Royal Priorities (18+)

by Decorated

Summary

After almost four years of distance, Callum and Rayla are set to meet again. The traitor Viren is still nowhere to be found.

A true sequel to Hard Priorities.
Rated explicit due to sparse descriptions of consensual, loving intimacy.
Hello.

If you're coming from Priority Mail or Hard Priorities, please note that this work deals with issues of adulthood and is not intended for audiences under 16 in Europe and 18 in the US.

June 23rd, a Friday, appeared on the horizon lovely like a blooming flower.

Callum stepped out of his tent and watched as his entourage busied themselves with packing. Being king had a great many downsides that most people didn’t appreciate, but this was certainly not one of them.

“Majesty!”, came the muted voice of Yasra within her armor from his right, “Good morning!”

“I’d say so, Yasra”, replied the king, stretching, “Today I get to end four years of ruling, eating and sleeping alone!”

“I have my doubts”, came an annoyed voice from behind the massive Sunfire canon guard, “However if this should all go according to your plan, please keep it to actually sleeping, will you? It won’t do to start this with a scandal! A bigger scandal, I mean!”

Opeli was blunt as a club with him, as usual. Callum couldn’t help but think that she thought he was stupid. She had a point, though, the years of his regency had asked a lot from her.

“Don’t worry”, he said flippantly, “We’re not done with her people’s rituals yet, remember?”

The councilwoman frowned at him, once more. “Nor ours!”

The truth was that Callum was not very good at being in charge of an entire country and this had reflected in his rather apathetic style of rule. He had signed and nodded when demanded of him,
taken the blame for decisions made in his name, but hadn’t offered many initiatives on his own. Well, safe for where his queen-to-be was concerned. Like a pining dog, he had lost his composure in step with the changing of the months.

Somewhere deep in Opeli’s controlled emotions stirred a renewing appreciation of his pain. But, alas! It was almost over and he had just made another stupid suggestion the other day. “Majesty, I will question once more the wisdom of de-touring to Regio Scotia. We are in hostile territory and need to get back home!”

“I know that better than anyone here, Councillor. Keep in mind though; If we go there, we’ll get a chance to make a good impression on the people who have been driving the opposition in every single negotiation we’ve had with Xadia so far. Not to mention that Rayla deserves to enjoy the fruits of her sentence at least a little. Speaking of my fiance, let’s get moving.”

Opeli shook her head, but turned to leave, nonetheless. He was no Ezran, definitely no Harrow, but he had had his moments. He was not to be trifled with when it came to keeping a grip on his more ‘active’ nobles, likely thanks to the steady tutillage of the elven agent, Helmond. He was also a natural peace-maker, settling disputes to the dissatisfaction of both sides. After all, a good compromise leaves its parties grouchy, but not upset.

After a few more minutes, the many hands of the entourage had broken camp and the convoy got moving. It was good to see the Dragon Queen’s personal guard work so smoothly with their human counterparts. At first, it hadn’t looked like the soldiers would mesh, but after almost a month of traveling together, they had established some rapport. This was also thanks to Callum’s ceaseless people senses. It was such that the elves now knew the song ‘Lovely Companion’ by heart, a favourite of the King’s.

Callum himself was riding comfortably on his winged animal. He felt it was a bit of a waste, having Isoros trot on the ground like his distant horse cousins, but as King he had to lead an Entourage and they could not protect him in the air. Plus, walking was easier on his steed and if there wasn’t a need for hurry, why bother straining the animal?

By midday, they reached the Arrias plateau. It was flat, grassy and had a few patches of forest. The place would’ve been rather unremarkable, were it not for the massive tornado, spinning unnaturally slowly around its center. The cracking of lighting was visible in it, a single flash taking minutes to play out. This was ancient magic, brought on by a singular source.

The Dragon King.
“There it is”, Yasra said, pointing at a structure near the ground. It was the entrance to a tunnel, a few guards were milling about. There was no way they hadn’t noticed the Katolins, with their red-and-gold banners flying in the wind next to the canon guards’ white-and-gold ones.

The gate opened and a few more guards exited on the backs of Perytons. The leader rode a Thurnwarg, a dark purple, wolf-like mount preferred by moon elves.

They closed quickly and Callum bode his convoy halt. It was starting to be normal to him that when he lifted his hand, things happened. Still a little awe inspiring to hear the clatter of twenty-six heavily armed soldiers of two nations coming to a rest.

“Greetin’s”, came a yell from the warden on his warg. When he had closed to speaking range, he continued, “Lord Callum, we hadn’t expected to see you until tomorrow! Regardless, we are honored by your presence.”

“Likewise! I’m a bit early, so it’s not your problem”, Callum smiled, “I don’t know if it would be asking too much to release Rayla right now?”

“Unless you wish to instigate a prison break, I’m afraid it would, Sire”, the warden said, sternly, “I would have to converse with the Capital to make this change in release date official...”

Elves and paperwork. Probably had to get it signed in triplicate, too. Callum sighed, but the warden wasn’t done talking yet, “...but I’d be happy to invite you inside for today. You should feel rather safe with all your, uh”, he gestured a circle at the entourage with his index.

Callum ignored Opeli’s strained breath. She didn’t matter right now.

When they rode into the tunnel, the king’s heart threatened to bruise itself against his ribs. Moments separated him from her. After almost four years of pining, he now appreciated very much the time limit she had set for the continuation of their relationship.

The difficulties resulting from him waiting for her to be released from her sentence were not just personal. His entire country had been waiting with baited breath on the last of the House of Katol to find someone to help him ensure that he was no longer the last.

“She’s been a delight, Sire. Only a single incident on her record and that wasn’t her fault”, the
warden said, cordially, “we’ve afforded her many graces that would normally beyond access for these prisoners. A sweet young lady!”

Callum snorted. He wasn’t quite sure that that sort of language would make her happy, but then they hadn’t really spoken casually for a long while.

The entourage exited into the eye of the tornado. It was miles across, allowing room for a forest, a few houses, a town square and a great many small patches of tilled and artificially irrigated farmland in which elves busied themselves in the heat of noon. A strong chicken-wire fence separated the prisoners from where the Katolins were now dismounting. A wave of raising heads swept the village.

The horizon of it all was a solid-looking, tapering wall of angry clouds.

Callum stared, scanning, he couldn’t see her. He couldn’t feel his heart at all, now, but even in the heat of the day, his hands were cold as ice. There was a clap of thunder going off in his stomach with every face he saw.

He turned to face the warden who was caressing his warg’s mane, observing the human carefully.

“I’d like to go look for her.”

“Naturally. Please, though, don’t bring all these people”, he gestured at the entourage again, “We don’t want to make too much of a scene. One should do.”

“Two, if that’s okay. Honsa? Yasra?”

Yasra stepped forward. Honsa gruffly waved him along from further back. She was once more clad in totally insane colors, wearing yellow riding pants and a blouse of a screaming orange that reminded Callum of Salis Anur. At least it clashed with her blue-green skin artfully rather than painfully.

The guards let them past the fence and Opeli’s foot tapped at the speed of light. She was beyond nervous. These criminals were holding farm equipment, knives, tools… it was a veritable garden of ways to end a royal line and plunge another human kingdom into civil unrest. A selfish man, this king.
Callum’s head swiveled, his gaze brushing every face. Old, young, sun elf, earthblood… hm. There was a man, bent by purpose and age both, the blue of an ocean dweller a mere hint in his almost transparent hair.

“Konar?”, the king asked with doubtful recognition, and the man looked up from his moonberry bushes, with a confused blink.

“Howzit, sonny? Oh. Oh my. You are the Callum, aren’t you?”, a wide smile spread across his furrowed face, revealing an almost total lack of teeth, “You’re not hard to pick out, ha! That I’m still alive to see this, I’ll count as a gift from fate. Come, I’ll show you to her house.”

Konar seemed almost as giddy as Callum himself as they trudged over a small path towards a stand of trees.

Honsa walked next to her elder, exchanging a few friendly words in Rune. Callum wasn’t happy about her, who was still blaming him for Lessa’s death. He understood, in a sense, but had hoped that she in particular would have forgiven him.

Nestled between the few trees stood a small, thatched house. Through the window facing the road, Callum could see the hints of a more distant window on the other side of the house. Ever so often, the light it allowed through the dwelling was interrupted by a dark figure. As he watched, total nervousness returned to the King and his legs faltered for a moment. Yasra’s armored hand fell heavily on his shoulder.

“Excellence?”

“I’m fine. Just really nervous.”

His guard patted him on the back which almost sent him sprawling, then they got moving again. Konar knocked on the door and a strangely unfamiliar familiar voice’s groan rang out from inside the house.

“Gimme a sec, I’m covered in ash! Is that you, Zala?”
Konar’s eyebrows danced at Callum. With a snicker, he replied, “Nah, kiddo, It’s just Konar. You know I don’t care if you’re mussed up, I ain’t your princeling after all. Just need to show ya something real quick.”

“Fine”, came the exasperated sigh from inside, “I guess I’ll finish fixing this place up, later”

Callum’s stomach turned with the door handle.

“So!”, the woman said, turned backward to hang up her apron next to the door on the inside, “what was soooo important that I couldn’t even fini--”

Her violet eyes had saccaded over the group, found the closest shape, Konar, the biggest shape, Yasra, the second biggest shape, Callum. Then they had stopped moving, widening to the size of golden merlons.

It felt like being plunged in cold water. Here she was. A stranger with a friend’s face. He could see the resemblance with the girl from his memories and the woman from her drawings, but there was something about her three-dimensional self that had been lost in the lines of graphite.

She had grown even taller, just like him. Her face was slimmer now, slightly more angular. Apparently she had given up on cutting her hair and it fell, delicate and white, past her muscular shoulders. The somewhat annoyed smirk in her face was slowly being replaced by shocked surprise. A dark gray streak of ash adorned her cheek.

“Did…”, she started, voicelessly, “Did I miss a day?”

Callum shook his head, slowly, then, hoarsely, he replied with the line he had been practicing since entering the camp. “No. I told you I was gonna break you out, r-remember?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Callum saw Honsa shove both Konar and Yasra to a more respectful distance.

“You… your voice… you… sound so different?”, Rayla said, still rather monotone. Touching her own lips with sooty fingers while still staring at Callum’s face, she continued, “Uh… do you… would you like to, uh, come inside? Or, uh, are you… we… leavin’?”
“Not yet. Let’s sit? Have a chat?”, the king said with far too much air.

Both of them were frozen in place, staring at each other. Then, Callum moved stiffly toward her and Rayla turned with a jerk to totter back into her house.

When Callum stepped over the threshold, he took stock of the place.

Right next to the door, under the window, was a simple desk. His last letter was still there. It seemed a bit worn, as though she had handled it a lot. Next to the desk and against the right wall of the house was her bed. It was more like a fancy cot, but looked cozy enough. Above it hung his drawings, mostly of himself and the things he’d been interested in in the past four years. At the foot of the bed stood a drawer.

Ahead to his right was a counter with some cooking utensils laid out for cleaning. To the left was a fireplace, in a half-completed state of de-ashing. Finally, at the very end of the house, stood a table with a few unmatching chairs.

Rayla motioned broadly at the seats and awkwardly shuttled herself into one of them, “Sorry about the state of the place, I, uh, I’m just cleanin’ up for the next person.”

Callum sat, opposite her, “It’s not a problem, I was guessing that was it. Not exactly on time, am I?”

Awkward silence dropped over the room as they both searched for something to look at.

Finally Callum heaved a sigh that turned into words. “I didn’t think it would go like this. I thought I’d have a second of ‘wow she is really different’ and then we’d just make out or something”

The king saw her face turn to a rather familiar expression; Rayla smirked. “If I remember correctly, you were gonna pull my horns, even. Oof, Callum! I can’t believe that’s you!”, she motioned at him, then her hands fell limply into her lap and her eyes started wandering again, “You got even more handsome while I wasn’t lookin’. Sharp clothes, too. I’m so underdressed!”

“You’d look majestic in a burlap sack, Rayla”, said Callum.
They both snickered, then went back to kneading their hands.

“So”, Rayla started, “I’m not crazy, right, the ocean elf out there - that’s Honsa?”

“That’s her, yes. I know, she’s lost a crazy amount of weight. Lessa passing away really hit her hard. When we picked her up at the border, I barely recognized her. Her dad, Temek, said to make sure she eats every day.”

Rayla shook her head, sadly, sending ripples through her long hair. “Gosh, I feel for her. I almost feel like I should go hug her.”

‘Me first’, Callum thought, but didn’t say it.

More silence followed, then Rayla got up. “I’m g-gonna make some… D-do you want some tea?”

He moved to answer, but was interrupted when she gave a small laugh, “Uh, duh, sorry, scratch that. Fireplace’s taken apart!”

Before she had a chance to sit back down, he shot up, startling her.

“Hug me!”, he blurted, then blushed to his own surprise, “Uh. If… if you want?”

Her eyes wandered to his. “Uh. Yeah. Of course”, she said, sounding not quite sure. She stepped into his reach and carefully wrapped her arms around him.

Her smell crept into his awareness. Soot, and a mixture of what could only be described as pickled lilac, sweat and an oddly familiar floral note? Huh. He thought he’d remembered her scent as straw and fresh linen. Even that had changed.

After a moment, Rayla heaved a deep sigh and hid her face in his neck. “Well, that was a need, right there. Why is this so awkward?”
Callum nodded. “It was a long time. We’re pretty different now.”

There was more quiet.

“I missed you”, she choked, finally.

Callum’s nose filled with pinpricks as he felt her tears on his neck.

“I missed you, too”, he said, unsteadily, stroking her back.

As his hand brushed the small of her back, she abruptly separated from him, walking toward the door. “We shouldn’t keep people waitin’”

The king watched as she palmed at her eyes for a moment, straightened herself out and tore open the door. “Come on in, guys.”

Confused worry crept into Callum. Was she rejecting him? Had she fallen out of love? He couldn’t blame her, he was very much unlike the boy she had known. At the same time, he had to admit that even though he felt a strong pull to this woman and rationally knew that they had kept each other distant company, he was alienated.

Yasra had to stoop to enter the low door in her armor which made her even taller, then she walked the length of the house to join Callum and allow the others to join them. Behind Konar and Honsa followed a Moon elf woman holding a fussing baby.

Konar simply nodded at Rayla, who nodded back.

Honsa offered her a hug, which she accepted, haltingly.

“Sistah, you’ve grown all the right stuff!”, the Ocean elf snickered, “Your hair looks just bombastic!”

“I was wonderin’ where that was goin’, you! It’s so good to see you, Honsa! We need to sit and
catch up soon, just the two of us”, Rayla said, patting the counselor’s shoulder.

“Hey Naves”, Rayla said to the woman with the baby, “You heard, eh?”

“Hard ta miss, yer prince charmin’”, came the amused, thickly accented answer, “A guess this is the last we’ll be seein’ of you, then? A was actually comin’ over to bid you my goodbyes, we’re leavin’ tomorrow mornin’ for a stint at home.”

Rayla’s face contorted into a frown. “I wish I could go through life without havin’ to leave people behind all the time”

“Aw, hun, nobody can master that one!”, Naves laughed, “Aodhan and A havnae been home with the wean and I bet my sisters’ are gonna lose it soon, judgin’ by their rabid letters. You goin’ to the Wee Country, too, before makin’ across the Breach?”

Rayla’s frown deepened. There was a question she suddenly felt uncomfortable answering.

“Rayla”, Callum’s recognizable but strange tenor rose from behind her, “I was planning to go to Scotia with you. If you want to.”

Confused glances flew between everyone in the room, but nobody said anything about the conditionality of the statement.

“Ah, quality Ser!”, Naves exclaimed, “We can go together!”

“Yea, I guess”, said Rayla with a nervous smile.

The group then somewhat dissolved into smaller ones for a great many different conversations.

Ever so often, Callum met Rayla’s glance. At first, they strained to look elsewhere, but as time went on, they’d exchange tepid smiles before returning to their respective conversations.

An hour had passed when suddenly there was another knock at the door.
Rayla opened it for a very annoyed looking human woman. “Who are you?”, she asked.

In answer, the woman bowed deeply. “A servant to Katolis and thus, to you, Lady Rayla. High Councillor Opeli, at your beck and call.”

The moonshadow elf blinked, then frowned when she saw the freezing stare Opeli directed at Callum. Uh oh.

“Please, come in, Opeli”

“Milady, I was hoping to have a word in private with Lord Callum”, the councilwoman said and Callum got up, excusing himself from the group.

The two humans stepped outside with Yasra in tow and once they had walked out of earshot, Opeli took a deep breath. Her frustrated expression changed to a somewhat incredulous smile.

“Sire, you can’t just vanish in a Xadian prison colony for an hour! But, my goodness! I didn’t think I’d ever say this about an elf but she is nothing short of gorgeous!”

Callum felt like she had slapped him. Huh?!

“I was convinced you were embellishing her looks in your drawings. This is good. She is so blindingly attractive that with a bit of accessorizing, people will forget that she is different. A cute face is a cute face, Lord, no matter the color of its skin!”

At this, the king’s composure faltered. He laughed heartily. “I think this is the first time I’ve heard you say something nice about my fiance!”

“I’m a pragmatist. I’ll take what I can get to execute on your demands”, Opeli said, sternly, “In this case I will take every bit of grace she can muster, given her common upbringing.”

“I’ve found that commoners sometimes have a more honest form of grace than the noblest of us”,
Callum said, equally sternly, the criticism clear in his voice.

“What was her reaction to you?”, the councillor demanded, ignoring it.

Callum sighed. “I’m not sure. We didn’t have much time alone. Obviously this isn’t easy”

“Hrmyeees”, grumbled his subordinate, “Unfortunate, if expected. Again, what will you do if she turns you down? We’ve advertised her coming home by your side. At your behest and against my better judgement, I might add.”

“Your snide pessimism isn’t appreciated”, Callum hissed, “I’ll decide on a course of action when I see fit. I’m tolerating your rudeness, councillor, I am not beholden to it. Change your tone, at least until we have a clear picture.”

Opeli’s voice suddenly changed to maternal tenderness, “Of course. On a personal note, I am heartbroken for you, Sire, if you don’t mind me saying so. Reuniting with one’s significant other after such a span of time must be a strange experience”

“You don’t know the half of it”, Callum smiled weakly, “Give me some more time with her tonight. I think we both need to thaw a little.”

“I was maybe able to assist you there, a little. The warden is arranging for you to have quarters beyond the fence. For reasons of safety. She’s welcome to join you for dinner and beyond.”

“Thank you, Opeli. Do you think they’d be able to arrange for separate quarters? I want her to feel comfortable and as little pressure as possible.”

Opeli smiled at him, sadly, “Sire, you are a incorrigible paragon of respect. I will see it done. Am I excused?”

“You are. I’ll see you later.”

With that, the King went back to the small house and Opeli returned to her perch beyond the fence.
Evening came surprisingly quickly. Throughout the day, people kept showing up say their goodbyes to Rayla. Eventually, Honsa excused herself.

One person that Callum wondered about hadn’t shown her face just yet.

Zala.

When the last one to leave, Konar, had closed the door behind him, Callum asked, “We’ve been asked to have dinner with the warden. On the other side of the fence. Do you want to go?”

His fiance gave him a look, then nodded, slowly. “Are we goin’ back inside after?”

“I don’t think so. They’ve arranged for quarters for you. I mean, you as in `not us`.”

Rayla didn’t know how to feel about this. She wanted so badly for him and her to feel right again, but it was just so outlandish. This man in front of her with his deep green eyes was Callum, doubtless. But his way of speaking, the crown, his defined face with the more dense stubble on his chin, his squarer shoulders, hairy arms, broader chest, and the deeper voice also made him a stranger.

She finally resolved to speak her mind. “What if I wanted to sleep next to you tonight, though? Would you let me?”

Callum seemed surprised. “Yeah, I guess?”

“That’s a strong answer”, she snickered sarcastically, “I get it though. I figure we’ll let thin’s happen as they do, yea?”

“Sounds good, yes. So. Do you want to go?”

He stood and offered her his arm and she blinked at him. He then realized that she was probably not familiar with the gesture.
“Oh, it’s, uh… It’s an offer to walk together, you just hook your arm in mine and off we go. Kind of a more respectable version of holding hands?”

Rayla slowly shook her head, a half-frown-half-smile on her mien. “This is gonna be a lark. More rules. `Respectable hand holdin` sounds like a moonshadow thin’, alright!”

“Again, please don’t force yourself. This isn’t your duty if you don’t want it”, Callum said, gently.

His fiance got up, now frowning fully. “I know. You keep sayin’.”

On an impulse, Callum put his right on her shoulder, caressing her upper arm. “Don’t get me wrong. I really want you to. I’m not trying to push you away.”

She placed her beringed hand on his, then nodded with a sigh. “I’ll come to dinner with you for now, how about that? First I gotta find Zala though. If I’m leavin’ now, I can’t just go without sayin’ goodbye to her.”

“Should I come with?”

“Obviously!”, Rayla laughed, “She’d break out of here to come after us if I didn’t introduce her to the guy I’ve been pinin’ for my entire stay! Let’s go.”

The moonshadow elf collected the letters in her nightstand and the pictures off the wall and dropped them into a scuffed up looking backpack. When Callum and Yasra had walked outside, she took in her home, heaving a deep sigh. Here were almost four years of her life, spent laughing, working, learning, worrying, pining. Every piece of furniture in the small space held a memory or two. Some good, some not so. With annoyance, she noticed the still ash-filled fireplace. That couldn’t stand.

Draping the apron around her, she dropped to her knees and shoveled more of the debris into a metal bucket. When she was brushing the last pieces of it into the pail, a hand entered her line of sight and she started.

Callum was reaching out to grab the bucket. “I’ll take it outside. I saw where you dumped the
“Thanks. I’m sorry to make you wait. Just needed to leave thin’s finished, I guess.”

“I get it. This is a huge goodbye for you. Take your time.”

He walked out again and she looked after him, appreciatively. He was still such an understander. After a moment, she looked around to see if there was anything else she needed to pack, but the furnishings weren’t hers, so that was it.

“Welp”, she went quietly, placing her hand on the wall above her bed, “Goodbye, house”

After another long moment, she slung the backpack over her shoulder and turned to join her fiance outside.

Yasra escorted them both as they exited the house and made their way down into the fields. Fewer people were out right now and here and there was a face that Callum recognized from earlier.

“It’s an interesting idea”, he said quietly, “instead of letting people rot in a dungeon, you put them in a situation where they have to work with others, learn new skills… I’d be interested to see what the effect is”

“Depends on the people”, Rayla said, suddenly sounding frosty, “They don’t get here if they’re violent. There’s other places for those.”

“Like Onni”, Callum said, carefully.

“Like Onni”, she acknowledged, “I’m still really angry about that. And disappointed in myself. If I was you, I would’ve been so mad.”

“I was. For a night. I’m still mad at her, actually, she took advantage of you. Even then, you didn’t go far enough for me to think of it as cheating. I know for a moon elf that might be a different story.”
“Would it ever!”, she replied with a small snort, “I’m ashamed of losin’ myself there. To me, I’m still a cheat”

“You’re free to have those standards, but as I said, long hugs are totally fine by me, as long as they don’t turn into snuggles. Again, you’re not a cheater. Remember our first kiss? You said something along the lines of ‘we’ve already broken all the moon-elf rules, so why care’? Why do you care now?”

Rayla shrugged. “I guess it’s still kinda there sometimes. That more narrow moral compass from when I was a kid. I’m glad to know you don’t see me as a cheater, though. Feels good to hear it, in your new, uh, ‘growly’ voice.”

They snickered and a bit of comfort snuck up on them. Her arm came up to wrap around his and he smiled in her direction.

“Respectable hand-holding?”

“Is that not how you do it?”, she asked, confused.

“That is how you do it”, he replied contentedly.

Rayla steered him over to a sky elf male, picking rocks out of his field.

“Ni, have you seen Zala?”, she asked.

The man pointed ahead, not looking up. “She’s at the plank. Fishing. For nothing. Nut.”

“Hey! She likes the quiet. Behave!”, Rayla said with mock anger.

“I refuse. Have a nice life, eh, Rayla?”, Ni said flatly, chucking another rock toward the side of the road.
After saying her goodbyes and a few more minutes of walking, they rounded a stand of trees and found the river as well as Rayla’s Plank. On it, an elf woman sat, a fishing rod without a line in her hands.

“Zala!”, Rayla called out to her and the woman twisted to look at them with raised eyebrows. When she noticed Callum, she put the rod aside and got up, brushing herself down.

“Excellence”, she greeted, bowing slightly, “You’re a day early to take my Rayla away from me”

“Aww, Zala!”, Rayla suddenly welled up, “Don’t make this harder than it already is! I can’t even hug you to feel better!”

“I think we can make an exception”, Zala said, sadly, then closed her eyes as Rayla wrapped her arms around her, “There, there, kiddo!”

Callum’s eyes burned. He understood Konar’s desire to stay here. Leaving a prison such as this meant leaving behind a tight-knit community.

“Thank you so much for being there for her”, Callum said, “She had nothing but good things to say about you”

“I would hope not!”, Zala laughed, releasing Rayla and patting herself down again, “What are you going to do, Rayla?”

“For now, dinner. Then we’ll see, I guess”, she said, quietly.

Zala nodded, then threw a hand in Callum’s direction. “Take it slow. Meet him fresh, again. I made the mistake of summing with a loser, so make sure he isn’t one, now”

Yasra snorted into her helmet.

“I’m not worried he’s like Okon”, Rayla reprimanded her, “Even just today he’s shown more grace and care than your summand ever did.”
“Oh, it’s easy when you’re young and carefree. But then, I suppose, you two never quite were, so maybe you have an advantage on life”, she sighed, “Rayla, I do not like saying goodbye, so let’s make this simple. Once I get out, I’ll come annoy you. Doesn’t matter if you’re some royal across the Breach or a legate in the Lucid.”

“You’re gonna keep makin’ me sob, you dunce! That’s only, what, eight years away?”, Rayla asked with a tearful laugh.

“Eight and a half.”

“You’ve been here for so long! Don’t you think you’ll miss it? I think I might.”

“I’ll miss it, for sure, but that’s life. You move on, remember it sadly some days, fondly others. I see the silver lining, at least I have someone to send me letters again. Keep me up!”

“I’ll do that”, Rayla promised, then stepped back from her friend, “Uh, I guess, I’ll see you around?”

“Live well, dear”, Zala said fondly.

To Callum, she added, rather gruffly, “And you let her, you hear me? She’s a person, not your property!”

Callum’s mien sagged. He had never actually considered what Zalas story with her summand might have been beyond the gambling. Her words had some implications that made him hurt for her. Words needed to assure her didn’t come to his mind easily so he simply said, “Don’t worry. She’s free to do whatever she wants.”

The middle-aged woman nodded, then turned around and sat to continue `fishing`.

As Callum, Rayla and Yasra were rounding the stand of trees on the way back, the king looked back. Zala was buckled over, crying into her hands with shaking shoulders.
A brave face, just like the one Rayla had put on for him.

Catching up with her, he offered his arm, once again. This time, she took it without hesitation.
When Callum and Rayla passed the fence, the warden greeted her like an old friend, telling her how happy he was for her at the end of her sentence.

Then Rayla had her second moment of high-society whiplash. A servant had stepped up to her, bowed, and asked to take her backpack.

“I’ll deal with it myself, thanks?”, she said, “I’ve got nothin’ in here that needs unpackin’ or whatnot”

The servant nodded. “As you wish, milady.”

When he had left, Rayla bent over to Callum and whispered, “Did I do that right?”

Her fiance snickered, “Yes, but you don’t have to explain yourself. Saying `no` like you did is good enough.”

Opeli was next. “A word of advice, milady?”, she offered, carefully.

“Please”, Rayla said, motioning at her.

“I’d suggest you freshen up and change into something matching the Lord’s dress before dinner. We’ve brought a small assortment of clothes for your perusal, based on the measurements you sent. Hopefully something will fit.”

For a moment, Rayla was tempted to make use of the `no` option again, but she had to admit that she felt rather out of place next to the richly decorated royal entourage and Callum in her simple, rather dirty work clothes.

“I’ll see you in a bit?”, she said to her fiance, who shrug-nodded.

The two women made their way into the guard's residence and climbed a flight of stairs to the
second floor. There Opeli led Rayla past two doors, then unlocked and opened the last one in the hallway. When Rayla approached her, she held out the keys.

"Milady, please accept this room for tonight. It is your personal space, nobody else will disturb you here unless you wish it. The outfits are laid out for you. I've also taken the liberty to have a bath drawn for you. I don't like the idea of you being at a disadvantage of impression tonight. It won't do to have you look less than regal, it would distort the balance of power. You are his Majesty's equal in all things."

The queen-to-be accepted the keys. "Thank you for all your work. I'll be honest, you're not what I imagined."

Opeli smiled. "Likewise. I would hope that his Majesty hasn't spoken of me with much favour. It is part of my calling to challenge his views. It often puts me in the role of devil's advocate and forces me to upset him. If you need help with the garments, please tell the servant I'm about to post for you. Do you need anything at this time?"

“A complete collection of all books on being Katolin royalty would be good”, Rayla quipped.

This joke pleased the councillor immensely, her smile becoming genuine. “It’s so good to hear you say these words. We will get to all that, in time. I’m sure you will be sick of my incessant worrying and reprimands soon enough. For now, please make sure you're at peace with the sheer amount of change on your horizon. Once you leave the walls of this prison with that ring on your hand, you will not get the choice so easily, again.”

“It’s funny, everyone seems concerned about what I want. What about Callum?"

Opeli laughed joylessly. “He is permitted to reject you, but in general the privileges of his birth deny him choice, as it will be with your heirs. Life as a royal is akin to a puppet, puppeteering. The lifeblood of your country is tied to yours. You are afforded many luxuries, but you will never live a normal, simple life. Though, it appears to me, you haven’t had that yet, anyways.”


“Very well. I assume I’m no longer needed?”
The expression on the councillor’s face prompted a question from the Lady of the Crescent Reflection. “I have to actually tell you you’re free to go, don’t I?”

“Unless you can package the permission to do so in normal hum--., uh, personal conversation, yes”, Opeli snickered.

“Uh. Okay, well, you’re free to go, then.”

Opeli bowed and made her way downstairs. There was whiplash number three.

After closing and locking the door behind her, Rayla looked around. It was a very simple room. To her left was a bed, covered in fancy clothes. Ahead on the facing wall stood a desk, on which sat a case full of jewelry and other accessories. Next to the case was a crisp, new, silver booklet.

A little nervous, she picked it up. The runes on the cover spelled ‘Federal Union (of the Xadian People) - Regio Scotia’. Rayla’s index came up to trace the stylized Precious White on her new passport. She was a full citizen, once more allowed to travel freely. Thumbing through the first few pages, she found her current personal details spelled out accurately. There was even a field (Remarks) that held her chosen Katolin Title. It was odd to see it spelled out in Common, in an official Xadian document. Sighing, she dropped the booklet on the table and finished her survey of the room.

To her left was the entrance to the bathroom, equipped with a bathtub that already steamed slightly. She was looking forward to a hot soak she hadn’t had to prepare herself.

Carefully, Rayla dropped her ragged bag next to the bed and took stock of the burgundy and gold garments.

There were two dresses, one more dainty and complex than the other. Then there were two slightly different versions of a suit, almost the same as Callum wore, just cut more widely around the hips and chest and more tightly around the waist. The last piece immediately had her approval since it was very obviously made on Callum’s behest.

It was a familiar looking piece of kit, burgundy, with gold trim, of course. She picked it up. He had apparently told them to copy and resize the gold-and-white assassin’s uniform from days past. While this rendition lacked the magical and protective components of real Xadian military armor, it had immediate sentimental value.
“Awww, dummy”, she cooed quietly, then stopped short. The tailor had chosen to turn the rear of
the vest into more of a long, flowing cape, which she shook her head at, lightly. So impractical.
Rather pretty, though. Feeling around the back, she missed the presence of the holsters for her
blades. She would have to fix that.

Her eyes then fell onto a small pile of underwear and bras and she bristled.

This was some serious finery. Lace, lace and more lace. The plainest pair would do. For a moment,
she inspected and tested the unfamiliar clasping mechanism, then nodded as its operation became
clear.

She then dug through the heap of underpants, shaking her head incredulously at some of the more
revealing and impractical shapes, then settled on a pair that would cover her hips and upper thighs,
like she was used to.

These clothes were like a warning of things to come. The cloth was fine and soft, smooth and silky.
It also looked like they would tear and rip rather easily. A snob’s underclothes. Unfamiliar, even
uncomfortable, despite their pleasant physical properties.

After laying out her outfit, she hopped into the waiting bath. As she soaked, the pressure of the
situation seemed to lessen a little. The day had been hectic and noisy and now she had a moment to
collect her thoughts without interruption.

He was here, like he had promised. Sure, he had changed, a lot, and so had she, but they still knew
each other’s thoughts rather well through the letters. Smiling, she admitted that his more apparent
confidence appealed to her, along with his now smooth voice. He’d shown himself to quip, that
hadn’t changed. Same with his concern for her.

His letters had made it clear that there was a myriad of expectations for her. Expectations that she
didn’t know how to deal with. Opeli’s warning stuck. She didn’t want to become a puppeteering
puppet. At the same time, she also felt a duty to Callum, as stupid as that was, since they had stuck
together for all this time.

It all came down to two not so simple questions.

Was she able to deal with being a noble, leaving behind a large piece of her autonomy to
subordinate herself to the state’s needs?

And; Was he worth it?

Almost in answer to her latter question, her hands came out of the water, to rest against her glowing cheeks. She felt a strong physical attraction to her stranger fiance, at the very least. He was devilishly handsome.

Though, more importantly to the re-kindling flame in her heart, he’d been loyal, trusting and loving this entire time. To compound this, he’d been on the outside, rejecting easier, more opportune couplings constantly.

So yes. He was worth it. He had quite proven that.

The question about nobility was the sticking point. Rayla hated the idea of becoming a cog in a machine. She despised the thought of having to make a prescribed impression on the people around her and her stomach turned at the thought that someone else might be telling her and Callum to have children when they weren’t ready or willing. From his letters, it was clear that heirs were an immediate expectation, two, three years at most from their return to Katolis. It seemed to her an impossibly short time.

Being held responsible for hundreds of thousands of people also didn’t appeal to her and she bristled at the pull she felt from her opposing loyalties, the passport on the table outside intruding on her thoughts. Could she really expect to be comfortable putting Katolis first, ‘her’ country, if it came to a choice between it and Scotia or Xadia as a whole?

A deep sigh escaped her and she resolved that this wasn’t a question she could answer without Callum’s input.

She had helped him navigate the forests and plains of Xadia.

This was his world.
When Rayla came back downstairs in her spiffy new outfit, Callum was already waiting in the lower hallway. He was pacing, obviously agitated. Behind Rayla, the servant who had waited next to her door followed at a respectful distance.

“What’s up?”, she prompted the king. When he looked up, his face changed from a deep frown to incredulity, then an adoring smile. She understood why. “Maybe a bit predictable, but you still know what I like. It’s missing the holsters, though, the ones near my shoulder blades?”

“Sorry, I should’ve guessed you’d like being armed. Uh, but, you do look great”, he said with an edge of worry in his voice.

“So, what’s wrong?”, Rayla asked, again.

The king shook his head. “It’s just today. All of it. It’s a lot. I’m sure you feel the same way.”

“I do, but I’m also really hungry right now”, Rayla said with a small smile, “We can have a bite with whoever shows up to this thin’ and then while away the night, talkin’”

Her fiance nodded and in a show of playful affection, she offered him her arm. He smirked at her, hooking himself under.

Together, they strode outside, causing interested glances among the resting entourage. Opeli beamed at them and Callum was bursting with enthusiasm at the expression. Her mounting approval meant a lot after literal years of arguing with her.

The councilwoman joined them, so did Honsa, who seemed a little put out.
“Hey”, Rayla greeted her quietly, “You don’t look too happy. What’s wrong?”

{You are Ozhko (who wore blue in the sea) in those colors, Rayla. It’s all so nightly and over-gilded. They don’t honor your true being at all!}, the ocean elf replied in gruff, whispered rune.

The queen-to-be shrugged, confused at her obvious attempt at excluding Callum from the conversation. “I don’t mind them too much. It’s no forest green, but it’s much better than what I had before, no?”

{You could appreciate me and not speak the standard tongue when I use native, dweller of Laraheme (town of the offensive)!}, Honsa hissed.

Callum turned to face the ocean elf, anger in his mien, {Honsa, I am Torok (who made a mistake and is shamefully aware of it), but you act like human!}

Rayla gaped at him and the counselor blanched, switching to the more simple common. “Y-you speak Rune!?”

“A bit. All this time you thought I couldn’t understand you, and yeah, I guess I didn’t for most of your tirades, I got the gist, though. I can deal with it if you’re blaming me, and cursing me, I totally deserve it. This is Rayla you’re ranting at. She’s got nothing to do with anything. You don’t have to be rude, ‘like a human’, as I said.”

Angry realization and a deep purple blush spread over Honsa’s face and she walked slower to fall behind them, walking next to Opeli.

“What happened with you two? She’s downright spiteful!”, Rayla whispered.

“Lessa. We still don’t know what exactly happened, but it all looks like my crown guard killed her. We couldn’t prove it conclusively, so they all walked. Honsa blames me, as she should. As should you”, Callum said, grimly.

Rayla stared at him for a moment, but couldn’t find a way to blame him for what others had done, no matter if they were attached to him or not. ‘Blamin’ one person for the acts of another is how
we got into this whole mess. I won’t be a part of that.”

He returned her uplifting smile with a frown showing obvious self-doubt.

They arrived at the officer’s commissary and Rayla reached out to open her side of the double doors, but was interrupted by two servants, doing it for her. That made whiplash number four.

The entourage’s ranking members as well as the warden and his lieutenants filed inside, standing next to their chairs.

Rayla looked around, confused. “What are they waitin’ for?”, she whispered, worried about the answer being…

“Us”, Callum smiled and pulled her into the seat next to him. As soon as they were on the way down, the entire table sat.

Five.

“Oh no”, Rayla whispered, blushing, “That is the most awkward thin’!”

“You get used to it”, Callum whispered back, with not a hint of joy in his voice.

The warden then thanked them for joining them and dinner proceeded without any major hiccups. Opeli would later scoff at the lack of manners at the table, forgetting entirely that elves might define manners somewhat differently from the human style of fifteen-course-menus with two-hundred different pieces of cutlery. Excessive portion sizes, indeed.

Toward the end of the affair, Rayla felt her back seize up. She’d been sitting stiff as a board, trying to appear regal and aloof as she imagined she would have to. Once more she leaned over to Callum to ask a question. “What, uh, do I do if I have to, uh, use the lavvy? I don’t want people to shoot up from their seats.”

He snorted into his desert, drawing judgy attention from Opeli.
“If you really have to, just excuse yourself quietly and go, otherwise just sit and wait it out, we’re almost done”, the king replied in a whisper, “Getting up is gonna draw attention, no matter what”

The truth was that she had already tried the first approach and was now starting to falter. She whispered a quiet excuse, then walked off, stiffly, under the watchful gaze of everyone safe for Callum who tried holding down the room to distract their attention.

When Rayla exited the washroom and made her way back to the officer’s commissary, she found Honsa lounging in a comfy looking, angularly designed sofa that was settled next to a tall window. She was staring outside, oblivious to the queen-to-be’s presence.

"Greetin’s", Rayla said, "Do you want to talk about it?"

Honsa smiled at her, sadly. "Funny to hear that from you, sistah. That used to be my line. The truth is, I know exactly what’s going on up here", she tapped her head, "and I’m working on it. It’s easier when it’s someone else and I’m just helping out."

"Why do it alone? Don’t you have someone you can turn to?"

"Not at the border. Dad was just as hurt as me", Honsa sighed, "I’m sorry about what I said, out there. You look really good, actually."

"Why say the opposite, then?", Rayla was now a little angry, "I’m already kind of insecure about all this. Why make it harder?"

"I’m sorry, alright? I lost my cool. I don’t want you to be like him. You’re better than that. You wearing those colors gets you halfway there”, suddenly, Honsa frowned, angrily, "He’s not a good person, Rayla. When my mum was killed, he told me by letter, and it wasn’t about her or me. He kept talking about how hard he was working and how much her death affected you and him and the peace talks. He said ‘I’m sorry’ in the most selfish, insincere way possible, like a true human king. Then he went and did absolutely nothing about the people who probably killed her. I don’t know what you see in him now, but the Callum you knew is not just gone, he’s dead. Died with Lessa as far as I’m concerned’"

Rayla considered her friend. "Did you try to talk to him about it? Maybe you’re just readin’ too much into clumsy phrasin’?"
"I don’t want to talk to him. I’m done talking to him. He makes me sick. The dressing down he gave me out there is proof enough that I don’t want to bring this up with the King of Katolis. He could’ve told me that he knew Rune rather than just sitting back and laugh at me in private. Ugh! I’m so stupid!"

The queen-to-be couldn’t help but feel that the ocean elf must have misunderstood Callum’s letter. Him being inconsiderate didn’t fit with what she had just seen today.

"Honsa, I’d like to show you his letter to me from when she died. Can I?"

"If you think it’s necessary"

"I do. I want to know what happened just as badly as you do, I liked Lessa a lot. Wait here."

With that, Rayla walked quickly back to her room, the short distance between the commissary and the quarters uncomfortably observed by members of the entourage and a few prison guards.

The way back was similarly annoying, but nobody stopped her or looked at her with anything more or less than curiosity.

"I’m back", she said, holding out the letter to Honsa, who grabbed it a little more energetically than was necessary.

After reading it over, she scoffed. "Yeah no, that’s exactly what I mean. He talks about himself and you. Doesn’t even spend half a letter on her cause he has so much other stuff going on. Lessa wasn’t important to him."

"Honsa, his only interaction with her was gettin’ locked up for no reason while she made him think I was dead. What do you expect? You and I had a bond with her. It’s a wonder he didn’t resent her."

The ocean elf angrily opened her mouth, then closed it. Tears of fury crept into her eyes as she studied Rayla’s face.
Then she cursed with a quivering lip as those tears started running down her face. “Yep! Sure! He didn’t have a single reason to care! Other than that she was murdered right under his nose!”

"I’m sorry Honsa. I really am. Do you want to hug it out?"

“I thought you'd have my back! Honi ko'u 'elemu, Rayla!”, she swore at the queen-to-be, shooting up from her seat, “For all we know, he ordered her dead! Go be with your killer king, you stupid sheep! I wish I would’ve broken you up back then!”

With that outburst, she stomped off, tearing the letter up and throwing it to the ground.

Rayla watched her leave, totally shocked. Honsa had always seemed very attached to Lessa. Hopefully she’d recover and come around. Her opinion on her and Callum stung very acutely, though, adding to her own worries. With a deep sigh, the queen-to-be moved to pick up the torn up letter, then sat back down, slowly rolling the worn paper in her hands.

Minutes passed and Rayla caught herself on the verge of tears a couple of times as she contemplated the few memories she had of Lessa. They were memories of care and protection, untainted by her parent’s cowardice.

“Leaving like that wasn’t proper”, came a gentle, female voice from behind her. Opeli sunk into the seat opposite her and threw her an empathetic glance, “Milady, you mustn’t walk off for long during a function. The king is still entertaining. You should be there, too.”

Rayla nodded slowly. “I figured. I had a bit of a run-in with an old friend.”

“I was wondering about that”, she motioned at the ripped paper in Rayla’s hands, “I assume it wasn’t good?”

“No. Another life touched by the war between Xadia and the Pentarchy.”

“Milady, there isn’t a war between our peoples.”, Opeli said through her teeth, critically.

Rayla scoffed. “No, there is. Just because it’s not official doesn’t mean it’s effects aren’t there.”
Opeli shook her head, frowning. “Your words have power, now, Lady Rayla. You calling it a war will worry people, make them expect soldiers and death on the horizon. Euphemisation is one of the more despicable parts of politics, but we must employ it, to achieve the state of the world we desire. Politics, especially at the royal level, is all about speaking the world into being as you wish it to be. It really is much like magic.”

“Sounds an awful lot like lyin’”, Rayla said, gruffly.

Opeli laughed brightly, nodding. “I won’t disagree with you. Doubtless, as a former assassin, you would be familiar with the idea of doing immoral things for moral reasons?”

The queen-to-be nodded. “Last time that came up for me, I did the moral thin’ for moral reasons and ended up sittin’ in prison for four years. Councillor, can we do something for my friend? I’m worried about her.”

“Do `something` for your `friend`? Milady, I will do what I can to satisfy your directives, but you will have to be more specific.”

Rayla told her a summary of Honsa’s problem and the councilwoman nodded along, her expression becoming more and more drawn.

“I see. Grief, unfortunately, is one thing that I myself do not handle well, at all. I would be the worst person to advise on this. Doctor Cardwell is his majesty’s personal counsellor, so we may contact him for any insights. On the other hand, I would expect a facility such as this to employ that sort of staff? I’ll ask the warden. Please, for now, assist your fiancé. He will be in dire straits trying to make excuses for your absence.”

Rayla nodded. “Thank you, Opeli. I’ll let you know if I come up with anythin’ else.”

“I see you’re learning”, Opeli said with a smile, getting up, “That was an expert implied dismissal.”
After Rayla had returned to the dinner table, Callum had breathed a sigh of relief. It was nice to share the unwelcome attention with someone else. Plus, it was simply brilliant to have her back.

The warden had mercifully released them into an early evening, forgoing any further activities.

Callum and Rayla scaled the stairs of the guards’ quarters together, then the king stopped by the first door of the hallway.

“So. This is my room. They’ve cleared this building for today, so the two of us and our attendants are the only ones here. Lydia’s gonna be around in a bit to grab your laundry and then take off for the day, so don’t be surprised”, he explained, “When you have a moment, you should ask her to introduce herself. Get to know her a bit. Speaking of, um, introductions, um, do you still want to talk tonight?”

Rayla nodded seriously. “Yeah. We really need to. I’ll just put on something a little less dressy and come find you. I really appreciate the effort you’ve gone through with this”, she motioned at her outfit, “but I still feel a bit out of place in it.”

“I’ll be in here. Just knock when you’re ready”, Callum said with a smile.

When the door closed behind him, he heaved a deep sigh. It was finally time for them to have the all-deciding conversation, and he couldn’t have been more nervous if he tried.

He lit the magical sconces in his room with a light touch to their sun-emblazoned activators, then stepped into the bathroom.

From the mirror above the sink, a slightly sunburned eighteen-year-old stared back at him. The young man in the reflection looked careworn, tired, tense. In short, he looked about ten years older than he was. Before departing to Xadia, his hairdresser had found a couple of gray hairs on his head, a fact that had amused and freaked him out in equal measure. He took off his crown and carelessly dropped it in the sink, where it clattered to a halt.

He would spit on it later, after brushing his teeth. A bit of spite at his situation he could afford himself in private.
This was not the life he had wished for himself. He felt incompetent and clueless, Honsa’s hostility from earlier still burning in his mind. He got this sort of thing a lot. People blamed him for everything that went wrong in Katolis, whether he’d had a hand in it or not. Opeli had told him not to take it to heart. He couldn’t avoid it, and it was so much worse coming from someone he had trusted once.

A cold splash of water brought some relief and a hot towel set out for him just before his arrival a feeling of cleanliness as a thin layer of makeup reluctantly came off his face. Then, he studied his own forehead and cheeks closely. A year ago, they had been wrecked by pimples and since then his awareness of any sign of them returning was heightened. Not a good time, at all. Satisfied, he nodded at himself and put on a well-trained fake smile that immediately vanished when he turned to leave the bathroom.

Unsure as to what to do, he decided to put on his pajamas. It felt good to leave the crown forgotten in the sink and to drop the stupidly ornate, restrictive travel suit he’d been wearing all day. Just as he had finished changing, there was a scratch at the door. Callum opened it to find the expected attendant, Lydia, asking for any laundry he wished to have done.

Rayla appeared behind her in the hallway, dressed in her own burgundy pajamas. The moon elf watched as the attendant bowed at both of them, departing with Callum’s suit and old underwear, then Callum motioned the queen-to-be inside and closed the door behind her.

“I was in the bathroom, gettin’ this stupid eyeliner off, when she… she scratched the door…? And just told her `come on in` and `thanks`, not realizin’ she would go and seek out every bit of dirty laundry in my room! She took it all, uh, even my grimy prison clothes and undies! I didn’t realize until after she’d already went”, she said with embarrassment.

That was whiplash number six.

“Feels rather invasive, you know? Plus, it’s so weird that they take care of us like that. Feels like I’m a wean again. I’ve done my own laundry ever since I was old enough to hold a washboard!”

Callum snickered. “They scratch instead of knocking so you can tell it’s an attendant. But yeah, I guess if you don’t grow up with it, the idea of Lydia rifling through your clothes is a bit weird. I washed my first jacket in the Ibalin, right after Žym tripped me into the mud at Ising-on-the-River. You showed me how.”
“Ancient history, eh, dummy?”, she quipped, then a hesitant hand flew to her mouth, “Uh, I guess that’s not a proper thin’ to say anymore, now is it?”

The king’s expression told her otherwise. It almost looked like he was going to cry. “I’ve actually been hoping to hear that from you, at one point or another. I’ve missed it like water in the desert.”

He sat on his bed and offered her the chair in front of his desk, but she sat next to him, instead.

“Do you want another hug?”, she asked quietly and he wrapped his arms around her, gladly.

With some confusion, Callum noted the now returned presence of straw and fresh linen. A hint of the new, odd scents still stuck to her, sans the sooty qualities. It was something to get used to, the smell not entirely pleasant.

She felt his hairy arms through the silk pajamas and stiffened at the unfamiliar sensation. The clothes themselves were glidey and smooth. Even in this much less pompous dress, she felt out of place. His natural scent was overshadowed by the cologne he wore; but that was fine since his smelly second letter had cemented this as him, for her. Even today, she could still pick up traces of the liquid from the paper.

“Can I just say how much I’ve missed you, again?”, Callum said, happily, “This is one of the most amazing moments of my life, right here.”

Rayla’s hand came up to stroke his hair, “I feel the same thin’”

For a moment, she contemplated saying the words, then decided it would be a possibly painful half-truth just yet and remained quiet.

They separated and scanned each other’s expressions.

“So. Your first day as a noble, done. How do you like it?”

Rayla huffed. “It’s entirely strange and unsettlin’”
The king nodded. “It gets better over time and at home. When we’re out and about like this, the attendants like to make a show of being overly caring to make a good impression on any observers. You have to expect to be coddled a little for now.”

“I had a door opened for me, today! I feel coddled, alright! It’s as though they think I’m not able to do even simple tasks like that!”

Callum snorted a little. “They know you’re able, but the idea is that you’re above those sorts of things. It’s a show of power. It’s saying, ‘Look, we have people that handle the minutiae for us. Let’s just get down to business.’”

“But! It feels like I’m disrespectin’ the attendants! They do all of this stuff, bowin’ left and right and I’m just sittin’ there, useless!”

“They’re being paid for it. They can chose to quit, they’re not slaves. If you treat them like people, you have nothing to be ashamed about. I like Horace and Lydia a lot, they’re really funny and he’s taught me a bit, as a painter. Everyone has a job to do, this is theirs and unless you’re being unreasonable with them, they’ll enjoy doing it. Uh, but, can we, uh, talk about us, for a bit? I’m sure Opeli will ream you over with this stuff soon enough.”

Rayla laughed quietly, nodding. “Where to start, though?”

“Do you still love me?”, Callum asked, bluntly, “I have to know. I’m actually dying to know.”

The queen-to-be’s laughter stuck in her throat and her eyes darted to the ground.

Callum’s heart jumped against his ribs and he felt like her next words would probably just outright kill him. She didn’t look happy.

“I…”, she said after a long while, tapping her chest, “Honestly, I think I do. In here is a gigantic ember for you, bouncin’, and it won’t take a whole lot to make it a fire, again.”

A warm, relieved smile spread on her fiance’s face. “I can’t tell you how good that just felt. It’s the same here, fawn, I just don’t think I could’ve said it so beautifully. Ever since you broke off our
hug to invite the others into your house, I’ve been worrying.”

His fiance smiled, stupidly, “Faaawwnn, ah! I’ve missed that, too, dummy. But yeah, at the house, uh, I, uh… I felt your hands go down on my back and sorta just… panicked. I thought you were gonna, uh, grab my butt, you know, like I sometimes used to make you when you stopped higher up. Didn’t seem comfortable, right then.”

Callum snorted. “Wow! No! I wouldn’t have done that! Even if I had felt like it, I would’ve asked before doing it!”

“I know that, now. That part of you hasn’t changed at all. You’re so respectful and considerate. Then I just felt strange. It was a bit of an overreaction, anyhow”, Rayla said, “Sorry about that. I guess we could’ve had our heart-to-heart a bit earlier, then.”

“No, I don’t think so. Opeli would’ve kicked the door down in the middle of it and made it awkward. No danger of that happening, now.”, the king snickered.

“She’s actually really nice. Gentle, even. From your letters I expected to really dislike her.”

Callum’s eyebrows rose. “That’s good to hear! Word of warning, though; She’s a politician. A good one, loyal to the throne and the people, but still - don’t ever feel tempted to trust her blindly.”

“So you’re sayin’ she’s puttin’ on a face?”, the queen-to-be said, frowning.

“No. I’m thinking she probably actually likes you. She’s not friendly to people she hates. Like me!”, a short, pained laugh escaped him, “Just be aware that everyone you’ll meet at court has their own plans and agendas. Unlike Opeli, the others aren’t always acting in good faith”, he said, then snorted, “When she called me outside your house there, she let me know that she thought you were ‘blindingly attractive’. I’ve never agreed more with her on anything.”

Rayla blushed slightly, “I said it before, but I think you’ve grown up really strong and good, too. You’re more cute than anythin’ right now cause of the ‘jammies, but I’m sure you’d be a real heartbreaker if you weren’t so nice.”

He flushed to an almost perfect red and his eyes darted between the ground and her face. “Uh, I’m taken, uh, by a really cute moonshadow elf. I don’t break hearts. Hopefully. Uh. Yeah. Thanks,
though?"

His fiance gave him an adorable smile which then slowly slipped off her face. She started kneading her hands and studied the ground. “I thought about what I needed to talk over. It made me realize that it’s not our personal relationship that’s the problem for me. The problem is tha… oh? You took it off?”

She had moved to point at his forehead but failed to find the crown there.

He simply nodded with a tired expression on his face. “I feel like it tightens down on me over the day. I drop it in the sink and forget about it, intentionally. It’s a bedtime routine at this point.”

Rayla gave him a somewhat confused look, then continued, “The problem is that I’m so, so torn up about this whole queen thin’. I’m not sure I can do it, frankly, even if that means... uh, even if that means we can’t be together. Today wasn’t reassuring’. I don’t know if I can give up bein’ myself.”

“You don’t have to!”, Callum half-yelled, seemingly terrified, “You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to, even if Opeli likes to make it sound that way! You always have to weigh your own comfort with the good you’ll do by letting them mess with it! Please don’t leave me, after all this time!”

She shrugged, sadly. “I just need to know that I won’t be driftwood in the sea of Katolis, Callum. I wanna be a whole person, making my own choices, until the moment I die. How can I do that if someone else or a book tells me what I have to do and how to do it, every second of every day?”

He once again raised a hand to caress her shoulder and upper arm, “That’s not how it works. Take for example this thing about heirs. That’s on my mind, huge, cause it affects us very personally and it’s got everyone fired up. I get it, politically, it’s a dangerous thing to have nobody lined up to hold the throne if I get murdered or die from illness, but we are not going to let ourselves get hurried into anything. It’s still our choice, if and when.”

He looked away, blushing, “That’s uh, kind of in the nature of it, anyway. It’s not like anyone is going to, uh, f-force us”, he laughed nervously.

For a moment, Rayla felt reminded of a younger him, sitting in the dirt, reading an uncomfortable letter for her sake.
The king continued spitefully, “For the record, ‘not right now’ is my choice. I’m already sacrificing myself for Katolis’ stability, if fate decides to off me, whatever. Bad luck. They can deal with the aftermath. I’m not okay with anyone else getting their life wrecked against their will.”

More brightly, he added, “We have to get all the rituals done first, anyhow, otherwise both the moonshadow tribe and Katolin nobles are gonna see a baby as a total scandal. My opinion also still stands, I’d be a terrible dad, especially right now. Plus, once you marry me, they have you to fall back on if I croak, so that should help things a little.”

Rayla was flustered and upset, thanks to the personal and dire topic, but soaked up his reassurances and earnest green eyes. She wanted to be convinced, at this point, but her doubts were burning in her mouth. “What about all those small rules? I don’t want to have to keep up a fake persona.”

“Easier to learn and stick to them than to change them. Not worth our energy”, Callum smiled, “But you’re allowed to be yourself. People will get used to your changes to the, uh, ‘base style’. Don’t expect them to like it at first, but your namesake, Lady Xena, was actually known for being really eccentric. Apparently throwing goblets, empty and full, at the wall was her favourite pastime at the dinner table. She made it through life without ever getting ousted and now she’s kind of a legend, so yea.”

“That’s a relief, I’ll make sure to throw lots of dishes!”, Rayla laughed, “One more thin’ that’s really heavy on me right now, and I’m sure Opeli will bring this up. I have… loyalty issues. I can’t say how I’d vote in a situation where I would have to choose between Katolis and Xadia.”

Callum’s brow furrowed. “That’s a problem, sure, but I think you shouldn’t stress too much over it. Katolis wants to be a friend to Xadia, so hopefully that will never come up in a way that has an obvious loser. If it does, I trust you to make the right choice for your own person. I can take responsibility for the actions of the country, if you don’t see a clear path forward. I feel like where you’re caught between the chairs, you should probably not have an official opinion at all. You’d risk affronting either or worse, both countries.”

His fiance sagged into herself. "That's exactly what I meant what I said I wanted to be a whole person, Callum. I don't wanna tiptoe all the time! I wanna be allowed to have an "official" opinion!"

A bit of anger crept into his voice. "You're obviously allowed to have an opinion but you can't just go and say it out loud in public if you can't live with the consequences. You're not a commoner anymore, a lot of people will listen to you. That's power and responsibility."
"I don't want either. I just wanna live my life."

"What does that look like for you, then?"

His angry question cut her. The truth was that she hadn't made plans. She had to admit that for the past four years every version of her future had contained him. What would she even do, now that she didn't have the Lucid's trust anymore? Would she just stick around here, where she had been reasonably happy? That thought didn’t appeal to her. She wanted to get out and travel again. Of course she had contemplated being a noble, but only today, when the reality of the situation had hit, was she really confronting her doubts.

"I guess I'll have to figure that out as I go", she said.

As the words' echo faded, his stony face brought the realization that they had sounded firm and final, like she had made a decision. She opened her mouth to qualify the statement, but he cut her off.

"Okay, great!", her fiance spat. His right came up to abruptly strip her ring from his finger, flinging it into the nearest corner of the room, where it ricocheted off the wall with a bright chime, then started rolling in an oblong circle on the floor. "Then I guess we’re done here, aren’t we?"

Rayla stared between him and the corner where the ring now came to a halt on the hardwood flooring.

"You're not even gonna ask if that’s my final decision? You're not even gonna argue?", she whispered, upset. It wasn't her final choice, but his immediate surrender felt as though he was happy about it.

Anger sped up his words and he ranted, "It’s not like I want to be king, but I don't have an alternative here. Without me, hundreds, if not thousands of people are going to die in a pointless civil war as the nobles of Katolis squabble over which house grabs the throne, next. Meanwhile, Xadia will lose faith about our negotiations and the war will turn hot again, probably leading to a number of casualties that I don’t even want to think about. Our-- My house, Katol, has held the Twin Towers since before the five-kingdom-war. That’s over five hundred years of stability! For humans, that’s a long time."

Hoarsely, he added, “I feel exactly the same as you, and I don’t want to have to convince you of
something *I’m* not happy with. If I had to talk you into this, then I’d feel like I’m doing to you what fate did to me. Force me into a life that I hate and a role I’m not good at.”

He avoided her gaze and swore, crudely, for the first time since she had known him. “Should’ve guessed this stupid fucking crown would take you from me, too. I guess I’ll go back home, marry the next best noble and come up with some form of heir.”

As Rayla watched on, he welled up, crying quietly into his hands.

She got up and picked up the ring. Sitting back down on the bed next to him, she extended her arms and drew him into a hug.

“Callum, I wasn’t done talkin’. I didn’t mean to sound like I was, either. It just came out that way. You are so dear to me, it tears me apart to see you like this. Here. Put it back on.”

She offered him the ring and he stared at it for a moment before slipping it back over his finger.

“Rayla”, he said quietly, in her arms, “I… I love you.”

It was now her turn to well up. The pain of the choice between two equally bad, utterly life-changing options was so terrible it felt like it would split her soul trying to pick one. And yet, she had to, otherwise time would pick, for her.

Gambling wasn’t her style.

Don’t be a Queen. Hate losing Callum.

‘Use your head! He’s here right now, looking hurt and sad and cute, of course you’re biased! But you can find someone else, too! You can have both! Freedom and love!’*, her mind pleaded and she cursed it for being both correct and totally disgusting. Loyalty and trust had been the basis of their relationship for the past four years. Her thoughts felt like a severe betrayal of that.

Stay with Callum. Hate being a Queen.
Her heart already pulled her painfully in his direction.

A moment later she found herself pushing her entire upper body against him, her lips forced into
his by an overwhelming need to find and give comfort. His stubbly, patchy beard pricked at the
edges of her lips.

He was surprised, but returned her sudden affection with mounting enthusiasm. Relief washed over
him and he closed his eyes, contently. His hand came up to pet the back of her head underneath her
horns.

The sensation sent shivers into her arms and her fingers dug into his back and trailed the curve of
his spine, coming to rest just above his pants’ waistband.

The kiss they were sharing was really ten or twenty, maybe more, chained together.

