian and, tentatively, rested
one of his own hands on Lorian’s own before it could retreat. The sight of his pale and slender
hand resting atop Lorian’s far larger and gauntlet-clad one would have been comical to most, but
Lorian made no move to laugh, or even move. Gwyndolin was grateful. “Mine elder sister,
Gwynevere, Queen of Sunlight—she wore a set of armour similar to thine own.”

“Oh!” It was Lorian’s turn to inhale sharply. “I had no idea that my set was that ancient! Or is it
simply a replica based on the metalwork of the gods?”

“Given the weathering of the bronze and the detailed spiculations of thine helm, I believe thine
armor was indeed crafted in the time before mine father, the Great Lord Gwyn, cast himself to the
Flame.” Gwyndolin let his hand drop and, after a few seconds, Lorian did the same. The Nameless
Moon had to resist the fleeting urge to grab it before it could leave his shoulder. “I am not terribly
familiar with the history of Lothric. Perhaps we could do some investigating together? Discover
the true origins of the set and, mayhap, link it back to its creator. Perhaps, if thou wouldst be
willing, Ser Aval and Ser Andre could study thine armour and search for clues.”

“Who is Ser Andre?”

“The last Divine Blacksmith in the Lordran.” Gwyndolin couldn’t help but smirk at the sight of Lorian’s astonished expression. “Thou hast heard of the Divine Blacksmiths, then?”

“How could I have not?” Lorian seemed almost affronted that Gwyndolin would question his knowledge of the old divinity, and the Nameless Moon had to remind himself that Lothric was a Gwyn-worshiping kingdom with a goddess as its queen, so it was likely that Lorian’s education was rooted in the ways of the Court of the Sun. “Blacksmiths with skills so unsurpassed that Titania herself fragmented her soul and bestowed upon them the shards. I was taught that they died out thousands of years ago.”

“Most did, in the aftermath of the death of the Goddess of Smithing—Andre is the only one that remains. The rest either perished or morphed into Titanite Demons in the immediate aftermath of Titania’s demise.” Gwyndolin slithered back to his desk and picked up his empty teacup. “Ser Andre spends his time traveling from realm to realm, instructing others in the ways of divine smithing, but he often returns to Irithyll to visit both mineself and Ser Aval. I have a feeling he would be chomping at the figurative bit to examine such a well-preserved suit of divine armour.”

Lorian chuckled in an exhausted sort of manner and carefully collapsed onto one of the soft chairs in front of the fireplace. “Giants, divine blacksmiths, crossbreed children, True Gods...it is as if I have been living in an ancient history book for the past week!”

Gwyndolin raised a delicate eyebrow and smirked. “Art thou calling mineself ancient, Ser Lorian? And after all I have done for thee and thy brother!”

Lorian flushed and lurched forward in his seat.

“Ah, no! I am not, I...I am saying not...I...!” It sounded as if Lorian’s tongue had somehow tied itself into a knot, and as Gwyndolin watched with both eyebrows towards his hairline, the elder prince maneuvered his jaw and smacked his lips in an attempt to untie it. “I just was...I was just...there are so many things here...things that I was taught no longer existed...that left or died out long ago! I...” More smacking. “I was not implying that you look...look ancient—!”

“Ser Lorian, prithee, rest thy heart. I was only teasing.” A lancet of guilt stabbed into the base of Gwyndolin’s stomach as he raised his hands to soothe the knight’s nerves. The Nameless Moon
was so used to playful teasing—whether it was directed at him by his siblings in the ancient past, to him directing it at Yorshka and Sulyvahn and Itoro, his dear knightess and already dear friend. Though Lorian had not spoken much of his treatment under his father, his knee jerk and almost frightened reaction to gentle barbs and jabs led Gwyndolin to believe that the type of tyranny practiced by Oceiros was far different from the blunt, booming, yet ultimately straightforward violence of Gwyn. “I would be the first to call myself ‘ancient’ when asked; for all intents and purposes, I am a walking and talking artifact.”

Lorian exhaled as if he had been kicked in the stomach and bowed his back over his legs, resting his forearms on his thighs as he visibly forced himself to relax. Oh, if only Gwyndolin could go back in time and shove a fist in his mouth before he’d said such a thing!

“With all due respect, Gwyndolin...you are the furthest thing from an artifact.” Lorian’s stuttering seemed to melt away with his panic. “Artifacts are those objects that are lost and forgotten over time...tools and trinkets that no longer have any practical use.”

“Oh...in that case, what wouldst thou call me instead?”

The guilt rushing in Gwyndolin’s heart ebbed into a current of fond amusement as he watched Lorian’s cheeks turn pink.

“...An encyclopedia.” It was clear that Lorian’s answer threw Gwyndolin off ever so slightly, and the knight prince was quick to elaborate. “A tome of knowledge, updated throughout the years with every fact and discovery, so that it never stops being relevant. A book that chronicles history without becoming lost in it. An intersection of the past and present that will continue to grow and adapt as long as there is a future to have.”

For a moment, Gwyndolin forgot how to speak, and Lorian ducked his head with what the god hoped was embarrassment and prayed wasn’t shame.

“...It is no wonder that little Lothric is so sweet,” Gwyndolin finally managed, mentally scolding the snakes for squirming and twisting around each other in such a silly and unbecoming manner...and in front of a guest no less! “The brother who raised him is just as sweet and polite, if not more so.”

The flush deepened. “I beg you, Gwyndolin—no more.” Lorian muttered, his eyes obscured by his curtain of platinum gray hair. “I am not sure if I can withstand both Lothric and the last True God in the Lordran assailing me with compliments.”
Gwyndolin chuckled good-naturedly and laid a hand on Lorian’s left shoulder.

“I would tell thee that ‘turnabout is fair play,’ but there is no reason for thee to call me ‘beautiful’ today, so I suppose I shall admit I am being the slightest bit unfair to thee in this instance.”

Lorian craned his head upwards to meet Gwyndolin’s gaze and frowned in confusion.

“Why would you say that?”

“Ser Lorian, I deeply, truly appreciate thine attempt at flattery, but it is completely unnecessary.”

“Attempt at…” Lorian blinked, and it seemed as if the knight’s blatant befuddlement was contagious, for Gwyndolin was growing steadily more confused by the second. “Gwyndolin, with all due respect, I do not know what you are talking about. Do you...do you believe I am lying?”

It was Gwyndolin’s turn to flush. What had he just been saying about turnabout being fair play? Lorian seemed to have a nasty habit of making the Nameless Moon eat his words on a regular basis.

“Lorian, look at me,” Gwyndolin insisted in a far squeakier voice than he would have liked as he gestured to himself, wondering if Lorian had somehow missed the wrinkled nightdress, uncombed hair, and sleep still gunked in the corners of his eyes. “I am a mess, and thou art too polite to say so, but I have no such qualms of labeling mine appearance what it is.”

Lorian looked aghast.

“That is what you consider a mess?! But I...I thought...you...I…a mess!?”

The elder prince looked genuinely shaken and perturbed by such an idea—as if he’d just learned that something he had held as a solid fact for the entirety of his life had just been proven to be the hollowest of lies—and Gwyndolin lacked the willpower so early in the morning to not double over from snorting laughter at the sight.
“Ser Lorian! Please!” Gwyndolin managed to find the breath to gasp out the words, even as he had to hold onto the back of the second chair in front of the hearth to keep from possibly keeling over. The snakes, mercifully, wrapped themselves around the legs of said chair as a means of extra support. “Thou actest as if I had informed thee that man-eating slug was living under thy bed! It is not so dramatic a revelation!”

“Well you don’t have to laugh at me about it! I thought you said I was free from abuse while in Irithyll! The divine are not supposed to lie!” Despite his faux-irritable words, Lorian’s own smile was cracking at the seams, and it didn’t take much longer for him to start giggling like a madman, clapping a hand over his mouth in an unnecessary attempt at modesty.

“Thou dost not have to hide thine laugh if thou dost not wish to.” The words flew surprisingly clearly out of Gwyndolin’s cackling mouth. “Thou hast a nice, friendly, and filling laugh...unlike mine, which sounds akin to a group of pigs descending upon their troughs.”

“Do not say that!” Lorian, again, sounded as if Gwyndolin had just uttered the most blasphemous sentence in the world. “Your laugh is as full of sunlight as your heritage!”

“No, you.”

“No, you.”

Goodness gracious. At that point, Gwyndolin wondered if he and Lorian were engaging in some sort of unconscious competition as to who could produce the reddest blush in the other party, and the god had a sneaking suspicion that the final score was a tie. All laughter forgotten, they simply stared at each other, mouths slightly open and hands hovering awkwardly for lack of anything to do with them.

Then, they started laughing again, clutching their stomachs as their eyelashes grew damp with tears.

“I,” Gwyndolin eventually said when they had calmed down, “have to get dressed. I have called Captain Aishura and Vice-Captain Telos to mine quarters as soon as their rounds have finished, and while I apparently lack a sense of shame when around thee, I would prefer to appear somewhat godly for mine citizens.”

“You look plenty godly to me.”
“I do not trust thine opinion. Thou art too sweet for thine own good.”

“Funny...my father used to say that to me. I enjoy that comment quite a bit more when it’s coming from you.” The Nameless Moon was thrown yet again—especially when he took a second or two to consider the implications—but Lorian acted as if he’d made an idle comment about the weather. “Should I head back to the guest room while you...?”

Gwyndolin raised his hand. “No need. In fact, I would not mind having thine opinion on the matter they come to discuss with me. I must admit that, while I grew up in a family of warriors, I mineself am quite lost as to the broader strokes of warplay. Thine assistance in preventing me from looking like an idiot in front of mine knights would be most appreciated.”

“It would be my utmost pleasure to assist.”

Lorian’s reply would have seemed like simple politeness to the average layperson, but it was not hard for Gwyndolin to see how the corners of his mouth ticked upwards ever so slightly, and how he leaned forward in his seat just so while laying his hands flat on the tops of his thighs. Lorian only ever exhibited those two particular tics, Gwyndolin had learned over the past week and a handful of days, when he held a keen interest in whatever subject was at hand. Said subjects often included his little brother, world history, local politics, specific kinds of novels (especially those filled with sweeping romances and epic battles), and—last but not least—military tactics.

It was not surprising that Lorian would be inwardly jumping at the bit to sink his teeth into a bit of strategy. From the conversations he’d had with the man over the past week, Gwyndolin learned that Lorian had never expected to serve on the field of battle again, and even discussed becoming a common laborer or longshoreman once he was well enough to search for work. Just remembering the idea made Gwyndolin want to laugh in a disgusted sort of amusement. Here was Lorian—demonslayer, war hero, eldest prince of the strongest kingdom in the Lordran outside of the Sunless Realms—suggesting that his most suited occupation was common lifting! Not that there was anything wrong with being a common hard laborer, absolutely not, but to have a man of Lorian’s political and tactical talents squander them all on standard work? What a wasteful tragedy it would be—not only for Lorian, but for the Lordran as a whole!

It would have been different, the god supposed, if Lorian had hated his role in Lothric’s hierarchy. However, spending time with Lorian made Gwyndolin realize just how much Lorian had adored being Knight Commander of the Kingdom of Lothric—how it was the only role outside of being his little brother’s caretaker in which he could take pride and feel confident and appreciated—and while Gwyndolin, too, would have sacrificed his ideal life for the sake of his own siblings, he refused to have Lorian punished for performing one of the most decent, selfless, and loving acts he had ever witnessed in his four millennia of existence! No, absolutely not—not in Gwyndolin’s...
kingdom, in Gwyndolin’s capital city, on Gwyndolin’s watch. The Nameless Moon could not restore Lorian’s claim to the Throne of Lothric (not yet, at least), but at the very least, he could give the elder prince the position in Irithyll society that he more than deserved.

All Gwyndolin could hope was that Lorian’s poor self-image would not prevent him from accepting the post.

“Very well.” Gwyndolin nodded at Lorian and slithered over to his closet, opening the doors to pick an outfit for the day. “Prithee, make thyself at home; I should only take a half-hour at the most.”

“Understood.” Gwyndolin heard the chair shift behind him as Lorian craned his neck to peek at the inside of Gwyndolin’s wardrobe. “If the Captain and Vice-Captain show up before you are finished, should I let them in, or...?”

“I shall tell them to wait. I fear that, even though I have informed them of thy presence in the residence—” and the role that I intend for thee to take “—I do not wish for them to assume anything untoward by seeing thee in full armor in mine quarters. No offense, Ser Lorian, but thou couldst be considered quite intimidating in thy regalia.”

“I figured. It is why I left my sword in the guest quarters, after all.”

“Oh? Was the presence in thy sword content with such abandonment?”

“No, of course not, but I was more concerned about being seen as an assassin by anyone I passed in the hallway than coddling the feelings of what is left of the Demon Prince. It is the least he deserves after his atrocities...oh, and nearly burning me alive. That, too.”

Gwyndolin smirked to himself as he studied his wardrobe with a far more careful eye than usual.

Normally, his choice of outfit would be automatic and almost reflexive: either a black or midnight-blue robe or dress, with his favorite black-and-gold shawl. However, after his foray in his closet on the day Lothric and Lorian arrived in Irithyll, Gwyndolin found himself curious about all of the different articles of clothing that he had either never worn or never remembered wearing. Most were dresses and robes cut in his preferred style (bell sleeves, square-cut necklines, flowing skirts), but dyed and embroidered in differing patterns and colors, while a few others were ceremonial pieces he had only ever worn once and had no desire to ever wear again.
Gwyndolin knew that he would never willingly touch white and gold for day dress ever again (having burned his old outfit the day he left the tomb for good), but raiments in forest green and royal purple had worked their way into his casual uniform over the past week—even though Gwyndolin would always hear Sulyvahn’s voice commenting on how black was the only color that didn’t wash out Gwyndolin’s pale skin when he dressed. Something about Lorian’s presence in his chambers made the Nameless Moon feel bold, and he bypassed the blacks, blues, violets, and greens for a red dress that had first caught his eye a day or so before. The soft fabric was dyed the color of fresh burgundy wine, with delicate, dark silver thread weaving through the dress’s bodice, sleeves, and hem in sweeping patterns. It was the same silver as Lorian’s hair, Gwyndolin realized, which made the final decision for him.

Who cares if the red washes me out? Gwyndolin rolled his eyes as he plucked the dress off of its hanger and slung it over his arm. After a moment of thought, the god also chose a dark blue cape to complete the outfit, knowing that the dress lacked the hood that allowed him to venture into public. Honestly, Sulyvahn could be far too persnickety at times! I am the Sovereign of the Sunless Realms and the last True God. I am allowed to wear whatever I want for whatever reason I want—pale skin or no! I am not the Dark Sun anymore!

As Gwyndolin exited his wardrobe, Lorian’s eyes briefly fell on the dress he carried—but if the knight had any qualms about the shade, he said nothing. The relief Gwyndolin felt was more than a little ridiculous.

“Would you mind terribly if I helped myself to some tea?” the knight queried.

“Of course not. Help thyself to whatever is on mine tray; I tend to eat only half of mine morning meal.” It may have seemed like a small portion, but given that the god was only able to finish a fourth of his breakfast before his last bout of illness, half was more than a slight improvement. “Again, if Captain Aishura and Vice-Captain Telos arrive before I finish, say nothing. I shall handle it.”

“As you wish.”

While Gwyndolin and his snakes enjoyed a leisurely soak as much as anyone else, the Nameless Moon did not like the image of Lorian sitting about and twiddling his thumbs in boredom, so he
made short yet thorough work of washing up before forcing the snakes out of the warm tub to dry.

The serpents curled around each other--damp and miserable--while Gwyndolin took a page from Gwynere’s book and used both brushing and the liberal use of Warmth to dry his hair in a matter of minutes. Sometimes the hassle of caring for longer hair made Gwyndolin long for his short hairstyle of millennia past, but he would quickly remember how exposed and vulnerable his short hairstyle made him feel, and he would remember how the spill and feel of his hair over his shoulders never failed to make him feel comfortable in his own body.

Besides, Yorshka adored playing with his hair, and Gwyndolin was far more concerned with making his sister happy than simplifying his grooming routine. That, in turn, made Gwyndolin wonder if Lothric enjoyed playing with Lorian’s long hair. The god made a mental note to ask the knight as soon as they had settled the pertinent matters at hand.

Once Gwyndolin’s hair was the consistency of white, freshly-spun silk, he secured his blue cape over his shoulders and exited the bathroom, his snakes eagerly sliding out of the humid room and leaving damp trails on the stone floor. He found Lorian standing over his desk, his teacup in his right hand as he thumbed the edges of Sulyvahn’s missive with the left, looking almost... annoyed.

“Is something troubling thee, Ser Lorian?”

The knight jumped—tea sloshing harmlessly from the cup onto his gauntlet—and turned sheepishly to face Gwyndolin, who was standing in front of the hearth, with arms crossed and an amused smirk on his face. The snakes, meanwhile, were busy rubbing themselves dry on Shanalotte’s gifted rug.

“Forgive me.” Lorian smiled weakly in apology. “I could...not help but be curious as to whether or not you...well, have mentioned my brother and me in your communications.”

Understandable, Gwyndolin mused, humming in agreement as he nodded reassuringly at the prince. Lorian is well aware that I hold the lives of himself and his brother in mine hands. He would have to be a blithering idiot to not wonder if I was conspiring to betray him behind his back.

“It is a letter from Sulyvahn, the Acting Lord Commander...then again, thou hast surely discerned that from thy perusal.”

After a moment of hesitation—looking from Gwyndolin to the letter and back again—Lorian
nodded.

“This is the same Sulyvahn who is courting you, correct?”

“Yes. The man who wishes to marry me.”

Lorian’s frown deepened. “I see.”

“Is something troubling thee, Lorian?”

Lorian glanced between the letter and Gwyndolin once more.

“...It is not my place to say.”

“Maybe not, but did I not give thee permission to speak freely when it was just the two of us? Place or not, thou art my friend, and thou shouldst speak if thou feels it right.”

There was another pause.

“Perhaps I am just imagining things…” Lorian finally began, slowly and haltingly, “...but I do not like the way Sulyvahn treats you like a child in this letter. I cannot help but find it... inappropriate, not only for an Acting Lord Commander, but also for a betrothed.”

Of all of the comments Gwyndolin had been expecting, a confirmation of his own feelings about the missive was not one of them, and the god and his snakes were sent blinking as they digested Lorian’s words.

“I…”

Before Gwyndolin could answer, there was a knock at the door, and both he and Lorian glanced towards it.
“Your Majesty?” a feminine, and surprisingly soft, voice queried from behind the heavy wood.

Lorian and Gwyndolin looked at each other and nodded; while Lorian moved to set the teacup back on the coffee table and settled himself against the bit of wall between the hearth and the left corner of the room, Gwyndolin activated his glamour and settled himself airily on the chair facing Lorian, pulling up the hood of his cloak and crossing his bare ankles beneath the long skirt of his dress.

“Thou mayst enter, Captain Aishura.”

The door creaked open, and two Silver Knights clanked into the room, their distinctive helmets tucked under their arms—as was the rule when entering into a formal audience with the King of the Gods.

“Lord Gwyndolin, Ser Lorian.” Fairuz Aishuralthos, the captain of the Silver Knights was the first to speak, giving Lorian a quick salute before dropping to one knee in front of Gwyndolin. Her second-in-command, Vice-Captain Damodar Telos, performed the same actions a few feet behind his commanding officer, though he chose to wear a polite yet jovial smile instead of Aishura’s stern frown. “You sent for us, Nameless Moon?”

“I did.” Gwyndolin nodded respectfully at Aishura and briefly touched his fingertips to her right pauldron—a greeting that had been practiced between divine sovereign and knight captain since the very conception of the order. “Please, stand, both of thee. We have much to discuss.”

At first, Gwyndolin simply sipped his tea and listened as Aishura gave the morning report, while Telos stood a few respectful paces behind her, close to the hearth. On occasion, the second-in-command would glance over at Lorian, who seemed to Gwyndolin to have turned into an entirely different person. Gone was the kind and bashful smile and the sparkle in those brown eyes, replaced instead by a stern mouth and hard gaze that reminded the god so much of his elder brother, Aestus, during the war council meetings he had been allowed to observe as a child. The gentle brother gone, replaced by a man with the weight of the world on his shoulders—a man whose every decision could mean life or death for hundreds of soldiers and commonfolk.

*If Lorian were not leaning against the wall, Gwyndolin mused, perhaps he, too, would stand with his chin in his hand and his back as straight as a rod, just like dear Aestus.*

It should not have surprised Gwyndolin so, in hindsight, that Lorian was quite a different person when placed in the position of a knight-prince. After all, Gwyndolin—the brother and friend—was far different from Gwyndolin—the Dark Moon and King of the Gods. Yet all he had known of
Lorian was a man who stroked Lothric’s hair with all the tenderness and softness of a mother; who bore Yorshka’s bossiness with a chuckle and the fondest of smiles; and who called Gwyndolin beautiful without hesitation and with every drop of that bountiful honesty he possessed. If Gwyndolin had first met Lorian as he was in this moment, then he would have been equally shocked by the warmth underlying the steel...perhaps even more so.

Gwyndolin tried desperately to listen to Aishura, he truly did, but he struggled to follow along with banal military management as it was; let alone when his new friend was being so unnervingly fascinating. He could not keep his gaze from drifting from Aishura to Lorian, no matter how desperately he tried to pull it back, and his mind was busy turning over the nature of those like himself and dear Lorian—who had worn so many masks to survive that shifting between personas was as seamless as breathing. Who could possibly focus on unremarkable nightly incidents and monotonous droning about requisitions with such a mystery in front of them?

“ My Lord.”

Gwyndolin kept himself from jumping in his seat by squeezing his hands together in his lap, and he found himself doubly glad that he was wearing his hood as he directed his eyes back to Aishura, for the captain surely would have seen the abashed look on his face without! “ Ah, yes, Captain?”

Aishura coughed politely into her free gauntlet and shifted on her feet. She was a surprisingly short and slender for a Silver Knight, but her tenacity and adaptability on the battlefield more than made up for her stature, and she could be as fierce and insurmountable as the largest of the knights on the training grounds. As her ancestors had fled from Wolnir’s conquering of Carthus centuries beforehand, her skin was as dark as the sands of her ancestral province, and she was notorious for the array of colorful beads that she wove through her cornrows. It took a great deal of self-assurance to wear such a bold hairstyle in such a regimental profession; in fact, it was one of the many reasons Gwyndolin had chosen her to replace the old captain after their death.

“ You seem preoccupied, Your Majesty.” Aishura maintained her poker face as she continued. “ I have asked several questions and you have not replied. Have I spoken out of turn?”

Gwyndolin squeezed his eyes shut and mentally kicked himself. This is why he so desperately needed a Lord Commander! Everything about warfare and the military outside of covert tactics sent him floundering like a beached fish!

“ Mine apologies, Captain; I do indeed have something pressing in mind. It is why I called both of thee to mine quarters in the first place.” Gwyndolin sighed and laced his fingers together in his hands. “ Perhaps it would be best to move on to my main concern and reconvene about daily matters at a later time.”
Aishura nodded. Telos, meanwhile, was clearly trying to not roll his eyes. A tall and lanky lad with yellow-brown skin, his great-grandparents had fled the land of Aditi for the Sunless Realms during a terrible famine, and he shared the unruly mop of curly black hair of the great-grandmother who had joined and served the Silver Knights with utmost valour until her retirement from old age. Her son, Telos’s grandfather, had also served in the Silver Knights, as had his daughter, and eventually her son. Telos was as quick with his wit as he was on his feet, and he had been Aishura’s first choice for the position of her second-in-command, though his loose and informal demeanor—even when in the presence of the monarch—made him unsuitable for full captaincy. A boyish and roguish charm he may have had, but his poker face was more of an attempt than an actual thing, and it was easy for Gwyndolin to sense that he thought the whole situation ridiculous.

Lorian seemed to see it, too, and his arm tightened around his helmet as he leveled a hard glare at the back of the Vice-Captain’s head. The sight made Gwyndolin smile from beneath the safety of his hood.

“The matter that I truly wished to discuss was that of the Outrider Knights.” Gwyndolin watched as Aishura stiffened at the mention, her mouth flattening into the shape of a thin blade, and even Telos’s natural half-smile dropped into a frown. Good; if the man hadn’t even bothered to be serious when it came to the lives of his fellow soldiers, Gwyndolin would have tossed him out of the residence himself. “I have heard nothing from either of thee about the status of their return...if any have returned at all. While I appreciate both of thee handling this matter with the discretion it deserves—and that managing the army in Patriarch Sulyvahn’s absence has been an unexpected and grievous strain on thine abilities—this matter is not one that can be shoved under the rug to be dealt with upon his return.”

Aishura remained stone-faced while Telos had the decency to look scolded. Gwyndolin could see Lorian smirk out of the corner of his eye.

“The last of your messengers returned last night, My Lord.” Aishura answered, gaze directed to her feet. “All of them reported contact with their assigned Outrider Knights. They were unharmed and free from peril, and when ordered to return to Irithyll, they agreed and bade the messengers to return ahead of them.”

Gwyndolin’s immense relief at the rest of his Outriders being unharmed was replaced with confusion as he picked over Aishura’s words.

“Why would the Outrider Knights not return with the messengers?” Gwyndolin chewed the inside of his right cheek as he spoke. “If all of the messengers have already returned to Irithyll, then would the knights not also be home by now if they had simply travelled together? The message was conveyed to them in full, yes?”
“As you ordered and wrote in each missive, My Lord.”

“Then, if the missives were conveyed without abridgement, the Outrider Knights would be aware of the terrible danger they are in as long as they remain outside the barriers of the capital.” After all, Lorian had assisted Gwyndolin in penning a message that was as emergent one could be without causing panic, and they had gone over at least twenty drafts side-by-side until they were both satisfied that they were saying just enough without revealing too much. Gwyndolin had faith in Lorian, and consequently, he had the utmost faith in their missive. “So why ignore the most important part? Why not return with utmost haste instead of...dawdling about?”