Then, Rayla felt her hands moving playfully under his shirt to come to rest on the rather warm,
slightly rough skin of his upper back and searing, rueful realization struck her like lightning. She
abruptly forced herself away and shot up and off his bed, her fists balling so tightly her knuckles
whitened and cracked audibly.

“I’m sorry. This was a huge mistake. I need more time, I’m not decided and I don’t wanna lead you
on. I’m really sorry for what I just did”, she said hoarsely, then strode out quickly, without another
look back.
The sound of a tapping finger echoed in the twilight of their cave. Viren had just told Aaravos that one of the coins he had been carrying around was missing.

“I get the feeling you left it on purpose”, came the smooth, annoyed voice from within his head, “You are not usually this careless”

“It must’ve happened during my last headcount in Katolis, don’t be paranoid! It is a small device, laying in one of our hideouts. They won’t find it anytime soon.”

“Who did you lose this time?”

“What do you mean, `this time`?! She is the first, Aaravos, the coin I accidentally dropped at the castle was blank!”

“Why did you bring it if you weren’t going to use it?! Why use them at all if killing their prisoners would have the same effect? It was foolish to leave it!”

“I am not a wanton killer! And they have no-one competent enough to reveal its mysteries. It took me decades and I have meticulously destroyed my notes and primary sources. To me this isn’t a great loss. One fewer thing to lug around, and not even an important one. The two of them were simply in the way and I was going to make use of their arcania once the need arose. It would be different if I had lost the general or the Legat--”

The archmage groaned with annoyance and worry. “I can tell my mirror was just moved, again. I’m worried they will eventually destroy it. Katolin savages. But then, my equally unimpressive Xadian followers are still busying themselves with the Key. They are misunderstanding my instructions and drawing unwelcome attention. Especially foolish now, since the Assembly is slowly admitting to the real events of the past. We need to retrieve my mirror and its key, before they are both compromised!”

“That window of opportunity has closed, Katolis is wary. Just have some patience! Our plan in Evenere is starting to bear fruit. In Del Bar, Solveig is working on Florian in our interest.”

“Yes, and making such good progress he was sent to beat down our rebellion near the border, and
did it! Don’t make me laugh! Even counting him and our agents in Duren, that makes but three less than tentative allies, Viren. Humans are weak creatures, we need full control over the Pentarchy if we hope to challenge the dragons and their elven pets successfully.”

“Let’s look at our other operations, then!”, Viren said, exasperated.

He bent over the map and tapped his finger down, dramatically.

“Neolandia!”, he sing-songed, “Our agents now have insight into their crown’s documents. They will eventually find something to hook Ahling, but it will take more doing. Do you have any snide comments about this?”

“You musn’t be rude. I can’t help it if you read your letters while I’m asleep.”

Viren’s finger moved south-east, “Katolis is the big sticking point, as per usual. They are still looking for us with great attention. You yourself were impressed with how quickly King Callum rooted out our subverters.”

“The boy had competent help, doubtless. We can’t get at Katolis, for the moment.”

“Well, unless I were to summon another copy of Thunder in the skies over the Twin Towers, but obviously that’s not an option as destroying my people to protect them would fail the mission rather spectacularly”, the high mage snorted at his own quip, evoking an audible smirk from his compatriot, “Again, patience! An opportunity will eventually show itself.”

“We know nothing about their inner workings. How would you know about opportunities without reliable spies?”

Viren sighed, then enumerated, “Ah, your tired argument! Once more: You have a point! My tired answer: We can’t help it! Sit and wait, friend, we will know our chance when we see it!”

“How about right now? The King’s not at the helm of his ship, for well publicized reasons.”

A confused frown crept into the archmage’s voice, “I must say, I find myself rooting for them. I see my past in their present. An odd conundrum. Viren, help me, I’m not sure I could harm the pair, given the chance.”
Aaravos’ ears rang after Viren’s next words. He had not expected this sort of pure, aggressive hate spilling from his friend’s mouth. “Don’t worry. I will take immense pleasure in hurting them for you, both the despicable traitor bastard and murderous elf roach! It is a personal wish of mine to expend her as fuel in the drawn-out strangling of her spineless betrothed and the dragon they stole from us!”

Viren could hear Aaravos’ protest coming, so he preempted it. “I know what you’re winding up to say. Fraternization with an elf is not the problem, don’t judge my reaction as bigotry. This particular elf, however, was one of the assassins responsible for his father’s gruesome murder. I’m morally appalled, disgusted, enraged, even! As his father’s closest friend and a servant to the people and crown he sullies by his utter incompetence and association with his father’s kil…”, Viren’s mien lit up in a flash and he started pacing circles, “Oohhhh, wait a minute! This is it!”

Aaravos was confused. This sometimes happened when Viren hit upon a new scheme. Here came the somewhat sprawling rant, explaining the situation. Three. Two. One. G--

“He left high councillor Kingsley and the elf Helmond in charge. Of course you probably would have realised this, we’ve likely spoken of him before, but Kingsley is the argus-eyed overseer of the Covertway”, the excited high mage waved his hand in a circle next to his head, “Y-Y-You know, the Katolin secret service! According to our very, very late friend Astilliar, Legate Helmond is an Agent of the Lucid, and apparently a very well known and connected one at that, which speaks to his qualifications.”

Viren now caressed his beard, continuing, “Two highly decorated intelligence officers of opposing couleur. Very little will escape their heightened attention. This might actually be the worst possible time to attempt Katolis without Callum there to trip them up. But! Once he is back with his father’s assassin, we can slander them so very easily! Imagine the impact of these simple words!”

Viren spread his arms and said, with pathos, “I’ve discovered that the then-prince conspired with moonshadow elves to have his own father and brother taken from us to assume a throne he was never to be privy to! I was blamed for King Ezran’s passing but look who benefits! He is an agent for Xadia, through and through, subverting our culture and installing a foreign ruler at his side!”

Dead silence followed. Viren laughed and shook his head, his arms falling to his side. “You still don’t trust me. After four years of fighting, working, sleeping, eating together, you still doubt my motivations.”

“I was merely contemplating your little speech. I… I approve, if reluctantly. It smacks of repeating history. My history”, Aaravos’ voice came, frigid, “Regardless, what makes you think I don’t trust
you? I prod and probe for betrayal, naturally, but I wouldn’t say we don’t have a base of trust between us. You do do the same thing - just now, in fact - and you don’t depend on me to act in your world. I hope you won’t feel offended with me saying it, but I’m rather starting to despise watching the world through your eyes. I want my own back. I want agency, freedom, justice!”

“Then what of your Xadian plots? You don’t speak of them, ever.”

The archmage’s voice was now sullen, toneless. “I just told you everything there is to say. The fools are misinterpreting my instructions, just as they did in ages past. They have the Key, but they do not understand how to use it”, Aaravos laughed with painful amusement, as though he was watching a Sickle Ape’s elf-like antics, “They have started attacking their kinspeople again. Why are these fools so easily motivated into and gleefully distracted by killing each other?”

“Might be because everyone hates their neighbor both for what they possess and lack”, Viren said, absentmindedly studying a bubbling experiment he had running on his workbench.

“Ugh. You are being cryptic and contradictory. Use more words, will you?”

“They either possess items, status or appearance which causes envy OR lack the same which causes disgust.”

Aaravos sighed, smiling broadly. “You just told me the obvious in a riddle, again. Why do you feel the need to do this?”

“I happen to enjoy the sound of my own voice, and yours”, Viren replied, mischievously.

This exchange made both the high- and archmage laugh.

Rayla would’ve probably described the laughter as ‘Bowfin’ snobby’.
Together

Her pillow was soaked. She had exhausted herself crying and was now lying in her comfortable bed in reverse. Her feet rested on the headboard and her hands were folded across her stomach. With dry eyes, she stared at the mostly expended, dimly lit ceiling lamp.

A while ago, the noises of what she assumed had been Callum’s blind rage down the hall had subsided. She felt searing guilt for making him hurt so much.

She was apparently the most selfish idiot in the world. Here she was, seemingly trying her damndest to sabotage a possibly amazing life.

What exactly was her problem? Following a few stupid rules on decorum? That shouldn’t be hard. Self-determination? Apparently that wasn’t nearly as much of an issue as she had thought.

It was strange to think about today and feel herself try to avoid admitting that she had enjoyed aspects of nobility, like not having to prepare her own food, boil water for her bath and do her own laundry.

Four long years she had worked her hands raw, even bloody, every day, doing mostly uncomplicated, boring but hard work. If she wasn’t going to go to Katolis, wasn’t that what waited for her, again? Was she content with the idea of being a... well, a simple-life-living nobody, like Otark? These people tended to get stepped on and have little say in the goings-on of the world.

She did not enjoy this prospect.

Whenever she had looked at herself in the mirror, there had always been a rank attached to her impression, with it a purpose, skills, permissions. Expectations were placed on her, too, and she had just finished her punishment for not fulfilling them.

Wasn't nobility sort of the same deal?

It wasn't in her personality to hold grand public speeches and the thought of others observing and judging her every move made her cold with anxiety. The idea of limelight was downright harrowing to the former moonshadow assassin.
Rayla didn't much care for the over-the-top mannerisms of the Royals she had interacted with. Given enough reason, she was brash and bold and forthright and didn’t see why that should be frowned upon.

Then, she thought of her fiance; he was an amazing person but, beyond memory, magic and drawing, he didn’t have any outstanding skills she knew of. Rayla’s mind bent itself against the realization that he wasn’t any more qualified or even willing to be king than she was to be queen. Yet here he was, after everything he had already sacrificed for his people and the world at large, grinding himself bloody against the wheels of politics for even the faintest hope of lasting peace.

Replaying her thoughts of the day and night, she was furious with herself for being so selfish, opportunistic and - against his opinion - a cheater on top.

After their conversation, she had only minor gripes, really, things she could deal with if it meant being able to be next to the person she was developing a fierce love for, once more. It was happening so quickly now, too, her total lapse of control in his arms serving as proof of this and a source of self-hate, both.

She had failed completely to ask his consent. It sent a wave of disgust over her. Onni had shown her how much it hurt to have someone you trusted violate this basic requirement of intimacy. To make matters worse, he had seemed to enjoy himself after the first shock had passed. In her mind’s eye swam his face, eyes closed in total relaxation. It was what she had seen right before she had forced herself away. Wouldn’t it have been better for everyone involved to keep going?

Her dry mouth opened and then slammed shut with the sound of her teeth colliding painfully as she chastised herself, then she flung herself into a sitting position and started punching the mattress, trying to find some sort of valve for the roiling emotion in her stomach.

Neither was a good, healthy reaction to her mounting self-hate, but the best she had available to her at the moment.

A loud groan of fury and turmoil escaped her when the punching didn’t help and she fell forward into her wet pillow, breathing heavily. The elf was disgusted by the sensation on her skin but didn’t have the will to move, anymore.

It was at this point that she realized the truth. She was pushing him away again, not to protect him, this time, but because she wasn't worth his affection. He’d stayed faithful, given her not a single
complaint that could compare to Onni. She had done so little for him while he rejected one chance at freedom and love after another, for her.

Her dark reverie was broken by a knock at her door. It would have startled her if she had had any energy left to flinch after crying and wearing herself out against the mattress. Like this, it merely set off a crackling firework in her stomach.

It was the middle of the night, her sense for the position of the moon told her as much as a look through the window. She could simply pretend to be asleep, and whoever meant to bother her would eventually walk.

She hoped that it wasn't Callum on the other side of that door. She didn't want to face him right now, she was too ashamed of her actions and thoughts.

Her mind changed immediately when she heard a pleading, tear-soaked and weak “Rayla, please” through the door.

To her, it sounded like flint striking steel.

She jumped up and tore open the door to embrace her fiance, who flinched at the suddenness of it all.

Once more he had come for her after she had torn him apart.

“I’m so, so sorry for doin’ this to you”, she cried quietly, then sniffled loudly to avoid snot dropping on his back. At this point they both felt like they were working through a cold.

For a long while they simply hugged in the doorway, then they separated and gave each other unsure, puffy-eyed half-smiles.

“We’re pathetic”, Callum crowed.

They settled on her bed and Callum laid backwards to rest his head on her pillow. As soon as it touched his neck, he shot up, confused and disgusted by its moistness.

“Just tears”, Rayla rasped with a smirk, “I don’t wet the bed ‘nymore, especially in that orientation.”

She shuffled herself into a diagonal position on the bed that left her feet dangling off the side. “Put your cute mug right here.”

She patted her midriff and he obliged, if haltingly, placing the back of his head there, where she started tussling his hair.

“Did you destroy your room?”, Rayla asked ruefully and quietly after a long, somewhat comfortable silence, noticing the dried blood on his right hand’s knuckles.

“Oh. Of course you’d hear that. I feel pretty stupid about it, now. Luckily nothing’s broken, both in there and in me, heh. The crown took the brunt, I think. It looks… uh, a bit scuffed up.”

“I’m sorry I made you do that.”

“Oh, no, don’t go there. Me doing this isn’t your fault. I lost my mind. I threw the chair. I punched the wall. You’re not in charge of managing my emotions, I am”, more quietly he added, “I’ll admit though, it feels good to hear you apologise. I thought you’d hate me; violent, angry Callum.”

"Losin' your temper isn't like you, no, but I also get it. You’re under a lot of pressure and you don’t have a better outlet right now. Next time, come to me and we’ll spar and meditate, okay? Can I ask you some more questions?”

His face lit up at the implications in her offer, then contorted with doubt. Fool me once.

He heaved a deep sigh. “First. Are you okay? I thought I heard you yell, or something.”
Rayla’s free hand balled into a fist. His concern burned like acid. She hadn’t considered going to look for him during his rage. Why not?

“I did yell, yea. I’m just… mad at myself.”

Callum nodded, then replied with a touch of ice in his voice; “Yeah, I think I can see why you might be. Ask away.”

A frown crept into her face. Obviously he also wasn’t happy with her. “How’d you sleep when they crowned you?”

“Didn’t”, he said curtly, “Spent my night pacing. Crying. Thinking about mom and dad and Ez and wallowing in self-pity. Kinda like today, actually, without the property and…” he lifted his hand, sighing, ”personal damage.”

“Can you go as you please, when you’re at home?”

Callum scoffed. “Without anyone to replace me, I’ve been just as locked up as you were. No offense.”

“None taken. Four years in good company were bad enough. Why would I want to be locked up forever in excellent company?” Her mental self slapped her. Selfish. Again.

“Come on, Rayla! I already told you; You wouldn’t be! Together, we can go places again. We have to! To convince people! I was waiting for you! I didn’t want to risk my life before seeing you again! I haven’t even commissioned my coronation portrait yet because you belong in it, in my mind.”

There was a crackling sensation in her eyes. She stretched and sat up a little to drink from the cup on her nightstand to relieve the sensation of her burning, tight throat. When it was empty, she felt another pang of guilt. She should’ve offered him some. Selfish! Again! At least there might be something she could do, now.

“Do you want some water?”, she asked, hopeful.

The answer came rather curt and angry. “No. I just wanna lie here right now. Any more
“Yeah. Can I speak my mind? In general, I mean?”

The King answered with a groan, “I thought we went over this! You’ll always have the freedom to, but there are consequences for you saying or doing things while wearing the crown! I’ll never tell you to shut up or keep your opinion to yourself. If the council does, you can simply ignore them! You make those choices! Just try to remember that in the worst case scenario, you, me and the entire country of Katolis is going to hang for it if you can’t keep your big mouth in check!”

She sighed sadly, then went back to her caresses. Silence fell over them as they resolved to simply enjoy each other for a moment.

Callum’s anger was slowly ebbing. He was enjoying her stomach’s regular breathing under his head and her smooth fingers in his hair. It reminded him of one time in particular they spent in this ‘T’-shaped position, in the forest near Larwein. The horror of battle had driven him to nightmares and she had cared for him.

“Callum. I’m sorry. I’ve been a huge jerk since you came. Selfish doesn’t even begin to describe it.”

“While that’s kinda true, I get it. It’s such an insane change for you. Peasant to queen inside a single day, you know?”

Rayla felt a groan rise, but suppressed it, letting him continue, “Plus, you’re losing your home and community of four yea--”

That was too much.

“Callum, will you shut up about ME, for a second?! I’m totally fine! Can you be a bit selfish for once?! Rayla asked, now angry, “You deserve some self-love! What is wrong with you? I’ve just spent a day bein’ indecisive and mean and this big, revoltin’ ball of ego! At this point I wouldn’t even be mad if you slapped me, that’s what I feel like right now! Like utter garbage!”

“Don’t!”, Callum said intensely and with renewing fury, “Just putting yourself down doesn’t make me feel better! You’re right, though, you’ve been much nicer and more considerate! I just think,
maybe you need some time to sort this all out. Maybe on your own. I think today was too much, too fast. That doesn’t ever work. Let’s just think everything over. You go do your thing and I go do mine and when you’re ready, you come find me. Or not, I guess! I waited four years, I can wait one more!”

Rayla’s heart contracted painfully. She had pushed him far enough where he was starting to give up. The time for hesitation and doubt was over. It was now, or never. She battled herself for a moment, torn between setting him free for good or holding on.

“Callum. Please, I need to ask you one more thin’”

“Well, you better ask, then”, he said.

“Do you want to be with me? After all this? Would you still take me?”

His head turned to face her. A wavering frown was etched into it, being replaced by a look of wide-eyed hope, tempered by doubt.

“Yeah. Of course. That’s a really stupid question, you know?”

“It’s not. I made a huge, stupid mistake, I hurt you and I need to fix it before I lose you. Callum, I love you. I love you a lot. That’s why I need to figure this royals thin’ out, with you. I love you, but I’m also an idiot who gets stuff wrong a lot, so I don’t trust myself to make a good choice on this by myself. What happened in your room is proof of both those thin’s.”

Her own frown deepened as his turned into an elated smile. “On that topic… I’m really sorry I didn’t, uh, make sure you wanted… ‘it’…, before… you know… grabbin’ under your shirt. That was uncalled for.”

His head tilted a little as he contemplated her apology, not quite sure what to make of the emphasis she’d placed and her lack of clarity. He’d enjoyed her snuggling him, why would she have to ask permission? A somewhat less comfortable interpretation knocked into his brain when he recalled the movements of her hands and opened his mouth for sheepish confirmation.

“Wait. Are you saying… did… did, uh, did you… uh, we, uh, almost m-make an heir back there?”
The words he chose, the quavering tone and unease with which he delivered the rather important question sounded so patently like the Callum she knew from way back that a loud, forceful laugh threatened to escape her. She tried to suppress it, but her exhausted mind only succeeded partially.

As a result, she snorted so violently that her contracting stomach propelled Callum’s head upward by a quarter-inch and a bit of snot hit his face. He shot into a sitting position.

“Huh!?”, he went, aghast, then they both started to laugh so hard that he buckled over, falling off the bed, which made the situation even more absurd. She became uncomfortably warm from embarrassment and laughter.

He scraped himself off the floor and stumbled into her washroom to clean himself off, limping with incredulous, almost hysterical laughter.

After a moment, she recovered and joined him while he ran a wet cloth over his face.

Her cheeks were a deep purple. She was flustered; not just by her misbehaving nose.

“I'm so sorry about that! Ech, I'm so disgustin'!”, she snickered, reaching for a handkerchief from a drawer under the sink.

He shook his head at her, smiling stupidly, “That sure was good aim!”

After blowing her nose, she leaned against the doorframe and said, "Uh, so, yeah. On your bed. I don’t think it was the right thin’ to do, it just sorta happened. I lost control and I can't apologise enough for it."

More quietly, she added "And, uh, the answer to your question is yes. But also no”

He blushed to such a degree that he expected the sound and steam of a boiling teapot to exit through his ears. Here he was, the awkward kid who had asked her to do this sort of thing on a couch in the middle of the Xadian capital, just old enough to understand completely what he was suggesting.
“Yes and no!!”, he asked after regaining a bit of his composure, “Yes because we started, no because you walked out?”

She shook her head, sheepishly. “Yes because we were gettin' there. No because I can’t get pregnant.”

His mien sunk into a sad frown, picking up on what he believed to be a heartbreaking implication. “W-what?”

She failed to recognize the emotions in his face as she breathed in deeply, then sang, her eyes tracking along the top of the bathroom mirror as though she was reading the lyrics.

Callum’s eyes widened, his mouth open in mild shock.

_Ismil at advent and Askander at ascent,_

_Take Etwer, Telis and Banther Incents,_

_By your interest’s eye._

Rayla sang with a voice that had definitely had a lot of training in the past four years. Smooth tones, the unhalting vocalizations of a confident singer. When she noticed his enraptured gaze, she held it and smiled at him, sweetly, still singing.

_Invertim and Salis Anur_

_Bring your poundin' achin’s cure_

_To your interest’s eye._

He slumped onto the edge of the tub, marveling at her.

“Wow. Fawn, you have… what the…?”, he swallowed, then breathed, “That was beautiful.”

“Thank you. Zala’s an artist, through and through. She taught me a lot of songs and we just belted them out whenever we were workin’ in the fields or splittin’ wood or sittin’ at home, fixin’ clothes
or… well, doin’ whatever, really. Sometimes you run out of other ways to entertain yourself and it has a way of… makin’ thin’s sound nice after a while. Just think of the entire village in the fields, singing a wild canon. Those were our harvest days.”

Callum blinked, closing his gaping mouth. “Uh. So. Wow, I can barely get a grip here. I have a really dumb question. You learned how to sing and that’s why you’re not able to have kids?”

She was dumbstruck by his interpretation. Once more, she laughed hard enough to buckle and she ended up sitting half inside and half outside the bathroom. “No! Ow, ow, ow, my stomach hurts!”, she kept laughing for a bit, then choked out, “The plants, dummy! The plants! remember the book I borrowed way back when?”

“The one you got from Talaar and Selchin? You translated a bunch of passages for me. Come to think of it, you gave me a recipe for every single of these song-plants, except fo…”, his mien lit up with recognition, “Wait just a minute! You smell like Invertim! And Salis Anur! Pickled Lilac, sweat and the flowery note!”

“Well, then! Here’s Mr. Memory, as requested! Interestin’ way to describe the revoltin’ thin’s but it fits! And you already figured it all out now, haven’t you?”

“You, uh, made a disgusting perfume?”, he quipped, knowing that that was the wrong answer.

“No, you numpty!”, she laughed, swatting at his naked foot, “For weeks now, I’ve been totally giddy, gettin’ myself hyped up for when I’d see you again. I wanted to make it as special as I possibly could, make up for some of the missed time, you know? I thought I was gonna jump into your arms the moment I saw you, kiss the air outta ya and… a… uh…”, her flush renewed, “And… uh… you know? Make our first night back together, uh, o-one to remember, fondly? Err… and so, uh, I wanted to be prepared and made a sort of medicine with those two plants. They make a disgustin’, thick, kinda chunky sludge that sorta stops the baby-thin’ from happenin’ without gettin’ in the way of the love-and-fun bits of the experience.”

“You planned to sleep with me.”, he posed the fact, flatly, with his arms outstretched, his hands coming down toward the floor as though he meant to push the discovery back into the earth.

Then he gaped at her, baffled, getting mad again, “You planned to sleep with me?! You PLANNED!? Then what was ALL THIS!? ALL THAT!? Giving me a hard time about becoming a noble?! Not telling me about your FEELINGS?! Walking out!? What the heck, Rayla?!”
Her gaze dropped to the ground. “It’s not like that. I had a different picture in my mind. Of you. Of what today… yesterday would be like. I was so naive! I didn’t think you’d be any different from the person in the letters! You don’t speak like you you write, I mean, talkin’ about voices! You opened your dummy, Callum mouth and a smooth, dark tenor came out!”, she tittered, the un-rayla-y sound of it surprising the King, “When I was lyin’ on the bed with your head right there, I loved how that felt, vibratin’ in my chest, brrt, brrt!”

“Wha-- Smooth, dark tenor?!””, he snorted, then laughed at her noises, “I mean, okay, fair! You’re not the only one who got vocal training! I have to sound like I know what I’m talking about, even when I don’t, not like a century old garden gate! Gosh, those first few sessions with the council were bad, I got no respect! And, I get the expectation versus reality thing, I haven’t exactly grabbed you by the horns yet, either, and your new talent just… I still feel a bit fuzzy! You’re going to blow people’s socks off, you have no idea! My dad’s singing voice is still kinda legendary among the nobles and…”, he sighed with a sad smile, “I guess you’re probably still not totally firm about that, are you?”

She clasped her hands over her face, “I had such a blast thinkin’ about all the neat thin’s I’d do as a queen. You told me, letter after letter, how this wasn’t going to be easy and all that, but I… I daydreamt about it so much, all day, every day! Then today, after all the weird, awkward stuff that happened because I am a royal, I just had a lot more bad thoughts about it, all at once. It was like someone just reached in and choked me! Opeli didn’t help. Honsa didn’t help. I mean, wow, she is so mad at the two of us and I don’t even think you deserve her spite! I don’t know if Opeli told you, but she had a massive explosion in the hallway. I actually think she told me to kiss her rear end!”

The king nodded pensively. “I really don’t want the details about that one right now. Believe me when I say I get your feelings. Every day I dream about things I want to do and then Opeli goes ‘Wah! Wah! Wah! pOliTics is tHe aRt of the posSiBLe, sIrE!’. I guess I also wasn’t super helpful in making you feel okay with the topic. I complain a lot about the pressure and I whine constantly about all the unfairnesses, but I also never starved in winter and can’t remember the last time I cleaned my own room or had to cook my own food! Uh, I can, actually, but, figure of speech, ha. Upsides, downsides. Again, the minutiae is taken care of so I can load up on responsibilities, and now we have all this other stuff to worry about and you’re not sure about it, probably, still, and, again, I don’t wanna have to convince you, it’s a lot, I know, you know, just take your time and make sure y--”

“Callum, hey!”, his fiance interrupted, with a smile, soft as a cloud, “You're ramblin’ a fair bit, now. Did you miss it?”

He blinked. “Huh? Did I miss you? Yes!”

“Not what I meant, but I missed you, too”, she leaned forward, giving him a conspiratorial look, “I
said - and I thought I was bein’ clear - `I am a royal`. So, selfish as I may be; I am a queen. The queen. Your queen. If you… if you still want me, that is. I… I don’t know if I deserve you, at this point…”

He stared at her, looking furious.

“Uh, C-Callum?”

Then he welled up, hard.

She was now terrified. Was he about to shoot her down, after all?

Callum fell painfully on his knees on the floor between her own and threw himself at her, almost knocking her over when his shoulders collided with hers.

“Thank you!”, he cried into her shoulder. “Thank you, thank you, thank you! I love you so much! It’ll be a quarter as stressful for me once you’re there with me, you have no idea how relieved I am right now! I thought I’d never convince you and I didn’t wanna have to and… and… Rayla! Fawn!”

“Shhh, dummy, it’s okay! I love you, too. I wanna be there for you, now. I was selfish even before today, leavin’ you to go back home to face all this by yourself. That you’re still stickin’ up for me is just… I’m sorry, It’s a bit insane! I can’t get over it! Thank you, seriously! I love you, loads!”

Her eyes once more attempted to weep, but the water was apparently needed elsewhere because nothing followed their stinging.

His hands came off her shoulders and he leaned in for a kiss. Thanks to their awkward position, he had to lean on her chest a little to prevent himself from outright crashing into her. They both flushed, realizing that she wasn’t, in fact, wearing a bra.

“Uh. Sorry. Didn’t mean to…”, he said, hoarsely and she nodded, giving him an somewhat startled, wide-eyed look of that’s-kind-of-new-isn’t-it.
Not quite sure how to handle this more intimate facet of this strange, fresh - yet old - relationship they had just (re-)started, he instead got up and extended a hand to help her do the same. She grabbed him by the ever-present scarf and kissed him.

“That’s familiar. You’ve kept that thin’ in mint condition!” she said, fondly petting the soft, red fabric that had saved her life. With a warmth that radiated gratitude, she added “Thanks for bein’ my better half, Callum. You’re amazin’ and from here on out, the only thin’ that will keep us apart is, uh… is…”, she choked for a moment, then found an euphemism, “our lovely companion.”

Opeli would be proud.

Then he became rather very sheepish, feeling as though he had to level the playing field a little, “Uh… heh, to be honest, I also prepared for unforgettable nights, I guess. I brought some protection from Katolis. Just because our last few weeks together back in the day already felt a bit… charged, you know? Back then I didn't even know how to bring it up, how to talk to you about it when... we got interrupted. It was super awkward. Still is, actually.”

“Yea. We’ll get to that level of comfort, again, I’m sure. Apparently I can barely hold off already”, she smiled painfully, “I don’t know what got into me. Sorry.”

Swallowing hard, her king decided to put a voice to his own, tumultuous emotional state. Quietly, he said, “Rayla. I’m super confused, too. I feel a bit like we just met, but I also know we’re fiancés, set to marry, basically as soon as possible, and I’ve known you for ages. I feel both comfortable and guarded around you and don’t know which is more right…”, sheepishly, he added, “I get your rush. I want to know what it’s like, too, you know?”

The admission made her blush and she opened her mouth to reply, but didn’t.

Callum then stretched, “Um, I’m exhausted, so I’m gonna go, now. Do you, uh, wanna come over and sleep with me?”

“H-huh?!”, Rayla went, flushing to a bright indigo. Had they not just tucked that away for later?

He blinked, then laughed brightly, a sound that made Rayla so very happy, “I could’ve have phrased that better! Sleep next to me! Gosh, apparently everything is now awkward! Sorry!”
“No, it’s fine. I’ll… um, I’ll think abou--”, she started then groaned at herself. “You know what, no! I’m so done with this worry-wormed, selfish, hesitant me! I’ll come with you!”, she spat, tearing the door open so brashly that it slipped from her fingers and banged against the wall, “Oh, oops. They’re gonna look at the place after we’ve left and think we’re total ruffians… ah, good! It didn’t make a mark! Good hunter leaves no trail, right?”

“Is that moon elf for ‘No harm, no foul’?”, he wondered.

“It’s an elven sayin’ actually, but I like that one, too!”

As they were slowly walking down the hallway, listening to the rage-filled sounds of the magical storm outside, she added pensively, “I get what you said, too, about us. I can see myself call you ‘summand’ without a whole lot of trouble, but at the same time there’s moments where I just don’t recognize you as the cute kid who ripped up his sketchbook in the rain to show me how much I meant to him.”

She gave him a comforting smile. “But, I’m sure we’ll figure it out, you know?”

Rayla hooked into his arm for some respectable hand-holding. “Together.”
Soren had finally hit upon something concrete. Or rather, golden. In the palm of his hand he held a small pile of dirt and a coin, picked from the ground in front of his feet.

“Babe, look at this. It’s another coin, like the one Clauds is working on.”

Over his shoulder appeared a very Durian, round, stubby nosed face adorned by freckles. Strands of shiny, black hair dangled into the former innkeeper’s face.

“Is there anyone in it?”, Jen asked.

“Looks empty to me.”

“Did you turn it over?”

He picked the coin out of the dirt and flipped it. The person inside lifted her eyes at him and her expression turned from relief to a rather annoyed frown.

“Oh, duh! Hm. Looks like an elf woman. Weird, when and where would dad have caught her?”

“Maybe he crossed over. You said it yourself, he’s been in and out of Katolis a lot.”

“Stupid magic”, the crown guard groaned, “Making tracks without feet! If he wasn’t so magic-y, we’d have him already. He really sucks at hiding his tracks without it. I mean, look at this place! He’s left all his stuff out and it’s not even that well hidden. Over there, look. It’s a piece of a burned letter. How much do you wanna bet he’s scribbled on it again?”

It was true. Since they had found his father’s trail again through a letter describing a shifty figure with a white staff in the outskirts of a village named Lautenweiler in Rhodia, he had been rather simple to follow, even though there was a long time between them hearing the news and showing up at the scene.
“What tipped you off?”, the bundle on her back jerked somewhat painfully into her ribs, so she turned her head and said, softly, “Stop fussing, you. Sorebear, can you take her on the way back to the horses? Back’s starting to get a bit sore.”

“Aw, of course I can! Here, I’ll take her right now!”, he lifted his daughter from his wife’s back and showed her the coin. She immediately grabbed at it, babbling excitedly.

Soren continued, “I found this place cause he must’ve torn his pants up here or something because there’s a bit of purple thread waving all over the entrance. I’d say he left here maybe a week ago, so we’re actually a lot further behind, again. Maybe he went back to Duren?”

The crown guard pursed his lips and addressed the toddler, “Here’s an important thing, Ames! So important! And we found it! Your mama and daddy are making the step-king proud!”

With that, he handed the coin over to the one-year-old on his arm who ran her little fingers over it.

Jen snickered, “I keep telling you not to call him that, I don’t think he likes it. Also, make me proud and don’t let her put that in her mouth”

“I know, I know!”, a second passed, “Argh, yep, she put it in her mouth! Give that to your horrible dad, you!”

The elven woman’s frown on the coin had reduced somewhat, making room for a part disgusted, part endeared expression.

“No! Dada!”, whined Amelia, grabbing for the coin.

“Maybe later, when we’ve washed it a bit”, said her mother, taking the coin from Soren in the same fashion as he had taken it from her. This made her giggle.

Jen studied the coin, then said, “She looks… confused. Hm. Older-ish. Wearing a warrior’s uniform?”

Her husband shook his head, lightly, “I don’t think I’ve ever seen armor like that on an elf soldier.
It looks kinda light, but still made of metal. Maybe she’s a merc? Tatoos are moon elf, no? Hm.”

“I don’t think we’re gonna find out about her so easily, unless we can make her write it out. Doesn’t look like she has pen and paper in there, though. Actually, she looks a bit squished in… I hope she can’t feel that.”

Soren shuddered. A few years ago he wouldn’t have worried too much about the elf, but then Callum had told stories about Rayla that sounded a little too much like stories he might have told about Jen.

Their separation hadn’t lasted nearly as long as the king’s and his chosen, but the crown guard and his wife understood the pain. Hearing about the elf from the distraught young king had adjusted their perspective on Xadia’s people a little.

“Yikes, Jen. What if Clauds can get them out but they’re all… you know, wrong in the head?”

“It’s sad but possible”, Jen agreed, “But she actually doesn’t look super scared in there. More just… annoyed. Might be cause I’m staring at her, though.”

She held out the coin to where she assumed its inhabitant could see her face in its entirety. “WE WILL HELP YOU GET OUT”, she mouthed. The woman shook her head, shrugging and scowling. “Yeah, I guess reading lips isn’t my strong suit, either.”

Soren was busy helping Amelie stumble all over the sandy cave, telling her what a good walker she was.

They had taken a lot of criticism for taking their daughter to travel, especially from Soren’s mother. She had a bad habit of underestimating the girl’s parents.

After Jen heard of Soren’s mission to catch Viren, she immediately agreed that it was rather important to him, on a personal level. That the affair had national and international implications had also driven her decision to quit tending bar and to join him. It was also true that a large part of her had been itching to do some adventuring, and who better to introduce her than a seasoned fighter, tracker and hunter?

Her then-boyfriend had embraced the idea and her wholly, making it his business to teach her to do
all those things, as well.

She took to it surprisingly quickly. Then, two years ago in October, almost two years after they had started their trek, she had to take a surprise break from gallivanting, going home to Duren.

Soren had been oblivious as to her reasons since she couldn’t get herself to call him off an extremely hot trail for what she thought was probably nothing. They had been so careful, after all!

“Making love’s always a bit of a gamble”, the doctor had said. Jen still smiled sheepishly at the choice words she’d found for her in answer to her annoying platitude. Something hadn’t quite worked the way it should have.

When Soren had come to see her for the winter solstice that year, his reaction had been total elation. From then on he visited her often, but the responsibility and guilt he felt for his father’s actions forced him back on the road time and time again. She had done her best to hurry him outside, wearing a brave face for him while she was pregnant, but demanded that she would be back on the road with him as soon as was possible.

By sheer luck, he had been there to see his daughter being born in May. Even today, Jen still laughed at his puppy-dog-eyed, but somewhat disgusted face when he first got to hold her. He claimed that hers hadn’t been much better.

They had then spent some time as a family, but both her and her husband couldn’t bear sitting still for long. It was such that Amelie came to grow up as a nomad from the tender age of eight months. They had set out again this January, tracking the high mage’s sudden appearance in temperate Duren.

There had so far been a single moment in which their choice had almost cost them dearly. The baby had caught pneumonia midway between the Durian border and the capital. The healer who had helped them get through it appeared in Jen’s dreams with the words ‘She’ll be fine’ ever so often.

Luck was in everything; and in the end, traveling in risk and adventure, together, was much preferable to going back to being alone in foreboding threat. The sword of total war still hung gleaming over the Durian border region and few people who had left had actually returned.

Jen turned the coin so the woman could watch Soren lead Amelie around, observing the elf’s expression. There was obvious endearment written across her face, a small smile draped over her
mouth and tugging at the corners of her eyes.

“Well, I think Ames just broke another heart”, Jen laughed.

“Yeah she does that. Eh, cutie?”, Soren smiled at his daughter, then lifted her off the ground and helped her settle into her carrier on his back, “Since dad’s so far away again, I figure we can drop in on the Twins and drop this coin off.”

“Why not just send it by raven? Lautenweiler’s not that far back.”

“What, you’re still sick of the idea of sleeping in a bed?”, Soren quipped.

“Well, I mean, we can do that there, too!”, his wife said, giving her patented ‘Oh-Soren’ look, “We just need to stay on the ball. I know we’re gonna find more stuff if we just keep going.”

“That’s true. More magic-y vanishing-y stuff”, Soren grumbled, picking up the burnt letter from the ground, “There’s other people out looking, you know?”

“Aw, don’t say that”, Jen chuckled, “You know that so far we’ve been the only ones to turn up something like a firm trace of him. And this”, she twisted the coin in her hands, “is just about as firm as we’ve gotten.”

With that, she showed the lady in the coin an apologetic mien.

“I’M SORRY”, she mouthed, then shoved the metal device in her pocket.
The next day started with a rather careful knock at the door. Rayla shot up, startled and confused, her exterior matching that exact emotional state. Her rather accurate inner clock spun wildly for a moment, then settled on mid-afternoon. Whoops. A truly royal rest.

Next to her, Callum roused, yawning. He looked terribly mussed, his eyes still pink from crying so much.

"What is it?", he asked, drunk with sleep.

"Opeli, sire. I simply wanted to check if his Majesty intends to join the living at some point today."

Rayla snickered.

"Long night. Is it too late to bother traveling?", Callum answered.

A deep sigh turning into a groan could be heard from outside. "I see the queen-to-be has joined you for your long night, how… absolutely wonderful. It is indeed past three in the afternoon. I must warn you of overstaying our welcome", with an audible tone of caution, the councillor added, "Lady Rayla will wish to retreat to her own chamber, I suspect?"

Rayla looked at her fiance, a question mark in her face. He simply motioned at her encouragingly.

"Uh, I'll be okay, thanks. We'll see you at dinner?", said the moonshadow elf, making an effort at implicit dismissal.

For a moment, there was the sound of a foot, tapping at the speed of light. Then a very grouchy "As you wish. Take very good care, Majesties."

With that, the councillor walked off.
"What's her problem?", Rayla asked her bed-headed fiance.

He laughed quietly. "She's worried about another scandal. It'll be hard enough to get people to stomach the idea of you and I. Imagine throwing a half-fing in the mix right off the bat."

His fiance nodded, frowning a little. "Sounds like we're damned if we do, damned if we don't."

"That's the council's problem for now, not ours. We're gonna do what we want in that respect, okay?"

With that, he dangled his feet over the side of the bed, getting ready to get up. To his surprise, Rayla's hand closed around his wrist and she pulled him into a fierce kiss.

"Do we w-want to give her a r-reason to worry?", she whispered breathily, flushing.

He scanned her expression, startled and blushing. The offer was insanely tempting. His body certainly agreed, the tightening sensation in his lap was entirely not his conscious doing. Then the events of the night re-played in his mind and he haltingly shook his head.

“As much... as much as I want to, fawn, I'm not s-super comfortable with the idea. I'm really sorry. Just, yesterday was really difficult. Right now I still feel a bit...”, he sighed as her expression turned sad, “…wounded. Sorry. I feel raw from arguing and all. Sleeping helped, but it's gonna be a bit until I can look at your cute face and not think about it.”

She let go of his wrist, frowning slightly, “Yea. That's fair. I guess I just wanted to, uh, make up for walkin' out and bein' a butt in general.”

The king hugged his fiance. “I don't think this is something I want to do as an apology, fawn. We shouldn't hurry it. Let's finish the bloom first, okay? I figure we'll get our chance to grab the flowers while we're up here. Middle of summer. They should all be around, more or less.”

She felt rejected, embarrassed and annoyed with herself. Of course she was asking too much, now. In many ways she was even glad to be turned down, the prospect of exposing herself to his concerned green gaze becoming less and less desirable with the waning of her roiling emotion.
So, she nodded into his shoulder, then separated from him. “I’ll go get dressed and stuff.”

With that, Rayla smiled sadly at Callum and got up to walk out.

"Hold on. Do you want to cuddle a bit?”, he offered, not wanting her to go looking dejected like this. He got up as well and spread his arms for her.

She shrug-nodded and walked toward him, an impish smile building on her lips as he moved to embrace her. Instead of stopping when he was close enough to hug, she stepped through, pushing him backwards and toppling him back into his bed. Then she leapt onto him and snuggled her cheek into his chest.

"Oooookay!", he said, his hands raised in confusion. After the first surprise had passed, he began stroking her back.

Just as they had settled into a comfortable position, there was another knock. Rayla rolled her eyes, avoiding to make a sound this time in case it was someone other than Opeli. Her reaction had been annoying enough.

“Yes?”, said Callum.

“Lydia, Majesty. Your presence is requested and required by Xadian royalty in the courtyard”, said Lydia, one of their attendants, through the door, “I’ve taken the liberty to collect the Lady’s and your clothes. Do you wish to receive them for her? I do not want to disturb her.”

Rayla rolled off him and he got up, strode to the door and opened it just wide enough to receive the clothes. “Thank you, Lydia. Xadian royalty?”

“Sire, I was asked to fetch you by Lady Opeli. I’ve not seen the Lord or Lady myself.”

“Alright. Thank you, again. I’ll get these to my fiance.”

When she had left, Callum turned around to find Rayla already in front of the bathroom mirror. She was brushing her hair with his brush, which was fine since he never used it anyway, preferring a
“Oh. You’re going, too?”

“Dafty, I’m not lettin’ you do this stuff alone from now on. I need to learn!”, she smirked into the mirror, catching his eyes.

“Well. I think Lydia just taught you your first lesson better than I could…”, he said, smiling broadly.

Rayla whipped around. He was holding up her robe-uniform from last night, but under the cape now dangled two holstered assassin’s blades.

“But?!”, the queen-to-be went, “BUT! It was just a teensy off-hand comment!? I didn’t mean for them to go through all this trouble!”

That was whiplash seven.

Rayla received the clothes. “I see what you meant by lesson, wow. My words… make stuff happen, whether I want them to or not! Seein’ it is a bit different than hearin’ you say it!”

Callum nodded sternly, “I told you about my first few weeks and how hard it was to adjust to that. We say a lot in passing or just to have said something. Now stuff happens when we do”, relaxing a little, he motioned at the folded up blades, “I hope these still work. They’ve not really been used for four years. I had Horace look them over for you, that’s why they had them.”

She unhooked one and immediately became giddy. Her trusty weapons, protection and training devices both, had been missing from her life more than she had realized.

With a still familiar flick of her wrist, the blade unfurled, readily.

“You kept them dry and clean, so it’s all good! Oooh, and honed!”, she said, appreciatively testing the fresh edge. Then she snickered. “Now if only I had mentioned how that cape could get in the way!”
“Oh!”, Callum went, "I thought of that when the tailor suggested it"

He ran a hand under the cape. With a lift and a pull, it came loose from the vest and Rayla laughed.

“You’ve got to be kiddin’! That’s so overcomplicated!”

“Just like you”, he teased, earning a bemused half-frown.

“Ha-Ha!”, she went, her smile becoming wider. Then she grabbed the uniform from him and slammed the bathroom door in his face. The cape was still in his hands.

A deep breath later, the King threw off his nightwear and walked around the bed to straighten out his suit.

“Do we have time t-- AH! A’M SO SORRY!", came Rayla’s voice from ahead of him and he looked up, startled, a yelp escaping him.

The bathroom door slammed shut once more.

“I’m sooorrreee-hee-hee!", she whined, mortified and he suppressed a laugh.

“It’s fine! You’ve seen me without a shirt and pants at a certain hot spring! What were you gonna ask?”

A tiny, flustered voice answered. “A do remember that, aye! But… you didnae have anythin’ p-pokin’ through sheer fandan silk skivvies back then, mannie!”

He flushed, looking down.

It was true, the fancy underwear was a bit revealing.
“Uh… yeah… uh, it’s still fine. What was the question?”

“Sorry! A didnae mean ta keek!”

“Rayla!”, he said, with amused reprimand, “Now you’re making it weird!”

She sighed, then chortled a little. “So. My qu-question was; Do we have time to put makeup on?”

“Don’t bother with that right now. We can’t make them wait for long.”

When he was dressed, he waited for her in front of the bathroom. Not a breath later, she walked out and hugged him in her now cape-less uniform. It was an oddly familiar sight.

“And there you were, wanting to do stuff when you can’t even keep a straight face seeing me in underwear!”, he said, petting her back under the blades.

She merely snickered quietly, stepping toward the door. He bode her wait.

“She merely snickered quietly, stepping toward the door. He bode her wait.

“Gotta use the washroom first.”

When they walked into the courtyard a moment later, nobody qualifying as a Royal could be spotted. Opeli was waiting for them, however, rather impatiently tapping her foot. It was becoming somewhat of a hallmark for her.

“Very nice of you to join us, after all, my Lord and… hrm, Lady”, she grumbled, “Follow me!”

When she got like this, there was no point arguing, knew Callum, so he made to trudge after her, Rayla hooked under his arm. They entered in the tunnel that would lead them outside the storm.
“Opeli”, the queen-to-be started and Callum walked a little straighter, “Why the pause?”

“I had not expected you, milady”, came the curt reply.

“Should I not be here?”

“You may do what you believe best. However I worry that it might still be too soon to present you as a Katolin official”

“You’re worried I’m goin’ to embarrass you.”

“It doesn’t take much”

Callum smiled at Rayla as her expression hardened.

“I’ll shut up, then.”

“That is precisely wrong, milady. Just as wrong as saying the wrong thing. Introduce yourself, be courteous. Do not make any commitments or promises. Do not speak of any actions `you` or `we` will take or will want to have taken.”

With that they passed through the outer gate and were immediately buffeted by soft wind. Within the colony, there was a very steady current in the air, out here they were going to be met with a full gale once they reached the top of the ramp.

Annoyed, Opeli whirled around, frowning at Rayla.

“Your hair! Tie it up, will you? You’ll look like chaos personified in this wind!”

Opeli pulled out the lowest of the laces of her traveling jacket and passed it to Rayla who swallowed a snarky answer and quickly twisted her hair into a ponytail.
“It’ll do”, sighed the high councillor.

As they ascended the ramp, Rayla realized that she was under the open sky once more. The horizon seemed endless, unconstrained by a storm. Her heart filled to the brim and she whirled around to kiss her fiance who returned her affection with elation. A few joyful tears squeezed into her eyes and a happy, sweet laugh escaped her lips while they found his, again.

She was free! Next to Callum! They were going home to Scotia! Nobody could be judgy with her now! She was going to be a queen!

For a moment, she wanted to skip with glee, then called herself to reason, not least because of Opeli’s icy stare.

Teary-eyed kissing was not proper.

Right.

First they’d have to meet this Xadian snob without her saying or doing something stupid.
The coin shuddered in midair, then dropped, tinkling to the ground. Claudia and Piper, her assistant, groaned in unison.

"This is getting really old, Pipe", the mage said, slumping into a chair. The grey of her face and the black in her eyes was slowly receding. Ever since they had managed to capture the rat in the device, they had been trying to extract the animal without luck.

Piper's short, blonde hair lent itself to ruffling and the lanky scientist had taken to doing it as a pensive gesture. "Maybe if we add a bit more calcium and a half measure of arc-bat blood to the submersion? The blood has de-structuring properties under power, I wonder if that would help the rat's energy release?"

"I tried that pretty early on. Blew the thing sky high. No harm in trying different doses, though. Either way, give me a bit. I'm pooched", her boss said, blowing a strand of hair out of her face.

Piper sat next to her and grabbed her stack of notes, riffling through them to see if they had missed some sort of tantalizing connection.

"It would be great to have more mages here. No offense, but you run out quicker every day."

"Totally true. I think I need a bit of a vacation, again… mabe see my brother and the Sorlet. Jenlet? I guess she'd be a Jenlet."

Piper nodded, absentmindedly. Claudia often spoke of her brother. She clearly missed him dearly and sometimes cursed herself for sending him off to hunt her father. Soren had been her best friend for much of their lives but was now tightly attached to his own task and family.

This was a bit alien to Piper, the odd girl out among a family of thirteen. She hadn't gotten along with her brothers, the question of food always a sticking point in their home. Without the support of the rest of clan Cariel, many of them would've probably starved.

"I know you have gripes. I can't blame you, under Callum's scrutiny my scientific possibilities have been curtailed somewhat, as well", the scientist said, her high, soft voice not quite filling the cavernous lab.
"I don’t think that’s it for me. I’m just burning out a little. Plus, shut up, you keep going on about how fascinating he is. ‘The first human sky mage’, whoop-dee-doo! His powers aren’t special, you know? I can do everything he can."

Piper smiled at her boss, wryly. "True, but he doesn't have to have weird ethical problems because of it."

"Look, it's not about ethics. It's about not becoming like Viren. Look at my hair! Look at my face! I’m twenty, Pipe, I’m not supposed to have this much white hair! And; I am sad and exhausted and angr--"

"Boss! You work too much! As far as I know, dark magic consumes the essence of the creatures you're using, not your own", Piper interrupted, placing a hand on the mage's shoulder, "I know you worry about its obvious cosmetic effects, but that's all they are."

Claudia shook her head. “I’m not so sure about that anymore. I’m… I’m changing, not just on the outside”, she wrung her hands, “Yesterday night I had one of the worst nightmares of my entire life. It was disjointed and abstract and crazy and I can’t put it in words, but when I screamed myself awake and got up for a glass of water, I couldn’t shake this feeling that around the next corner or when I’d turn around I’d see nameless, ancient horrors. I’m afraid of mirrors, now. Especially in the dark. It feels like I’m not seeing myself in there anymore. This thing didn’t help. I feel like it’s watching me as much as I’m watching it”

She threw a hand at the ornate, oval mirror under a purple cover. It was turned to face the wall.

Tears beaded into the corners of her eyes. “Pipe, how… how do I do this? Make up for what Viren is doing, without losing myself in the process? Four years I’ve been throwing my life at this stupid coin and I’ve found out a lot, sure, but it’s all useless unless I can get them out. He’s not going to do it, and he’s not going to tell us how to do it, either.”

Piper now pulled up her chair and drew the mage into an embrace. “I can see how much this scares you and frankly, it concerns me. I’m no psychologist but I don’t think this is a healthy experience at all. Did you talk to Dr. Cardwell at all?"

“No. I don’t even know what he’d be able to do for me. Callum’s well off, he can go draw a bunch of naked men and women and be at peace. I don’t know what I’d do. Nature walks?”, Claudia said, then snickered, “I guess I could just join Soren and Jen, be an aunt for a bit. Probably get in their
There was a knock at the door and Piper ended their embrace with a friendly pat to Claudia’s shoulder.

At the door was the crow master with a sealed envelope. Soren’s seal locked the contents. The mage said her thanks and waited for the postmaster to leave, then broke the seal.

A short letter explained how they had come across this new coin and indicated that all three of them were healthy and in good spirits. It also contained an oft-repeated order to care more for her well-being that she intended to ignore, as per usual.

The new coin had her interest piqued and quickly displaced her worry.

“Pipe! They found someone!”, she showed the woman in the coin to her assistant who immediately grabbed a pen and paper.

“Let’s see. Observations. Middle-aged. Strange armor, unlike anything I’ve seen, it looks weirdly organic. Hm… I wish this had color. Are these… flowers on her armor? Stylized stars, maybe? Markings look kind of moonshadow-y, but there’s a twist to them that I don’t understand. Heh, she is feisty with those frowns!”

Claudia smiled at the lady and the elf looked taken aback. Somehow, the woman seemed familiar, as though the mage had seen a less animated version of this face, elsewhere.

“Write this out, Pipe; `We are trying to get you out. Who are you?’”

Her friend jotted down the words and held them up for the woman to read. The elf proceeded to smile doubtfully at them and shook her head.

Then, she used her fingers to spell out her name, very slowly, so Piper could jot down the shapes.
Lapses in Trust

“No way!”, Rayla shouted.

Opeli’s mien sagged as though someone had attached a long ton of steel to the corners of her mouth. That sort of exclamation was not proper!

Surrounded by four Templar Dragon Guard in light, sky-blue scale armor stood a Dragon of the same color. He was about as tall as a horse and a half at the shoulders.

The young storm dragon’s mouth seemed to stretch into a dog-like smile.

“What is up, you guys!”, he said, with a hoarse, growling voice that didn’t fit his still oddly cute exterior at all, “I’m sorry I just made it here! Was worried you had moved on already!”

The Dragon Guard moved their winged Perytons to let them pass. All the while they were throwing icy glares at Rayla who stared back, defiantly. She had nothing to be ashamed of after having served her sentence. Then she realized that the hostility might be due to the fact that she was armed and wearing Katolin colors.

“Good to see you, buddy! And to hear you!”, Callum said, tears of pride and joy in his eyes.

“Man, Callum, that was a long flight, I’m sooo done”, quipped the dragon, “Don’t suppose I can ride in your dark, stuffy saddle bag again?”

“That’s how you’re gonna use your language skills?! To mock me!?”, Callum laughed.

Rayla joined his laughter and patted the Dragon Prince’s proffered snout. “It’s so good to see you! We didn’t have a better way to hide you then, and I somehow doubt you’d fit now! You’ve grown so much!”

“Is that your way of saying I’m fat!?”, the dragon asked, with mock anger, his head shooting back, “Rayla, Rayla, Rayla - still hangin’ on to both your hands?”
She frowned dramatically at the heckle, placing her fists on her hips. “Rude!”

Opeli stood outside the circle of guards, tapping her foot.

“Who’s the shelf cloud?”, Azymondias asked, nodding in her direction.

“One of our advisors”, Callum said, frowning slightly, “Are you just dropping in on us on the way somewhere or is there a reason you’re here?”

“Yeah no, I have wings, man, I fly in random directions all day, got nothing better to do, y’know... Callum, bro, OF COURSE there’s a reason I’m here, it’s you guys! I haven’t seen either of you since I learned common and put on a bit of bulk”, he suddenly seemed a bit sad, “Man, cows, lemme tell you, they are so unhappy when I pick them up for food, but what am I gonna do?! I don’t do veg! I tried! I really did!”

“Not everyone’s fit for that sort of diet”, Rayla said, patting his snout bracingly, “As long as you’re not hurtin’ them more than you need to”

“Got no reason to. So! You two, back together, that’s good! Back together though, right? Like, TOGETHER, know’m sayin’?”

“I think we figured it out”. Callum said, shooting his fiance a questioning smile which she returned with a small nod that contained a bit of sadness, “How’s your mom?”

“Ah, busy as the wind! I’m not clear on how much stuff you hear over the border but things have been baaaaaad with a capital ‘B’! The Children of Elarion are back and they are not happy at all, nope! Day after day I hear of them magicking some town to rubble!”

Callum was alarmed. The name struck a very personal chord with him after Rayla’s plenary session, “So the terrorists who followed Aaravos back in the day are still around?!”

“Something got them going again. The Assembly thinks it was the whole big reveal during Rayla’s hearing. A lot of people were kinda cheesed off by us dragons and the Assembly changing history, you know? The Lucid doesn’t think it was just that, though, and that’s also kind of why I’m here.”
“So you did have another reason!”, Rayla said with some reprimand.

“Nah, girl, I came to see you guys, otherwise I could’ve just sent a hawk, you feel me?”

“Oh, yeah, I’m pettin’ your… nose?”

“Not what I meant, but don’t stop, either, your tiny hand feels nice, I’m so glad I saved it for you! Look, You guys had an object with you. I remember it. It was often in the same bag as me. It was a big die with primal symbols on it? Was that a thing? I remember that so clearly, please tell me I’m not goin’ whacko!”

“Yeah. The Key of Aaravos”, Callum said, frowning, “It was stolen from us the day before the hearing.”

“Ahh, I know that part, too. You didn’t tell civil protection what it was, eh?”

“No. No, we didn’t. We didn’t know anything about it other than it glows to identify an arcanum near it”, the king replied, “We didn’t know if it was going to make us look bad to have it.”

Azymondias sighed, “Yep, you’ve got that right. It would’ve scared them A LOT, bro, like ‘woah, put that thing down and get on the ground with your hands behind your back’ scared! Turns out, it’s got the power to bring back Aaravos -- well, duh, that’s why it’s called ‘the Key of Aaravos’”, his face screwed up as though he was trying to remember something, “it, uh, ‘helps unlock magical potentials and his prison’, as per mother.”

“Bring him back? So, you’re sayin’ that not only did this guy exist, he’s also still alive?!”, Rayla exclaimed.

“Probably. He’s a startouch, they live really freakin’ long. With humans around, they even outlive archdragons!”

Callum’s mien sagged. “Nice jab, Zym, thanks. So, if it ‘unlocks’ powers, does that mean I only managed to learn magic because I had the key?”
“Sorry bro, I didn’t mean to be a waner. But, no. It means you learned magic quickly because you had the key. I said `unlocks` potential, it doesn’t `create` it. I mean Sol Regem saw you do Alatus, right, so I’m sure he would’ve called you out for knowing magic because of the implication.”

“He actually did”, Callum said, frowning.

“But if he had made the connection to Aaravos…”, Zym started and an obvious frown overshadowed his adorable features when Callum simply nodded, “Nah, man he went there!?”, the frown deepened a little, “What a tool. Kinda glad he messed with mother. No loss for the world, that one. Speaking of losers, what about Virus, or whatever his name was?”

“No sign of Viren”, Callum said, grouchy, “I still have people out, looking for him.”

With that, the human king and dragon prince launched into an exchange of politics that Rayla managed to follow just barely. So much had changed while she was locked up.

There was a demilitarized Zone near the Breach now and both sides watched it with eagle eyes. Bounty hunters hadn’t been nearly as much of a problem since the skirmish four years ago.

Raszagal had signed more regulation into power, restricting the Dragons’ roles in the Assembly. They were no longer the speakers for each of their fractions. She had also consolidated some power on her person, making some people rather uneasy. The queen had seen it as necessary given her lapse of control and the Assembly had granted her some of the executive rights that she had demanded.

As the Children of Elarion had resurged, the queen had used those laws and Xadia was now officially in a state of emergency. So rattled was the population that the Auxilia had been called to reinforce Civil Protection across the federation.

Zym lowered his voice, conspiratorially. “Don’t pass this on, but there’s no way we could fight a war right now. Auxilia’s spread way too thin.”

Callum shook his head. “Almost funny how this all turned into internal conflict. Evenere’s holding down their rebellion. There’s whispers from Duren, too, but Aanya’s been through this before. She knows how to deal with it.”
“What about Katolis”, Rayla asked.

Callum smiled at her, and from a distance, Opeli could be seen tapping her foot faster. This was not a topic for discussion under Xadian skies, and now the king would have to answer her or seem avoidant. He’d already said too much for her liking.

“Katolis is fine. Helmond and Kingsley are watching. Under those eyes, Rebellions are basically impossible. Not to say that people don’t have issues, I mean, you know the polls, but they’re alright with me. Or better, they’re okay with the stuff I’ve looked at and signed my name under”, the king gave a somewhat painful laugh, then stared at his fiance and shook his head very subtly, with furious eyes that sent a clear message.

‘No more of that.’

Rayla’s expression hardened, her eyebrow lifted, but she didn’t ask any further questions.
They had said their good-nights to Zym after reminiscing for a while longer.

Around an hour after they had started talking to the dragon, Naves’ Summand had walked up to Opeli to have a short conversation that ended with a somewhat amused look at Rayla and Callum.

The two Katolin royals were now on the way back to the gate with Opeli in tow. The excuse for a sneaky reprimand was too juicy to pass up.

“You said you’d travel with them”, Opeli smiled, wryly, “A promise given should be kept! They were rather enthused by the idea of traveling under more protection, so they’ve delayed their plans for tomorrow. All to suit your change in schedule, Majesties.”

Callum snickered, but Rayla’s thoughts were back to his angry reaction from earlier. She felt a bit wounded and also annoyed that she had said the wrong thing. It was obvious that Callum didn’t want to speak about Katolis, even to a close friend like Zym.

Then, their arrival at the ramp interrupted her train of thought and she stopped abruptly, yanking on Callum’s arm.

“Oompf!”, he went, turning to look at her, “What’s wrong?”

“Can… can we not go back in? Last time I did, I didn’t come out for four years.”

There was an expression of love and shock on Callum’s face that made her feel a lot better about his silent reprimand. “Of… yeah, no, of course you wouldn’t want to go back in! Opeli?”

“I’ll get the entourage ready to leave, Majesties. Lady Rayla, for all it’s worth, I applaud your choice. I don’t much enjoy the thought of spending more time in a prison”, the councillor smiled at the queen-to-be, then turned to make for the gate.

Out here, they were out of earshot of the guards at the gate and the dragon guard further back who were now busy setting up tents. Zym was circling high above them, looking for dinner.
Rayla took a deep breath. “Callum. Why that look? What did I do wrong?”

He regarded her for a moment, then extended a hand to caress her cheek. She leaned into his affectionate gesture, but held his gaze, expectantly.

“Sorry. I needed you to shut up about Katolis. It sucks, but we can’t trust Zym completely. Raszagal’s choices as of late aren’t the friendliest. She’s consolidating power, grabbing more and more for herself. You heard us talk about it, right?”

“Sure. I just figured we were friends and could trust each other. You think he’s got split loyalties, too?”

Callum’s expression suddenly changed to fear and his hand dropped from her cheek. It took him a moment to gather his jumbled thoughts. He was looking at an elf woman. Worse, an ex-soldier. No! Worse! An ex-assassin of the Lucid!

Was this smart? Letting her get closer than anyone, both to him and his state?

“What’s wrong?!”, the elf asked. She looked around, finding nothing that could’ve scared him like this.

“You!”, he spat, grabbing her by the shoulders, “Look at me!”

She felt her arms receive the command to jerk upward and suppressed the reflex that would have brought him to a very painful rest on his chest. Instead, she looked at him, wide-eyed. This was extraordinarily strange.

“Have you ever told anyone anything that I’ve put in my letters!?"

Rayla swallowed. His expression was downright hostile, hateful, even. His demand was a quiet but furious hiss. “I talked to Zala and Konar about them, on occasion, yea. Why?”
“Did you ever tell them about decisions I asked you to make? Things I told you about Katolis?”

A painful frown was now etched into the queen-to-be’s face. His fingers were digging into her shoulders, hard. Was he hurting her on purpose? “I… no, I don’t think so? I told… told them about the polls, but I figure that… was kinda personal… Callum, this really hurts. Let me go.”

It was as though he was trying to stare a hole into her soul and his obvious distrust wounded her, but his fingers loosened a little.

Then, it hit her, her soldier’s mind kicking into gear. He was going to perform the bloom with her, and if he was sincere about the ritual, he would tell her every single secret he knew. Knowing Callum, he’d be extremely sincere and use his outstanding memory to fill her in on Katolis' most restricted secrets.

She’d be a monstrous liability afterward and he was torn about this aspect. He had split loyalties, as well, between her and his country.

Rayla lifted her hand and started petting her fiance’s cheek, giving him a loving smile. “Poor dafty. I won’t tell anyone anythin’ you tell me. I swear. I’m good at keepin’ secrets, at least.”

His painful grab at her shoulders immediately turned into an intense hug. “This political stuff is making me paranoid, fawn. Real trust, like we used to have, is so, so hard. I’m sorry I hurt you. It’ll take a while to be comfortable.”

The queen-to-be kissed her fiance and pet his hair which he enjoyed more than he wanted to admit. It reminded him of a time in which there were larger-than-life figures around him that bore his burdens with far more grace than he was managing to.

“It’s alright, I think you should feel comfortable with that discomfort. You’re a good king for worryin’ about this sort of thin’. After the b-bloom…”

Her heart jumped into her throat.

He noticed her sudden quiet, obviously. “What’s wrong?”
“I’m just gettin’ a bit nervous about it. That’s all. It’ll make everythin’ feel so official, you know?”

Callum scanned her expression and she gave what she hoped was a convincing smile.

“And you probably still have some secrets to tell me, too, eh?”, he smiled, “Well, I guess that’s what the ritual is for.”

“It’s just… what if I tell you somethin’ that hurts you more than not knowin’ it?”

The question was extremely stupid and she realized it as soon as the last syllable had left her idiot mouth.

A look of distrust and worry was now writ large on her fiance’s face.

“Onni”, he assumed, growing very cold.

Rayla shook her head. It was probably better to just tell him right now to keep him from getting more paranoid. ‘Dummy, if she did anythin’ more than what I told you about, she wouldn’t have gotten off with a broken arm and chin. And before you ask, I didn’t have anythin’ with anyone else. I was pinin’ like a tree for you and… and… uh…”

A shadow washed over her as she trailed off, as though she was still holding something back. The slight smile and light flush that followed made Callum forgive her instantly. It was probably something adorable or embarrassing he could look forward to hearing during the Bloom.

She cleared her throat. “What I meant by that is… really, really old stuff. When I first met you, in that moment in the castle where I had you down on your butt and you said you were Ezran? I was a hair away from slicin’ you up. So, so close. I was wound up, Callum. If you had made a wrong move, said a wrong word… none of this would’ve happened”

He regarded her for a long moment, then smiled, tepidly. “I knew that. You came to kill. You were on edge. Of course you’d be ready to do it.”

She shook her head, frowning. “If I had done it, I would’ve missed all this. How do I feel… what
would…"

“Rayla. It didn’t happen that way. Why get broken up abo--”

“Runaan and the others would be alive! I wouldn’t have gone to prison!”, she spat, admitting to the part of this story that made it a secret.

A prick of regret.

Silence settled.

Then Callum sighed, deeply. “Right. That’s a tough one.”

He drew her into a tight hug and kissed her. “Thank you so much for choosing the harder path. You had my life and Ez’s in your hands. You chose to trust us, give peace a chance. You chose to stand against your country, your family, your culture, your duty. Everything and everyone you held dear. And then they screwed you over for it. After all that, you still warn me that you might, possibly have split allegiances! Gosh, Rayla. I love you so much. You’re so awesome, damn it!”

She laughed and returned his affection, happily.

“What they’re gettin’ stuff set up, do you wanna go find those plants? Together?”

“Give me a moment. I’ll go in, put on something better for mountaineering and tell the councillor where we’re going”, he snickered, worriedly, “She’s going to be so mad!”
Amelie fussed in Jen’s carrier. They all dismounted, resolving to give her a bit of time to roam. Her dad let her feet touch the ground and slowly walked her along. She tried her best to go through the motions of the activity, staring down at her swinging feet.

“I’m really looking forward to when she can walk”, Jen said, stretching, “But then I don’t look forward to when she’s too heavy to carry, either.”

“Yeah I know what you mean. It’s kinda weird just thinking about how tiny she was this time last year. Totally useless, too. At least she wasn’t a loud kid.”

“Still isn’t’, Jen said, smiling at her quietly toddling daughter, “Wonder when she’ll be able to ride by herself, actually”

They slowly walked up to a bend in the road. Rounding it were four hooded, rough looking figures.

“Babe”, Jen warned.

“I see them. Look a bit hobo-y, alright. Doesn’t mean they want anything bad from us. Do you wanna take her or do the honors?”

“I’ll watch her. Come here, sweetie.”

Jen mounted up, grabbed their daughter from her husband,s extended arms and he placed the now freed hand on the hilt of his blade, ready to draw it at a moment’s notice.

The figures came closer, very obviously eyeing the family with interest. Whether it was friendly or not was impossible to say.

“Hey!”, Soren greeted.

“Hey’ to you too, Ser. Adorable kid ye’ve got!”, said one of the men in the group. It was a gruff,
harsh voice but it had an honest, endearred tone to it.

Jen smiled at the group, nervously.

Then, they passed each other and soon the suspicious gaggle had vanished around the bend behind them.

Soren refused to relax. “Babe, I’ll go back to check on them. They’re really not giving me a good vibe. Just keep trotting and keep your eyes peeled for an ambush.”

Jen nodded and helped Amelie into her backpack where the girl settled, tensely looking between her parents. She was starting to pick up on their moods and seemed to follow them rather exactly. Her mother’s hand now also rested on her blade’s grip, her eyes dashing between the crowns of the trees and the sides of the road.

The crown guard jumped into the trees and cut through the bit of forest in the crook of the bend, scaling a small hill. On the other side he found the group almost immediately, engaged in a quiet debate.

“I told you. I don’t do kids”, said one man.

“Yeah, we don’t do kids!”’, said another.

“Look. He’s some kind of bigshot. He’s bound to have a lot of cash on him. I mean, Thayne got horses! Look at the uniform he’s wearing and the weapons they had strapped on ‘em. That’s serious finery”, came a feminine voice from beneath the nicest looking hood.

“Ruth, come on! He’s crown guard and they have a baby with them!”, another woman reprimanded, “The kid can’t be older than Rosa’s runt. Would you kill Rosa?”

There was pensive silence.

“Ugh, fine. Let the golden boy walk, I guess. Screw you guys and your limp-blade bullshit.”
“No, screw you, Ruth! It’s a baby! That you’d even consider this shit is evil!”

“Woah, that’s a shocker! Ursa! You know we’ve been sorta killing people this entire time, right? It’s kind of what we do! How’s killing adults any different from kids? I’m pretty sure none of them like the idea of dying! And! Unlike kids, adults already have shit going on! Friends, families that need them! How do you feel okay with one but not the other, huh?!”

“Whatever! I do what I have to to put food in my mouth, okay? Doesn’t mean I have to like it and doesn’t mean I wanna shank innocent kids for it! Plus, the old guy we tried to clobber last wednesday really kicked our asses with his stupid staff! Let’s hold off on any more fancy looking dudes and just go!”

Three of the figures roughly shoved the fourth one along, but Soren’s interest was piqued.

He jumped down on the path in front of them and stood straight, his chest puffed out. “Hey there, everyone! Thank you so much for not trying to murder my family and I for the massive take of two whole gold merlons we have between us! You can have one of them if you tell me more about the old guy”

“Look at you, idiot! We’re four against one! Why don’t you give us both the coins and piss off?”, Ruth yelled, drawing her blade.

Her stance was very clearly self-taught and would make her an extremely easy opponent. It wasn’t overly stable and probably meant to intimidate civilians.

“Come at me, I guess”, Soren challenged laxly, his own sword coming up.

When Ruth stepped toward him, her compatriots didn’t follow and she quickly lost her chutzpah. “Uh. Guys?”

“Just tell him the story. Why fight for two hundred quid if we can have one for just words? Feeds us for four days, easy, Ruth”, Ursa said, then turned to Soren, “Look, we don’t want any trouble with the crown guard and we’ll be moving on from here so don’t bother looking for us after. The old guy, who is he?”
“He’s my dad and I need him to know that he has a granddaughter now.”

The robbers gave each other confused, doubtful glances, then Ursa spoke up. “Okay well, your daddy’s a bit nuts, then. He killed three of us and was just laughing his ass off about it. Enjoys ‘self defense’ a bit too much, if you ask me.”

This didn’t sound like the Viren Soren had known, but it seemed more and more like that person had vanished from this world about four years ago.

“Where did you fight him?”

“Further back the way we came. Near where the river Laute turns into the Durian border. After he zapped our buddies to death, we just took off, so maybe their bodies are still there”

“Did he say where he was going or hint at it? Anything like that?”

“Yeah! We had a totally friendly conversation, dude!”, Ursa said, laughing gruffly.

“So?”

“So what?”

“Where did he go?”

The group laughed.

“Are you stupid? Heard of sarcasm? The old man seriously messed us up! We didn’t talk to him about his vacation plans, numbskull! I mean, I don’t see why he’d go that way if not to cross into Duren. There isn’t much out there on our side unless you go really far and he didn’t look like he had food or tools for a long trip like that.”

Soren tried to come up with another question but couldn’t think of anything more. So, he shrugged. “Alight. Here, catch.”
He threw his would-be attackers a golden merlon, which they pocketed without any further words. Then the crown guard watched them disappear among the trees.

When he was sure they weren’t going to turn around, the crown guard returned to his wife and daughter, finding them unharmed further down the road. He recounted what he’d heard.

Jen snickered, “Ames can’t even walk yet and we already owe her”

“She is going to be such a badass when she’s grown. I mean look at her parents, woah!”

He leaned over to kiss his wife and she returned the gesture.

“What if she doesn’t care for fighting, at all?”

The crown guard shrugged. “Fine by me as long as she doesn’t pick up some weird nerd thing. Like, I don’t know, drawing! Like the step-king?”

“Soren!”

“Don’t call him that’, I get it”, the accosted snickered, “it’s just a throwback, you know, to the good old times?”

“It’s not that! I don’t want you saying stuff like that about Ames. She’ll chose her own path, you know, do her own thing? I don’t want to be like my own parents, telling her what to do and who to be. It took you to get me to leave the bar behind and I was hating basically every day pouring drinks. In my opinion, we’re just gonna be background characters in her life at some point and that’s fine.”

“Background characters?!” Soren gasped dramatically, “But I’m always the main guy!”

His wife gave him an incredulous smile. “Shut up, you! Off to Duren, then?”
“Yep, looks like it.”
Callum had replaced his fancy suit with some light armor that allowed him a bit more freedom of movement. He had also strapped a sword to his hip. They had then rather quickly discovered a stand of Invertim and Telis under an overhang and had grabbed a pair of each. All the while they were recounting stories from their years apart.

A common thread was that there really wasn’t much to talk about. Most days had been rather very similar. Plus, Callum remembered everything they had covered in their letters and Rayla had handled his so much that she could recite some of them by heart.

It was more a way to enjoy the voices they had missed dearly.

“... and then, Zala went to `fish`, like you saw. She likes to be alone a lot and that gives her an excuse. There’s a lot of people who have quirks in that place. It kind of just does it to them. I guess everyone still knows they’re not allowed to go anywhere and that alone feels pretty bad, even if the village has some great people in it”, Rayla said.

“Did you pick up anything new?”, Callum asked.

“Uh, well. I don’t really know. I guess you’ll be able to tell me. Skills, sure. Singin’, you know that, sowin’, weavin’, a little bit of everythin’, really.”

A pensive smile spread on the queen-to-be’s face. “I also taught a few thin’s. You know, calisthenics, survival, that sort of thin’. Also passed on some of your dancin’. Never did the figures with a partner, though. Would’ve felt kinda odd doing that with someone other than you. It’s your thin’ with me. Same with sign language."

He wanted to tell her that it would’ve been okay to dance with other people, but then he also felt happy hearing her reasons for why she hadn’t.

So, he simply smiled at her as she continued. “We need to pick that back up, I don’t know how much I remember. I think the most useful thing I’ve learned was how to grow all sorts of foods, not just forage for them. I wish I could remember all the advice that people have been givin’ me for all the plants”, she smirked at him, “It must be so neat for you, rememberin’ every second of every day...”
Callum shook his head, “Eh, it’s not quite that. Sometimes all I remember is the concept of the moment, not the moment itself. I remember being happy or whatever, but not exactly why, just that it had something to do with, say, a jelly tart”, he thought for a moment, “As for quirks? Hm. I feel like you’re more… distrustful. But that might just be cause… you know.”

“We just met again?”

“Yeah. I think that’s the best way of putting it.”

“You’re probably right, though. Trust isn’t somethin’ that comes easy in a prison. You just know that everyone there has a reason to be locked up and if they’re not upfront with it, that can give you pause. Come to think of it, I’m not the only one with trust issues here…”

Callum nodded, scanning a rockface for extremely orange petals. “Yeah. Trust isn't something that comes easy in a castle, either. I want to trust you.”

His head turned to eye her fondly over his shoulder, “Actually, no, I do trust you. I’ve just decided that I'm not going to make this a thing I carry around with me. I'm just overly paranoid. Especially with you.”

For a moment, Rayla just looked at him, smiling. Apparently she wasn't the only one who knew to use force of will to overcome unreasonable feelings. Then she started looking about again.

“Onni really made me paranoid. Didn’t really trust anyone after her. She just hid her true nature so well”, Rayla said, after a moment, “I’m sorry. I was terrible. I shoul--”

“No, stop!”, Callum said, a little more gruffly than he meant, “We’re done talking about her. You said there was nothing else, I believe it. Don’t feel bad about it anymore, please? I don’t know if it helps, but, given the chance I would’ve probably done the same thing, you know? Tried to find comfort with a friend? I was really lonely and it’d be wrong to judge you for doing what I wanted to, but couldn’t. I spent a lot of time looking down into the courtyard, seeing people I used to talk to or be friends with just having fun without me, you know? Unmarried kings have no friends, only advisers, petitioners and suitors.”

Rayla embraced her fiance from behind and sighed. “I would’ve been so mad, Callum, you have no idea. That’s part of why I’m so disappointed with myself, cause I held a double standard. But thank you. We’ll just have to make up for all the hugs we missed. I’ll stick to you like glue, okay?
Just like I promised.”

He snickered. “Please do”

She turned him around and kissed him, passionately. Her figure fit against his quite snugly, the touch and smell of her slightly sweaty body intruding on him. The implications of the still odd scent of her medicine made his own body react, awkwardly, and he squirmed a little, trying to make some space between the two of them without making it seem like he disliked her embrace.

The sensation also raised a rather delicate question. After gnawing on it for a moment, the king decided to leave it for later. This was awkward enough. “So, um, on the topic of trust. How fast do you want to go with this whole exchange of secrets stuff? I figure if we were really dedicated, we could get through it in like two ni--”

“Callum”, she interrupted with a tone like worry.

“W-what?”

She tittered again, the sound once more foreign in Callum’s ears. “I th-think I f-feel you on my thigh”, she whispered, embarrassed.

The king flushed. Busted!

“I… uh… I don’t control that. I’m really sorry, it’s a… a, um, reaction”, he croaked and tried to wiggle away from her for her sake, but she held him tight. He couldn’t see her face now, but her voice was rather unsteady.

“A reaction… to me?”

“Y… yeah? I g-guess? I… I also had a… question, I guess.”

When he didn’t elaborate, she stuttered ”D-do you wanna tell me?”
“Uuuh…”, he started, not quite sure how to ask the question, “When you… prepped for our first night together, w-what did it look like t-to you? In your mind?”

Her chin left his shoulder to regard him, a rather embarrassed, questioning frown on her face.

He felt it necessary to address her obvious discomfort. “Sorry, I’m just curious. I didn’t wanna sound creepy or, uh, whatever...”

For a moment they simply looked at each other, then laughed at their opposites’ insecure, embarrassed expression.

Rayla collected her nerves, then leaned in, to whisper in his ear. “I imagined it really… romantic and, uh, a bit wild? I didn’t really have a firm plan, but whenever I got to, uh, thinkin’ about it, I, uh…”, the words raced from her lips, as though she had to get them out before deciding otherwise, “playedItOutABitByMeself”

He blinked, then actually stepped backwards a little to increase the space between their lower bodies.

The elf simply snickered. She actually felt a bit sorry for him. Her own body acted without her say-so, as well, it was just not nearly as obvious.

The King frowned slightly. He was embarrassed by his reaction. It was actually somewhat worrying since a budding need he knew from many a lonely night seemed to begin overriding his rational faculties including the plans they had made together.

After a moment of expectant pause, Rayla decided to prompt him. She had given up her secret, so she wanted one of his to make up for it.

“You don’t have t-to, uh, move away, i-it’s fine, I’m… sorta seein’ it as a really nice compliment!”, she laughed nervously, “What about you? Did you have any, uh, d-deeper thoughts on the night? I mean, you prepped too…?”

He regarded her for a moment, then nodded, lightly. “I kinda wanted to… make some of my dreams come true. I think at one point I wrote about intense dreams. I meant nightmares, but also… well… dreams of you. Dreams of us”, he trailed off, staring at the ground.
A light zap went through her. This was news to her and the idea of him dreaming of her in this fashion was enticing. “Uh, so, what... what did we do?”

He shook his head, wildly.

“Aww, dafty, please”, her voice became tiny, “Tell me? I, uh, told you mine?”

He squirmed uncomfortably, “Sure, but what if I said something you thought was weird or dumb, like... I don’t know...”, he took a deep breath, then blurted out, “I dreamt of us going to a ball and then, uh, hiding away b-behind a curtain in the ballroom to... y-you know?”

“Huh?!”, she went.

The thought of sleeping with him at all had made her flush to a pure indigo. There was nothing beyond it and yet she felt as though there should be to suit her opinion on this suggestion.

After a moment of not being sure how to respond, she chose the truth. “I... I’m sorry that is a little weird... It’s just... That’s... that’s so public! Why would you want that?! What if we... got caught?!”

“I don’t want that! It’s a dream, fawn, even if we d-did get caught, there’s no p-problem”, he smirked sheepishly, “In reality I’d probably die of anxiety right there and you’d have to explain to everyone how and why I croaked... with my and your pants down!”

They laughed at this, but the tension the conversation had created now hung over them like a dense fog.

“We’ll wait till after the bloom, right?”, she breathed, unsure.

“I asked you to, but...”, he replied, unsure.

It felt as though emotionally, neither of them was totally ready for this step, but the burning
curiosity, the intense attraction they felt for each other and their more base desires ground against that layer of hesitation, with an almost audible shriek.

Suddenly, the king’s mouth opened. “Can we… find… some shelter, uh, for this?”, he asked, hotly and Rayla’s head immediately started swiveling.

Before they could even separate from their hug to look in earnest, there was annoyed shouting in the distance, dissipating the magic like a gigantic, Durian paper fan.

Opeli had come to `save the day`.

“Of all the irresponsible, stupid things to be doing!”, she yelled, “Collecting flurry growths! In the twilight! What has gotten into you?!”

Rayla frowned at Callum. “I thought you told her to keep her feet still?!”

“Didn’t have the nerve”, he replied, sheepishly, “She knows about the bloom, but I uh, couldn’t find her at the prison and, uh--”

She almost wanted to smack her man. “You’re the king! How do you not… Augh! Are we just doomed to be interrupted right when thin’s start goin’ right?”, she whispered, angrily, then shouted, “Opeli! We’re fine! Go back to camp!”

“But!”, the councilwoman yelled, “There is a letter waiting for you and it’s getting dark, Majesties!”

“I’m a bloody moonshadow elf! I’m armed! He’s a mage! He’s also armed! I don’t give a damn about the o-so-sawwy night! I actually live for the night!”, the queen-to-be yelled back, “Shove yo-- I mean, just go away, please!”

A frustrated tapping noise could be heard on rock, then Opeli turned around and strode off.

“That was some dismissal!”, Callum laughed heartily, “Man I just remembered saying how much I looked forward to you handling people. That was beautiful.”
His queen whirled around and stabbed at his chest with her index. “No! That was your job! You tell her to back off, next time! Put your foot down! Come on already! Dafty! You’re the King! You can’t put your tail between your legs like some rowdy skulk pup!”

The King, so addressed, was dumbfounded. After a moment, Rayla just broke into laughter.

“Ye look like yer gonna swally a wagonload of cabbages!”, she wheezed, “I missed that dumb face so much!”

When she had calmed down, he gave her a sheepish look. “You’re right, though. I… I’ve been pretty spineless.”

“Well, we’ll have to change that”, said the queen-to-be, gruffly.

Then, night and awkward silence fell over them. The heavy fog in their heads had once more run its course.

“Sooo”, Rayla started with a deep breath, “Did you still wanna… find shelter?”

Callum sighed, deeply. “Maybe not. I’d have to sneak back to get the sheepsun condoms, but I doubt I co--”

Rayla’s face changed to revulsion and she accosted him, once more, “Sheepsun-- what?! No! No!! Absolutely not! That’s insane! Callum! Animal parts aren’t goin’ to play a role in this! Nu-uh! No! Ew! We’re safe as is! I’m takin’ care of it!”

“But!”, he protested, “I was always taught that you take care of your own protection, that this isn’t something you leave to others, ever! Plus, doubling up sounds like a really good id--”

She grabbed him by the scarf and pulled him close. He felt rather very small in her grip, especially because her anger from Opeli’s interruption had apparently carried over. “Now, I don’t know about humans, dummy, but accordin’ to Zala, that first bit of *insanely smart advice* goes for people you don’t *trust*! Why you’d want to do bed sports with someone untrustworthy, I don’t get, but you just told me earlier how you trust *me* and all that, so how about you do that?! You’re my first, and I am
a squeaky clean elf! Prison doctor tells me so, too, and she would know! AND I take this disgustin’ stuff every night at the exact same time to make sure we don’t make a scandal for poor, dumb Opeli and there’s just a teensy one-in-one-hundred chance that your little Katolin soldiers could march around that… uh… and only… uh… if we mess up and… and…”

Her anger was somewhat displaced by an itemized list of all the words she had just said.

“Uh”, she said, giving a startled glance at her fiance’s equally wide-eyed face.

He chose to reassure her. “Okay, well… uh… I got a check-up too. You’re also my first, obviously, and I’m a squeaky clean human. So I guess we’re good?”

She blinked, then let him go with a nervous laugh. “Let’s find ourselves some Salis Anur already! What are we standin’ here for?!”

With that, she quickly walked ahead.
Role Models

The scent was familiar and a complete throwback to a night spent in a frosty Xadian cave. Oranges, cinnamon and cedarwood. This time, he had goggles - originally meant to protect from sandy winds - and was engaged in rather pleasant conversation with his fiance while being pelted by bits and pieces of Telis seed.

They were sitting in a rather substantial tent, raised for them by the entourage. In the middle burned a small fire which exhausted through a hole in the roof. Along the rear sides stood two cots they were intending to move side-by-side later. On either side of the entrance stood a desk and chair, equipped with quills and paper.

After returning from their more or less successful walk, they had decided to process the flowers right then and there. It would be nice to have the Bloom all done before crossing into her homeland where the Lucid would doubtlessly eye them with some annoyance.

Since they had both slept in, a long night didn’t seem so bad.

Callum had made sure to tell Opeli to wake them early tomorrow. He wasn’t looking forward to traveling exhausted, but it would have to happen. They had only about two weeks to get to Scotia and Rayla’s home, Cardow, then turn around and go to Point Sarai for a month, three-quarters of the way across the continent. Callum’s plan was to send the entourage back to the Twins as soon as they crossed the border into Katolis, then making use of Isoros’ superior speed. He was somewhat banking on the idea that the animal would be capable of carrying them both.

He was so looking forward to leaving all these people behind.

Opeli didn’t yet know this plan.

“... so Naves asks me to hold the baby and I’m just standing there, holding him under his arms with my own outstretched while he’s screamin’ his lil’ head off. She re-fastens her arming belt all calm, grabs him from me and simply grunts ‘Aye, tanks’!”, Rayla imitated the guard’s lower voice with pursed lips and a dramatic frown, “I do not know how she handles this baby or babies in general! I’m so worried I’ll break them or they’ll break me!”

“I’ve heard it’s not like that when they’re your own”, Callum said, mixing his Banther Lily mush and Etwer sap with the powdered Telis. Unlike last time, the ingredients were fresher and easier to
stir into a smooth paste.

“Eh, I somehow doubt that. My own are gonna be heirs to a human kingdom. They already have issues that I don’t look forward to dealin’ with”

“Hey, I grew up a prince! What’s wrong with that?”

“You didn’t have us as your parents?”

They laughed at this, but Callum found himself agreeing. His parents had seemed so in control of everything, he had always felt protected and safe. Somehow it was difficult to think that he’d be able to provide that. Looking at the life he had lived recently and what he was afraid would come, it was hard to think that having children would be doing them any favours, them being halflings, supposed to inherit a human kingdom.

Rayla had her own doubts. Her parents had given her an idea as to how not to do things, she’d have to look to Runaan as a good role model. He had had similar issues, though, also putting duty first and treating her more like a soldier than a child at times. At least he had always been very caring, together with his summand Akande. Despite what she had believed of herself when she was younger, there were now some doubts floating in her mind about wanting children at all.

The time they had taken to introspect was the first moment of silence they had had since setting out on their flower picking adventure. Neither of them felt like talking about their future worries right now.

“All done”, said Callum, spearing the last of his incense sticks into a bucket of sand to let them dry.

Getting up from the fireside to wash his mortar and pestle outside, he noticed a sealed envelope on his desk. After he had finished cleaning his tools, he picked it up and held it up for her.

“Rayla. This is the Royal Avisa. It’s a newsletter. Keeps us up-to-date on Katolis and the world as Katolis knows it. We read it, then burn it. Never keep them lying around. If there’s something you need to remember, write it down, elsewhere, in code. You do know some kind of cypher, right?”

The queen-to-be nodded, smirking wryly. “Ex-Lucid agent here, dafty. I know ‘a` cypher, alright. If it’s so sensitive, why would they send it to Xadia? That sounds like a terrible idea to me”
"It’s all written in code", the king said, breaking the seal.

He studied the page, then used a small book to find the cypher the writers had used. For a moment, he sat at his desk to decode the lengthy message.

As Rayla was dumping dirty water from her own mortar outside, he leaned back and sighed, deeply. “Damn. Not again.”

She stepped behind him, draped her arms around his neck and kissed his cheek. He relaxed palpably. It was so, so nice to not take these sorts of news by yourself.

“So? What’s the crisis?”, the queen-to-be asked, quietly, while still nuzzling him.

“We had another skirmish with rebels at Klimme on the shore of the Valmar bay. They’re coming over from Evenere, trying to get stuff started in Katolis, too.”

Rayla pulled up her chair and sat. “What are their goals?”

“To get rid of the Monarchy, essentially. They want `democracy`.”

“Why’d you say it like that? Xadia’s democratic.”

“Yeah. Helped a lot to avoid making dumb choices, right?”, he scoffed, “I’m okay with the idea of giving the people some power, don’t get me wrong, but if Xadia’s taught me anything it’s that a democratic government is only ever as good as the topics and people they run on. Unless people on the whole know a lot about the world, politicians like Sol Regem can pretty easily carve out a majority by making up random problems and blowing others out of proportion. Plus, I just think that if we let violent rebels create a government on their terms, it’s gonna be made up of bullies.”

Rayla shrug-nodded. “Makes sense, in a way. What if you changed Katolis to allow for some democracy? Wouldn’t that sorta help calm them down?”
Her king smiled at her. “I’ve been working on that, actually. The nobles and the council aren’t super enthusiastic about the idea. It’s a huge struggle to make anything happen in that direction without getting myself deposed. My dad had that same fight with them over public education. I feel like it’s still not done, that project.”

“Pfft. Show them the alternative. Point at Evenere.”

“I have, they don’t care. But, still, good thinking.”

His fiance thought for a moment, then asked, “I thought you didn’t like bein’ king. Why does it matter if you’re deposed?”

He snorted. She was being a bit naive. “Well, for one I - we, actually - would probably be killed in the process. Even if that wasn’t a problem, I have a vision for Katolis that I think is better than what the other houses are looking to do, so I don’t want to hand off power. Two of them are actually pro-war.”

“So who are these houses?”

“Hm. There’s four principalities in Katolis”, he scanned the scroll-holder on his table, then pulled out a map, “In the north we have Rhodia next to the Valmar Bay. It’s controlled by House Rho. Vedevis by the Xadian border belongs to house Vedin. Then, the middle-kingdom or Katrismark, that’s ours. The last one is known as the maritime because they have more ocean shores than any other county. It’s actually called Tineland, belonging to, predictably, the Tines. Those are the four most important noble houses. The only ones that matter, really. Rho, Vedin, Tines, Katol.”

“So, wait, if Katol is only one house, why do they control the whole country?”

“Katol is the most powerful. The Katrismark has always been the largest since Saskia carved it out for our house. It’s named for her favourite dog, actually.”

“Katolis is the name of a dog?!!”

“No, Katris is. Saskia’s clan was Katol. So really, the region is ‘Katris’ place’ and the country’s named ‘Of the clan Katol’. Del Bar actually still holds on to the whole clan thing”, after a pensive second, he shrugged, “I guess we do, too, just not in our names.”
Rayla’s head was spinning a little. “Sounds like sky elves. So, I’m assumin’ I need to kinda know a bit about all these houses, right? Make a good impression?”

Callum spun to face her, smiling, then dropped forward into her arms. “Fawn! It’s like you were made for this! Yes, of course it would make a good impression if you knew a bit about each of them!”

She pet his hair. “So? Tell me some stuff.”

He got up. “What time is it?”

For a moment, Rayla simply listened into herself. “Hm. Few minutes after midnight?”, she said.

“Okay, well, Opeli hates to sleep, so I’ll be right back.”

He strode out and Rayla blinked. Was he not going to teach her himself?

While she waited, she read the rest of the avisa. There was a lot of data buried in it, statistics about food reserves, mostly. A small note on public demonstrations in Duren. A section on a skirmish between a so-called task force and a larger group of human bounty hunters in the demilitarized zone.

The queen-to-be blinked. “Task force?”

Then came a few more personal messages meant for Callum’s eyes and she stopped reading, but not before noticing a sentence that indicated that Soren had found another coin.

She twiddled her thumbs for a while, blushing like an idiot while thinking back to their evening. Opeli’s interruption had erased the moment’s magic, so nothing of note had happened between them. Once more she admitted that rationally, they were going too fast for her liking, and yet, it all seemed so right.
Her smiley-faced reverie was interrupted when Callum came back with a book. Once more Rayla was struck by how ‘blindingly attractive’ he was.

“Hey!” she said, breathily.

Hearing her oddly eager tone made her frown, internally, ‘Too! Fast! Keep yer heid!’

He hadn’t really noticed, either way, dropping the book on his table in front of her. There was an angry frown on his face.

“What happened?”, Rayla inquired.

“It’s Opeli. She’s still annoyed at us for going to get the flowers. According to her we should’ve sent our attendants instead.”

“She really just doesn’t want you to die. That’s a goal we share”, Rayla snickered.

“The high councillor has asked me to inform you how unimpressed she is with your actions and words”, Callum said, giving his best impression of a noble.

“The high councillor can go jump off a cliff”, the elf replied, also using a snobby inflection, then she got up to embrace her fiance.

He was starting to wish that she’d be able to touch him without his mind immediately short circuiting. It felt a little disrespectful to be so singularly attracted to her body, to snap into this mode of desire whenever she stepped a little too close or looked at him just so. For the moment, the only thing he could think to do was to step out of her arms and to sit down again. She seemed a bit confused, but sat, as well.

“Looks like they might’ve found another coin”, she said to lighten the suddenly heavy mood.

Callum quickly read over the avisa and scanned the few personal notes.
“Contains an elf woman. Interesting. She spelled out her name for them”, he smirked at his fiance, mischievously, “You elves all know each other, right? Know anyone named `Tyne`?”

Her hand closed around his lower arm, mouth opened in shock, her eyes widened.

“Callum! That’s my mum’s name!”
First Ruling

The next day came with Opeli’s loud good-mornings through the closed tent flap. It was also raining slightly, making for a cozy atmosphere under their shared blanket.

Even though she enjoyed waking up next to her fiance, Rayla felt numb and confused. The idea that her mother might be in a coin rather than having ran off turned her stomach in five different directions.

As a result, she hadn't slept well, even given that there was absolutely nothing she could do.

Callum had told her they were going to send a letter early today, giving orders based on the avisa which now smoldered as ash in the fire bowl in the center of the tent.

Rayla fully intended to have Claudia ask the lady in the coin if she was her mother. If it turned out to be true, the elf surmised, she'd have a lot of things to reevaluate.

The queen-to-be had followed the lead of others in her community in denouncing her own parents as cowards. The idea that none of it was true, that her parents had done their duty and were still being dragged through the mud by her and every other person in Cardow made her rather very upset.

For the moment, she resolved, she should probably pass on Opeli’s message and wake her fiance.

“Hey”, she went, snuggling close to Callum. He didn’t react at all, the regular rise and fall of his chest undisturbed.

An impish smile stole into the corner of her lips as she poked his side. The first prod resulted in a grunt, the second in a half-hearted swat at her hand.

“You sleep like a rock”, Rayla whispered in his ear, “Come on, my king, wakey-wakey”

Rocking him softly, she finally managed to wake him. He grunted, then opened his eyes, blinking.
“Ugh”, was the first word out of his mouth, then his glance met hers and he smiled, lovingly. His voice was gruff and hoarse from not getting enough sleep. “I keep waking up wondering if I dreamt all this, but here you are, radiant like the morning sun”

She smiled at his sweet compliment. “It’s nice. Sleepin’ next to you. Wakin’ next to you. Actually, just bein’ next to you is great overall.”

Then the queen-to-be bent over to kiss her king and whispered, “But you do look a bit tired. Wanna get dressed?”

“You first”, he said, yawning. He got up and made to leave the tent to give her space.

While he leaned outside to grab something right in front of the tent’s entrance, she wondered, “You’ll go out there in your jammies? The king. Standin’ in the rain in his jammies?”, she asked, incredulous.

He turned around with a small tub of hot water in his hands, doubtlessly prepared by their attendants and shot her a confused smile. “I… uh… did it yesterday?”

“It was the middle of the night, Callum, nobody saw you. Just… you know, stay. I figure after all that bedroom talk yesterday we might as well get comfortable with this, first. Feels a bit like harnessing the warg by the rear end, otherwise”

“Putting the cart before the horse?”

“Oh, those are kinda similar. Not my point, though.”

He put the tub down, thought for a moment, then stripped off his shirt.

“You already saw everything you’ll see today”, he said, “So I don’t even really ca-- what?”

“You’re gonna put on new undies”, she said, matter-of-factly, crossing her arms. She couldn’t
believe he would wear the same underwear more than two days in a row. At least, if given the choice, which she knew he had.

He looked rather sheepish. “Uh. I would, sure, but…”

“Callum, if you’re not comfortable with this, please tell me. I’m not Opeli, you don’t have to tuck your tail”, his fiance said with an annoyed edge at his tongue-tiedness.

He felt rather challenged by her tone, so he gave her a defiant frown, hooked his thumbs into his pants and underpants and pushed them down past his knees.

“Aha!”, he went when she whirled about to avoid looking, standing straight as a board, “Talk to me about discomfort, will you!?”

“Ya big jerk!”, she laughed nervously, “Ya could’ve… A don’t know, gone a wee bit slower?!?”

His hand came to rest on her shoulder. “Sorry. I… I hope t-that wasn’t weird.”

She shook her head, then spoke, keeping a very controlled tone, “Nah, it was actually pretty funny”

In her mind though, chaos ruled. He was not wearing anything behind her! He was touching her! With no clothes on him!

The moonshadow elf took a deep breath and when his hand left her shoulder, she asked, “Is it awright if A look?”

“Duh, of course, otherwise I wouldn’t have p-pulled my pants down in plain view”, came his amused but nervous reply.

She turned, slowly. He was turned away, busy giving himself a quick wash with a wet towel.

Then he started digging through a chest of clothes that had originally been under his cot, but stood against the rear wall now. He was crouched down and Rayla caught herself wishing he’d turn
around already. Not that she didn't appreciate his back, the anticipation simply gnawed at her.

He felt her eyes on his rear, trying to not feel embarrassed or strange about her attention. It was new, this sensation of being naked around her. He'd been in the nude with his doctors, but that felt merely professional and entirely distant.

“Are you gonna get dressed, too?”

She simply shook her head.

“Wow, that’s not fair”, he laughed, “You’re the one who started this!”

Rayla started kneading her cold hands. Stupid, big mouth!

“Don’t worry, it’s alright if you don’t want to”, Callum said, then turned to put on his fresh underwear.

“Eep”, exclaimed his fiance.

He blinked at her, then realized where she was looking and was torn between laughter and embarrassment. With a determined pull, his underwear covered the area of her attention and her eyes started darting, now aware of her somewhat obvious stare.

“Ah, dafty!”, Rayla finally found her voice again, “Ye’re a bonnie in the skud!”

He smirked. “I’m hoping that’s a good thing?”

She nodded.

When he was dressed, he snickered at her nervous expression, then made for the tent flap. Outside, he looked around. Around their tent was a ring of nothingness that gave them some privacy. Then followed the tents of their guards. Further outside that ring camped the Canon Guard. The misty rain obscured more distant objects, but far to his right he could see a Zym-shaped object hugging
the ground. He wasn’t quite sure what the dragon intended to do from here.

“Callum”, came Rayla’s tiny voice from inside.

He knew exactly what she was doing. “You don’t have to get even. I get that it’s a bit different for you. You’re a moonshadow elf so we’ll get to it during the Blo--”

“Shut up an’ look already!”, she shouted, angrily.

The king hiccuped as his heart rammed into his throat.

He waddled through the flap and found her, nervous, naked and blushing, as he’d expected. She was still standing rather stiffly, her right arm crossed over her chest, her left hand covering her lap.

“You’re gorgeous”, he said as though he was stating universal fact, surprised at how easily the words found their way across his lips.

His gaze and the words made his attention rather plain and she panicked. In Rayla’s culture, there was a lot attached to this moment, but it was all out of order!

“Th-thanks! Now g-get out!”, she stuttered.

“Oh, uh, sure?”, he said, rather surprised.

Seeing him turn away with confused disappointment in his face made her mad at herself.

Tradition, schmadition! If she was one to follow tradition, he’d be dead by her hand! Screw tradition!

Uh, a little.
“Stop!”, Rayla ordered with a squeak that made her even more embarrassed.

Callum turned back, his confusion mounting. “Can you, uh, be a bit more consistent?”

He could see her swallow. “A’m sorry. A really am. Me an’ ma big, stupid mouth. A’m fightin’ my old moral compass again, it’s just… a bit difficult.”

“You don’t have to. Like I said, it’s way more important that you’re comfortable.”

“A want to. A wouldn’t feel right otherwise. So… uh… look.”

Her arms fell to her side, haltingly, and he took her in. It took a moment for him to regain his composure.

“Fawn. You don’t just feel like marble, you look like a statue, too. I really want to draw you!”

Her nervous laughter sounded like music to him. “That’s s-so you! A show ya my all an’ the ferst thin’ ya think of is yer pen an’ paper!”

“I had a l-lot of other thoughts first”, he said, “B-but I t-think we’d be interrupted again if we s-started stuff now“

“Fair, fair, A should g-get this done”, she said, rather very eager to end her bareness, then whipped around to wash herself.

Finally, she bent over to rummage in her own trunk, to find more uncomplicated underwear. After realizing how dead quiet he’d gotten and why, she quickly crouched.

“This is nerve wrackin’”, she laughed as she finished putting on her underwear, “Feels like suitin’ up for battle!”

“Phew, I don’t know about that”, came Callum’s shaky voice from behind her and she turned around to see him sitting on their cot. He was leaning forward, with his elbows on his knees
supporting his head on his hands, “I sure know which I like better.”

She scoffed with bemusement and threw her old bra at him. His Callumism and dreamy expression had put her at ease shockingly well.

A moment later they walked toward Opeli’s tent near the second circle. The entourage was still resting, safe for the guards on duty.

Even in the wet cold of the early morning, a deep sense of comfort now lay over them both. Another vulnerable moment had passed and it became clear that neither of them thought of the others’ attraction and body as weird.

Rayla lightly swung their joined hands in the rain, making their blades clatter in their sheaths. The wet grass sprayed beneath their boots as Opeli beckoned them inside her tent.

“Terrible weather, I look forward to riding in it”, the councillor scoffed, “So, Majesties, for the first time together, I’m sure this will be rather interesting!”

She motioned them into a pair of seats, “Of course, the queen-to-be will want to advise, even if her opinion is as yet unofficial?”

“I mean, she’s always done that. I asked her a lot of questions over the years”, Callum said and Opeli shrug-nodded.

“So. The avisa from yesterday contained two points on which I’d like your input. One; The skirmish with rebels near Klimme, Tinesland; Two; The task force’s clash with the Band of Ortis at the Border.”

“There’s a name we’re not gonna be allowed to forget”, Rayla grumbled, “I’d like to add a point there. The elf in the coin. Her name makes me think she could be my mother.”

Opeli was first surprised, then nodded, eagerly, pulling a quill and paper towards herself. “I suspect you will want high mage Claudia to confirm this theory?”
“You got it. Ask her what happened to my favorite toy.”

Callum couldn’t help but notice how bitter she sounded.

The councilwoman scribbled for a moment then looked up, expectantly.

“About Klimme. I’d like to remind Rho and Tines about the idea I had”

“Democracy”, Opeli said, flatly, “Sire, politics is the art of the possible. You know that Kingsley Rho and Bertram Tines will not agree to anything that reduces their power.”

“A rebellion will reduce their power, alright”, said Rayla with a scoff, “reduce their height, too, from what I gather”

The councilwoman shook her head at the queen-to-be, “I’m sorry milady, but you don’t have an appreciable perspective on this issue yet. I’ll assume you spoke to your betrothed about his plans, but have so far neglected to find your own facts?”

“My own facts?”

“An argument not based in fact is an opinion. You will want to elaborate on why you believe that Katolis will experience a rebellion. You will then have to explain why you believe that Katolis will fall to said rebellion. Further, this then raises questions as to your fitness to hold the throne, hypothetically speaking, as under more capable rulers, the rebellion would neither break out nor capture the Twins. You must be aware of the implications of your words.”

Rayla sat back in her chair, shooting Callum a questioning look. He simply nodded, wryly. So this is what he meant by resistance. It wasn’t that Opeli didn’t agree with his plans, it was that she saw too many ways their arguments could lead to upsetting the influential of Katolis.

“Didn’t the northern Kingdoms have a rebellion a few years back?”, the elf asked.

“Quite so, but their gripes weren’t political, just a matter of food. A desire quite easily satisfied”, Opeli sighed, “I will remind them of your suggestion, Majesty, however I don’t believe it will do
much other than remind them how much they dislike the idea.”

“They both like me, personally. So I don’t see the harm”, Callum said.

“However, Rhodia as a faction is still rather very unhappy with us right now. It was unwise to decline their request for military support during the uprising milady just mentioned.”

“Sending in soldiers would’ve made the situation worse”, the king said, matter-of-factly, “You heard Fen’s report. They were armed and ready to do whatever it takes if their demands weren’t met.”

“The commoners have different interests from the houses. Indeed so. Maybe with your father’s public education initiative, they will learn to appreciate the nobles’ points of view?”

Rayla shook her head, lightly. “Sounds like you think you’re better than them”

“I am merely gilded by my responsibility for them, milady, like a mother is ‘better’ than her children”, Opeli answered, giving her a warning look, “On that rather egalitarian note, you’d do well to remember that you are an elf and a commoner marrying a king in the noble’s eyes. Two things they despise. It’s a good thing you have a history of battle. It will doubtlessly come in handy until you’ve established yourself as someone who is not to be trifled with.”

“What are you sayin’?”, the elf asked, frowning.

“I don’t doubt that before this year is through, we will have seen an attempt on your life. Maybe the Lord’s, too.”

“They’ll try to murder us?!”

“Our is not a safe game, milady. Don’t let the furnishings and mannerisms of high society fool you. Racism and power struggle brings out rather nasty characteristics of our kind. The moment you put on that ring, you were both in mortal danger.”

Rayla looked at her engagement ring, then shrugged. “Eh. That’s not new to me. I say they can
Opeli smiled at her. “Queen Sarai would rather approve of this defiant attitude. I will say it’s good to know you’re no damsel, milady. Uh… the red thread is now rather quite lost on me…”

The councilwoman looked at her notes for a moment, then said, “Ah yes, of course. So! We will…”, she sighed, exasperated, “…once more submit to Rho and Tines your view that some concessions to the people’s demands would guarantee the long-term stability of the noble houses and kingdom of Katolis. Anything else you wish to do on this topic?”

Rayla looked at Callum who looked back, expectantly. The queen-to-be faced Opeli, then said, “What if Rhodia wants more support? Can we send soldiers to the sea to reinforce their border?”

“Agreed!”, Opeli said, “Lord Callum?”

“We should offer it, yeah”

The high councillor nodded, writing the instruction down.

“In that case let’s move on to… the border skirmish. According to the Avisa, the Band of Ortis was spotted returning from Xadia, then the task force under commanders Fen and Janai bottled them up and managed to destroy a substantial number of their forces, routing the rest of the band in the outskirts of Taelin Rock.”

“So first, what’s the task force?”, Rayla asked.

“It’s part of our armistice agreement with Xadia”, Callum said, “We created a Demilitarized Zone around the border and gave special permission to a group of both elves and humans to operate in it, together, to fight off bounty hunters. We agreed to keeping out the hunters in exchange for Xadia giving us access to some materials for Dark Magic.”

“Wait, they’re allowing you to do it?!”, the queen-to-be was shocked.

“What’s the alternative? Unless I can figure out how to pass on the sky arcanum or whatever, how
are we going to sustain the Pentarchy without magic? I really don’t like it, but… well, without dark magic, there’s no way to get people out of those coins, either. It’s a transitional agreement, limited to five years. Runs out next year. I’m not happy about that cause unless we can find Viren, we’re basically back to war.”

Rayla sighed. She was starting to understand Callum’s problem. A lot of these issues had been so clear to her. ‘Dark magic bad’, for example, but after a thousand years of relying on the practice she couldn’t expect her subjects to just leave it behind from one day to the next. Plus, human military and Auxilia working together was a really good sign.

“I suggest we officially congratulate the commanders on a job well done and ensure that all the contraband Fen has collected is returned to Xadian authorities”, Opeli said, interrupting Rayla’s reverie.

“I’d be surprised if he had hung on to anything”, Callum said, “Fen and Janai work together pretty well. But yes, let’s do that, Opeli.”

Opeli put a last period on her letter with pizzazz, then nodded at her rulers, happily. “Well. Unless you have any other issues you’d like to raise with me?”

They got up and the councillor held the tent flap for them, respectfully.

“Oh, one more thing!”, she said and the two royals turned to face her, “When shall we leave?”

“As soon as Naves and her Summand are with us”, Callum said.

“Very well. Soon, then.”
Yasra was rather teary-eyed. "Majesty, it was a pleasure to be in your company."

"Likewise. Thank you so much for all your help and support. I'm not nearly as scared of my sword now. But! Be careful now!", Callum laughed, "you don't wanna get caught using human addresses for the dragon queen!"

"Oh. No, that would not go over well, Excellence ", the guard replied with a smirk, "I have one more order to fill before I leave. Lady Rayla?"

The addressed perked up, as though startled from deep thought. "Uh, yes!?"

"Regina Draconis has ordered that I offer you this mount as a token of her apology", the guard said, motioning at her winged doe, "She is aware that Andris will not make up for her error, but wishes to speed your travels to make it easier to make up for lost time"

Rayla’s eyes grew to the size of golden merlons. “Uh, thanks, but how are you gettin’ home?!”

“I will… take your horse, of course”, rhymed Yasra with an impish smile, making Callum snort, “The Lord has permitted it and I’ve had experience with these animals while in Katolis. Perytons, especially winged ones, are fragile and rather tempramental. I’ve grown fond of horses’ hardiness and more pliable attitude. On that note, please don’t ever charge an enemy on Andris, despite her training, she will buck you off!”

With that, Yasra stepped toward Andris and led her to Rayla by her stirrups. The queen-to-be extended a hand to let the animal sniff her and when it showed no hostility, pet its flaring muzzle.

“Thank you, she’s amazin’”, said the moon elf.

“You are so very welcome. Good luck, Maj-- Excellence , from what I’ve experienced you will need it. I had the luxury of hiding away in my chambers and in heavy armor. As leader, you probably will not have such privacy.”
Rayla shook her head. “I’m prepared for all that. It’s actually a bit funny. The moment my life got a bit nicer because people can’t harass me for my parent’s sins and my own failin’s, I decide to go play queen to a bunch of… well, racists”

“Not all of Katolis hates you”, Callum said, grumpily, “You have a fan club, fawn!”

The queen-to-be snorted, “I know, you keep remindin’ me. But; Most people still don’t know what to think of you and I together and a lot of them are pretty angry.”

“Is this you doing that thing where you make things more negative than they are so when it turns out bad you can keep your positivity up?”, the king asked.

Rayla nodded, self-satisfied.

“I didn’t mean to sound quite so dire”, Yasra said, “The Twin Towers are quite nice and the staff has gotten used to elves being around. Councilor Kingsley used to be rather rude with me, but working with Helmond changed his attitude somewhat. I can’t blame the man, I am, after all, a foreign soldier, set to go home. No doubt the Lucid will debrief me. There’s really nothing to tell them beyond confirming the human affinity for eating lavish meals.”

“That they do”, the queen-to-be snickered, “Yasra, thank you. Both for the amazin’ mount and for takin’ such good care of my fiance. There’s not a scratch on him”, she smiled at Callum, “but also for the warnin’ and tryin’ to set me at ease. Don’t worry, I’m still as paranoid as ever so whatever they’re preparin’ for me over there, I’ll be expectin’ it.”

The king stepped forward and extended his hand. Yasra grabbed it and Callum somewhat regretted the choice. She was a very, very strong sunfire elf. “Thank you, Yasra. For everything. Hopefully we’ll see each other again.”

“I would like that, Sire. Live well.”

“Thank you. Farewell and give our regards to Raszagal and your son”, the king replied.

With that, Yasra saluted, twice, to Callum in the human way, to Rayla in the elven fashion. The latter instinctively returned the gesture.
The horse meant for the queen-to-be was already waiting for Yasra, so she swung herself into the saddle and made off, eastward.

As the Katolin Royals watched her vanish behind a rise in the ground, someone approached from behind, the grass rustling beneath their feet.

“So. One less elf in your following”, Honsa growled, “We’re all just waiting for you two to get going.”

Rayla turned to face the angry ocean wave elf and said, “You don’t have to come with, you know. If you’re so unhappy with us, why would you want to?”

This earned the queen-to-be a contemptuous glare. “Oh. I guess so. Bye, then.”

Without giving any of them another word, the counselor stomped off.

“Wait!”, Rayla yelled, but Honsa ignored her.

Sadly, the moon elf added, “That… isn’t what I meant.”

Callum shook his head. “She needs to figure this grief out somehow. I don’t know how to help her. It’s not like I haven’t tried, either. There’s only so much abuse I’m willing to take from her, though, so I stopped. She wants me to care more about Lessa, I get it, but I… I can’t dwell on her, you know? She’s one problem of many that we’re going to be dealing with.”

“There has to be somethin’ we can do. We’re a king and queen.”

“That gives us the means to give her gifts or money, pay for a vacation or a fancy meal. None of that would help. She needs to get help from someone she trusts, and that’s not us. Not anymore.”

A moment later, Honsa could be seen riding after Yasra on a Peryton.
Callum was now walking back to rejoin the entourage who were busy packing up camp.

Rayla huffed. Then, she mounted her new doe and spurred her, going after Honsa.

A normal Peryton was faster than a horse, sure. But the winged ones were made for speed. In fact, it was the only thing they were good for, really. Andris’s hooves left the ground as the powerful wings and their underlying magic started propelling her forward. The wind drove tears into Rayla’s eyes.

Soon she was above Honsa and with a light downward tug on her aid, Andris’ hooves found the ground.

“What do you want??”, Honsa yelled.

“I wanna punch you out!”, yelled Rayla, angrily, “But this isn’t about what I want! It’s about you! How can I help you? What do I do to make you feel less pain?”

The ocean elf tore at her reins and came to a skidding halt. Rayla didn’t want to test her doe’s loyalty like this just yet and let her come to a much slower stop.

Honsa yelled from where she was, “What makes you think you can do anything to help me? Just because the guy boning you down is a king??”

Even though the rudeness of the statement annoyed her, Rayla chose to look the other way. Ironically, because of something Honsa herself had said, years ago: ‘We say a lot of things in anger that we don’t really mean. It’s up to the other person to take those words and run with them.’

“Yea, that’s part of what makes me think so! It sorta kinda makes me the queen, you know? Way more important than that is the fact that I like you, you angry dunker! I want to be your friend and I think friends help each other!”

From where Rayla was, it was impossible to make out Honsa’s expression. As the queen-to-be came closer, she realized that the other woman wore a rather empty mien, as though she was processing what she had heard.
“Friends help each other”, she repeated, “Why would I want to be your friend?”

“We have history, Honsa. You helped us back then, and you’re a great person. I can’t help but want that person to be happy.”

“History, ha! I should’ve pulled Callum into a disgusting, slimy kiss just to piss you off, you moonshadow prude! I’m done with the both of you! Him because he’s a king and won’t do what’s right, you because you condone it! He let you rot for four years! Don’t you think he could’ve gotten you out earlier if he’d tried a little? This is what you get for messing around with abusers, Rayla!”

“Come on, don’t be racist. Just because you don’t like him doesn’t mean you have to--”

“Oh, shut up! If I was letting a pinko sleep in my bed I’d defend them too, probably, but guess what, I have some self-respect left! I lived next to the border, I know how they are! Sneaking over every day and night to steal more animals and plants for their evil garbage magic!”

“Callum tried to have me released, you know that, I showed you the letter and--”

“`A sho’d ye ta letta`”, mocked Honsa with a thick, fake scotian accent, “I read it, yes! He used Lessa as an excuse! Come on, oh queen! Read the crowd’s mood when they rip up your stupid letter!”

Anger boiled in the moon elf’s stomach now. It was starting to be too much. “Look. You’re angry. I get it. You don’t have to be such an ass about thin’s though. I’m tryin’ to be helpful, not tryin’ to rub it in or anythin’.”

“I honestly don’t care! I don’t need or want your help! Just go! Be a human’s little pet slu--”

“HEY!”, Rayla shouted and Honsa jerked, “You call me that and I swear you will regret it! I can take your doubt and your anger but that’s too far! You’ve already implied it enough!”

“Awww, sore spot? Widdle Rayla doesn’t actually want to be an abuser-bedding floozie? A tramp? A harlo--”
The punch connecting with Honsa’s face wasn’t enough to hurt someone trained for battle but did the job quite nicely for the counselor. The ocean elf almost fell off her ride, but her attacker caught her by the middle of her shirt and pulled her uncomfortably close.

“A tried ta give ye care! A tried ta give ye measured words! An’ now ye better calmy doony, lass, before A loose the rest’a my composure! Listen here! Me lad’s not aw powerful as ye think, he has to script an’ work around all sorts of bampot fandans and hope they don’t tear’em up and off his throne! Lessa dyin’ is messed up, but he wisnae even there when it happened! He sent two elves to check’r out, didnae trust his own people to do it right! And guess what! They found nil! So! Next thin’ he does isn’t to sit back and go ‘ah well, nottin’ fer it, i’is wha’ i’is’, no! He kicks out every single guard who was supposed to protect her! Cause it’s the only thin’ he could do, since they do have laws over there, too, ye ken?!”

“You… hit me”, said Honsa, dumbfounded.

“Aye, and A’ll do it again if ye don’t find some nicer words for me!”

Rayla let go of the counselor’s shirt and Honsa rubbed her cheek, looking confused.

“I don’t think anyone ever punched me before”, she said, “It’s… not as bad as I thought.”

“Oh, trust me, I can hit you a lot harder.”, the queen-to-be warned, grumpily.

The ocean elf looked up at her, then her eyes scanned the ground. “I’m… I’m sorry”, she finally said, “I shouldn’t have called you those things. You just make me so… so mad!”

“Why? What did I do?”

Honsa groaned, “I don’t even know! That’s just it! The fact that you’re with him is enough to be angry at you! Rayla, I’m sorry. You don’t deserve it.”

“Funny what a bit of percussive care can do”, Rayla grumbled, “So what are you gonna do, then?”

“Not sure”
“Callum doesn’t want angry Honsa around and neither do I. Not-so-angry Honsa would be welcome.”

The ocean elf shook her head. “I’m not staying. I need to sort myself out, I think, and I can’t do that here. It’s probably time I went back home. Not back to dad, but… home.”

“You mean the sea?”

Honsa nodded. “Yea. Haven’t been in fifteen years.”

They looked at each other, unsure.

After a long moment, the ocean elf nodded her goodbye, and spurred her Peryton.

“I’ll send you a letter or two”, the moon elf promised, “Have a good trip.”

“No such thing. Looking forward to hearing from you, Queen Rayla. Bye.”

Rayla watched as the counselor galloped off, then turned her own mount around to rejoin the entourage.
Trainee

The entourage was moving through a bit of forest which afforded everyone a bit of cool in the mounting heat of the day.

The two royals had let themselves drift into the rear to get away from Opeli who was rather obviously observing them. Here she didn’t have an excuse to hug the edge of their vocal range.

“So”, Callum started, quietly, “How’d your little meeting with Honsa go?”

Rayla’s neutral expression fell victim to an insecure, worried frown. “I… I really don’t know. I ended up punchin’ her”

“You did what ?! That’s really not… I didn’t think you’d ever get physical with anyone who wasn’t after your life! What happened?”

“She, uh, found some choice words. I snapped a bit. I’m not proud of it. Ravak didn’t even get me there. Maybe because he wasn’t a friend?”

The king’s expression turned from incredulity to anger. “Ravak!? What did she say!?”

“She called me… a floozy. And uh, variations.”

As she thought back to the scene, Rayla felt more and more dirty. Since this morning she had felt an odd comfort with the idea of baring herself to him. Honsa’s words had rather damaged that comfort. Was she being… improper? Disgusting?

Callum was gaping at her, then finally caught himself. “Wow. Uh. I don’t know what to say to that? She’s the master of undeserved insults. You’re about as far from that as I am from a wicker basket.”

It was good to hear him say this and the Callumism made her snicker. “Dafty, that isn’t very far.”
“Hey!”, he huffed dramatically, “I’m trying to be a supportive fiance right here!”

“And I appreciate that, but I already know what you’re thinkin’. I’ll work through it, don’t you worry. Just, right now it’s still a bit raw.”

“Hmyea”, Callum said, “I’m kinda glad she took off. Feels like a black cloud moving on. Now there’s only Opeli.”

“And the dragon guard”, Rayla grumbled, nodding upwards.

Above them, the four dragon guard and Zym were flying in formation, barely able to keep step with the much slower moving Katolin entourage.

“They’re giving you grief?”

“Eh, just the usual stares. I get to wonder now, though, is it cause I’m wearin’ these colors or are they still not happy with my performance or offended by their ex-colleagues, my parents? Yaaay!”, she went, joylessly.

For a moment, Callum's memory pulled him in and he was back in a Katolin forest, talking to her about going to Banther Lodge.

He shook off the impression and smirked at his fiance, boyishly. “Speaking of, I sent the arrow off to Claudia while you were talking to Honsa. Should get there about mid-day and then come back this evening.”

“How many arrows did you bring?”

“Uh, a lot. Raszagal lets us trade for them right now. Part of the armistice Agreement.”

Rayla nodded. “Sounds like a good deal to me, that armistice. Who negotiated it?”

Her fiance looked a bit hurt. “I did! What makes you think otherwise?”
“Uh, sorry, but this mornin’ in Opeli’s tent, you didn’t have much to say other than the democracy thin’ you had thought of before.”

“I think better when I’m *not* in the moment!”, the king complained, “Plus, why would I suggest something if your ideas are good?”

“Because Opeli told me that that wasn’t a new thin’! You’re a king, not a nodder! I know you, you have ideas and plans! Open your dummy mouth!”

She watched as her fiance pouted like a five-year-old, then exhaled slowly. “Well. Thanks for that. I’ll go up front where the councilwoman can help you sort me out, I guess.”