Aishura’s neutral expression finally cracked, revealing a woman that looked...as equally lost about the situation as Gwyndolin. She glanced back at Telos, an open invitation for him to offer any thoughts on the matter, but he simply shrugged in a way that spoke of any guess being as good as his. Aishura sighed, rubbed her right temple with her free hand, and turned her head back to Gwyndolin. She opened her mouth to speak, most likely to say nothing more than a polite ‘I do not know’, when—

“This may not be my place, but...the Outrider Knights are simply being prudent, Lord Gwyndolin, both for themselves and the messengers.”

It was Aishura and Telos’s turn to jump, and they quickly spun to stare at Lorian, who pushed himself off the wall and walked a few steps closer to the edge of the rug. His back, Gwyndolin realized with a pang of appreciative satisfaction, was indeed ramrod straight.

“Explain, Ser Lorian.” Gwyndolin shifted in his chair to face Lorian in full, heart whirling like the sword of a Carthusian soldier as the situation he had hoped for unfolded in front of him. “For I, for one, am at a loss for an explanation.”

Unbeknownst to the knight himself, Lorian’s final test had been underway since Aishura and Telos had entered the bedchamber, and Gwyndolin had a feeling he was just about to pass with flying colors.

“It is understandable why you would be confused, Nameless Moon, for it does seem the safest course of action would be to return to Irithyll as if Undead dogs were nipping at their heels.” There was no uncertainty in the way that Lorian spoke—no stuttering, no hesitation, and no grabbing for words as if they were autumn leaves falling from a tree—and a strange, soaring sensation rose from Gwyndolin’s stomach and into his throat at the sight and sound of Lorian at his most comfortable and confident. “However, as someone who assisted in writing the missive you sent, we made it clear to the Outrider Knights that an unseen force was acting against them in the most...
malevolent of ways, yet we remained vague as to the actual nature of the threat, correct?”

“Yes.” Gwyndolin leaned forward in his chair, rested his elbows on his manufactured thighs, and tucked his steepled hands underneath his chin.

“Well, then, how could the Outrider Knights have been sure that these messengers were the messengers from Irithyll?” The feeling only grew all the more unbearable as Lorian shrugged and rolled his right shoulder as he continued. “Perhaps the messengers had been waylaid by whatever nameless usurpers were targeting them, and were waiting for the knights to let down their guard before ambushing them. Perhaps the messengers themselves, if they were from Irithyll, were participants in a plot working from within the capital itself. Or—if the messengers were indeed who they said they were—perhaps they would be in as much danger as the Outrider Knights themselves if they remained together.”

“So they sent messengers on ahead for the protection of both parties.”

“Correct, Lord Gwyndolin.”

“Why, then, is there such a delay between the return of the messengers and the return of the Outrider Knights? Those from the closest borders should have returned by now.”

“That is also an answer that seems elusive at first, but is surprisingly simple once you see it. And it is a question that can be answered with another question.”

“Which is?”

“How could the Outrider Knights be sure they were not being followed?”

The final piece clicked smoothly into place, and from the shadows in which his face was eclipsed, Gwyndolin grinned.

“It all seems so obvious when framed with such clarity. A little too obvious, for I instruct mine Blades to take the most cumbersome and tedious routes back to Irithyll when they return from contracts, and the Outrider Knights train closely with the Blades. It is unsurprising that they would think with the same mind when it comes to secrecy.”
What Gwyndolin was *not* saying was that he had an inkling that such a thing was the case the moment he opened his mouth to muse over the delayed return of the Outrider Knights, but to hear Lorian say it out loud—and without the background that the Nameless Moon had when it came to the training regimens of two of the three specialized branches of the Irithylian military—was as perfect and sweet as biting into one of Kuro’s strawberry and persimmon rice balls.

It was magnificent—so utterly magnificent—and *oh*, Gwyndolin had expected nothing less from his dear friend Lorian, but how *delicious* it was all the same to be irrefutably vindicated in his expectations. It was a feeling he experienced so rarely when Sulyvahn was present. How the Nameless Moon had missed the surety of being in the right!

“Not terribly obvious, I think, especially when you wish for them to do nothing more but return to Irithyll as soon as possible. I assure you that your knights are not only worried for their own safety, but worried for the True God that cares for them so, and they will return to Irithyll as soon as they deem it safe to do so.” Lorian’s smile was easy in a way that Gwyndolin envied—the mask cracking ever so slightly to allow a peek at the man underneath. The strange pressure in his stomach swelled and popped.

“How long wouldst thee suggest we wait before taking further action?”

Lorian put his thumb to the dip of his chin (*ha! he knew it!*) and spent the next few seconds in silent musing. Aishura and Telos were quiet, but Gwyndolin did not bother looking to gauge their reactions, knowing that they would follow Gwyndolin’s lead no matter their own personal uncertainty. No one was chosen to become a Silver Knight unless it was determined that their loyalty to the divine royalty was absolute.

“The first should show up within the next two weeks.” Lorian decided. “If, by then, none have appeared, send your Blades to seek them...not messengers.”

“Why?” Gwyndolin knew why, but he wanted to hear Lorian say it.

“By then, if none of the Outriders have returned to Irithyll, that would suggest forces beyond prudence are at play for their delay. It will take more than the average soldier, then, to seek them out.”

“Very good, Ser Lorian.” Gwyndolin was surprised at how well he kept the glee from his voice. “Until then, we shall wait and see.” He finally turned to look at Aishura and Telos, and while he...
was not surprised to see the woman as stony-faced as usual, the surprisingly docile and compliant look in Telos’s eyes was another story. He never appeared so satisfied whenever he attended meetings with Sulyvahn. If that was not a sign from the fates, then what was? “Send for me the moment one of the Outrider Knights returns, and not a moment after.”

Aishura nodded. “Yes, Lord Gwyndolin.”

“Very well. Return to thy duties, both of thee.”

Contrary to when they first came in, Telos was the first to exit, with Aishura seemingly pacing her steps so that she trailed behind. Once the captain reached the doorway, she paused, craning her head back to look at Gwyndolin.

“My Lord?”

“Yes?”

A trace of a smile flickered across Aishura’s lips. “Excellent choice.”

Warmth pooled in Gwyndolin’s belly and spread to his fingertips and makeshift toes. The sublime joy of being in the right. “Well met, Captain Aishura.”

Gwyndolin waited for the door to close and the heavy clanking footsteps to fade to the left before dropping his hood and releasing his glamour, sinking back into his chair with a punched-out sigh as the snakes unwound and fanned about on the floor, hissing in relief.

“I appreciate thine input, Lorian.” Gwyndolin smiled like a cat full of cream and lazily trained his eyes over to Lorian, who had dropped his “Knight Commander” mask entirely in favor of looking almost comically confused. “As I have told thee in the past, most military matters are beyond me, and I am rather lost at these meetings without the assistance of a Lord Commander.”

“Ah.” Lorian blinked as if emerging from a trance and smiled kindly at Gwyndolin. “It was my pleasure, Gwyndolin, but…”
“Yes?”

“What did Captain Aishura mean by ‘excellent choice?”’

Gwyndolin’s smirk split into a grin.

“Walk with me, Ser Lorian.”

There had been a time once, ten millennia or so in the past, when the royal residence had been bustling with life. The Court of the Sun, in its heyday, was composed of every True and Lesser God known to the Lordran, and the innumerable visitors from other kingdoms seemed to flow in and out of Anor Londo like the Boreal River after a long rain. Lordran was a shining beacon—the land where the First Flame had been discovered—and it seemed that everyone on the continent and beyond wished to soak up as much of its warmth as they could. Well, unless they were deformed and disappointing, like Gwyndolin. Or human. Or demon. Or Undead. Or… Or.

That time was long gone, however, and it was just Lorian and Gwyndolin walking through the corridors towards the room that his father and elder brother had once called the ‘Chamber of the War Council,’ alone outside of the flickering torches and the occasional Silver Knight passing on patrol.

“I have two questions to ask thee, dear friend,” Gwyndolin kept his voice low to keep it from echoing unnervingly off of the old stone walls. “I wish for thee to know, though, that thine answer to the second question will in no way impact the first. It is an unconditional request with an unconditional answer.”

Lorian quirked an eyebrow. “Which is?”

“That I wish for thee and Lothric to live in the royal residence with Yorshka and mineself.”
The elder prince yelped and nearly tripped over the red rug that lined the very center of the corridor, and Gwyndolin quickly reached out to steady him, though he doubted he had the strength to keep Lorian from toppling over completely.

Fortunately, Lorian quickly righted himself, and he gazed down at Gwyndolin with the widest brown eyes the god had ever seen.

“Do you…” Lorian stopped himself and shook his head. “No, of course you mean it, of course. But…” He gulped and adjusted the helm underneath his arm as they resumed walking. “Forgive me if this is insulting, but…are you sure? Lothric and I…we have nothing to offer you. Politically or strategically. I am certain that we hold no more claim over the throne, and housing us…if Father finds Irithyll…”

“…Then he shall be shredded upon the spears of Irithyll’s standing forces.” Gwyndolin’s answer was immediate and firm. “Let us say, for a moment, that thyself and Lothric truly do not have anything to offer—which is a gross and misleading falsehood, but we shall touch upon that notion at a later time…”

After a moment of hesitation, Gwyndolin reached out and touched the tips of his fingers to the back of Lorian’s gauntlet, his own breath hitching in time with the knight’s.

“Allow me to be honest with thee, Ser Lorian—my refusal to have thee punished and downgraded in thy station for doing what is right and good aside, it is…it is lonely in these halls with just Yorshka and mineself…and before Yorshka was born, it was just mineself and the Silver Knights. I…I believe I would rather perish than return to those days.” Gwyndolin swallowed. “But having thyself and Lothric living with us over these past ten days has made me realize just how loud the old silence was, even with Yorshka to fill it, and both my dear sister and mineself have discussed at length how much...how much we enjoy having life in these halls…”

Gwyndolin dropped his fingers from Lorian’s gauntlet.

“…How much we have enjoyed having family grace our halls.”

Lorian took a sharp intake of breath, and Gwyndolin hoped—prayed—that he hadn’t crossed some invisible line.
“...To be honest, Lothric and I...we were thinking along the same lines.” Lorian continued to stare straight ahead, but a small smile of wonder had formed on his face, and it made Gwyndolin feel a lightness of heart that he had never before experienced. “After Mother...after Lothric was born, it was just himself and me, and there was no one in which we could confide. It was just us against the world.” His brown eyes briefly locked with Gwyndolin’s gold and amber. “It has been...no small relief to know that is not the case any longer.”

“Lorian,” Gwyndolin breathed. He screwed his eyes shut against the wetness that had bloomed out of nowhere.

“It feels...the idea feels inappropriate, with you being the last True God, and us only having known each other for a short while, but...” Lorian breathed and squared his shoulders before stopping to face Gwyndolin in full. “If...if it would truly bring you the joy you say it will...to have Lothric and I living under this roof...then it would bring Lothric and me the greatest of joys as well.”

Gwyndolin opened his eyes and met Lorian’s spreading grin with his own. “Good. Oh, good. That is...that is good.”

The two stood there for a few seconds—simply staring at each other and marveling at how their lives had changed so drastically in the span of a week-and-a-half—before they began walking once more down the corridor.

“Shall Lothric and I live in the guest area, then?” Lorian queried after another moment of silence. Gwyndolin shook his head.

“No. Thy quarters shall be in the same hallway as mine and Yorshka’s, but it is a long corridor, and thee and Lothric shall have as much privacy as if thee were living in thine own house.” A pause. “Oh, perhaps...perhaps Lothric should like his own room as well? The one next to thine own, maybe, with a door between them to allow easy access. There are a few chambers fashioned in such a way...”

It was Lorian’s turn to shake his head. “No, that will not be necessary. Lothric’s health is far too poor and he requires far too much assistance to perform daily tasks to live separately...and...” Lorian blushed and used his free hand to scratch the back of his head. “Lothric and I...we both feel better when we sleep in the same bed. It sounds...strange, I am sure. We certainly got our fair share of looks from the house staff, who thought him too old to sleep with me...but...”

Gwyndolin couldn’t help but roll his eyes at the complete and utter foolishness of some sentient
“Ah, yes, how dare two brothers demonstrate physical affection. Clearly something is wrong and twisted in thine relationship and I am both disgusted and morally offended.” The desired effect was achieved, and Lorian was reduced to snickering for a few seconds, his hand dropping from the back of his head as his shoulders relaxed. “None of that here, Lorian. Gwynevere and I would often sleep in the same bed, even after I came of age, and Yorshka still frequently sleeps in my room—in spite of demanding I knock before entering her own quarters. The arbitrary lines that some outside societies use to differentiate appropriate and inappropriate platonic affection do not exist in Irithyll—and they certainly do not exist in mine...no, our household.”

“...Ah...I see.” Gwyndolin pretended not to notice the timid gratitude in Lorian voice—nor the way the apple of his throat trembled when he swallowed, nor how he quickly reached up a bronze finger to wipe the corners of his eyes. “I shall...I shall remember that, my friend. Thank you.”

The rest of the walk was spent in companionable silence, and it didn’t take much longer for them to reach the mahogany double-doors that only a select few could ever say they had access to, although Lorian did not know that at the time. Smiling a secret all of his own, Gwyndolin placed his hand on the split and released the sealing rune, pushing open the rightmost door and allowing Lorian to enter first.

“After you, Ser Lorian.”

Initially, the room was pitch black, with thick curtains drawn over the windows and the old torches being unlit. Gwyndolin released his glamour and used his memory to guide him around the large center table and to the window, where he wasted no time in flinging open the thick upholstered curtains to let in the eternal moonlight of the Sunless Realms, coughing from the dust released by the fabric at the action.

“Are you all right?” Lorian’s voice was concerned. “Should I fetch a glass of water?”

Gwyndolin shook his head and raised his hand in a conciliatory gesture.

“I simply forgot...to beat out the curtains the last time I was here.” Fortunately, the coughing jag didn’t last long, and Gwyndolin soon turned his attention to opening the other set of curtains and using a bit of spellwork to light the torches surrounding the room. “The household staff does not have permission to enter this room, so it is I who must perform the upkeep, although Yorshka has volunteered to dust many a time.”
“I see.” Out of the corner of his eye, Gwyndolin watched Lorian approach the center table and set his helmet on the edge, peering at the large canvas map spread across and pinned to the old mahogany surface like a tablecloth. “This is...a map of the Lordran! It is the largest I have ever seen!”

“It is the first that was ever crafted.” Gwyndolin held his hand up to a torch, palm facing the wick, and he felt a familiar tingling in his fingertips as the wood and cloth caught light. While casting more powerful spells without a catalyst would risk permanently injuring Gwyndolin’s hands, a simple flame enchantment caused no harm, and it was good to practice his barehanded casting in case he ever found himself unarmored. He placed the glass cover back over the last torch and slithered to stand next to Lorian. “It was crafted by my father and his first wife when they founded the country, and if thou lookest closely, thou shouldst be able to see how it has been edited and expanded over millennia. There are several other maps stored away of different lands—including maps depicting Irithyll and the Sunless Realms—and the table can be folded out to pin several maps together at once...though, that feature has not been required since the war with the Archdragons.”

Realization seemed to smack Lorian in the face, and Gwyndolin watched—fascinated—as the knight-prince took in the room in full: the bookshelves, full of ancient tomes and overflowing with scrolls that lined the walls; the large, circular table in the center that was surrounded by at least a dozen chairs; the ancient and expansive topographical map of the Lordran that covered the entirety of its surface, with lines of stitches and half-erased graphite criss-crossing the entirety of its faded yet well-maintained surface; and the small table in the right corner of the room where innumerable small yet familiar figures and shapes made of battered pewter stood sentry over the dusty chamber.

“This is...” The elder prince’s voice was positively awestruck—almost as awestruck as he had seemed when he saw Gwyndolin in full for the first time—and he turned to said god with the flabbergasted expression of a child receiving a table of gifts for their birthday. “These are the chambers of a war council!”

Gwyndolin smiled and nodded.

“Indeed. This is where the Great Lord Gwyn and his men gathered together and crafted their strategies during the first of all wars. After Father cast himself to the Flame, this chamber has only ever been used by the Lord Commanders of Irithyll; it was last used five years ago by thy mentor, Holy Knight Hodrick, before he retired and returned to his homeland to become an instructor.”

“Ser Hodrick was...” Lorian licked his dry lips and shuddered. “He was the Lord Commander of Irithyll’s Standing Forces?”
“Indeed. When he left the Lothric Knights in your capable hands ten years ago, he returned to Irithyll to help raise his granddaughter, Ser Sirris, and I vetted him for the position after the last Lord Commander perished in an unexplained accident.” Gwyndolin reached out and ran his fingertips along the edge of the canvas map as he spoke. “Ser Hodrick, at the time, was unparalleled in his knowledge of tactics and military formations, and my attempt to find someone to fill his position after he left was…well, impossible, at first. When I opened up relations with the Cathedral of the Deep, Patriarch Sulyvahn very generously offered to act as a temporary Lord Commander until I found a permanent replacement, but as I have told thee…”

“…He is not an ideal choice.” Lorian winced, clearly remembering Gwyndolin’s ‘horror stories’ about the corvian’s questionable decisions (the worst of which being his utter mishandling of the Outrider Knights), and the god could not help but snicker at his perturbed expression.

“Yet…” Lorian reached out and blindly grasped at the edge of the table with his right hand. “Yet you have brought—you have brought me here.”

“Correct.”

Bronze gauntlets scratched against thick oak as the hand tightened its grip. “You mean to say…”

“Wouldst thou refuse, Ser Lorian?”

Lorian blinked. Opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again. A soft, strangled noise emerged instead of words, and Gwyndolin watched with concern as the elder prince leaned almost the entirety of his weight into the massive table. He looked as if he were having a heart attack.

“As I said when we were walking here, Lorian…” Gwyndolin reached out and placed what he hoped was a soothing hand on Lorian’s right shoulder. “Your position as a resident of this household will not be affected by this decision. If thou dost choose to refuse to accept the position, then that will be that…but I hope that thou dost accept the position as my new Lord Commander. I hope for that very much.”

“Gwyndolin…” Lorian croaked out. He shoved one of the chairs away from the table with his foot
and all but fell into the seat, cupping his head in his hands as he rested his elbows on his spread thighs. Gwyndolin sank down on his snakes until he was “kneeling” in front of the knight, his hand never leaving Lorian’s pauldron. “All of those questions you asked me during my convalescence...my opinions on ancient battles, my knowledge of military scholars...was that all...?”

“A test? In a way, yes, but my main purpose was to converse with thee about something for which thou art passionate. The testing was an afterthought.” Gwyndolin gingerly slipped his hand in the gap between Lorian’s chestplate and his neck and massaged the straining muscles underneath. “My mind was made up, frankly, the day we met.”

“How?”

“Hodrick had spoken of thee before our meeting on the riverbank.” Lorian’s head snapped up at those words. Gold and amber heterochromic eyes locked onto stupefied brown and refused to let go. “Of all of thy feats...of the immense reputation that the Standing Army of Lothric has earned since thee took the reins from his hands. I have heard what the expatriates of thy kingdom—the very ones that thou helped escape from thy father’s tyranny—have told my Blades about thee: about how thou dancest around thine opponents when it comes to strategy; about how thou cared for thy soldiers more than any Knight Commander in the past; about how thou didst not shy away from incurring thy father’s wrath when it came to ensuring the safety of thy men.” The straight line of Gwyndolin’s thin lips curved into the slightest of smiles. “Thou art so very brave, Ser Lorian, and kind, gentle, chivalrous, noble, honorable...all of those qualities that knights are supposed to embody...qualities that I have not seen represented in such splendor since the deaths of the Four Knights of Gwyn. Mine questions and queries were not tests, Ser Lorian, but they showed me that the chatter about thee was not idle, and when thou spoke up to assist me with Captain Aishura and Vice-Captain Telos...”

“So that...that was a true test.”

“Mostly. But, as thou didst witness during said meeting, I greatly appreciated thy help in holding my own in such matters.” Gwyndolin chuckled and shrugged as the snakes curled loosely around Lorian’s legs. Neither party paid them any mind. “I have made up my mind, Lorian—I believe that thou art the Lord Commander that I have been seeking since Ser Hodrick’s departure—but I will not force thee into a position that thou dost not want. Do not accept or reject mine offer unless thou art sure it is what thou wantest.”

Lorian closed his eyes and exhaled through his nose.

“This is very...very sudden.”
“I am sorry, but I did not want to make an idle promise and then snatch it away at the last second. It would have been a cruelty that thou didst not deserve.”

Lorian seemed to relax at that sentence, and opened his eyes and dropped his hands from his face to rest on his thighs, watching idly as Gwyndolin slid his hand from Lorian’s neck to rest lightly on his right forearm.

“I cannot take the position if it requires me to be on the front lines. I am all that Lothric has and I will not risk myself in a position that has a high chance of leaving him with nothing.”

“It is a tactical position, Ser Lorian—different from being a Knight Commander. Riding into battle with thy men will be thy choice and the amount entirely up to thy discretion. I trust thee, Ser Lorian.”

“You have only known me for a week and a half.”

“Then it says a lot about thy reputation and thy character that I am steadfast in my resolve.”

“I risk our asylum in Irithyll should I fail.”

“Thou hast mine word that thee and Lothric will forever have a home in our residence for as long as the both of thee wish, and nothing that thou dost as Lord Commander will have any bearing on mine stance...assuming, of course, that the two of thee do not turn out to be the most vile of traitors.”

“I am going blind, Gwyndolin.” Lorian’s voice was the harshest of whispers as he ducked his head, hiding his face behind his long hair.

Gwyndolin blinked.

“Blind?” the god queried. Lorian nodded. “How so?”
“A condition I was born with...the healers believed it to be a reaction between my mother’s godly blood and my father’s mortal blood.” Gwyndolin could just barely see Lorian lick his lips through the thick curtain of ashen silver. “They told me when I was ten years of age...and I started noticing when I was fifteen.”

“Willst thou lose thy sight completely?”

“No...I will still be able to see objects from up close, but that will be it. Anything a meter or more from me will be a blur.”

Gwyndolin hummed in thought. “So thine obfuscating helm…”

“Yes. Preparation for the inevitable.” Emboldened by the fact that Gwyndolin did not seem disgusted or off-put by the revelation, Lorian lifted his head just enough to reveal his defective eyes, returning Gwyndolin’s soothing smile with a weak quirk of his own. “It is funny...for I actually prefer to fight with the helmet on. It is easier, I have discovered, to rely on my hearing and sense of touch over my eyesight. Less overwhelming in the heat of battle.”

“Thou art one of the most adaptable beings I have ever encountered.” Gwyndolin did not skimp on the admiration in his voice, and Lorian seemed to mentally stagger at such an unexpected compliment, his attempt to hide himself once more behind his head foiled by Gwyndolin’s hands gently grasping the sides of his face. “Willst thou still be able to read a map?”

“Well...yes…”

“And read a book?”

“...Yes.” For some reason, Lorian hesitated with his answer, and Gwyndolin filed it away as an oddity on which to ruminate at a later date.

“What of following a diagram?”

“If it is on a table or a nearby wall...yes...that should not be an issue.”
“Then I see no reason for thy impending blindness to disqualify thee from the candidacy.” The Nameless Moon’s heart lurched at raw and tender hope pouring from Lorian’s expression. Just how badly had Oceiros ground his son’s self-confidence into the dirt? “Dost thou have any further excuses as to why thou dost not believe thee art qualified for the position, or art thou ready to answer with thy heart instead of thy doubts?”

Lorian chuckled, finally, and Gwyndolin felt as if he was finally getting somewhere. “You certainly have perfected the ability of hitting all of one’s sore spots, haven’t you?”

“Over four millennia of practice.” Gwyndolin wrestled away his shame of exposing Lorian’s deepest insecurities in such a flippant way and forced his focus to remain on the here and now. “Lorian, answer me with that same honesty that calls me ‘beautiful’ without regret—didst thou enjoy being the Knight Commander of Lothric’s Standing Forces?”

“Yes.” There was no hesitation in Lorian’s answer. Good.

“And wouldst thou—over any profession that thou couldst choose—wish to be the Lord Commander of the Standing Forces of the Sunless Realms?”

Lorian let his eyes drift closed as he mulled over the question. Gwyndolin’s pulse seemed to bob in his veins as he waited.

“Yes…” Lorian’s answer knocked the wind out of Gwyndolin’s lungs, and the Nameless Moon felt as if would collapse into an unceremonious puddle on the floor as a week and a half’s worth of pent-up tension and uncertainty seemed to evaporate all at once. “Yes, Gwyndolin...I...I could think of nothing that I would enjoy more than serving as the Lord Commander of the land that saved my brother’s life.”

“Then thou shalt…”

“Yes. Yes, Gwyndolin, I accept. I will be your Lord Commander.”

Gwyndolin wanted to laugh and cry all at once. “And it is what thou really wantest?”

An unguarded, euphoric laugh flowed from Lorian’s lips, and it sounded for all the world like a dam breaking inside of his heart. “I...I think I...yes! Yes, yes! Oh, Gwyndolin, this...this is what I
really want, isn’t it?”

“Well, I would certainly hope so...otherwise we shall be in trouble in a few months!”

Lorian laughed, again—like someone who had discovered something strange and wonderful for the very first time—and oh, if Gwyndolin had been a different person, he would have grabbed Lorian’s hands, tugged him out of his chair, and spun him around to the time to the music that sang so clearly from the knight’s soul!

Gwyndolin was Gwyndolin, however, and so he simply smiled (in a way that would remind Lorian of a sunrise upon later reflection) and laced his pale, immaculate, yet frail fingers with Lorian’s strong, solid, and bronze-covered own and it felt more like a sunrise than the god could ever become.

“Come then, Ser Lorian.” Gwyndolin rose and brought Lorian with him, but sadly, there was no dancing involved. “Let us seek out Yorshka and Lothric; for out of all of those with whom we must share the news, I believe the children should be the first to know.”