“Don’t be daft! I’d never team up on you with her. I just want you to be… outspoken.”

“Yeah, I’ve tried that. Apparently it gets people killed.”

His voice had gone quiet, pensive. Rayla now felt like a huge jerk.

For a while, they rode in silence.

Callum watched Naves on her Peryton with some wonder, to the point where Rayla took note.

“I hear she’s summed”, the queen-to-be said, carefully bemused.

“Huh?”, her fiance went, “Oh, no, *that* kind of look is reserved for *another* Scotian”, he bent over to kiss her and she bent his way to make it easier, “I was just thinking how it’s neat that the baby doesn’t seem to get in the way much. Here they are, travelling as a family, you know?”

“I don’t see it. She’s sittin’ in her saddle all crooked, that’s gonna be achy tonight. Wean’s gettin’ in the way, alright.”
“They’ve been passing him between each other, so she won’t spend a whole lot of time like that. Plus, I think if they had their backs open, the kid could ride in a carrier.”

Naves’ head spun, her gaze fixing on the chattering pair of royals with a somewhat grim smile. “Gabbin’ around a moonshadow elf isnae a great idea, Rayla, ye should know that!”

“Fair, fair, but ye cannæ expect us to not take note of your expert parentin’”, Rayla snickered.

“Expert!?”, Naves laughed, “A’ll be glad if the wean doesn’t turn out like his dad!”

“Hey!”, Aodhan protested, “Better the trainer than the trainee!”

Naves stuck her tongue out at her summand, then let her stag drift in Callum’s direction.

“What, yer thinkin’ of havin’ one?”, she asked the royals.

They both shrugged synchronously which made Naves snicker. “Look, A get it, seems overwhelmin’ and a bit nuts, and it is, for the first bit. And then ye just… live. Ye know? The cryin’, the poopin’, you get used to it quicker than ye think.”

“I just don’t think right now is a good time. I figure we need to give people back home a bit of time to get used to this whole Rayla-as-queen thing first before chucking in an heir”, Callum said.

“Ah, politickin’, is it? Well that’s rather above my horns”, Naves laughed, “I just think you’ll never find a `good time`. You just let it happen! That’s how we did it, too. Got off the sludge, then few months lat…”, she caught an annoyed look from her summand, “Aodhan, please tell me you’re not gonna be mad at me for tellin’ them! It’s advice, is what it is!”

“Ye say wha’ ye want, babbler!”, her summand grumbled motioning widely at the entourage, “Isnae like anyone else’s gonna hear our innermost!”

"Ah, he's got a point A 'spose", Naves said, sheepishly, and adjusted her son, who was still sleeping soundly in her arms.
“How’s travelin’ with him?”, Rayla asked to bridge the awkwardness.

“Eh, A hand ‘em off when m’back’s had enough and get ‘em handed back when Aodhan’s does. It’s workin’ out”, Naves answered, laxly. “The three days it’s gonna take to the border and the two it’ll be to Cardow, A can deal, easy. One of my sisters is there, Sila.”

“I can hold him for a bit if you want”, Callum offered.

Naves didn’t hesitate, offering her bundled up baby to the king.

“Uh”, he went, then carefully lifted the child onto his saddle.

“Hold up his head, he’s not good to do that himself when he’s nappin’”, Naves said, amused, and Callum adjusted his grip, “Good thin’ ye’ve got balance, Excellence. First few times A had ‘em on a stag, A almost toppled off!”

Rayla watched her fiance handle the baby and couldn’t help but find it endearing. He didn’t seem too comfortable, and she could identify. Holding a child felt a lot like holding fresh prey, they were so floppy and rather useless. The association between baby and dead animal made her a bit queasy.

Callum was sweating rocks. Was he holding the baby right? Too tight? Not tight enough? This little life seemed supremely breakable and soft, the face peaceful in sleep. Two smooth stubs marked the place where the horns would eventually grow on this little elf, and the King wondered if his children would have them.

An odd thought.

He wasn’t comfortable with the idea of being a father right now, not even a little. The fact that his advisers had been so loud about needing heirs hadn’t exactly helped avoid the issue. It was important, would be brought up constantly and repeatedly until him and Rayla finally got it done.

Getting it done. Not the sort of thing one should think when entering parenthood.
“What is his name?”, the king asked.

“Rhodam. After his great-grandfather”, Aodhan said, a sort of light frown on his face as he observed his son in Callum’s arms.

“Do you mind me holding him?”

“Ah, A got a face on me, don’t A? Well, not cause of who ye are”, the man answered, “A just wanna make sure he’s doin’ awright. Ye seem to have a knack for it though, Excellence. Most strangers don’t hold ‘em fer long ‘fore he yammers.”

An odd pride washed over Callum. The baby liked him!

“Maybe cause he’s a politician”, Rayla snickered from his right, “They put everyone ta sleep.”

“I hate to inform her Majesty”, the king said, gruffly, “that she is a politician, too, having made rather political choices for her house and country just this morn?”

“Bah!”, the queen-to-be scoffed, but had no further argument.
Around noon, the entourage stopped. They hadn’t yet left the shady woods, but the heat was getting rather stifling.

The chef handed out lunch and Rayla was surprised at how varied it was, given their circumstance. There was some bread, slices of cheese - not soft, to her disappointment - an assortment of vegetables that were unfamiliar to her and a cup of water.

“What’s this?”, she asked Callum who was shoving food in his mouth.

“That’s a tomato. I’ll warn you right now, they’re basically water in a red shell. You’re gonna make a mess if you’re not careful.”

Rayla bit heedlessly into the fruit and immediately regretted it, sucking at the liquid rendering from it.

“I did warn you”, her fiance scolded.

“Tasty though! Sweetish, sourish, all in balance. Good vegetable.”

“Fruit, actually. Here’s celery and carrot.”

“Celery I know as Apium, can’t mistake that smell for anythin’. Carrots are…”, she swung the vegetable like a dagger, “Really hard!”

With a crunch, she took a bite out of the orange root, then hummed appreciatively.

“Good for snacks I bet! Sweet! Fibry!”

They finished lunch, then mounted up and continued northward.
Evening came, and with it a new Camp. On a large, grassy clearing that looked like it had burned in a wildfire a year ago, the entourage set up their usual ring formation. As they got started with this, Opeli approached the two Royals.

“Milady. Is now a good time to have a lesson on expectations, decorum and the like?”

Rayla gave Callum a glance who simply motioned her along. He watched her leave, adoring the fact that she would be with him again, soon. It still felt surreal to have her back. Waking up next to her for the second time this morning had been a soothing experience. The first time, when he had woken to Opeli’s complaints, he had spent a good fifteen seconds believing that she wasn’t really there.

A massive shape appeared next to him.

“Hey, Zym.”

“Hey, Callum.”

They simply stood next to each other, watching others work.

After a bit, Zym sat and wrapped his tail around his feet.

“Watching them work makes me wanna help, but, eh.”

“Sometimes, it’s nice to be king”, Callum smirked at his dragon friend.

“Other times not so much. Dude, can I ask you something, now that our guards are busy?”

“Sure?”

“Do you trust me?”
The king gave the dragon an inquiring glance. “Why do you ask?”

“So the answer is ‘no’. Yeah I was guessing so. I get it. I can’t tell you everything I know, either. It’s just part of the deal, I guess, to not let people get too close.”

Callum nodded, slowly. After a moment of pensive silence, he got a hunch. “Zym, how’s your mom?”

The dragon huffed. “Eh, she’s been better. Fight with Sol Regem took it outta her and she never totally recovered. Can’t really fly for long, anymore.”

The king hadn’t known this. Jackpot. “That’s terrible, I’m sorry.”

After the elation of discovering a secret had waned, Callum started feeling like a jerk. This was how it always went. Manipulate and be manipulated. A puppet, puppeteering.

“She’s making it work. Lucky for her, she has interpreters so she still gets out. I’m just… Callum, I’m more worried about her head. She’s getting really paranoid, locked up like that. Sees conspiracies everywhere. I can’t blame her, really, after all that happened with you guys. The Children don’t help, there. Dangerous, dangerous people. And they’re everywhere, too. For all I know, my own guard could have one or two of Aaravos’ lackys.”

“What are their goals, exactly?”

Callum knew what the organization wanted. Another manipulation, conjured as naturally as normal speech. Disgusting.

“Bring back Aaravos, like you probably know from yesterday, but also kill all the dragons. They think that we split humans and elves to keep them from turning against us. That’s actually what I need to talk to you about.”

“Huh?”

“Mother is worried you’re gonna support them. You know, given who you are and who your sum--
hm… no. What was that called, again, the human thing before `summand`?

“Fiance. Yeah, no, I’m not supporting a terrorist organisation! Why would she think that?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think you’ve given her a reason to, but she’s convinced.”

“What can I do to un-convince her!”, Callum asked, a scared shiver running over his body. The idea that Raszagal might see him as a conspirator didn’t bode well for the armistice.

There was obvious pain in Zym’s voice. “See, dude, this is the problem. I can’t tell you the truth, and even if I did we both wouldn’t like it. I could lie and it wouldn’t help. What am I supposed to do?”

“I have another question, then. Why are you telling me this in the first place?”

“I think it’s fair for you to know. She’s not thinkin’ straight and the Assembly isn’t seeing it. I’m around her a lot. I see the change happening. Tried to talk to the senators, but they see me as a kid. Which I am, sure, but I also know mother. She’s going crazy, bro, and the hardliners love it. I sure don’t”, tears started flowing from the dragon’s eyes, “The only thing I can think to do is unthinkable.”

“Buddy, I wish you were a huggable size cause I can’t say another word until I’ve found some way to give you one”, Callum said, welling up.

Zym unfurled his tail and Callum stepped in to hug his right front leg.

After a moment of them standing like this, Zym hiccuped.

“Hoo man”, the dragon went, using his free paw to brush the wet off his face, “Yeah, so that’s the story. I’ve reached the end of my draconic, so… I dunno, do you have an idea?”

“You’re sure you can’t convince her? Of anything?”
“She’s off in her own world.”

“I’m not gonna suggest what you just called ‘unthinkable’. Is there any other way you could sort of... *insert* yourself between her and the Assembly? Filter her messages?”

“I’d have to get rid of every single one of her interpreters. That’s not happening, either.”

“Hm. How about I’ll talk to Ray—”

“Nope. Don’t. I don’t…”, the dragon took a deep breath, “I… I don’t completely trust her.”

Callum was now completely puzzled. “W… what? Why not?”

“Look, I know it sounds totally nuts, but... she’s Ex-Lucid, right? They have their own rules, play their own games.”

“Yeah, but she’s EX-Lucid! She’s your friend! She saved your butt more than you probably remember! Zym, you’re gonna have to give me more than that. You *have* to have a reason to say that, no?!”

There was obvious strain in the dragon’s demeanor now. “Look. This is... I don’t... I’m so happy you guys are back together, okay? I don’t wanna... if she hasn’t told you yet, maybe she will during the Bloom? I... just give her the chance to, okay?”

“Is this about Onni?”

“Who? I dunno, man, I just... Ugh, fine! She sent a message from prison. Out of circulation. Nobody knows where, except that it flew north, not west. Didn’t get caught, officially, probably cause it would’ve embarrassed the prison warden. Lucid found out, though.”

Callum’s mien sagged. Rayla had not mentioned this. “How do they know it was her?”

“Well, I’m not so clear on that, but mother says the guards said it was.”
“So you have this information from your mom? Doesn’t that make you think she might’ve said it to, you know, sow doubt?”

Zym looked at his friend, then slowly nodded. “You know, now that you say it… might be it. It’s kinda disgusting and really freakin’ mean but… that’s her, now. I’d say ask her, your fi-- you know, Rayla. I figure she’ll tell you if you ask… but… ugh, dude, I hope she tells you or at least has something to say that’ll… damn. She can’t really, can she? Damn! I feel like I messed up now, man. Talk about sowing doubt… I’m really sorry. Uh.”

The dragon turned to walk off. “I… I gotta go. See ya.”

“I’ll let you know if we come up with anything”, Callum said, “And don’t worry too much. Rayla’s not gonna lie to me.”

Turning to walk to his now finished tent, the king grumbled.

“I hope.”
Rayla opened the tent flap, two hours later. She yawned gratuitously and made to drape her arms around her fiance who was busy writing something at his desk.

“Don’t!”, came the grouchy order.

The queen-to-be jolted backward and stood behind him, rather forlornly. Was he just worried about smudging his ink?

He signed the page he was working on, then folded it up. Wax dripped onto the paper, then his sigil ring sealed the letter. The king dropped it on a small stack, then turned around his chair to face his betrothed.

“Sit”, he hissed, curtly.

Rayla pulled up her chair, giving him a somewhat angry, questioning glance.

“Did you send a message northward from Arrias? Out of circulation?”, he growled.

His fiance blinked, then frowned. “How wou--”

“Did you send a message? Yes or no?”

Her mouth closed into a thin line as guilt flooded her mind. “You still… don't trust me. And I guess I deserve it. Let’s finish the Bloom, right now. I think this is kinda a… good point to do it and I wanna get this all out. I need you to know that there are no more secrets between us.”
Callum exhaled, slowly, then nodded. “Yup. Let’s get it done.”

She grabbed a backpack, stuffing two blankets inside. Wherever they were going to sit, it wouldn’t be plush.

He gathered his materials and some documents in a binder. He also grabbed a bag he’d had prepared for when this would come up.

They walked past the guards who were rather confused. “Milord, Milady, where are--”

“It’s fine, corporal. We’ll be back soon. Keep it quiet, will you?”, Callum ordered.

The man nodded, giving a look of pure curiosity.

For a while, they walked in silence, looking for someplace safe. The waning moon wasn’t much help and so it was predictably Rayla who finally found a shallow cave next to a small, sputtering well.

Callum lit a few candles, sticking them to the walls of the cave while Rayla folded up the blankets and placed them on the ground. Then they sat.

“So… normally, the moon’s supposed to be at zenith for this, but… whatever. I’ll start.”

She lit one of her incense sticks and stuck it in a cup of sand between them. He followed suit. Then the moonshadow elf took a deep, bracing breath.

With nervous pathos, she recited, “Callum. My innermost is for you alone: I love you.”

Callum’s demeanor changed a little. He’d been silent and curt, but the atmosphere was romantic and her sheepish behaviour rather adorable. He assumed that this would be him, during the wedding vows. To him, this felt much less official. “Rayla. I hold the same secret: I love you.”

“Our inner worlds so bridged, will you share more?”
“I will complete myself by your mysteries.”

Rayla smiled at her fiance, nervously. This was it, right here.

Despite his remaining tension, he smiled back, lovingly. No matter what she would reveal here tonight, he was now more or less sure it wouldn’t upset him too badly.

“M-minor secrets”, the moonshadow elf said, “Uh. Do we even have any of those left?”

“Favourite food? Ah, wait! It’s always `Moonberries’”, Callum said and they snickered, breaking the tension a little more, “Seriously though, I don’t think so. I know a lot about you.”

“So, uh, yeah. Secrets of hurt. I’ll start so we can get it out of the way”, Rayla swallowed, clasping her hands, “Back when we had our conversation there about me becoming a royal, right before I… you know, grabbed at you, I had this thought that I can’t shake now. I thought `I could just find someone else, so I don’t have to be queen`.”

She studied his face in the light of the candles, but failed to find anger. Instead, he nodded. “Yeah, I’ve had that thought a lot in the past four years. It was painful. Every time I got a new letter telling me about a marriage proposal, I was tempted to meet them. To have some kind of contact with someone, you know?”

Rayla’s eyes darted across his face and a bit of anger bubbled in her stomach. She recognized the foolishness in the emotion and sighed, deeply. “Yeah. I guess that’s understandable. Thank you, for holding out for me. I… I still have this weird feelin’ that I don’t deserve it.”

He shook his head. “I figure that’s not something you’re gonna shake easily. You’ve carried it around for a while. Just know that I think you are getting exactly what you deserve. My, uh, love and devotion”, he smiled, stupidly, “Man that was schmaltzy, it sounded WAY better in my head.”

“No, I liked it, it was cute”, she smiled at her sappy king, then started kneading her hands. “So. Um. I can’t really think of anything else, so I guess I’ll get to the question you asked me earlier. I did send a message northward, yes.”
The admission rudely surprised Callum. He hadn’t expected this to be true, at all.

“I wrote home. Runaan’s summand.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”, the king asked, distrustfully.

“Because, uh, I wrote about you. And then I got a very… negative… answer.”

“Still kind of weird that you wouldn’t tell me.”

“You… no, you don’t get it. This was basically a month after Onni. I basically asked him if I should just cut you loose. I had that thought a few times, too. In that moment, I still felt so dirty, you know? I thought you wouldn’t want me anymore but were too polite to end it via letter. I wanted his opinion. So, I stole an arrow after visitin’ with the warden one day and… well… asked him.”

“You asked him if you should break up with me and he told you to do it”, Callum said, relaxing, “That’s… not so bad.”

Rayla snorted. “I guess you expected worse?”

“Yeah. I did. I always do. I thought you were sending information to the Lucid or something.”

“He was extremely rude. He blames me for Runaan’s… death? I guess unless we find him in one of the coins, that’s what we’ll call it. Akande called me an idiot for even startin’ somethin’ with a human. By the time he answered, I had your answer for April. Let’s just say if he’s still in Cardow, he’s gonna hear how unimpressed I was with his answer”, she sighed, once more, the weight on her shoulders lightening a little, “So, how did you find this out? They never caught me, they were just kinda annoyed with me about getting two letters.”

“Zym brought it up. We’ll get to that later. Now that you mention the coins, we haven’t gotten Claudia’s answer just yet. I wonder if something happened to delay her? Guh, we’ll see eventually, I guess.”
The king took a deep breath. “I have another few things I need to tell you. Do you remember back when we were on the plains and you struck a pose for me?”

“Vaguely.”

He rifled in his binder for a long moment, then pulled out a drawing of her. In it, she was standing over him, her blade pointed downward at his face.

“Yeeup! I remember that now!”, she said, blushing a little.

“Well, back then I lied and said that it’d be hard drawing you like this lying down, but what actually made it difficult was that this was kinda… hot. I didn’t wanna be disrespectful.”

“I loved you then, too, it wouldn’t have been disrespectful of you to tell me that you liked the way I looked. But… uh, you like to be threatened?”, she snickered.

“Maybe? I don’t know it was just… a bit spicy, I guess. Uh, another thing from back then. Remember the night on the mountain pass whe--”

“UH!”, Rayla went, blushing again, “Yes, I… I went outside cause… you know, it was getting…”

He blinked. “Huh? I was gonna say I lied about turning on the sunfire device. That night I just shivered in my sleeping bag so you could get some rest, then turned it on when it got a little lighter outside. What were you talking about?”

“Uh, um… first, thanks for bearing that for me. Second; remember the log hut? I remember the log hut. It’s one of those thin’s that kept me goin’ through prison.”

“When you tried to break up with me? Yep.”

“I do that… a lot… don’t I?”, she asked, sadly.
“Yeah, but most of the time you’re not doing it for selfish reasons. Please don’t do it again, though, for any reason.”

She nodded sheepishly, then said, “In the cabin, we were snuggled up under that blanket, right? Had our massive fight, and then you said somethin’ like ‘I’ll be there for you’ and I just go so… fired up! I feel like without Amaya’s letter… Maybe we would’ve gotten into deep, deep trouble with each other, up there. Unprotected.”

He shook his head, giggling. “Sounds like we were close more than once.”

“Yeah, but, t-tonight, we’re not gonna get int-uh-interrupted”, Rayla sputtered.

There was a rather pointed pause in which Callum scanned his fiance’s face. Then he nodded, slowly, and she relaxed a little.

He was up for it.

“One long night after another”, he snickered, nervously.

They moved on to secrets of the family and state, since in Callum’s case those things were pretty much the same thing.

Rayla’s head started spinning quickly as he showed her everything secret about the Katolin state. There were statistics on important farmland and crop production, trade routes, persons of note, diplomatic relations, troop deployments and finally, agents of the Covertway within Xadia.

The queen-to-be then told him those she already knew of thanks to the Lucid, who loved observing foreign agents to feed them false information. This caused a surprised and frustrated session of scribbling from the king. She thought this a fair exchange between her loyalties to Xadia and to Katolis, since it would remove the agents from her homeland without leaving them dead.

Then, a few hours after they had started, they were suddenly done.

“Nothin’ more?”, Rayla asked her Mr. memory.
“One more thing. I told you how Zym came to see me earlier. He didn’t just show up to tell me about you, he also said that his mom is losing her mind. Like, actual mental health problems. She thinks we’re supporting the Children of Elarion.”

The queen-to-be frowned. “That’s really dumb. I get that their goals are kinda the same as ours, safe for that whole killin’ all the dragons part, but their methods are not decent.”

“Zym wanted to know if we had an idea how he could prevent his mom from messing with the peace process and Xadia as a whole while she’s not acting sanely. I suggested he could find a way to insert himself between her and the Assembly, kind of like a messenger. He said that would mean having to kill all of her interpreters.”

“Or… well, he could just…”, Rayla took a deep breath, “k-kill the Queen?”

Callum nodded, grimly. “Yep, we thought of that, too. Fawn, never dare say that so clearly out loud, ever again. If the wrong ears hear you, you will start a war.”

Worry squeezed Rayla’s throat. Could she watch her words this closely? She vowed to do her utmost and thought about the problem at hand some more. “Could he ask the Interpreters to not support Raszagal? I mean, that’d be dangerous for him since he has to… that’s a bad plan, too, isn’t it?”

“It’s a really complex situation, yeah.”, the king said, pensively.

For a long time, there was quiet as the two of them tried to find a good solution for this issue. Finally, Rayla gave in and slapped her hands to her thighs.

“I’m not comin’ up with anythin’. We should think about this again, later. Is there anythin’ else you wanna talk about?”

“Nothing I can think of. I mean, we’ve basically done most of this before we even came here, fawn. We’re a talkative couple.”

“Uh, so, uh”, his fiance said, blushing, “Do we… is it time to…”
“How about we just snuggle, for now? No rush.”

He got up and picked up the folded blanket he’d been sitting on, then spread it out and sat on it.

“You wanna come sit?”

The target of his affectionate gaze did indeed sit. He pulled her closer and kissed her. “This was a lot less painful than I thought it would be.”

Rayla nodded. “It’s like you said. We talk about our problems. I bet a lot of couples fall apart right here as they figure out how sneaky the other person is. I guess, most couples wouldn’t get through it in a single night, either. It’s just that whenever there was somethin’ between us, we brought it up.”

She leaned in to kiss him and he kept her there, wrapping his arms around her shoulders.

"Do couples honestly talk things over during the Bloom, you think? I figure people might just lie to each other in that moment, too", Callum wondered.

"I took it seriously! Please believe me?", came Rayla’s worried request.

The fact that she sounded wounded by something he hadn't even targeted at her rather struck the king, "I wasn’t talking about you. But, I promise; No more distrustful Callum."

She kissed him as an answer.

The outline of her face was barely illuminated by the candles, but even in this light, he found her adorable.

“Your lips are soft as clouds”, Rayla said, then snorted at her terrible flirt.
“I don’t think you’ve ever touched a cloud, then”, her fiance chortled, “I tried, it doesn’t really work, they’re not really… uh, solid.”

His mouth curled into a pensive pout as he wracked his brain for a better metaphor. “Your lips… are like velvet”

“Oooh, uh, what’s that?”

“Huh… really?”

“I don’t know, okay?”

“It’s a fancy kind of fabric that’s really… well… soft, duh.”

They snickered. Then there was some more or less comfortable silence in which the tension seemed to mount, but the emotions didn’t follow suit.

“This feels a little awkward. When we were looking for the plants, it all just happened”, Callum said, breaking the silence.

“Yeah. There it sorta snuck up on us. Here we are doin’ the sneakin. Hm. Can… can I touch you?”

“Wherever you’d, uh, l-like”, Callum consented, his confidence rollercoasting with every word.

“Well same here. Uh, g-grabble away!”, Rayla agreed, with a stupid snicker.

The moonshadow elf’s hand tentatively slipped under Callum’s shirt while she kissed him. It seemed reasonable to get back into a position and action she knew from before.

Once more she noticed how warm he was, how oddly pliable and rough his skin under her fingers. Humans felt a bit different from elves. On his shoulder she found the bumps of an old scar, marker of a wound inflicted upon him by Helmond.
When Callum’s own hands found their way under her shirt, she shivered a little. His hands were oddly cold and the touch unfamiliar. But. So, so pleasant.

The king trailed his fiance’s ribs to her spine where he started pushing down to massage her - or, do what he thought of as a massage. She seemed to rather enjoy this, a quiet gasp escaping her as he started. Her hands found his hair and he loved the light tugs on his scalp as she grabbed at it.

Then his fingers moved upward and collided with fabric. He had seen her put on her bra this morning, so he ran his fingers over the clasp, identifying which part overlapped which. His memory replayed the part with her closing the straps. He used the thumb and index of his right to fumble them apart. The hooks came loose rather suddenly and Rayla yelped a little.

“You… sneaky little… did you manage that with a single hand?!"

“I did!”, he said grandly, proud of his achievement.

So freed, his fingers went back to their massaging work.

It felt nice, having the tips of his fingers push in-between her shoulder blades. Somehow, it was surprising how sensitive she was. Nobody had ever touched her like this but she decided she’d ask him to do it every day if possible. The fact that her bra now hung more or less useless over her chest was a little annoying, though, and she pushed off him, lightly.

“Something wrong?”, he asked, concerned.

“Nah, it’s just the stupid over-the-shoulder-boulder-holder. Gimme a sec.”

While he was guffawing at her choice of words, she reached under her shirt and fiddled with the shoulder straps of the bra. After a moment of what she was sure looked like rather very stupid fumbling, she gave up. The fake assassin’s uniform was too rigid to get the straps off her shoulders and around her hands.

“Dummy”, she said, blushing, “I need to take this off”
He nodded, not sure what to do. “Do you want me to… turn around?”

The suggestion was silly, of course.

“Nah, just… uh… don’t stare too hard, A guess.”

He laughed, then said, “I’ll stare softly. I’ll take my jacket and shirt off, too.”

They each undressed their upper body and Rayla threw off her bra, then re-arranged her somewhat messy long hair.

Callum was staring. Rayla was considering a reprimand but she found she enjoyed his attention.

“Well? Are ye all touched out?”, the moonshadow elf teased.

There was a somewhat familiar sensation in Callum’s stomach. It was like missing a stair step but spread deeper and into his lap. This time, he made no efforts at hiding his body’s reaction since it was in line with his feelings.

“There we go”, Rayla said with an interested look at his pants.

Then they caught each other’s gaze and laughed for a good half minute.

“‘There we go’?! Fawn, really?!”

“It seemed nicer in ma heid, A swear!”

She moved up to him and pressed her body against his, savoring his human heat in the somewhat coolish cave. “Dafty, ye’re a real prize, ye ken that?”
He was the perfect person.

The king lifted her chin and kissed her, passionately. When they separated, she opened her eyes and the ravenous glint in her violet irises excited him. He adored how much that look wanted him. “Fawn, you're amazing. I love you.”

She was the perfect person.

The tiny fires around them were like stars in a private night sky. From outside the cave came the soft splash of water and the whistle of soft, warm summer winds as well as the noises of restful nature.

This was a perfect moment.

Suddenly, their kisses left her wanting, no longer did they satisfy her need. A demanding emptiness became manifest in her abdomen and she resolved to combat it by sitting in his lap.

“Touch me”, she demanded and his hands moved against her back once more, pressing her even tighter into his torrid figure.

His mouth found her chest and he realized that there was something else he loved kissing, other than her lips. A strange impulse made him lick her and she giggled at the tickle.

“What'r ye doin, dafty?!”

“Uh, was that weird?”

“Tickles! Felt nice, though.”

She savored the tantalizing touch of their lower bodies through their clothes and started moving, as much by instinct as by her own volition. The sensation gave her nothing like satisfaction, it was like lightly scratching an itch in that it made it worse, not better.
He loved her grinding, her eagerness apparently matching his. The king felt for the waistband of her pants and pulled, fruitlessly. She laughed against his lips.

“Can’t get t-that off with me s-sittin’ here!”

She got up, bringing her hips to about eye-height for him. Her heart was bruising itself against her ribs, now, a lifetime of anticipation unraveling into nervous expectation. For a moment, Honsa’s insult threatened to install doubt, but Rayla was determined.

With a bend of her body and a push of her hands, her pants and underpants dropped to her ankles where she picked them up and threw them onto her bag.

With trepidation she stood, letting him take her in. “Like w-what you see?”

He made an effort to smile at her eyes first, then tracked downward, over her sublime chest with two thin, white, vertical scars. From there he found her taut stomach, sporting a similar horizontal line. Then his glance reached her lap. His ears burned as the candle light threw soft, feathered shadows, accentuating her curves.

“I love you. A lot”, he said hoarsely, then got up, as well, “but I need to g-get even so you can enjoy this, too.”

He copied her motion and before she could say anything, pulled her into a tight hug. The touch of their totally naked bodies was incredible to both of them.

The queen-to-be caught herself wishing that he’d allowed her a better look, but when his hands ran over her back and pressed her close, he grazed her lap and carnal want shocked through her like four-day-old hunger.

“Dummy”, she whispered with accelerating breath, “Please!”

Her tone left no doubt as to what she wanted and the king grew impatient with desire, brought on by the same touch as hers.
“How… how do you want to do this?”, he asked.

She shrugged, honestly unsure.

“Um. Okay, well, I’ve read that it’s easiest for the first time if you just lay down and spread your legs.”

She did as bidden and he bent over to grab a towel from his bag which he rolled up and shoved under her head.

“Uh, I figured we’d need those later, anyway… uh, speaking of messes, how should we, uh, deal with mine?”

“I told you, remember? I guess I wasn’t super c-clear. We’re safe, but… it’d still be safest if… we kept it outside.”

He nodded.

When he moved himself in position between her knees, Honsa’s words broke through and echoed in her mind. It wasn’t fair! She and him were about to become summands!

She wanted this and she refused to think less of herself for wanting it. Still, her breathing sped up, from nervosity this time, and she grabbed the blanket under her.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes. Perfectly. Please, just, do it!”, she pleaded. The last thing she wanted was to lose her composure to nerves right now.

Then she felt him enter her and for the first few seconds, it felt alright, if a bit dry. There was a sharp prick in her abdomen, then sudden pain flooded her.

“Ow, stop!”, she yelped and he jerked away from her.
“What did I do? Are you alright?”

“It… it hurt! A lot!”, Rayla said, sitting up. She touched herself and a thin drop of purple stuck to her hands. Her face screwed up. “That… I guess… was supposed to happen”

“Ugh, I really didn’t mean to hurt you! I’m really sorry!”, her fiance said, mortified.

“No, don’t worry, it’s… normal, the first time, I t-think?”

“Huh? You’re gonna have to explain that a bit… f-for dumb humans”

“Uh, there’s this bit of skin we needed to get through. It’s normal to have it, but I’m actually surprised I still did, what with all the bendin’ and rollin’ and jumpin’ around I’ve been doin’. Tears real easy for restless ones like me.”

She gave him a nervous smile, then said, “Go for it, dummy, I’ll be okay now. Just go slow. I’m a bit… dry.”

Realization spread on his face. “Hold on. I have something that might help.”

She watched, admiring his well-defined thighs and butt as he rummaged in his bag, then pulled out a small canteen. He unstoppered it and dipped his fingers inside.

“Gum grass sap!”, he said with a smirk, “It makes things slippery.”

His fiance smiled at him, somewhat painfully. She didn’t want this to be complicated.

Zala had told her about gumgrass, irreverent, as she had always been about the topic. Her friend had said that she had never needed it, but some couples couldn’t do without.

It looked as though for now, they were one such couple.
He sat behind her and pulled her into his lap, kissing her hair. “Do you wanna sit against me? I need to snuggle you for a bit, I think. Get back into the, uh, ‘mood’.”

She nodded, feeling rather very much the same. Her shoulders rested comfortably against his chest.

He kissed her neck and she was surprised to find that she enjoyed the soft contact more than elsewhere.

“Is it okay if I... touch you? You know, d-down there?”, Callum asked, nervously.

“I did say you could t-touch me anywhere, so please do.”

A moment later, there were cold, wet fingers in her lap, finding their way inside her easily thanks to the lube. Rayla jolted a little at the sudden change in temperature, then gasped, quietly as delight spread through her. She had done this herself, obviously, but it was so much nicer when somebody else did it. He reached deeper and his fingers were thicker, spreading her out more.

He was surprised as to how snug she was. A single finger was quite easy, but two already posed a challenge. The king realized that this probably explained why she’d experienced some pain earlier.

“Is this good?”, he asked and she nodded, turning her head and leaning back to kiss him. Her hands came down to guide him a little, to a rough spot about an inch inside her. When his fingertips pressed up on it, a sweet, open-mouthed smile spread on her face.

“Right there!”, she laughed, “Ye got it!”

The queen-to-be felt her cheeks flush and the urge to keen sprung into her throat as he picked up speed. She had expected this and suppressed it, expertly. Nobody liked a loud moonshadow elf.

His left hand came up to touch her chest and she stiffened against the sensation. Or was it the
building tension in her stomach? She had wanted this, needed this, with increasing urgency over the past few days. The fact that she hadn’t had the privacy to tend to it herself had left her frazzled and aching for release. The speed at which that release now approached, pleased her immensely.

Every fiber, every muscle in her body flexed. Pleasure bent her and a small, unceremonious squak escaped her mouth when he didn’t stop. She had always stopped here, avoiding the sudden oversensitivity. When she gained control of her extremities, her hand swatted his away, then she laughed, quietly.

“Stop, don-- uh--”

Her breath hitched and she smiled, savoring a renewing wave of pleasure.

When it subsided, she turned around between his legs to kiss him, furiously.

“Phew, A liked that!”, she said, smirking, “Was about time, too! Past few days had me all fired up!”

Callum felt another stab of odd pride at her pleasure. Her shaky voice and fiery expression felt like a reward for a job well done.

“Yeah, me too. Stupid people, g-getting in our way!”

Looking down, she placed her hand in his lap. Strange, how solid he felt.

Almost like a carrot.

Carrot?!

The thought made her snort. He was a Call-rrot.

“Huh?”, he asked, confused by her amusement, then his breath hitched and he gave her an intense smile.
Callum enjoyed the attention she gave him, her stroking motion feeling foreign due to the size and shape of her hands. His own were busy exploring her body some more, pausing on her chest and grabbing her butt, the latter of which she seemed to repay with a cheeky, flustered smile every time.

She wasn’t holding on firmly enough or moving her hand fast enough to get him anywhere, but he didn’t have the heart to tell her.

This was also not necessary because she was getting visibly impatient, now.

After another moment, she gently pushed him over while giving him a loving, inquiring gaze. A look that asked for any objections, of which he had none. She positioned herself over his lap, then aligned him with her hand and slowly lowered herself.

Before she could envelop him, he looked down and shook his head.

“Hold on”, Callum said and she stopped, giving him a puzzled glance. He arched to grab the canteen of gum grass sap and coated himself with it.

When he was done, he pulled her into a kiss and while they were connected like this, she advanced downward.

“Ow”, she winced.

Then, she tried again.

“Ow!”, she went, angrily.

Callum placed a hand on her thigh and lifted her chin so she would have to face him. There were tears of frustration and pain in her eyes and his heart almost broke. “Don’t force it, fawn, please. I don’t want to hurt you. We ca--”
“Shushh-shh-shh”, his fiance went, pressing a finger to his lips, “A’m done waitin’! It’s not supposed to hurt like this after the first go!”

She lowered herself further, agony rippling through her over and over until finally she groaned and sunk forward to rest on his chest, breathing flatly to help the burning pain in her abdomen subside. She knew what getting stabbed felt like, and this was scarily comparable.

His voice was tiny and worried. “I… I don’t wanna hurt you, fawn. We need to stop.”

“This is stupid”, she said, “First it was Raszagal, then Opeli, and now me?!"

She groaned, frustration and anger escaping her with force. “Why can’t we just… shag!?"

They broke into incredulous laughter at her choice of words and the absurdity of it all.

When they had calmed down, Callum hugged her tightly, caressing her hair and back. She snuggled her cheek into his chest and closed her eyes.

“I love you”, he said.

After a moment, she hummed quietly. “I love you too. A could nap like this.”

His hand found her butt and he tried moving it between her legs. He couldn’t reach, which annoyed him a little. He wanted to fluster her some more and knew exactly how to do it, now.

His hands found purchase on her butt and he pulled. With a quizzical “Huh?!” she slid upward on his chest and before she knew it, his fingers entered her again. She bit back a surprised moan as his tongue found her chest.

“Let’s not sleep just yet”

The insistent growl of his voice and his sudden agency sent a jolt of need through her and she kissed him, swatting his hand away from her lap, again.
“A ken *that* feels good. A wanna try the real deal, again…”

A moment later, he felt her pass over him, a tight, ring-like structure caressing him. Then inches and inches of soft, textured warmth.

Observing her face, he took note of every single flicker of pain. There were many. She was still forcing herself. He was almost as relieved as her when their thighs finally met.

“I win!”, she snickered, “Now I just need another moment…”

She sunk forward onto his chest again and relaxed. He twitched inside her and the fact that he was inside her, filling her in a way that she had never expected needing suddenly became real to her. She blushed to a solid indigo.

“Dummy, h-how d-does that feel to y-you? I-Inside me?”, she whispered against her hands, clasping over her face.

“Feels, uh, warm”, he replied, unfocussed, “I *really want to move*, Rayla! Please!?”

She nodded and he angled his hips backwards, making himself slide part way out of her. The motion was painful but also rather pleasurable. She didn’t quite understand how that was supposed to work together, but she also didn’t want him to stop.

The king made a concerted effort to not let his instincts and urges dictate the speed. Rayla was hurting, and it was partially his fault. He wanted to go faster, but he needed to wait for her say-so.

“That’s startin’ to feel *really, really good!*”, she smiled at him, hotly and he had to restrain himself once more.

“Can I go faster?”, he begged.

“Please do…”
He got quicker and on one hand, she loved it, the urge to cry out more and more pressing.

On the other hand, there was a sore spot he was hitting ever so often, and it was getting worse. Grrrr.

She rose a little, enjoying the change in angle, but he was still hitting that damned spot!

“Hold on, dafty”, she requested breathily, and he acquiesced. She got into her own rhythm, moving her hips to avoid the aching parts. Waves of pleasure washed over her now. That was how it was supposed to feel, damn it!

“Rayla…”, his voice was hoarse and unsteady.

She loved it.

Below her, Callum was savoring every stroke she made, but he felt a familiar, urgent pressure building. He did not want this moment to end just yet, his fingers found her thighs and his mind raced to find every bit of shameful or stupid information to distract him from the furious, instinctual compulsion in his lap.

Rayla was now herself grabbing at his hands, wanting him to move them to her chest. When he didn’t, frustration welled up inside her, unbidden. Then his grip became painful, he groaned, his hips bucked upwards, into her and she felt herself become wetter. Was he…!? 

Her fiance had lost all semblance of control, instinct propelling him upward, deep inside her, where his primal urges found release.

She looked down, dizzy with lust, marveling at his apparent pleasure and the convulsions that wracked his body. With another hard, aggressive thrust, he set her off, as well, making her shudder, buckling under the sensation of sticky liquid adding to her slickness with each of his pulses.

His arms flew upward and pulled her down, into a tight hug. Like this, they breathed heavily for a while, savoring the emptiness in their minds and the bliss of love.
Then, realization struck her like a hammer.

“Uh”, she went, getting incredibly angry at what she assumed was intentional betrayal, “I… I can’t believe you did that! Outside! I said outside!”

“I’m sorry!”, he whined, his hands coming down to cover his embarrassed expression, “I… it felt so good and I just didn’t want it to end! I didn’t think it would just… happen, you know!? I thought I had a handle on it!”

The realization that he hadn’t done it on purpose washed away a large chunk of her anger. She shook her head at him, putting her hands under her chin to rest easier. “You are just… tsk. Well, good thin’ I’m such a responsible, sludge drinkin’ Lady, otherwise the council could probably do the we-have-an-heir dance, eh?”

“Sorry!”, he repeated, ruefully.

Rayla snickered. She couldn’t stay angry at him right now, especially since she secretly enjoyed the odd sensation that added to her feeling of completion, a feather-like touch at her abdomen. It was viscous fluid settling, satisfying an ancient part of her biology, like it was meant to be just so.

She shuddered a little as the heavy fog of lust dissipated and under her keen observation, feeling returned to her nether regions.

“Was that... good?”, she asked.

“I loved it”, he answered, “How about you?”

She laughed quietly, “I’m glad you enjoyed it. I’m really sore, now.”

“You didn’t have a good time?”

“I did. Just, uh, expected better, I guess. Didn’t think it would smart so much.”
He now looked thoroughly thunderstruck.

“I’m sorry, fawn! Hurting you, not warning you! Ugh, I’m such a bad... s-summand?!”

She smiled at him. “That you are. It’s fine, don’t worry about it. I just expected to, you know, ram you in there and just... go?”, her smile became a bit strained and she shrugged, “Turns out I’m fickle, heh. And as for the, uh, goo? We’re safe. Totally safe!”, frowning, she warned, “But! Unless we agree to, don’t do it again!”

“Again?! Do you, uh, want to? I don’t think I could, right now, and you said--”

“Nah. I meant ‘another day’.”

With that tantalizing bit of foreshadowing, she got off him, the sound of their separation making them both laugh. Like a boot, releasing from deep mud.

Rayla soaked one of the towels and started cleaning herself. It was rather difficult. He had really left a mess, pent up as he was, and something told the queen-to-be that her and gravity would have a rather annoying time with it. As some of the liquid got on her fingers, she couldn’t help but spread it between her thumb and index, wondering about its sticky and slippery properties.

He watched her flex for better access, frowning while his mind raced. How had the dice fallen today? Would she get pregnant, despite her protestations? There was a small chance, but a chance nonetheless. ‘Good job you irresponsible idiot’, he chastised himself.

A moment later she disturbed his reverie by handing him another wet towel.

“You better clean up. We should probably go back before someone comes lookin’.”

He gave her an adoring smile. “Probably a good idea. All I wanna do is lie here and snuggle, but I guess we can save that for later.”
She snickered quietly and bent down to kiss him.

His anatomy caught her eye as he moved to clean himself.

“Uh… it’s really tiny now? And floppy! Why is it so tiny and floppy?!”

He frowned at her, halting the rubbing of the towel between his legs.

“That’s just how things work, okay? It’s gotta get out of the way, somehow!”

“No need to get offended, dummy”, she snickered.

Grumbling, he got back to work.

They got dressed and packed up their papers and equipment.

When they left the cave, their hands interlocked and they gave each other a loving, intense look. There was now a solid sense of trust between them, gone the undercurrent of alienation.

The ritual had driven the last vestiges of it away and the pleasure they had shared after was like sealing wax on the entire affair.

Callum looked up, finding the night sky somewhat overcast. "Hey Rayla, wanna touch a cloud?"

She blinked at him, surprised. "Huh? Uh, sure?"

His hand swung through the air, confidently drawing a rune. "Don't worry. You're safe. Have fun. Alatus mille cubit!", he activated, while the tips of his fingers were touching the center of her chest.

She screamed as the spell carried her upward, the sound of fear turning smoothly into thrilled
She sailed past the tops of the trees and found herself drifting just a few feet above a sea of clouds. He was right, they basically didn't exist to the touch. Above her gleamed stars and the sickle of an almost new moon.

Next to her a very self-satisfied looking Katolin king burst through the clouds and she shouted, "Ya massive weapon! Could've given a bit more warnin'!"

He cast Ratis on himself and swam over to embrace her.

"Love you, summand."

"Love you, too, summand."

laughter.
They strode past the guards who saluted, once again watching them curiously. Callum hoped they wouldn’t notice his flush.

Back at their tent, Rayla immediately made over to her trunk and started digging.

Callum noticed a letter on his desk. It’s presence made him groan.

“What’s the matter?”, his summand asked.

“Ugh, Opeli must’ve dropped this off, meaning she knows we weren’t here.”

“So what if she does!? We’re her king and queen, she can get bent! Read it to me, will you?”

The king turned around and flushed at the still unfamiliar sight. Rayla had taken off her pants and underpants, frowning at a fresh, frilly pair of the latter.

“Uh, what’s wrong with them?”

“My old ones were nasty with someone else’s goo ”, she said, with an angry, blushing smirk at him that drove shameful heat into his ears, “and now I only have these… weird ones. Ech, better than nothin’, I guess. Though, I’ll go through these like no-one’s business if this... deluge keeps goin’! I will strangle you if you do that again!”

“I won’t, I promise! Uh... would you like to take a quick bath?”

She blinked at him. “Huh? It’s the middle of the night, Callum. I’d love to, but how is that gonna happen?”

Callum held up a finger. “In a moment. Letter, first. Claudia writes that the orders we gave are being executed, that the rest of today was quiet and they asked the woman in the coin if she knows a Rayla and what happened to her favourite toy.”
“Uh-huh?”, Rayla asked, hopeful.

“Hate to say it, fawn, but she just shook her head to both those things, apparently”, the king said, gently.

“Ah. Well, that sucks. I had my hopes up.”, his summand exhaled slowly, slumping down on their cot. Then, she thought better of it and got back up, scanning the spot where she had sat for wetness. Grr, stupid dummy! “Tyne’s a fairly common name. Could really be anyone.”

Callum walked up to her and pulled her into a hug. “Maybe she also just lied, you know? If she is a dragon guard, she wouldn’t be quick to trust humans.”

The queen-to-be shrugged, sadly. “Eh, I think I’m more comfortable with the idea of her not bein’ my mum. That way, if she really isn’t, I won’t be disappointed”

He lifted her chin. “So. Bath?”

She shrug-nodded, curious as to how this would come to be in the middle of a forest and the middle of the night.

The king strode outside, toward a tent in the inner circle. He knocked against the flap-board and waited. From inside came a rustle, then a head poked through the tent flap.

Horace was old, for a human, approaching seventy, in fact. His hair was thoroughly faded, but his brown eyes gleamed with the edge of a mischief maker. He’d served Sarai’s family before finding employ with house Katol. Beyond his attendance, he was also a rather close personal friend, having sat with Callum through quite a few nightly panic attacks.

“Orders, Majesty?”

“Could I ask for a bath?”
“A riddle to challenge my rusting wit, Sire? Or simply a stupid question? Of course there is a bath to be had! I’ll get everything ready.”

The night attendant strode out of his tent, nodding at his much younger king, fondly.

Callum smirked. Perks.

He turned and walked back to his own tent.

The king found Rayla, curled up on a towel on their cot. She smiled at him, sadly, as he quickly patted down the tent flap to maintain her privacy.

“Hey, summand”, she said, “No bath then?”

He sat next to her, in the bend of her knees, and started petting her thigh. “Hey, summand. Give it a bit. How are you feeling?”

“Well… I’m really happy about us. I just wanna kiss you and cuddle you and dance with you and…”, she sighed, “…but hearin’ about the coin lady is clouds over my round. I guess this is what happens when I let myself hope.”

“I’d say don’t give up, just yet. Tomorrow, we’re gonna get the court painter to set up a quick portrait of her, then we’ll know for sure.”

“That’s a brilliant idea!”, she sat up and kissed him, “Why didn’t they come up with it?!”

“That’s fair. Oh boy, I just realized somethin’ else, talkin’ about priorities. Now that we’re summed, we need to get the tattoos so people at home can tell, otherwise the Lucid’s still gonna be mad if we dare to hold hands or whatever.”
Suddenly her face burst into elation and she grabbed his arm, “Dummy, we’re summed! A f-family!! I could scream!”

She kissed him and he pet her hair glad to share in this sudden explosion of happiness. After a moment, they separated.

“Tattoos, yeah”, he frowned a little. He couldn’t imagine getting the markings on the top of his right hand would be wholly painless. “Almost forgot about that part. Do you think we can wait on that until we’re in moon elven territory?”

“We’ll probably have to unless there’s a tattoo artist with us. Just act all proper and coy around me until we have them”, she snickered, “That won’t be hard, right?”

“Oh yeah, no problem at all, after tonight”, mischief prodded him and the fingers of his left moved to lightly caress her between her legs, finding her cold, somewhere between sticky and slick.

Against his intentions, the touch made her wince and his impish smirk collapsed, “Ugh, I’m really sorry!”

“I am so, so sore”, she grimaced, “I know you probably meant that to be romantic, or whatever, but please don’t touch.”

He nodded, wiping his fingers on her towel. “It’s really unfair that I had such an amazing time back there. It would’ve been better if I had some pain, too. Or you felt none, like me. I just feel… responsible.”

She shook her head. “Aww, you! I did have a good time! Felt amazing when it didn’t hurt. I think I just need to, uh, loosen up a bit. Don’t worry about it.”

“I do worry about it! A lot! You had tears in your eyes! I need to find a way to make it up to you.”

“You don’t have toooo”, she pleaded, swatting limply at his chest, “Please don’t feel baaaaaad!”

She drew him into a hug and together they moved to lie down. They spent some time like this,
simply enjoying each other’s closeness and touch.

Sleep crept up on them, now, exhausted as they were from the night before, the day spent traveling and the very eventful evening.

Some time passed; then there was a bit of busyness outside and a knock at the flap board of their tent made them both jolt wide awake.

Callum got up and threw their blanket over Rayla who was digging at it to poke her head out, sleepily.

“Sire, the bath is ready.”

“Thank you. Bring it in.”

He stood aside while four guards luged a large wooden tub inside the tent, filled with hot water. Horace placed soap and two fresh towels on the King’s desk, nodded politely at the covered up, confused Rayla, saying “Milady” and then strode out, after the guards.

“They… drew a bath for me?! How?!” Rayla gaped.

“You are the queen, fawn”, said Callum, marveling at his summand’s graceful, naked shape emerging from under the blankets, “Horace loves a challenge. He’s our night attendant. Probably had to go wake a scout or two to find enough water to put this together.”

There was whiplash eight. Her wishes woke people and they didn’t seem terribly annoyed.

She sunk into the water and hummed, appreciatively. “hmm… I totally needed this. Makin’ love is crazy sticky…”

He sat next to her on the floor, trailing his hand through the water.

“Do you, uh, have to sit there? I’m bein’ a bit graceless in here.”, she said, wincing at the
washboard dragging across her lap.

“Fawn, don’t worry about it. Nothing you do, is”

She splashed him with water.

“Ack! Except that! Why??”

She snickered, then leaned on the edge of the tub. “I do a lot of graceless thin’s! I’m not some gleamin’ fae who doesn’t ever need to poop!”

Her summand guffawed. “I know that! Just, right now, let me idolize you a bit! You’re so loving and smart and cute and se--”

Sappy king! “Stop it, you mushy dork! You’re gonna make me melt into this bathwater!”, she snickered and splashed him again, “Go take a nap!”

So shooed, he resolved to lie down until she woke him.

His summand watched him undress and slip under the covers, appreciating his soft but muscular build once more. He just struck that perfect balance between protectable boy-man and impressive king.

A few minutes later, she dried off, wrapping up her hair. After putting on her pajamas, she roused him, so he could take his bath. By the nature of things, he wasn’t nearly as sticky as her and was done rather quickly, even though he gave himself a thorough wash. It gave her some time to dry her hair a little.

When he joined her in bed, she snuggled close, spooning him, and hummed, satisfied.

“I like to be clean… but we’re gonna be so tired, tomorrow”, he said, ”I guess if it's too much, we can just nap in a cart like Horace."
“Yea, ‘nother late night… worth it, though, *summand?*, she asked, sleepily.

“Totally, *summand.*”
Thoughts in Passing

Viren stuffed his fake papers back in his jacket and spurred his horse. The Katolin border guard had once more fallen for his magical disguise.

A few minutes passed in which Viren scanned his surroundings, bored. The biggest downside of being on the run while organizing a rebellion was that there were large swaths of nothingness and quiet.

Then his glance fell on two riders approaching ahead of him, apparently on their way to Duren. One of them seemed familiar at a distance.

As they came closer, Viren's heart skipped. It was Soren, without a doubt!

He was cradling an upset toddler?! Was she his?!

"You mustn't", came Aaravos' voice from his subconscious, "I envy and pity you in equal measure. You're a grandfather, congratulations. However, remember his reaction when you last saw him. He is not on our side."

"Are you reading my mind?", asked Viren, under his breath.

Aaravos laughed. "That isn't possible, but I drew conclusions, in much the same way you did, friend. You see your son with a babe in his arms and a woman by his side. What else could one surmise?"

They were now passing each other and Viren listened to his son babble soothingly at his granddaughter with an aching heart. He and Soren had not parted on good terms.

There was a ring on his left, same with the young woman next to him.

He had missed his own son's wedding. Not just that, but the relationship that must have come beforehand.
Speaking of, what had happened between Soren and Commander Gren? They had looked fond of… oh. Right.

Viren frowned, the coins in his pocket suddenly seeming heavier. The commander had been rather close with Soren in the short time they had spent together at the Twins.

It seemed as though Viren had closed an entirely different life's path to his son via his actions at Taelin.

Where was Claudia? Had they had a falling out? The siblings had been inseparable for the longest time.

His children were lost to him, probably forever, unless something happened to convince them of his good intentions.

And yet. Part of him wanted to stop. Catch up. Hold the newest member of his family. Why did he have to sacrifice his relationships, his health and good name, for the good of the pentarchy? Was it even worth it?

Wouldn’t it have been easier if he had just sat back and enjoyed the last few years of his life in royal comfort?

The high mage’s teeth started grinding painfully. Regrets, regrets. It was too late for any of that. Plus, his mission was so much larger than any of this. Without his intervention, the Xadian menace would wipe all of them out, all possible future generations included.

His gaze fixed to the road, determined to ignore his feelings. After all, he was off to inform the people of Katolis of the bastard usurper and his bruiser witch’s heinous deeds. No matter his own failings, the traitorous Callum would have to find his demise before he could install a bad actor as queen.

He could not afford to let him succeed. Granting a Xadian agent control over Katolis and, as a consequence, the Pentarchy as a whole, was not an option.
Cold fear gripped his heart as he internalized, for the first time, that him and his children were on opposite sides of a war. They were working with the bastard king, as evidenced by Soren's uniform.

Perhaps Claudia herself was assisting her former crush as well. This was somewhat inconceivable, given how angry he expected his daughter to be at Callum, both for betraying his country and her.

Had Viren expected the events that had transpired since Harrow's passing, he would have encouraged their relationship more, ensured his family's influence by marriage rather than subterfuge.

He shuddered a little with the thought of giving her hand to the man he despised so much. The mage had never been fond of the prince he used to be, either, had dragged Claudia away whenever he felt they were getting too close.

The boy had always had his head in the clouds, was unfocused and utterly stupid. He had dawdled away his life, spending it playing with crayons like a toddler. Surely, he was not fit to even be in the same province as a crown.

Before the year was through, he would have to add Harrow's step-son's murder to his conscience.

*This* traitor king deserved no leniency.

Behind him, a child's laughter could be heard and he had to fight the impulse to look back.

Maybe in a different life.
Twilight

They had been so exhausted after their summation night, the next day had passed without them noticing much other than each other’s presence. An early night had followed. Tuesday had started with an annoyed Opeli, calling them out of bed “on time, for once!”. That day, too, had passed without much more hubbub.

The landscape had turned from golden mallorn to ever-green boreal forest filled with a billion fireflies.

Today, a Wednesday, had begun with a small, half-serious fight about him hogging their shared blanket at night.

Late in the morning, the landscape had rather suddenly turned into a dry but cold-ish plain with insane rock formations and a rich covering of ferns and bushes, accompanied by a few short trees with massive, sprawling crowns. The place looked like a low cathedral, filled with the songs of unseen birds.

The earth here appeared rather blue, a side effect of the eternal twilight caused by the trees. They seemed to dampen the sun even when it was as high in the sky as now, shortly before noon.

The ground covering plants were rich with bioluminescence, their almost black leaves soaking up whatever light they could gather from the moon and sun.

What few animals had been visible to the humans so far were small and dark reptiles, scuttling in the colorful underbrush.

So this was the heart of moon elven territory.

Callum didn’t like it.

It wasn’t that it wasn’t beautiful, oh no. He was looking forward to spending the night here, when the last bit of sky light would fade and the plants’ glow would cut vividly through the solid dark.
He missed the sun. It was summer, and the unnatural twilight seemed as stifling as the highest of heat. The atmosphere was tiring the humans and the twelve sun elves among the canon guard were sagging in their saddles, mostly cut off as they were from their primal source.

However; Rayla, Naves, Aodhan and the toddler were overflowing with energy.

The queen-to-be was pointing at and explaining this tree and that flower, trying to give her summand a good impression of her homeland.

Then sounded a familiar whoosh and a hawk-arrow speared into the ground next to Opeli. She dismounted, picked it up, extracted the letter and scanned the address.

A moment later, she was at Rayla’s side.

“Majesty. From Anatol, the court painter.”

“Finally!”, Rayla yelled, tearing the letter from Opeli’s hands.

A frown like a thunderstorm balled in the councillor’s face. “Milady! Mind your manners!”

The queen-to-be blinked at her, then became sheepish. “Sorry! I’m excited! It’s been so long since I’ve felt… charged… like this, you know, and the picture took them forever!”

“Manners make Majesty”, Opeli warned, a smirk stealing into the corners of her mouth, “But I appreciate your excitement. I will likely feel a similar joy, crossing into the familiarity of Katolis.”

Rayla tore apart the seal and unfolded the letter.

“Ohh, she was out of town. That explains it. Wastes a good paragraph on sayin’ sorry”, she chuckled, then eagerly looked at the next page that had a drawing on it.

A sad frown snuck into her face.
Callum noticed, leaned over and extended an arm to tap her shoulder, questioningly.

“Pretty sure it’s... not her”, his summand said, downtrodden, “It’s kinda hard to tell cause she’s tryin’ her best to hide her face or whatever, but her familials sure aren’t like mine.”

She passed the drawing to the king who studied it. Anatol was great with willing subjects. Here, she had struggled. It was obvious that the elf woman had done everything in her power to make herself hard to draw. Her long hair was draped over her face and her gloved hands were obscuring her horns. On top of that, she was probably grimacing.

But, it was true. Rayla’s familial markings under her eyes didn’t match the bit of the woman’s that Callum could make out in the pencil drawing. Where his summands’ were shaped a little like carnissals, reaching from within her lower eyelids to about the middle of her cheeks, the woman’s were rather more circular in shape, a bit of them showing between the strands of her hair.

“Could she have changed them?”

Rayla frowned. “Only reason you’d ever change your familials would be to leave your family behind. Even I didn’t go there. They may be cowards, but they’re MY cowards.”

“What about us? Do we get them?”, her summand asked, worried about the answer being that there would be a needle in his face before long.

The queen-to-be smirked at his obvious quaver and shook her head, lightly. “Nah. Not yet. I’ll have mine changed to somethin’ a bit more tiny and human-palatable once we, uh… have an heir. That’s normally how it goes.”

“So your parents got theirs when they got you?”

“Yeah. The hand-markin’s make us a couple, and I guess, a family of two. But then the familials make us a proper, capital ’F family. Come either by adoption or birth.”

Callum handed her back the drawing and Rayla stared at it with mounting frustration.
“Feels like the baby topic is all around us right now”, the king sighed. “Wish the world would take the hint and leave us alone about it”

“Yup”, his summand agreed, absentmindedly. The drawing was expertly done, no doubt about it. The woman didn’t not look like her mother, but that just meant that she also didn’t.

“I wish I could get a look at her with my own eyes”, Rayla eventually whined, stuffing the letter and drawing roughly into her saddlebag, “I can’t be sure. I want it to be her, too. Ugh, Tyne! Why do you have to be so guarded?”

Callum snorted. “She’s a moonshadow elf.”

“Aye”, his summand growled.

From then on, she wasn’t in good spirits anymore, fuming in her saddle.

Her summand tried to cheer her up but she was like a block of purplish concrete. Eventually his own mood deteriorated and he decided to leave her side for a while.

Zym saw him riding by himself and swooped down, falling into a neat trot next to him.

“You guys okay?”

“Yup. She’s just really grouchy.”

“Mmhh… Did you, uh, get that thing figured out, dude? With her?”

“Yes. It was totally innocent. Well. Politically. Personally it was kinda painful, but, eh. She didn’t mean to hurt me”, Callum turned to his friend, “Trust her, Zym. She’s good for it.”

“Eh, bro, I’ll make my own judgements. It sucks bu--”
“No, I mean it. Like, seriously. She’s never really done anything to earn your distrust, right? Think about it.”

The dragon’s face contorted. “Rrghh”, he went after a pensive moment, “I guess she really hasn’t. See, I’m just like mother, looking at her and seeing what she is more than who.”

“I’ve made the same mistake.”

“You did?! How are you still alive, dude?”

They snickered, then Callum said, “Made that mistake with her. But also with you.”

“I know, I said that’s fine. We’re a prince and a king on two sides of a paused war.”

“Are you sure? I feel like we’re on the side of peace, together. But we’re also friends. I’d like to think that, if Ez was still alive, you’d be more like family.”

Zym regarded him, then nodded, sadly, his head turning to scan the ground. “Ever so often I feel like he’s still there, you know? It's hard to explain.”

Callum sighed deeply, a sad but serene smile claiming his face. “No, I get it. I haven’t… really cleared out our old rooms, you know? Walking in there it feels like any moment he’s gonna come climbing out of one of his hiding places with his fingers covered in persimmon, Bait in hand.”

For a while, they just stayed next to each other, lost in their own remembrance.

Zym eventually broke the silence. “So, uh, Bait. How is he?”

“Guards brought him back from Taelin. A survivor, the little twerp. Sucks that we can’t really ask him what happened. Nobody in Katolis speaks toad these days.”
“Well, uh, I do”, Zym said.

Callum looked at him, wondering if the dragon was offering something. “Are you saying you’ll come talk to him?”

“Look dude, I’m really curious to know what happened to my first and only interpreter. Sorry if that sounds offensive to you but, my bond with him was deeper than yours. No, *is* deeper than yours. I can feel him, tugging at that string. Mother says a dead interpreter is *quiet* and *still* and this… this isn’t that. That connection… it’s like… like a drop of dew, running along a spider web. Heh, listen to me, I need to write that down…”

The king did frown, rather hurt by the dragon’s assertion, but there was a question burning on his tongue, now. “Wait. You’re saying he might not be… gone?”

“I honestly don’t know. It would suck if I got your hopes up after so long and it all turned out to be a fluke. I need to talk to the glow toad. So yea. I’ll come with you to Katolis.”

“Did you work that out? With your mom?”

“Wh, she doesn’t need to know, right?”

Callum grumbled. “That’s a dangerous game, Zym. I can’t imagine she’d let you go with us, especially since she doesn’t trust me. Please tell her.”

“Pfft, don’t bug out on me, bro!”, the dragon prince sounded angry, all of a sudden, “I can go where I want! And I will, I don't have to tell her zilch!”

With those words, he lifted off to rejoin his dragon guard in the air, pelting Callum with dirt in the process.

For a while, the Katolin King rode alone, in silence. Today, apparently, he was making people angry.

He was so caught up in his reverie over Ez that he jolted when Rayla’s annoyed voice interrupted
from his right. “I see the thankless lizard has stirred in your head again? More doubts?”

“Yeah, actually, but not about you. He… he has a hunch that maybe, possibly, tentatively Ezran could still be alive.”

There was weighty silence for a moment, then his summand spoke up.

“That sounds… kinda…”, she leaned over and whispered in his ear, causing an entirely inappropriate feeling to grab hold of his heart and abdomen, “Do you think he’s up to somethin’? Bein’ manipulative?”

The king quickly spun and kissed her, surprising her quite a bit. “Fawn, your whispers are niiice”, he grinned, but she frowned angrily, believing her words to have gone to waste until he spoke again, “But, no, I don’t think so. You two have been really worried about each other. He said he was looking at you for what you are, not who. Maybe you’re doing the same?”

“‘What’ I am? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“In his eyes, you were ex-lucid first, then Rayla, the person. Is he the dragon prince or Zym, to you?”

“He used to be ‘Zym’ before he chucked a gigantic trust-axe at the two of us first chance he got to be alone with you.”

“Hey!”, Callum said, frowning, “That was your fault. You could’ve told me about the letter!”

Rayla scoffed. “Yeah. Sure I could have. Would’ve gone over so well while I was worried you had already decided to leave me and then after when you were so messed up about other stuff. I didn’t wanna add to your probl--”

“I don’t want your protection! Tell the damn truth, even if it hurts me!”, the king said, in a forceful, angry whisper.

“I did tell the truth!”
“Not at the time, you didn’t! Sure, you told the truth up to a point! But a lie of omission is still a lie! Own your mistake instead of blaming him! He deserves your distrust as much as you deserve his!”

Rayla gave him a furious glare, then spurred her doe and was soon gone from view, obscured by the entourage.

Yep. Today, he made people angry.
It was early in the afternoon when Callum spotted a set of banners next to the road in the distance.

Waving in a weak wind, their silver fabric showed nothing but a black, stylized Precious White.

Ahead of him, Rayla, who had sat sagged unhappily into her saddle for the past few hours, seemed to perk up a little.

They hadn’t spoken since their annoyed words earlier and it was starting to gnaw at the king. He wanted to be close to her, especially as they made the memory of crossing into her homeland, officially.

“Hey”, he said cautiously, closing to her side.

“Hey”, she looked over and gave him a sheepish, somewhat sad smile. “You were right. I’m sorry. I’ll do better?”

It didn’t take more words than that. He simply leaned over to kiss her, then got his mount into lockstep with hers and they rode ahead. Two of the crown and canon guard each separated from the rest of the entourage to follow them.

The border between Regio Magna and Scotia was a broad river with a bridge and a large guardhouse. Callum had learned that the two moonshadow provinces, Bretain and Scotia, were the only ones who still maintained their border checkpoints.

Everyone else had simply handed that responsibility to the federal level, trusting the Auxilia to keep humans out at the breach.

As they approached, a number of soldiers filed out of the guardhouse, led by a worried looking figure in a black uniform who stepped into a small booth right next to the bridge.

The king and queen-to-be slowed their approach and decided to dismount for the last few feet.
Obvious relief at the lack of confrontation showed in the official’s mien.

“We’ve been expectin’ ya, Lady Rayla, Lord Callum. May A please inspect yer papers?”

They handed over their passports and the official looked them over.

*Pedantically*.

He paused for a long moment over Rayla’s title, apparently struggling a little with the association.

“...and do ya have a Federal Entrance Permit?”

“I do, she’s a citizen”, said Callum, seemingly amused by the question. He handed the piece of stamped paper over.

“Obviously”, the officer said with a slight sneer at Rayla's passport, “Thank you.”

Once more there was a poignant pause in which the elf read and cross-referenced the information with Callum's documents.

“Do ye also have, err, Permit A38, Permission to Enter into the Scotian Domain?”

The king handed it over. “That one was a pain to get”, he told Rayla, "Nearly drove Opelix and I crazy", he cleared his throat, “*Opeli*, I mean.”

“Last but not least, A will have to ask ye to sign and date - Xadian format, please - this form, granting the Lucid insight into and control over the noted aspects of your visit.”

He received a form and a quill. “Uh. I don’t read a whole lot of Rune”, Callum said, sheepishly.
“I do”, Rayla said, smirking at him, “They want you to understand that they can watch you whenever they please, however they please, that they can ask you to show what’s in your pockets. You also say that you understand the culture and the expectations and that punishments must be fought in this and that court, yada yada. Uh, plus, they wanna make clear that the Lucid is civil protection in Scotia, unlike Xadia, where they only serve as secret service.”

“Uh. Wasn’t Helmond kinda trying to murder me outside of his territory, then?”

“Ye were an illegal alien, Lord. The Lucid had full access to ye, as such”, came the answer from the official, “Well, yer papers are in order, so, welcome to the Wee Country, Excellences.”

He nodded at them, businesslike and they said their goodbyes to return to their mounts.

Suddenly, Callum frowned. “I just realized that I won’t get to snuggle you for the next few days. Well, outside our tent, anyway.”

“Eh, it’s safer not to, even inside. I don’t wanna have to shank another officer of the Lucid, especially on their home turf.”

“Why not? Last time you did that, you added a really smart guy to our retinue!”

They snickered.

Then they gave each other a sad glance. “No hugs for, what, three days?”

“Not even holdin’ hands, dummy. Don’t wanna risk it, yea? Remember the form you signed. Would be surprised if there wasn’t already a band of agents waitin’ in the trees across that bridge.”

“Probably, with our super low profile”, Callum grumbled, looking at the entourage, who was now arriving at the crossing, “It’s gonna take like an hour or two to get everyone across…”

It was a gross exaggeration, but while Opeli went through the arduous task of having their following certified by the border guard, Rayla grabbed her summand’s wrist.
“Come with”, she said and pulled him along, off the road and into the nearest trees.

“Uh, we are getting in so much troubl--”, Callum laughed, but Rayla cut him off by kissing him.

“Wha’, are you a teenager runnin’ from yer mum? Come on, dummy!”, she snickered.

“I am a teenager!”, he protested, “and Opeli is worse than my mom!”

"Shuuut uuuup!!", she laughed, tackling him to the ground, into the ferns and black leaves.

“Dummy, dummy, this all happened so quick…”, she breathed against his lips, “Few days ago I was still locked up, pinin’ and now… now we’re summed… feels crazy but so, so good!”

He pressed a long kiss to her lips, then said, “Sure. But we waited for four years. The moment you opened that door, I was in love, again.”

For a while, they rolled about, tightly intertwined, kissing and snuggling. Then Callum’s hand found her lap and she giggled, swatting at it.

“No time for that, you!”

He groaned, disappointed, but also acknowledged that she was right. “Should’ve done it more yesterday and the day before”, he grinned.

“Oh, nah, that wouldn’t have worked. Sorry.”

“Still sore?”

“... uh, yea.”
The obvious pause made it seem as though she was hiding something, again. His boyish grin deteriorated somewhat. “That… didn’t sound complete. Didn’t you just tell me you’d do better?”

“I know, I know, it’s just… so uncomfortable”, she said, sighing, “There’s some stuff that I just feel weird talkin’ about.”

“Even with me?”

“Especially with ye. A don’t… ye’re the last person A want to think of me as weird or disgustin’

“Oh, don’t worry, I already know, you adorable snot ballista ”, he snickered and she swatted at his chest lightly with the back of her hand while giving him an aghast smile, “Trust me. I’m gonna try my best to not be mad or think you’re weird. Please just tell me what’s going on?”

She frowned, studying the ground. The elf caught herself wishing they’d be attacked, to alleviate the tension a little.

“Do h-human women… g-get moon b-bleeds?”, she eventually choked out.

Callum immediately felt like an idiot. Of course they did, and obviously, so did his summand.

“Is t-there anything I can do to help?”, he asked with a cracking quaver, wondering if that was a dumb question.

Apparently it was, since his summand coughed to badly suppress a laugh, then shook her head. “A didnae live to nineteen without learnin’ to deal with and prep for it. A guess that’s not the same for you.”

“No, it, uh, really isn’t. I mean, the same books that deal with protection and that stuff also have chapters on this, but this is the first time it’s really come up as a… a thing in my life .”

“Must be nice, A’m kinda jealous. They can be painful and mess with everythin’ ”, Rayla said with a wry smirk.
“What does that mean?”, he asked, curiously.

She brushed an errant strand of hair over her ear, scanning the ground. “Uh, well. Everything, as in, ye know, hunger, thirst, sweat, uh... bathroom stuff. Just, uh, *everything*.”

Then she took a moment to adore her summand. “Thanks for not makin’ this awkward. Last time I had to tell a guy about this was back when it first happened. Runaan, uh, didn’t... ‘appreciate’ the problem, I guess. He didn’t know how to deal with it. We had no supplies to deal with it. It was a really, really bad time. Made me feel terrible about myself, cause he was so... panicky. Sent me to sit down with Lessa to talk it through. Only time I ever really talked to her as a kid.”

A bit of bitterness crept into her voice. “This guy who probably changed my diapers at some point and murdered people for a livin’ was scared of a bit of blood ‘cause of where it came from and what it meant. Breaks ma heid.”

Callum shook his head. “I remember you telling me that he wasn’t super open about any of this stuff.”

His summand scoffed. “Yeah. Zala was so, so mad when she found out that I was still kinda clueless at sixteen. She sat me down one day and had this long, long talk about consent and respect and discoverin’ yourself by self-pleasure. She said ‘To own your body, you have to understand it’, or somethin’ like that. The relationship with her summand was her first one and she was about as clueless as I was before Amaya’s letter. He was not... wholesome and respectful. Not like you. She... she said she lost her innocence before she understood what that meant. That kinda hurt to hear.”

The king nodded, slowly, “Yeah. Back when he gave me ‘the talk’, my dad told me how it’s important to know how you work before you do things with others. That way you don’t come in at a disadvantage.”

Rayla smirked at him, lifting her eyebrows meaningfully.

“Okay, yes! I messed up! I overestimated myself! Sorry, again!”, he said, snickering sheepishly.

“It, uh, definitely was an *experience*, dummy. Not somethin’ a finger does, for sure”, she laughed brightly, then kissed him, “At least now we know for sure that the sludge worked. No babies this
Callum nodded, pensively. Then realization lit up his face. “Wait. So you *were* worried?”

“Yeah, I guess you were, too? Remember, I’m a worrier. Hard to feel, uh, totally confident about somethin’ like this. One-in-one-hundred sounds like a small risk, but it’s still… it’s not *nil*, you know?”

The king nodded. “What if… what if it fails?”

“That’ll only happen if *you* fail, and trust me when I say there’s a much better chance than one-in-one-hundred of me gettin’ very, very mad if you do!”, she warned.

“No more accidents, I promise”, he said and meant it, “But… I don’t know. I just feel like we need to talk about this. Figure out what we’d do if it still happened, somehow. Everything about heirs and all that aside, what do you think?”

His summand looked unsure, confirming his assumption that this was a necessary conversation. “I… I don’t want kids right now”, she said, finally, kneading her hands, “B… but if… if it happened… I don’t think I could… you know… n… not have it?”

“Yeah. I think we’re on the same page”, Callum said, “It kinda sucks that this is such an unequal thing, having kids. Not only am I getting more out of making love, apparently, you’re, uh, also the one… with the womb, heh… I just wanna make sure you know that either way you’d have my support.”

She nodded, slowly. “You’ll just have to make up for it by taking care of the tyke for the first year or so by yourself”, she smirked, ”I kid, that probably wouldn't work. As for your promise, I always knew you'd have my back. You’re a wonderful person, dafty.”

“For, uh, telling the woman I love that I’ll be there if fate deals us a bad card? I’m sorry but, feelings aside, there really isn't an alternative if I don't wanna be a total assh--, uh, looser. So I think that's just… normal?”

She frowned slightly. “It should be, but I doubt Zala ever heard those words.”
With that, the queen-to-be pulled him back into her arms and because he was losing his balance, he flailed in her strong grip, like a fish out of water.

They spent a while longer on the ground, snuggling and kissing to make up for time they’d lose until getting the tattoos, then Rayla turned to look through the thicket to where the entourage was. “But, uh, we should probably get back now, before Opeli stops bein’ busy.”

They reassembled themselves, then walked back onto the road where Rayla picked a black leaf from Callum’s crown. Together they strode toward their animals, their hands only separating when they mounted up.

Opeli was still busy, luckily.
The Other Side

When the entourage was properly signed in, Callum and Rayla moved to the front of it and led their retinue across the bridge.

On the other side, the queen-to-be immediately found her expectations confirmed, but not in the way that she had thought.

In the middle of the road waited an elf on a Thurnwarg. Apparently the field uniform of the Lucid had not changed in the past four years; she was clad in familiar green.

"Excellencies, welcome to Regio Scotia. I am Tribune Wynda. The privy council has attached me to your band as cultural adviser. We will work together to ensure your visit will be as uneventful as possible."

Spoken in the haughtiest of Bretani accents, this introduction seemed to be both welcome and warning. The officer was still rather young, thirty at most. Her hair was cropped short and her somewhat sharp face coupled with her frosty expression reminded Callum of an angry hawk.

“I look forward to working with you, Tribune. It’s good to know that the Lucid takes our visit so very seriously”, Callum said and Rayla smirked at him.

His voice carried no edge, but it was still somehow clear that he meant this sarcastically.

Wynda didn’t pick up on this or simply chose to ignore it. “I am sure you have familiarized yourself with the role the Lucid plays in safeguarding our people’s wellbeing. Obviously, you have the eyes of our people in uncommon measure. As such, you are expected to follow our rules to the letter. To assist in this, I recommend you make separate sleeping arrangements.”

The impertinence drove searing anger into Callum’s stomach. “You may expect us to fulfill your demands, so long as they are reasonable. We agreed to following the customs of your people, but I refuse to let the Lucid dictate our sleeping arrangements! Our word is our bond. While within the domain, we will not engage in any ‘improper’ behaviour.”

Wynda’s eyes narrowed as she regarded the king and the queen-to-be, who stared back, defiantly.
Suddenly, there was the loud breaking of wood in the air and a massive shape descended near the royals and the agent. Every single hand flew in the direction of the nearest weapon.

“Wooaaaahh guys!”, came Azymondias’ holler, “Look out below!”

He landed in a heap of broken branches and a stream of gold-orange sunlight, shaking off black and green leaves from the upper layers of the forest.

“Hullo”, he said as he joined the startled entourage, “Took me a bit to figure out where you all had gone from up there. What’s crackin’? Uh, other than branches?”

“Greetin’s Azymondias, we’re just meetin’ Tribune Wynda, our ‘cultural adviser’”, Rayla said with an amused look at Wynda who was blanching in her saddle, “Good of you to drop in!”

“Yo, Tribune Wynda, I’m the Dragon Prince!”, the dragon introduced himself, laxly.

Wynda saluted. “Excellence, what a surprise! Will you, uh, be joining us?”

“I will indeed be joining you-hoo”, said Zym haughtily, bouncing his eyebrows at her, “Aaaaand have a bit of an eye on you-hooooooo...”, the repeated sound became surprisingly stern and toneless as he stared at the agent who seemed rather convinced that she would end up with lightening up her rear end if she acted out of order.

Behind the dragon, a few sun elves could be seen dragging themselves into the beam of light. They were blinking upwards with expressions of pure bliss as they took off their helmets.

Rayla’s smile waned a little as she turned back to Wynda.

“Tribune, this is my home. I just want to spend a few days with old friends and family. We’re not here to make trouble. The only thin’ we’ve planned that’s a bit out of the ordinary is that we’ll be gettin’ our bond wreaths in Cardow, and after that we shouldn’t have much of an issue, right?”, she said, hoping to get on the agent’s good side.
The officer gave her a strange smile, it almost looked… pitiful? “Bond wreaths! Well, congratulations, Rayla, you must be so very excited!”

With that, Wynda turned about and spurred her warg to make room for the rest of the entourage to cross the border.

The queen-to-be was puzzled. The address had been rather informal. Did Wynda know her as a child? She wasn’t old enough to be fading from memory like Lessa. Food for thought.

The group moved at a slower pace than Callum had hoped. The humans were rather nervous, scanning the roadside for possible ambushes. Their king wasn’t worried, knowing that they had permission to be here. Elves were strict with rules and theirs said that being here was okay with the papers he’d handed over. Plus, no elf would dare challenge the dragon prince.

“Zym, where’s your guard?”, Callum asked, suddenly realizing that they were nowhere to be seen.

“Oh, they? I sent them home to let mother know where I’m going.”

“Uh… why did you send all of them?”

“No point in dragging them down here, anyway! They’re all sun elves. Look at these tough nuts.”

Rayla noticed that the poor sun elven guards deteriorated further with the advancing evening while her own energy levels spiked in the deepening twilight. It was an interesting choice to give them so many guards who depended on this primal source, given that Callum had announced his intent to diverge into the wee country.

“Why only bring hotheads?”, she asked.

“Duh, Canon and dragon guard is mostly sunfire! That’s why your ‘rents were so spesh. I mean, it’s all about bein’ the best fighter, right, so sun elves have an edge. Plus, when dealing with dragons, it helps to be a bit… fire proof”

Rayla shrug-nodded, still puzzling. It was true that sun elves made up a large part of the upper
ranks of the auxilia. Their primal source predisposed them for prowess in head-on battle and impressive stature. But their guard was still disproportionate.

They rode in silence for a while.

Since they were being watched, the queen-to-be resolved to smiling at her summand every time he looked over. He appreciated the little gesture a lot more than she knew.

“Rayla”, he said and Wynda’s head turned ever so slightly, if not slightly enough to escape Rayla. She simply pointed at the agent, with her eyebrows raised.

Callum shrug-nodded, then continued, “Did you introduce yourself to Lydia and Horace yet? It’s getting late in the afternoon, they should both be up.”

“D’oh!”, the queen-to-be went, slapping her hand to her forehead, “I totally forgot! I’ll go say hello right now!”

The king snickered at her stupified, self-conscious expression as she led her doe to the side of the road and stopped.

While she searched her fellowship for the two attendants, she grumbled at herself under her breath. “Plenty good to wash your dainties, are they, but ye wouldnae even say hello, would ye, ye div?”

She eventually spotted Lydia on the side of the road. She was crouched down, marvelling at a rather vibrant fern.

“They’re nice, eh?”, the queen-to-be said, dismounting.

Lydia stood and curtsied. Her brown hair was tied back in a pony tail, the remaining lose bangs neatly framing her middle-aged features. In many ways, Rayla felt reminded of Lessa, looking at her.

“Milady. How can I help?”
“I was hopin’ to get to know you a bit, if that’s alright. You, uh, already did so much for me. So first of all; thank you.”

“You are welcome, Milady”, Lydia said, “What, uh, would you like to know?”

Rayla thought for a moment, then said, “How did you come to work with Callum?”

“I started with house Vedin, but when my wife and I decided to move to be closer to a sick family member, I quit. King Harrow was looking for someone to help with the princes and so I applied. Since then I’ve been with house Katol. Ah, that’s over a decade spent tending, now! Time flies, Milady, I’m shocked!”

“You must have some great stories about kid Callum, then?”

The attendant smirked wryly, “I may have one or two… hundred, but sadly I won’t be able to share them with you unless the Lord wills it. He’s a good employer and I don’t want to damage his trust.”

“That’s actually good to hear”, Rayla said, then remembered a question that had been burning on her mind, “Back at the prison, you heard me say that I missed the holsters. Next thin’ I knew, they were on there.”

“Yes, Milady. I added them myself, that night. I hope they met your expectations.”

“Met them? I didn’t have any! I’m happy to have my weapons back, thank you, but it was a bit of a shock, makin’ you do all that work just by sayin’ some dumb words in passin’!”

“I figured it was in my best interest to make a good first impression”, Lydia snickered, “I’m glad to have left a mark.”

“You really did! Callum called it a lesson, even. I’m still new to all this, so I’m sorry if I do or say somethin’ that’s totally wrong.”
“It’s not my place to judge you, Milady.”

Rayla shook her head. “Judge! Please! If you’re comfortable, I mean. I need someone who isn’t as stuck up as Opeli to let me know when I’m out of order.”

Lydia laughed, then she said, “The councillor means well. As for your request, I can certainly give you my perspective, having spent all my life around nobles. If you’ll allow me to say; I’m rather glad that the Lord has chosen a commoner. My friends and I… uh…”, the woman blushed a little, “We are… r-rooting for you, Milady.”

It was now Rayla’s turn to snicker. “You’re the fan club?”

“I, uh, hope that’s alright?”, the attendant asked, fiddling with her hands. “It’s just that, we all dream, you know? Royalty seems glamorous to all who lack it, but the attendants and staff also know the flipside. I would not be capable of wearing the crown, to be honest. In many ways, we reap many of the same rewards as the nobles we serve without all the, uh, exposure and responsibility.”

“I’d be lyin’ if I pretended I wasn’t worried. I just know that I have a good vision for the world, and I’ll be damned if I don’t try my best to get it done.”

“Oh, that was so unromantic”, the attendant laughed, a bit of disappointment in her voice, “I was betting on you saying ‘I couldn’t let him do it alone’ or something.”

Rayla snorted, the non-chalantness of the statement appealing to her. “I don’t think I could’ve gotten myself to do it just for Callum. Don’t get me wrong, I would kill for him…”, her tone actually surprised the queen-to-be because she hadn’t quite internalized how serious she was about the statement. She had almost killed Helmond, already. Callum had laden his own conscience with Kel, for her. How was the prospect of losing part of her agency harder to bear than the thought of murder?! Was this her training rearing its head?

Lydia blinked at her, confused at her sudden silence. Eventually Rayla gave her a confused smirk and continued. “Uh…, but… uh…, I just need to be sure that I’m not just turnin’ myself into a puppet. I like havin’ control over myself.”

“I value that, too”, Lydia nodded, “A lot of people confuse my work with my life, calling me a slave. If the Lord was mean-spirited or something, I’d understand their disdain, but he’s such a
good, kind person, and from what I can see you’ll be the same. Ha! Slave! I will shamelessly rub one of these plants in their faces. No other Katolin has seen this for a thousand years! Katolis didn’t even exist then!”

The queen’s expression drooped. Should she tell the enthusiastic woman that bounty hunters frequently snuck deep into Xadia to steal all sorts of materials for black magic?

Eeh, it was a small omission.
The next two days passed slowly, boring as they were. Even Zym eventually ran out of small talk and the constant twilight led everyone but the annoyed moon elves to an early sleep.

It was such that the entourage heaved a breath of relief when finally the forest opened up into a wide canyon that allowed for more daylight. It was still oddly dark, safe for a few hours around noon when the sun was high in the sky, but it helped the sun elves noticeably.

Callum and Rayla were getting a little frazzled, the need to embrace each other stronger every day. After the long separation every moment not stuck together seemed like a slight insult.

Paranoia and a weird sense of duty had kept them to their promise of not touching each other, so they weren’t worried about repercussions.

On July 1st, then, a house came into view. Then another. Soon, they were looking at a largish town, maybe the size of Taelin. Beyond the houses built with Larwein’s swooping architecture, it was partially built into the canyon walls.

Here, few words were spoken in common. A runic dialect reigned, the syllables spilling forth in an odd rhythm. It was music to Rayla’s ears.

“So, this is Cardow”, Callum said. As per usual when the two of them interacted in any way whatsoever, a set of ears perked on a short-haired head.

Wynda was less watchful than she was earful. She had left them alone for the most part, not obviously intruding on their privacy. It was probably largely thanks to Zym, who had no love to spare for the Tribune. It won him a lot of good favor with Rayla.
“Yea, this is home”, the queen-to-be smiled, letting her glance wander upward, beyond the canyon’s edge. There, high above the town, outside the constant shade of the rocky walls, stood a single house. It seemed in good repair, buoying Rayla’s hope of finding her foster-dad’s summand still living there.

“I wanna go see if he’s around. But I guess, before we do anythin’, we should make sure we all have a place to sleep”, she told Callum who promptly called over Opeli.

The elves in the street were rather confused, the human entourage nervous. The King was glad to have the canon guard and Zym around to make them seem legitimate. In most faces was more annoyed interest than outright hate, but the atmosphere was still a bit tense.

“Can you take care of finding us all room and board, councilor? We’re going to see some of Rayla’s family.”

“Naturally!”, the councilwoman scoffed, “However I must say…”, she leaned in to whisper, “I have doubts as to my ability to… make myself understood.”

The problem solved itself with Naves who, holding Rhodam right behind the councilwoman, simply turned and patted Opeli’s shoulder. “Goan wit. A’ll get ya aw settled. Yer what, therty people? Ther’s a bit in the Long Wall that’ll house that, no problem.”

“Egads!”, the Katolin politician exclaimed, “You heard that?!?”

“Aye, and A wisnae even tryin’, either”, came the flat answer while her left index twirled at her head, “These ears ’r not fer show. So. Ye goan chum me to the inn?”

The two women walked off and the retinue mostly followed, leaving behind only a crown- and canon guard each. Wynda also remained behind, eyeing the royals, warily.

“So? How do we get up there?”, Callum asked his summand.

“Uh, dafty?”, she snickered.
“What?”

She pointed and he followed her finger’s direction to the wings of his steed.

“Duh-doy!”, he went with a laugh, then spurred Isoros.

Their mounts seemed to love the idea of finally leaving the ground behind.

From below came a shout of warning from their guards as well as Wynda, but Rayla paid them no heed. The past three days had been tense for her and she didn’t want to drag this out any longer.

Callum on the other hand shouted back, saying to either join the entourage or take the long way. Zym lifted off, as well, coming after them.

"Good day for a bit of casual flyin', guys", said the dragon as he caught up with them, "I'm guessing you won't want me around for this, so I'll see you soon”, he frowned, “Gotta find me some din-din, too. Aah, what shall I murder tonight?"

They turned a lot of heads as they separated from the dragon and ascended past the dwellings that were dug into the rock. The queen-to-be let her gaze drift, soaking in memories.

It was odd to think that she hadn’t been here for more than seven years. How many people from back when she was twelve would she still find here? How had they changed?

With clattering hooves, they came to stand on the rocky plateau on top of the canyon wall. The horizon seemed endless up here, the landscape flat as an orange board, streaked with bluish valleys in the evening sun.

Callum took it in for a moment, then dismounted. For a second he had the impulse to offer her a hug before she tackled this reunion, but he thought better of it.

There was no guarantee whatsoever that Wynda was the only agent they had on them.
Rayla smiled at her summand, nervously, then glanced at the house that lay still in the summer heat.

“Do you wanna go together or should I wait?”, the king asked.

Rayla sighed. “I think it’d be better if I went in alone for now. Remember, last thin’ he heard was that I cheated on you and he told me to break it off.”

Callum’s lips flattened into a frown. “I really wish you’d stop saying it like that. You’re not a cheater.”

“I…”, she breathed out slowly, “Can we… tackle that later?”

He nodded. “Of course. Let me know when you’re ready for me. I’ll be here.”

With that, she walked toward the lone house. Before she knocked on the door, she looked back, seeing him lead their mounts into the shade of a large boulder. Seen from a distance, she felt reminded of his fifteen-year-old self, what with the scarf, the sketchbook and the tan armor he wore for travel.

A deep, nervous breath later, her knuckles connected with a door she had snuck through, ran through, slammed closed and open in anger and elation.

Then she stood, swaying back and forth with her hands behind her back.

It took a moment, but finally the door opened and in front of her stood someone she knew very, very well.

“Tinker!”, she said, “Hi!”

“You’re here”, he said. While toneless, his voice was still so incredibly soft. Rayla remembered a great many night-time stories told by it. “Come in.”
When she passed over the threshold after the sunfire elf, nostalgia drowned her.

The room hadn’t changed too much, though it felt a lot smaller than the last time she had seen it. To her left was the kitchen, cramped and rather chaotic. Akande got distracted with his inventions and experiments, often leaving tasks that didn’t hold his immediate attention for later.

Further to the left was a small dining and sitting area with a worn but still comfortable looking sofa that had often served as her daytime bed when she was sick.

Ahead was the set of stairs that led up to the second floor with their bedroom and her old room. Runaan and Akande had always called it the ‘visitor’s room’, but really, she had spent more time here than at her parent’s house.

Further ahead and to her right was Akande’s workshop, taking up the entire right side of the house. Here as well, chaos ruled. It looked as though he had a thousand unfinished projects strewn all over.

“Want some water?”, he asked.

“I’d love some, thanks.”

He motioned her to sit at the dinner table, then busied himself with finding a clean cup in the heap of washed dishes next to the sink.

A few minutes later, he joined her at the table and sat, passing her the drink.

“So”, he started, staring at his own cup, “You’re back. How are you?”

“I’m excited to see you!”, Rayla said,

He simply nodded, looking like the words wounded him.
“You seem really upset”, the queen-to-be said, her eyes saccading over his plain expression.

“You coming here is hard. Really hard. I’m in the middle of a lot of things that I’m supposed to be finishing.”

“I… I can come back later if that’d be bet--”

“No. Once you leave, please don’t come back.”

It was as though he was choking her. For a moment, she was simply swallowing, over and over to regain control over her throat to speak.

“W-why?”

A light frown became manifest in the sunfire mage’s face. “Do you see Runaan’s familials anywhere on this face?”, he gestured at himself, “Do you see them when you look in a mirror?”

The softness of his voice harbored no ill intent, he was speaking evenly, sad, but without audible anger. He sounded disappointed.

“No?”, Rayla said, tears quivering in her eyes.

“No”, he chuckled sadly, turning his cup in his hands, “You were our daughter, but we never got to adopt you. Runaan, you and I… we never got to be a whole family. I begged him to adopt another child with me. He wouldn’t, not until you were ready to be your own person. That’s how he was. Dedicated. Conscientious. A bit single-minded.”

His tearful gaze found hers and he smiled, sadly. “And now he’s dead.”

The words rammed through her like a spear, causing all the self-hate and doubt Rayla had still stored up about the night she had abandoned her mission to gush forward like a bleeding wound.

She sobbed, crumpling into her seat. Tears locked her throat and she couldn’t say a single word to
defend herself. Her mind felt blank with sadness.

“Rayla, I don’t want to hurt you. I’m sorry”, her foster-dad continued, “I just need you to know why you don’t have a place here, anymore. I… I can’t help see you as a person who took more than I was able to give. This would… all be different if he was still alive…”

“A tried!”, she choked, “A tried s-so hard to make him s-stop, Tinker! To make him g-give peace a ch-chance and stop t-the murderin’! He could’ve walked! But he d-didn’t!”

“I figured. It’s what you would do, try to talk him down. You always had a good heart. This isn’t about that night or what you did or didn’t do. It’s all about… about community. ”

His hand motioned at the front door. “Out there. That’s him, isn’t it? The human? What are you doing? I told you to break up, gave you good reasons.”

A hand came up to brush over his forehead, then he continued, “People told me I was crazy for wanting to be with an opposite, as though sources mattered that much. For him, I chose a life of struggle in this place”, he scoffed, “Too quiet for a sunfire elf, too sunfire to be accepted into rural Scotia.”

"If it h-hurt you, why d-do it to me? Don’t you feel wrong about that?"

“I do. But I just can’t see it. I can’t see how this’ll be good for you. You were with him as a kid, for a month. Then nothing but letters for four years. You got out, what, less than ten days ago?”, he shook his head. "He's your first love, Rayla. Don't run into this, thoughtless. The first never lasts. You're barely an adult, you need to see who else might fit you before you settle. There are other people out there for you, someone who cares for you more than he ever could. Someone who won't make others look at you with disdain. Runaan wasn't my first, either. By the time we got together, I knew from experience that he was worth getting myself flogged for."

“We’re s-summed!”, she sobbed, quietly.

Akande’s eyes widened as he slumped back in his chair and his hands came down open on the table to complement his gape in a display of absolute shock.

It took him a moment to gather his thoughts. “I don’t believe it. Does he understand what that
means? Better question, actually, do you understand what that means? The fact that he's a human isn't the most shocking thing to me anymore, and that's saying something. You can't just go and summate with a guy you barely know, that's insane. With him, you're taking on so much baggage. Are you even thinking about that? I had to work hard to fit in here. It took a lot to not be sneered at constantly. There's no way you'll have a good life as a human queen.”

He leaned forward, his gaze fixed on hers, "We don't live with them, Rayla. We don't even trade or talk to them. There's a reason for all that. They're Abusers. If you go with him, you're gonna end up regretting it and not just because he's a king and you'll always be the lowest priority in his life.”

“What do you care, anyway!", Rayla suddenly shouted, shooting up from her seat, “You're blamin' me for you not adoptin' as though I knew that I was holdin' you up!”

“Sorry, I need to be clearer. I don’t blame you for that. You didn’t have a say in how that all played out. But, Rayla, summing with an Abuser, you're making us both outcasts again. You weren’t alone in bearing your parents’ shame. You might’ve cleared your name, but what about Runaan and I? We were all so close to each other, people still think less of us for what they did. How do you think they’ll react once they hear of… of you doing this!? You're unraveling my whole life. Again. I didn’t want to move, but I might have to, now.”

Akande looked at her helplessly, then his hands came up to rub at his hair, agitated, "Ugh, please, please tell me you at least used protection! How do you even know he’s healthy!? Have you been regular since?!"

"Regular !? Are ye fer real?! A knew wha’ A had tae do to be `regular `, no thanks tae ye! Ye gabbin' about raisin' me in the same breath as that topic is some heavy shite!”

“Language!", he said, sternly. The sound set off rusty warning bells in Rayla’s mind. Tinker raising his voice beyond a loud whisper was a sign of an imminent grounding.

“You’re right, of course. Neither of us was great talking to you about this”, he sighed deeply, placing his cheek on the table, “But we also weren’t your real parents.”

This once more felt like a blade being stabbed through her heart. “A see. Well, if you're not real family, what am A even still doin’ here?”
She stomped through the kitchen and flung open the front door, then thought better of it and yelled at Akande, “Family is somethin’ ye feel, Tinker! Not somethin’ that needs a markin’ to be real! A wanted you to bond me, but A guess A’ll have to find someone else to witness since the person I thought of as the last bit of family A still had isnae interested! I called you ‘dad’! Ye meant so much to me!”

Akande simply watched her, crumpled in his chair.

“And about `the human`! He has a name! Callum! He’s been through hell and back with me, A don’t care if he’s my first! Actually scratch that! A care a lot that he’s my first and A dinae have tae go through binders and binders of people tae find someone who is this carin’ and good tae me! Imagine that luck!”, she stabbed her index at the ceiling, “After gettin’ shafted with yin set of parents who were never there and left me disgraced!”, her middle finger joined her index, “then gettin’ two more dads, one of which A probably got killed and the other is kickin’ me in the arse right no--”

Arms wrapped around her shoulder and waist from behind and she jolted. Akande’s expression had turned once more to mild shock.

“Heard my name. Thought I’d come look. I hope that’s okay”, came a gentle, sad voice from behind her.

“Ye can’t be touchin’ me, dafty”, she said quietly, the request as painful as it was loving. His bracing touch was so, so welcome.

Callum released her and regarded Akande. “I don’t wanna intrude. I just wanted to make sure my summand’s alright. Excuse me.”

With that, he turned to leave, but Rayla’s hand fell on his shoulder, then immediately snapped back to her side. “This concerns ye, too. My ex-dad here thinks ye don’t know what summation means. Do ye?”

The Katolin turned as Akande apparently wrestled with her choice of description. “I’m sorry about this, it’s obviously really hard. I do understand what summation means, sir. It’s a promise to care for each other every day, to work for each other’s benefit, to compromise for shared goals and work on common ones. It means to share the experience of life. It’s at the core of traditional families, like human weddings.”
When the sun elf had nothing to say, Callum continued, “I didn’t hear a lot of your argument, but let me say this; I love Rayla, and I’m willing to do pretty much anything to make her happy.”

“You’ve barely known her! How can you love her?”, Akande asked, sounding very angry.

“Just because we weren’t next to each other doesn’t mean we weren’t close. We’ve shared in each other’s lives and thoughts and feelings this entire time. As far as I’m concerned, we’re in the fourth year of our relationship, not the first nine days.”

Tinker scoffed. “You are quite a gifted politician, smooth talking. Why should I believe you?”

“Why should we care if ye do?”, Rayla said coolly, “Apparently ye don’t think of me as yer daughter, so who cares, right?”

Runaan’s summand shook his head. “I do think of you as my daughter. How could I not, after raising you since you fit in a water bucket?”, he now welled up, once more rubbing his hands against his hair, “I don’t… I don’t want you to be unhappy but at the same time being around you, being part of your family... it’s painful. I want to feel at home again, want to get over all this, move on, but I can’t do that if people tell me every day that my daughter is a traitor”

“Traitor!?”, Callum flared but Rayla placed a bracing hand on his chest.

“A sat in prison for that supposed crime! I sacrificed for Xad--”

“You’re obviously not a traitor! It’s not about the truth! It’s about appearances, Rayla!”, her foster-dad shouted furiously, “It’s always about damn appearances here! I love you like the family I wish you were, but all they’ll see is a human’s pet!”

“No! That’s wha’ YOU see”, Rayla fired back, “So far yer the second person who called me that but the other one added the word ‘slut’! Is that what A am tae ye?! Sure sounds like it! Yoan and say it! Yer so sure that A was rushin’ into his bed, gaggin’ for it, without the thoughts and feelin’s tae back it up! Just say what ye mean!”

Akande stared at her, aghast, for a long moment. Then he whispered, “I’m sorry… I didn’t… that wasn’t…”
His hand clasped over his mouth and he cried, shuddering. “I d-don’t know wh-what to s-say… I didn’t m-mean to imply that at all… I’m sorry… please forgive me…”

“There’s a lot of thin’s between us right now, Akande. A’m goin’ with Callum, human or not, he’s the person A want to be with”, her voice became brittle, “Ye can either be at peace with that and me or we can say `farewell`, right now. Choose.”

“You chose for me, Rayla. I didn’t get a say. The moment you stepped into Cardow with him, you cursed everyone here who’s associated with you.”

“You don’t have to stay here”, Callum said, “I get how hard it must be to live out here as the only sunfire elf among people who aren’t like you and give you grief. You can always come with us.”

Tinker shook his head, lightly. “If I can’t find community here, how would I manage among humans?”

“You could try”, Rayla said, gruffly, “If Helmond, the murderin’ ex-lucid, can throw off his stupid ideas, so can you! They’re not bad people. There are some that are, sure, but they’re the minority. Just like elves.”

There was a moment of tense silence, then the sunfire elf said, “There’s a few things in your old room that you might want to bring.”

The queen-to-be scoffed, grabbing Callum by the wrist.

Together they ascended the stairs and entered the door on the right.

Rayla slammed it shut, feeling rather very nostalgic about that, too.
Forgiveness

Chapter Notes

There will be a short hiatus so I can deal with some life stuff.

It's nothing crazy, just need to catch up on some things.

Expect this to continue July 01, 2019 at the latest

To Callum, Rayla’s old room looked very spartan.

Next to the door on the left stood a dresser, all its drawers pulled out and empty. Ahead was an open closet, also void of contents. To the right of that stood a nightstand with a magical lamp on it, the activator all but used up.

The middle of the room held a small bed, illuminated by the dusty orange light from a window on the right side of the house which pointed towards the town.

Below the window was a small, empty desk under which stood a colorful wooden box. The wall with the door was completely empty to allow some space to walk around the bed.

Old dust covered everything but a vaguely person-shaped imprint on the bed.

“Wow. Uh”, Callum went, “You didn’t have a lot of toys.”

“They’re in that box under the table, but really, my favourite toy was that”, Rayla said, motioning at the window, “I was barely ever in here.”

Her glance fell on the bed. “Looks like he slept here not too long ago. Wonder why?”

“What happened down there? Between you two?”
“Bah, you heard most of his issues. He always just wanted to fit in, have friends and a tight-knit family. First he didn’t get the former cause of his quiet ways. Then he never got the latter... cause of me, apparently. Plus, he thinks that I’m goin’ too quick with you. Well, you had words with him about that”, she regarded her summand, sadly, “Kiss me, please. I need it.”

His hand caressed her cheek and carded into her hair under her horns as he drew her into a needy, passionate kiss. It turned desperate almost immediately, their bodies collided in an embrace that had been three days in the making. They fell onto her tiny old bed, a light cloud of dust drifting off the blanket.

“I needed that, too”, Callum said, rubbing her back.

“Let’s hope nobody sees it”, Rayla said sadly, well aware that there was probably no way anyone could. Plus, even if someone did, she could fudge it and claim that this was her family’s home and they were free to do whatever under its roof.

At least until she’d step across its threshold for the last time.

“So... if you say `outside` was your favourite toy... what did you expect to hear when you asked Claudia to ask Tyne about what happened to it?”, her summand asked, interrupting her reverie with more pain.

With bitterness in her voice she explained, “My mum, uh, she’d say `Muriel got lost when Rayla took’r outside one day`. It’s a stupid doll they gave me when I was a wean. I had a thin’ for it for about a month. Every time they came to visit, even when I was older, I’d dig it out to make them happy. Eventually just chucked it in the river down in the canyon.”

Stunned silence followed as the king processed the extent of her parent’s absences. Her hand drew pensive circles on his chest as she looked around the room, flexing backward to look at the desk and the box underneath. It seemed as though she was quick to move on from the memory that threatened to make him cry.

An old wound, no doubt.

“Looks so empty and dead in here with all the drawers open like this. I took all my clothes when I first left to go to boot camp. Looks like they didn’t touch anythin’ in here afterwards”, she harrumphed, “Was kinda unnecessary to lug all that cloth, they ended up givin’ everyone
Callum bristled further at this thought of having her childhood belongings ripped up when she became what Katolins understood to be a child soldier. The practice of drafting persons under eighteen was outlawed since Harrow had held the throne.

Nobles and courtiers often excluded themselves from this to foster a sense of nation and duty among their children. This was how Soren had managed to distinguish himself as Crown Guard Sergeant by the age of 17. He had loved sword play, showing enormous aptitude and eagerness, and Callum still felt the pains of many lost battles through their carefree youth and not quite so carefree teen years.

“I think the only times you weren’t in uniform around me were when we slept, when you woke up from your coma and nine days ago, the prison clothes. Every other time you either wore lucid green or a fancy variation”, the king said, then blinked, his expression becoming a little dreamy, “Oh wait, hold on, I almost forgot about the dress...”

The memory of their first dance together made her smile. "What happened to it?"

"It's waiting for you at the Twins. Doubt it'll still fit."

"I didn't add that much bulk!", she protested, "I'm betting you it'll still fit. Might be a bit tight in the arms and a little short"

"Okay. Helmond would be our impartial judge. What are you betting?", he asked impishly.

"Hum", she went, "If… if he says it doesn't fit, I'll umm..."

"... come to a life-drawing session with me? Improve your anatomy skills?"

"HUH!", she went blushing a little. After a moment she stuttered, "okay, b-b-b-but! If he says it looks good, you have to… you have toooo…”, he features contorted, then slackened with a dramatic exhale. “Ugh, I can't come up with anythin' that would make you as embarrassed..."
"I'll let you think about it. Not like we're gonna get to the Twins any time soon."

She hugged him close once more and he sighed contentedly.

Then Rayla got up to rummage in the box while he watched from the bed. While she was busy, there was a creaking sound from the door and Callum looked over, expecting it to open. When it didn’t, he shrugged. It was an old wooden house, they worked and groaned in the dry heat of summer.

After withdrawing a few tin soldiers and a deflated ball, his summand sat back, holding a piece of paper. "Oh", she went.

The drawing showed five people, all with stern expressions safe for one. There was a maybe ten-year-old Rayla in the foreground between her parents, smiling toothily. The three of them all had the small carnissal markings under their eyes, making Callum wonder when elven kids were undergoing the tattooing process. Behind them stood Tinker and Runaan.

They looked like a family.

Tears welled into Rayla’s eyes, frustrated ones as much as sad ones. Callum slid off the bed and sat behind her to embrace her.

“C... Callum, w-what if he’s right?”, she said, suddenly, “What if we’re rushin’ thin's?”

He pulled her closer. It hurt to hear her say this and he couldn’t quite manage to keep the angry edge out of his voice. “Four years, fawn. We’ve been together, apart, for four years. Don’t be stupid.”

She took a moment, but then nodded, slowly. “I’m sorry. It’s makin’ me birl, havin’ Tinker give me a batterin’ with that brick boot of his. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Don’t feel bad about doubt. I’d rather you voice it rather than keep it bottled up.”

“It’s not fair to you, though. I already hurt you, a lot.”
He frowned. “You did it again, just now. But I think at the moment you’re hurting way worse and I can’t be mad at you. We came here expecting to find him... annoyed, sure, but not renounce-your-daughter furious. It’s a shock, alright, even to me, and he’s not my dad.”

She spun, lifting her legs over his to bring her knees level with his body, then pulled herself into him, desperately. “I love you so much. I’m actually glad we went fast. I really am. I’d be all alone if not for you. You’re the only one who sticks with me, even though I make it hard.”

He pet her hair, allowing her silent tears to drip onto his back.

“Is he right about how people are going to react to us?” he eventually asked, gently.

His summand sniffled, then shrugged. “I’m havin’ a hard time guessin’ at that. In Veltis-Tiram, people were mostly okay, but...”

“... but we got yelled at by a bunch of moon elves”, he finished her sentence.

She nodded, “I remember that so clearly. When we just talked about the dress, that night came back to mind. If that’s the reaction we’ll get here... disgust... I... Ugh. I can’t blame Akande for not wantin’ to be part of that.”

“I can”, Callum said, quietly, “He’s your dad. He should be sticking up for you.”

“Just cause he helped raise me doesn’t mean he has to take on all my burdens. That wouldn’t be fair. He’s already... given `more than he was willin’`, to put it in his words. He chose to care for me. I’m grateful for that, but he’s free to stop. My parents chose to... create me, they wouldn’t get off that easy.”

Her summand’s lips flattened. She had a point, but it was hard to accept.

“If the reaction is going to be this bad, will we even find someone to perform the bonding? Do the tattoos?”
“I don’t know. I was hopin’ Akande would do it. I guess he’s out.”

“He does tattoo work?”

“Used to bond-witness people all the time. Wonder if he still does, actually. He’s a sun mage, so he can also erase tattoos. Comes in handy when he messes up. Never let anyone walk out with a tat they didn’t like.”

She kissed him. “I’m sorry I’m such a mess of doubt and worry and...”

“You didn’t have an easy life. It won’t get much better from here, fawn. How can I blame you?”

“By doin’ it. Just like that. Just like Akande. Just like the Hecklers at the dance. You could blame me for so many thin’s. Leavin’ you to deal with bein’ king, alone, just so I could sit in prison”, she scoffed, “...for nothin’ apparently. People still hate me. You could blame me for bein' indecisive and flakey”, she looked up at him, “You could blame me for Onni. Why aren’t you?”

He rolled his eyes. “I’m not sure what more to say. Are you sure you wanna get into this again? Now?”

“Yeah. You keep sayin’ how I’m not a cheater but...”

Suddenly a very scary possibility snuck into his mind and he feelt a jolt of worry. “Rayla... did you have feelings for her?”, he asked.

She breathed in and out, slowly. It was less a sigh and more of a pensive pause. “No. B-but I feel like I could’ve very easily had some, if I hadn’t been pinin’ for you.”

“That’s... good, I guess? It’s still short of actually doing or feeling the wrong thing. You didn’t cheat physically, you meant to hug her, not snuggle her. You didn’t cheat emotionally, you meant to be a good friend, not a lover.”

She scanned the floor between them. “But you still don’t actually trust me about it, do you?”
It hit him like a ton of bricks. He had doubts about how truthful she was being, his reaction to Zym’s warning showed that.

They looked at each other, worriedly. Then Callum nodded. “It’s hard to believe you shared a bed with her and didn’t think it was a bit... wrong right off the bat. You got upset about Honsa touching my head.”

“And that’s what I mean when I say I’m a cheat”, she said, frustrated tears collecting in her eyes once more, “I did think it was wrong, but I didn’t wanna stop it, either. I didn’t wanna wake her, but I also wanted to be held. Wanted my nights to be not so lonely.”

“Why... didn’t you bring this up during the bloom?”, Callum said, the implication of her adding old information to their shared truth once again casting doubt on the whole ritual.

“I thought we had it figured. Just, your reaction from earlier... you seemed really mad.”

“I was. At you calling yourself a cheater when I told you to think better of yourself. Now I’m glad you didn’t interpret it that way”, he heaved a heavy sigh that turned into a groan, then stared off into the distance for a moment in which her heart started trying to smash itself against her ribcage.

Finally, without looking at her, he said, “You admitting to not doing anything because you enjoyed what she was doing... I still think given the chance I might’ve done the same thing. I had a hugging blanket, for crying out loud!”

He gave her a weary smile. “Are you doing this on purpose right now, when I can’t get mad at you cause of Akande?”

She scoffed. “Nah, I don’t mean to be manipulative like that. Feel free to cuss me out if you need to. I feel like I dese--”

“Shut your fucking mouth, Rayla”, he said. Guiding the back of her head a little more forcefully than he intended, he kissed her.

This time, his kiss left her flushed. It had been different, but she couldn’t really say how. Maybe it
was the slight aggression he’d put into it by swearing and being a little rough with her?

“Cussin’ me out, eh?” she snickered quietly.

He regarded her, a sad gentleness in his eyes. “So... are you done here?”

“Yea. I guess I am”, she replied, “There really isn’t anythin’ here I feel like bringin’. It’d be kinda tainted now, too.”

“Bring the picture, at least. As a reminder of better times.”

She nodded, picking the piece of paper up again.

As she got to her feet, the queen-to-be extended her hand to help her summand up. Together, they walked over to the door and she opened it.

On the landing of the stairs sat Akande, leaning against the back wall of the house. His hand was clasped over his mouth as he stared straight ahead.

“Oh. You spied on us”, Rayla said, flatly.

Her foster-dad nodded. “I’m sorry. I was going to announce myself, but... you were having a moment.”

“And that makes it better?”, his daughter said, growing rather very angry, again.

“I was wrong. So are they”, Akande said, throwing a hand in the direction of the town, “I heard... such gentle words. So much forgiveness. So much selflessness”, he looked up at Callum, tears running over his cheek, “I’m sorry for what I said about you. How I acted. I was a racist. You’re a better person than a lot of elves I know.”

“You have no idea how much it means to hear you say that, sir”, said the king, torn between offense at the sun elf’s spying and a hope that it might’ve led him to better ways.
To Rayla, the sun elf said, “I’m so sorry. I did a great injustice to you today. I should’ve welcomed you to this home that is also yours. Looked past my misgivings and gotten to know you, again. There’s so much I don’t know about you other than by hearsay. It was wrong for me to load your conscience with mine and your other parent’s choices and make it sound like you’re responsible for the warped impression that people have of you.”

The queen-to-be knelt and placed a hand on her father’s. “Tinker, you’re an ass. A massive one at that. But I’ll still call you my dad if you want me to. I can forgive you like that”, she snapped her fingers, “because of all the thin’s you’ve given me as a kid. You cared for me when others wouldn’t, even though you didn’t have to and you hurt yourself doin’ it.”

She smiled at her summand, sighing. “What’s between me and Callum is... a little crazy. But it’s also right. ‘Fight puts together what goes together’, right? That was as true for my parents as it is for us. I saved this man’s life, Tinker. Multiple times. He did the same for me. I almost died on the Korhal plains. No, really, I was dead until Callum killed for me and got me help. And then he sat, for four years, gettin’ pelted with offers from easier mates. He said no, to all of them.”

“He... kills?”, Akande said, looking at the king with a scared frown.

“I know that look from my bathroom mirror. Taking a life to save ours wasn’t easy. It wasn’t even right. But it happened and I’m starting to make a bit of peace with it. Killing the bounty hunter isn’t something I ever want to repeat, sir. It... stole part of my soul. A part I’m still missing, sometimes”, the Katolin said.

A slow, pensive nod followed on Tinker’s part. Then he said, “I suppose that’s a fitting outlook for someone who’s close to an assassin who refuses to kill.”

To Rayla, he added, “Little sheep... if you will have me as you offered... I’ve thought it over and you’re right. Whether I’m a pariah here or in the Pentarchy really doesn’t matter, but... I’d have you. I’d have family.”

With that, him and his daughter rose. “Will you allow me to come with you, still?”

“Yea”, she said, tearing up and drawing him into a hug.

“I’d be glad for your expertise in our retinue, too, if you’re willing”, Callum added, “I won’t ever
ask you to create or research anything that will harm a Xadian.”

Tinker looked at him for a long, long time, then turned his head to Rayla, who was stooping a little to make the hug work.

“How can... how can I stand between you two if not with needle and ink?”
"So, why do you call him `Tinker`?"

Given their surroundings, the question seemed rather stupid to Rayla. "Dafty, have you had a look around? The man spends his days thinkin' and messin' with stuff. How could his nickname be anythin' else?"

Callum snickered. "That's fair."

They were cleaning up the mess in the kitchen, waiting for Akande to collect his belongings. He had been concerned about some of his projects, but Callum assured him that he'd be able to bring it all.

The king was willing to sacrifice some of his own belongings on the carts of the entourage if needed.

"Why bother with that, little sheep?", came her foster-father's voice from the back of his workshop, "nobody is going to be here. I doubt very much that the ghosts of the past will care much if the dishes are clean and tidy."

"We'll be back! Gotta take a break from smelly humans sometime!", yelled Rayla.

Her summand cleared his throat in response and she stuck her tongue out at him.

When they had almost finished, there was a knock at the front door. Rayla dried off her hands and opened it.
“Tribune Wynda, welcome to my home”, said the queen-to-be, pointedly.

“Oh, but what a beautiful home it is, Rayla! It was quite the climb to get here, but the view is really nice!”, Wynda smiled, once more confusing the target of the statement, “Is your dad still around, then?”

It wasn’t too surprising that Wynda knew about Tinker. The queen-to-be knew from experience how good the Lucid was at keeping and using records. “He’s still livin’ here, yes. Anythin’ you want from him?”

“Ah, I do have some boring stuff to talk to him about. Is it okay if I come in?”

Rayla stepped aside, looking after the agent as she said her thank-yous and strode toward Tinker who was engrossed in a schematic. Then, she went back to help Callum with the rest of the dishes, bewildered.

A moment later, her father raised his voice to alarm-bell ringing levels.

“Just because I’ve elected to leave this workshop does not mean that I will hand over all my notes!”, Tinker protested, “You will show me legal documentation that shows that you have the authority to demand such things!”

“I am an agent of the Lucid. Obviously I can’t expect an outsider such as yourself to quite understand the powers granted to us by the Scotian privy council, but rest assured that they encompass the authority to prevent Xadian technology and arcana falling into enemy hands. I don’t need an arbiter’s permission to guarantee the confidentiality of military secrets.”

“These are personal projects, Tribune. They were not commissioned by the Xadian state or the Domain, so they do not have a right to them! I will happily leave you the notes on the syphon that I’ve been preparing for your slimy organization, bu--”

“All of them were developed under our patronage, sun elf! You will not be taking any of them across the border!”
“Agent!”, Rayla interrupted, a towel in her hands, “The Lucid has a lot of power here, you’re right, but if my trainin’s still worth anythin’, you can’t be takin’ personal belongings without a seizure permit!”

A sickly sweet smile spread across Wynda’s face as she turned to her ex-colleague. “We are in a state of emergency, honey. That means that normal people’s freedoms and rights aren’t as important as keeping them safe, even from themselves. So I can tell your dad that he can’t bring his stuff with him to the human country. That would be dangerous to Xadia. Bad enough that he’s leaving! Don’t you think so, too?”

Rayla stared at the Tribune, then asked, “Why are you talkin’ to me like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like I’m a child!?”

The agent looked between the other three people in the room with pursed lips, like she was a dum-dum, only now noticing her own way of speaking. “Oh, I was only trying to be fair! I was under the impression you were a bit slow”, a furious blaze now danced in her eyes, “How else could you abandon your posting and rank?”

“I was punished for my `crimes`, Tribune! My name’s clear!”

The agent snorted. “Oh, yes, In the legal sense, you are very much cleared. However. Much like Akande here, I had a stake in your mission to Katolis. My brother Pirin. Thank you for bringing about his pointless death.”

Rayla had the sudden urge to slap herself as she realized the resemblance the agent had with her dead bandmate, linear familials and the short-on-the-sides-long-on-top haircut included.

Wynda continued, ”This, coupled with your inane choice to become a human queen casts doubt on your mental health, in my mind. They are not sane, logical choices for a person with your training and education. Hence, I can’t feel scorn or anger for you, merely pity. I apologise if that offends you.”

Callum’s mind churned. There was no way this assignment was a coincidence. A terrible suspicion
shook itself loose in the King's head.

Rayla was obviously boiling now, trying to find the words to air her misgivings, but Tinker preempted her.

"Out!", he spat, quietly but in a tone that left no doubt as to what would happen if Wynda didn't put some space between his house and her.

“Hold on”, his daughter’s summand said, standing in Wynda’s way, “Why take this assignment?”

“It was given to me. Unlike her, I follow orders.”

“Given by whom?”, Callum asked, ignoring the barb thrown at Rayla.

Wynda laughed. “You ask as though I would tell you! Let me assure you, Lord Callum, not all agents of the Lucid are as indecent as her.”

“I’m not sure why you insist on insulting the future queen of Katolis, agent. Let me assure you that it’s rather stupid to ruin your standing with one of the most powerful elven rulers of this world”, Callum warned and Rayla looked strangely embarrassed on top of her anger.

Wynda on the other hand seemed unsure, suddenly. Apparently she hadn't thought that far ahead.

Then the King's voice became rather menacing. "Not very clever of you to reveal your grudge, either. One might draw certain conclusions . Ex-Legate Helmond is rather open, too, and I am sure he will have lots of interesting things to say about you.”

The name triggered a deep upset in Wynda that escaped her in a furious hiss. “Decorated as he may be, he is a dark mark on our record. You would do well to never let him return across the breach!”

With this, she strode out.

Rayla slammed the door behind her then spun to stab her index at Callum. “You could’ve given
me a word! She was tramplin’ on my feet all that time!”

Without addressing her issue, he went back into the kitchen to dry off the last two cups. After a moment of pensive silence, he groused, “She’s a trap.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”, his summand asked, gruffly.

“There’s no way her superiors don’t know about her brother. There’s also no way that they didn’t take this into consideration when they assigned her. To me, this all looks like a setup. For what, I can only guess. I figure they want an excuse to arrest us, something like that.”

Rayla crossed her arms. “Why would they be lookin’ for an excuse? It’s the Lucid, they can do whatever, apparently.”

Callum nodded. “That’s true, too. Hm... Why would she warn Akande not to bring his stuff if they wanted an excuse? It would’ve been perfect. We roll up to the border and they nail us for trafficking military secrets.”

“So, they assign someone motivated to hurt us, who is so angry that she can’t even hide it. Then that agent warns us about a way she could get one up on us? I dunno, sounds... weird”, Rayla said, rubbing her chin.

“Maybe not; If there’s two actors who are opposed in their goals. Power struggle behind the scenes”, Callum speculated, “Would explain Zym’s offstandish attitude with Wynda”

His queen’s features were grim. “Wait, so, you think the Lucid and the Dragons are havin’ a go at each other? Why wouldn’t Zym te--”, her face lit up with realization. “Oh. Cause of me. He thinks I’m still part of the bureau, doesn’t he?”

“He probably does”, Callum acknowledged, “Doubt there’s anything we can do to convince him otherwise. Man, this sucks. You two should be family after all we’ve done to get him home.”

“I’m sorry, we are talking about the dragon prince here?”, Akande asked.
“Yea. The little guy we brought back from Katolis has grown up a bit and isn’t on super good terms with me at the moment”, Rayla grumbled.

Her dad shook his head, slowly, then took a deep breath during which he looked between Callum and his daughter, wide-eyed. “A beautiful mess. I suppose it would be best not to make things more complicated. I’ll just... leave my projects and bring my tools, only.”

“Ugh. I can’t wait until we get to Katolis”, Rayla groaned, “Not enough confusin’ intrigue in the air, yet.”
With Tinker’s most necessary tools all packed up, they left his house in a rather grim mood. The inventor had thrown handfuls of blueprint into his fireplace and set the work of years alight, firmly convinced that the Lucid would come for it as soon as they could.

Night had fallen and Isoros and Andris were napping next to the boulder where Callum had left them.

“Winged Perytons!”, the sun elf said, seemingly impressed.

The animals lifted their delicate heads and blinked at them, sleepily. It almost made the royals feel bad to ask them to carry them down into town.

Rayla looked up, groaning a little.

“What’s wrong?”, asked her summand.

“Tomorrow’s interstice. Nothin’s gonna be open.”