Chapter End Notes

I'll add a funny end note when I think of one. ::sad trombone and raspberry noises::

Also, if anyone is interested at a glimpse at what Lorian and Gwyndolin will be like when they get together, I wrote a short 'future' fic that takes place after 'Throw Stars at the Twilight' without spoiling anything but the obvious. It's called 'walking me across a fragile line (and comfort's calling late)', and it can be found in the 'put a line through it' series page. Check it out if you're interested!
standing here it's all so clear i'm where i'm meant to be

Chapter Summary

The first four hours of Lorian's position as the Lord Commander of the Standing Forces of the Sunless Realms are not spent working. They are not spent surveying his forces, learning of important treaties, or memorizing military codes of conduct.

Instead, the Elder Prince of Lothric spends the first four hours of his new life in the company of the god that bestowed it upon him. It is clear that Gwyndolin has been far too lonely for far too long, and it is a feeling that Lorian knows as intimately as a tender lover, though he has not suffered in isolation for nearly long as his liege and friend. They are two forlorn souls that had to stay silent to survive, but as difficult as it may be opening the doors to their souls for other, it is somehow as easy as breathing when Gwyndolin and Lorian are together.

Gwyndolin discusses his mothers, the history of the Lordran, and his favorite books. Lorian listens, learns, and frets over tiny letters scribed in unfriendly fonts. Sandwiches are eaten, garden strolls are had, and Lothric is very suspicious.

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: I just wanted you all to know that this chapter was painful to write. Not because anything bad happens, oh no; this chapter is the definition of both fluff and happiness. It's just that writing about Gwyndolin and Lorian being so obviously in love and enamored with each other without even registering it themselves made me--the author that knows full damn well they're not going to get together for awhile--scream "JUST KISS ALREADY" at the computer screen.

Trigger/Content Warnings: Implied/referenced child abuse; brief mention of past self-harm; discussion of forced child abandonment; implied anxiety and panic attacks; implied PTSD; discussion of slavery; very vaguely implied relationship abuse; headcanons up the wazoo; the pain of reading about two people going on their first date without even knowing it; snake legs committing crimes against paper.

Thanks To: Iced-Blood, whom I consider to be my co-writer on this project, and whose insight, input, and editing on have been invaluable (seriously, this story and series wouldn't be half of what it is now without him, and I do not hesitate to admit that); Monzi, for coming up with the best damn Gwyndolin and Lorian designs I have ever seen; Toko, Ami, and Lexy, for being amazing and inspiring friends in general; Al, for being a Yu-Gi-Oh! fan that reads this fic without ever having touched the Dark Souls series, and who is even more awesome because of it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lorian spent the first three hours of his position as Lord Commander of the Standing Forces of the
Sunless Realms in conversation with Gwyndolin.

The first half hour was spent talking with the god about his new position, and the duties and responsibilities it required, and Lorian had truly, honestly tried his best to pay attention, because he wasn’t going to have to give up being a Knight Commander. No, in fact, being Lord Commander was even better for his situation than being a Knight Commander, because it enabled him to still lead and manage soldiers while being able to limit his time on the field according to his needs.

As miserable as Lorian had been in the Kingdom of Lothric, he had adored being a prince, and he had adored being the Knight Commander—had felt confident and competent whenever he was fielding the numerous tasks expected of those two positions, such as managing land disputes, balancing food distribution, and puzzling out a complicated battle like it was a game of Izalith Chess. He had been sorrowful—but prepared—to sacrifice both of those things for his little brother’s life, but to learn that he did not have to leave behind the majority of his life’s work and knowledge base was more than a bit delightful.

Not only that—not only that—but to have the last True God in the Lordran—the divine representation of Moonlight, Justice, and Judgement himself—personally vet him for the position? To clasp Lorian’s face in his hands and tell him that he was the Lord Commander he had been seeking for years? That he deserved to stand in the same room where the Gods of Sunlight and War built the foundation of the military tactics that the elder prince had studied almost the entirety of his life? It made Lorian’s heart skip and his head swim from the enormity of it all.

The last True God chose me. The last True God chose me. The last True God chose me.

Me.

Said True God, the Dark Moon Gwyndolin, did not seem to mind Lorian’s preoccupation with everything but the topic at hand. In fact, the moment he noticed Lorian’s gaze darting about the room—as if attempting to take in every single nook and cranny of the ancient room—he cheerfully declared that the particulars could wait until later that night or tomorrow, and he immediately went about giving the knight as much of a guided tour as one could give of such a small space. He started by taking Lorian to each of the maps that decorated the walls, explaining—in as chipper a voice as the knight had ever heard from him—about the approximate date of their creation (“give or take a few hundred years,” Gwyndolin warned), the circumstances of the charting, and how each map had been altered and expanded upon over the centuries.

It had been easy enough to follow at first (after all, while Lorian may not have been good at reading words, he was excellent at reading maps), and it had been a genuinely interesting glimpse into just how much the Lordran and its surrounding countries had changed since the days of the Court of the Sun. Once the maps were done, however, Gwyndolin immediately slithered about the room with a surprising amount of speed, picking up what seemed to be devices and objects at random and handing them to Lorian for him to examine while he gave a little fact about each.

The pewter statuettes had been made by Aestus, God of Lightning and eldest child of Gwyn, and Gwyndolin and Filianore would squirrel them out of the chamber and use them to fight battles against their combined legion of stuffed animals. The quadrant and sextant had been used by his great-uncle, Lloyd the Allfather, when he and Gwyn first mapped out the foundations of what would become the city of Old Londo. As much of an unmitigated and irredeemable bastard as Lloyd had been, he had been as clever with shapes and designs as Gwyndolin had ever seen...at least, until meeting the Chosen Undead. The telescope had been presented as a gift from the Kingdom of Heide to Gwyn, and he remembered when his mother—Ithil, Goddess of the Cosmos—used to take Gwyndolin to the roof of Anor Londo when he was just a little bit and showed him...
how to use the telescope to know the stars of his birthright more intimately. Oh! And that stationary set! It was one of the last gifts sent by the Four Kings of New Londo to their Lord Sovereign before they fell to the Abyss—!

Without anything strategic or concrete to hang onto, Lorian found himself unable to hold back the tide of raw overwhelming, and as the last True God in the Lordran pressed priceless artifacts into hands that he had always been taught were unworthy—antiques and trinkets and treasures that had once been in the possession of the God of Sunlight and the God of War and all of the heroes Lorian had been brought up to admire and idolize—Lorian suddenly found his chest heavy and hot, and gods above, there was no way that any of this could be anything but some sort of dying hallucination—!

“ I think I am going to faint.” Lorian managed to choke out, white spots beginning to dance in front of his eyes as breathing quickened in pace to a point beyond counting.

Gwyndolin, who had been in the middle of pulling the old blueprints for Anor Londo off of a tall bookshelf, let the ancient parchment drop to the floor like discarded trash as he lowered his snakes back to their lowest station and moved to grab the knight’s arm. It seemed that said knight had become worryingly pale and clammy in the short time it took for the god to turn his back and raise himself up on his snakes to reach the scrolls.

“ Oh dear! Art thou ill, Lorian? Here, sit down!” Lorian dimly registered Gwyndolin’s voice and touch as he used the snakes to pull a nearby chair over and guided the knight to sit. “ Is it the dust? Is thine armour too hot? Has the hole in your left lung reopened? Should I call Dr. Watari?! Or perhaps heal thee mineself…?!”

Lorian shook his head ‘no’ before letting it drop heavy between his thighs, curling his arms around his knees and doing his best to slow his breathing before he truly did faint, his chest heaving and aching as his brain fought against his body.

One of Gwyndolin’s hands reached underneath his hair and laid on the back of his neck—cool, pristine, and soft—and the heavenly touch allowed Lorian to focus on something that wasn’t his heart trying to beat its way out of his chest. Slowly but surely, his breathing settled, and the walls no longer seemed as if they were closing in around him.

“ It is...it is a lot.” Lorian finally raised his head to look at Gwyndolin, and he weakly smiled in what he hoped was a reassuring way to the god, who looked neatly twain between confusion and concern. Even the snakes were regarding him with what almost seemed to be panic in their tiny eyes. “ The position, the...the war council, all of these historic treasures—treasures that belonged to the very first of us—” The knight sighed and rubbed his eyes with his thumbs. “ I...I cannot honestly believe I am here. It feels as if I am in some sort of fever dream—where everything is real and unreal all at once.”

Gwyndolin made a small noise of distress, his excitement falling from his face like a stage curtain, and oh, Lorian wished he could cut out his own heart!

“ I...I sincerely apologize.” Gwyndolin removed his hand from the back of Lorian’s neck and nervously drummed his fingers on the armor covering Lorian’s knees. “ It is just...it has been so long since I have shown anyone this room. Other than Yorshka, of course! However...” The god shyly glanced away. “ She is just a child and, thus, does not understand the significance and the importance of this room and its contents. Thou dost, however, and...I was carried away by my excitement.”

Oh.
Gwyndolin has been lonely. The realization stung and shook Lorian in a way that was similar to the lightning flowing from the mouth of the beast on the riverbank. *I am his first friend. He has never been able to discuss these things before. He has been alive for five-thousand years. I am his first friend.*

"And appreciate it I do!" Lorian smiled as he sat up straight, brought his legs together, and steepled his gauntlet-clad fingers in his lap. "You have no idea how interesting I find...well, *everything." He gestured around the room and watched as Gwyndolin ducked his head in an attempt to hide his blush behind his hair. It seemed Lorian was not the only one that possessed such a habit. "Just...be a little patient with me, Gwyndolin. I may be godkin, but all I know of the gods is what I was taught by the scholars and what I was told by Mother, so to be so casually immersed by articles that would be tokens of worship outside of this city...it is..."

Gwyndolin hummed in thought and ‘rose’ on his snakes until he was eye level with Lorian. "I believe I understand...somewhat. I had assumed that thou hadst been brought up like the demigod thou art, and not the mortal thou art not."

Lorian blinked once. Twice. "What do you—"

"I didn't mean it as an insult, of course! There is no shame in being mortal!" Gwyndolin quickly waved his hands in the air as he backtracked, as if Lorian was somehow upset by the god’s strange comment, rather than simply confused. "It is just that...*this*—"

It was Gwyndolin’s turn to gesture about the room.

"—*this* is thy birthright, Ser Lorian, and also that of thy brother. Desdimonda was a ‘lesser god’ in name only; she may not bear mine family’s blood—not a Lord Soul—but she was the only goddess of fertility and bounty in Anor Londo. That is nothing to laugh at, and for one that desires godhood as much as King Oceiros, I am honestly surprised that he cared not for thy status as first-generation godkin of such a well-known deity."

Splinters of ice prickled through the elder prince’s veins. "But your sister..."

"'twas an identity manufactured by the Great Lord Gwyn.″ Gwyndolin finished. "Father introduced Gwynere as a goddess of fertility and bounty to her potential suitors, and his words eventually reached the ears of the other gods, which then inevitably made their way to the mortals." The god’s thin mouth crinkled with disgust. "He thought that if he dangled the carrot of children with pure divinity running through their veins in front of foreign kingdoms, then the rest of the cart would follow, so to speak."

Good heavens! It was no wonder that Desdimonda had frequently commented on how *sorry* she felt for Gwynere during her youth. "That’s monstrous...Chaos below, that is a machination my own father would attempt if he had the chance."

"...did he ever...?"

"No." Lorian shook his head before Gwyndolin could let the horror in his eyes spill over and consume the rest of his emotional state. "No, absolutely not. I was not worth marrying in Father’s eyes."

"Not even to garner power or solidify an alliance?"

"You have to remember, dear friend, that the Kingdom of Lothric takes a very different approach to diplomacy.” Lorian snorted and rolled his eyes. "Whatever allies we garnered would come and
go with the seasons, driven away by Father’s rampant paranoia and endless grasping for superiority and resources. It never took them long to see that King Oceiros wanted serfs instead of equals.”

Gwyndolin’s delicate eyebrows arched high upon his forehead. “How, exactly, has thy father’s reign lasted as long as it has?”

A shrug. “Never underestimate the effectiveness of dragonfire wielded by an iron fist.”

“And of competent firstborn sons.”

Lorian choked.

“Ah...yes...” The knight rubbed the back of his neck and tried not to look at the sly smile on the god’s lips. “That, too, I suppose.”

Gwyndolin and his serpents smirked at the same time. It was unnerving in a pleasant way that Lorian could not quite articulate.

The elder prince had not been lying, however, about his interest in all that the council chamber had to offer. So, as soon as he wrestled his anxiety back into submission and regained his bearings, Lorian asked Gwyndolin to continue the tour, a request that would have had the god skipping if he had possessed humanoid legs. Instead, the six snakes curled and uncurled around each other as Gwyndolin snatched tomes and scrolls and brought them over to Lorian, almost making the knight laugh from how much Gwyndolin’s behavior reminded him of a raven, showing its nest of shiny objects to a potential mate. It was a sight too delightful for words.

The second half hour was spent pouring over papers that Gwyndolin would call ‘nostalgic’ and Lorian would call ‘historic.’ Lorian gravitated towards the maps—both curious to see for himself just how the terrain of the Lordran had shifted and morphed with every Linking of the Flame, and desperately trying to avoid looking at the books despite his desire to read all of them—but Gwyndolin would occasionally open a particular passage and hand it to Lorian for him to read. Mercifully, Gwyndolin would either describe exactly what the page said in his own words, or it was a snippet from a book that Lorian—who had access to one of the most extensive libraries in the world, from birth—had already read, so he was able to nod along with Gwyndolin’s bubbly chatter, while offering just enough commentary to make it seem as if he had been able to read the words in the miserably short time frame Gwyndolin had given him to do so.

Lorian’s anxiety, therefore, was kept in relative check, and he would easily say that he and Gwyndolin had a lovely time walking through the old and winding roads of his past...that is, until Gwyndolin handed Lorian one of the books he had (foolishly) mentioned wanting to read some time in the future.

“Why wait?” Gwyndolin had asked, shrugging his shoulders and smiling benevolently at Lorian. “Thou shalt have a fair amount of idling time during thine orientation to thy new role, and I possess no doubt that thou shalt be wanting for intellectual stimulation soon enough, so thou art more than welcome to borrow mine brother’s copy. It is not as if he is here to use it, and books...they should be read, no? Not locked way in a dusty room for hundreds upon thousands of years!”

Conceptually, Lorian agreed with Gwyndolin on all of his points, but it didn’t make the urge to throw the book in the god’s face and flee from the room any less potent. “Are you sure, Gwyndolin? What if I tear or stain the pages, or it—I—lose it, and—”

“Oh! As if the books Aestus favored are not already peppered with battle ash, dirty fingerprints, and smudges of spear grease—as thou shalt soon discover thyself! He never washed his hands
before handling paper!” Gwyndolin scoffed and rolled his eyes at the memory (or many memories, it seemed). “Thou mayst be just as mighty of a warrior as mine brother, Ser Lorian, but thou art certainly far cleanlier than he! I hath absolute faith that thou willst not mar the tome any worse than Aestus.”

Lorian chuckled in a way that he hoped didn’t sound too nervous as he studied the book in his hands. It was a beautifully constructed volume—all blood red leather, gold thread binding, and gilded dragons sweeping and soaring across the cover—and the old river-reed parchment felt supple yet sturdy underneath his fingertips, as he flipped curiously through the pages. Yet as pleasant as the aesthetics were, Lorian did not give much of a damn about the prettiness of the volume—only that it was possibly the last remaining copy of a legendary reference guide on archdragons.

There were many books, of course, on wyverns and drakes and wyrms (authored mainly by the dragonriders and tamers of Lothric, and those from the dragon-bearing lands across the ocean), but the archdragons had been labeled extinct for over ten thousand years, and all known firsthand accounts of the noble creatures had been lost to time. The last known book on archdragon physiology and behavior, according to the Crystal Sage that led the Grand Archives, had been lost when the great library of the fallen kingdom of Helsmith was razed and burned to the ground by High Lord Wolnir. The book in Lorian’s hands was one that had been universally lauded by literature historians all over the Lordran as both the first and most thorough, and complete, record of archdragon biology, physiology, and sociology ever penned, but the last time it had been reportedly seen was six thousand years ago, when it had been immolated along with the draconologist carrying it—after aggravating a particularly prickly wyrm one time too many.

(Served him right, Lorian had thought the first time he’d heard the tale as a child, and his mindset hadn’t changed one bit. It didn’t matter how big or deadly the dragon; using a long spear and a hoe in an attempt to forcibly rip off their scales for study was animal abuse, plain and simple. He’d had dragon-trainers stripped of their credentials and banned from the Dragons’ Barracks for far lesser offenses than mutilation)

Lorian had always been fascinated by archdragons, and while he himself—of course—had never seen this lauded guide in person, he had heard, and read, enough rumors about the ‘elegant’ and ‘unique’ cover to suspect its identity on sight, and his mouth had gone dry the moment he’d read and confirmed the title. It shouldn’t have surprised him, really, that the last True God in the Lordran would have this reference volume in his possession, but to actually hold it in his hands—a book discussed by dragon enthusiasts with the same longing and reverence as the feats of ancient heroes were discussed by modern day warriors and champions—was just as unbelievable as the rest of Lorian’s situation.

Oh, if Lorian had only discovered it while alone, he could have surreptitiously tucked it away and read it in private at his own pace without anyone being the wiser! It was clear to him, however, that Gwyndolin had both read the book and was eager to discuss its contents with someone who had also read the book. Which meant…

“Perhaps I could give thee some time to read and then discuss the subject matter with thee!” Oh, it hurt Lorian to see how delighted Gwyndolin was to discuss what was clearly one of his favorite books with someone; it would just make his inevitable failure to live up to the god’s expectations both shameful and painful. “Should we reconvene in a week, mayhap, to discuss our mutual findings?”

A week! Lorian clenched his throat so that Gwyndolin would not see him gulp at the idea. A week? How far did Gwyndolin expect Lorian to read in a week? A few pages? A few chapters? The
whole thing? The volume was far slimmer than most encyclopedias, and if the print had been larger and more forgiving, it was likely that Lorian could have plowed through at least a comfortable half of the book by the end of the week. At least he could have read enough to keep from looking like either a dishonest friend or a complete and blithering idiot to the Last True God in the Lordran!

The letters were so small, however—small in that eye-straining and inaccessible way of most scientific texts that Lorian had learned to avoid, out of self-preservation. The printing had been performed in a style that added extra space between the words so that each line of text was the same even length—a swollen river of whitespace that never failed to make Lorian repeatedly lose his place when reading. The pages had apparently been bleached prior to printing, and the contrast between the blackness of the ink and the bleached whiteness of the parchment was far too bright and jarring, even after thousands of years of fading (and Lorian would have hated to see just how badly the words blurred when the ink was fresh on the paper!). Finally, the print itself was one of that Lorian hated the most—the type that curved at the end of each ‘stroke’, making it look ‘fancy’ and ‘decorative’ at the cost of having the letters run together whenever Lorian tried to read.

It was awful. It was almost incomprehensible. It was every sizzling powder keg that Lorian had learned to avoid at a young age. Attempting to read such an unwieldy book in such a short amount of time would inevitably end in disaster and humiliation. Yet, with Gwyndolin looking at him with such unguarded joy, Lorian couldn’t find it in himself to say no.

“ That sounds like an excellent idea.” Lorian agreed, sealing his fate with a smile and a nod. His fingers ached from how hard they were pressing into the cover and spine. “ I shall endeavor to get through as much of the volume as possible—at least, enough to have a decent discussion!”

“ Wonderful!” The way Gwyndolin beamed and clapped his hands together in front of his chest was more than worth Lorian’s impending downfall. “ It should not take thee terribly long to read; while the words may be tiny and tightly packed, the syntax itself flows ever so nicely. Time will fly by and the book will be finished before thou knowest!”

Lorian’s soul screamed in despair as he tucked the book into his side pouch. “ I look forward to it.”

After that, the ‘tour’ of the council chamber began to wind down, and Lorian used his photographic memory to help Gwyndolin return all of the books, scrolls, and assorted antiques back to their proper places. After giving the curtains a good shake (which Lorian insisted on doing himself, as Gwyndolin’s lungs sounded just as terrible as Lothric’s, and the elder brother in him refused to let the god exacerbate his asthma if he could help it), the two walked out of the war room and into the hallway, with Gwyndolin snuffing out the torches with a snap of his fingers before closing the door behind them.

“ Now,” Gwyndolin hummed as he placed another sealing rune on the door, “since the children have not yet returned from the Church of Yorshka, I have a sneaking suspicion that Yorshka has succeeded in convincing Lothric to meet the crystal lizards.” Once finished, Gwyndolin took a moment to reanimate his glamour before turning to face Lorian, who smiled bashfully and offered his arm. Gwyndolin did not need the assistance of a mirror to know that his cheeks were as red as fresh beets, but he did not hesitate to link his arm with Lorian’s, smiling at the way the knight adjusted their point of contact so that the god’s arm was resting in the soft cloth bend at the inner elbow of his gauntlet.

“ Ah, yes—Lady Yorshka’s infamous scaly children.” Lorian chuckled and allowed the god to lead them down the corridor towards the back of the residence. “ Their garden is...behind your cathedral, correct?”
“It is not mine cathedral exactly, but the Cathedral of the Moon, yes.” It was Gwyndolin’s turn to chuckle at the confusion in Lorian’s eyes. “All of mine power and divinity, Lorian, stems from mine affiliation with the moon. God of Moonlight I may be, but I would be the God of Nothing if the moon did not exist, and select me to represent her on this physical plain. If the cathedral was entirely for mine worship, it would be the Cathedral of the Dark Moon, not the Cathedral of the Moon. Dost thou understand?”

“...I...believe I do?” Lorian still seemed somewhat confounded by the idea, but he nodded anyway. “You may be a god, but it is the moon—as much as your birthright—that made you such in the first place. Though, in my opinion, you would be just as worthy of worship as the God of Nothing as you are the God of the Moon.”

Gwyndolin squeaked and ducked his head so that his face was hidden by his hair. “Thou art saying such honeyed words in an attempt to embarrass me!”

“No, no, I swear I am genuine! I mean every bit of it!” Lorian reached across his body with his free arm and rubbed Gwyndolin’s arm until his turned his head up once more. “I have...I have read so many tomes and heard so many stories about the gods—of Gwyn and Velka and Caitha and Nahr Alma and...and of so many others—yet you are the only god to have ever given me cause to believe that such divinity could even be worth worshiping.”

The knight’s words made the god balk. “Lorian, in case thou hast forgotten both the entirety of thy life and the conversation we had just a short time ago, thou art the son of a goddess. How canst thou not believe in divinity when thou wast born from it?”

“Because it is that very divinity that condemned my brother to death.”

The moment those words left Lorian’s mouth, the elder prince fully remembered—with the sickening sort of horror that drops the bottom out of one’s stomach—that Gwyndolin was one of those very beings he had just maligned. The elder prince watched with horror as Gwyndolin’s skin drained of what little color it possessed, and he immediately opened his mouth to apologize, though he soon discovered that his tongue had locked up and refused to produce more than garbled and stammering syllables.

“Shhh, Ser Lorian. All is well.” Though Gwyndolin’s voice was as calm and soft always, it was hard for Lorian to miss the haunted look in the god’s amber and golden eyes, and the milk-white hand that crossed Gwyndolin’s chest to rest on Lorian’s embraced arm was trembling. “I know that I was not included in thy statement, and I thank thee heartily for thy faith, but also...but I also wish for thee to know that I understand how thou feelest mineself. At least, in a way.”

The god’s unexpected response was sufficient to restore Lorian’s words. “How...?”

“Simple—the selfsame divinity that damned little Lothric took mine father and the only mother I have ever truly known from me.”

Lorian’s mouth grew as dry as cotton.

“Your mother? Ithil, the Goddess of the Cosmos?”

“No. Mine biological mother abandoned me when I was young...though it was through no choice of her own.” Gwyndolin’s voice was almost as hollow as an undead prisoner, and as he continued to speak, Lorian could feel the arm linked with his own start to shiver. “I speak of Hadiya Hamidou, the Second Lord...or, as the history books call her, the Chosen Undead.”
“The...the Chosen Undead?” Lorian did not mean to sound so incredulous, but of all of the answers he had expected, the fact that the legendary Second Lord of Cinder—a mere Undead—could be called a mother to the last True God was not one of them. He felt Gwyndolin’s arm stiffen around his own, and the knight-prince watched with a small amount of horror as his companion seemed to wilt like a flower in dry soil, which caused him to almost physically trip over himself in his rush to correct the misunderstanding.

“I am not saying that I do not believe you, Gwyndolin; it was simply not an answer that I had been expecting.” The Nameless Moon seemed to perk up at Lorian’s reassurances, shoulders squaring and head raising up to look at the knight, and the prince was emboldened by the curiosity flickering in those gold and amber eyes. “It is just that...well, have you seen the illustrations of the Chosen Undead in modern history books?”

Gwyndolin’s mouth made a small ‘o’ of realization. “Ah! Thou art referring to the common depiction of the Chosen Undead as some sort of three-to-four-meter tall being clad constantly in heavy plate armor, yes?”

Lorian nodded. “I cannot imagine that sort of person mothering anyone, let alone someone as graceful and refined as you, Lord Gwyndolin.”

A burble of laughter tumbled from Gwyndolin’s mouth, and the god hastily pressed his lips together and puffed out his cheeks in an effort to stifle the rest, although it only succeeded in making him look like a distressed pufferfish. The sight made Lorian want to clutch his chest, because flame and dark, the God of Moonlight and Judgement could be absolutely adorable!

“Oh, my dear Lorian…” Gwydolin’s voice bounced with mirth when he finally managed to speak. “I can assure thee that Lady Hadiya would not have been caught Hollowed wearing a suit of plate armour. She only ever wore leathers at the most, but most of the time, she simply wore a long black coat over civilian garb. The only way one could tell she was a warrior was by the caesti on her hands.”

“She was a hand-to-hand combatant?” Lorian asked with a voice that did nothing to hide his sudden brimming curiosity.