“Huh? Summer solstice was on the twenty-first. Kind of a bummer, missing that in Katolis.”

Tinker laughed at him, quietly. “You’re telling me that you’ve summed with a moon elf and don’t know what an interstice day is?”

“I... I really don’t?”, he said, growing a bit impatient with the two of them.

Rayla seemed confused. “Huh. I don’t get how that hasn’t come up yet. We spent so much time together...?”
While she was talking, Callum snuck up to her and leaned in to whisper. “Is this another... uh... lady thing?”

She burst out laughing, startling her father who was busy caressing Isoros’ mane. When she had finished, she said, “No, dummy! I’m tryin’ to remember... way back when we were on the road, there were a few interstices you would’ve been there for... you know, the day before a new moon night? I’m always super tired and a little bit grouchy.”

He shook his head, lost. “The time we spent walking together from Katolis was so chaotic. If there was an effect on you, I never noticed. Probably just thought you had a bad day.”

“Pfft”, she went with a smile, “How attentive of you, summand. I guess I’ll take it as a complim--”, her expression suddenly slackened with realization. A moment later, her right hand came up to touch her lips, “I... I think I fought Kel... on an interstice...”

The mention of the name still struck something dark in Callum, but he had learned to cope. It wouldn’t do to let the past dictate the future.

“What!?” the King exclaimed, “Now I really need to go look up the moon calendar, because if that’s true I’ll start wearing armor to snuggle you!”

Laughing, they mounted up, Rayla and her father sharing Andris.

Tinker held tightly on to his daughter’s waist.

“Dad. Bit of slack on those arms, if you could?”, she said with a painful smirk.

“Sorry, I’m just... uh, this is my first time seeing and riding one of these things.”

Once they were in the air and he noticed how smooth the ride was, he relaxed a little. “The Long Wall is the northern district!”, he yelled over the din of rushing wind, “There’s a large inn there, called the `Warg’s Den’!”

“That wasn’t around last time I was here!”, Rayla shouted, “when did they start?”
“I can’t remember, long time ago! Five, six years!?” came the answer, “You’ve been gone for a long time!”

“True! Is anyone from way back still here?!”

“I don’t think so! Taog went to Zander, for illusionist training! Dard left after summing with a girl from Hollister!”

“She went with a Bretani !?”

The incredulous tone of her question made Tinker laugh. “Have some self-awareness!”

“Fair!”, Rayla laughed back.

They found the inn without much hassle, it was one of the few places that had lights out since it catered to foreigners, meaning elves who didn’t have ultrasight. The rest of Cardow lay in darkness, but Callum could see that the town was far from sleeping just yet, dark crowds moving in the streets.

They landed on a small, wooden platform in the wall where the entourages’ other animals were tied up.

The Katolin King looked around, stretching his neck to look upward at the many artificial caves that had been hewn into the rock. On the level they were on, there was an entrance with a runic sign. Unlike the legalese of the forms they had received at the border, this one was legible to the human.

It read {Home of Rhis, where wargs rear their young}.

Callum lighty nudged Rayla. “Fawn, who or what is `Rhis`?”

“Huh? Oh, the sign! I forgot you can read that stuff now. Uh, Res is a legendary earthblood elf
who was known for givin’ lavish meals to her guests. The reading is ’Res, who served many dishes’. In Common, that’s basically just ‘Inn’.”

“Wait so is it ’Res’ like you just said or ’Rhis’? I thought that little mark means to widen your mouth?”

She laughed. “Dafty! I’m scotian, we don’t speak plain rune! Where do you think my weird accent comes from?”

“Oh, uh, duh, makes sense”, he snickered, “It’s not weird, it’s nice! Hm... actually, do I have a Katrinian accent when I speak Common?”

She tapped her chin while they were stepping through the heavy curtains that kept the sounds and smoke inside the inn’s restaurant.

Rayla was distracted from his question as she took in the room. It was a large place, easily big enough to seat a hundred people. To the right was a long bar, hewn from rock and staffed by six moonshadow elves who all seemed very busy thanks to the sizeable dinner crowd. There was an opening behind it, no doubt leading to a kitchen judging by the clattering of dishes.

Ahead was a long corridor with a few doors. It ended in a staircase next to which was a sign with an arrow pointing upwards indicating that the guest rooms were upstairs.

To the left of her was a flat, long set of stairs into a slightly lower part of the room. There, rows and rows of benches and tables stood. Many of them were fully occupied and groaning under the weight of dishes.

Further back in the room was another dip, containing comfortable looking sofas and an assortment of water pipes. The conversations being had there were led in smaller groups, some of which were laughing uproariously, others seemed to be engrossed in serious discussion, looking haughty and nodding along with the points the others in the circle were making.

The blue smoke in the room had a heavy, sweet aroma that immediately offended her fresh-air nostrils.

Sikil Tobacco. Disgusting.
Callum smirked wryly. For a people so concerned with appearances, these moonshadow elves seemed to be in very good spirits. *Spirits* was indeed the key word here as the King observed the patrons take swigs of something that looked vaguely like thick red wine from tiny metal cups.

Generally when dealing with alcohol, a smaller drinking container indicated a higher percentage. This stuff looked suspiciously like moonberry juice, the nutritious berries very likely making for an extremely potent drink.

“Hoy”, went one of the barkeepers, a stocky scotian. He had a distrustful scowl on his face, “If yer lookin’ for the other pinkos, they’re around the bend. Brin’ you anythin’?”

“Uh”, Callum went, but Rayla pointed at the drinkers and excitedly said, “Whatever they’re havin’, for all three of us!”, then she dragged her summand and Tinker toward the hallway and in front of the room the keeper had indicated.

“I’m pretty sure you just orde--”, Callum said, but was drowned out when Rayla opened the door. About twenty voices were belting out a rather crude Katolin song that stopped abruptly when the king and the queen-to-be stepped inside.

To Rayla's chagrin, everyone rose, turned to face them and the soldiers among them saluted.

With a wry smirk, Callum acknowledged Opeli who seemed annoyed and not entirely sober. She wasn’t nearly as much of a party pooper as people assumed when they first met her. To her left, Naves smirked wryly, to her right stood Lydia who was still quietly humming.

“Good of you to join us”, said the high councillor with the hint of a lilt, “I was just about to order a search and rescue and then call it a night!”

“Bah! Milady, it’s not nearly late enough!”, protested Lydia, “We’re staying for a few days, aren’t we? No point lying around if not for a hangover!”

She laughed with a loud snort that forced quiet snickers from the soldiers and Naves.

Rayla wasn’t immune to this and cleared her throat to suppress a laugh. She was observing
Callum’s behaviour keenly, opting to stay silent so she could learn.

Her summand raised his voice. “First, please welcome Akande, inventor, mage and father to the queen-to-be. He will be joining us for the trip back home.”

The startled sunfire elf tepidly waved at everyone.

"As for your question; Yes we are staying for two days. Now, carry on, I haven’t heard that one for quite a while!”

Rayla was rather happy when the room seated themselves and launched back into the song. It was good to know that they were comfortable enough around their King - and, well, her - to let loose when prompted.

The new arrivals filed in at the end of the table where Opeli, Lydia and Naves were.

The high counselor looked suspiciously at Tinker, not subtle enough to escape anyone at the table except for the nervous scientist.

“Counselor, how long have you been drinking?”, asked Callum, close to laughter at her dramatic expression.

“Oh! Since I’ve paid the innkeepers with enough gold to make them stutter! So! Not long enough, Majesty! It pains our coffers! But! I haven’t had this much fun in... well, ages, really! The last time I can remember my own voice raised in song fit to make my sober persona flush was during your father’s days!”

With that she fell in with Lydia and the soldiers to finish telling the rather raunchy story of one Admiral Omashu, Lady of the Windward Sail.

The door opened and the stocky barkeeper walked in, carrying a few cups and two pitchers. There was a tall, thin container filled to the brim with the red liquid that was being consumed in ridiculous quantities both inside and outside of their little private room.
“Can we have some food, too?”, Callum asked and the server nodded.

“What’ll it be?”

He placed a much larger pitcher with a bubbling, amber drink in front of them.

“Uh, cheeses and vegetables with some bread?”

The elf nodded, turning to leave. For a moment he listened to the song, then harrumphed with an incredulous smirk and left.

Naves leaned over to Rayla. “Haw, the drink’s good here. My sister’s caskin’ it herself, both the ginger beer and Shine.”

“Oh, your sister runs the place?”, said the queen-to-be and Naves nodded with a conspiratorial grin, “So, uh, which is which? This is my first time drinkin’”

The smirk was wiped from the guards’ face and she gaped. “Wait a hot second! Ye are how old, lass?”

“Almost twenty?”

“Ha. HA!! Tear me up and strum my gut like a harp!”, Naves exclaimed, startled, “Ye got through lockup without once gettin’ pestered into the terrible twist bell shite they brew in there?”, she leaned forward to address the king, “Ser Callum, yer chosen’s a shinin’ beacon of innocence! We shall have tae fix that right quick!”

She moved to pour a drink for Rayla but Tinker cleared his throat, “We’re not going to talk them into drinking, are we?”

“Shush! That’s my choice, you!”, the queen-to-be protested with an angry half-smile at her unwanted chaperone, “I’ll have some! I know not to overdo it!”
“Bah! Not gonna talk her into anythin’! Ye’re her da’ aren’t ye? Gotta be lucky she didnae get into the stuff on her own while ye weren’t watchin’!”, Naves elbowed Tinker, lightly, “Worried your daughter’ll walk off with the next best human, lad?”, the guard laughed loudly, “Look at ye, playin’ Lucid!”

The sun elf stared at her. Then, without breaking eye-contact, he grabbed the tall, thin pitcher and filled himself one of the tiny cups. He emptied it, angrily. “I’m no friend of that pack of sneak thieves!”

While that budding friendship was unfolding, Callum had poured himself and his summand a glass of ginger beer each.

He lifted his in her direction, then snickered as she totally failed to understand the gesture, saying, “Huh? But, I already have one?”

“Right”, he said, “Humans clink glasses to, uh, show good spirit!”

They toasted and the King felt reminded of his first interaction with Helmond.

She took an eager drink, then put the glass down, smacking her lips. “It tastes pretty terrible... I expected more, the way people talk about drinkin’”

“Yup, that’s about the same reaction I had my first time”, Callum snickered. He sat back in his chair, the sweet and sharp taste of ginger lingering in his mouth.

While looking about the room, he could feel Rayla’s low heat on his right and loved the fact that she was here, relaxing with him, even drinking with him.

Once more he wished they could hug each other. He looked over and found her looking back.

“That song is nasty!”, she laughed, “That Lady wasn’t very proper! Did I hear that right just now? ’Ten-thousand laid on sheet and plank’?!”

“Even her kills and lovers taken together, I’m guessing that’s probably not true”, the King smirked,
“Actually, the Admiral never married and had no children, meaning her line of nobility ends with her. She’s a great example for what I meant when I said that nobles don’t have to follow all the rules.”

They spent some time listening and drinking.

“Aye, sounds like a lady after my own taste!”, Naves said when the song had ended, “How about it, Rayla, ye wanna counter with yin of our own?”

The queen-to-be took another swig from her almost empty glass, then said, “Ye’re a summed mother, Naves! How can ye say that?!”

“Just cause A got a tall and a wee boy suckin’ my paps doesn’t mean A’m not yin fer adventurin’!”

Laughter from the soldiers in earshot and the two royals followed her crude comment.

When Rayla had settled down, she motioned at her older friend, “How about ‘Waxin’ Wandrer’?”

A moment later, Callum smirked as every single head in the room turned to listen to the song, almost entirely unintelligible even to him who had some knowledge of standard rune.

Ever so often, a word or two that he could make out left the women’s lips and he started to piece together the lyrics a little.

The server came in, placing a platter of cheeses and sliced vegetables as well as a breadbasket between him and Rayla.

When his summand and the prison guard had finished singing, the pounding of fists and raucous cheers followed, startling the elves in the room.

“It means we liked it!”, Opeli shouted over the din.

Rayla took another eager drink, emptying her cup and fanned her flushed face. “Uh, it’s a bit of a
bigger deal with an audience!", she laughed.

“I caught only a few words of that”, Callum said, “What’s it about?”

“A like it a lot, it reminds me of us!”, Rayla said, “It sorta talks about a place like this, where ye’ll find people who’ve never left, sittin’ and drinkin’ and bein’ caught up in their own little world. Lemme try…”

Her brow furrowed, trying to do the translation justice, “uh, `Ther’s sober yins aplenty and drunkards barely twenty and old’uns past one-sixty who’ve never yet stoln’ a kiss`”

She smiled at him, “And then comes the part that makes me happy; `But send me a waxin’ wandrer, frae Hadrin down tae Zander, we’ll walk the country over and together we’ll dae it aw!’”

“I see why you like it”, her summand smirked, “I talk and walk a lot, so I’m your `waxing wanderer’!”

She snort-laughed, a little harder than reasonable and an impish smirk stole into his face. Rayla was getting tipsy.

A moment later his amusement turned to concern when she eyed the red liquid with intent.

“Uh, before you go for more”, he said, “How are you feeling?”

She blinked at him, then frowned. “Ye, too, my Keng? A don’t need another dad!”

“I just wanna make sure you’re pacing yourself! This isn’t exactly light beer and we haven’t had dinner! I don’t want you to get sick!”

Her head cocked with an `awww`, then she snorted, “That’s actually really good of ye! Tell ye what, we’ll have yin of these and then A’ll stop! Here!”

She handed him one of the tiny cups and he sniffed it. Definitely moonberry hooch.
“Now, deh sip it!”, Naves warned, “Shine gaes doon like liquid fire if ye deh swally it in a snap!”

Rayla pounded the shot and Callum was quick to follow.

They both shuddered.

Moonshine was thick, sickly sweet and burned all the way down.

“Eew”, the queen-to-be laughed, “A deh even want more of that!”

She then reached over to help herself to some bread and cheese, but Callum had already prepared a sandwich for both of them while she had sung, worried what the empty stomach might do to them, later.

As they were eating, Tinker leaned over and asked quietly, "So what's your plan for the bond-witness?"

Rayla smiled. It was great to have him on board with the idea. Enthusiasm and alcohol raised her voice. "We should do it the day after tomorrow, probably wouldn't be a good idea to have it on an interstice"

Opeli had heard her talk and leaned in from the other side of the table. "What are you talking about?"

"Bond witnessing. Can we, uh, talk about this later?", Callum said, sudden nervousness grabbing him. The councillor knew the sequence of the bloom and the whole thing was supposed to be kept quiet. If Wynda caught wind of them speaking of it in relative public, it could spell trouble.

"Bond wit--", Opeli frowned, then whispered furiously, "You are placing your needs as a couple over Katolis’! We haven't even left Xadia and already your priorities are problematic! You were to delay any... physical activity until after marriage! What are we going to do if we come back with an obviously expecting, unmarried queen-to-be?"
Rayla’s mouth opened for an angry response, but Callum’s hand squeezed her thigh and she jolted at the unexpected touch. It quickly left, again.

“Opeli”, Callum said with a warm smile, “You should be my bond witness.”

The councillor's mouth opened slightly. Then, she welled up. “Me!? Be... your b-bond mother!?”

She suddenly reached over the table to embrace the King who was totally flabbergasted.

The queen-to-be was rather surprised, herself, giving her summand a questioning look over the councillors shoulder. He simply shrugged and smirked, stupidly.

“Gosh, I am so sorry! I d-don’t know what’s g-gotten into me!”, Opeli said, sniffling. She sat back down and studied her almost empty glass, “I suppose the offer is rather transparent manipulation, is it not?”

Callum shook his head, lightly. “I’m not trying to bribe you, councillor. You have been the closest thing I’ve had to a mother since Amaya’s disappearance. It would feel right to have you there.”

This drove more tears into the councilwoman’s eyes. “I’ve challenged you and spoken against you many times, sire. I was under the impression you disliked me.”

For some reason, the King’s throat tightened. “I... sometimes wondered if you had some sort of grudge with me, yes.”

While this moment was unfolding, Rayla had simply looked between them, but now she said, “That works for me, too. As for my priorities as future queen; Opeli, we’re bein’ careful and there’s good evidence it’s all workin’ the way it’s supposed to. Ye know.”

The councillor regarded her critically for a moment, then nodded with a deep sigh.

Then, Naves leaned in. “Why wait?! Get’er done!”
The King frowned at her. “Of course you heard all that.”

“A hae *ears*, in the name of feck, Ser!”, she shouted, pointing at her head.

Opeli, Tinker, Callum and Rayla erupted into hysterical laughter while Naves looked between them, a defiant, almost angry expression on her face.

Somewhere during the laughter, Rayla caught her summand’s gaze and when everyone had calmed down, they were regarding each other, lovingly.

“Why... why not?”, Callum said, eventually.

“Yea. Why not. Right now?”

“Right now.”

“Aye, that’s the spirit!”, hollered Naves, shooting up, “A’ve just the place for it!”

A moment later, Opeli and Akande were standing next to Callum and Rayla in a locked, dimly lit cellar room.

The two summands were facing each other. Callum’s hand was in hers, the back of it facing upward.

The atmosphere was relaxed, tranquil. This was a formality that would make their bond visible to outsiders, nothing more.

Akande laid out his tools. There were two brass tubes, each of which contained a needle that could be moved back and forth rapidly. An empty inkwell followed, which the artisan filled with pigment and some liquid that dissolved it. The resulting ink shimmered black and blue in the light of candles.

Then, he cleared his throat, got up and stood in front of Rayla. “Do you share your truth with him?”
“A do. Secrets spoken to my ears will echo in his.”

Her father turned to face Callum. “Do you share your truth with her?”

“I do. We share one life with many purposes.”

Opeli folded her hands over her lap. “I witness these summands in stead of our community. From here on, I will speak of them as one.”

“We shall speak of them as one until such time as they can no more bear each other’s presence”, Tinker affirmed, then stepped between them, “Support him so he may bear all pain with ease.”

Rayla’s hand pressed up against his while Opeli’s secured him by his wrist.

A second later, a fast series of sharp pricks made Callum wince, his expression warped with discomfort.

Not ten minutes later, the top of his hand was raw and bloody, the image below somewhat unrecognizable.

Akande changed the needle, then got to work on Rayla. “Support her so she may bear all pain with ease.”

Unlike her King, she worked through the ordeal with a cheeky smirk. Callum felt a little challenged, which wasn’t fair since he hadn’t at all tried to put on a brave face.

When her father had finished, he stood and put down his tools, then wiped the blood and excess ink from their hands.

There was a small, geometric wreath on the backs of their hands, now. The pricks still bled a little and Akande inspected his work before drawing a complex rune. He raised his hands in a claw-like manner over both of theirs.
“Ideo istae crudus sanetur.”

Once more, Callum sucked air through his teeth as heat cauterized the many pricks, then a feeling of golden relief washed over him as the healing magic soothed the skin and set the color underneath. This time, pain had flashed across Rayla’s face, as well.

When the effect had subsided, the King yanked her into his arms and they kissed, now safe from scrutiny.

The kiss was so long that Opeli eventually cleared her throat and they separated, sheepishly.

“Well!”, the councilwoman snickered, “Can’t have both my royals suffocate, now can I? Congratulations, majesties. Shall we, uh, rejoin our compatriots?”

Chapter End Notes

Here's what the bond-wreaths look like

The song Rayla and Naves sing is based on The Ramblin' Rover - Siobhan Miller
Creatures of the Night

A few hours later Opeli rose and walked out, supporting a rather unsteady Lydia. It was at this point that Rayla and Callum decided it was time to call it a night, especially since Tinker and Naves had also wandered out, cursing at the Assembly together.

A peek into the now mostly empty restaurant room of the inn showed them agreeing angrily with each other and a group of elderly elves in the smoking den.

The royals ascended the stairs, humming one of the Katolin songs they had heard tonight. Both of them had enjoyed a few more drinks, skirting the line of tipsy under each other’s watchful gaze.

When they reached the floor that was reserved for the entourage, the two rather exhausted looking sunfire guards posted there stepped aside, respectfully.

Behind them and to the side sat Horace on a chair. The elderly attendant looked up, giving them a paternal smile.

“Good evening, Milord, Milady. Is there anything you need?”

Rayla said, “Actually, A’d like tae speak to ye, Horace. A got tae talk tae Lydia a while back, but ye, A’ve barely even seen.”

“Good idea”, Callum snickered, “You two creatures of the night have a talk.”

He pulled his queen aside and whispered in her ear. “I’ll be in our room. See you later...”

His tone was heavy with innuendo and Rayla shook her head at him. “Don’t work yerself up too much. A’m not done with my lady problems, dummy.”

“Aww”, he went, his expression and body slackening, “It would’ve been perfect!”

“We’ll just have tae make up fer it later”, Rayla said, pulling him into a fierce kiss.
“I love you, but I guess for now it’s good night, then?”

“A’ll still come snuggle ye now that we can, dummy. Love ye, too.”

He smirked, then walked off, humming ‘The Waxing Wanderer’.

The queen-to-be motioned Horace along and together they strode outside onto a balcony into the fresh, coolish night air.

Immediately, Rayla got dizzy.

“Oop”, she went, her vision bouncing a little. For a moment, she braced herself against a wall.

“Had a bit to drink, I see?”, the old man snickered, “It’s surprising what a whiff of fresh air can do with the stuff. Are you alright?”

“Just got a case of the birls”, his superiour smirked.

Horace nodded, then leaned onto the balcony’s handrail, hewn from rock like everything else. “You come from a wondrous place. I’ve seen more magic in the few weeks it took to come here than in my entire life.”

“It’s sorta in the air here, isn’t it?”

“Mh-hm. Will you miss it, milady?”

The question punched a hole in Rayla’s stomach. She hadn’t really taken the time to really be in the moment, to reflect on coming back home.

She stepped forward to lean onto the handrail next to the night attendant. “A probably will. Dealt with a lot tae be able tae come back without bein’ pelted with insults. Not sure if it worked, yet.
Suppose tomorrow’s gonna show what me bein’ locked up was worth”, she sighed, “This town here is twelve years of my life. Lots of memories. Good ones, bad ones. A’ll miss it, like A always have when A was away, but A can also come back, ye know? Not like its outta the world once A cross the border and put on that crown. Plus, my dad’s comin’ with, so there aren’t a whole lot of reasons tae miss the place safe for the place itself.”

“Katolis is much less magical. I suppose that might change a bit with the arrival of more elves. I’m glad to be alive for the beginnings of reconciliation. Gives me hope for future generations.”

“Ye got any family?”

He shook his head. “I was an only-child and had different priorities. Love was never important to me, Milady. I have many friends, but…”, he shrugged, “I suppose I’ve never found ‘the one’. It didn’t lessen my experience.”

Rayla snickered. “This then is probably really weird to ye. Comin’ all this way fer a random moonshadow elf?”

“Oh, no, just because I don’t enjoy others in that way doesn’t mean I’m not happy for my King and you. Plus…”, he smirked irreverently, “Tickled me pink whenever Opeli had another moment over the boy not going with a proposal. He’s got his mind set on few things. Peace. Democracy. You. I think that might actually be it.”

The queen-to-be flushed a little. What a sappy King he was. “A was wonderin’... when he asked you to get that bath ready, what did you, uh, think?”

The question had been in her head ever since they had brought in the wooden tub. She was sure everyone there could’ve drawn all kinds of uncomfortable conclusions.

“I simply thought he wanted a bath. Was there something else I should have considered? Was it not to his liking?”, his eyebrows rose in honest wonder and Rayla felt a bit of relief.

“No, A guess what A’m really askin’ is... isn’t it kinda weird to... do someone else’s chores fer them?”

The attendant guffawed. “That’s the sort of question that shows you're a commoner! For some
reason, people seem to think that `chores` are a lesser task, to do them for someone else, even family, is often seen as demeaning. I’ve never felt as though they were beneath me. Don’t worry, I enjoy my work, especially since it leaves plenty of time for me to tend to my many hobbies. I paint and write and tinker. Never bored, this one.”

“A guess it’s a strange thin’ to me cause A’ve always done my own chores and never enjoyed ‘em.”

Horace nodded, pensively. “I have you to thank for showing the King how to do all the menial tasks we perform for him. He has an appreciation for us that I don’t feel I’ve been given by other nobles.”

“Uh, but then, some of the stuff ye attendants take care of is also a bit... personal?”

The truth was that a few particular pairs of underwear were still buried deep in Rayla’s belongings. She hadn’t had the chance to tend to them and did not want Lydia or Horace to wash those ones, for everyone’s comfort.

“You’re set to be queen, milady. Your choices have more impact on my life than my own”, he gave her a mischievous smirk, “I figure I can wash many a frilly nighty before my influence on you becomes more personal than that.”

Once more, Rayla felt a keen prick of hesitance. Did she want this kind of responsibility for a country full of people? At this point, it was too late to back out, she had committed. Still, the doubt was there.

“Not sure A’m better at chosin’ the right thin’ than ye are, Horace”, she said, quietly.

“And there’s the sign of a good queen”, the attendant said with a small smile, “Doubt and the recognition that one is fallible. It makes you receptive to other points of view and nothing is more helpful than the voices of many when considering what's best for them. I won’t lie, you have a frightful battle for their hearts and minds ahead of you. The will for peace is in most commoners, sick of having their livelihoods destroyed, but the hate for elves runs... rather deep. However, from what I know of you now, I’m sure that the people of Katolis will eventually come to trust in you to advance their interests and keep them safe.”

A veil of sadness obscured his features. “I’ve had many such conversations with the King’s
mother, Lady Sarai. She, too, was full of self-doubt and concern and had an ear for everyone’s concerns.”

For a moment, the old man seemed to be lost in thought. His pained expression made Rayla think that to pry would expose parts of his inner world he didn’t want to share. With a deep sigh, he blinked at her, then gestured at Rayla’s hand. “I see you have a new tattoo. One wonders if they all mean something?”

The queen-to-be inspected the fresh marking with a smile. “The ones under my eyes are familials, they mark me as a member of a family. This one’s called a ‘bond wreath’ and Callum has the exact same on his hand. Shows we’re a couple, hopefully for life.”

Horace’s eyes widened and he chuckled. “Oho, like a wedding band! So, as far as your people are concerned, you are now the queen of Katolis?”

The question was rather important, but Rayla didn’t quite know how to answer it. Plus, she was starting to feel rather light-headed. “I’m not sure. From my point of view, I’d say I’m Callum’s summand. Once I actually wear that crown, maybe I’ll see myself as a queen. For the moment I’m just... Rayla.”

“Ah, I suppose that’s true. Your handfasting and coronation will happen on the same night, though, so for Katolins, there will never be a question as to what your status is. Queen-to-be is one thing, but Queen is quite another. One tells people to get on your good side, the other means that you have the power to crush them if they aren’t”, her attendant regarded her with an investigating glance.

Then, his brows furrowed, “Milady, are you sure you’re alright? You seem a bit pale.”

Rayla sighed. “I think I’m startin’ to feel the interstice now. Moon fades, so do I.”

Horace looked up at the sky. “Makes eminent sense, I suppose. Full moon, height of power. New moon, the opposite. Is there anyth--”

“Fulminis!”, Callum’s voice shouted, pain and mortal terror marring its tone.

A clap of thunder shook the entire structure and Rayla darted inside, blades in hand.
There was pressure in his disembodied hand.

“Callum! Can you hear me? What happened?”

“I don’t know”, his brain commanded to speak, but nothing happened.

Hands on his neck and lips.

“He’s not breathin’!”

A scramble of many feet, furniture being pushed around and falling over, a shout for a doctor.

An angry demand, “Ye can’t just die on me, come on!”, more desparately, “Dummy, breathe! Please!”

He wanted to open his eyes and mouth to say, “I'm feeling fine, what's your issue?!”

But then, he wasn’t really sure if he had a mouth.

He felt nothing, but confused, tumbling emptiness.

Nothing at all.

Then, gasps.

“Please... breathe...”, came an exhausted sob, "just breathe..."
Painful pressure on his chest, repeated, the cracking of his ribs.

Dry lips on his, a shared breath in his lungs.

The sound of a door, slamming open.

"Move, A’ve got it!"

A slight prick, then searing pain in his arm.

Drop after drop of liquid, dripping into his throat.

Was it water?

No, it seemed thicker.

Was there taste?

Acrid. Bitter. There was taste.

It ran into his windpipe, tickling painfully and he wanted to cough it all up but had no control over his lungs.

More nothing.

A gurgling sensation in his throat and the splatter of liquid.

Silent darkness.
A warm, wet rag on his naked chest and stomach.

Breath in his lungs.

“Ugh... you’re such a mess”, a disgusted heave, a pause in the rag’s motion.

Anger, tempered by fear and love, “You’re in so much trouble if you wake up.”

A sob. “Oh, dummy, what’r you doin’?”

His voice answered, eagerly. “Lying down!”

Her shocked reply was muffled by his fading conscience.

Something like sleep.

Muffled voices, heard halfway through the wood of a closed door

Rayla. “... get that, but what if the King doesn't pull through?”

Opeli. “... no heirs. As Queen, ... would be next ... .”

Rayla. “I can't imagine that.”

Opeli. “... it's .......... ... worried about ... ....... hear from Katolis.”

Sleep.

A quiet song.
... your blade.

So pyre me where it pleases my lover,

near friends - or deep within our quarry’s land.

Oh, my task didn’t end with my life, So;

how can - I pass to endless final r
Beyond

The Moon.

It was full, massive, threatening to consume his entire being.

The white orb loomed over him in total darkness, aggressive and radiant like the eye of an ancient predator, staring.

Then, another radius started taking it away, mil by mil.

Eventually it vanished in a dark, comforting shadow.

Nothing but darkness followed, a state that he was now rather used to.

Prick.

A puncture appeared in the velvet black, a sharp stab of light, not cold and demanding of his attention like the moon’s.

Curious, he examined it.

It was crisp and lovely, a diamond set in a mosaic of obsidian.

Two more appeared, slightly different in color.

Four more came into existence.

Eight.

Sixteen.
A blink of the eye later he was bathed in starlight, a band of them coursing through the center of his vision.

He had never seen a sky this colorful, this breathtaking.

Out of its wonderful chaos, a strange order formed, a shape.

He knew what it meant and if he’d had a finger, he would have traced it out.

*Anzur 'iilaa nihayat al'ard.*

A flash.

Then nothing.

This time, the darkness was no longer friendly.

He wanted it to end.
Grim Counsel

Uncertainty and change were thick in the air, the latest events percolating into what the three Katolin courtiers in the room expected would be deep history.

Kingsley and Claudia had been arguing loudly over possibilities and theories for the past thirty minutes since the mage had brought Opeli’s reply to the latest avisa into the war room.

Helmond took a deep breath, trying to calm his aging heart. “Colleagues, where is the connection between one thing and the other, and is there one, at all?”

His compatriots seemed rather confused. It took him a moment to realize that he hadn’t really filled them in on his train of thought.

Helmond smirked wryly. “Pardon. I was just contemplating if the timing of Jorge’s demise and the attack on Lord Callum were not rather conveniently juxtaposed. We currently have a grip on Katolis, firm and stable, our agents report no disorder and no organized grumblings. Imagine how that would change if we were to announce Callum’s death.”

“The end of a line. Queen-to-be is not ‘Queen’, after all”, Kingsley griped, “We warned him. Over and over and over. Poor, stupid boy. How will we steer this mess into anything other than civil war?”

“We don’t tell anyone!”, said Claudia. Somewhere deep inside her was grief and worry, but the emotions were tenuous, hidden beneath what she had started to perceive as a lack of care for everything, “What, do we actually owe an explanation to someone outside the castle? We bring Rayla here, put a crown on her stupid, horned head and let her play Queen. Meanwhile, we say he’s sick, or something, so the principalities don’t start fighting!”

Helmond shook his head. “Even if we could keep a secret so monstrous, you can’t honestly believe that the houses of Katolis would accept an elven Queen without a human King to offset her... otherness.”

Claudia’s tired eyes flew across the room, to the dark windows, then to the Ex-Legate. “I can’t believe this is happening. Children of Elarion. What a bunch of elven bastards. What do you know about Leafclimber poison?”
“I myself have never used the substance, though it was available to the agents of the Lucid in a cleansed form”, the elf rubbed his chin, “Unrefined, the poison kills within seconds by paralysis. But, if his attackers had been in possession of the clarified version of the chemical, the lethal effect would have been slowed to allow for subconscious interrogation in the initial day. The victim is supposedly aware of very little unless touched or spoken to directly. One can selectively reactivate bodily functions by trickling the antidote over the affected tissue. It’s perfect. A world that might consist of nothing but questions and torturous pain plied by the interr--”

“Helmond, will you please shut up about it!? It’s terrible to think what he might have been through!”, Kinglsey spat, then sighed, shrinking into his chair. “I can see our next steps are something we need to mull over, we can’t be hasty... right now, we have more threats to discuss!”, his hands flew into the air, his ebony features warped with dismay, “Ugh! Insanity!”

The navy-blue cloak he wore swayed around his generous figure as he pointed at the map table, his other hand shifting his also blue fez a little further up his fading, gray hairline.

“We’ve managed to embed two agents within the rebel’s highest ranks”, the head of the Covertway explained, “They are apparently trying to establish a parliament in La Doré. Let’s just say it’s not going well, too many interests at work at once, no educated guidance. Same for the rest of the country. There’s still widespread fighting going on between them and the loyalists”, he sighed, “Marielle and her son have made it across to Tinesland. My house has taken them in for now.”

“Opeli told us to bring them to the Twins”, Claudia said, referring to the letter that had brought them nothing but harrowing news.

Kingsley scoffed. “Of course she has.”

There was a moment of expectant silence in which Claudia and Helmond eyed the Tinesian, suspiciously.

“Well, are you going to heed her request?”, the elf asked eventually.

“With this sort of change on the horizon, I will be hard pressed to order it! Holding them is power House Tines needs for the coming struggle!”, the councilman yelled, distraught. Then his head dropped into his hands. “I can’t believe I have to consider such things. It’s a catastrophe. After over five hundred years of peace in Katolis... a catastrophe... I’m a loyal courtier, personal friend of the boy. I can’t... believe it..."
Helmond was torn between anger and understanding for the conflicted loyalties of the man, “You will want to evaluate this course of action carefully, councillor. It would be challenging the stability of this country. You’re being entirely too hasty, we need to keep our heads cool. As for Evenere, the rebels are contained within the island nation for now. They won't be able to cross in force unless they manage to organize themselves more firmly.”

“Yeah, and apparently they’re not doing a good job with it”, Claudia sneered at the map table, “So, what, Evenere just... self-destructs?”

The two men in the room stared at the map.

“It’s not a forgone conclusion. While La Doré is lost and the monarchy’s control is rather disrupted, the majority of the country is still in royal hands. Not all Evenerans want democracy. Many of them rightfully doubt that the other Kingdoms would cooperate”, Kingsley said, “We need to keep disrupting the rebels’ efforts and will have to see where things go from there.”

Helmond nodded. “I will contact my Xadian sources in the meantime. See what they have to say on this and Callum’s situation. Lady Claudia, have you made any further progress with the coins?”

The mage groaned. “Sort of? The rat is out.”

The other two courtiers gaped at her.

“You’ve managed?!”, Kingsley gasped, “How are we hearing of this only now?!”

“Uh... well...”, Claudia griped, rubbing her forehead, “The rat’s dead, so... kinda useless knowledge.”

“I’d still say it’s a step in the right direction”, Helmond said gently, then squatted in front of the seated mage, “Milady, are you alright? You seem worse for the wear, lately.”

Her green eyes flitted over his features, not having expected the almost paternal tone. “It’s a drag”, she admitted, “But I’ll do what I have to.”
The elf regarded her, then slowly started shaking his head. “You should stop. I see you fade more and more every time we meet. Your eyes seem to be losing their shine.”

His concern now confused her. “I’m fine, really! Dark magic takes a lot out of its users, Helmond, but I have to do this. Why do you care so much, anyway?”

He sighed. “You’ve lost your father. Your brother hasn’t been here in a long time and with Callum’s departure, you’ve lost a close friend. It seems to me, Milady, you are short of those who would care about your wellbeing.”

“I have my assistant and friend, Piper”, the mage challenged.

Helmond smiled at her, sadly. “Of course.”

His gaze wandered to Kingsley who was bent over the map and he sighed.

“I do consider Kingsley in similar ways... but I believe you and I are still united in... loneliness.”
The King startled into conscience and a sitting position, scaring his Queen awake. From the looks of things, she had been sleeping next to him in a chair, fully clothed and armed.

“Callum!”, Rayla screamed, relieved beyond measure. She scrambled into their bed and embraced her summand, sobbing into his chest while he regained his bearings, “Callum!”, her horns scratched his chin and her clawing hands dug into his pajamas, tears stained them and strangled cries wracked the queen-to-be.

His entire body felt numb, his throat, chest, arms and legs tingled. From the looks of things, they were now in the lower levels of the inn, there were no windows and no balcony.

`What...`, he started but no sound left his mouth.

He pet his summand for a moment, then tapped her horn to get her attention.

She still despised the sensation of the pulsing contact vibrating into her skull so it worked rather instantly. She jolted backward, confused by his first impulse after waking from his deathbed being to annoy her.

Rayla looked like she hadn’t really slept for days, her eyes were underlined in black and her hair was in total disorder.

The expression on her face and her obvious distress made him want to comfort her, but at the same time he had a short list of extremely pressing needs.

‘Water?’, he signed.

She at first seemed confused, then recognition lit up her face and she sat up.

“You want a drink”, she confirmed, grudgingly.
Callum nodded.

His queen got up, walked into their bathroom and came back with a cup of water, no doubt magically created from thin air.

“Pace yourself”, she said, handing it to him, “and don’t tap my horns again! Petting is good! Kissing is great! Tapping and yanking? No! Do not!”

While part of him really just wanted to laugh at her intensity, the cup in his hands was more important. Pacing himself was easier said than done, his parched lips and throat aching for more than he was willing to give as he was forcing himself to sip.

After four cups, he felt sated and could tend to other issues. His legs were numb and wouldn’t quite move the way he needed them to, so he’d need her help, again.

‘Can’t walk. I need the bathroom. Please help?’, he signed, after testing his voice and finding it silent once more. A bit of worry bubbled up in him about this, now. He’d assumed it had to do with the lack of moisture.

The queen-to-be did indeed help him up. He was rather shaky on his legs and was glad for her support.

When they arrived in the bathroom, she lowered him onto the generous tub’s broad rim and said, “Do you need help from here or are you good?”

For a moment he considered asking her for her assistance, given that he couldn’t call out to her if something went wrong, but pride and shame kept him from accepting the offer.

She walked out, leaving him to his own devices, hoping that they would be enough. Obviously, she was also a little relieved. Over the past few days she had already done a few things out of love and concern that she wouldn’t have otherwise managed.

A moment later, there was a frantic knock on the door to their room and Rayla walked over to respond to it, a blade readying in her hand.
It was Opeli.

"You were heard screaming! What's going on!?", she asked without preamble. There was obvious fear etched into her face.

“He’s alright, just usin’ the washroom”, The queen-to-be said, watching Opeli’s expression fill with relief, "Had some water. I don’t think he’s up for much. Doesn’t seem to speak, he’s been signin’ at me.”

“As predicted, I suppose. You understand sign?”

Rayla shrugged. “Back in the day I thought I’d have to make a good impression on General Amaya. I know a bit. Anyway, I’d like to give him some time before we break the news? Tomorrow?”

“Of course. I’ll have Horace bring you some food, he must be famished. Please keep me posted. We need to catch him up, and soon.”

With the front door closed, Rayla walked back to the bathroom. “If you’re okay in there, give me a single knock, please.”

A reverberating knock against the metal sink appeased her. She slid to the floor, leaning backwards against the wall and kneaded her hands, relief now allowing her to feel more tired than ever before.

“Knock once for `yes`, twice for `no`. Okay?”

Knock.

“Do you know what happened?”

Knock, knock. She couldn’t know it, but these knocks actually meant `kind of?`.

“So. You were under for, uh, three days. Weirdest thing is, while you were totally out, you still
answered questions. Nothing else, just direct, pointed questions. Two masked people attacked you, like the ones we fought in Veltis-Tiram. You know, the Children of Elarion who stole the Key? We think they stuck you with a poison dart from the balcony, then came in to finish the job.”

She sighed, then continued, “We found two darts in the sheets of our bed, so they were comin’ for both of us. That also makes me think they weren’t moonshadow elves since otherwise they would’ve seen that it was just you in there.”

She sat back and closed her eyes. “Still okay in there?”

Knock.

Yawning, Rayla continued, "Not sure what happened before I came in, but I figure you must've fulminissed them because we heard you cast the spell and they were on the floor, kinda puttin' themselves together. From the mark on the wall, you must’ve missed them.”

Frustration snuck into her voice. “The guards and I started fightin' them to get to you. Bastards got away from us, though. We wounded one of them, so they both booked it.”

There was a series of four knocks and Rayla shot up, fearing that that was Callum's way of calling for help.

In a way, it was true. He was leaning on the sink, not overly sure of his legs which were wobbling beneath him. His summand simply picked him up and carried him back to bed.

Once there, he finally pulled her into a kiss.

She sighed, deeply. "Phew. I can't tell you how good that felt", once more she welled up, “I thought you were gonna d-die. If Naves' hadn't recognized the poison... oh, dummy..."

She held him tight enough to make him squeak, had he had a voice, but he knew exactly how she felt. Comforting words wanted to cross his lips. Nothing followed the intent but a stream of inarticulate air. Panic crept into his chest and he began to hyperventilate.
'I can't speak', he signed, 'please help?'

His summand grabbed his shoulders, tightly, "Sorry, I should've mentioned that! You’re okay, calm down, everythin’s as expected. Naves said that you'd have some issues with your vocal chords, arms and legs. Leafclimber frog poison has a paralyzing effect. If hadn't been countered, it would've done the same to your lungs and heart. Looks like you're on the mend, though, since you can move those hands just fine."

'That's good to know’, he signed, the panic subsiding a little. After a moment, he frowned. Somehow, he had a hard time focussing. ‘So, the Children of Elarion are trying to murder us?’

"It looks like it. Seems to me they were thinkin’ of comin’ after us right when we were relaxed and tired. I could also feel the interstice in my bones, so it was a good time."

'How does that make sense though? Why would they want to do this?’

Rayla blinked, then an amused frown crept into her mien. "Stop flappin’ your hands about like you’re tryin’ to swat a fly, dafty. I don’t follow!"

He smirked wryly, then repeated the gestures more slowly.

Rayla sighed. "I honestly don't know. I'm just glad to have you back! First hours were so tense. I had to breathe for you and keep your heart goin' while they put together the antidote. Thought I was gonna faint after a while”, she sniffled, remembering the situation brought tears to her eyes again, "You were dead and... I...", she pressed a tearful kiss to his mouth, “I love you!"

'I love you, too. Thank you for saving me again', he signed, now equally waterlogged.

Then, Rayla’s expression changed to sheepish embarrassment. "Um, also, I need to tell you somethin'. You, uh, threw up on yourself, uh, and me, uh, so I... w-washed you. I'm sorry, I couldn't exactly ask if you were okay with that."

He groaned, disgusted at himself. So much for pride. 'Don't be silly, fawn. Thanks for that, too. Can’t have been pleasant for you.'
She shrugged, putting on a brave face. It had been weird, undressing him. She had tried not to feel neither repulsion nor attraction to his soiled, naked body, unconscious and helpless as he had been. As strange as it was, she’d not really succeeded either way.

Seeing her inner conflict, he extended a hand to pet her cheek.

He even managed a tiny, hoarse whisper, now. “Fawn. We’re summed. You have my consent to do whatever you want or need to do.”

Rayla gave him an exhausted, quizzical look. "Oh, hello, voice. Hm... `Whatever I want`? Like, in general?"

He nodded. “I know you wouldn't do something bad to me.”

His summand smiled weakly. "Well, same here. Just assume I'm good with anythin' and I'll let you know if I don't like somethin' you're doin’", her smile turned into a wry smirk, “…and I also mean that in general, not just when I’m out like a candle in the wind and pukin’ on you."

He snickered as she dragged him down into the sheets and clung to him as though he'd evaporate if she didn't.

Rayla's eyelids were leaden at this point. She'd been watching over Callum, only sleeping a few minutes every night.

Tomorrow she would have to fill him in on the state of their world, but for now, she couldn't keep her grip on conscience, the fact that her blades were uncomfortably pushing against her back didn’t matter, the discomfort balanced evenly by her summands warm, vivacious hold on her.
Callum stretched and felt glad for the lack of tingling in his arms. Yesterday night, he’d wiggled out of Rayla’s grasp to eat a few bites, remembering Lessa’s warning from when his summand had been in a similar situation.

This came to help him now, since next to him, Rayla was still very much asleep and he still didn’t want to disturb her, after everything she had done for him.

Carefully, he got up, finding his legs in working order. He quickly rifled through his bags to find a set of day clothes, then vanished in the bathroom, closing the door very softly.

In here, he felt it was safe to test his voice. "Hello, stupid!", he greeted his pale, narrow face in the mirror.

The stronger sound of himself delighted him, even though it was still hoarse and unrefined, reminding him of when he was younger.

The next thing he noticed was that he’d forgotten to grab his crown.

After getting dressed, he looked around the bedroom for the golden headpiece. He found it on his nightstand and snuck over to grab it.

It scraped softly against the stone of the chiseled furniture.

A four-fingered hand closed around his wrist. "What'r you doin’?"

With an apologetic frown, he regarded his annoyed Queen. "Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you. I was just gonna go see what time it is and get caught up. I missed the avisa on Sunday."

"It’s about seven thirty. The world can wait. You! Back to bed and snuggle me!", came the grouchy order.
The King snickered. What would Opeli say about his priorities if she knew what he was going to do next?

The crown clinked back onto the nightstand and he stripped to his underwear, then slipped under the blankets to embrace his summand.

She nuzzled her face into his chest and hummed, happily. "Good to hear your dummy voice"

"Yeah, I'm glad it's back, too. How are you feeling?"

"Dead tired and happy to have you back. I don't think I ever really understood how you must've felt back when you thought I was dead. Terrible feelin'. Insane to think that you had to live with that for a week."

For a while, they snuggled and Rayla dozed off once more, intertwined with him.

Callum wasn't tired in the slightest and sought to distract himself, so as to not disturb his sleeping saviour.

Eventually, he ran out of things to think about and the burning desire to learn the contents of the avisa grew.

Then, his Queen mumbled, her voice heavy with lust and desire. "Mmmhh... Callum..."

The King flushed. Woah. What was she dreaming?

Would she answer him? "Do you like it?"

She snickered, then arched and demanded, "Go harder..."

Heat now flashed through Callum, want manifesting itself in his lap. He remembered their conversation from the night before, her blanket consent inspiring a raunchy decision.
He reached out, seeking the waistband of her pants. Thanks to her arched position, it was easy to slip his hand below her underwear. Wetness greeted the tips of his fingers, beyond what he had thought was naturally possible.

Two of his digits curled inside her, pressing up against the rough spot she had shown him.

With his touch, her breathing sped, but she didn’t wake. For a tense while, he simply massaged her, slowly, watching for any flicker of conscience in her mien. Beyond a deepening indigo flush, she didn’t react.

It was an experiment. Would she wake? How would she respond to his touch?

Had he misinterpreted her words?

Doubt and worry began to seep into his desire now and he was about to stop.

Then, suddenly, she shuddered and keened, the high-pitched, happy sound heavy with lust and love startled him into withdrawing his hand and woke her. She blinked at him and his wet hand raised above the blankets sleepily, then her arms and legs wrapped around him and she drew him into a close hug.

"Why’d you stop?", she demanded with a tired, heated smile.

“Uh... you, uh..., um, w-was that okay for me to do?”

"Dafty", she breathed, "A wanted ye so bad since the first time... ’course it’s okay fer ye to do. A told ye yesterday. Keep it u... oh no."

She sat up, horror in her eyes.

“What’s wrong?!”, he asked, suddenly worried that she felt he had violated her, after all.
“Uh... I’m... I’m not done bleedin’”, she whispered, embarrassment plain in her expression. Then her hands came up in a limp posture that made it clear she was revolted, “Actually... I’m... ew... soaked . Dummy, ew!”

Callum’s worry changed to bemused concern at her self-disgust. He showed her his still wet fingers, the substance coating and spanning between them a milky, clearish white. “I think you were just really excited by your dream. See, it’s not purple.”

She hal-frowned at him, glad he hadn’t actually covered himself in blood. “I don’t dream. And that doesn’t mean anythin’, dummy, for all we know my stupid body could just be takin’ a breather before delightin’ us with more lovely, dark-blue crud. It’s only been a week and a bit.”

He shrugged. “You mumbled some pretty intense stuff for someone who doesn’t dream. Plus, so what? You cleaned my puke off of us. I can deal with a bit of blood.”

“This isn’t just about your comfort!”, she said, now a little angry, “I’m not okay with the idea of bleedin’ all over you and makin’ a giant mess!”

“Sorry, I hadn’t... considered that”, he said, sheepishly.

She huffed, then smirked at him wryly and waved a hand. “It’s fine. I can’t expect you to read my mind, and I did give you permission. Just, in the future when we’re close to this joyful week in the month, maybe keep your lusty fingers on the outside?”

“But that wouldn’t really do anything for you, would it?”, he puzzled.

A smirk curled her lips and she got up to take off her pants.

Callum felt a little weirded out by the thread of viscous liquid that spanned between her and her underpants for a moment.

“Ugh, I'm so wet!”, she laughed sheepishly at his expression.

Then, she shimmied back on the bed, careful not to dirty the sheets. She pointed downward, a flush
spreading on both their faces as he followed her index’s direction into her lap. "Time for a bit of an anatomy lesson, dummy”.

“Never got a g-good look at you”, he said, the light of the magical sconce above their bed’s headboard revealing much more than the tiny flickering candles from their cave.

“Well, uh, ye b-better look, then”, she snickered, spreading herself, “Ye see that little, uh, knob, above the bigger hole, a bit hidden under t-that hood?”

Her summand nodded, a wild blush consuming his expression.

“This thin’ is what you should be touchin’ at all times, dummy. Feels better than most of the inside, even.”

He dropped onto the sheets, inspecting her with mounting curiosity. The scientific air of it made her lose a bit of the lust she had felt to embarrassment.

This all changed when, in a motion she had not expected, he plunged his head between her legs and rounded the part of her she had just pointed out with his tongue.

The slightly rough, nimble touch was electrifying and she barely stifled a surprised moan, shoving him away. A second of anger at him not asking to do it passed when she realized that she had given him free range. An unexpected consequence.

“What, wasn’t that good?”, he asked, grinning at her mischievously.

“It’s nasty down there!”, she griped, then admitted, “... uh, but... it did feel pretty nice...”

“Sounded like it, too”, he said, the grin keeping up.

True shame now enveloped her. He had heard.

“A’m so sorry!”, her legs folded into a more modest pose and her hand came up to cover her
mouth, “A didnae mean tae... y-ye just surprised me!”

He seemed confused at her reaction. “What’s wrong?”

“A know A’m not supposed to... be... loud”, she whispered, mortified.

A worried frown now curled his brows. “You, uh, were pretty loud when you woke, didn’t seem to bother you. Why worry about this?”

Her shame deepened and her hands covered her face. “Ack, A was?! Nooo! I’m sorry, Callum!”

His hand came to rest on her shoulder. “Why do you think you have to be... quiet?”

The question confused her. “Uh... the book and Zala both... said that... bein’ loud’s not... proper. Not for moonshadow.”

Callum frowned. “Oh. Sorry, I didn’t know. Did you not like me making noise? I can stop.”

She looked up from her hands. “No, A loved it! It was kinda... encouragin’.”

His frown lightened into a confused half-smirk. “So, why do you think you making noises would be any different to me?”

The gears were now turning in her head. “A was told... A read...”, a sudden frown dropped over her face. “Ah, A think A get it. If it disnae make sense, it’s tradition, isn’t it?”

Her King snorted, her irreverent, annoyed tone too amusing to ignore.

“I really like when you show me what you enjoy. It’s hot and cute. I want you to let loose, okay? I mean, uh, as much as you want to”, he said.
She nodded, slowly. This was going to feel weird after a lifetime of suppressing herself, first to avoid getting caught, then to conform to a cultural expectation.

After a moment, she sighed and resolved to annotate her consent from yesterday.

“Hey, uh, next time you wanna try somethin’ new, please ask. So... what made you... lick me?”, she asked.

He shrugged, guilt in his mien. “Sorry, I will. Saw a vague illustration in one of the books once. Thought it might be fun.”

She cocked her head. “That’s a strange thin’ to want to do. Uh. What’d it taste like?”

His eyes rolled a little as he tried to form a suitable comparison, then a slight blush came over his face. “Well, um... I’m actually a bit... I feel weird now. I... I kinda tasted myself at one point, and, uh... expected you might’ve done the s-same?”

She gaped. “Ye put yer stuff in yer mouth ?!”

“Look, I was curious , okay?”, shame now flooded his expression, he felt it was undeserved, “Curious, just curious. For the record, you taste a bit sour, a bit... hm... like copper coins in... uh... milk?”

His elf eyed him, baffled. “A coin. With mi--? Uh, what else have ye put in yer mouth , dummy?”

“Have you honestly never tasted anything weird as a kid? I haven’t exactly eaten a merlon in a few years”, his voice shrunk, “You’re making me feel really ashamed, you know?”

“Oh”, she went, feeling a bit upset at herself, “A didn’t mean to be all judgy. Sorry. Just surprised. I guess as a wean I put some weird stuff in my mouth, too.”

She sheepishly looked around the room, then said, “So, uh, what do you ... taste like?
His brows furrowed with a challenging smirk. “I guess you’ll just have to find out, one of those
days.”

The elf’s cheeks flushed, the possibility of her licking him far surpassed the challenge of her
allowing herself to moan.

Noticing her apparent discomfort, he kissed her passionately. The King meant to rekindle the fire of
lust, and so, while his hand started caressing her still slick lap, he asked, "I know this sucks to ask,
but I wanna make sure. You're still taking the stuff, right? We could make love?"

She frowned with closed eyes, her half-angry response interrupted by smiling gasps, "Cou-rse A
am! Stoppin’ would’ve been kinda like givin’ up on you! And yes we can, and we should! A really
want to..."

He readjusted his position, sitting in front of her with his legs crossed. This accentuated his tented
underpants that sported a growing wet spot. She glimpsed it and redoubled desire worked its way
into her core.

"Alright, fawn... I guess I’ll just grab a towel to take care of the mess I'm gonna make", he smiled,
looking toward the bathroom.

"As long as it isn't inside me, A don't g-give a damn where it goes!", she snickered, pulling his
underpants toward her into the bend of his knees, then pushed him over and lowered herself onto
him. He was totally flabbergasted when their thighs met with a somewhat wet slap.

"Huh. That was ea--", he started, but then he saw her face warped with pain.

"Ow. Overdid it!", she sucked air through her teeth, "Damn, ow, that hurts!"

The queen-to-be looked at the ceiling, working through the tearing sensation in her abdomen. It
stung and prickled, not as bad as the first time, but not much nicer, either.

Callum looked up at her, a feeling of guilt burning his insides. He wanted so badly for her to feel as
good as he did, resting inside her welcoming warmth.
“Are you okay?”, he asked, gently stroking her lower arm.

“No, but give it a sec”, she snickered tepidly, surreptitiously wiping beads of cold sweat from her forehead.

A minute later, she looked down to face him with a hard-won grin and started moving.

Without the artificial slickness of the gum grass sap, the lustful friction was entirely more pronounced for both of them.

"Concentratin’?", asked Rayla with amusement in her voice, "A’m just goin’ slow so A can g-get settled. Don't ye d-dare `overestimate` yerself again!"

"Ha-ha! I get it! I’m fine, you’re gonna have to work a lot harder than this!"

She laughed and he lightly slapped her thigh. For some reason, the slight exterior pain added to her excitement.

Following his heckle, she picked up speed and soon she was breathing heavily, controlling the angle of attack by the position of her hips. The desire to cry out was there, but she couldn’t quite bring herself to allow it, yet.

Under her, Callum felt rather more confident with himself. Her long hair was in the way, tickling and slapping his face. Monitoring his body closely took away some of the abandon pleasure he’d felt the first time, but it was a small price to pay.

It was nice, the feeling of her rotating around him, her constant change in angle pressing him into her walls in a never ending caress.

When his Queen came down on him in an almost painfully tight embrace, it came as a total surprise.

"Woah, you're wild today!", he laughed, brushing his splayed fingers over both her horns.
"A’m... j-u--", she went, shuddering, "Gah... ah... A’m just so g-glad yer okay, d-dafty, ye have no idea! I love that, please keep doin’ it!"

A shower of dry-lipped kisses followed, then she separated from him and stumbled over to the bathroom. "A’ll be right back, just really need a glass of water! This is some serious cardio!"

He slipped into the bathroom while she was strapping her hair into a loose tie, grabbing one of the towels that hung there. Further, he couldn’t resist the temptation to also grab her butt while she was drinking which she repaid with a surprised spit take.

"Ye better-- ah!", she laughed as his arms wrapped around her and his fingers caressed her newly introduced sensitive spot while the towel dangled against her chest and stomach, "Stop it, ye wretch! Back on the bed wi-th ye!"

He refused to stop due to her playful tone and eventually she just whirled around, grabbed him by his shoulders and shoved him along until he quickly spread the towel on the bed and they both landed on it, laughing.

She let herself get wrestled onto her back. A hot glance later, he was between her knees and slipped inside her, providing satisfaction to her gnawing emptiness.

He moved faster than her by virtue of standing on the floor. She enjoyed herself much more than the first time, having expected more pain than there was. Every few seconds there was another prick of hurt and a jolt of fulfillment in her body. Being sensitive had tradeoffs. Bits of pain, lots of pleasure.

A particularly strong impulse washed over her and her legs closed firmly around her lover, in a move that pressed him deep inside her and left him no room to move. While she bore out waves of delight, he squirmed and finally, her urge to keen was released in a quiet, controlled moan that sounded more like a contented sigh.

It was great to let go a bit of her inhibitions.

"Rayla! Don’t!", he warned, an intense growl that sent a renewing wave of need through her, despite its message.
She gave him a confused look. "A thought ye wanted me to be noisier!?"

"That’s not it! If you do that, I’m not going anywhere", he complained, gesturing at her feet to either side of him.

"Hah, that was sorta the point", she gave him a heated smile, "A wanted ye deep inside."

"Forgetting something?", he said. Motioning the explosive gush of liquid with his hands, he puffed his cheeks, saying, “Booooshhhh...”

She blinked, then snort-laughed and let her legs drop to his side. "Ah, oops, of course! Not thinkin’ with my head right now!"

She sat up and used his shoulders to pull herself up to kiss him.

He picked up her thighs, bracing them against his sides and she savoured his thrusts. Though, she wanted him to plunge deeper, felt the need to tease him, his warning serving as inspiration.

Callum felt her lips on his ear, hot breath and her husky voice dripping in lust, "Felt right to have you close while you were all thrusty and intense. The aftermath sucked, but A loved havin’ you make the mess in there... deeper, dummy. A want you deeper.”

He keened, The admission made him lose rhythm, the turn-on so intense that it added to the physical pressure in his abdomen. It wasn’t fair that words should have that sort of power.

When he redoubled his efforts to satiate her, she allowed herself to moan, quietly, proud of her skills as a temptress. Her request had worked, the feeling of him now striking deep within her causing shocks of joy that rebounded in her toes and fingers.

His hand found the spot between her legs and additional pleasure spread from it, making her dizzy with lust.
"You like that?", he panted.

"Uh-huh", she whispered.

His summand draped her arms around his neck, started carding her hands through his hair and kissed him. Familiar sensations that he enjoyed beyond reason given the context.

"... I'm really close", he growled.

"Nuuuh", she whined in his ear, "Me too, don't stop just yet!"

Her legs closed behind him, more lightly this time, as though she was asking permission to hold him there. Confusion and want grabbed hold of his thought process.

Worse, he wasn't entirely thinking with his head either. It took a concerted mental effort to do the sensible thing.

To her disappointment, he withdrew, breathing a muffled curse into her hair. Sticky liquid hit her stomach and thighs, a sensation that made he blink her eyes even though he was too low to actually hit her face. Then he dropped to sprawl on the carpeted floor, breathing hard.

Suddenly, his eyes tore open.

"Rayla!", he shouted, "Rayla! I have it!"

Her head spun with unfulfilled need, lust and worry at his strange behaviour.

"Ye... what?"

"I...", he stuttered, sitting up. He lifted his right hand and extended his index, drawing an insanely complicated rune that looked rather unlike any sky magic Rayla had ever seen.
It glowed, but instead of radiating light, it seemed to absorb it, giving the white trail an animated, fiery black outline.

He breathed deeply, then activated, with angry determination, “Acies Viren”

An immediate change came over Callum.

He felt a familiar presence.

“Hellooo, stupid!”, the King spat.

To Rayla, it looked as though his entire body tensed, eyes glowing in the colors of a sparkling diamond for a split second, then he went limp and collapsed.

The queen-to-be scrambled off the bed and fell to the ground next to him, terrified, but he started laughing like a mad man before she could even examine him.

“I’m fine! I’m so awesome! Wooo!”, he shouted, sitting up and drawing her into the most disgusting hug she had ever shared with him, his mess squelching between them.

Anger now grabbed her by the horns. “Will ye please stop bein’ an ass and let yer summand partake in yer insanity?!” , she hissed.

“Fawn! I just caught a glimpse of where Viren is!”, he half-shouted and affixed a bite-like kiss to her lower lip, “And I have the star arcanum!”
Her summand’s revelations did nothing to make Rayla’s confusion ebb. With a frown, she stood and grabbed the towel from the bed to wipe herself dry.

After she had contained his mess, she threw the towel at him, roughly.

“A bit more information would be nice, King Confusin’”, she growled, sitting on the bed, cross-legged and cross-armed.