Of all of the numerous texts, tomes, and accounts about the Legend of the Second Lord Lorian had read since childhood, all of them had varied on the preferred weapon of the Chosen Undead. Depending on the historian, the woman he now knew to be called Hadiya Hamidou would wield longswords, rapiers, maces, halberds, axes, clubs, staffs, daggers, greatswords, twinswords, spears, and even whips on occasion—but never her bare hands. Well, mostly bare, but most of the caesti Lorian had seen in his life had limited padding at best. It was an entirely different version of the legendary hero that the warrior prince had idolized since childhood—well, her and the Four Knights of Gwyn. Perhaps, if he was lucky, Gwyndolin would be willing to tell him about all five of them! What a delight that would be!

“She was indeed! Lady Hadiya was a master of almost every martial art that existed in that time period. It was her second passion—the first being architecture.” Gwyndolin stopped them at the end of the hallway, waved away the illusory wall barring their path, and led Lorian onward. “She would compete in underground fighting tournaments in her homeland of Jan’ja to support herself while studying at the College of Architecture in Lazahn Kil. She would participate in official bouts when travelling from town to town for her job as a freelance architect.”

Lorian sucked in a quiet breath as Gwyndolin guided him down the newly-revealed staircase. He truly did know her. “So the Chosen Undead was from one of the Desert Kingdoms? Then how in Chaos did she end up in the Lordran in the first place?”
Gwyndolin’s smile thinned and tired.

“For love, Ser Lorian. Love both began her journey and brought it to its close.” The fatigue seemed to spread from Gwyndolin’s smile and into the rest of his body. “Forgive me, Lorian, but I...I do not wish to discuss her any further. Not today. I have to be in a particular sort of mood to delve into that part of mine life, and if I am not…”

“Of course. I understand.” Lorian placed his free hand on the thin arm wrapped around his own. “Forgive me for being so intrusive.” In his eagerness to learn more about the historical figures he had so ardently admired, Lorian had briefly forgotten that Gwyndolin had known and loved the Chosen Undead, just as he surely must have known and loved the Four Knights of Gwyn. What was an intellectual interest for the elder prince was a lost loved one for the Nameless Moon.

*Gwyndolin is so vibrant and real,* Lorian mused as they descended down the final flight of stairs, *that I sometimes forget he is ancient. To think of all of those he has loved and lost: friends, family, companions…and he surely remembers them all. I must be careful to avoid opening old wounds.*

“No need to apologize, Lorian, though I appreciate the sentiment.” The sadness of Gwyndolin’s smile was replaced with an undercurrent of relief. “I suppose such names are a curiosity to one raised hearing their legends. I will share more, one day, but—”

“—but not today.” Lorian nodded. “But know that I would very much like to hear those stories when you are willing to share them.”

“...It is funny. Yorshka is the only one I have spoken to about the Four Knights and the Chosen Undead in thousands of years.” Gwyndolin murmured. Was Lorian imagining things, or was the god pressing himself ever so slightly into his side? “I have never had the chance to, I suppose. It is a novelty.”

“There are things I have never before shared with another living being outside of Lothric...and things that I cannot share with him at all, for his own sake.” Lorian kept his hand on Gwyndolin’s arm as they reached the base of the stairs. “Perhaps, in the future, we could have an exchange of secrets and tales—like those that occur at gatherings of soothsayers and bards.”

Gwyndolin sighed and, with moment of hesitation, rested his cheek—briefly—on Lorian’s pauldron. The knight suddenly felt as if he would spontaneously combust. “We shall make a date of it, then.”

“Y-yes.” It was only when Gwyndolin stood tall once more that Lorian realized he had briefly stopped breathing. “One day...when we in are both... both are in agreeable moods.”

The pair found themselves in one of the hidden hallways that—as Gwyndolin, Lothric, and Yorshka had informed him—snaked throughout the entirety of the royal residence. The left side of the hallway lead down a stone staircase, and the right lead to what appeared to be a door to the outside. In the middle of the hallway was a door that seemed to be of the type leading to another residential area, but the handle was coated with a layer of dust, so Lorian could only conclude that it lead to a little-used storage room of some sort. Yet it was a strangely ornate door for a storage room...

“Oh! I completely forgot mine breakfast!” Gwyndolin suddenly exclaimed. The god unwound his arm from Lorian’s and stepped to the knight’s left, and Lorian suddenly felt colder and smaller than before—as if a warm cover had been ripped off of him while asleep. “Wouldst thou mind terribly if I ran to the kitchens? I can bring something for thee if thou wouldst like.”
“Ah...that would be lovely, thank you.” Lorian frowned. “Would you like me to...?”

“No need!” Gwyndolin had turned his back to Lorian and started walking towards the staircase before he had even finished speaking. “Just take the door at the end of the hallway and meet me in the garden!”

“The...garden?”

“Yes!” Gwyndolin’s laughter tinkled like echoing church bells as he descended the old stone staircase. “No need to be shy, Ser Lorian; for from this day onward, this house shall be thine home, and I bid thee to treat it as such!”

*Our home.* Something sweet and sharp worked its way up Lorian’s throat at the thought, and no amount of swallowing could make it go away. A new home—in a cold and gentle place. We made it, Lothric. We actually *made* it.

Lorian was afraid that he would collapse into a quivering puddle of relief if he mulled too hard over his, and his brother’s, new situation, so he instead squared his shoulders and made for the right doorway, taking off his helmet and tucking it under his left shoulder as he went.

The garden, as it turned out, was a sprawling expanse of barely-contained flowering chaos. The winding and worn cobblestone pathways were well-tended, but the flowering bushes lining the paths had been trimmed just enough to avoid encroaching onto the walkways, leaving them free to spread their perfumed branches in every other possible direction. Flowering trees of every size and shape were thick with green and dark blues leaves and practically dripping with blossoms of white, blue, violet, and pink. Some even bore similarly pastel-colored fruits, the likes of which Lorian had never before seen or tried, and it was only the shyness of his new station and the wariness of eating unknown plantlife that kept the elder prince from taking a few pieces.

The petals that fell from the trees covered the surrounding grass, flower beds, and stone like a thin carpet, and Lorian could not help but remember that Oceiros so dutifully swept the walkways of his own garden every single day, to the point where he would refuse to attend meetings and events until his ‘tidying’ was complete.

*Father would trim each of his bushes until it was a perfect circular, pyramidal, or cuboid shape,* Lorian reflected with a mixture of bitterness and amusement. He spied a nearby bench next to the beginning of the main path—its back butted up against a trellis of blooming Boreal wisteria—and moved to sit, taking his helmet from beneath his arm and placing it on the space next to him, even though it was unnecessary to reserve a place for Gwyndolin in the god’s own personal garden. *He would clip any flower that grew out of its proper place and replant entire rows that failed to meet his ideal of how plants in the King of Lothric’s personal garden should appear. Even the stream would be herded into perfect S-curves by knights with shovels and trowels. Weeds would not dare to grow in the earth to which Father tended. I wonder how many weeds live in Gwyndolin’s garden...*

With a sigh, Lorian tipped his head backwards and gazed up at the sky that was still so very foreign to him, with nary a sun in sight. Instead the moon that gave Gwyndolin his right to divinity hung waxing and gibbous above him, painting the sky only a few shades darker than that of Lothric’s midday sun. Soft clouds occasionally crossed the moon’s path, stretching and blurring the faint but still present shadows on the ground and, as the minutes ticked by, a few handfuls of snowflakes would drift lazily to the ground.

*I like this garden better than Father’s,* Lorian eventually decided, letting his head press into the
metal back with a sigh. Father’s garden always looked as immaculate as a picture, but this garden actually feels like a part of the world around it, with a neat sort of messiness and a bounty that is relatively unrestrained. Did Gwyndolin plant all of this? Or has the garden existed even before him?

The sound of soft slithering against cobblestone broke Lorian from his pondering. Apparently Gwyndolin felt safe enough in the garden to release his glamour...which meant very few people were likely allowed inside. It made Lorian feel honored in a way he had never before experienced.

“Forgive mine tardiness.” Gwyndolin hummed as he slithered up to the bench. “The kitchen staff has gone on break, so I had to make us something myself. There is no need to bother them with a request between meal times.”

If Lorian had canine or feline ears, they would have perked violently upon hearing the news of the God of Moonlight and Judgement, last of Gwyn’s line, making him something to eat. He straightened his head and hastily moved his helmet to sit next to his feet, and Gwyndolin lowered himself to sit with a smile, carrying something wrapped in brown butcher paper in his arms. “You did not have to, Gwyndolin…”

“Of course I did.” Gwyndolin replied airily. He set the bundle in his lap and unwrapped the paper, revealing two halves of a loaf of Catarina bread, split down the middle and filled with a variety of cold meats and cheeses. “I was not going to make myself something to eat and leave thee to do nothing but watch. Is a sandwich acceptable?”

“A sandwich is more than acceptable.” Lorian smiled bashfully and took the larger half when it was offered to him. Once it was in his hands, the knight prince could see that Gwyndolin had gone through the trouble of slicing up pickled vegetables to put inside, and the whole affair was bound together with some sort of creamy white sauce. “I was not going to make myself something to eat and leave thee to do nothing but watch. Is a sandwich acceptable?”

“I was taught how to cook as a child.” Gwyndolin picked idly at his sandwich as his smile suddenly nosedived into a frown. “I enjoy baking on occasion—especially with mine sister—but cooking brings back far too...far too many memories and unwanted feelings for me to do so on a regular basis. Crafting a sandwich, however, can hardly be considered ‘cooking.’”

“It is food that you prepared and assembled...so I consider it cooking, yes.” Not wanting a repeat of their earlier conversation, Lorian took a bite of sandwich in lieu of pressing further, humming in appreciation as he chewed. While he had not been terribly hungry before that moment, the way Gwyndolin’s face lit up with delight at Lorian’s noises of satisfaction seemed to make him grow ravenous, and he eagerly tore off another bite as soon as he had swallowed the first one.

“Delicious.” Lorian breathed after swallowing again. Gwyndolin flushed and muttered what sounded like ‘thank thee’ before taking a delicate bite of his own brunch.

They ate together on that bench in the garden, with Lorian’s ankles and Gwyndolin’s serpents knocking playfully against each other from time to time, and they talked in between chewing and swallowing. Well, it was mostly Gwyndolin talking—as he had in the war council—but Lorian did not mind. It was clear that Gwyndolin had not had a friendly ear of his own age and ‘station’ for quite some time, and not only was Lorian pleased to make Gwyndolin pleased by the mere power of his presence, but the elder prince was eager to gobble up every bit of information he could glean about his new divine friend. As his mother always said, Lorian was more of a conversational ‘digester’ than a ‘spewer,’ and he had always been reticent when it came to talking about himself.

The garden, Lorian discovered, had been a wedding gift from Gwyn to his fourth wife and
Gwyndolin’s mother—Ithil, the Goddess of the Cosmos. According to numerous stories told by Gwyndolin’s siblings, the garden had been originally full of exotic flowers and trees from every corner of the Lordran, but it had been nigh-impossible for such tropical treasures to survive in the climate of Old Londo, even when magically terraformed by Gwyn himself. Ithil had been nonplussed, however, and she had simply replanted the entirety of the plot with seeds she had brought with her from her ‘native land.’ Many considered it unsurprising that Goddess of the Cosmos had had the foresight to bring her own seeds—since Ithil’s love of flowers had been so well-known, her stepchildren had given her the affectionate nickname of ‘Queen Flora’—but Gwyn had been convinced that Ithil used her magic to poison the garden herself in an attempt to ‘prove her superiority’ by ‘humiliating’ him.

Ithil had borne Gwyn’s grumbling ire with the patience and aloofness she was renowned for, and soon the garden was full of flowering plants that had never before been seen in any of the known continents. Deities and courtly visitors from all over the Lordran and beyond would come to see Ithil’s garden—with its crystalline blossoms, shimmering leaves, and iridescent shades of color—and Gwyn’s attitude soon shifted from spite to pride, and he would frequently boast about how Ithil could plant a rock and make it grow into an archtree.

It had been the zenith of the marriage of the God of the Sun and the Goddess of the Cosmos—when Gwyn’s respect and admiration of his untouchable yet tantalizingly tangible wife had paired nicely with Ithil’s cunning wit, affable unsociability, and her seemingly limitless tolerance of her husband’s ego—and, for a short and shining bit of time, it seemed to the three eldest children of Gwyn and the Four Knights that the chaos and philandering that had unmade the Lord of Sunlight’s three prior marriages had become a thing of the past. Gwyn was loyal and devoted (for once), Ithil breezed through his torrents of fire and brimstone with cool smiles and distant gazes, and it seemed as if peace had finally arrived in the halls of Anor Londo.

Unbeknownst to them, the calm of Gwyn and Ithil’s early life together was but the eye of the storm; for after Gwyndolin’s tumultuous birth, their personal relationship entered into a vicious and catastrophic decline from which there would be no recovery. Gwyn had chosen his pride and Ithil had chosen her child; it was as simple as that.

“I still remember the day she left. I remember it with perfect clarity.” Gwyndolin’s voice was somber in a way that made Lorian’s heart ache as he spoke. “I was the human, and godkin, equivalent of around eight years of age. Mother had spent the whole day with me beforehand—walking with me in the forest, taking me onto our favorite stargazing spot on the ramparts, even taking me swimming in the pond on the outskirts of the cathedral—the pond Father never wished for me to visit, since it would risk my being seen by the populace of Old Londo.”

Despite the thousands of years that had passed since his mother’s departure, the god’s voice began to quiver, and his lower lip was quick to follow. Lorian reached out and placed a hand on one of Gwyndolin’s—his awkwardness and shyness driven away by an overwhelming desire to comfort—and the Nameless Moon clung onto his gauntlet like a weapon in the middle of a battle.

“She had bathed me—as if I were a toddler once more—and was brushing my hair when she told me that she had to leave. She said...oh, she said something so very queer about how she had tried to take me with her while I was asleep several months before, but that I was unable to come with her to her true home...not as long as the First Flame continued to burn. I asked her what she meant, but she said that she was unable to tell me—that Father would kill me if I knew the truth.” Gwyndolin sighed and wiped his misty eyes with his sleeve before pressing onward. “She told me that her relationship with Father had soured to the point where he was going to have her killed, and she would have to return to her homeland to escape his wrath.”
“Wrath?” Lorian cocked his head to the side. “Wrath over what?”

“According to mine sister’s handmaidens and our servants, Father was convinced that I was an illegitimate child—the result of an affair between herself and Seath the Scaleless.” Gwyndolin’s heterochromic eyes flared with a slow-smoldering fury as he spoke. “But Mother told me that night that he was afraid of what she knew of him—some sort of truth that was so horrible, it would have destroyed my father had it come out—and that he was afraid of who she truly was. Mother said that Father’s fury was akin to a smokescreen to hide his fear of her.” Gwyndolin sighed and rubbed his face with his right hand, still clinging to Lorian’s with his left. “She told me that she would return for me as soon as the First Flame went out. Only then will it be safe for me to know her truths and secrets. Until then, she said, she had two requests for me: the first was that I had to be gentle, godly, and good; the second was to always watch over the last of Ariamis’s paintings, which hung in the art gallery for years before I had it moved to the basement a millennia or so past.”

“Ariamis? The God of Artisans?”

“One of them, at least; it is a horrifically exclusive misnomer to declare him the only one, as my Father did. I am not sure what is so special about the painting, but she told me that while no one must ever touch it—including myself—it also must not be harmed or destroyed. It was kept under stringent guard for years before and after Father’s death, but I had it moved to the basement when I began construction of Irithyll, since I had the old art gallery demolished around with all but the central cathedral. The other paintings are either hanging in museums all over the Sunless Realms, or are spread across the royal residence. I am the only one that knows of the resting place of Ariamis’ masterpiece, and I venture down to the basement every so often to check on its integrity...though I do not touch it, as I promised Mother.”

Gwyndolin sighed and glanced up at the source of his divinity.

“Mother...she told me that I was beautiful. She told me that Father and the other gods could not appreciate my power and magnificence and that I would truly come into my own once the Flame began to fade in earnest. She called me her ‘blessed miracle,’ as she always had, and told me to never forget that she loved me. That somewhere—far from where I could see her and she could see me—she would be watching over me from mine dreams. ‘By the time thou awakenst from thy slumber,’ she told me, ‘I shall be gone’, and oh...oh Lorian , I tried so hard to stay awake, but I was so tired from the events of the day and the shock of her impending departure that I fell asleep right there in her arms...”

“...and she was gone when you awoke.” Lorian finished, wishing it was appropriate for him to wrap an arm around the god’s shoulders and pull him to his side. Gwyndolin nodded.

“Father never talked about her, and he refused to answer any questions I had about her whereabouts, silencing me with stony gazes and booming commands whenever I asked. For years, he forced me to wear nothing but her old hand-me-down dresses...almost as if he wished for me to be imprisoned in her identity as a punishment for us both: a punishment to my mother for leaving, and a punishment to myself for having been born in the first place.” Gwyndolin blinked wetly and turned his pained gaze up to Lorian, who frowned empathetically in return. “Forgive me...I have prattled on about mine own problems for far too long.”

“It is what friends are for.” Lorian shook his head and gave Gwyndolin’s hand a gentle squeeze, not wanting to damage the god’s fine skin with the hard joint lines of his gauntlet. “Am I the first person you have told about your mother?”

Gwyndolin sniffed and nodded. “The first since mine elder siblings and the Four Knights. Thou
art the first person that I have discussed personal matters with in at least two thousand years. I have told Yorshka some, of course, but…”

“…but it is different with a child,” Lorian finished knowingly, “especially when said child is under your care.”

A smile finally returned to Gwyndolin’s face at those words. “Exactly. I take it thou art in the same situation with little Lothric.”

“Yes. I may not have lived as long as you, Gwyndolin, but I am similar to you in that you are the first real friend outside of mine family that I have ever had. There are some stories inside of me that have rested so deeply inside of me and for so long, that...that I am not even sure I would know where to begin in telling them.”

“I was not even sure that I would be able to speak of my mother again...at least, more than the most rote of facts.” Gwyndolin reached over with his right hand and patted the back of the gauntlet that held his left. “There is something about thee...something that loosens mine lips and cracks the walls around my memories. I hope, in time, that I shall inspire the same in thee.”

Something bubbling and diaphanous sparked to life in Lorian’s chest. “I am sure you will, although it may take more time than you are willing to give; as Lothric will surely complain to you, I detest talking about myself.”

“For thee, Ser Lorian? I have all the time in the world.”

The two had long since finished lunch, and Lorian had rolled up the butcher paper and tucked it underneath the bench when Gwyndolin began reminiscing, not wanting to break the spell of companionship that had settled over the two of them. By that point in the conversation, one of the snakes—Ludus, specifically—began to gnaw and toss about said sandwich wrappings, making Gwyndolin curse and physically shake his leg until it dropped the paper, which in turn made Lorian laugh until he was close to falling off the bench.

“Little miscreant! How darest thou misbehave in front of Lorian!” Gwyndolin’s face was as red as one of the tomatoes he had put on the sandwich. He grabbed Ludus’s head and forced the snake to look directly into his eyes as he scolded him, despite knowing better than anyone that his legs were not sentient. “Mind thy manners or I shall chop thee off and have thy skin stitched into shoes for a traveling cleric! Thou art a part of me, yes?! Then how is it that thou dost not—Lorian, stop laughing—how dost thou not possess any of mine shamefacedness?! Do not make that face at me, Ludus!”

Ludus, unperturbed at his host’s anger, simply flicked his tongue in a particularly impudent way. Gwyndolin’s responding screech made Lorian laugh all the harder.

Once Gwyndolin had finished chastising his leg and Lorian had finished catching his breath, the god took the knight-prince on a tour through the millennia-old garden, the two arm-in-arm as if they had known each other for years instead of weeks. Finally free to show his lifelong love of flowers and plants, Lorian eagerly soaked up all of Gwyndolin’s facts about the alien vegetation (or, at least, what Ithil had shared with her child about said alien vegetation), and he found himself asking more and more questions as his dam of shyness finally began to crack.

Rather than be put off by Lorian’s sudden exuberance, Gwyndolin seemed to flourish under the elder prince’s undivided attention, and his own soon grew to be as free-flowing and voluble as Lorian’s questions. It was clear that the Dark Moon loved to teach as much as the Unyielding Sword loved to learn.
"This garden maintains itself most of the time, believe it or not.” Gwyndolin hummed before unlinking his arm from Lorian’s, and reaching up to grab the low-hanging branch of a flowering tree. “I believe it is due to my mother’s lingering magic. However, I do try to do a bit of gardening on a somewhat regular basis...though it is difficult when I have so many other duties to which I must attend, and the recent fluctuant state of my health…”

Lorian hummed in concern and shifted his helm from where he held it under his right arm. “Yorshka did mention that you have been ill as of late...is it anything serious?”

“Oh, no, not at all!” Gwyndolin pulled the branch down to eye-level and examined each of its large, shimmering white blossoms as he spoke. “I was afflicted with similar bouts of symptoms when I was a youth, and my frailty has a habit of...catching up with me, so to speak, several times a year. Said bouts have been slightly more frequent over these past several months than they have been in recent centuries, I admit, but it is nothing terribly out of the ordinary.”

“Ah.” A pause. “Are you feeling well now?”

“Quite well; frankly, I have felt better this past week than I have in quite a long while.” Gwyndolin giggled and grabbed the base of one of the larger blooms. “Art thou worried for me, Ser Lorian?”

“Well, of course! You are my friend!” Lorian coughed and ducked his head to hide it behind his hair. “It is second nature, given my younger brother’s own weakness and chronic illness…”

“Thou mistakest my teasing for criticism, dear Lorian; I assure thee that I am nothing but flattered and touched by thy concern.” With that, Gwyndolin snapped the flower off of the branch and turned to face his friend, his smile soft and reassuring. “Duck thy head, if it pleases thee.”

Despite being confused, Lorian immediately did as Gwyndolin requested, and his breath hitched in his chair at the feel of Gwyndolin’s silken fingers running through his hair.

“As I was saying...I would not be averse to having someone assist me in tending to the plants.” Gwyndolin’s voice was as soft as his touch as he smoothed out the hair that hung over Lorian’s right ear. “However, I am...reluctant to let those outside of my personal circle—as small as it may be—in what was once the sanctum of mine biological mother. Even the Silver Knights are only allowed inside to fetch me to handle an emergent situation; otherwise, they are only permitted to patrol around the perimeter.”

_Gwyndolin keeps inviting me into his most sacred spaces_, Lorian thought, letting his eyes slip shut as Gwyndolin began to weave the flower into the hair behind his left ear. The knight’s legs suddenly felt all too warm and shaky and required a concerning amount of willpower to remain steady. _He truly does consider me a friend, doesn’t he? He truly does like me. He truly does wish for me to stay. What could the last True God possibly see in someone like me? I do not understand._

“There.” Once the flower was tucked securely into Lorian’s long silver hair, Gwyndolin stepped backwards and studied his handiwork with a smirk of satisfaction, hands resting on his hips. “I thought the blossom would pair well with the silver of thy hair, and I must say, I was not misled.”

“Oh? Does it?” Shyly, Lorian reached up and gently touched his new hair ornament, its petals damp and waxy against the calluses on his fingertips. “I have never worn flowers in my hair. Father would not allow me to even wear a flower crown, and I could only ever make them in secret; he said that such activities would make my hands too soft to hold a sword.” The thought pleased the knight-prince, and he suddenly found himself looking around for a decorative pond or another reflective surface, feeling slightly disappointed to find none in sight. “Lothric adores wearing flowers in his hair, however; do you think I could bring some back to him?”
“Be my guest.” Gwyndolin grinned and made a grand sweeping gesture around the garden. “Pick as many as thou thinkest Lothric would enjoy.”

“Oh, those are dangerous words, Gwyndolin. Lothric would turn his hair into a flower bed if he could.”

After Lorian had selected five blue-and-white flowers and tucked them safely into his side bag, the pair decided it was time to find their younger siblings...although Gwyndolin insisted on taking the ‘scenic route’ to the crystal lizard garden behind the Cathedral of the Moon.

“Incredible.” Lorian breathed, eyes wide and mouth slightly parted. Gwyndolin grinned behind his right bell sleeve.

“Is it as thy mother described to thee?”

“Stories cannot do this place justice. The vague visions I have always possessed in my mind do not hold even the smallest candle to the real thing.”

Gwyndolin lingered on the elevator bridge as Lorian walked to the base of the grand staircase of Anor Londo, watching as the Elder Prince of Lothric craned his neck at painful angles in an attempt to take in every single detail of what was considered to be one of the most sacred places in the Lordran, second only to the Kiln of the First Flame. Now that the two were standing on the tallest structure in Irithyll, the normally faint sun shone brilliantly in the cloudless blue sky, its light reflecting off of Lorian’s armor and setting the polished bronze of his armor aflame with shimmering gold.

Had Lorian’s armor ever shone so incandescently before? No, not in recent times, for it had been painted black long before Lorian received the antique suit as a gift from Oceiros on his eighteenth birthday (the last gift, Lorian recalled with a bitter taste in his mouth, that my father ever gave me...and Lothric does not count). When asked by his oldest son why the suit was painted black, Oceiros had simply shrugged and said something about how the grandfather of his father had the suit washed black after ‘some battle or another,’ and none of the Black Hands or armorsmiths had been alive during the time of its alteration. Not even the Crystal Sage herself could recall a time when the armor had been without its black paint, and the written historical records of the kingdom gave no answers, leaving the reason behind its cosmetic alteration a mystery that was destined to never be solved.

There had been a time when Lorian wanted to scrub off the paint and polish the suit himself, but alas, he had lacked the opportunity to do so before riding into battle against the Demon Prince. When he and his men had returned to Lothric triumphant, it took only a day for the rumor that his armor had been scorched black during his battle with the malevolent heir to spread through Lothric and its surrounding kingdoms like the Chaos Flame itself, and Lorian had neither the heart nor the energy to correct the fallacy. If it brought the citizens of Lothric—who grew more downtrodden, despondent, and desperate by the day—a rare measure of hope and pride, then who was their prince to deny them?

Besides, the black-blunted armor seemed an appropriate metaphor for the state of the kingdom as a whole, with everything good and genuine being blunted and dulled underneath layer upon layer of peeling lies, stale rot, and umbral ash.