This morning had started far too early for her liking, then gone from raunchy to awkward back to passionate, then to dissatisfaction and stupefying perplexion.

He got off the floor to clean himself off, then sat next to her and tried awkwardly to embrace her. Her hardened, prickly posture made it impossible and after a moment he finally understood that she was rather very upset.

“Fawn, what’s wrong?”

Her already annoyed expression tightened. “You go and shout! You do somethin’ and it looks like you’re hurt again! Plus, why would you stop? I was so close!”

He cocked his head, sheepishly. “Um... sorry. I was just really excited, and, uh, why did I stop? Two reasons, I guess. First, it was just... in that moment, it came flooding back to me, the stuff I remembered from when I was out. I... d-do you want me to... help you finish? I can just use my fi-

“Too late!”, she shook her head curtly, her mood was completely shot. “Just tell me what’s goin’ on with that magic stuff, already!”, she hissed.

“Okay, uh, I’m really sorry!”, he said, “I... uh, where to start? Um, while I was under, I felt like I had no body and no... anchor. Sometimes you’d pull me in, I’d hear your voice or the surroundings or... feel parts of me. But most of the time, I was just floating, disconnected from the real world.”
He gestured at the ceiling, meaning the sky. “You said it was an interstice, so a new moon. I spent a long time thinking about it while I was out. Realized that the moon is often so bright that you can’t see most of the stars, so, without it, without its influence, I would really see them clearly.”

The King smoothed out the sheets between them, “I had this weird... dream thing. Kind of like when I found the sky arcanum. I saw the moon, but it was this... angry monster that didn’t allow me to see what I wanted to. But then, it went away and the stars came out. And I saw them. More clearly than I’ve ever seen them with my real eyes. Rayla, the stars are like the sun, just really, really far away!”

She frowned at him, having no frame of reference. This was the first time she had ever been close to startouched magic or one of the primal’s creatures. If the stars were just other suns, wasn’t their magic the same as sun?

He continued, still excited, “They are there all the time, just like the moon, shining even when we can’t see them during the day. But! Because they’re so far away, a lot of the stars we see here are actually not there anymore! So, th--”

“None of that makes sense!”, she interrupted, “How can somethin’ still shine if it’s gone?”

“Ah, you see, that’s the whole thing about star magic! What you see now and here isn’t actually always now and here. The light from the stars has to travel, like a ship, so its source could be gone long before we’d know it! Light is super fast, so we don’t notice the delay here, but the stars are so, so far away that it matters!”

Her head spun so wildly she thought it would screw loose from her neck and she latched onto the only thing in his explanation that she felt she could argue with. “I thought that was the idea behind moon... what you think you see isn’t reality?”

“Well, yes, and no. In star’s case, what you see is real, just not... bound by time and space. In my... uh... vision, I guess, I saw this rune. It allows me to tap into someone’s emotions and senses at any distance, for a very short moment.”

He breathed in and out, slowly. “Not exactly pleasant, actually. Head hurts a bit, and I feel kinda dizzy.”

“So... that’s how you know where Viren is? How did the vision teach you a spell? I thought you
had to learn all sky magic by yourself?”

“Okay, woah, three questions!? I still don’t have all the sky spells, but I... don’t have a good
explanation for learning this one . I figure star magic is the magic of revelation and insight, right?
So maybe this is how it all starts? Uh, then, about Viren, I don’t... know , exactly, either. I know
what he saw, heard and felt. A cave, the rush of water, a whispering voice, saying ‘Evening is
ours’ or something. The emotion was satisfaction ! Uh, so, uh, whatever he’s up to can’t be good
for us.”

“So, do it again! Maybe we’ll get a better picture!”, his excitement had now successfully arced to
her, her once crossed arms now pattering against her thighs.

He smirked at her and slid off the bed, drawing the rune, again. Where he had started drawing, it
faded. Frowning, he watched it disappear under his fingers before he could activate. “Weird?”

Rayla tapped her chin, equally confused. “Do you think this was a one-time thin’?”

He shook his head, frustratedly drawing the vanishing rune again and again. “I can feel the stars,
Rayla! I’m hooked into them just like I am connected to sky!”

With angry swipes of his hand, he drew Aspiro. Activating it worked as expected and he blew her
hair into a frizzy mess.

The King growled impatiently. After a few more tries at Acies, he hung his head and arms. “Ugh.
It’s not working anymore!”

“Aww dummy”, his Queen went, getting up to embrace him, “Just try again later? Maybe you need
time to recharge?”

He frowned, but was rather very obviously distracted by her naked form, which she found
incredibly satisfying.

“At least our love-makin’ was so good it made you see stars”, she snickered.
“Yeah. Was better than the first time”, he admitted with slightly lifting spirits, “Did you enjoy it, too?”

She shrugged, a half-frown on her face. “Better than the first, for sure. Let’s clean up, yea?”

The whole truth was a bit more complicated. A certain soreness had announced itself again, familiar to her from last time. It would be another few days until she’d feel ready for him again. Plus, she really hoped that once that moment came, she wouldn’t leave it with this annoying lack of fulfillment.

Together, they sauntered into the bathroom where he filled the bathtub and dropped a sunfire pellet into the water.

While he was standing there, watching the pellet dissolve, her hands ran over his shoulder and around his waist. Rayla pressed into his back, the somewhat caked together, curly white hair in her lap tickling his butt.

“Love you, my loud mage”, she whispered, running her fingertips over his chest.

“Love you, too, my quiet elf”, he replied, savouring her touch.

“Pfft, I’m not gonna be quiet anymore!”, she snickered impishly, “I’ll take that first bath!”

“We can both fit in there, fawn”, he said, sounding a bit miffed. She had a bad habit of claiming the water when it was fresh and clean.

“Oh. Neat!”

They slipped into the water and both of them sighed contently.

“This is nice”, Rayla smiled, threading her legs under his and resting them on either side of him.

A moment later, she opened her eyes and the look on his face puzzled her. “That’s your ‘I don’t
know how to say it` face. Out with it, dummy.”

He snickered, then leaned forward to kiss her. “Things got a bit... confusing, fawn. Sorry. I almost forgot about it over the whole star magic thing, even though it’s also important.”

“What’s the matter?”

He pursed his lips. “Hhhrrg, erm... first you made me promise one thing, then you almost forced the opposite...”

She smiled sheepishly at him. “Look, dafty, I’m probably bein’ stupid, but I feel kinda safe after your, uh, accident leadin’ to no babies. Plus, while we’re doin’ it, I really just want you to... you know, uh, be close to me when you... cum?”, she kneaded her hands, flushing at the unfamiliar word in her mouth. “It’s a wild feelin’ and I don’t really get it. Right now I wanna say, ‘do the safe thin’`, cause that’s responsible and all, but at the same time...”, she trailed off.

“Uh... so what do I do?!””, he asked, again.

She bit her lip. “I... don’t know? I hate the drawn out mess... I don’t... ugh, I don’t know.”

A frown spread on his face. An impasse generally meant compromise. "Okay. How about we just do it ever so often? Like, every second or third time?"

She rolled her eyes. "We have to keep count now?"

"Fawn, what do you want me to say? I don't get it. I loved that feeling the first time it happened, even though I was terrified of what it might mean. I love the idea . Just not... the reality of it."

Frustration with the situation made her stomach tingle. She wanted to have her cake and eat it, too. Her tone was unsure, yet defiant, "Ugh, this is so dumb. I feel safe. We are safe. You enjoy it, I enjoy it. Maybe, you should just... do it? Whenever you feel like it?"

He gaped at her. "What about the risk?"
She snorted sardonically. "Risk, ha. That's kinda funny comin' from a guy who was basically dyin' in my arms for the past few days. At this point there’s probably a better chance that one of us dies before we manage to have an accidental heir, Callum. It’s one-in-one-hundred. It’s fine. It’s totally fine."

It sounded like she was trying to convince herself. When his frozen expression didn’t change, she splashed him with water.

He spat and laughed, wiping his face. “Is that... is that your final choice? You won’t be... Fawn, what if you do get pregnant? You saying for me to choose... That’s not fair... I don’t wanna make that choice for both of us.”

“I’m not gettin’ pregnant! It’s not happenin’, dummy!”, she said as if stating an unmoving fact, but then quavering uncertainty crept into her voice, again. “If it happens, talk about fate, I guess! Tiny halflin’s! We’ll have to make some heirs eventually, can’t have Katolis descend into the same chaos as Evenere!”

His dismayed, growing frown told her that the topic wasn’t closed, so she hastily added, “Look. If you don’t feel comfortable with it, I’m good with that too. I’m not sayin’ you have to fi--”

He reached out to place his wet, dripping index on her lips, now obviously furious. “Rayla? What the fuck happened in Evenere?”
Rayla had had a bear of a time calming Callum down. She had explained the Eveneran Monarchy’s pickle and filled him on the containment strategy the rest of the Pentarchy were employing, all while getting dressed.

Given that she had been wearing her faux uniform for a few days now, she had opted for one of the suits instead. Lydia was more than happy to take the uniform from her. Her blades now hung off a standard arming belt, just like Callum’s broadsword.

They were standing in Opeli’s room to discuss the contents of the avisa that Callum had missed. He had calmed down somewhat when he’d heard that the Rebels hadn’t actually taken full control over Katolis’ neighbor and seemed rather busy with themselves at the moment.

“In your absence, the queen-to-be, the general staff and I have taken certain measures to safeguard Katolis’ borders. First, we have bolstered the number of soldiers on our shores. Second, we are in talks with the other Monarchs to send troops to the island to force an armistice.”

Callum’s mouth had opened to protest when Opeli had first mentioned sending soldiers, then closed when she’d explained the reason. He didn’t want to cause bloodshed within the Pentarchy, but if the rebels would not sit and talk, maybe there was not going to be another way to get out of this situation with the human world in one piece.

“Has anythin’ changed?”, Rayla asked, concern evident in her voice and posture.

“Not for the worse. According to Lady Claudia’s latest update, Kingsley has agreed to bring the Eveneran royals to the Twin towers when he heard of the King’s recovery. I recommend we leave here, quickly. We need to be at the helm of our ship, Majesties.”

The King looked at his summand. “Looks like we're not going to the beach just yet. Are you ready to go?”

The elf nodded, firmly. “Can’t be sittin’ here while the Pentarchy’s in this much trouble, dummy. We need to get back.”

“I agree”, he said, “Councillor, get everything ready to go. We’ll postpone our trip to Point Sarai
and go straight home, as fast as possible.”

“I will have the pathfinders draw up a direct route rather than our original path, Milord.”

“Further, I want to speak to Wynda.”

“To what end?”

“I want her take on this attack. It doesn’t make sense to me that the Children of Elarion would want me dead while the dragon queen believes us easy allies. The Lucid must have something on them that could shed light on this, even if just a little.”

“Their motivations seem rather similar to your own, yes. I’ll have her found.”

“Rayla and I will go wander the streets for an hour. I want this visit to have an impact here.”

His Queen blinked at him. He wanted to go for a stroll? After everything that had happened?

“I cannot endorse that!”, Opeli hissed, “You were almost killed, Sire! Under the watchful eye of your guards and summand, no less!”

The elven word sounded strange from her mouth.

“Exactly, which is why I need to figure out at least a bit of what happened here before I can leave! I want to gauge the mood. Here, people have a way to attach to Rayla, a personal stake. If we can plant a positive seed here, where most of the anger and opposition to our plans has come from, I’ll consider that a win. And if we face nothing but hostility out there, that’s also good to know. Rayla? Do you want to go?”

“Yea, I do”, the queen-to-be smirked wryly, “I wanted to show us off for a while now, but someone had to have a bit of a lie-down”

Opeli frowned at them both, then a sardonic snort escaped her and she stood, as well. “Good to
hear that at least there’s a *front* of utility to your window shopping, my liege.”

Her expression changed to more than professional concern. “Please, take a bodyguard. We cannot lose you. The past few days have...”, she started crying, “n-not been easy...”

The King stepped close to her and placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. “Rayla will be with me. Sober, this time. I’m sure we’ll be fine.”

“I was convinced you would pass. For a moment, you did. You were gone. No heartbeat, no breath”, she heaved a bracing sigh, patting his hand with her own, “In your pallor I saw the end of the Kingdoms, an untamed, unchallenged Xadia erasing all of humanity.”

He swallowed. After a moment he took to regain his composure, he said, “I lived, though. And I learned something extremely valuable.”

The mage explained his newest power, omitting the fact that he’d only managed to cast the spell once.

The councillor marveled at him, then slumped onto her bed. “My, my. A useful skill, to be sure. Detecting the traitor’s thoughts and impressions will do wonders in helping to find him.”

She looked up at her royals. “Please, Milady, Milord. Be careful. I’ll get the entourage ready to go and have Wynda sent to your quarters a few minutes after ten thirty.”

He nodded, then grabbed Rayla’s hand. “We’ll be back then. Please don’t freak out if we’re twenty minutes over, okay?”

Opeli nodded weakly, then the door to her room closed behind the leaving royals.

They ascended the stairs and entered the restaurant room of the inn that was currently mostly deserted safe for the people who actually boarded here, having breakfast.

Here already, looks followed the pair whenever the patrons noticed the joined hands. It was hard to tell what emotions played in the multicolored faces, but nobody said anything. In here at least ruled
the same atmosphere of dazzled curiosity as in Veltis-Tiram. This was probably helped by the note posted at the inn’s entrance, explaining the presence of a human entourage.

They strode outside into the early morning and Rayla sighed, deeply. She hadn’t been in fresh air since the conversation with Horace. “I’m glad we’re leavin’ the inn. Maybe not Cardow since I’ve not had a chance to do much here, but the inn, definitely. Talk about some bad memories.”

Her summand turned to plant a kiss on her lips. Over her shoulder he saw a familiar shape, separating from the Wall. Wynda smirked at them, sardonically, her eyes tacked to the tattoos on their hands.

The King could see that she was about to make a snarky comment when, between them, a group of moon elves appeared over the cusp of the ramp that led from the ground level onto the raised platform.

Their conversation suddenly halted with the words, “... no, Mother, it’s fine, really! I’ll just stay at the Warg’s De--”

The human and elf pair regarded the three interlopers warily as their confused stares continued. Since they were close, it was easy to see that their eyes also dashed to the bond wreaths and back to the royals’ faces.

Suddenly, recognition seemed to creep into the leader’s mien. “Wait. Is that you, Rayla?”

The queen-to-be squinted at the young man. “Taog?”

Out of her mouth, the name sounded like ‘took’. He was tall, taller even than Rayla and Callum. The angle at which Callum had to take in his bespectacled, narrow face with the beak-like nose reminded him of Yasra. Taog’s broad shoulders were encumbered with a rather large rucksack. Beneath his travel cloak, one could fathom a body in extremely good shape.

“Yep. That’s me. Taog”, the confused illusionist said with a voice as dark as midnight shade, “I, uh, came to, uh, see my parents.”

“Same here”, Rayla said, equally baffled at the chance meeting, “What, is Dard gonna come around, too?”
“Haven’t heard of her in ye... Rayla, what’s going on? Mom and Dad told me we had a bunch of pinkos in town and I couldn’t believe it, but, uh...”, he motioned at them, “Here we, uh, are?”

Wynda seemed to follow the exchange with piqued interest.

Callum raised his hand in greeting. “Greetings, uh, I’m Callum. King of Katolis. Should I give you two a moment?”

“No, it’s fine”, Rayla quavered, lifting her right hand, “As you can see, I, uh, am gonna be the queen of Katolis soon-ish? So, uh, that’s what’s going on and that’s why they’re all here... cause of him and I...”

Taog’s mother spoke up, “Weren’t ye the coward dragon guard’s brat? Gutsy and a bit harebrained of ye tae show up here! And with an Abuser summand, no less! What's wrong wit ye?”

“He’s no Abuser , we brought the dragon prince back home! I cleared my name!”, the queen-to-be moved her fists to her hips in a show of annoyance.

“When I heard about that, I had a feeling that that was my Rayla! What a story between the two of you!”, Taog beamed, “I think we need to catch up a little. Do you have time?”

Behind the illusionist, Wynda perked up.

Rayla shook her head. “Sorry, no. We’re gonna move on in about an hour.”

Then she almost burst out laughing at her summand’s distrustful expression which he turned into a predictable question before she could preempt it.

`` My Rayla`? Were you two an item at some point?”

Taog laughed brightly. “Sir, I have to say, I didn’t expect to be the target of a King’s jealousy today. But no. Her and I were simply the best of childhood friends, that’s all. Besides, few people
dare approach Candidates Lucid. Or the daughters of renowned warriors. Both? Ha, not a chance! I meant it as "the Rayla I know" as opposed to other people of the same name."

“That makes sense”, the King said, sheepishly.

Taog’s parents then accosted him for his big city accent and spreading his innermost. He brushed them off and asked to meet them again for dinner, which they agreed to, reluctantly.

“I told you, dummy. I was an ironclad scarecrow”, his summand whispered over their argument, “Plus, I had a bit of a crush on Dard …”

The human was a little startled at the admission, but pacified nonetheless. It was rather strange, feeling jealous of this good looking, imposing elf for even just the hint that he might’ve been an ex of hers. Callum was annoyed with himself because he was glad that it wasn’t Dard whom they had ran into.

Wynda’s expression was rather plain, now. If Callum had to guess, she had assumed to find a new tool in Taog, but wasn’t quite sure how to use him now that his and Rayla’s relationship had been explained.

As Taog’s parents departed, they waved tepidly at the strange pair of royals.

“I hope I’m not out of line, you being royals and all, but, what are you up to?”, Rayla’s old friend asked, with a good natured but perplexed smirk.

Callum noticed that there was a well-hidden edge of distrust on his face whenever he looked at the King.

“You’re fine, I don’t care too much for pomp. We were just going to check on our animals and then take a stroll through town”, Callum said, gesturing at the platform where Isoros and Andris were tied up in different places than before. The attendants would have given them some time to roam in the past three days.

“Mind if I tag along? I’ve missed you, Rayla, I’d hate to just see this glimpse of your new, crazy life and not get the chance to talk it over a little”, Taog pled.
The royals were both fine with this and while their new follower settled his affairs with the Inn’s staff, they made for their animals.

Squeaky whinnying greeted Callum as he approached Isoros. Andris didn’t seem quite so happy to see Rayla yet.

Brushing and soothing their animals, they spent a moment to care for them.

“Isn’t it nice to reconnect?”, Wynda’s voice was sweet, once more and Rayla swore that she would box the agent if she didn’t fix her attitude, “You two seem to have a lot of history.”

“Come find us later, Wynda. I have a few questions to ask you”, Callum said, ignoring the agent’s words.

“I was going to resume my posting, Excellence. I am your adviser and should be at your side whenever you are out in the open.”

“I suppose so, but with our bond witnessed, what are you worried about?”

“Oh, I am not worried. You have shown an excellent grasp of our customs. I would simply be in dereliction of my duty if I did not escort you”, Wynda said.

The King stopped his ministrations and stepped into the agent’s personal space which caught her off guard. Angry Callum still sounded rather strange in Rayla’s ears, but she was getting used to it. It was a bit sad. “Speaking of duty, what have you to say about the attack on my person while in your care, then?”

“From what I know, the attackers were followers of Aaravos, no? They enjoy a publicity grabbing murder. I doubt there were deeper motivations than that.”

“But if they had been successful”, Callum growled, “It would split the Pentarchy and Xadia further instead of bringing them closer together, the opposite of what they say they want.”
Wynda shrug-nodded. “I understand your confusion, I feel it myself. The Children are rather unpredictable, who knows if somehow you managed to offend them? I’ve since reached out to the bureau to see if our sources amongst the terrorists have anything to say. So far, I’ve not heard back.”

“You will let me know as soon as you have an answer”

“Naturally. In the meantime, you do have my apology for not detecting the attempt before it happened. No doubt the reprimand I will receive from my superiours has already been entered in my permanent record.”

“I’m so sorry that my near-death has put a damper on your career”, the King hissed, then went back to brushing his mount.

When Taog came back, he marveled at the winged stags.

A mischievous glint appeared in his eyes as he turned to Rayla, “Queen, eh? I guess that’s really the only way to upgrade from where you were, boss.”

She snickered. “Ha! You found an interestin’ path yourself, minion. How’s bein’ an illusionist?”

Callum smirked wryly at the two of them, not getting the dusty inside joke. Ostensibly Taog had wanted to know more about her, but she had successfully misdirected him to avoid talking about herself in front of Wynda. He was now gushing about his education and life in general.

Heh, extroverts.

They made their way down to the street, the elves on the stairs and ramps making room for them as they descended. While the King was the conversational third wheel, he held his summand’s hand quite openly. It suited him just fine that he had his full concentration to scan the expressions on passing faces.

There was confusion on most of them, a sort of angry shock when they noticed his humanity that seemed to be tempered when their gaze locked on Rayla and their joined hands.
It seemed as though Rayla’s theory was being confirmed here. Elves didn’t like humans, but if an elf held hands with one and had the same bond-wreath, maybe that human wasn’t so bad? At the very least, that human was legal.

Then, it happened.

Just as they rounded a corner to enter what Callum assumed was a marketplace, Rayla’s hand flew out of his.

Before the King or Taog had even grasped the danger, she was already on the ground, holding an angry, yelling elf woman down by kneeling on her twisted arm while Wynda had spun to protect their rear.

On the cobblestone next to Rayla’s attacker, a knife spun to a rest.

“Blood traitor! Terrorist! Follower of Aaravos! Help!”, the woman shrieked. Everywhere, heads turned to look at the commotion and Callum’s neck hair rose.

From the center of the plaza, a Civil Protection officer approached them, quickly. The official wearing Assassin’s garb unfurled his blade. “Get off her. Now.”

Rayla released the woman, right after kicking her weapon further away from her. Immediately, the attacker launched herself upright, deluging the queen-to-be in slurs and threats, a tirade that ended when the officer cut her off.

“Silence! You attacked these people? Why?”, he hissed.

“Look at ‘em!”, the woman shouted, “Abuser and an elf! Disgustin’! How can she sum with that?! He’s an enemy King, how is he allowed to wander about??”

A crowd now gathered, grim and curious faces forming a fence around the five actors.

Wynda stepped forward. “The Katolin King was permitted here by Regina Draconis herself and they bear the marks of bond. Nothing can be laid at their feet that would explain your attack,
“You’re under arrest”, the protector said, grabbing the woman by the shoulder in deference to his superiour.

Callum saw his chance and stepped forward. “Hold on, officer. We don’t intend to press charges. We’re asking a lot from your people and don’t want to cause any harm. I wanted my summand to see her home once more before we make our way across the Breach. We were worried that the attention we’d get wouldn’t be entirely positive.”

“So yer sayin’ ye provoked this?”, asked the officer with a half-frown.

“Not provoked , we just hazarded the consequence. I feel responsible and don’t want this Scotian to be judged for her impulse to protect her home. We have much to repair, humans and elves, it’s no wonder. I hope we can start it here. Please let her go.”

The officer blinked, then released the woman. “Very well, uh... Say `thank ye`, wretch!”

The would-be killer did no such thing, she scoffed, looking the human up and down. “Forgiveness, eh? Nice show, ye lyin’, schemin’ pinko!”

With that, she stomped off, drawing mostly annoyed and incredulous looks and a few shouts to lock her up from the crowd. The demeanor they showed to the people still inside the circle had now evened out.

The majority here had quite clearly decided that Callum was probably not to be hated, at least.

Rayla nudged her summand. While she had the attention of a sizeable crowd, she wanted to speak, too. He had hoped she would let him do the talking, given that she hadn’t exactly received a lot of lessons in oratory skills just yet, but he nodded, unwilling to deny her a voice.

“A t-think most of ye have p-probably heard of me”, she started, her normally confident tone sapped by nervousity, “Rayla, the d-daughter of disgraced dragon guards, coward by blood. Traitor of s-secrets, the assassin who d-didn’t do what she was t-told”
The mood darkened somewhat and Callum wanted to groan. Yes. They knew of her, the frowning, angry faces making that quite obvious. She had just told them all the reasons why their anger was justified.

“A want ye all tae k-know, though, that A am also Rayla, wh-who brought home the dragon prince, who p-paid for her c-crimes and hopes fer ye-yer support. Rayla, who will soon b-become a ruler of Katolis and will use her hu-human crown to d-deal with elven problems wherever she c-can and who has an open ear fer ye if she c-can do anythin’ to help.”

The crowd seemed to collectively shake their heads. There were a few that seemed interesting, but most seemed too caught up in the shame her family had cast on their community and the strange fact that she was going to be the head of a hostile nation.

The King watched on as they dispersed, almost as soon as Rayla had finished. At least there weren’t any heckles thrown at them. Whether that was because they had had nothing to say or because of the protector and Wynda, he wasn’t sure.

Less pessimistically, he allowed himself to postulate that her plea might still change a mind or two after people had a moment to reflect on it.

For now, though, the queen-to-be seemed thoroughly deflated, having misread her audience completely.

“And ye want me to do this fer a livin’”, she griped when her summand embraced her, “Almost peed myself just now. Why am A so bad at this speakin’ thin’? I thought A was gonna get good responses...”

“You shouldn’t have told them about all the stuff you did `wrong`. Always put yourself into the best light possible, they already know all the bad stuff. It’s a skill, you just have to learn it, fawn, like anything. I mean, that woman would’ve definitely stabbed me if she had come for me instead of you. I didn’t even realize what was happening and you already had her down on the ground.”

“Aye, but I can’t do that with a random noble when they come at me like...”, she jabbed her eyes in Wynda’s direction.

“Yeah. Best not to rise to her jabs. She’s looking for a way to get to you, maybe give them an excuse to lock you up. Seemed like she was wracking her brain over Taog there, too, so be on the
lookout.”

Wynda and Taog joined them again as they made their way through town. Rayla would periodically point out a landmark she recognized or things that had changed.

“Its weird how much change there can be in seven years”, she said on the way back to the inn, “I feel like I know the place and don’t, at the same time.”

Taog nodded. “I come back here every year and even for me it’s nuts how much stuff changes.”

“Taog, have you been following the mood in town? About humans and Rayla?”, Callum asked.

The elf regarded him with the same expression of mostly hidden distrust, then said, “I’m... sorry, sir, I don’t feel comfortable giving you a spy’s report on my people and family.”

The King snickered sardonically, “I understand. I’m sorry if I offended you.”

“Minion, you can trust him”, Rayla said, herself a little upset at her old friend’s reluctance, “What’s the harm in tellin’ him?”

“I can’t know that”, the illusionist replied, quietly, “I don’t know what he’s looking for. Since you’re summed, I’m not sure I could tell you, either.”

The queen-to-be now frowned openly. “Taog. It’s still me, Rayla. The boss. You know I wouldn’t sell out Scotia or Xadia.”

Her friend cocked his head. “How can that work with your bond vows? Either you don’t tell him and your inner worlds splits, or you tell him and sell out Xadia. You can’t have it both ways.”

Rayla bit her lower lip in thought. This was exactly what she had been worried about. If she ever came across information that would hurt Xadia, would she be able to pass it on to help or protect Katolis?
“My heart for Xadia, my head for Katolis”, she said, depressed, “I need to think.”

As Wynda, Callum and Taog watched on, she forged ahead to be alone.
The two men walked beside each other, both with expressions of concern for their summand and friend. Wynda was further behind, her head swiveling this way and that way, now seemingly rather nervous about another assassination attempt.

“I feel terrible for her”, Callum said, “This is gonna be a tightrope walk that’s gonna cause a lot of trouble for us.”

Taog regarded him with more obvious disdain, now that Rayla was gone, “Personally, I’m more worried about you.”

“Me?”

“I’ve heard of you, in more ways than just as the prince who helped bring home Azymondias. You’re the ‘Mage King’ of Katolis. Is it true that you can perform sky magic?”

“Yes.”

Callum didn’t think it wise to reveal his new abilities.

“How did you come to connect to the primal? It’s mostly unheard of, someone without a connection creating one”, the illusionist said, pointedly.

“No need to act coy. I know about Aaravos. In fact, Rayla and I are the reason people know the truth about him, now. But no, I didn’t do anything untoward to connect. I sat in a cave, breathing really hard and almost dying. Figured some stuff out about the world and myself and bam; Sky magic!”, the King laughed, “I learned the base spells during our travels and more recently, some variations for Aspiro, Fulminis, Ratis, Alatus and Nebula”

“That many, eh? Strange. It takes most elves an octade or two to cast a few spells with good success. How have you gotten five before your sixteenth birthday?”

The mage King shrugged, knowing the answer was probably ‘the Key of Aaravos’. Zym’s warning
was heavy on his mind.

“I have an eidetic memory and more than ten years of drawing experience. Seems to me like magic features both memory and shapes rather prominently.”

Taog snickered. “And muscles, which you don’t seem to be doing so well on.”

“Tsk, tsk, tsk. Not a very nice way to talk to a stranger”, said Callum with a wry smile, “If I didn’t think better of Rayla’s taste in people, I’d say you were trying to get a rise out of me.”

“It just seems odd to me that a human King would bother with a Xadian commoner...?”, led the illusionist.

“Oh. So this is about Rayla, after all?”

“She’s my friend. I worry about her.”

Callum nodded. “We have a lot of history together. Long days spent traveling to the point where silence was the only thing we had left to share. We saved each other’s lives a couple of times. Fight puts together what goes together, as they say”, a wistful smile crept the human’s face. It was genuine. “To me, she’s about as common as a flawless primal gem. Good on you for worrying about her, though. I understand that. In your position, I’d probably feel the same.”

While Taog rolled his eyes at his corny metaphor, the King visualized this towering, studious elf getting cozy with Claudia. He did this not to be crass, but to foster his understanding for the elf’s feelings. An impish smirk curled his lips as the image inspired an idea.

“Say, I don’t suppose you’d be interested in coming to Katolis with us?”, he asked.

“What?!”, Taog exclaimed, obviously taken aback, “Why would I want to do that?!”

“Rayla’s short on friends there and I’d love to learn more about the moon arcanum. Plus, the more elves I can bring, the more people are going to realize how little difference there actually is between us and you.”
“Well, it’s an interesting offer to be sure, but no. No, I don’t think so. I don’t want to exile myself and continue my studies. I don’t understand how Rayla can just go and leave everything she knows behind to rule a country that hates her.”

“I wonder, too. It’s something I can never repay her for”, Callum pondered, wistfully.

“What are her motivations, anyway? You must know, you’re... summed.”

The slight hint of disgust didn’t escape the King. It wasn’t nice to hear, given the implications.

“That’s pretty personal, Taog. Wouldn’t want to hand out her secrets like that.”

The illusionist eyed him, seeming rather amused. "I can’t seem to get a grip on you. Slick like an oiled Thunder Eel, aren't you?"

“One learns”, grumbled Callum.

“Ha, that sounded grim!”

“Politics is hard, my friend. She’s going to hate me some days for what I’m pulling her into. Though, I don’t plan on intentionally giving her any reason to complain about me.”

Taog seemed to mull this over for quite a long time. In fact, the next time he spoke was when they reached the bottom of the inn’s entrance ramp.

With a massive sigh that actually turned a few heads, the massive elf regarded the human.

“Sir, I’m at odds with you. I feel that only time will tell if you’re anything more than just a pretty face with a smart brain behind it.”

Suddenly, there were many Taogs all around him. The King was rather relaxed, seeing how this
had attracted Rayla's attention.

The copies all spoke in unison. “But, I want to be clear. If I hear that she has any issues with you, personally and you hurt her in any way, I will come fi-ih-ah--?!”

The illusions fizzled as their caster groaned with pain. Rayla was obviously still not in a very great mood, crushing his real ear between her thumb and index. “Bein’ an insufferable tough guy, are we? Well stop it, you hunk of junk! I can protect myself, and I don’t need protection from him, he’s the sweetest thin’ to ever walk the earth! You’re just like Lessa, ugh! He’s not dangerous just cause he has a smooth skull, ye dunderheid!”

“I’m sorry”, Taog bit out.

Rayla released him, looking stern. “Look, minion, I know how insane this probably looks. But I wanna do it. I wanna take this on my shoulders not just cause I love this smooth-ear, but also cause I have plans, hopes, wishes. I can either sit here and dream, or I can go and try and make them come true.”

She turned to Callum, looking rather sad. “I can’t keep secrets from you. Not just cause of our bond vows, but also cause I don’t want to. But at the same time, what if I learn somethin’ that would hurt Xadians but help Katolins? What do I do, then? I wish I could talk to my summand without also talkin’ to the King of Katolis.”

He frowned at her, upset. “You don’t get that choice. We won’t do things that hurt Xadia, as I keep saying”, his voice turned hoarse, “If that’s too much, you can always back out.”

Wynda cleared her throat, pointedly. This was not a conversation for the public. It was strange for the two summands to find themselves agreeing with the agent.

For a moment, they looked at each other, a lot of tense, important words unsaid.

Then Rayla tore her gaze from his to face her friend with an earth-shattering sigh-groan. “You heard him. He’s a friend to all Xadians. You can help, or not. Up to you.”

“I’m not coming with, boss”, the tall elf frowned, still rubbing his ear.
The queen-to-be blinked at him, then grumbled, “Huh? Of course you aren’t, why would you? I meant you tellin’ us about the mood in town. I honestly can’t think of anythin’ there that the *eeevil human* and his *craaazy traitor Queen* could use to *destroy* the Federation!”

Her friend frowned at her, hesitantly, for a rather long time. She held his gaze.

Finally, he sighed, angrily. “Let’s find a quieter place, at least.”

Wynda seemed unwilling to follow them into the inn, leaning against the wall next to the main entrance again.

A few minutes later, their room’s door closed behind Callum. Taog was looking around as the King watched Rayla sprinting to the bed. She fumbled with something, strode into the bathroom, then came back empty-handed to smirk sheepishly at the two men.

“So?”, she asked, far too enthusiastically.

It hit Callum then with an almost physically painful pang of shame; They hadn’t taken care of their soiled towel this morning. At least the stained memento lightened both their moods a little.

“Uh”, he said, motioning at one of the two chairs in the room, “Taog, have a seat. Rayla and I are obviously really worried about the impression we’re making. We hope to foster a solid peace with Xadia, but the silver and red factions have been very resistant to everything we’ve put on the table. You travel through Scotia and Bretain a lot, so I wonder if you’d give us some insight into that.”

The large elf pulled the chair up and sat, watching as Rayla did the same with the other and Callum settled on the bed. “From what I hear, people aren’t too concerned with humans right now. The Children of Elarion have been a much more immediate threat. In fact, just last week they killed two professors at my university.”

“Did you know them?”, Rayla asked.

“No personally, but I had lectures with Professor Morin. Arithmancy, the study of mathematics processed through illusory magic.”
Callum gaped. “Magic can do math?!”

“Uh, yes, of course. Difficult calculations that would take days to do by hand can be solved in hours by magic.”

The queen-to-be gave her excited summand a bemused look, then asked, “Why was he killed, do you think?”

Taog’s eyebrows contorted in thought. “You know, I’m pretty sure they didn’t murder him for his lectures. He kept it very apolitical and formal. One might say dry, but to the point. I suppose he did, on multiple occasions, laugh about human’s mathematical tools and lack of advancement. Never really struck me as anything more than quips, though.”

“What about the other one?”, Callum asked, now more focussed.

“Ah, uh, I didn’t have any lectures with her, but from what I hear she was pretty anti-human. Given her specialization, I’m not shocked. Tactics and Strategy of Illusion. A military course.”

“Hm... no help there”, Rayla wagered, “They sound like the exact kind of people the Children would go after. I mean, the second one does, for sure.”

“Hum, I have to ask, you were interested in the general climate and we then went on this rather focussed tangent...?”, the illusionist asked.

“Since you’re being so helpful - thank you, by the way - I was almost killed by the Children. Only just recovered this morning. They were out for Rayla, too, but she wasn’t here when they came for us”, explained the King, “We’re trying to figure that out.”

“You?! But, that doesn’t make any sense. Why would they attack a human? They love humans!”

“Not all humans”, said Callum, “There’s warmongers on our side too. I’m just not one of them. Not at all. I’m the opposite. They’re working for reconciliation, in a way that I don’t agree with. I could be an ally to them if I wasn’t so disgusted by their methods. You see why I’m trying to figure out how we got on their bad side.”
Taog shrug-nodded. “That’s all I know. You saying you could be allies to terrorists doesn’t inspire confidence.”

The royals sighed in unison. Callum had violated his own rule never to highlight something that could be seen as negative. The King replied, “The operative phrase there was ‘disgusted by their methods’. We might share goals, but I would fight them to prevent them from reaching them their way. So! If people aren’t too concerned with humans right now, why are we being stonewalled by silver? Shouldn’t the politicians do what their voters want?”

“Well, they kind of are”, said the illusionist, “While people don’t seem to think the Pentarchy is a threat right now, they... we... also don’t like humans, period. Almost everyone has a first, second or third-hand story about human bounty hunters or relatives swallowed by the Breach. Generations of stories, even. Plus, you’re the reason our Archdragons are powerless now. Sky’s power grab has everyone on edge and you enabled that. It’s even worse for sunfire, they’ve lost their last Archdragon!”

“But as a tradeoff, elves themselves got more power”, Callum said, “Plus, why would you or sun be led by persons that have shown themselves to be untrustworthy?”

“More power to elves? I’ll grant that. The archdragons being untrustworthy? I’m... split on that. From what I understand they were conspiring against the Dragon Queen who has now - as I said - grabbed a lot of power. That has a way of... relativizing their deeds. Some people even think what they did was to protect us all from her overreach.”

Callum mulled this over. Reconciliation would take a lot of effort on both sides, at the highest level. With Raszagal being in the state she was, there wasn’t much hope for cooperation on that point.

“What about me?”, Rayla asked when her summand didn’t pick up the red thread, “Did you hear anythin’ about me and him? Clearin’ my name? Anythin’ about Zym? Me being locked up?”

Taog sat back, searching his brain. “Well, I heard of your trial. I knew that you brought back Azymondias, from the same person. He’s one of my fellows, has an aunt in the capital. Boss, you got a lot of respect for that, but here in Cardow... I don’t know. My parents are still kind of upset at your family, I’d guess it’s pretty similar for others. Also knew that there was a human prince with you, but... people don’t know that you’re gonna be the Queen of Katolis. Travelling together, obviously there were loads of rumors around you and him, especially cause of the stuff that came out about Aaravos and Elarion. I didn’t believe any of it until I showed up here to you two sucking face.”
“Rumours?”, Callum asked.

“Yeah, baseless, dumb stuff, mostly. One rumor was that you were summands before you came to trial. Another said that you were mind-controlling Rayla with dark magic”, he scoffed, “I could’ve believed the former if I hadn't known that Rayla went behind bars for telling you secrets. People do get into that stuff around that age even if the conservative whole-bloomed folks around here need to think otherwise to keep sane. The latter is ludicrous for anyone who knows even a little about magic.”

“Yeah, that first rumor absolutely isn’t true”, the King’s face felt a little hot, “Quick question though? ‘Whole-bloomed’?”

Rayla elaborated. “It’s a term to describe people who, like us, have gone through all the plants, not just the easy ones.”

Taog looked between them, surprised. “Oh! Wow! You went through all that effort? Consider me shocked! Most people I know did only the easy ones. Most plants of the second verse don’t grow here, just Invertim. You’d have to trudge all the way to the Wall of Fire!”

Callum nodded. “We were there, anyway, to get Rayla. To your earlier point, we met an earthblood mage who thought that I was puppeteering her, too. I only used dark magic once, and that was to help Rayla save a Dragon from a bunch of humans.”

Taog’s face became stern, but more concentrated than revolted. The academic in him was showing. “Bah, she was joking. Mind control and thought reading is not in the purview of any magic. But; You have used it? Hm... and you didn’t stick with it? I hear its far quicker and easier than primal magic.”

“Yeah, it’s not right, though”, the King said, “I’m working to have it replaced, but that’s slow going, mostly because you guys don’t want to come teach us or send us information. It’s possible for humans to learn primal magic, I’ve shown that. We just need to figure out the details. I can use the stuff, I can’t explain why. I don’t have the education, sadly.”

“I had no idea there was such an effort”, the illusionist said, grimly, “I suppose the military is worried about the idea of giving humans access to another form of magic. That’s so stupid, you already have access to everything primal magic can do, through primal stones and the emulations of dark magic.”
“I’ve raised that argument a few times”, groaned Callum, “It’s like talking to a wall.”

Taog now seemed to think very hard, his brows furrowed to the extent where they touched.

The King was distracted from this by Rayla who almost slammed her fist onto the small desk next to her, catching herself at the last second. He got up to crouch down in front of her. “You hoped to hear more positive things about yourself.”

She nodded, silently. It was clear that she was extremely angry.

“Four! Years!”, she finally spat, “Four! Damn! Years! I sat and I dug in the dirt and had people insult me and... and... this is what they think of me?! Still shamed! And apparently mind controlled! Wynda thinks I’m insane! I’m so stupid! We should’ve summed back then to mess up their stupid arguments and ran off to Katolis, let them think whatever! The only reason I went to Arrias is to be respected by the people I defended and worked for! That’s all I wanted, respect! Most of them still hate my gut, you saw their reactions out there! I’m just so... bloody angry!”

She shot up, kicking her chair aside, “Help me, dafty! I need to get this out before I turn this room into splinters!”

He nodded grimly. “Do you want to get it out on the platform? Not enough space in here.”

She nodded.

A moment later, they were standing outside, on the same platform as their animals, but on the side that was exposed to the sun and thus empty.

Wynda was eyeing them, interested. Taog had followed them, looking as though he was still lost in thought.

The King raised his fists, their sparring sessions coming back to his mind.
His summand’s posture was familiar, she had tried to teach it to him back in the day.

With her face contorted by fury, she came for him. She had the upper hand as she forced him to deflect and block a flurry of nimble punches, many of which still connected lightly with his core. Trying to be sporting, she decided to leave herself a little more open after she had worn herself out.

Callum ducked under a few of her less dangerous jabs, then planted his own fist against her stomach which made her jolt a little. She hadn’t expected it to happen so quickly.

“Oooohhh”, she snickered angrily, “You’ve not been sittin’ on your cute arse! But you lumber like a milite! Yasra ruined you!”

Her leg swiped out for him and he coughed as she kicked him in his stomach.

“Ah, did I hurt you?”, she quavered, as he buckled slightly and took a few steps back.

“Oh come on, this is supposed to be brutal !”, he laughed, lunging at her.

The fact that all of her moves had been studied with her light armor in mind didn’t help her, there was no faeshield bracer to painlessly deflect his five-fingered punch. His haymaker struck her in the forearm rather than gliding off as she had instinctively expected and she groaned quietly at the feeling of numbness that spread from it.

They exchanged a few more blows, dancing about each other to escape the flying fists.

Rayla’s arms came down on his, locking him down, then her leg swept into his to make him fall.

With a surprised, pained yelp, he tumbled, twisting about his caught arm.

She held him down in a smooth flowing motion, both of them breathing hard at this point.

“Got ye now, dummy”, she smirked.
He looked over his shoulder, a mean smirk, annotated by a lot of pain was on his face. “No. Alatus!”

The spell took hold of his summand immediately. She flailed as a gust of wind carried her upward, almost beyond the level of the plateau.

“Callum!”, she yelled, “Put me down, you wee sook cheater!”

“Cheater?!”, he laughed.

She glared at him, furiously. “I will never go easy on you again, you summand-flinging, smooth-eared pinko!”

The spell subsided, she started her descent. Near the ground, she came close to the wall. She had a strong need for revenge and planted her feet against it.

“I’m comin’ for you!”, she yelled, then pushed herself off.

The queen-to-be crashed into her King and together, they crumpled to the ground. Her surprise attack had hit him square in the mouth.

Both the fighters and their illusionist observer laughed while Callum rubbed his jaw.

“You two have a rather violent relationship”, said Taog, “That was an amusing performance!”

Next to him, Wynda smirked disdainfully.

The royals got up, dusting themselves off.

"Thanks, dafty, I'm better now", Rayla said while embracing her sparring partner, "are you okay?”
He snickered, trying to ignore the pulsing in his jaw, "I'm fine. Glad to be your training dummy."

She burst into laughter, confusing him. It hadn't been that funny.

"T-trainin' `dummy`! ", she wheezed, "how d-did I not think of th-that?!"

Everyone, even Wynda, groaned.
Less than a Corpse

With their sparring session ended, the royals and Taog decided to have a bit of breakfast, seeing as it was a little past eleven. Outside, the entourage was now busy loading carts and saddling horses.

Opeli intercepted them, annoyance in her voice. “Majesties, I’m glad to see you are alright, if a bit... scuffed up. It would have been appreciated if you had returned within your given timeframe.”

“We did, we just came back outside”, said Callum.

“Well, in that case might I request that next time, you send someone to let me know of your safe return?”

“Oh. That’s fair, I’m sorry.”

The councillor sighed. Rayla had to stifle a laugh, the interaction being altogether too much like a mother scolding her son. Then a sudden idea struck her as her arm pulsed, once more.

“Opeli, can we send Lydia to buy a few thin’s for me?”, she asked.

“Oh? I thought you were just out, window shopping?”, the councillor teased, “I will send Mister Horace instead, Miss Lydia is engrossed in the cleaning of your room at this moment.”

A horrified scream went through Callum’s mind. ‘ WE DIDN’T CLEAN UP!’

His eyebrows furrowed and he had a very hard time keeping a straight face. It was probably too late to stop the gossip machine that was Rayla’s fan club.

“What might he purchase for you?”, continued Opeli.

“Armor”, said Rayla and Wynda immediately stepped up.
“That is a stupid idea”, she interrupted, “You are expecting an elven merchant to sell arming wares to a human?”

Rayla blinked at her. “Duh. I guess we’ll have to detour a bit. I missed my bracers and chest guard during our sparring session.”

“Sparring session?!”, Opeli exclaimed, “I suppose I now won’t have to ask why you are looking so dusty!”

The councillor stomped off, cursing under her breath, “Don’t need assassins if the royals murder each other! Must’ve learned it from his parents, crazy folk!”

Taog had followed this exchange with a plain face, but snickered at the councillor’s quiet outrage. The royals rejoined him to have a quick bite.

As they were getting settled in a quiet corner of the restaurant room, Callum asked, “So, Taog. You seemed pretty pensive when we left to fight.”

The illusionist took a bite out of his scrambled egg sandwich, then said, “You said you were trying to abolish the dark arts. This is the first time I’ve ever heard of a human arguing against their use. I wonder why you’d want to take this step?”

“Well, it’s not sustainable”, said Callum, “It removes energy from the cycle of life. When a creature is expended in the casting of a spell, that material and potential are forever lost. It’s unlike killing in that you still get both those things from a corpse.”

“Just so. A lot of people here have a visceral reaction to dark magic because they believe it destroys the immortal soul. Good to know you have considered the science first. My point is, I understand your conundrum. Humans have relied on this power for a thousand years, just stopping isn’t feasible and for the moment, we have the luxury of time. Of course the powers that be respond to the former, more folksy and exploitable fear”, he sighed deeply, “Rayla, I can’t believe I’m saying this but... I’ll see what I can do to get people around me invested in the idea of helping humans figure this out. I’m pretty sure I know a few professors who will brighten their shine when I tell them that I’ve met the Mage King.”

Callum almost fainted from joy. “You will!? Taog! I will elevate you to knighthood if you pull this off!”
The illusionist laughed heartily. “Let’s first see what impact a lowly student can have, Excellence. I’m also hoping I’ll get to write my dissertation on you, to be honest. It would be really interesting. So, not entirely selfless!”

Rayla placed a hand on her friend’s. “You’ve really helped us a lot. Thank you.”

“Ah, don’t mention it. I feel kind of confused about this entire affair, still, but also excited. You two - and once again, I can’t believe I’m saying this - you two seem to make a good couple from what I’ve seen.”

“You’ve seen us argue and beat each other up”, the queen-to-be laughed.

“I don’t envy you your problems, they seem rather complicated. What I mean though is, none of your interactions seemed half-hearted or mean-spirited.”, he scoffed, suddenly seeming rather unhappy, “Staying with my ‘rents, I have a pretty good ref-- uh...”

He blinked, shame flooding his face.

“Don’t worry, we won’t tell”, Callum said, recognizing that Taog had just blurted out something he actually considered a secret.

As their meal advanced, Rayla and her friend launched into tales from years gone by. A few bites remained of Callum’s omelet when the Captain of the Crown Guard showed up at their table, saluting.

“Majesties, I report the entourage settled and awaiting your word.”

“Very well, Captain. We’ll be out shortly. Oh! One moment. Will you please find the moon elf Naves?”, the King requested, “I’ve not properly thanked her.”

“I cannot, sire. The Lady has departed two days ago, in unknown direction. However, as far as I know, she has left you a message with Miss Lydia.”
“Huh”, went Rayla, “I guess she had to move on to see her other sisters? Wonder why she didn’t say goodbye and give me the message?”

Callum shrugged. “I don’t know, either. Maybe she didn’t want to disturb us? Thank you, Captain.”

The soldier saluted, then walked off.

The queen-to-be sighed, looking at her old friend who caught her plaintive gaze. “You couldn’t have shown up three days earlier, eh?”

Taog nodded. “Yeah, I would’ve liked a bit more time to catch up. We barely got into it.”

“Plus, you could’ve been there for this one’s first time drinking”, snickered Callum.

“Whaaaat?!”, gaped the illusionist, “I would’ve eaten my cloak to see you drunk, boss! Are you a loud one or a quiet one?”

“Huh? I just got a bit tipsy, just enough to giggle. Didn’t overdo it”, Rayla said.

This seemed to amuse Taog. “Eh, I guess I can’t expect everyone to drink like us academics.”

They all got up and Taog escorted them outside where Wynda and Opeli were already waiting, their troops lined up in two neat rows, humans in front, elves behind. For a second, Zym’s shadow made the sunlight flicker, then the Dragon landed, spraying everyone with dust.

As the royals stepped into the sunlight, the soldiers saluted. Taog shrunk a little as the full reality of whom he was with set in. He’d been pretty colloquial, even insulting, with a King and future Queen . The Dragon Prince was here, too, both Callum and Rayla exchanging a greeting with him while he was busy drinking from the through of water meant for the mounts of the inn’s guests.

Rayla didn’t seem too pleased, the attention of the entourage still feeling rather awkward.

“Majesties”, said Opeli, “At your convenience.”
The royals spun to face their newest supporter. The queen-to-be lifted her hand. “It was good meetin’ you. Thanks for everythin’. I’ll write, okay?”

“I look forward to it, bo... Excellence, I mean. Whew, what a...”, he sighed, “Good luck. With everything.”

The man regarded her gently, as though she was on her death bed. She didn’t like that look one bit.

“Well Taog, it was a pleasure. I’m gonna squeeze a paragraph into my summand’s letters here and there, I’m sure. Thank you. Don’t hesitate to send us mail if there’s anything we can help with”, said Callum, also raising his hand.

“I’ll likely make use of that offer, Excellence. I’m assuming we’ll be able to run some experiments at a distance.”

With that, the royals and their entourage mounted up, the soldiers going through a lot of ceremony for it that attracted quite a bit of attention.

This gave Callum an idea.

“Wynda. Would it be agreeable for us to take the main road rather than to circumnavigate the town center?”

“You want to show her under your banner”, the agent guessed, correctly, “I don’t see how that could be considered an affront. The roads are open to anyone.”

“And we can get that armor”, grumbled Rayla, the thought of lending the parading some utility appealing to her.

Opeli had heard this exchange and steered her own mount close. “Further publicity, Sire? I can’t say I disagree, now that you are under watchful eyes.”
A sheepish smile from Rayla reminded Callum that the councillour could never hear of the attempt on their lives in the marketplace.

“However”, Opeli continued, “I will have to add something to this picture, just to make the message obvious.”

She dismounted to pull a white, silken bundle out of her saddle bag. Unfurling it brought to light a polished, golden surface. “Now, I know it’s somewhat unconventional and frowned upon to wear the circlet before the coronation but I think the pure symbolic value warrants it.”

The Katolin courtier handled the golden ring with altogether too much care for Callum’s liking, placing it on her flat hands in it’s silk wrapper so as to not touch the metal.

“You brought the crown out here?”, asked Callum, “Why?”

“It will not leave my sight until it finds permanent rest on a Queen’s head, Sire”, grumbled the councillor.

She offered it to Rayla who eyed it like it was a desirable sort of poison. Her summand understood her mixed feelings.

“Don’t worry”, he said, quietly, while his heart received a squeeze, “They won’t bolt it on. It’ll come off once we leave Cardow.”

“Of course it will!”, grumbled Opeli.

Hesitantly the queen-to-be reached out and picked the crown off the councillor’s hands, then threaded her horns through it to place it on her head. The feeling of her hair being pulled by it immediately annoyed her, so she fussed with the strands to settle the piece of regalia more comfortably.

When it sat about as well as it would, she sighed, putting on a somewhat strained smile. The added weight was more than just physical.
“How do I look?”

Callum’s wistful expression was answer enough, but he added, “Like a Queen, fawn. A strong one.”
The horses’ and perytons’ hooves clop was deafening on the cobblestones of the main road. Diamond shaped, the entourage was riding in a parade formation, the King and queen-to-be centered for protection but given a lot of room so people could see them clearly.

And see, they did. Rayla stared forward, trying to ignore the gapes, the perplexed glares, the curious rubberneeking. Her assassin’s senses felt the attention burn like fire on her skin. At the moment, she wanted nothing more than to hide, turn invisible and forget about the world. Callum’s equally attention grabbing presence at her side was comforting, at least.

They came to a halt in front of the town’s smithy, displaying all kinds of stock armor. In Katolis, this would’ve been unthinkable given that most armor had to be made to fit a certain body. Faeshield on the other hand...

Under the watchful eye of Wynda and a crown guard, the royals entered the shop. The man behind the counter was completely flabbergasted.

“We’ll trade gold for some armor for the two of us”, Callum said, surprising Rayla. She hadn’t considered him getting anything at all.

“Uh”, the shopkeeper went, the rest of a possible sentence stuck in his throat. After a moment, he stuttered, “I’m n-not sure I’m p-permitted to offer ar--, uh, arming wares to a hu-human... Excellence?”

“You are”, came Wynda’s annoyed voice from behind Rayla, "unless you intend to enter a contract to produce enough for an army.”

The exasperation of the agents statement made Callum snicker. She clearly didn’t agree with her orders.

"What are you looking for, then?”, asked the armorer.

"Pair of vambraces, lamed stab- and impact guard and a set of greaves”, Rayla said, rattling off the pieces like reading from a book.
Her summand was considering his options while the armorer found the requested pieces.

“Du--”, she started but coughed to suppress the term of endearment. She wasn’t going to address the King of Katolis like this on official business. “Callum, do you need a hand?”

“Hm. I want something light to cover basically all of me safe for my hands and head. Katolin armor is great for battle, but try to ride a Peryton wearing it and you’ll see a lot of dirt. They don’t like the heft.”

The armorer could be heard snickering in the back room.

“Well, everythin’ here is made for assassin use. So it’s all light stuff, made to ward against aggressive magic, bolts and arrows. I’d say go with the same stuff I did, it’ll protect the most important parts without weighin’ you down.”

In the end, Callum found himself armored in the same way she was, the feeling of the lamellar elven plate armor on his chest quite annoying. It seemed far too wide for him.

“Can we adjust this chest guard somehow?”, he asked, looking to tighten the straps.

“No”, said Rayla, “It’ll take a few hours, but the metal will snuggle up to you. You’ll see. Faeshield’s magical, it'll be like a second skin.”

“In fact”, spoke the armorer with a somewhat smarmy expression on his face, “It is an alloy made from titanium, mithril, a--”

“Ahem! You were permitted to sell your armor, not the secrets of its manufacture”, Wynda cut him off.

A moment later the Katolin coffers were substantially lighter, but Opeli beamed nonetheless. Armor for her precious King? Armor that he had picked and agreed to wear while traveling on his fickle mount? It was both shocking and welcome.
The Royals mounted up, both of them trying very hard to block out the growing crowd that seemed in all stages of anger or disbelief. Among them though seemed to be a few that were beaming at Rayla with something like hope or admiration in their eyes. One young elf girl was excitedly motioning a circlet around her head at her father who was nodding at her, grinning. Callum reached over to tap his Queen, bringing this adorable display to her attention.

“She should I... get off and talk to her?”, she asked under her breath.

“Uh... better not”, the King quavered, worried about what might happen if she closed the distance.

He gave the signal for the entourage to continue and the parade diamond continued forward, slowly, to avoid rushing the crowd.

To everyone’s relief, the entourage reached the edge of town without incident. Zym, who had been at the front of the column to show his approval, waited on the side of the road for the royals and fell into a comfortable looking trot next to Rayla.

“Hey guys”, he greeted, “I haven’t gotten the chance to say it, so; Good to see you up, bro. I heard it was touch-and-go for a bit there. Would’ve come to visit, but elves don’t build their houses with dragons in mind.”

“Yeah I figured. How was hunting around Cardow?”

“Not a single cow here. Lots of Kakaru though. Flying snacks. It’s sad they taste so good, actually. I think I might’ve overeaten at one point. Makes me feel pretty guilty”, his face showed what Callum believed to be a half-hearted smirk, “Hey, uh, speaking of me being a total butthead... Rayla? I’m sorry I didn’t trust you. Callum’s right, you haven’t given me a reason to distrust.”

“Yea well”, the queen-to-be grumbled affectionately, “Glad to hear it, you big, dumb lizard. Have I mentioned how much I’ve missed your adorable face?”

“Adorable?! Have you seen these teeth, woman?! Blaaaahh...”, the dragon protested, opening his mouth and deluging them in apex predator meat breath.

“Ooof”, Callum went, waving his hand in front of his face, “Stop it or we’re gonna die from poisoning after all! Dragons need to start brushing their teeth!”
“Aren’t you guys nice!”, Zym chortled, “So where to now?”

“We’re going to Katolis. Stuff has happened. I’ll fill you in later”, the King explained with a sidelong glance at Wynda, “Maybe wait until we cross the border. Yes, councillor?”

Opeli had appeared between Zym and Rayla. Before she could even say anything, Rayla had torn the circlet off her head and held it out to her.

“Oh. Uh. Thank you”, said Opeli, confused to have the golden headdress shoved in her face. She used the silk cloth to grab it, the metal not touching her skin before she bundled it up and stowed it in her saddle bag.

The speed at which this had all happened once more saddened Callum.
They day passed and by the end, the entourage was just on the cusp of re-entering the midnight forest with its cathedral-like tree cover. While the soldiers and attendants were busy setting another circular camp, Rayla was getting sick of the hustle and bustle of everyone around her.

She decided to escape for a while and started looking for her summand. Walking past Tinker and Horace who had an animated conversation about some piece of kit the night attendant was messing with, she saw the King in front of one of the equipment carts.

It looked as though he was holding a small box, wrapped in brown paper and was in the motions of saying goodbye to a stressed looking Lydia.

“Hey, fawn. Lydia just gave me this, from Naves. Apparently we should open it `away from prying eyes`.”

A smirk formed on the queen-to-be’s face. Just what she had wanted, anyways.

“Come with”, she said, grabbing her summand’s wrist.

The King was perplexed, stumbling after her into the black treeline. They strode past the perimeter guard who saluted. “Majesties! Should I keep this quiet, again?”

Callum snorted. “Corporal, you have a talent for being in the right place at the right time. Unless someone asks for us, yes, please keep it quiet.”

The man smirked, nodding his understanding. “I’ve been young, Sire.”

Rayla led her summand to one of the trees, then deftly climbed into the wide crown. He struggled a little more thanks to the package, but a childhood spent climbing much smoother trunks had prepared him well for the challenge.

Around half-way up, the branches above thinned as the tree’s trunk split into five thick, yard-wide arms that extended toward the ground after a short ascent. It was here that Callum realized that this
forest was really a single tree, growing in arches.

“Wow”, he whispered.

“Neat, eh? You can’t see that from the ground”, snickered Rayla who was lounging on one of the arms. She patted the wood next to her and he sidled against her, resting his head on his hand over her armored shoulder.

“Ahh”, she went, “Precious quiet. How’s your armor feelin’?”

“Uh, I, uh, forgot I was wearing it”, admitted the King, sounding surprised.

“Aye, that’s how it should be”, she sighed, “That was an experience. Gettin’ paraded about. Wearin’ the crown.”

“Mh-hm. How do you feel about it all?”

“Worried but excited. I hated the attention, but when you pointed out the girl... that made me giddy. There’s people out there who get it! They understand why I’m doin’ this and are maybe even a little inspired by it!", she moved the arm that he was laying on to drape over his waist and pulled him up a bit so she could kiss him.

"About... the loyalties stuff. I'm disappointed with the reaction I've gotten so far. I thought people would respect me a bit more. That still doesn't really change my issue. They don't have as much power as I do, it wouldn't be right for me to be spiteful. I know that for you there isn't much of a choice here. You have to do what's best for Kato--"

To her surprise, he shook his head, interrupting her. "You have it all wrong, Rayla. We don't rule apart from each other. I expect you to tell me everything you find, whether you think it'll hurt Xadia or not. You'll know everything about Katolis, after all. We have to make our decisions together. I won't do anything that you don't agree with and I doubt you’d try and do something behind my back. We have to do what’s best for Xadia and Katolis. We can’t have it any other way. If anything, us being on different sides of an issue is a good thing, it’ll keep both our views balanced.”

She blinked at him. Now that he was putting it like that, it seemed rather easy. Still, she wanted to
make sure that she had understood completely.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, think about it this way. In the abstract, I always knew that I can’t make demands or set ultimatums for Xadia if I don’t want to piss them off. That hasn’t always worked, though, I still sometimes miss an edge or viewpoint to an argument that the Xadians don’t take well. With you there, I can voice those issues out and get a Xadian patriot’s opinion before we carry it out to the people making the decisions. I want and need you to stay in contact with people here, because this peace thing isn’t gonna work if either side is too set on getting what they want.”

He brushed a bit of hair out of her face and touched his lips to hers. “I love you. That will always be true, no matter how much you argue with me over politics. You need to, okay? Promise? Don’t let me be selfish.”