Yet everything is shining now—my armour, my brother’s eyes, even our very futures—and it is all because of Gwyndolin.
With his smile beaming as brightly as the gauntlets on his arms, Lorian turned around to thank Gwyndolin for taking him to Anor Londo, but the words died on his lips at the sight of the unexpectedly troubled look on the deity’s face. The Nameless Moon’s frail hands were clenched at his sides, his pale features seemed frozen into lifelessness underneath his hood, and Lorian could just barely make out those gold and amber eyes, trained on the spiculated helm tucked underneath his right arm. Gwyndolin’s gaze was near and far all at once, and it seemed like he was staring at something beyond Lorian, and it…

The helm nearly fell out from underneath Lorian’s arm as a sudden wave of panic stole his breath and slacked his limbs.

*His stare looks like my mother’s.*

“ When Mother said that it took ten years to complete the construction of Anor Londo, I thought she was exaggerating!”

Lorian’s loud and slightly manic declaration seemed to break Gwyndolin from his trance, and the god blinked owlishly at his new friend as he returned to the here and now, his hands unclenching themselves at his sides. What in the name of the Flame had *that* been about? “ What didst thou say, Lorian?”

“ My mother! When she told me of Anor Londo, she said that ten years—years it— *it took ten years* to build from start to finish, and I always thought she was exaggerating for dramatic effect!” Lorian continued, desperately trying to convince himself that nothing important had just occurred, even though he knew it to be a lie. Whatever. It did not matter—just so long as Gwyndolin never had that look in his eyes *ever again*. “ But n-now that I am seeing Anor Londo for myself...well...I am surprised that it *only* took ten years! Did Lord Gwyn not have a war to win? Where did he find the resources and the *time?* ”

Gwyndolin laughed and stepped off of the bridge to join Lorian at the base of the stairs, pulling his cloak tightly around his thin body as he stepped out of the protection offered by the stone pillars and walls of the great elevator. It was a futile effort, however, as a great gust of wind lashed about the great cathedral the moment he crossed the threshold, cutting through the thin silk fabric and making the Nameless Moon shiver and curl his shoulders into himself. Lorian’s anxiety was swiftly replaced with concern, and he found himself wishing that he had worn normal clothing instead of his armor that morning, if only so he could offer Gwyndolin a coat or cloak crafted from more substantial material.

“ Before the First Flame,” Gwyndolin began, his lips tight in a clear effort to keep his teeth from chattering, “those of the divine race—as well as the pygmies—were confined to dismal and secluded cities and townships after their first failed wars against the everlasting dragons, so it is not surprising that those who could not bear arms were eager to help build a new home instead. The creation of miracles—in conjunction with the magic the divine race had been practicing since its inception—made surprisingly short work of the heavy lifting.”

Gwyndolin paused, suddenly, and cleared his throat with a polite cough.

“ Though I shall be frank with thee, Ser Lorian—only the cathedral itself was built by the hands of the divine. By the time the construction of Anor Londo was completed, Father had finished subjugating the giants of this continent, and it was through the use of slave labor that the city of Old Londo came to be.”

Lorian paled and swallowed.
“...Ah.” The elder prince’s voice was hoarse. “I can see why Mother did not mention that fact in her stories. I can imagine such a thing was... shameful to acknowledge.”

“A valley of pure white stone that shone golden in the sun,” Desdimonda had told him as she painted, dabbing white clouds onto the blue sky that hung above the High Wall as Lorian watched and listened, enthralled by both his mother’s artistic skill and her stories of a time long past. “Nestled safely in the protective embrace of the Melting Mountains. We called them so because they used to be covered with snow, but after Gwyn spread his sunlight over the land, the peaks melted into hundreds of little rivers. The grand cathedral itself, Anor Londo, sometimes seemed tall enough to touch the very sun that inspired its creation. Stained glass windows on every wall, majestic columns, and enough flying buttresses to support at least two dozen smaller cathedrals! Oh, as rigid and oppressive as the court and our society could be, there was something about living in Anor Londo that made one feel the divinity that coursed through their veins! I do so hope you shall see it one day, dear Lorian, at least once—”

“Many of the divine—including Desdimonda—disagreed with Father’s enslavement of the giants.” Gwyndolin was quick to elaborate as he walked to stand beside Lorian, his body as tense as the drawn string of a dragonslayer bow as he braced himself against yet another squall—an unfortunate and constant side effect of Anor Londo’s high elevation and close proximity to the Boreal Mountain Range. “However, the consequences of speaking out against Father led to punishments that were just as unyielding and unmerciful as his will, so the rest of the divinity—including mine siblings—were cowed into silence.”

“Is that the reason you demolished Old Londo and replaced it with Irithyll?” Suddenly struck by a bolt of inspiration (and annoyed at himself for not thinking of it sooner), Lorian reached behind himself and began to fumble with the fasteners of his waist cape, curious to find out if Ser Aval had discovered and recreated its dual purpose in his restoration efforts.

“The primary reason, yes; I refused to settle a new civilization in a city built on the broken backs of slaves.” Gwyndolin sighed and smiled weakly at the cathedral...though it was not a smile of happiness, that much Lorian could tell. “Not only would it be an unconscious continuation of the tyranny experienced by the giants—and, to an extent, the other groups of sentient beings for which my father felt disdain—but I personally could not have lived with myself if I had preserved any bit of the wretched, blood-stained illusion of grandeur that was Old Londo.”

“Why not demolish Anor Londo as well?”

Lorian immediately regretted opening his mouth, for Gwyndolin suddenly appeared uncomfortable—well, even more uncomfortable than he had been since they walked through what the god had said was a memorial for fallen Silver Knights during the time of Gwyn. Even though the wind was not blowing at that moment, he still pulled his cloak tighter around his arms, as if attempting to shield himself from some other torment.

“Well, as I said, Anor Londo was not built with slave labor...and...and it has so much artistic and historical significance that I...I did not see the need to destroy it with the rest of the city. It is important, Ser Lorian, to remember where we came from to avoid making the mistakes of the past. It would not have been...not have been proper to reduce the grand cathedral of the gods to rubble on a whim.”

Lorian’s heart ached at the forlorn look on Gwyndolin’s half-hidden face. Ten days ago, he would have never imagined that the last True God in the Lordran—well, the image that his father, his mother, and the Scholars had drilled into him from the day of his birth—would demonstrate such vulnerability. Yet here was Gwyndolin before him, looking as frail and raw as Lothric did
whenever he woke from a screaming nightmare of flames and fathers, and Lorian wanted nothing more but to cross the short distance between them and shield the god in his embrace.

Gwyndolin was still the lastborn of Gwyn, however, and Lorian had only known him for a week and a half. So instead, the elder prince finished unfastening his half cape and detached it from his leggings, grinning at the sight of the thick bustle that had been wrapped around his waist. As Gwyndolin watched—his distress momentarily replaced by curiosity—Lorian set his helm on one of the stone pillars of the fence surrounding the platform and used both hands to unfurl the cape to its full length. Ser Aval was truly an armoursmith beyond peer! Lorian could not wait to thank him in person!

“What was the second reason?”

“Eh?” Gwyndolin blinked.

“You said that the primary reason was because of the slavery of the giants.” Lorian stuck his tongue out of the corner of his mouth as he unwound the fabric as carefully as one could while wearing armored gauntlets. It seemed to be made from the same material as his old, tattered cape, so there was no real reason to be careful, but it was better to be safe than sorry. “What was the second reason?”

“Oh! That!” Gwyndolin smiled softly and shyly cast his heterochromic gaze to the ground. “Well, dost thou remember what I told thee of the Chosen Undead—that she was an unrivaled architect in her homeland of Jan’ja?”

“Yes.”

“Well, after she Linked the First Flame, I found a set of blueprints that she had crafted during her time in my service as a Blade of the Darkmoon, and bequeathed to me upon her Linking. They were the plans for a city, and though her final letter mentioned no reason for their creation, it was safe to assume that she had been inspired by the cities and towns she visited on her pilgrimage. ‘Raise this city in your image, if you so wish’, she had written...so I did. In this way, for as long as this city stands, Hadiya Hamidou—the wife, the architect, the fighter, the woman behind the title of ‘Chosen Undead’—shall never be forgotten.”

Realization struck Lorian like a lightning spear. “So Irithyll was constructed from blueprints left to you by your surrogate mother, Hadiya...and then you named the city after your biological mother, Ithil.”

Gwyndolin’s smile shifted into a satisfied smirk. “Ah, so thou didst notice.”

“Not at first...but it was very clever of you, if I do say so myself.”

“Just as I refused to let Hadiya to be forgotten as the woman she was, I refused to let my father succeed in erasing my mother from the world. Her garden, her name, the statues of her visage throughout the city...I ripped my mother from the obscurity my father forced upon her with my bare hands, and one day, the name of Ithil shall be more known to the citizens of the Sunless Realms than the name of Gwyn. If it takes my last act on this plane, I shall make it so.”

As Lorian shook the wrinkles out of his cape, he watched as Gwyndolin shivered under the assault of another blast of cold mountain wind, his thin hands curling around his arms below the shoulder as he locked his jaw to keep from trembling. The Nameless Moon was frail, delicate, and demure—all things which Oceiros openly mocked as signs of weakness—yet Lorian knew that even the legendary strength of the Lord of Sunlight could not hold a candle to that of his lastborn. The
strength to toss away everything that one has ever known; the strength to tear down the world in
which one was born and raised and build a better one on its ashes, no matter how daunting or
perilous the task; the strength to turn your back on a legacy that many others would have killed to
inherit; the strength to throw down the lash you had been handed and say ‘no more.’

Gwyndolin could have easily and understandably continued to make his father’s mistakes—to
continue the savage and ruthless cycle of savage violence and flagrant bigotry upon which the Age
of Fire had been built. It was the legacy which Gwyndolin had been raised to follow, after all, and
it was clear from the way the Nameless Moon regarded that cathedral that it was a legacy that
pained him still. Yet despite the innumerable abuses, losses, and tragedies that the god had endured
over his five and some millennia of existence, he chose instead to be kind. To be fair. To be just. To
make himself into an unbreakable shield in a world that only valued unyielding swords.

Lorian had never thought that he would meet someone that possessed his younger brother’s
bountiful strength, nor did ever think he would come to admire another the way he admired his
dear Lothric, yet Gwyndolin had been shattering his expectations from the moment they met. It
would have been impossible for someone as tongue-tied and word-jumbled as Lorian to verbally
express to the last of the True Gods (the most powerful of the True Gods, in Lorian’s opinion, as
well as the only one that mattered) just how honored and blessed he was to be his friend.

So instead, Lorian simply grinned and threw his fully extended cloak around Gwyndolin’s
shoulders, fastening it around Gwyndolin’s neck with the same snaps he used to attach it to his
leggings. The elder prince then stood back and watched--hands on his hips and a jolly grin on his
face—as Gwyndolin slowly released his arms to clutch the royal blue fabric in his hands, confusion
etched into his smooth face as he looked from Lorian to the cape and back to Lorian again,
blinking all the while.

“This is…”

“A trick—something I came up with after I inherited the set from Father.” Lorian laughed and, in
a rare show of pride, puffed out his chest. “It was originally equipped with a waist cape, but I
wished to have a full cloak on hand for important affairs and cold journeys, so I ended up taking a
full cape and rolling its top until it was as short as a waist cape, then bustled the fabric and clipped
it to my leggings with fasteners that I sewed myself. That way, if I ever wish to wear a full cloak,
all I have to do is detach the waist cape and unroll the fabric.”

The smile that touched Gwyndolin’s lips reminded Lorian of a flower that bloomed first thing in
the morning. “And thou sayest that I am the clever one.” He hummed thoughtfully and ran his soft
fingers along the hem of the cloak. “I am impressed that Ser Aval was able to so easily replicate
thy design...then again, it was probably a simple enough matter for a blacksmith of his experience
and caliber.”

“He even made it from the same material as my last waist cloak.”

“Material?” Gwyndolin blinked yet again and rubbed a bit of the cloak between his fingertips,
brow furrowed as studied the texture of the fabric: soft as silk, yet as sturdy as burlap. “This is...woven dragon skin, is it not?” At Lorian’s confirmatory nod, Gwyndolin began to swish the
cape about his feet, an action that Lorian found painfully endearing. “I am surprised Ser Aval had
any left on hands, for it is not as if the Sunless Realms are home to a plethora of drakes and
wyverns; that is the purview of the Kingdom of Lothric.”

“As you said, Ser Aval has lived a long time; he probably has innumerable blacksmithing
materials and tools on hand—some which may be considered archaic by the smiths of today.” As
Lorian spoke, he noticed that his cloak—which only came to his ankles when fully unravelled—was
long enough to drag on the floor when worn by Gwyndolin, and the embers of his earlier endearment roared into a blazing fire that threatened to burn him from the inside out. “Woven dragon skin: durable enough to last many a battle without tearing, waterproof, surprisingly warm for fabric of its thickness, and—most importantly—impermeable to wind.”

“Ah. Ah.” Gwyndolin’s cheeks pinked—though from emotion or windburn, Lorian could not tell—and he did not hesitate to wrap the cloak snugly around his body, sighing in relief as the gusts battering his body were abruptly cut off. “I thank thee heartily, Lorian. Thou art...unfailingly kind.”

Lorian chuckled and shrugged dismissively.

“No need to thank me; after all, it is what friends are for.”

Gwyndolin kept Lorian’s cloak on even after they departed Anor Londo—deciding to forego a visit to the cathedral proper until Lothric was with them—and descended down the elevator to the ancient tomb of the first Silver Knights. Gwyndolin made an immediate beeline for the only other non-illusory door in the chamber, and Lorian actually had to trot to keep pace, his eyes falling briefly on both the faded statue of Gwyn on the far wall and the empty raised space in the center of the room that appeared to Lorian as if it had once been the site of a coiled bonfire. Given how the Undead Pilgrimage would lead the Chosen Undead through Anor Londo, he was not surprised that there would be several bonfire locations throughout the ancient cathedral, although it seemed as if the spot had not been utilized as such for quite some time.

Where had the bonfire gone? Had it simply been ‘decommissioned’ once Gwyndolin had—rather obviously—stopped supporting said pilgrimage? Furthermore, why did that statue of Gwyn feel so...off to him?

It was obvious that the tomb made Gwyndolin uncomfortable, however—even more than Anor Londo itself—and Lorian had already caused enough unintentional distress with his questions for one day. So he silently followed Gwyndolin up the short flight of stairs and onto the roof: a collection of flat stone balconies tiered upon each other, with snow-dusted flying buttresses connecting them to several shorter towers.

Lorian’s bewilderment must have shown on his face, for Gwyndolin laughed—the sound of twinkling bells—and looped his right arm around Lorian’s left, gently pulling the knight to the left.

“Never fear, Ser Lorian; I used to scale these rooftops with my siblings when I was a child, and those were the days before I had developed the glamour of real legs! It is the shortest way down to the Cathedral of the Moon, I assure thee, and completely safe...as long as thou art not an intruder.”

True to the god’s point, the pair passed by several Silver Knights standing sentry on the rooftop as they made their way to the leftmost buttress, with swords sheathed at their waists, shields strapped to their backs, and dragonslayer greatbows propped at their sides, ready to rain calamity on whomever would dare trespass upon Irithyll’s most hallowed ground. Each gave a low bow to Gwyndolin and a respectful nod to Lorian as they walked by, and the knight couldn’t help but gulp as he nodded to each in return, wondering what they thought of the strange visitor at their god’s side, and if they knew said visitor was to be their new Lord Commander. Had Captain Aishura and Vice-Captain Telos already informed them of the change in command—or were they waiting for Gwyndolin to give the final say?

*Captain Aishuralthos clearly knew of Gwyndolin’s intentions—given her words to Gwyndolin as she and Telos departed—and she also knew that I was not likely to refuse. After all...*
Lorian glanced down at the Nameless Moon, humming pleasantly as he leaned his meager weight into the strong line of Lorian's arm as they walked, and the same thrill of pleasure he had experienced at the base of Anor Londo shot up the prince’s spine at the sight of his cloak swishing behind Gwyndolin like a short train.

*Is there anyone in the Lordran that is capable of refusing him anything?*

It was an interesting question to ponder, for up until that point, the only one Lorian had been incapable of refusing had been his little brother. It had not been a secret in Lothric Castle that the younger prince had the elder prince wrapped around his finger from the moment of his birth, and the handmaidens would often joke that if Lothric had asked Lorian to jump into a pool of lava for seemingly no reason, Lorian would do so without a moment of hesitation. Lorian knew this, of course, but he simply did not care; there were worse things to do than to dote on a sickly and pain-afflicted child that was destined to burn alive. Besides, Lothric knew it as well, but he was so polite and kind that Lorian could not remember a time when he had personally exploited his elder brother’s blatant weakness.

“I would do anything for you too, Lorian,” Lothric had told him a few months after his seventh birthday. “You know that, right? Whatever you wanted, whatever you wished for me to do, I would do my best to see it done. I would even Link the First Flame if you asked me to—just for you, dear brother.” And Lorian had to find a secluded and abandoned guest room in the castle later that night so no one could hear him screaming and punching every available piece of furniture into bloody splinters. He had been forced to go to Emma for help in getting the smaller pieces of wood out of his mangled knuckles, and she had given him such a disapproving look as she worked on his hands with her tweezers, and he had been so ashamed—

The memory had Lorian violently shaking his head, to the point where Gwyndolin paused their journey to turn to him, a worried frown just barely visible from the shadow of his hooded cloak. “Lorian? Is everything alright?”

“Ah, yes, of course. Just mulling over things.” Seeing that they had arrived at the leftmost buttress, Lorian quickly turned his thoughts back to the present, and he released Gwyndolin’s arm and stepped onto the unconventional walkway. After checking to make sure that the snow was not thick enough to cause slippage and that the blue clay tiles were not at risk of falling off, Lorian turned to face the blatantly amused Gwyndolin and offered a sheepish smile, extending his hand for the god to take.

“For my own satisfaction, Lord Gwyndolin. I have nothing but the utmost faith in your upkeep of your ancestral home.”

“How very chivalrous of thee. It has been centuries since a knight personally led my way.” Gwyndolin smiled coyly and grabbed Lorian’s hand with his left, using his right to hold up his skirt and cloaks as he stepped onto the rafter with his bare false feet. “It has been some time since I made this journey without simply teleporting to the courtyard—not since Yorshka was still small enough to need my guidance.”

“You could teleport us below if you would prefer.”

“Oh, there is no need. Besides…” Gwyndolin sidled up next to Lorian and linked their arms together once more. “It is nice to take the scenic route from time to time, is it not?”

“That it is.” Lorian grinned and gave the god’s frail arm a gentle squeeze. “Especially when in the presence of agreeable company.”
“On that we are in agreement.”

When they reached the small tower in between the two buttresses, Gwyndolin made sure to step off before Lorian had the chance to offer his hand once more, giggling like a madman at the playful pout his ‘disagreement’ produced. Lorian may have chosen to walk around the opposite side of the tower than Gwyndolin, just so he could reach the next buttress first and offer his hand, which Gwyndolin took with a beaming smile and a roll of his eyes. Soon enough, they arrived at the top of what Gwyndolin said to be a water reservoir, which was kept at least half full during wet months and filled consistently during dryer months.

“One never knows when catastrophic water contamination could occur.” Gwyndolin mentioned idly as he stood with Lorian on the open top floor, allowing the knight to survey the courtyard below at his leisure. “Besides, if there is ever a massive medical emergency, the doctors and healers will need access to all of the fresh water they can lay their hands on. Hydration skins, sterilization, medicine preparation—it is a surprisingly extensive list. As Father always said, ‘tis better to be safe than sorry,’ and he was more than right in that.”

The courtyard below extended from the base of the entrance to the water reservoir to a connected, smaller garden behind a cathedral—smaller than Anor Londo, but gorgeously gothic and ancient all the same—that Lorian could only assume was the Cathedral of the Moon. A wide stone walkway cut through the center of the courtyard and ended in stairs up to the smaller garden, and the path was flanked with two neat yet fecund rows of trees, bushes, flowers, and statues of a woman that could only be Ithil, the Goddess of the Cosmos. Given Lorian’s failing farsight, he was too far away to make out the exact details of her visage, but he was able to see the dozens of crystal lizards milling about both the courtyard and the garden, each of them wearing a ribbon of a different color and pattern around their necks. Some of them were chewing on the plentiful vegetation of the area, some were wrestling and play-fighting (which seemed to consist of them growling, circling each other, and occasionally butting their snouts together), and some were simply snoozing in the brightest patches of moonlight they could find.

“I thought they were confined to the garden behind the Cathedral of the Moon.” Lorian remarked. Gwyndolin snorted.

“I welcome thee to try and make twenty-three crystal lizards do anything that they do not wish to. Giving them orders is as effective is shouting at a stone.”

In the small garden, Lorian could see a brown-haired and white-clad figure that could only be Lady Yorshka, sitting in what seemed to be a pile of crystal lizards as she talked animatedly with a slightly smaller, black-haired child clad in what appeared to be a brown yukata. Said child was sitting cross-legged in front of Yorshka, using a rag to polish the gemstone back of a crystal lizard lounging in his lap as listened to Yorshka chatter on, and Lorian could see him nod silently in agreement from time to time. On the steps leading to the back door of the Cathedral of the Moon sat an adult figure, who—despite the crystal lizard draped across his legs like a bag of rice—seemed entirely focused on the gabbing youths. His black (or was it white?) hair was tied in a topknot, and the style of his long red coat and brown-wrapped tunic reminded Lorian of his visit to the rogue Kinonese nation of Ashina a few years past, where he saw its numerous shinobi and samurai wearing similar garments as a way to distinguish themselves from those of the rest of the continent. The sight of what was possibly a katana strapped to his side further bolstered Lorian’s suspicions.

“Who are those two with Lady Yorshka?” Lorian asked Gwyndolin. And where is Lothric?

“Oh! I believe they are Lord Kuro and Wolf—the two Lothric and mine sister have told thee about! Yorshka must have invited them to the cathedral so they could finally meet thee and little
Lothric.”

Gwyndolin seemed pleased to see the two of them—which was reassuring, given Lorian’s natural state of protective concern at the idea of Lothric being friends with someone he had never met. Given how fondly had Lothric gushed about his ‘dream friend’ over the past week and a half (and how Yorshka seemed just as fond of the mysterious child as his little brother), Lorian was reasonably sure that this ‘Kuro’ was someone he would like and approve of his brother associating with, given Lothric’s unrivaled skill at judging one’s character. Still, Lorian doubted—having remembered Lothric’s disastrous interactions with the children of Oceiros’s occasional guests—and he could only pray that a face-to-face meeting with Lothric’s new friend would put his heart at ease. After all, Lothric had never before had friends his own age, not before coming to Irithyll...

Speaking of Lothric, where in the Lordran was he?

“ Chloanne, where are you?!”

Oh, there he was—in between the two staircases leading up to the first floor of the water reservoir. Lothric was wearing the silver hooded robe that Lorian had seen him in earlier that morning (one of the pieces that Yorshka and Gwyndolin had made for him, cut from the softest cotton and bamboo that either brother had ever touched, and dyed with pigments specifically used in the crafting of clothing for those with sensitive skin), and he was kneeling in front of the flowering bushes that grew against the wall between the staircases, digging almost frantically through the leaves and branches.

That’s no good, Lorian thought, frowning with worry. Lothric will rip off his skin if he does that with bare hands.

“ Lothric!” Lorian called down to his brother, releasing Gwyndolin’s arm and taking his helm in both hands, placing it on his head at just the right angle to keep the brim from falling over his eyes. Lothric’s head snapped up at the sound of his brother’s voice—the hood of his robe slipping off with the action—and Lorian watched as Lothric made quick work of scanning the surrounding area, almost wanting to laugh (and feeling bad for it) at how much his brother looked like a bewildered puppy. “ Up here, Lothric!”

Lothric looked up, his bright blue eyes locking with Lorian’s brown, and a wide grin nearly split the child’s face in two. It was the face of a child that had been given exactly what they wanted for Allfather’s Day, and for the life of him, Lorian did not know what he had done to deserve having someone as amazingly wonderful as Lothric look at him as if he was everything good and right with the world. He did not understand, but he also did not care, and the elder prince opened up his arms with a wide smile of his own.

“ What art thou—” Gwyndolin began.

There was a flash of white light, and the Nameless Moon let out a little ‘eep’ of shock and stumbled backwards as Lothric dropped out of thin air and into Lorian’s arms, his own gangly limbs wrapping around the knight’s neck and holding fast.

“ There you are!” Lothric half-laughed, half-exclaimed, leaning up to press a kiss on Lorian’s cheek. “ I was wondering what was taking you so long! You were supposed to have been free to leave four hours ago, Lorian! I was about to go search for you myself!”

“ Forgive me, forgive me,” Lorian chuckled, kissing Lothric’s forehead before giving him as big a hug as he could without risking the child harm. “ Dr. Watari ended up clearing me early, but you and Yorshka had not yet returned from breakfast, so I went to see Gwyndolin while I waited. We
ended up becoming...quite distracted with important matters.”

“Distracted?” For the first time, Lothric noticed the flower twined in Lorian’s hair, and his eyes were soft and glittering as he reached up to touch it. “Oh, where did you get this? It’s beautiful!”

“Gwyndolin picked it out for me. We ended up taking a stroll through his mother’s old garden.” Lorian looked over at Gwyndolin and smiled. Said god, having seemingly recovered from his brief shock at Lothric’s abrupt appearance, smiled fondly at the twin princes and nodded. “I brought some flowers to weave in your hair, if you would like.”

“Oh, really? That sounds wonderful! I wonder if they are all as unique as the blossom in your own hair!” Lothric made quick and practiced work of shifting himself to rest on Lorian’s back, resting his chin on Lorian’s left pauldron as the knight shrugged him into a more comfortable position. “Did you truly spend the entire morning in the garden?”

“Ah, no...just lunch.” Lorian felt strangely embarrassed talking to Lothric about his hours alone with Gwyndolin—as if he were a child caught stealing a treat instead of a grown man spending time with a friend. “Gwyndolin also took me to see Anor Londo, but we did not go inside the cathedral proper, since we wished to wait until you were with us for a proper tour.”

“Anor Londo?” Lothric blinked and turned his head to look at Gwyndolin. It did not take long for him to recognize the cape the god was wearing, and he pulled himself up Lorian’s back just enough to see his brother’s face, his blue eyes wide and befuddled. “Why is Gwyndolin wearing your waist cape?”

“Ah, well...” Gwyndolin also seemed slightly embarrassed—though not as much as Lorian—and he reached up to adjust his hood so that only his mouth and nose were visible. “I am afraid that taking Lorian to Anor Londo was a spontaneous decision, and I found myself dressed quite inappropriately to handle the mountain winds. Thy brother was kind enough to lend me his cloak, and I suppose I just...forgot to return it to him once we had returned.”

Lorian had expected Lothric to simply accept Gwyndolin’s explanation with a nod and a few understanding words, but if anything, the younger prince looked even more confused than before. He looked to Lorian, then back at Gwyndolin, then glanced over at the flower resting above Lorian’s left ear. He reached up with a spindly hand and gently caressed its petals.

“Oh.”

“Oh?” Lorian queried, eyebrows shooting towards his hairline at the awed tone of his brother’s voice, as if he were a scientist who had just come upon a revolutionary new discovery instead of a child of seven-and-three-quarter years. “What is that supposed to mean? Have Gwyndolin and I said something wrong?”

“Oh. Oh dear.” Lothric sighed—an exhale of breath that was far too long-suffering for someone his age—and twisted his head to look once more at his elder brother’s face. Was it Lorian imagining things, or did his younger brother have a look of pity in his eyes. “You both are in a great deal of trouble, aren’t you? Oh, this is going to be a bugbear of a time; I can just feel it.”

Gwyndolin and Lorian glanced at each other.

“Oh, forgive me; I am just rambling about things.” Lothric waved a hand dismissively in the air before wrapping it once more around his opposite wrist. “Thank you for waiting to see Anor Londo with me; the only time I have been up there was the day we arrived, and that was just to see Ser Aval’s workshop. It would be less fun if we did not see it for the first time together.”
Whatever vision or revelation that Lothric had witnessed, it was clear that he meant to keep it to himself, and Lorian noticed—to his relief—that Gwyndolin seemed just as content as he to leave him to his secrets. The elder prince had no short amount of horror stories of all of the times their father and the Scholars had tried to pry Lothric’s visions from his lips literally and figuratively. Gwyndolin was a deity of utmost decency, however, and Lorian had expected no less from him.

“You have something to tell me. I can sense it.” Lothric rested his left cheek on Lorian’s shoulder and used his horizontal position to better study Lorian’s expression (or, at least, one side of it). “It is something good, too; I felt it earlier. Panic and worry, mixing with doubt and swelling into a bubble, which then popped to release joy.” The crossbreed child’s bare toes curled against Lorian’s back armor in excitement. “Well, don’t keep me waiting! Tell me! Tell me!”

Gwyndolin was clearly confused by Lothric’s words (though, to his immense credit, he seemed far less bewildered than most when faced with Lothric’s ‘sixth sense’ for the first time), but he nonetheless smiled agreeably at Lorian when the knight turned to face him, nodding and holding up his hand the moment Lorian opened his mouth. “I shall leave thee to tell him. I shall be in the garden with my sister and our guests; feel free to join us at thy leisure.”

With that, Gwyndolin was gone in a flash of light of his own, reappearing in the middle of the courtyard below. As Lorian and Lothric watched, the god began strolling leisurely towards the Cathedral of the Moon, pausing only to pick up a crystal lizard in his path and heft it over his shoulder like a sack of grain.

“Oh, there’s Chloanne!” Lothric exclaimed, pointing at the lizard that Gwyndolin was carrying. “She ran off into the courtyard after I accidentally stepped on her tail; I wanted to find her and tell her I was sorry. I think she knows it was an accident, but still…”

“Given that Gwyndolin is taking her back to the garden, I believe it will be a simple matter of finding her once we’re done talking.” Lorian’s voice was soothing in response to Lothric’s regretful tone, and he slowly shifted to kneel on the ground, allowing Lothric to safely climb off. “Here, come sit with me for a moment; we have much to discuss.”

“Good things, am I right?” Lothric’s talons scratched Lorian’s freshly polished armor as he dismounted, but really, Lorian couldn’t have cared less. He was certain the suit would soon be marred by much less pleasant forces. “I had a dream last night about learning something that would change our lives, but I had no idea it would come so soon!”

“Well, I did receive news today—wonderful, overwhelming news.” Lorian sat with his legs dangling over the side of the balcony and waited until Lothric was seated on one of his thighs before continuing. “Gwyndolin made me two offers today.”

“Which were?” Lothric’s feet began to kick back and forth, his bare heels whacking into the plating of Lorian’s leggings, and Lorian was quick to reach out and hold them still.

“Shh! Do not bruise yourself!”

“Ah, sorry!”

Lorian waited until he was certain Lothric would no longer kick before releasing his ankles. He then reached into his side pouch and pulled out one of the flowers—a blossom the color of a fresh compact of cream blush, with a yellow center and two layers of diamond-shaped petals—and began to weave the stem into Lothric’s shoulder-length hair.

“The first offer,” Lorian spoke after he was certain the flower was securely in place, “was for us to
live in the royal residence with him and Yorshka.” True to Lorian’s prediction, Lothric gasped and practically jumped to look up at Lorian, his normally light blue eyes dark and intense.

“ And?! What did you say? What did you say, Lorian?!”

“My answer was yes, of course.” Lorian laughed as Lothric cheered and launched himself against Lorian’s chest, squealing and kicking his legs once more as hugged his elder brother as tightly as his meager upper body strength would allow. “ I take it my decision pleases thee, then!”

“ Of course it does, you silly knight! I cannot imagine anything could possibly please me more! Oh, Lorian, to live with our new family...it’s simply too wonderful for words!”

Lorian exhaled in relief and pressed his right cheek against the crown of Lothric’s hair. He had known, logically, that Lothric would approve of his decision to remain in the royal residence with Gwyndolin and Yorshka; they had even spent the past three days discussing and hoping for such a conclusion. Yet the elder prince had been conscious of the fact that it was a decision that would impact both of their lives, and he had felt slightly guilty that it had been a decision he had made alone, so Lothric’s exuberant acceptance meant more to Lorian than he could possibly say.

“ Well, if that is the case, then perhaps there is no need to share the other bit of news with you.” Lorian teased, laughing as Lothric snorted and smacked his side with mock annoyance. “ Oh, all right, all right!” He gently grabbed his brother’s shoulders and pushed him back until they were staring face-to-face. “ The other bit of news is that I have a new position.”

Lothric blinked. “ A... position?”

“Yes.” Lorian’s smile widened into a mischievous grin. “ The title does not have the same ring as ‘Lorian, Knight Commander of Lothric’s Standing Forces’, but how does ‘Lorian, Lord Commander of the Standing Forces of the Sunless Realms’ sound to thee?”

It became clear that Lorian should have waited to start weaving the flowers in his brother’s hair, for as Lothric screamed and tackled Lorian’s torso to the ground, the force of the child’s hug dislodged the pink flower from his thin tresses, and neither brother was the wiser as the bloom was carried down by the breeze and into the waiting mouth of a crystal lizard.

Chapter End Notes

Lothric: So, let me get this straight: you two ate lunch together. While sitting on the same bench.

Lorian: Yes.

Lothric: And then you took a stroll, arm-in-arm, through Gwyndolin's personal garden.

Lorian: Correct.

Lothric: Gwyndolin put a flower in your hair and you let him wear your cloak when he was cold.

Lorian: That is what happened next, yes.

Lothric: And you made a point of helping Gwyndolin onto and off of every rafter
while coming down from Anor Londo.

Lorian: I know this already, Lothric; I was there.

Lothric: That's not the point. The point is that there is only one conclusion that you can draw from this series of events.

Lorian, clearly confused: And what conclusion would that be? That Gwyndolin and I have become very close friends in the short period of time we have known each other?

Lothric, turning to Kuro and Wolf with tears in his eyes: I changed my mind; just take me back to Lothric and throw me into the Kiln of the First Flame. Burning alive could not possibly be as painful as this.
Chapter Summary

The day had been perfect; Lorian was wonderful company, and Gwyndolin found himself happy in a way he had never before experienced.

His happiness should have continued to flower and flourish—especially when in the presence of close companions, especially in the face of Lothric's joy at his brother's appointment as Lord Commander of the Standing Forces of the Sunless Realms, especially in the face of Yorshka's approval, especially when given the chance to finally introduce Kuro and Wolf to Lorian—but one innocent comment from his little sister inadvertently turned his emotions on their end. Everything that Gwyndolin had once thought certain was suddenly thrown into doubt; but as the cracks began to spread through the foundations beneath his feet, so, too, did such cracks begin to spread through the a miserable fate once set in stone.

Little did the Nameless Moon know that those arms that held him so tightly were offering far more than comfort.

Chapter Notes

Notes: FINALLY; AFTER TWO-HUNDRED YEARS, I HAVE UPDATED.

Sorry for my absence, gang; I just recently got done working four weeks of 11-hours-a-day, six-days-a-week shifts for my medical residency, so I didn't have a bountiful amount of time to write. I have to confess that this chapter was completed two weeks ago, but there were several aspects of it (such as the ending and One Particular Scene(tm)) that were making me nervous, so I had to get my sorta-kind-of-writer's approval before posting it to the public. I promise that it was totally worth the wait, though!

...I think.

Chapter 10 is a little shorter than past chapters (by, like three or four pages maybe, lol), but it felt like a natural ending point, and I'm sure y'all would like a bit of a breather from my monster chunks now and then. Next chapter begins the time skips and the major nitty-gritty of the plot (kinda), so enjoy this bit of a breather...if you can even call it that.

Oh, also, no joke bit at the end of the chapter this time. I think you guys will be able to see why.

Warnings: Implied/referenced child abuse; Gwyndolin's alexithymia finally rearing its ugly head; Yorshka and Lothric having playful sibling fights; snake legs.

EXTREMELY IMPORTANT WARNING: Near the end of the chapter, there is a short section in italics that contains both a blatant scene of emotional and mental abuse and a far less descriptive mention of vomiting. Please take care of yourselves and feel
free to skip that section if any of those things is too much for y'all.

Credits: Iced-Blood, the step-father of this fic that has custody of it on weekends; Ami, Toko, and Lexy for continuing to be the bomb-ass friends and idea-bouncers that they are; Wade, for easing my mind on the ending and making fabulous icons for my Gwyndolin RP blog; and Nette, for reading my fic in spite of their busy as hell schedule as a game designer. I love y'all.

As he approached the curved staircase leading to the small garden behind the Cathedral of the Moon, Gwyndolin came to the realization that he was happy, and he had to pause at the foot of the stairs to collect himself.

It was not as if the deity had never been happy before, for Gwyndolin could recall many times in both his recent and distant past that he had been happy, and he had even been positively overjoyed from time to time. Yorshka’s birth, for example, had easily been one of the happiest moments of his life--if not the happiest of them all--and he supposed that had been happy enough when Sulyvahn confessed his feelings for him a year and a half past. Yet there was something about this newer happiness that Gwyndolin had never before experienced. It felt as if there were a million small, shimmering bubbles dancing through his veins, popping in the tips of his fingers and pooling in the pit of his stomach.

The feeling was confusing, disorienting, almost frightening--but at the same time, the Nameless Moon hoped that it would never come to an end. Gwyndolin liked the way his heart was skittering in his chest like a spider weaving a web. He liked it makes his snakes thrum with a soft heat from within their illusory confines. He liked how it made him want to sprawl out on the lawn of the courtyard and stare up at the sky and laugh and laugh and laugh until his very lungs ached. He liked that it made him want to cry, liked that it made him want to scream, liked that it made him want to climb onto the tallest spire of the Cathedral of the Moon and shout his joy to the entire realm.

It was everything that would normally make the god freeze and blank, forcing him to dash to his room to scream and weep into his pillow until he could function again. Yet all Gwyndolin wanted to do was stretch his arms out at his sides and spin around and sing--sing, of all things!--and he did not know why this happiness was so very different from the happiness he had felt in the past, and he did not know why he was feeling such a thing, but he knew that it was all because of Lorian. It was all because of his new, wondrously strange friend.

Do I make Lorian feel this way?

The thought made Gwyndolin shiver as if he was still standing atop Anor Londo in only his thin silk cloak. The deity placed his free hand on his abdomen and breathed in deeply, focusing on how his diaphragm rippled beneath his skin.

I hope I do. I am not sure what I am feeling at this moment, but I can only hope that I give Lorian at least a fraction of this strange sort of happiness. I hope I am just as good of a friend as he is to me.

Gwyndolin was drawn from his flustered, fluttery musings by the low screech of the crystal lizard resting on his right shoulder, who was clearly growing more and more displeased at being held so high above the ground. As Chloanne whined and wriggled, she began to slide off of Gwyndolin’s
shoulder, and the god was quick to shove her back up his right arm and hold her fast.

“Oh, hush, little miscreant.” Gwyndolin muttered as Chloanne began to whine and wriggle with far more vigour than before. “I shall let thee down soon enough. Honestly, for creatures that do naught but laze about and eat greenery and hems, thou art a bewilderingly impatient lot.”

Chloanne made a miserable sort of burbling noise, and Gwyndolin couldn’t help but snicker at the comical amount of distress in her beady eyes—as if he was ripping the gem off of her back instead of hefting her about the courtyard!

Perhaps Yorshka is spoiling them far too much, he mused as he finally began to climb the stairs to the back of the cathedral, rolling his eyes as Chloanne went completely limp in protest of her ‘unfair treatment’. Then again, how else dost one raise crystal lizards? The mass farms treat them barbarically, and they are not common household pets, so it is not as if we have a great deal of information to glean on tending to and caring for them appropriately. ‘Tis better to be spoiled by mine dear sister than hunted for sport and profit.

As he neared the top of the stairs, Gwyndolin could see that Yorshka was still engaged with a lively, rather one-sided conversation with Kuro, who seemed content to simply polish McDuff’s gemstone and listen to Yorshka as she babbled on about her recent craft projects and her ‘adventures’ with Lothric and Lorian over the past ten days. Wolf, who was sitting on the stairs leading to the back door of the cathedral, was the first to see Gwyndolin approach, and he gave the god a respectful nod while he stroked the backs of the crystal lizards resting on each thigh.

Gwyndolin smiled softly and nodded in turn.

I believe I feel more secure having Wolf watch the children than the Silver Knights. He would make a fine Blade of the Darkmoon...but I doubt he would wish to serve a god, even one to whom he felt indebted.

As capable as Wolf was, it was standard procedure for at least two Silver Knights to accompany Yorshka at a respectful distance whenever she was outside of the residence proper, and at least two would be stationed at her church whenever she was present. The two Silver Knights assigned to Yorshka on this particular outing had seemingly been roped into helping her replant some of the rose bushes, and they dropped their shovels and bowed upon seeing Gwyndolin approach. The god gave a short bow in turn, and the two resumed their impassioned digging, damp soil splattering against their suits of armour and turning gleaming silver into a dingy gray sky.

As much of a stickler as Gwyndolin tended to be when it came to the cleanliness and professional appearance of his Silver Knights (given their status as public symbols of the old royalty and divinity), dirtiness in the name of Yorshka’s happiness was easily acceptable, and it was nothing a quick hosing down and polishing could not fix. It was all well and good...just so long as they cleaned up before they left the area of the residence. Gwyndolin would not stand for two of his knights gamboling about in public while looking as if they had emerged from Blighttown itself.

Speaking of Yorshka...

“Brother dearest!” The crossbreed girl had finally caught sight of Gwyndolin as he reached the top of the stairs, and she quickly yet gently pushed the gaggle of crystal lizards off of her lap and stood, dashing over to meet him. “Thou certainly tookest thy sweet time! We were about to come searching for Ser Lorian and thee!”

“As Lorian just explained to Lothric, I was giving Lorian a small tour around the residence, and I am afraid we lost track of time.” Gwyndolin reached out with his free arm and pulled his greatest treasure close, nosing her sweet smelling veil and even sweeter smelling hair as she wrapped her
arms around his waist and clung tight. Yorshka’s tail wasted no time in curling affectionately around his glamoured legs, and the snakes fussed and ‘pouted’ within their confines, clearly disappointed at being unable to play with the appendage. “Hast thou had a good morn with Lothric?”

“A very good morn!” Yorshka bopped her forehead against Gwyndolin’s chest before pulling away and beaming up at him. “Lothric asked if he could assist me with mine duties at the Church of the Branching Yew, and dear brother, thou wouldst not believe how well Lothric fit in with everyone there! He was so patient and kind with the younger children, and he listened to well to the parishioners—even the old ones that seem to never stop speaking! Oh, all of the parishioners and the priestesses adored him, and his healing! He was able to drive away pain and cold that not even High Priestess Fidda had been able to abate! She even asked if he would be willing to work with me in the church on occasion, canst thou believe it? High Priestess Fidda of all beings!”

Given how persnickety High Priestess Fidda tended to be about those who wished to work in the church—especially when it came to children, Yorshka notwithstanding—Gwyndolin could not help but be impressed himself. Of course, he already knew that Lothric was a wonderful little miracle in almost every way, shape, and form, but to have others be equally awed by the child showed that Gwyndolin’s high opinion was not due to bias. Lothric really was that incredible.

“I see...and what didst Lothric have to say about all of this?”

Chloanne, at the sight of her mistress, began squeaking and squirming once more, and Gwyndolin did not hesitate to pluck the crystal lizard off of his shoulder and place it into Yorshka’s waiting arms.

“Nothing, really!” Yorshka giggled and hugged Chloanne as if she were a giant teddy bear. Unlike a regular stuffed animal, however, it was impossible for Yorshka to accidentally squeeze her head off with her draconic strength. “He simply blushed and muttered out some sort of thanks before hiding his face in my shoulder. Lothric may complain about Lorian being far too modest for his own good, but it seems as if the apple dost not fall far from the tree, for praise makes him flush just as brightly as his elder brother!”

Gwyndolin laughed and adjusted Yorshka’s veil so that it hung evenly around her face.

“Indeed it dost not. The twin princes are kind, shy, and courageous, I believe—just in different ways and measures.”

“So, you call them the twin princes as well!” A familiar voice exclaimed, and Gwyndolin and Yorshka turned to see Kuro sitting in his usual prim manner on the ground, tapping his hands against the gemstone of Lenigrast, who was spread out and snoring on top of his thighs. “Yorshka-dono called them the exact same thing earlier, yet they are twenty-one years apart in age! Is there a reason for the nickname?”

Gwyndolin hid his smirk behind his bell sleeve as Yorshka scoffed and shrugged.

“Thou shalt understand everything once thou seest them together, Kuro!” The crossbreed girl plopped herself next to Kuro and busied herself with adjusting Chloanne’s ribbon, which had begun to come undone as she was struggling on Gwyndolin’s shoulder. “Those two are quite separate in age, it is true—and Lorian, like mine own dear brother, is both a parent and an elder sibling to him—but their souls are very much intertwined. Gwyndolin and I have both noticed that it seems as if they can read each other’s thoughts and sense each other’s emotions, and they seem to be blissfully unaware of such a thing—as if knowing one another is...is...”
“Subconscious.” Gwyndolin finished, smiling again as Yorshka cried out with a triumphant ‘yes, that is the word!’ "Almost reflexive. I once attempted to broach the topic with Lorian, but he seemed genuinely confused when I did so, for he did not see anything abnormal.” The Nameless Moon placed the index and middle finger of his right hand to his lips and hummed. “In fact, when Lothric came to meet us on our way down from Anor Londo, he once more demonstrated that he could very well sense the emotions of his brother. It is an act, to them, that comes as naturally as breathing.”

Kuro’s face donned the expression of a contemplative scholar (which, on a child as ‘young’ as him, was simply adorable), and Wolf himself seemed to mull on the subject, his hands moving to scratch the necks of the two crystal lizards lounging on his individual thighs.

“Sometimes Wolf and I can sense each other’s thoughts due to the bond of the Dragon’s Heritage.” Kuro finally said, looking behind his shoulder at said shinobi, who nodded seriously in confirmation. “But it seems like it is not a phenomenon that is in any way comparable to Lothric and Ser Lorian. It truly does seem as if their souls are...well...twins.”

“Exactly!” Yorshka finished fluffing up the bow of the red and white striped ribbon around Chloanne’s neck and grinned toothily. “That is exactly the conclusion that Gwyndolin and I came to the other day—which is why we call them the ‘twin princes’ when speaking amongst ourselves!” A pause. “But do not tell Lothric and Lorian of our nickname for them. Gwyndolin and I do not wish to cause any unintentional offense.”

Kuro giggled. “My lips are sealed.”

“As are mine,” Wolf agreed, but with far more solemn sternness than the situation required, which nearly sent Gwyndolin into snickers.

A distant scream of joy came from the direction of the water reserve, coming from what sounded like the youngest topic of their conversation; and while Yorshka, Kuro, and Wolf simply looked confused, Gwyndolin knew exactly what Lothric was so happy about, and he didn’t even bother to hide the grin that spread across his lips.

“Not that I am averse to seeing thee happy, brother dearest, but why dost thou look like the cat that caught the crow?” Yorshka queried.

Gwyndolin chuckled and released his glamour, and he lowered himself to sit next to Yorshka and Kuro, the snakes curling around him in a neat little pile.

“You shalt find out soon enough...well, as soon as the twin princes arrive.”

Yorshka cocked her head to the side. “Thou canst be truly strange, Gwyndolin.”

“And thou art one to talk.”

It was Kuro’s turn to giggle as Yorshka huffed and crossed her arms. Wolf, ever professional, quickly turned his head to the side to hide his own smile of amusement.

“On another note...” Gwyndolin turned his head so that both Kuro and Wolf were in his field of vision and smiled. “I was not expecting to see the two of thee. The last little Lothric informed me, he and Lorian werest to meet the two of thee later in at the teahouse...but it seems as if there has been a change of plans.”

While Kuro blushed and stammered in an attempt to find a reply, Wolf caught Gwyndolin’s eye from over his lord’s bowed, and both the god and the shinobi exchanged a knowing smirk.
“Miko-sama ended up crafting a number of dishes in an attempt to impress Lothric-dono when they met.” Wolf, showing mercy upon his embarrassed master, chose to reply in his stead. “Realizing that he was unable to sell much of what he had cooked in the chashitsu, Kuro-sama decided that he did not wish to let all of the food go to waste, and—since he knew that today was the day Lorian was to be released from his sickbed—he decided to surprise the brothers with a midday tea, so to speak.”

“Yes! Exactly!” Kuro huffed and puffed out his cheeks. Gwyndolin wanted nothing more than to pinch them raw. “Well spoken, Wolf!”

“Thank you, Miko-sama.”

It was a curious explanation, for Gwyndolin knew that Kuro often brought his leftover foodstuffs from the Everblossom to the Church of Yorshka to give to those in need, so why specifically seek out Lothric and Lorian on this particular occasion? Unbeknownst to Kuro, however, Wolf’s expression told Gwyndolin that the heir to the Dragon’s Heritage had simply been looking for an excuse to meet Lothric early, leading him to cook far too many dishes to give him the excuse of ‘avoiding waste’ to anyone that asked.

It was a charming little ruse, yes, but the fact that Kuro felt as if he needed an excuse beyond being excited to meet a new friend made the Nameless Moon wilt ever so slightly on the inside. Gwyndolin had made it clear to both Kuro and Wolf numerous times over the past one-and-a-half years that they were welcome to visit the royal residence whenever they wished, but if the young lord still felt as if Gwyndolin needed an ‘official’ reason to approve of their presence, it meant that the god did not make the shinobi and his ward feel welcome.

It was quite strange, however; for Kuro adored playing with Yorshka when he did visit, and it was clear that he and the ‘elder’ crossbreed girl took to their friendship swimmingly. So was it something that Gwyndolin himself was doing that made the boy feel so uncomfortable and distant? Was Gwyndolin too proper? Too formal? Was it his way of speaking? It was how Gwyndolin always spoke, and Kuro was extremely formal himself when speaking Kinonese, but maybe it was the old ‘age’ of the Lordranian itself that threw the child off. Or was it simply the fact that Gwyndolin was a god? Of all of the people to have a problem with Gwyndolin’s divinity, however, why would it be Kuro of all beings? Or was it Wolf that kept his lord at a distance?

“Brother?” Yorshka queried, and Gwyndolin quickly shook his head and smiled reassuringly at his sister, whose eyes and voice were exuding concern.

“Ah, I am alright, Yorshka. I am simply tired today. Perhaps I shall retire early tonight.”

Yorshka looked as if she did not truly believe him, but just as she opened her mouth to speak, she seemed to catch sight of something on Gwyndolin’s body. Her blue eyes lit up with curiosity, and she quickly placed Chloanne, scooting closer to her brother while the lizard quickly meandered off to munch on a rose bush with its siblings.

“Where didst thou get this cloak? I have never seen thee wear it before!” Yorshka reached out and grabbed the edge of Lorian’s cloak with her right hand, rubbing the soft yet supple blue fabric between her fingers. “The fabric is so soft, yet it is like no other fabric I have ever felt before...is it from another land?”

“Somewhat.” Gwyndolin pulled the other side of the cloak around his body and smiled softly. “I briefly took Lorian to visit Anor Londo, and I am afraid the cloak that I chose for the day was unsuited for the higher altitude, so Lorian was gracious enough to lend me his own waist cape. It is made of sown dragon skin.”
“Dragon skin!” Yorshka exclaimed with bated breath, grabbing the side of the cloak with both hands and bringing it up to her face for closer study. “I have read about it in fantasy romance novels, but I have never seen it up close! Feel it, Kuro! The texture is so unique!”

Kuro, who had already inched forward out of curiosity, was coaxed forward by both Yorshka’s command and Gwyndolin’s reassuring smile. The immortal heir reached out with a hand, hesitated, and looked back at Wolf with nervous eyes. The shinobi nodded with his trademark serious confidence, and Kuro finally crossed those last few inches to touch the cloak. His eyes widened.

“Impressive! This truly does feel like the hide of a dragon, yet it is malleable enough to be used as fabric for garments!” Kuro brought a corner of the cloak up to his face and rubbed it against his cheek. “I had almost forgotten how this felt…”

“How dost thou know what a dragon feels like?” Yorshka asked. Kuro, lost in the current of a bitter yet blissful memory, failed to hear her question.

“Is it alright if Wolf comes to feel?” Kuro finally opened his eyes and looked up at Gwyndolin, and the god nodded so enthusiastically that his neck began to ache. “Wolf, come here and feel this cloak! My mother and father had skin that felt like this!”

Wolf’s face brightened with some indescribable emotion, and he let the crystal lizards on his knees fall unceremoniously to the ground as he stood and walked towards them, ignoring how the creatures shrieked in anger as they thrashed about on their backs.

“Mother and father?” Yorshka mouthed at Gwyndolin. The deity shook his head and brought a surreptitious finger to his lips as Wolf drew close.

“Are you sure it is alright, Gwyndolin-sama?” Wolf asked as he knelt a few feet from the god’s side, taking the knee and bowing his head in respectful acquiescence. The god’s eyebrows rose towards the hairline hidden by the hood of his cloak.

“Quite alright, Ser Wolf.” It was remarkable, Gwyndolin pondered as he watched Wolf submit to him, that a man who did not believe in physical gods offered the Nameless Moon more respect than some of his most devoted followers and so-called ‘servants’. It was a fact that upset Gwyndolin whenever he mulled over it, so he decided to push it to the back of his mind…for the moment.

“Very well.” With that, Wolf reached out and touched the piece of cloak that Kuro was holding out to him, the pads of his fingers just barely skirting along the blue-dyed woven skin. His hand froze.

“So soft.” Wolf breathed, and his eyes were so full of wonder--as if he had just beheld a majestic mountain or a hidden lacuna instead of a bit of fabric--that Gwyndolin had to frantically cover his mouth with his sleeve before his mirth could embarrass the normally imperturbable warrior.

Just how sheltered and narrow was his life in Ashina? Did Wolf truly do nothing but serve and fight before meeting his current master…?

“It is strange…”

Gwyndolin was broken from his thoughts by Yorshka’s mystified words, and when he turned his attention from Wolf to look at his sister, he found the crossbreed girl scrutinizing the hem of Lorian’s cloak, as if it had asked her a question that she did not know how to answer. “What is strange, Yorshka?”

“Oh, I am sure it is nothing, but…” Yorshka pursed her thin lips together before turning her gaze
to her brother, her blue eyes locking with his own gold and amber, despite being hidden in the
shadow of his hood. “Of all the times I have seen both of thee together, I do not recall Patriarch
Sulyvahn ever lending you his own cloak, even when thou werst clearly shivering!”

It was as if a poison arrow had suddenly pierced through Gwyndolin’s chest.

“I…”

“As I said, perhaps I am mistaken! After all, I am not always around when thou and Sulyvahn art
spending courtship time with each other.” Yorshka giggled and hid her blush behind a bit of cloak.
“I was just remembering how, during the winter solstice festivities, when thou wast addressing the
people…an unexpected gale blew in after an unusually warm morning, and Sulyvahn was all
bundled up at thy side, yet he did not offer a single cloak to thee, even in private!”

Gwyndolin’s breath lodged painfully at the base of his throat, and he was oh, oh so thankful that he
was still wearing his hood, because he could not fathom what the expression on his face looked
like.

“I remember that!” Kuro piped up before Gwyndolin could get his voice to work. “Wolf and I
snuck onto one of the roofs close to the cathedral so we could better see you speak, and while none
of the other citizens were close enough to see you shivering, Wolf and I couldn’t help but notice!
The outfit you were wearing was so light and you were standing so rigidly that I almost asked Wolf
to buy a cape and sneak through the back of the cathedral to give it to you!”

“Yet Sulyvahn had several cloaks brought to him by a deacon as soon as it started snowing,” Wolf
mused, “and he was wearing them comfortably while you froze. He could have offered you one, or
asked that same deacon to bring you a cloak, but he did none of those things--even when you were
out of sight of the crowd.”

Gwyndolin could see Wolf studying him out of the corner of his eye, his gaze deceptively neutral,
and the god suddenly wished he could melt into the earth and vanish. They were only facts, for
Flame’s sake--recollections of an event that were completely true, because Gwyndolin did
remember that day--and the curiosity discovered by his sister was one he could easily explain
away, so the god should not have been feeling anything out of the ordinary. Yet he was nauseous
and dizzy and hot and cold all at once, and he just could not figure out why.

Nothing could have caused his symptoms outside of those facts, but such a concept was
completely and utterly ridiculous, for why would statements of facts that Gwyndolin already knew
make him fall ill? They were just facts. They were just facts.

“Sulyvahn grows chilled very easily.” The words fell from Gwyndolin’s lips with a steadiness his
body envied. “His intolerance of cold is one of the reasons he left Ariandel when he was young. I
do not blame him for wanting to be warm.”

Wolf looked as if he wished to say something but had chosen instead to bite his tongue. Gwyndolin
was grateful to him--far more grateful than he could say, and certainly far more grateful than was
reasonable--but the children, sadly, possessed no such restraint.

“Surely Patriarch Sulyvahn would not mind a little cold if it meant the comfort of his betrothed.”
Yorshka’s tone was light and teasing, and she flopped herself backwards to lie on the ground,
staring up at the moonlit sky with her arms outstretched. “I doubt wearing two cloaks instead of
three would make him freeze.”

“And even if he did need all of those cloaks,” Kuro continued, “he could have easily asked his
fellow deacon to fetch one for you as well. Surely a warm covering cannot be *that* difficult to find in a place like Irithyll.”

Gwyndolin’s palms broke into a cold sweat from where they were clenched together in his lap. He felt as if he was going to faint.

*Why am I feeling this way? Nothing is wrong. The children are just asking reasonable questions. What is happening to me?*

Yet at the same time...

*Has Sulyvahn ever leant me his cloak? Even once?*

Before Gwyndolin could be forced to reply, the sound of Lorian and Lothric chattering excitedly as they ascended the stairs met his ears, and Gwyndolin wanted to collapse at the sight of Kuro, Wolf, and Yorshka immediately diverting their attention to the pair. *Thank all of the light in the land!*

“*My goodness, Ser Lorian!*” Yorshka’s eyes were practically glittering as she clapped her hands in front of her chest. “*Thou art every picture of a noble and dashing knight--as if thou hast emerged straight from the pages of a romantic fantasy! Do not tell me that thou art to ride into battle so soon after thy recovery!*”

Lorian laughed bashfully, and the sound made the hands of that inexplicable *wrongness* suddenly released Gwyndolin from their grasp, allowing the deity to breathe and think and *exist* once more. A wave of relief washed over him--warm, gentle, and soft--and it was only the presence of the children that kept the Nameless Moon from bowing forward and resting his head on the ground. It almost felt as if Lorian had pulled Gwyndolin back from the edge of some horrible precipice...which was also ridiculous, since all he did was save the god from having to answer awkward yet completely answerable questions.

Gwyndolin breathed and pulled Lorian’s cloak tighter around himself, closing his eyes and relaxing into a warmth that was somehow *more* than warmth.

*Has Sulyvahn ever leant me his cloak? I cannot recall…*

Before Gwyndolin could rise and greet his guests, there was a flash of blinding white light, and the god squeaked and rocked backwards as he suddenly found himself with a lapful of younger prince.

“*Lothric?*” Gwyndolin breathed, his arms instinctively moving to wrap around Lothric as the child dug his talons into the back of his robe and clung close, burying his face in his chest as he shook and wept. It took less than a handful of seconds for the god to feel wetness soaking through the front of his red dress. “*Lothric, what in the Lordran hast come over thee? Art thou ill?*”

“*--ank you.*”

Gwyndolin blinked.

“*What didst thou say?*”

“*Thank you, Lin!*” Lothric’s voice was wet and wavering, his cracking words muffled by Gwyndolin’s chest, yet the god could understand him as clearly as a thunderclap. “*Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you--!*”

It did not take long for Gwyndolin to realize just *why* Lothric was thanking him so effusively, and the panic that had been building in his chest popped like a bubble, releasing a gush of warm
tenderness that spilled from his lips as an adoring smile.

“ I take it that Lorian has informed thee of mine offers.” Gwyndolin whispered. Lothric nodded, and the god began to card a hand through the little prince’s fine blond hair, using his other hand to rub Lothric’s back. He made sure to pretend he could not see Yorshka pouting and huffing out of the corner of his eye. “ Have I made thee happy, then, little Lothric? Art thy tears sweet with joy?”

“ Oh, yes! Yes, Lin!” Lothric seemed to both laugh and sob out his answer at the same time, and his thin arms squeezed Gwyndolin with a surprising amount of strength, given the child’s frail and emaciated frame. “ Oh, Gwyndolin, I don’t think I have ever felt this happy before! We get to stay! We get to stay with you and Yorshka, and oh, to think that Lorian is to...oh, Lin, what does one do with such happiness?! I feel as if I am going to burst!”

If Gwyndolin had known Lothric better, he would have given the child a kiss on the head, but he decided that ten days of familiarity was not enough time to justify such a familiar gesture of affection. Instead, he simply scratched the back of the child’s neck with one hand and stroked his back in the other, delighting at how the little prince seemed to purr like a cat. Behind him, there was a sound of clanking bronze and heavy footfalls on cold-hardened ground, signaling Lorian’s approach. Gwyndolin’s smile grew just a little bit broader.

“ I must admit, I am quite happy myself, Prince Lothric.” The use of the child’s formal title made him giggle into the silver bodice of Gwyndolin’s dress. “ The residence would have seemed far too cold and lonely without thy presence. Not even Yorshka’s bountiful personality can fill the silence of all of those rooms...nor her bountiful lungs.”

“ I heard that!” Said crossbreed girl huffed, crossing her arms and glowering at her elder brother, who could not hold back a laugh at the sight. “ Thou wouldst die of boredom if I was not around to make thy life interesting!”

“ I most assuredly would.” Gwyndolin agreed, giving Lothric a playful wink when the child lifted his head from his chest to look at him. “ I would also be terribly bored without thee, dear Lothric; and it gladdens my heart that thou and thy brother wishest to stay with my sister and I.”

“ Of course we do! You and Yorshka are wonderful!” Lothric sniffled and grinned up at Gwyndolin, giving an impressive view of his textbook crossbreed teeth. His light blue eyes were practically luminescent in their wetness. “ You have not only saved our lives, you have...you have given us entirely new lives as well! Oh, thank you, Gwyndolin!”

Overcome by emotion once more, Lothric buried his face in his chest and began to sob in earnest, and the Nameless Moon found himself besieged with two equal and warring urges: one to comfort and never let go; the other to hunt down Oceiros and use a pair of Yorshka’s pliers to pull off every single one of his fingernails.

“ Shhhhhhh...oh, little Lothric...it has--and will always be--mine absolute pleasure.”

As Gwyndolin did his best to shush and rock the overwhelmed prince, he heard the sound of Lorian coming to stand at his left, his bronze armor creaking and sliding against its leather backings as he knelt at the god’s side.

‘Happiness?’ Gwyndolin mouthed quietly at the knight, not wanting to disturb the child in his arms. Lorian nodded, and Gwyndolin did his best to ignore that damnable bothersome helm in favor of gazing upon the elder prince’s brown eyes and beaming smile.

*Flames. If the light hits the spiculations of his helm just right, it almost seems as if he is on fire. I*
Without saying a word, Lorian placed his hand atop Lothric’s head, cupping it with a tenderness that reminded him of how his mother would comfort and cradle him when he was small. Gwyndolin’s throat tightened to the point where he dared not risk speech, for fear of bursting into tears at the action.

What is wrong with me? Everything feels so raw and bright, and I am having trouble knowing what to do with myself. Am I falling ill again?

For a moment, all of the parties present were silent, not wanting to disturb whatever happiness had brought Lothric such immense joy. Even Yorshka seemed willing to bite her tongue...at least, until Lothric had finally calmed into the softest of sniffles, after which she seemingly could not take the suspense any longer.

“What in the name of the Lords are the three of thee talking about?” The crossbreed girl stomped forward and crossed her arms, her frown showing equal parts curiosity and concern. “Lothric was perfectly fine before he went to find Chloanne! What in heaven’s name didst thou say to him, Ser Lorian?!”

Lorian flushed and glanced shyly over at Gwyndolin, asking for silent permission to deliver to Yorshka the fortunate news. Before either adult could speak, Lothric wriggled away from Gwyndolin’s chest and shifted in his lap so that he was facing his friend, wiping his damp and puffy eyes with his sleeve. His giddy smile seemed stuck to his face.

“Gwyndolin has named Lorian the Lord Commander of the Standing Forces of the Sunless Realms,” Lothric explained. Gwyndolin could feel the child’s spines curling underneath the back of his silver robe. Perhaps they responded to emotion in a way similar to Yorshka’s tail. “And he has invited Lorian and I to live in the royal residence...permanently.”

Yorshka gasped—loud and high-pitched—and quickly clapped her hands over her mouth. Kuro and Wolf seemed somewhat surprised themselves, but the two seemed to sense that the impending conversation was a ‘family affair’, so they simply shared a glance and remained silent.

“Wait...w-what?” Yorshka’s voice escaped through the gaps between her fingers as a muffled squeak. “Did...didst thou say that Lorian is to be our Lord Commander? Our permanent Lord Commander?”

Lothric giggled and hiccuped all at once. “Yes, ‘tis true! Is it not wonderful, Yorshka? Don’t tell me that you were unaware of Lin’s designs!”

“N-n-no, I, I mean, of course not, but...” As Yorshka stammered and fumbled for her words, her tail coiled up as tight as a newly-budded fern leaf, then straightened with enough force and violence to thrash the bushes behind her. “I mean, of course I knew that Gwyndolin was to ask thee to stay, for we have discussed it ever since the second day of thy tenure under our roof! But...but Lord Commander?! The girl dropped her hands from her mouth and focused the full force of her surprise upon her brother. “Gwyndolin, was this...was this thy plan the entire time? Why didst thou not tell me? Didst thou not trust me to keep it a secret from Lothric?”

“Of course not, dear one.” Gwyndolin’s heart throbbed from guilt, and he used the arm not draped around Lothric’s back to beckon Yorshka closer, which she did with a displeased and hurt look on her face. “Thou knowest I trust thee impeccably; in fact, thou art one of the most trustworthy beings I have ever had the pleasure of knowing.”
As Yorshka fell to her knees at his left side, the Nameless Moon reached out and slipped his hand underneath her veil, carding his long fingers through her brown tresses. “I simply did not tell thee because I was unaware if Lorian would accept the position or not…or if I would discover some detail or factor that would have prevented me from offering him the position. It would have been pointless to get thy hopes up for them to only be dashed in the end.”

Yorshka seemed to accept the explanation with little difficulty; after all, Gwyndolin had never before lied to his little sister…even if he did have a tendency to sugarcoat the ‘harsher’ realities of the world.

“I guess I can see the logic of thy decision.” Yorshka sighed in contentment at the feel of Gwyndolin’s manicured fingers against her scalp, tail flicking lazily back and forth against the blue-green grass characteristic of the Boreal Valley. “I suppose, given Lothric’s overjoyed reaction, that Lorian has accepted the position.”

“He has!” Lothric had apparently switched from crying to laughing, and he was giggling as he clapped his hands together and teleported out of Gwyndolin’s lap, reappearing in his favorite position on Lorian’s back. “And allow me to say that being the Lord Commander of the last True God in the Lordran is a step above being Knight Commander for a plain old mortal king like our father! It is the very least that my dear brother deserves, even if I can sense him getting ready to open his mouth to say otherwise!”

“Oh, so now you can read my mind, can you?” Lorian chided without malice or annoyance, and his smile was soft and fond as he ‘shrugged’ Lothric into a better position on his back. “Does the dragon in you make you all-seeing and all-knowing, little brother?”

“Not quite.” Lothric buried his face into the soft section of Lorian’s left neck and snickered. “You are just terribly predictable, Lorian…at least to me.”

“Oh! Well aren’t you just an insufferable little dragon gremlin?! ” Lorian scoffed and rolled his eyes in an exaggerated manner, setting Lothric to giggling once more. “Honestly, I do not know why I tolerate such blatant disrespect from someone so much younger than myself! Me—a proud and decorated knight whose mere presence makes demons quiver and run back home to Izalith!”

“Well, the answer to that is simple; it is because you love me!”

“Oh, yes, right. That. Almost forgot.”

Lothric snorted. “Sometimes you can be so silly, Lorian.” He leaned forward just enough to kiss his brother on the cheek before settling back into a ‘neutral’ position on Lorian’s shoulders. “Are all knights this silly, Lin? Or is it just Lorian’s own nature that makes him completely ridiculous?”

It was clear from the ease of their words and body language that the Twin Princes were more than used to that particular ‘disagreement’, and it made Gwyndolin’s soul sing to watch the pair be so at ease with each other, reminding him of long-gone times with his own elder brother. Despite the similarities, however, Gwyndolin had never been as in sync with Aestus as Lothric and Lorian were with each other—not just physically, but mentally and emotionally as well. It was almost as if they knew what the other was thinking before they even had a chance to put their thoughts to words.

What was it that Lorian told me once? That little Lothric was the ‘other half of his soul’?

Gwyndolin slipped his hand from Yorshka’s hair (earning a particularly adorable pout from the crossbreed girl) and steepled his fingers together in his lap of dozing snakes. I cannot help but wonder if, perhaps, there is an element of truth to his hyperbole…
"As one who has known innumerable knights over their lifetime of six-thousand years, I can say with utmost certainty that the majority of knights are ridiculously silly." Gwyndolin punctuated his statement with a playful wink, making the brothers and Yorshka snicker. "Mine elder brother, Aestus, was an incredibly silly sort of person: always pulling pranks on our father and the Silver Knights; always talking and joking about something or another; and always laughing over whatever he found amusing at the time. I can count on both of my hands the times when he was not mirthful over something."

Although those times, the god reflected, were so miserably dark and dire...it almost seemed as if he was being punished by Father and fate itself for his happiness. As if his vibrant and boundless optimism were sins for which he had to atone.

Something splintered in Gwyndolin's chest.

I cannot think about this. Not now. Not yet.

"The Four Knights of Gwyn themselves were also quite silly--albeit in ways unique to each of them--so perhaps it is a legacy that they have passed down to later generations of knights." The moment Gwyndolin mentioned the beings commonly considered the ‘patron saints of knighthood’, Lorian's expression visibly brightened, and he opened his mouth to ask a question. Then, suddenly, the elder prince's mouth closed, and his expression grew thoughtfully somber. Oh dear, was Gwyndolin's reluctance to speak of his departed family that blatant on his face? Yet Yorshka did not look concerned, so how...?

Gwyndolin blinked.

Oh. Earlier, in the stairwell. About Aati Hadiya. The god swallowed down the tightness of his throat. I thank thee, Ser Lorian. I thank thee with every aspect of my soul.

"Ahh, perhaps." Lothric, too, seemed to notice a shift in Gwyndolin's expression that was subtle enough to elude every other gaze. He smiled softly and began to comb the talons of his right hand through Lorian's silky hair, making the elder prince visibly shiver with delight. "Well, silly or not, I would not trade Lorian for the world. Too much dourness leads to a miserable soul...and poor Lorian is stoic enough as it is."

"I can hear you." Lorian rumbled, eyes slipping shut as his little brother continued to finger comb his hair. "Am I stoic around you?"

"No...but I am not worried about how you feel and act when around me, Lorian. You know that."

Lorian shrugged dismissively, and Lothric heaved a massive sigh before falling silent, letting the subject drop unceremoniously. It was another familiar argument, it seemed, but it possessed none of the banter of the earlier one. Gwyndolin made a mental note to press Lorian or Lothric on the subject once they were alone.

"Um, pardon me, but are we not forgetting something important?" Yorshka asked, rolling her eyes. "Such as how Lorian is apparently the new Lord Commander of the Sunless Realms? Or am I the only one that thinks such a monumental change in the power structure of Irithyll deserves at least a few minutes of discussion?!"

By the cosmos, Gwyndolin adored that girl.

"Oh, well, yes, I suppose." Lorian snapped out of the pleasant haze brought upon by Lothric's combing and gave the Heir of the Sunless Realms an uneasy smile. "I realize that it is a sudden
and abrupt change, Lady Yorshka, but your brother has assured me that he finds me more than capable of the--"

“First off,” Yorshka interjected before Lorian could finish, “there will be none of this ‘Lady Yorshka’ business, Lorian! If I am not allowed to call the ‘ser’ unironically, then thou art not allowed to call me ‘lady’ unironically, agreed?” Lorian nodded dumbly, and Yorshka sniffed primly before continuing, using the regal ‘future Queen of the Gods once thou retirest, dear brother’ voice that she practiced every night in front of her bathroom mirror. “Now, in my opinion—which is not insignificant, given my role as the Heir to the Sunless Realms—I believe that thou art a more than fitting choice for the position of Lord Commander! In fact, I would go so far as to say that thou art perfect for the role—as if it was specifically created for thee at its inception! Which, I know, is impossible. I mean. I think…”

Yorshka persona faltered with her words, and she turned her head to look at her brother, blue eyes wide with wonder and curiosity. “Didst thou--?”

Gwyndolin chuckled behind his sleeve. Goodness, they were certainly doing a lot of laughing that afternoon, weren’t they?

“Nay, dearest Yorshka; my omnipotence is not suited for future sight. That is the realm of our sister Filianore, the Goddess of Time.”

“Oh! Yes! I mean...I...I knew that. Just making sure, is all.”

With a confident (if clumsy) nod of understanding, Yorshka turned her attention back to Lorian, whose face had gone stiff from his effort not to laugh.

“Now, as I was saying!” Yorshka rolled her eyes and crossed her arms over her check, which made Lorian’s mouth crack minutely at the corners. Gwyndolin, too, wished he could laugh at the entire scene. “I will admit that I was startled by the announcement...but only because of its suddenness, and not because I find thee unfitting! In fact, now that I consider it, thy choice makes perfect sense! Thou art certainly strong, bright, clever and kind, and according to Lothric, thou hast over a decade of experience leading the standing army of thy old kingdom! In short, I am absolutely, positively pleased that thou art to remain here, Lorian—as both Lord Commander and friend.”

By the time Yorshka had finished speaking, Lorian had lost the fight to contain his smile, although it was no longer one of amused mirth. His brown eyes were round and glimmering through just the faintest veneer of damp.

“Yorshka, I…” The knight choked, swallowed, and reached out to take the crossbreed girl’s hands in his own. It was a sight that made Gwyndolin’s heart sing. “Thank you, dear Yorshka. Your blessing...it means more to me than I can say. It is my honor and pleasure to be called your friend.”

“Oh, hush, you!” The elder prince’s words had Yorshka flushing from her ears to her toes. “Lothric is right; thou art completely ridiculous!”

Rather than accepting Lorian’s genuine yet simple gesture of affection, Yorshka batted his hands away and lurched herself forward, throwing her arms around Lorian’s neck. Lothric squawked in annoyance—having to duck to avoid getting hit in the face with her arm—but the older crossbreed was unrepentant, ignoring his grumbling in favor of burying her face in the soft part of Lorian’s neck.

“Oi! What was that for!” Lothric released his right arm from his grip and swatted the top of Yorshka’s head. “You could have broken my nose, you china-crashing bull!”
“Oh, as if thou couldst not heal thyself instantly.” Yorshka sighed in happiness as Lorian—who was initially stunned into inaction—carefully wrapped his bronze-clad arms around her thin back. “Wouldst thou rather not have me show thy brother the appreciation he deserve’st for being so wonderful?”

“Of course not,” Lothric grumbled, “but you do not have to clobber me in the face to do so!” He raised his hand to bap at Yorshka once more, but Lorian made a chiding ‘cluck’ with his tongue, and he instead wrapped the arm around his elder brother’s neck. “Clumsy oaf.”

“Spindly brat.” Yorshka sniped back, voice muffled from where her lips were smushed against the collar of Lorian’s armor. The god and the knight prince rolled their eyes and smiled bemusedly at each other.

“Play nice, children. Have the two of thee forgotten that we art in front of an audience?” Gwyndolin used his snakes to shift himself until he was angled towards Wolf and Kuro, who were waiting patiently and (seemingly) pleasantly for the ‘intimate’ moment to conclude. “I sincerely apologize, Lord Kuro, Ser Wolf. ‘tis simply been a very eventful morn for the four of us.”

Kuro’s small smile morphed into a bashful yet beatific grin. “There is no need to apologize, Gwyndolin-dono. It makes me happy to see everyone else happy—especially Lothric and Yorshka.”

At the sound of Kuro’s voice, Lorian’s entire body seemed to jerk in place, and he swiveled his head to stare at Kuro and Wolf with wide eyes. It was almost as if the knight had been unaware of anyone outside of Gwyndolin, Lothric, and Yorshka being present...then again, given that Lothric had immediately teleported into Gwyndolin’s arms and started crying the moment he ascended the staircase, his momentary lapse in situational awareness was more than understandable to the Nameless Moon.

“Oh! You are the Kuro that Lothric has told me so much about!” Lorian looked down at Yorshka and patted her sides. “Yorshka, would you mind terribly if we continued this hug at a later time? I would feel rude if I...I...I waited any longer to greet Lothric’s newest friend.”

“Oh, very well! Spoilsport.” Yorshka made a big show of grumbling as she pulled away, but the bright and happy smile remained stuck on her face. “It is not as if we shan’t have plenty of time to embrace later, yes? Now that the both of thee art staying with us.”

Lorian snickered and nodded as he shifted his legs underneath him, reaching behind himself with his right hand to support Lothric before rising to his feet.

“I do not find you rude at all.” Kuro smiled up at Lorian as the knight approached, giggling at the sight of Lothric at him from where he was draped over the knight’s back. “You have been through a lot, Lorian-san, and I find that good things come to those who wait.”

“You flatter me, Lord Kuro.” Lorian sank to his knees in front of Kuro and yelped when Lothric smacked him lightly on the head. “What?”

“Don’t call him ‘lord’!” Lothric chided, rubbing his fingers over the spot on Lorian’s head. “You are not allowed to call any of my friends ‘lord’ or ‘lady’, Lorian; it just sounds overly formal and strange!”

Kuro giggled and Wolf hid a smile behind his hand. The sight made Gwyndolin grin just as widely as Lorian in that moment.
“You may call me as you wish, Lorian-dono, but I do not mind being simply Kuro.” The boy bowed forward in greeting before sitting straight once more. “I am Kuro, head of both the Dragonspring and Hirata clans, and this is my loyal shinobi and dear companion, Wolf.”

“A pleasure to meet the both of you.” Gwyndolin blinked as Lorian slipped into surprisingly fluent Kinonese, bowing so low over his legs that Lothric was easily able to reach out and boop Kuro’s nose before he straightened up, making the Divine Heir squeal and bat at his spindly hand. “Lothric has told me much about you, Kuro-dono, and about you, Wolf-san. He tends to have overly glowing praise of me, so I can only hope I live up to at least some of the expectations he has set.”

“From what I have seen so far, Lorian-san, I believe everything Lothric has said about you to be correct.” Kuro replied magnanimously, reaching out his hand to Lorian, who took it in his own after a moment of flustered hesitation. “You speak very fluent Kinonese. Have you visited the continent before?”

“Several times--on behalf of our father.” Lorian nodded, reaching up absentmindedly to stroke Lothric’s hair with his left hand. “I enjoy studying languages, however, even though I am not good at words. It i-i-is a...a hobby of mine.”

The more Gwyndolin listened to Lorian talk, the more he was convinced that the knight stumbling over his words was more than simple nervousness, especially with how he would smack his lips and click his tongue in a seeming attempt to set himself straight. Gwyndolin had seen many a congenital stutter in the past, but what surprised him about Lorian was not only how smooth and fluent his words were when around Lothric and himself, but how his verbal ‘hiccups’ seemed to multiply whenever he startled or nervous. Yet even in front of Aishura and Telos--two beings he had never before met--Lorian’s words had slid as smooth as freshly-churned butter from his lips, and his words to Kuro--who he had greeted with the formality of a diplomatic introduction--had been stutter-free until the boy’s compliment had thrown him off.

Was there a component of anxiety to Lorian’s speech impediment? Was that the reason so many of the knightly expatriates from Lothric he had spoken to over the past week-and-a-half had talked about how Lorian would grow as quiet as a stone whenever in the presence of his father or other members of the Lothric nobility? Was that why the other expatriates from Lothric--those who had lived in the castle but had not had regular contact with the elder prince--had thought him to be all but mute?

*I am the King of the Gods and the lastborn of Gwyn,* Gwyndolin thought, yet Lorian speaks almost as easily around me as he does with his dearest Lothric. *The only times I have heard him stutter and stumble on his words--other than the first two days of our knowing each other--have been during discussions of difficult and uncomfortable subjects. Does Lorian truly feel that comfortable around me?*

The thought made Gwyndolin’s insides grow uncomfortably warm and fluttery, and he pulled Lorian’s cloak tight around himself, watching as Lothric absentmindedly caressed the petals of the flower he had woven into Lorian’s hair during their walk.

“Miko-sama prepared a number of dishes last night in honor of your arrival.” Wolf finally spoke up, gesturing to the picnic blanket he and Kuro had set up in the middle of the garden, which was covered with boxes and baskets full of the Divine Heir’s decadent cooking. “It would be our greatest honor if you and Lothric-dono would join us for lunch, Lorian-dono.”

Lorian flushed as brightly as the red flowers of the bush the Silver Knights had planted.

“Well...Gwyndolin and I...” Lorian was apparently going to tell Wolf that he and Gwyndolin had
eaten lunch earlier in the day, but he stopped himself and quickly glanced behind himself at the
god, who smiled and nodded in approval. “We would love to join you and Kuro for lunch, Wolf-
san.”

“I hope they start speaking in Lordranian soon.” Yorshka grumbled from where she had slumped
herself against Gwyndolin’s right side. “I can barely speak common Kinonese, let alone
understand Kuro’s formal tongue! I shall have to start taking my Kinonese lessons more seriously
if Kuro is to visit us more often!”

“Ah.” The Nameless Moon smiled weakly down at his sister and adjusted the veil so that it fell
straight down her back. “Dost that mean thou shalt spend thy language lessons doing more than
sulking and doodling in the margins of thy books?”

“Only if thou ceasest to hold them at the crack of dawn.” The crossbreed girl giggled and rubbed
her cheek into her brother’s shoulder. “I am glad that Lorian shalt be our new Lord Commander,
Gwyndolin. Very glad. Even if I am still somewhat sore at thy secrecy.”

“Oh, I am certain that thou shalt find it in thy heart to forgive me one day.”

“Perhaps.” The teasing expression on Yorshka’s face slipped into something more contemplative.
“Dost Sulyvahn know of thy choice?”

The awful, gaping sickness from earlier returned, making the god’s insides seize.

“No...no, he does not even know of Lorian’s existence.”

“Then...when shalt thou tell him? And how?”

Rather than answering, Gwyndolin simply rested his left cheek on the crown of Yorshka’s hair and
closed his eyes, breathing in the sweet scent of her freshly washed hair and marveling at the
softness of her gossamer veil against his skin. He felt so terribly tired.

Kuro’s cooking was delicious—of course—but Gwyndolin found himself utterly unable to enjoy it.
While the god had been hopeful that his mood would improve food and rest, his emotional
exhaustion only seemed to grow during their long lunch, and Gwyndolin had found himself unable
to do more than pick idly at his food while the others ate and drank with a vigor he envied.

Lorian and Wolf had swiftly bonded over their mutual love of swordplay, and the two warriors had
spent the majority of lunch discussing the differences between Ashina and Kinonese-style
bladesmithing, which eventually phased into a more somber discussion of the state of Ashina’s
sovereignty. Yorshka, Lothric, and Kuro, meanwhile, were lost in their own little world, having
easily slipped into one of those easy and natural friendships that so marked childhood. The three of
them lay sprawled out on their stomachs; Yorshka was chatting freely and easily in spite of the two
crystal lizards dozing on her back, and Kuro and Lothric were practically sandwiched together
across from her, chins propped on their folded hands and legs kicking absently against each other.

The three crossbreed children were giggling and whispering secrets in a language all of their own,
and while Gwyndolin was thrilled that Lothric and Yorshka were so happy and comfortably around
each other, even that joy seemed unable to rouse him from his cloying stupor. In fact, as Lorian and
Wolf laughed over one of the shinobi’s bluntly honest remarks, Gwyndolin found himself feeling
as if his stomach had sunk into the heads of his snakes. He set his plate and chopsticks on the
picnic blanket, rose to his full station, and quietly slithered away from the group and towards the cathedral. Mercifully, his friends and family seemed far too engrossed in their conversations to notice his departure.

*What is the matter with me?* Gwyndolin felt as if he was going to be sick as he applied his glamour and ascended the stairs to the Cathedral of the Moon. *I was feeling so well just a short time ago---strange, yes, but not in a bad way!--but now...*

What had happened? What had so violently and abruptly changed his mood? Was his illness rearing its ugly head once more? Or was a different yet equally debilitating force digging its talons into his body and mind? Those questions swirled like mist around the god’s mind. He quickly dispelled the sealing rune and pushed the door open, shutting it behind him as he walked inside, and he quickly remembered to pull up his hood to avoid exposing his face to any hapless citizens or city guards. Gwyndolin was already feeling poorly enough as it was; he had no desire to add the trauma of scaring one of his beloved people to his already dour mood.

Thankfully, the Cathedral of the Moon had just undergone its daily cleaning, so the front doors were still sealed shut. The drapes hanging about the front ‘altar’ smelled pleasantly of lavender soap, and the faint scent of lemon mixed with apple cider vinegar wafted up from the freshly polished stone floors, which felt pleasantly cool and smooth beneath his false feet. As was procedure when freshly cleaned (or when Gwyndolin himself was present for mass), the four statues of the god’s likeness were draped with black cloth, saving Gwyndolin from having to deal with his fictionalized likenesses staring down at him as he walked past.

The Nameless Moon all but ran to the elevator leading to his private ‘office’, and the relief he felt when he ascended to the top floor was truly ridiculous in scale, making his false knees shake and his lungs quiver. He leaned against the backing of the lift and closed his eyes, remaining in the elevator even after it had stopped on the top floor, listening to the wind battering against the stone walls and the hissing and popping of the gas lamps and candle flames that kept the church alight.

*Oh.* It was during that moment of quiet contemplation—as Gwyndolin softened his pounding heart and slowed his breath—that he realized just what was bothering him so. He sighed and used his left bell sleeve to wipe the sweat off of his brow, his throat clenching in disgust at how clammy his skin felt.

*Has Sulyvahn ever leant me his cloak?*

With a frustrated scowl, Gwyndolin pushed himself off of the back of the lift and walked onto the raised ‘platform’ that acted as his personal offense, releasing his glamour the way one would release a drawn slingshot. The violent uncoiling of the snakes actually made him stumble, but he managed to fling his hand out and grab the stone railing to keep his balance, muttering curses under his breath as he righted himself.

*Get a hold of thyself, Gwyndolin!* Instead of sitting down at his desk and attempting to lose himself—however briefly—in work, Gwyndolin slithered across the office and to the opposite railing, staring out over the nave and letting his eyes rest upon the stained glass window situated above the main entrance.

*So what if Sulyvahn has never lent thee his cloak? Thou knowest how easily he grows cold! Thou art quite capable of getting thy own warm garments if thou so desirest! Thou shouldst not be relying upon thy intended to compensate for thy inability to dress appropriately for the weather! The god squeezed his eyes shut and gripped the railing in an attempt to stop the trembling of his hands. It dost not mean that he dost not love thee, or care about thee, or—!*
The memory hit him like a lightning spear.

*Oh.*

Gwyndolin gasped, eyes popping open to the point of pain, and the snakes quickly wrapped themselves around the stone pillars supporting the railing as he all but doubled himself over the edge. His stomach seemed to fold and roll over itself until it felt like a lead ball.

*Sulyvahn has loaned me his cloak. Once before.*

It had happened a little over a year past, when Gwyndolin and Sulyvahn—newly courting—were attending the annual Governor’s Ball. Once a year, Gwyndolin invited all those that ran the numerous provinces and townships of the Sunless Realms to the capital, where two weeks of politics, haggling, and negotiating were capped with a party so lavish and extravagant that it had the city itself dancing and reveling alongside the actual attendees. It had been a surprisingly warm night during the normally frigid early spring, and Gwyndolin had chosen to wear a simple yet elegant dress made of blue organza, with a wide square neckline and long sleeves that began at the final third of his shoulders.

It had been such a shining, sparkling night, and Gwyndolin had talked and laughed with his governors with a rare sort of comfort and ease. He had received so many compliments for his dress that he spent practically the entire night blushing underneath the Sunset Crown, and he had briefly known what Gwynevere had meant when she talked about feeling powerful at their father’s old gatherings—as if she was able to control and manipulate the attention of everyone in the room. He had felt light. Free. Powerful. *Happy.*

As the ball had started to wind down, Gwyndolin had been standing outside with several of the governors from the western provinces, talking animatedly about how to best manage the threat of Londor bearing down on their more distant homesteads. Sulyvahn had approached the group from the main hall—the definition of dignity in an elegant silver and black brocade robe—and Gwyndolin had felt equal parts shocked and touched when the Patriarch silently removed his matching cloak over his shoulders and draped it over Gwyndolin’s own. It had been an unexpected public demonstration of tenderness, and Gwyndolin—assuming that Sulyvahn had noticed the chill descending over the late night—had given his acting Lord Commander a warm and grateful smile as he pulled the cloak around himself. Even the other governors seemed impressed by the display, and for a brief and fleeting moment, Gwyndolin felt as if he could one day come to love him.

It was when Sulyvahn was walking him back to the royal residence—arm-in-arm with the god—that he revealed his true intentions.

“*Honestly!*” Sulyvahn chuckled and shook his head in what seemed to be fond exasperation, earning a confused look from Gwyndolin. “I have been tempted to give you my cloak the entire night! What were you thinking with that dress, dear Gwyndolin?”

The god frowned and cocked his head. “What dost thou mean, dear Sulyvahn?” Was the Patriarch concerned about the chill descending over the late night—had given his acting Lord Commander a warm and grateful smile as he pulled the cloak around himself. Even the other governors seemed impressed by the display, and for a brief and fleeting moment, Gwyndolin felt as if he could one day come to love him.

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“*Honesty!*” Sulyvahn looked down at Gwyndolin as if maggots were crawling out of his Sunset Crown. “I understand wanting to impress your governors, My Grace, but attempting to do so with sensual appeal was completely unnecessary! It is no surprise you earned so many compliments with a dress like that!”

A layer of frost seemed to form over Gwyndolin’s tongue, and when he took in a desperate and
gasping breath, his lungs burned from the cold that had suddenly washed over him.

“ What in the name of the Flame art thou talking about? There is nothing wrong with my dress!”

Sulyvahn laughed, but not in a nice way, no; it was the laugh of someone who could not believe what he was hearing. “ Are you serious? I know you have spent a dreadfully long period of your life isolated, my dearest, but surely you can tell the difference between a dress appropriate for a ball and a dress appropriate for a lady of the night!”

Gwyndolin reeled backwards, wrenching his arm out of Sulyvahn’s in the process. “ Art thou saying that I...I looked like a courtesan? In front of my governors?”

“ Well, what can you expect when wearing a dress with a neckline that low?” Sulyvahn retorted, sending daggers of ice stabbing into Gwyndolin’s stomach and chest. “ True, it is not a plunging neckline, and you do not exactly have a bust you were at risk of exposing, but your shoulders! They were practically falling out of your dress all night! It may not have been your intention, but you certainly gave your governors quite a show! I am sure they’re busy gabbing about it now that you are out of earshot!”

Sick pooled underneath Gwyndolin’s tongue. “ How darest thou!” Bitter tears pushed against the gold face of his crown and cracked through his voice. “ Dost thou truly think that I am so socially inept as to dress like a prostitute in front of my governors?! After I have been dressing myself for this event for thousands of years?!”

“ Well, in that case, I certainly hope that you have never worn a dress like this one during those thousands of years!” The sheer aggression in the corvian’s voice had Gwyndolin flinching backwards. “ Else I would wonder if some of these governors only attend this ball to see the spectacle you make of yourself! ‘Oh, let us all go down to Irithyll, for it is the one time of the year we can see Gwyn’s progeny dress and trot himself about like a trollop!’”

Gwyndolin gasped, clenched his arms around his middle, and vomited on his false feet.

There was a flurry of footsteps and movement, and Sulyvahn’s hands were suddenly on Gwyndolin’s face and back, stroking his cheek and pulling him into the firm line of the corvian’s body. Gwyndolin sobbed miserably and pushed his acid-drenched lips into Sulyvahn’s cassock.

“ Oh, Gwyndolin, dearest Gwyndolin—” Sulyvahn’s words were sorrowful and apologetic, and the hands he used to hold his intended were soft and kind. It was as if the anger and hostility of just a few seconds before had never existed at all. “ Forgive me, oh, forgive me! I should have guarded my words! I should have been more careful! Oh, Gwyndolin, I never meant to hurt you!” He pressed his thin lips on the parts of Gwyndolin’s face and head below the Sunset Crown, and the Nameless Moon was torn between pressing closer and pulling away. He feared he would vomit again. “ I just worry so much for you, my sweet, and I know you try so very hard to be the god your father was! I just...I just wanted to help you, that is all! For sometimes you do not even realize some of the more outlandish things you do--and who can blame you, after spending so much of your early life alone?--and I do not want you to be hindered by your inexperience!”

“ I did not look like a lady of the night!” Gwyndolin’s voice came out wet and garbled, and tears began to leak out from under the edge of his crown, making Sulyvahn gasp and hold him all the more tighter. “ I did not, I did not, I did not, I did not—!”

“ Of course you didn’t, My Light; I was simply exaggerating in order to make a point!” Sulyvahn rubbed soothing circles on Gwyndolin’s neck with one hand and rocked him gently back and forth with the other. “ It is just that...those shoulders were lower than they should have been, my sweet.
That is all! You looked divine--simply divine--and all of the governors knew it…!

The litany of praise he had received over the course of the night suddenly seemed sour and rotten, and Gwyndolin clung desperately to the Patriarch in an attempt to escape the memories of the now lecherous and mocking glances, fisting his thin fingers into black and silver brocade. “Just...take me back to my room, Sulyvahn! Take me back to my room, and for Flame’s sake, do not let anyone else see me!”

That night, Gwyndolin ripped the dress off of his body and threw it into the fireplace, and he watched--wet eyed and bile-tongued--as the organza curled and crumbled into cinders and ash. He watched the dress burn and wished that his humiliation and shame could also go up in smoke, and oh, did he truly look lascivious in that outfit? If that was the case, then thank goodness Sulyvahn was there to tell him, otherwise he may have continued to embarrass himself year after year after year after year after year...

“...Gwyndolin?”

The god wrenched his head out of his musings and turned it towards the direction of the voice, finding Lorian standing just at the edge of the lift, helm missing and brown eyes wide and alarmed.

“L…?” Why was Gwyndolin’s mouth so dry? The Nameless Moon rapidly licked his lips and tried again. “L-Lorian? What art thou doing here? I...I did not hear thee come up…”

“I...I...I...” Lorian, too, seemed cotton-mouthed and tongue-tied, and he took a few shaky steps towards the god before standing still. “I...I had noticed that you had left the picnic, a-a-a-and that you had not eaten anything o-o-o-on your plate, so I...I came to see if you were alright. Wolf and the children are...are...are still in the garden, talking.”

*He looks as if he has seen a ghost.* Gwyndolin frowned in concern and forced his snakes to uncurl themselves from the stone braces, which they did with a miserable reluctance that their host could feel in the marrow of his bones. “Lorian, why art thou looking at me like that? Is...is something wrong?”

There was silence. Lorian worked his mouth without sound and cleared his throat.

“You are crying, Gwyndolin.” The elder prince’s voice was low and hoarse, and for the first time since sinking into the swell of memory, Gwyndolin realized that both his face and the collar of his dress were drenched with tears.

Oh.

“Lorian...I...”

Gwyndolin’s eyes hurt. There was a painful knot in his throat and a heavy, hot lump where his heart should have been, and more and more tears seem to leak from his eyes as he frantically attempted to wipe them dry. He felt like a broken fountain gushing water everywhere, and as the knot in his throat widened to the point of choking, he came to the miserable realization that he *could not stop crying*. “Lorian...I...I cannot…”

Lorian took a few steps forward, and an awful, anguished sound somehow pushed its way through the suffocating lump, making the snakes wind even tighter around themselves in a futile attempt at self-comfort. Gwyndolin could feel the moisture dripping from his cheeks and onto their scaly heads. He was melting.

“Lorian...I...I am sorry…”
Those brown eyes widened before narrowing into a determined glare. Gwyndolin’s words seemed to cause the elder prince to come to some sort of silent decision, and as the Nameless Moon watched—shaking and crying and feeling as if he would crumble into ash with the slightest unfriendly touch—the knight crossed the distance between them with two massive steps and opened his arms. Gwyndolin sobbed and flung himself forward.

“Lorian…oh, Lorian…!”

It was the first time that Gwyndolin had ever felt such an embrace. It was not as if he had never been hugged by someone bigger and stronger than he—for Aestus and Gwynevere had given excellent hugs—but never before had he been held so closely and strongly and tenderly all at once. Those bronze-covered arms enfolded the entirety of Gwyndolin’s narrow shoulders and frail back, hiding him from the cold and harsh realities of the outside world, and Gwyndolin suddenly knew what it felt like to be a drowning man pulled from a raging sea. He wrapped his own arms around Lorian’s middle, pressed his face into his breastplate, and wept with the abandonment he had only ever felt when crying alone. His snakes wrapped themselves around Lorian’s legs as if they wished to meld into the knight’s body—winding tight and squeezing and squeezing—but the elder prince did not even seem to notice their presence.

One gauntlet-clad hand moved to cover the back of Gwyndolin’s head while the other remained tight around Gwyndolin’s shoulders, and while a similar hold from Sulyvahn would have felt like a shackles, the Nameless Moon realized that he had never before felt so free. He pressed himself impossibly closer to Lorian’s body and prayed that they would never have to part.

“Oh, Gwyndolin…” Lorian’s voice was just loud enough for the god to hear over his ragged breath. “My dear friend…please, tell me what has caused you such agony, so that I may lessen it if I can. Are you sick? Are you hurt? Did…did Wolf and I say something to upset you?”

Gwyndolin shook his head violently against Lorian’s breastplate, smearing tears and snot all over the freshly polished bronze. He would have felt embarrassed had he actually been in a stable state of mind. “No...no, Lorian, it…it has nothing to do with thee…I swear it…”

“Then what is it?” As Lorian spoke, he began to gently rock Gwyndolin back and forth, and the god found his sobs softening at the soothing action. “We are friends, Gwyndolin, and friends…friends can tell each other anything, can they not? So please, if you feel as if you need to confide in someone…do not hesitate to confide in me.”

Gwyndolin shook his head again. Lorian’s thumb began to stroke the back of his head in time with their rocking.

“I…I cannot…” Gwyndolin’s voice, while still a mess of tears and phlegm, was at least slightly less garbled than before. “I cannot…I cannot even find the words, dear Lorian…I do not even know what to think of it all…!”

“Then do not try.” Lorian shushed him before Gwyndolin could stumble even more over himself. “Just know that…that I am here if you do find the words, and I will be here if you do not. I am not going anywhere, dearest Gwyndolin; this much I swear.”

Gwyndolin sniffled and sagged in relief.

The two of them stood in the loft for what seemed like centuries, and Gwyndolin almost felt eternal in Lorian’s hold—as if his ardent and feverish prayers had actually created a pocket of space and time where such a beautiful moment could last forever. Even after Gwyndolin’s tears had ceased and his breathing had returned to normal, he and Lorian remained intertwined, Lorian’s arms
around his back and Gwyndolin’s snakes around his legs. It was soft. Dreamlike. That strange, warm, overwhelming sensation was back, and though it remained tantalizingly familiar, Gwyndolin could neither recognize what it was or remember when he had last felt such a thing.

*Perhaps it is a feeling unique to Lorian,* Gwyndolin mused, and found his lips curling at the thought.

“Are you feeling better?” Lorian whispered.

Gwyndolin nodded and finally--reluctantly--pulled himself and his snakes away from Lorian. The six serpents hissed so petulantly that it made the knight and the god burst into a brief bout of snickers.

“I thank thee, Lorian, from the bottom of my heart.” Gwyndolin’s cheeks felt stiff and tacky from dried tears, but he smiled as widely as he could at Lorian, who beamed back. “I do not know what I would have done if thou hadst not come in search of me…”

“It is what friends do.” Lorian said sagely. Gwyndolin nodded in solemn understanding.

“Yes. It is.”

Perhaps it was the lingering warmth of the embrace. Perhaps it was his physical and emotional exhaustion. Or, perhaps, it was that wondrously strange feeling that Lorian stirred in his bones. Whatever the reason, Gwyndolin found boldness rising up within him, and he took a deep and steadying breath.

“May I ask thee a question, Lorian?”

“Of course.”

Another breath. “How…how do I look in my dress?”

Lorian blinked and frowned, and for a few horrifying seconds, Gwyndolin wondered if he had finally overstepped his bounds. He opened his mouth to apologize and withdraw his question when—

“I am not particularly…descriptive when it comes to describing clothing.” Lorian’s tone, while hesitant, was full of the honesty that Gwyndolin had come to expect from him. “So I do not have any particularly…poetic words when it comes to describing your outfit. What I can tell you, however, is that I think you look lovely in this dress, Gwyndolin.”

Gwyndolin’s breath caught in his throat.

“Thou…thou dost not think the neckline is too…?” He trailed off, unable to finish the sentence.

“Too what?” Lorian looked somewhat confused, but continued onward all the same. “I think it makes your neck and shoulders look…elegant. Graceful. It makes you look…well, just as divine as your higher collars, only in a…different way.” The knight swallowed and chuckled nervously. “Am I making any sense?”

Lorian’s words did not have the poetic and lyrical nature of Sulyvahn’s, but those plain and honest sentiments made hope swell in Gwyndolin’s heart like never before, and he found himself creeping closer to the knight.

“And…” Remembering another one of Sulyvahn’s vocal sentiments, Gwyndolin felt himself
wilting once more, though he swiftly gathered his nerve and swallowed his heartbeat down from the hollow of his throat. “Dost thou think the red...washes me out? Or makes me...makes me look like…”

Like a whore?

Lorian frowned, his eyes flicking down to Gwyndolin’s dress, then back up at his face.

“The red matches that of your eyes.” Lorian’s voice emerged as a rasp, and the elder prince averted his gaze in embarrassment, his scarred cheeks pinking until their color matched that of the flower still wound in his hair. “It is...the red of a sunset. Vibrant. Brilliant. Beautiful. That is...that is what I think. I see no ‘washing out’--whatever that means.”

It was as if that atrocious memory had been nothing but a bad dream from which Gwyndolin had finally awoken. Every centimeter of Gwyndolin’s body was singing in harmony with his soul--his very being crying out in what could only be called euphoria--and as the god stood before the stalwart knight, he once more felt the same power he had so briefly experienced during that fateful Governor’s Ball.

Gwyndolin had never thought he would feel such a way again, but Lorian--his newest, dearest, first and only friend--seemed to have miracles sewn into his very smile. With a contentment that had been unfathomable mere minutes before, the god smiled and sank his head once more against Lorian’s breast, and the knight released a punch of breath before resting his chin on top of Gwyndolin’s head.

They did not move for a long time.

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