She moved forward to complete his kiss and grabbed his butt, which made him snort. “Love you, too. You know I speak my mind. Always have, always will. For some reason I always had this picture in my mind of us doin’... shifts? I guess? I don’t know why. Now that you said it, I feel a bit stupid. Of course I’m not makin’ those important choices by myself.”

Her summand shrugged and started drawing circles on her abdomen with his index. “I can’t expect you to have a clear picture of all this before we get there and into the thick of things. I trust you, Rayla. We’ll talk about things. Maybe spar them over in the courtyard. Sometimes our answer is going to be a ‘we don’t know’ because we can’t find a good compromise.”

“What happens then?”, the Queen asked quietly while carding her hands through his hair, one from the front, the other from the side.

“I was going to ask you for ideas. If we can absolutely not find an answer that satisfies both parties, if they’re irreconcilable... do we just pick at random? We can’t hand the decision off to the council, they will chose Katolis at every turn”, his hand moved from her abdomen to her horns, stroking them.

The light prickle of the sensation ran straight down her spine where it curved around her body and between her legs. With a snicker, she grabbed his hand and moved it back to her stomach. “Hey now, don’t try and seduce me durin’ a discussion like this! That’s cheatin’!”
“Huh?!”, he went, blushing, “That’s sensual to you?!”

“We don’t call ’em _smooch handles_ for nothin’, dummy”, she laughed brightly, “I thought you knew!”

She kissed him, finding his surprised expression to be absolutely adorable, then said, “Look, I feel like a deadlock isn’t somethin’ that’s gonna happen a lot, and if so, it really depends on the situation. We don’t need a general plan for everythin’. What you said, me backin’ out? In my mind, that’s not an option anymore. I’ve committed to my dreams of workin’ for peace between humans and Xadia. We’ve been at war too long. It needs to stop.”

His green eyes flitted across her face, looking for uncertainty but finding nothing but determination. “You have no idea how good it feels to hear that.”

Suddenly, her hand caressed his crotch with measured force and he squawked his surprise.

“Oh, someone's excited! Must've been some realization with those horns of mine!”, she frowned playfully, “Pervy King!”

“Okay, woah”, he chortled, “I didn't grab your crotch just now, pervy Queen! How about you paw at this package instead?”

Rayla took Naves’ message from where it had rested between them and carefully tore at the thick brown paper. The spine of a book came into view and she extracted it, flipping it over.

“Oh”, Callum went, “Runes again. Should’ve guessed.”

He bent forward to read the title.

{Manual of Horgahn}.

No help here, the human had no idea when, what, where or who _Horgahn_ was.
A moment passed in which Rayla seemed to gain several shades of purple. “Eheheee”, she finally went, “It’s... uh... a book!”

“I gather that”, Callum snickered at her expression, already making guesses at the contents, “What’s ‘Horgahn’?”

His Queen snorted. “I don’t know the details, but... uh... it’s a statue from sunfire culture. Uh, a... uh... fertility symbol.”

She opened the book. As she did, two things caught Callum’s attention. The first was a rather explicit series of illustrations showing two elven men, contorted into what the human thought was an impossible position, the other was a folded piece of paper sailing out of the book and into the evening air where Rayla caught it, more out of reflex than intent.

She blinked at both, then slammed the book shut, laughing stupidly. “I think that’s her way of leavin’ us one more of her terrible jokes! Let’s see what she has to say here.”

The queen-to-be unfolded the letter, then started reading. “Hello you two. This might get a little personal, so I hope you’re not readin’ this out loud...”

A frown stole into the elf’s eyes. Instead of continuing to read, she tilted the paper to allow her summand to read the message himself.

It read:

Hello you two.

This might get a little personal, so I hope you’re not reading this out loud. Everything in Scotia has ears and blades. Please, don’t ever tell another elf about this.

I am a Child of Elarion. This is probably not something you wanted to know about me because of your public stance on us.

You don’t approve of us. I get it. Our methods aren’t exactly squeaky clean, like
yours. Diplomacy works when you’re on a level playing field and the enemy has some kind of respect for you.

We’re just a few people and don’t have much of a choice in the matter. For us, great change requires great sacrifice. The Dragons and Elves have loaded a lot of guilt on their heads before and during the exodus, guilt we can’t wash off our hands by simply saying `sorry`. We have to take action and I don’t want to be on the wrong side of history anymore. I want my son to be able to grow up with respect for my husband and I as the rest of us come out of their racist thousand-year patriotism coma.

Anyway. We share a goal. Let’s focus on that instead of getting hung up on how we each like to do things.

After the attempt on the King, I went and got in contact with the local cell. They were confused to say the least and carried it up the chain. The message came back clear and fast.

We didn’t attack you. The Children want you to succeed. Whoever did was smart about it. They used a poison we’ve used before. They used our masks and our tactics.

This was not us. Please believe me.

Rayla, our friendship was real.

I’m sorry to end it like this.

Have a nice life.

Naves

P.S. Hope the book helps you get over the shock. Don’t go past page 133 before you’re very comfortable with everything before that. Sun elves are nasty in all the best ways. Wink, wink, nudge, nudge.
Rayla woke.

For a moment she stared into the dark, expecting to hear the breath of another.

When it didn’t happen, she rolled out of the tiny bed. The window over the table in front of her was covered with curtains, a small strip of bright light on the floor showed that the day was quite advanced.

These dreams of Callum threw her off.

He had never met Taog. They had never sat in that tree. Why would her mind show her these images, after being quiet for years and years?

The memory was etched into the dark and threatened to make her cry, again. She tore open the curtains, the light of afternoon burning in her tearing eyes.

There was Cardow, as it had been on the day he died.

“Rayla? Are you up?”

She didn’t feel like answering.

A moment later, the door opened.

“Tinker, can ye please just go?”, she whispered.

Her foster father stood in the door to her childhood room, unsure how to proceed. “Little sheep... please listen. I know what this feels like. Sitting here won’t make it better.”
“Nothin’ will.”

“Not true. You have to allow yourself the chance to recover. Go outside. You’ve been sleeping this past week away. I doubt he would’ve wanted this for you. Please live.”

She whirled around, furious. “He wasn’t just my summand! He was a King! A’m not just grievin’ for him, A’m grievin’ for the thousands and thousands of people who are gonna die because of it! And here A am. Powerless to do anythin’ about it, like A always was! My entire life is a failure!”

It was as though Tinker flickered for a second. There was a hateful visage there for a second, in place of her father’s face.

“You want do do something about it? You’re smart and strong and capable, you don’t need to be a Queen to change the world!”

Rayla scoffed. “Yeah, cause two blades will beat a million. Don’t be a waner, Tinker! A tried. A really did, even ye have tae admit that. A went tae Katolis cause A wanted tae clear my name. A came back with Zym cause A wanted tae change the world. A went tae prison cause that wisnae good enough and A was stupid enough to just go, thinkin’ it would make people hate me less. A didn’t even are about bein’ liked, A just didn’t wanna be outcast. A’m done. A can’t fight the world. All A can do is just... sit here.”

“You could at least do something other than sleep. I’m not asking you to change the world.”

“Aye, A could. A could walk out the front door and... and what? A’ve no rank, no mission, no power. What do people normally do with themselves? A had a goal. Peace. Lastin’ peace and gettin’ the federations to get along. There’s just no way that’ll happen now. The Pentarchy’s armin’ up. Xadia’s armin’ up. It’s like him and A never happened. It was all for nothin’. He died for nothin’.”

Tinker had run out of things to say. He wanted so badly to embrace his daughter, but he know that she would not accept him right now. Sighing, he sat on her bed. “When I heard that Runaan had passed... I was angry. So angry that I almost burned down the house. At the humans, his bandmates. At you. I was ready to burn it all down and... yeah. I didn’t know what to do, either. Eventually found purpose in my work.”

Her father looked up at her, tears in his eyes. “You’re not alone, little sheep. Please come
downstairs and have dinner with me. You’ll find purpose again, just... you need to be there when it comes for you.”

His plea softened her visibly and she sat next to him. She couldn’t be angry at him while he was welling up like this.

When Rayla embraced him tightly, Akande was rather surprised. “What do... A do?”, she sobbed, “A canny let him go, dad! A canny let my big, dumb human go! A keep dreamin’ of him!”

The sun elf returned her embrace, reminded of so many of her birthdays when her parents’ letter had left her feeling alone. “It takes time. Lots and lots of time.”

For a long while, they sat while she exhausted herself crying. The feeling was familiar to her, now. Without purpose, she languished, thought too much about what she had lost.

Eventually she quieted and Tinker tightened his grasp on her. “Come eat. It won’t get better if you stay up here in the dark.”

She nodded weakly. “What are we havin’?”, she asked.

“Something to remember good times by”, he got up and dragged her with him, “Moonberry Surprise.”
The shock of learning about Naves’ true affiliation sat deep, especially with Rayla. She had trusted the guard and couldn’t reconcile her gruff but cordial attitude with the image she had of murdering terrorists.

Further, Callum had noticed a change in her that worried him. She had woken up crying on their second day of travel. Once more she insisted that she hadn’t dreamt anything.

Was she just really stressed?

After all, given what Naves had told them, the two royals felt a rekindled sense of paranoia. For the two days it took to get to the Scotian border, they spoke very little about private affairs and encouraged the rest of the entourage to do the same.

This time, thanks to the change in route, the border consisted of an angry looking crack in the ground, probably caused by an earthquake in a long forgotten era.

The first thing that Callum noticed was that there was a lot of Auxilia here. It seemed as though a quarter of a legion was being checked through the crossing at the moment.

The comparatively tiny entourage approached the guard house and was curtly welcomed by a stressed looking official. “A only have a moment, as ye can see, we’re a bit busy right now. What can A do fer ye?”

“We’re wondering if you’d be able to get us across. We’re only thirty people”, Callum asked, “Otherwise we’ll have to camp here.”

The official sighed. “Sorta makes sense, these soldiers aren’t goin’ anywhere. Lemme see yer papers.”

Opeli handed over the stack of forms and the official went over them with some haste. Then he hesitated. “Uh, says here you’re to cross at Kincardine. This isn’t that.”
“We had to divert to get home quicker. Something’s come up”, said Callum, silently begging for the official to not be too much of a Scotian stickler.

The Scotian stickler looked at him, his crown, his ears and back to the papers. Rayla noticed with alarm that his eyes darted toward the milites, getting checked through by one of his colleagues.

“A’m... sorry, Excellence, A... A cannae let ye pass. Profuse apologies, Excellence, permit A38 says ye have to cross in and out of Scotia at Kincardine. That’s about two days east from here.”

Opeli groaned. “Please, sir, is there something we can do to cross here?”

“Aye, ye can apply for a new copy of A38 with the Privy Council. Should take just about two weeks for the first request to go through. Ye know the drill.”

Defeated, they took back their documents and rejoined the entourage.

“What do we do?”, asked Callum, “We can’t just sit here, time’s wasting! Why did we come this way, anyway? Did nobody think to check the requirements?”

The councilwoman nodded apologetically. “Sire, I honestly did not think they would refuse us passage. Going home via the other crossing would cost us a week and a half at least. Going this way, we’d cut straight across Xadia. The other way would bring us basically all the way back to Arrias, then arch about the Wall of Fire. Good grief, and here I thought I was a binder banther!”

“What if we just snuck across?”, Rayla suggested, under her breath, “Not terribly hard, a bit further northwest.”

Her summand only replied after checking that Wynda was still staring angrily at a piece of paper. “They’ll grok that and then we have to explain why we don’t follow the local customs. Where’s Zym? He could probably put his... paw down.”

Opeli pointed upward, into the dense canopy. “Hunting.”

“Right. Well, I guess we’ll wait for him to come back.”
For two hours, the entourage watched as more and more milites cleared the crossing. Then, with the thunderous cracking of branches, Zym joined them, his muzzle stained with blue blood.

“Hoooo, that was necessary. Was starving after two days of nothing”, the dragon grumbled, both upset and content, “What, are we in line for this, or why are you all sitting here?”

“They won’t let us pass. Don’t have the right paperwork”, Callum said, lamely gesturing at the game of cards he, Opeli and the two attendants had started.

Rayla was busy penning a long overdue letter to Honsa.

“Ha! We’ll see about that”, snickered Zym. He turned and approached the border guards. Even from where the entourage was located, they could see the official’s eyes widen. He was clutching his clipboard as the Dragon Prince spoke to him.

For a while it seemed as though Zym had him agreeing, but then a lot more head-shaking was introduced into his demeanor and Rayla’s frustration grew just by watching.

It eventually turned into angry yelling that carried enough to make out a few words that indicated that the presence of the Milites emboldened the paper crazed elf.

Zym’s mouth opened and the elf blanched, stepping back a few feet. Then the Dragon Prince huffed at him, the effect of which was much like Aspiro in that it blew his hat off and put his long white hair in total disorder.

Clearly angered, the Dragon stomped towards the entourage and flopped down next to Rayla.

“So?”, asked Callum, almost amused by the exchange.

“He said the ‘Veee-aye-pees’ can go ahead, but the soldiers have to take the long way. Doesn’t trust you to not make a mess further ahead”, grumbled Azymondias, “I wanna turn him into a chew toy, he’d probably even squeak. But I guess that wouldn’t exactly be helpful. This many soldiers would be trouble for me, too.”
“Yea, not to mention that your mum would probably lose it if she heard of you test-tastin’ elves”, snickered Rayla.

“But Rayla! You taste so good!”, quipped Callum, meaning elves, then stifled a laugh at his Queen’s expression.

Only later would he realize how what he had said made her look quite so startled and embarrassed.

Zym, who interpreted him as intended, gave Callum a bemused glance. “You know, dude, Mother might’ve already snacked on the guards I sent back to tell her about my own detour.”

Opeli’s frown spoke volumes. “I don’t... Majesties, I can’t believe I’m saying this but given the circumstances, I believe we need to split up. You should continue ahead and take the reigns of Katolis while we circumnavigate this elven idiot and his forms.”

She threw a hand at the official who was still looking for his hat, “At least you’ll be able to fly.”

Callum frowned right back. “Without you we’d be missing an important cornerstone of our staff. We need your help. Plus, what about Akande, Lydia and Horace?”

“I’d like my dad to be there, yea”, Rayla said, pouting very slightly. It was clear that she had banked on a little support from him, which was perfectly understandable.

“You know what I can do?”, Zym asked, then laughed when everyone started to puzzle over his meaning. “Fly, you fools! That’s four people! It’ll be snug, but it’ll work!”

Everyone gaped at the Dragon now. Rayla voiced everyone’s thoughts. “You mean you’d let them ride you?!”

“Why not? You need to get home. I need to get to Katolis. We don’t wanna beef with these border hoarders and we gotta go fast.”
Opeli did not seem at all enthusiastic at the idea, Lydia was giddy, Horace interested and Tinker was mentally absent, sitting with his back to the group.

One of the pathfinders produced a map for them. It had a great many blank spaces and rough guesses sketched in very recently. The other side of the breach sparkled with detail in comparison, and this was a redacted map meant to be less useful if taken by hostile forces.

“If we get rid of everything in our saddle bags that isn’t food or important equipment, we could do it. It’s only about a week’s worth of flying from here”, said Callum.

A consent seemed to form now. Even though Opeli squirmed at the thought, she didn’t feel as though she could argue the sense behind it.

The attendants got to work, assembling food for six people. Water wasn’t going to be too much of a problem, given that their path was passing over several lakes and rivers.

Rayla finished her letter, then got up. “You’re sure you don’t wanna add anythin’? I’m just tellin’ her how everythin’ went so far”, she asked her summand.

“I’ll start writing letters to Honsa once she indicates that she’s comfortable with me, not a moment sooner. I’m done having my words intentionally twisted”, he grumbled while dropping a few more drawing supplies from his saddle bag into a wooden box meant to go on one of the carts.

Rayla sighed, then nocked the hawk arrow on the bow she had borrowed from one of the Crown Guards.

“Honsa!”, she said, loosing the device. It immediately dropped to the ground.

“Ah, damn, not this again”, groaned Callum.

The queen-to-be shook her head, not completely able to shake the bad feeling that came with the event. “She’s an ocean elf. Remember, she needs to be reachable by air. If she’s divin’ or somethin’, this won’t work. I’ll just try again, later.”
After shouldering the bow and requisitioning the accompanying quiver from the very helpful Crown Guard, Rayla helped the would-be dragon riders saddle up Zym’s generous back.

Tinker and Horace had quickly devised and put together a harnessing system of sorts, using material meant for repairing saddles and strapping. It tied into the still short spikes on the dragon’s back, allowing everyone to be a bit more safe and comfortable. To test it, everyone climbed on, moving excessively and tugging at the straps.

Zym stretched under the foreign load. “Oh yeah! This is gonna be a nice workout! I can already tell my weight and balance is gonna be off. Lydia, can you trade spots with Horace? I can still take two bags over my tail, as long as one isn't much heavier or lighter than the other.”

While the dragon riders puzzled and drew straws over the contents of said bags, Callum approached Wynda.

“Well, agent, it seems as though this is where your assignment ends.”

“No, Excellence. I will follow the entourage until they pass into Regio Magna”, the elf replied with a tired smile, “You will be pleased to hear that I have been demoted to Octurion, second class. I’ve just received the letter.”

“In fact, I’m not pleased to hear that. I know how hard you would have had to work for your rank. Losing two at once is... maybe a bit excessive.”

“Please, spare me your parading empathy. I know it to be a tool of your trade.”

“Wynda, come on. I’m trying to be friendly here. If you prefer, I can be as much of an asshat as yourself.”

The agent snorted despite herself. “I will admit, that phrase is one I will remember.”

Now Rayla also stepped closer. “Wynda... I haven’t said it yet because we’ve not seen eye-to-eye, but I’m really sorry about Pirin. I didn't mean for him to die. If I had had the power to drag them all out, I would've done it.”
The agent’s gaze lagged over the queen-to-be’s face. “While I appreciate the platitude, I can’t say I care much what you meant to have happen. My brother is dead. Nothing can undo that.”

“You’re right. Either way, I’m thankful for what you’ve done for us. You kept us out of trouble, mostly, and you made sure we wouldn’t get slammed for bringin’ my dad’s experiments.”

“A side effect of my duties to keep Xadian secrets Xadian, I’m afraid”, said the agent with a lame smirk, “Farewell, now. I’m sure I won’t ever be able to escape tales of your grandeur, oh Lady of the Crescent Reflection.”

With this, she bowed, flush with mockery and strode off to find her Peryton.

“Bitch”, Rayla whispered and Callum snorted explosively.
Zym let the thermals from below carry him along. He was conserving his strength for when he would need it.

Below them, the shining, black desert landscape drifted by at a speed that would’ve been rather alarming if they were closer. Up this high, the only thing one might hit was a stray cloud. Everyone was glad for the goggles, keeping the wind out of their eyes.

On the dragon's back sat four chattering bipeds. Lydia and Opeli were engrossed in a game of ‘I spy’ even though their eyes weren’t really sharp enough to make out the details of the midnight desert’s landscape.

Horace and Tinker on the other hand were once more talking shop over something called a ‘firework’. They seemed excited about the noise and colors they might produce. The dragon was confused - why not just use magic?

He was flanked by Callum on the right and Rayla on the left, their mounts capable of much higher speeds than poor, load-bearing Zym. It felt like the Perytons were mocking him, but their somewhat worried glances at him satisfied his need for respect.

Couldn’t let the domestics forget the hierarchy here.

“How are you holdin' up, Zym?”, asked Rayla.

“Fine, thanks for asking”, chortled the dragon, “How come you’re so comfortable? Isn’t this more or less your first time on a winged?”

“Eh, it’s not too different from a normal one, and they did teach us how to steer a winged”, she rolled her eyes, "Never know when you might have to handle one after murderin’ its rider.”

“I hear the scent of blood makes them panic. Explains why they’re eyeing me all shiftily. Big-headed bleaters...”
Andris whinnied, offended.

“Fair enough”, quavered Zym, obviously distressed, “I do sort of eat you guys’ cousins.”

Callum drifted a little closer. “Sun’s going down. Maybe we should start calling it a night?”

“Yes well, I’m beginning to think I’ve won some kind of game”, snickered Tinker, “Riding the two rarest mounts on the continent within a week!”

They found a rocky sort of island that jutted out of the black sand and set down on it.

As soon as she was on the ground, Opeli stretched. “Ah, sweet, solid land, we meet again!”

Rayla was confused. For some reason, that sentence and voice seemed to go together, eerily. A moment later, she shook her head, mumbling, “Yer goin’ mental.”

“Yes well, I’m beginning to think I’ve won some kind of game”, snickered Tinker, “Riding the two rarest mounts on the continent within a week!”

The air was sweltering and the rock they had set down on was rather hot. A hollow within the island provided merciful, cool shade.

While Horace and Lydia prepared dinner, the royals were setting up tents. Opeli had tried to take it off their hands, but she was useless. Tinker seemed to be daydreaming, running his free hand through the fine, obsidian sand that stretched as far as one could see. The other held a bundle of dried sticks and grass. Callum observed this, over his shoulder.

“Uh, Rayla, is he going to be okay out there? It’s really hot and that sand can’t be nice on skin.”
“Dummy. Sun fire elf?” his summand replied with an incredulous smile.

“Duh”, he went.

An hour after dinner, Opeli and Horace had gone to sleep. The night attendant was rather put out by this, but he’d been awake for most of the day and had almost fallen asleep and into the fire.

Callum and Rayla had snuck off to the part of the small island that was furthest away from the flickering light.

Lydia and Tinker now sat alone, quietly listening to the flames crackle. Ever so often, the sunfire mage would reactivate his spell to keep the meager kindling from burning too quickly.

“So, Akande”, Lydia started, “What can you tell me about my future queen?”

Tinker yawned and fixed her with a tired, dry smirk. “Her name is Rayla.”

“I mean, what kind of person is she? I’ve my own impressions, but...”

“Look, Lydia, was it? Lydia, Moonshadow elves are very guarded. If you are meant to know something about her, she will tell you in due course. I have an abundance of stories of her when she was little. As for the woman she is now... I’ll have to get to know her a little more.”

His expression smoothly transitioned into a thousand-mile stare. “She’s really the last bit of family I have... Though, there was a time where I didn’t consider her that.”

An unhappy frown overcast his features. "I wonder if she ever remembered me the same she did Runaan. He was `dad`. I was always just `Tinker`.”

Lydia’s expression cracked as the sunfire elf started to tear up. “She... she calls me d-dad now. Only now. After he passed. Even to her... I’m s-second best... worse... I d-deserve it...”
The man sniffled, seemingly becoming aware of her presence again. He wiped his eyes. “I’m sorry. I get emotional about issues of family.”

“It’s fine. I shouldn’t have pried”, quavered the attendant.

There was uncomfortable silence, only broken by laughter from Callum and Rayla.

“It's kind of nice to hear him laugh. He seems a bit more carefree right now. I wonder if that’ll hold up once he’s back to ruling. Actually, they both seem really comfortable out here. Can’t say the same about me, heh”, Lydia said, pulling her knees up to her chest, “Guess they’re remembering their travels. Me, I’m glad to be on the way home, as neat as Xadia is. I miss Katolis.”

“What do you miss most?”, asked Tinker, hoping to find something for himself to look forward to.

“My wife, Cho. Not riding all day. Our quarters at the Twins”, she snickered, “The tavern across the drawbridge.”

His smirk was laden with honest amusement and she chortled, “Oh, you were asking for ONE thing... sorry. I’m talkative, what can I say? Do you miss anything from home?”

“Unlike you, I don’t miss any one. The people... the last person I care for is with me. I do however miss my workshop. I destroyed the work of years when I left. What I can’t remember is now lost to flames”, the elf smirked wistfully, “Maybe it’s better that way. It was mostly stuff I was cracking my horns against. Fresh start. Horace has already given me more ideas.”

“The Twins have an amazing workshop. The old man is in there all night unless the King needs him. I’m sure you’ll enjoy it just as much.”

“I might, but the mess I seem to leave in my wake would probably put him off.”

“Doubt it”, Lydia cackled, “He puts all his cleaning time into the hallways and the King’s study. Huh, wonder when he’s gonna retire, anyway. He’s quite old at this point.”

“How long do humans normally live?”
“Uh... seventy, sometimes eighty years?”

Tinker frowned. “Grand. He’s just about on his last ten years, then. He might be the first friend I make in over a decade. Just my luck to find a like-minded flame in the flicker-years of its burn.”

“Blunt, aren’t you?”, said Lydia, her feathers a little ruffled.

“I’ve been called worse”, he smirked sadly, “Some people say I’m soft and weak. Others see me as cold and hard as a brick. I’ve managed to summate the two extremes, it seems.”

More silence followed. In the quiet of the night, the royal’s voices carried somewhat. Not enough to convey sense, but emotion came through quite clearly, allowing Lydia to pine for a night long past which she had spent stargazing with Cho. The feeling of fresh, intense love wasn’t something that shone through after so many years. In the course of a shared life, they had been replaced by deep comfort.

The attendant shifted, sighing.

She yearned for some intensity.
Real (M)

Callum woke with a start, breathing heavily. Next to him, Rayla jumped into a defensive posture, grabbing one of her blades.

Disoriented, he blinked into the darkness. This was decidedly not Arrias.

“What’s wrong?”, came his summand’s half concerned, half annoyed inquiry.

He faced her, barely visible in the dark of their shared tent. “I think I just had one of the most realistic dreams of my life... and I really didn’t like it.”

She embraced him. “What happened?”

“I came to get you. From the prison”, he cleared his throat, “You were... busy kissing Onni. Recognized her from the drawing you sent. Y...you didn’t even care that... I was there. Seemed like you just... couldn’t see me. Then when I made myself heard, you told me to get lost. So I turn... to leave... and the next thing I see is one of... your blades, getting rammed through me from behind.”

He swallowed, grabbing at the spot where the weapon had shown up, "It was so... painful. So I fall over and there you are, laughing at me while I'm bleeding out. Onni stabbed me, but you... You laughed."

While he couldn’t see her face, he could almost hear her frown. “So you still don’t trust me about her? Is that what you’re tryin' to say?”

Callum decided he needed to be sure that this was real and the dream was not before answering.

His summand grabbed his wrist, even before the sound of his slap had decayed completely. “What are you doin’, hittin’ yourself?!?”

The pain in his cheek didn’t help convince himself of this being reality, the feeling of being impaled had been equally realistic.
“I... was trying to make sure I’m not going insane... Rayla, I trust you. That dream... was so real! I... I can remember every second of it. It’s like a real memory... of you kissing her... getting stabbed...”

“Well, I sure didn’t”, the moon elf said. She wanted to be upset with him for giving her the impression that she was still untrusted, but he was so obviously distressed that she couldn’t.

She lifted his chin and kissed him a few times, softly. He seemed to relax a little with every touch of her lips. Eventually, his mouth seemed to curl into a sweet smile.

Rayla whispered, “Dummy. These lips? They’re for you alone.”

He snickered against her chin. “You don’t need them to talk?”

“Oh shush, you’re already much better, makin’ terrible puns!”, she smirked and pushed him away, lightly.

“Can’t help it. It’s like healing magic. I just love it when you kiss me.”

“Sappy King”, she chortled, “what else do you love me doin’?”

“Stuff I don’t wanna say out loud cause we’re in a not-so-private tent?”

He bent forward to kiss her, but shot up, sitting straight as a ruler when he felt her hand in his pants.

“A can guess...”

She first caressed, then stroked him, her slightly cold fingers contrasting heavily with the temperature of his body.

“A can help ye forget, if ye want... make some more nice memories...”, she whispered.
“Fawn, we can’t... don’t even have a towel or anything...”, he breathed.

She seemed to think on this for quite a while, never stopping to touch. It was getting to a point where he was rather worked up.

“Could you... ah... stop?”, he demanded.

“Do ye really want me t-to?”

“No, I... nnh... don’t! But we can’t.”

“A have a few s-spare underpants and wool b-bindin’s. Ye know, to... to soak up... stuff...”

He gently grabbed her wrist and removed her hand from his lap. “I don’t think wasting clean clothes and... uh... equipment just to mop up after a fun time is a good idea.”

“That... wasn’t really what A had in mind...”, she snickered, “Moppin’ up, A mean. A, uh, was gonna, uh... um... take care of the mess.”

“Oh”, he quavered, “We need to... talk about that some more. I want you, don’t get me wrong... I just still don’t know if I like the idea of being risky.”

There was a moment of silence as she considered his expression.

“A guess ye’re right”, she sighed, “I’m sorry.”

The tone of her voice twisted his stomach. “Ugh, you sound so sad! I’m sorry, I didn’t mean...”

“Don’t be, A just thought it’d be a nice way to make ye happy after a dream like that.”
They looked at each other’s vague shapes, Rayla seeing his eyes saccade over her face.

“... it would be”, he warbled.

Her hand found his cheek and rubbed it. “Dummy. A feel the same way. Unsure. Worried. At the same time, A also think we're bein' stupid about it. A wouldn’t play a game if the chances of winnin’ were only one in a hundred. If we were not the people we are, A wouldn’t wanna do this, either. A know we’re both healthy. A know A can trust ye. We're summed. A know A love ye, and whatever happens, A wouldn’t be alone with it.”

“So... you’re saying... you, uh, w-want me to?”

The sensation in his abdomen pushed him.

Part of him hoped that Rayla would just go to bed, the other wanted to be coaxed into something risky, having her take the majority of responsibility for the choice. Doubly risky, actually, given that the tent would offer them little soundproofing and the others were only about a dozen feet away.

“Um...”, she started with a wobble in her voice, her hand leaving his cheek, “A... guess?”

He breathed in to reply, but couldn’t get himself to. Eventually he just groaned with a confused frown-smirk on his face. “Why do you have to be so damn tempting right now? You have no idea how much I want this!”

She sighed. “A dunno. Ye sound like ye don’t know what ye want.”

“It’s true, I really don’t. Seems like neither do you. It just makes me anxious. Sorry”, he drew a deep breath, deciding to just move on, “I’m just glad that the dream wasn’t actually real. Could’ve fooled me. If that was kind of what you went through two days ago, I don’t blame you for your reaction, waking up.”

“Smooth, dummy, changin’ the topic. We’ll never figure this out”, she grumbled, “How many times do I have to say it until you believe it? I don’t remember dreamin’ anythin’.”
“So, what, you just wake up randomly, crying? Come on. Even if you can’t remember, don’t you think there was something there?”

She huffed. It was true, she had been probing her mind about what horrors it had conjured up for her that night, but came up empty, as per usual. For almost two years now, her nights had been black and meaningless.

“It’s kinda weird how we both had nightmares that didn’t leave us alone after wakin’. Especially so close together.”

“Yeah. Do you know of anyone else having this happen?”

She shrugged, then realized he probably couldn’t see the gesture too clearly. “Not really, no. I figure people have nightmares. Not like they take ‘em seriously.”

“Mh”, Callum acquiesced, “You know, maybe that’s true, too. Maybe we’re overreacting. It was just a dream. Realistic and kinda insane, but still...”

Rayla pulled him close and down into their sleeping bags. “Let’s get some rest, anyway. Fallin’ asleep on a flying peryton doesn’t sound smart.”

He nodded, his hair brushing against her arms.
The night was so cold that even Rayla started shivering. It was such that she woke completely tangled with her summand.

"Mornin’ cutie", she purred, snuggling closer, "Had any more bad dreams?"

He yawned gratuitously, then kissed her. "The opposite. Dream Rayla is raunchy"

"Real Rayla wanted to be raunchy, too", she snickered.

“Yeah…”, he sighed and peeled herself out of her arms.

A bit of hurt snuck into her chest. She had expected him to cuddle and banter with her for a bit.

“Somethin’ wrong?”, she asked.

“Eh, I… just… it’s Sunday”, he said, getting dressed with some difficulty thanks to the low tent, “Avisa day”

“Ah. And that puts you off?”

“Hum…”, he went, “They don’t generally write when things go well, you know? It’s a depressing letter most of the time.”

"I’m sure it's nothin' we can't handle", Rayla said, getting up, "By the way, I was wonderin’... Why does Opeli get the letter and not us?"

"It's the way things are done. She reads it and makes sure we're not wasting our time with anything unimportant. Same idea as with the attendants."
Rayla untangled herself from her sleeping bag and got dressed.

When she stepped outside, Opeli was already talking to Callum near where the fire had been the night before. It was early and the air was still cold and pleasant.

The queen-to-be joined them and the high councillor smiled widely at them both. It was unsettling.

“We are three days out from Katolis. I’m sure you’ll agree that we could all use both the reassurance of a crowned Queen as well as a series of festivities to distract from the Pentarchy’s issues? I suggest we pursue your handfasting with due haste.”

Rayla nodded. “Yup, why not? It’s all politics anyway, isn’t it?”

Callum’s expression told her that she had just said something rather hurtful. “Is... that how you feel about us getting married? Just politics?”

“Uh”, she went, not having expected his reaction.

“Sure, that’s a part of it”, Callum grumbled, “But... this is also about us. A promise to have a future together.”

“Dummy, we... uh, we’re summed and bonded ?”

There was a hint of confused incredulity in her voice. She felt as though he had maybe misunderstood the meaning of summation after all.

Both him and Opeli frowned at her.

“So this isn’t important to you? Emotionally, I mean?”, he asked.

“Emo... what does that have to do with anythin’?”
“Everything! It has everything to do with it! We’re getting married, Rayla!”

She was thoroughly confused at his intensity. “Yeah, I know, but... how does that change anythin’ between us?”

Her summand now gaped at her in an expression of mild shock. Rayla was starting to feel guilty. For what, she didn’t really know.

“You...”, he started, then closed his mouth, unsure how to continue. He was baffled as to how, after everything, she could say something so cold.

As he was looking for answers, he came across his memories of their summation night and his thoughts on wedding vows. Something clicked.

Before he could continue, Opeli said, “Milady, marriage is no joke! You will be Queen after, but even for commo--”

“Councillor”, Callum interceded, “I think I get the comment now. To her, we’re already married.”

The two women looked at him, expectantly.

“Like you said, fawn, we’re summed and bonded. To me, that means a lot, but I didn’t grow up with it”, the King explained.

“Oh”, his Queen went, suddenly feeling very thoughtless, “Oh gosh, that makes sense! You’d think marriage was more important!”

Her phrasing was still rather unfortunate and Callum had to work very hard to not be snippy with her. “Um... yeah. To me it’s just as important as consummation.”

Rayla nodded sheepishly. “Sorry. I’m excited for it, don’t get me wrong, but more in a sort of `ooo I wonder what the ceremony’s gonna be like’ way.”
Sighing, the King shrugged. “I guess I can live with that. After all, you’re mostly right when you say that nothing’s gonna change between us.”

“Speakin’ of festivities... it’s your Birthday soon!”, exclaimed Rayla with an eager look at Callum.

“Smooth change of topic”, he replied, giving her an exasperated smile, “Yeah. I’m looking forward to it. The staff thought I was gonna be either at Point Sarai or off in Xadia, so they didn’t prepare anything and told the Nobles not to bother showing up. It’s gonna be nice and quiet. Funny to think that as a kid that whole circus used to be awesome.”

Opeli smirked. “I suppose that when you were littler, the nobles did not have as much reason to appeal to you. Ahem, but, uh, we should really talk about the handfasting...”

“Right”, the King said, “How fast is reasonable? Rayla, what do you think? As soon as possible?”

“Yeah, I’m okay with anythin’ as long as I have a bit of time to figure out how everythin’ works?”

“Much work has already gone into preparations, so I think we can hurry things along, maybe reduce or drop some events we’ve only started planning. I’m guessing we could be ready for July 24th. Festivities until the end of the month should then keep everyone captivated so we can settle the mess in Evenere quietly.”

“Then it’ll be Rayla’s Birthday!”, Callum said, copying her tone from before with mocking intent.

She picked up on this and stuck out her tongue at him.

“Mind your manners!”, scolded Opeli, looking between them with disbelief, “In the privacy of your quarters you may behave like the ch... young adults you are, but not in broad daylight!”

“We’re among friends though”, cooed Callum, earning an annoyed eye-roll from Opeli.

Lydia was behind her, readying breakfast. Tinker and Horace both seemed to still be asleep.
Zym was nowhere to be found, a fact that would’ve worried the King had it not been for the dragon’s warning that he might have to go further to find something edible.

“So... how does the ceremony work?”, asked Rayla.

“It’s a rather ancient thing, carried over from a time before Expulsion, so don’t be confused if... things don’t quite seem to make sense”, said the counsellor with a snicker, “Humans back then believed quite readily in the supernatural. Quaint, really, but we didn’t know better. Not having access to magic and being somewhat excluded from attaining higher forms of knowledge has left us with much to catch up.”

She motioned at Rayla. “You being a moonshadow elf actually lends it a poetic note that I hadn’t really considered. You see, the ceremony involves the images of sun and moon, personified in the Lord and yourself, respectively. You will play the characters of Rhiannon and Lugh, the hunted hunters. Sun chases moon, moon chases sun, you see?”

“Uh. I s’pose? So, I’d be... Rhiannon?”

“Indeed. If I had been able to bring my materials, I would show you an illustration, but imagine wearing a black, flowing gown and a sheer white cape over top. Since this is a royal wedding, you will also be wearing a silver circlet, inset with diamonds. The whole affair is veritably drenched with lunar imagery”, the councillor snickered, “Don’t worry, it’s not nearly as gaudy as it sounds. Traditionally, the royals of Katolis are married in the Valley Radagast. There we pyre and memorialize all our Kings and Queens.”

“Sounds like a gloomy place for a celebration”, Rayla puzzled.

“Well, yes and no. Ancient humans believed that our ancestors would be able to watch over us rather than being drawn into the Beyond. So, to gain their approval for a marriage, we hold them close to where they might be watching most closely.”

“I still like the idea of my mom catching a glimpse of you”, said Callum, petting his fiance’s shoulder.

“I can understand that desire a little”, she agreed, giving him a sad smile. Ever so often, she would still stare at the drawing of Tyne, trying to figure out if this woman was her mother.
It was maddening not to know more about what had happened to them.

“I have a feeling both King Harrow and Queen Sarai would be utterly infatuated with this union”, Opeli said, using her best politician’s voice.

She believed that Harrow would have liked the symbolism of it, that Sarai would’ve enjoyed Rayla’s person. But at the same time, she also guessed that both the royalties would’ve been worried sick about what an elven queen might do to their country, not just by her actions, but also by her presence.

All this, the councillor swallowed and instead moved on. “The actual ceremony is actually very simple. You approach each other from opposite ends of the valley, in costume. You say a few words. Then you grasp each other’s right arm to touch your wrists. I ask five questions. With each answer, I thread a length of rope through your wedding bands and around your joined arms. Once that is done, you will untangle the bands and offer them to each other.”

A somewhat dreamy expression decorated the woman’s face now. “At this point you are married. We will then return to the Twins to crown you, Lady Rayla. The generals and courtiers will make their vows of allegiance to you. As soon as this is done, more loose festivities will begin and you are... encouraged to retire. Obviously, you’re welcome to return or mingle as you please.”

A sly smirk played on Callum’s lips. “Retire, Opeli?”

She flushed. “Please, my Liege, do not toy with me. It’s tradition and the hope for heirs is rather strong among... well, everyone. Even your opponents among nobility probably would rather see you continue the line rather than enter catastrophic conflict.”

“About that”, Rayla said, “Both Callum and I aren’t... really up for kids right now.”

The King immediately sat straighter. He’d seen this confrontation coming.

Opeli groaned. “Milady, I enjoy an elevated position among the council because I am attached to the house of Katol, your house. If the hereditary line runs out, we are looking at civil war, societal collapse and, more personally, a total loss of power. So! As a courtier, I need you to be pregnant, no more than two seconds after the crown touches your head. However! As a woman and - debatably - sane person, I understand that that isn’t an option. Can’t be an option. Children demand... everything, simply put. Creating life isn’t a simple choice and is to be well considered.
Obviously, I’d like to re-emphasise how disastrous it would be if you decided to live your life childless and leave this world without heirs. You would at least have to adopt at the eleventh hour to warrant the stability of Katolis.”

Callum blinked at the advisor, confused. She had never given him the benefit of that advice.

“Ah, what am I saying”, she continued with a sad snicker, “You are an elf. I will be dust before any of that becomes relevant to you. Please, you both need to be comfortable with this idea. Nobody has the right to demand children from you.”

“That’s really good to hear”, Rayla said, legitimately relieved.

“Yeah Opeli, that is really good to hear”, grumbled her summand.

The councillor ignored him, once more. “After your marriage, you will be expected to tour the country to attend some of the celebrations. But all that, we can plan later. Or discard. We are in dire straits at the mo--”

“Sorry, but, I think my summand had an issue with you”, interrupted the queen-to-be, throwing an annoyed glare in Callum’s direction.

He looked back, dumbstruck, while Opeli fixed him with an inquiring gaze. “Issue, Milord?”

“You, uh”, the King started, sheepishly, “You never told me you understood my doubts about kids like you did just now. Always just told me to have some to secure the line.”

“I am sorry if I was terse explaining your options”, Opeli sighed, “However, I expected you to know them, given your royal upbringing. Lady Rayla is a commoner, I assumed she would need the reassurance.”

“That’s fair, but maybe next time something like this comes up, let me know what you actually think”, frowned Callum.

The councillor moved to answer but was interrupted by Zym landing. “Alright everyone, get your
butts on my back so we can leave this stupid, dead place behind!”

“Did you find food?”, asked Rayla.

“I did, but man, slim pickings. That’s not gonna last a growing, hard-working dragon like me!”

With this they all got busy packing, a frazzled Horace grumbling his way through the process. Tinker had apparently been scared awake by Azymondias's landing and scarfed down breakfast absentmindedly before lending a hand.

Rayla watched as Callum once more drew Acies, like he had every day since discovering the power.

As it had before, the rune fizzled, leaving him frustrated.
The Breach

Lucky for Zym, they quickly passed the Midnight Desert, entering the border Regio of Tarsonis. Unlike Korhal, it was covered in a lush, green hillscape housing a great number of wild Fluffaloes. The great bovines were known for their soft wool coat and fearsome attitude. The latter left dragons as one of the only predators capable of challenging them.

To Callum's delight, the Avisa had been short and uneventful, essentially telling them how Evenere's situation hadn't changed much and that Marielle was on her way to the Twins. She would be arriving there around the same time as the Katolin royals.

This, of course, annoyed Callum. He had never met the queen in person and didn't know what to expect from her, especially where Rayla was concerned. He would've preferred a chance to settle and have his Queen adjust a little before dropping a random noble into the mix.

At the same time, he felt incredibly selfish for these thoughts, given what the queen of Evenere had been through. Jorge had been dreamy-eyed whenever he got to speak about his wife and son. It was likely that she was devastated by his murder and the loss of their throne.

Late on July 12th then, they saw the Border in the distance, an angry red scar, spewing hot steam into the air. They followed it southward for a while to find the Breach.

Callum was glad for Zym's presence. Below them scrambled the many feet of the Xadian Auxilia to accommodate their landing Prince.

While everyone was dismounting under the watchful stares of the Milites, a sunfire elf approached, saluting as she got closer.

“Prime Legate Janai”, Callum greeted, “Good to see you. A bit sooner than we thought, I hope we didn’t worry anyone.”

She shook her head. "We meet again, Sir Callum. I'm delighted to see that your mission was successful. Regina Draconis has sent us orders regarding the Prince, so we expected your arrival alongside him.”

“Orders?”, Zym asked.
“Excellence, you are to please return to your mother”, the Prime Legate said. “Interpreting the tone of the instruction, she is not intent on letting you cross the border.”

“Uh, I don’t really have much of a choice”, grumbled the dragon, “I’m kinda chauffeuring these guys around.”

“I’m sure we can figure out some transportation in Katolis”, said Rayla with a questioning look at her summand.

He shrug-nodded, guessing that Zym’s protest was simply an excuse. One that she had now deprived him of. “Sure, but we’d be slower with everyone else on horses. Plus, Zym has business with good ol’ Bait.”

“Bait, Sire?”, asked Janai.

“Glow toad”, grumbled Zym dismissively. “Look, Janai, thank you for passing on the message, but I can’t just abandon these guys. I’m crossing.”

“Are you sure? I’m not sure your mom is going to respond well to that”, warned Callum, “I don’t want this to become some sort of diplomatic incident.”

“Don’t bug out on me, bro. I said it before, I go where I want to. I’m not a widdle baby anymore”, hissed the dragon, “I’m going, period. About your `diplomacy` thing... Janai, you wanna let her know that I’m going cause I want to, not cause the King of Katolis is kidnapping me?”, his head drooped and he added, “Send a copy to the Assembly, too.”

“As you command. Before I do, however, I would need you to acknowledge your receipt of the message”, the sunfire elf smirked wryly, “I would rather not be held responsible for you ignoring it.”

She produced a piece of paper and Zym sighed. “‘Course. Only makes sense.”

He pointed at it and said “Signum Caeli”. 
The paper seemed to be torn by a harsh breeze for a split second, then a gleaming, light blue seal appeared on it.

Callum’s interest was piqued.

“Thank you”, said Janai, rolling up the piece of paper, “Will you be crossing tonight?”

Zym looked at the Katolin King, questioningly.

“I was hoping to, yes”, said Callum.

“In that case, I would suggest the Prince cross after you have warned your people on the other side. While we’re on friendly terms with General Fen and his troops, their experiences with dragons are less than pleasant.”

“Good point”, said Zym with a sad frown, “Just have them raise a flag or something once it’s okay for me to wander over. I’m not gonna fly, keep everyone nice and comfy.”

The Katolin Royals mounted up. “We’ll get them to fly my personal colors if the coast is clear. Opeli, I hope you can keep these delinquents from breaking anything while we’re over there?”, smirked Callum.

“I’ve managed to keep you from setting fire to your office, Milord, this should be simple”, came the equally wry answer from the Councillor.

A few minutes later, Callum and Rayla were making their way across the Breach, marvelling at the horrifyingly beautiful landscape. The same ancient magic that had set in place the storm at Arrias had carved this volcanic wound with its streams of magma and craggly basalt formations.

In a show of good faith, the gate to the human border fort was left open. The Guard who stood next to it eyed them uncomfortably until they were close enough for him to see the crown.
“Milord!”, he greeted with entirely too much breath as they arrived next to him, “W-would you like me t-to announce your arrival?”

“Please do, Private”

The man sprinted inside and the royals followed on the backs of their mounts, drawing attention from the other soldiers in the courtyard.

While they were waiting, Rayla scanned their faces. Curiosity and worry were dominating. In fact, she couldn’t see a single face that seemed even slightly hostile.

“Hey”, she whispered, nudging her summand, “This is kinda encouragin’ already; Nobody’s givin’ me the stinkeye!”

His expression was a bemused but sad frown. “Fawn, these soldiers have been working with elves. They know you’re not a monster. I don’t wanna rain on your parade, but...”

She nodded slightly, anxiety prickling in the back of her mind. “Guess I’ll wait to judge until we meet some Cardow-types”

“Eh, you can’t make a flash-judgement based on one interaction, either way”, Callum said, extending a hand to pat her thigh, bracingly. “Don’t worry. We’ll convince people eventually. It’s not just a personal thing, but also kind of a requirement for lasting peace.”

“Aye”, his Queen said. After a moment, she whispered, “Hey um... what’s the policy on royals kissin’ in public? Cause I really want to, right now.”

The King smirked and leaned over to fulfill her wish. Before they got too far into it, the door the soldier had vanished through swung open and out strode General Fen. Callum was painfully reminded of Amayas absence whenever he saw the man and it put a damper on their interactions.

“Milord, Milady”, greeted the General, saluting in the most gratuitous manner possible, “Pleased to see you home. Expected you tomorrow. Good to see you ahead of schedule.”
“Likewise, General. We came over to make sure you got the message about the Dragon Prince, but since you know we were coming I’ll assume so?”

“Yessir, knew about the dragon. Assume he will be along shortly?”

“We’ll have to signal him. Warn your soldiers and raise my personal colors.”

“At once, Sire”, the General motioned one of his Lieutenants and turned back to the royals, “Expect you’ve heard of the incident with the Band Ortis?”

“Yes, what about it?”

“Released all the materials captured to the Xadians, of course. Yesterday, Janai sent me this.”

He passed a letter to Callum. Reading it, his face became stern. “They’re not serious. That old argument, again? How would they even know?”

“Assumptions, sire. Can’t prove it. Same as every time.”

“I’ll have words with the ambassador over this, it’s a stupid accusation and I’m getting really tired of hearing it.”

He handed the letter to Rayla. The queen-to-be read it over, first shaking her head at the accusing tone of it, demanding proof that all the materials had been returned.

The last paragraph, however, shocked her to the core.

“You kept a dragon’s horn?!”, she hissed, interrupting her summand’s conversation.

“Old incident, Ma’am. Assembly accuses us of withholding material every time the task force confiscates a large amount”, said Fen, “Dragon’s Horn was taken from Band Ortis not long after the DMZ was created. Passed on to High Mage Claudia.”
“Without me knowing, I might add”, Callum grumbled. “We couldn’t even give it back because she ground it up and used part of it for the coins. Hard to argue when she finally figured out what they’re good for.”

“You let her keep it?!”, spat Rayla, “You let her keep and use a dragon’s horn!?”

He frowned at her, lightly shaking his head, just as he had done when she had started talking about Katolis in front of Zym. The message was, once more, clear.

Not here, not now.

Her insides boiled.
Zym and the rest of their party had come over the Breach after seeing Callum’s colors over the Bastion. Fen had insisted that they stay the night and so everyone had settled in.

The two royals had spent dinner perched together like a pair of shaken bottles of sparkling wine.

As soon as the door of their quarters had closed behind them, Callum’s cork popped.

“Rayla, why would you stab me in the back like that!?”, he accosted his Queen, “Disagreeing over the letter with me is one thing, but keep it to yourself until we have a moment to ourselves! We have to pre--”

“So sorry tae mar yer public image!”, shouted Rayla, “A canny believe what A had tae read! Dark Magic with dragon parts! Are ye all insane!? It’s a wonder the Queen didnae go to war over it!”

“Look! It was horrible and difficult, but w--”

“No `but`! Give it back! What’s left, A mean! Have the powder shipped back over the Breach! Don’t be like Viren!”

“Viren!? Really!? You’re comparing me to Viren!? The asshole who killed my brother and started all this by murdering the dragon king!? What is wrong with you!”

“Wrong with me ?! Ye’re the one lookin’ the other way while Claudia messes around with dragon parts! Dragons are aware, like elves and humans, more so than other animals! It’s like ye’re defendin’ the idea of cuttin’ off my horns and usin’ them!”

The mental image of someone taking a saw to her exquisitely sensitive appendages made him physically sick, his stomach performing a rather impressive backflip.

He sat on the bed and clasped his hands in his lap. For a long moment there was nothing but charged silence in which he stared at his shoes and Rayla stared at him.
“The horn came from one of the sunfire dragons who attacked us four years ag--”

“Aye, ‘course! That makes this perfectly fiiine, jigns!”, she spat, her voice dripping in disbelief and sarcasm.

“Rayla, please let me finish. This isn’t easy, it might not even be right, but Claudia was settled with her dad’s sins. You know what that feels like. The horn allowed her to capture the rat in the coin. She said it would’ve taken decades to figure out how to do that with lesser materials. That means that if I give up the horn, I’ll take that little bit of progress she’s made over the past four years away from her and with it the hope of getting people out of those coins any time soon.”

“Oh, poor Claudia! Boo-hoo! Ye don’t even know if there are more coins, more people!”, she stabbed her index at the ceiling, “We know of yin! O N E!”

“Yup. So, uh, what if Runaan is in one of them? What if Tyne turns out to be your mom? You’re not sure, right?”

Rayla’s breath, meant to challenge him, caught in her throat and he continued.

“Even if she isn’t, she might be someone’s mom. Someone’s sister. Someone’s summand. For sure, she’s someone’s daughter and a living, breathing, sentient person who might be suffering incredibly, locked in like that. How can you justify prioritising a dead dragon who took part in the murder of your people - and they are yours, now - over a victim of Viren?”

It was now Rayla’s turn to slump to the bed and stare at her feet.

Eventually, Callum moved over, closer to her, and leaned his head against her shoulder. She absentmindedly raised a hand to pet his hair.

“Gads”, she went after a long time, “This is why you hate rulin’, isn’t it? Questions without clear cut answers... it sucks.”

He snickered, nodding. “There’s a lot of that. Worse, you have to make a decision. It’s not like a personal choice that you can drag out forever.”
“I’m already wrackin’ my brain, tryin’ to find some kind of compromise.”

“It’s an old problem at this point. They’ll keep using it as an excuse to doubt us and we will just have to take it. As long as we don’t actually hang on to anything else, they won’t be able to prove anything and nothing will come of it.”

“Yea... but... what’s actually right?”

“What do you mean?”

“There has to be... some way to say which choice is better...”

Callum snorted. “There are a lot of arguments about that. Stoics, Hedonists, Utilitarians... yeah. Hate to say it, but... what we choose, as King and Queen, is the de-facto best choice, doesn’t matter if we’re right. We’re tie breakers. If we do our job well, most people will agree with our choices and we reduce the overall suffering in the world.”

“How do we know that this... choice... will do that?”

“We... uh... don’t. Not until months or years after we make it.”

His Queen fell backwards onto the bed, then shot up as she realized that she was still in her dirty travel clothes.

“Guessin’ it’s unlikely that they’ll find a tub for us?”

Her King snickered. “Haven’t you learned anything? All you have to do is ask them politely and they’ll do what they can, Queen Rayla”

She gave him a confused, pensive smile that didn’t quite extend to her eyes.
“Hey”, he went, placing his hands on either of her cheeks, forcing her into a pout, “I know this sucks. I really do. I wish we could have it both ways.”

He kissed her puckered lips and she snorted slightly. “There’s a sentence we’ve used a lot lately.”

“Huh?”

“Uh, for, uh, more personal stuff”, she explained.

“Heh, right. At least there we have a good default answer. What do you think about this, then? Do we leave things as they are or... do we ask Claudia to hand the dragon dust back?”

“I...”, she exhaled slowly, “It is what it is, I guess. I sure can’t come up with a better choice right now. Um, I had a question, actually.”

“Uh-huh?”

“Why didn’t you tell me about this? Seems like somethin’ you might think me interested in.”

“Uh... honestly, I just didn’t think of it. This is probably going to happen a few times, and I’m sorry. Over the past four years I’ve made a million decisions and a... a lot of them were wrong.”

A shadow fell over him that made her regret having posed the question. Dark, worried Callum gave her flashbacks to her dragging him into their shared tent atop a snowy pass.

“Some days it feels like most of them were”, he added, getting up and straightening out his clothes, “Look, uh... I... I’m not sure if I made the right choice. I’m putting speed over ethics. You’re...”, he sighed in a way that made it clear how much he disliked himself, “you’re right to compare me to Viren. He’s all for expediency.”

He jolted as her hand slapped loudly against his butt.

“What?! Are!? You?! Doing?!”, he enumerated, caught in painful, gasping laughter.
“Showin’ my appreciation and annoyance in one go”, she said, sternly, “You’re not like Viren. He’d never feel bad about doin’ this sort of thin’, wouldn’t have doubts. He just knows he’s right.”

“You never even met him. What makes you say that?”, the King said, stepping out of his pants and underpants to inspect the damage, ostensibly.

Rayla was obviously distracted. He loved her uncontrolled stare.

“Heh”, she went, “Just.. from what A ken of him and his kids...”

“You left a mark”, he grumbled, “I feel like I should be really mad at you!”

“Eep, A’me sorry, A didnae mean to hit ye so hard!”, she said, honestly ashamed of herself, “Just meant that to be a bit of a stronger pat! A’m sorry, dummy! Really!”

“Hrm”, her summand smirked with mild disbelief at the reddening handprint on his butt, “Once I can forgive... under one condition.”

Her expression turned to suspicion. “That sounds worrisome. Go ahead?”

“You let me, uh... taste you tonight. For a bit.”

She flushed. “That’s not fair! A hurt ye, how can A say no to that?!”

“I’m kidding, obviously you can turn me down”, the King laughed, “Just being a bit playful, is all.”

“Uh-huh! Sure! Playful is the word, is it?”, Rayla replied with an unsure smirk on her lips, “Hhaa... alright, fine. But! I wanna take a bath, first.”

“Okay, but you have to ask for it yourself.”
“Callum... A... dunno if...”

“Oh-bap-bap! You heard me. King glow-toad-butt commands it!”

She crossed her arms, pouting dramatically. “Fine.”
Rayla had struggled for her bath, making Horace snort when she stuttered the request. Now the queen-to-be was soaking, still conflicted. About asking others to do simple tasks for her. About dragon horns.

The wooden tub was a little small, certainly nothing like the one at the Warg’s Den. It was serviceable though, and in some way even comforting. During her training and prison stay, she had taken many a bath in such devices.

Simpler times.

The water was getting cold-ish already, the lack of sunfire magic being obvious once more.

Dragon horns. Yikes.

Her hand came up to stroke her own, the smooth, textured curves pleasing to the touch. She was a magical creature. Just like the dragon’s, her horns could be consumed in the performance of dark magic.

Her index grazed an uneven ridge. Kel’s blade Mooncleaver had knocked a chip out of her horn, a permanent reminder of the life-and-death nature of their fight. The thought led her to dark places.

What would it feel like to have them cut off? Broken?

She shuddered, remembering some tales of people losing their horns and the grisly pain they described. With these unsettling thoughts, she resolved to get out of the water, now that she was clean. Callum would probably have a few minutes until the water was...

She sighed. Selfish, again. She hadn’t considered that he was warmer than her, meaning that to him the tepid water would likely feel cold.

Her mind snickered at her. She was the Queen and could ask for them to boil him water for a fresh bath, if he wanted it.
‘I could also just boil it myself’, she replied, defiantly.

Drying off, she stepped out of the bathroom and found him sprawled on the bed, naked and asleep. For a moment she wasn’t sure what to make of this since they had made plans. It felt a little odd that he’d be able to snooze, given the excitement the anticipation caused her.

Then she decided that since she had enjoyed his sensual wake-up call, he might enjoy one himself.

After making sure that her hair wouldn't make the bed too wet, she snuck onto the sheets, wearing an eager smirk.

Reaching out to caress him, she bent slightly over his chest.

Before she could even touch him, he started awake with a terrified scream and his fist barrelled into her temple, hard enough to make her see stars.

Rayla shot up from the bed, just in time to escape another swing. Her world seemed a bit fuzzy as she deflected the panicked King, confused as to what to do. "Callum! Calm down!"

He lunged for her, a crazed expression on his face. She couldn't believe the pain when his teeth sank into her defensively raised arm. There was purple blood in his mouth.

The assassin came alive. With a jab to Callum’s chest and a twist of his arm, she had him contained, pressed face-down onto the bed.

He cried out, a sound drenched in mortal fear, and Rayla was glad that she had dismissed the attendants. An interruption now would look more than a little compromising.

He struggled under her, hard. "Please, please don't kill me! I LIED , I'm not Ezran , please !", he begged, "he's my little brother, I don't know where... where he is! I swear!"

"Callum, stop! It was a dream! Just a dream!", She panted, trying to ignore the stabbing and
pulsing sensations in her wounded arm, "You're safe, nobody is goin' to hurt you!"

He wasn't listening at all, still begging for his and Ezran's lives. Rayla welled up. "I love you! Everythin's fine!"

Finally he relented, going limp in her grasp. "What", he panted, "What ?"

She let him go and got into a guarded, wary posture off the bed while he sat up, shaking with terrified sobs.

He was hunched over, turned away from her, his arms wrapped around himself. It was obvious that he felt bared in front of her, uncomfortable and scared for his life as he was.

"You wanna tell me what that was about?", prompted Rayla sternly, her head starting to ache keenly. It was odd, seeing him as a source of danger, but her mind couldn't help but expect him to attack.

"Is this some kind of sick joke?", he choked, tears streaming over his face, "you were going to kill him! And me! I had to defend us!"

"Ez isn’t even here, Callum! None of that was real!", said Rayla, a scared tone entering her voice that she hadn't expected from her highly alarmed mind.

She doubted that it would be a good idea to tell him more about where his brother probably was.

He started looking around, confused. "Where are we?"

"At the Breach. Remember we came here after flying from Cardow?"

He swallowed hard. "Th... That was real? So... so your name’s Rayla? We’re... we’re... I am...”

The queen-to-be bristled. "This is insane! Stay right there and don't move!"
Callum watched on as she got dressed hurriedly, his mind slowly creeping from confusion to realization.

"Ezran’s dead... we’re... summed... I’m K...", he enumerated breathlessly, as she pulled an undershirt over her head, leaving a trail of blood on it. The sight somewhat pulled him from his stupor. “I... I bit you.”

"Yea, ye did! Ye hit me, too! A said DON'T MOVE!", she yelled as he shifted slightly.

"I was... protecting myself?", he quavered, smacking his lips at the foreign, metallic taste and sitting back down.

"Don't move an inch, ye hear!? A'll be back with a doctor or somethin’!", ordered Rayla, hurrying outside.
Drain

Tinker pondered the state Callum was in. He was leaning against the wall outside his daughter and her summand’s quarters while a medic of the Standing Battalion was tending to both of them.

A voice he had come to enjoy interrupted his stream of thought. “You look like you’ve been thinking far too hard for far too long, Akande. Here.”

Horace handed him a steaming cup that smelled vaguely of lemon leaf. The sun elf sipped the piping hot tea, nodding his thanks.

“Bit hot, isn’t it?!”, the attendant went, gaping.

“SUN elf, friend”, chuckled Tinker, “What is this?”

“Oh, fair enough. It’s mint tea.”

“Rather nice. You are right, by the way, I’ve been mulling this strange occurrence over. It reminds me of an incident I had with a student of sky magic during my time at university.”

Oh?”

Tinker took another sip, savouring the spicy sensation.

“We were in our first year, but he was a bit of a prodigy. His first spell was Ratis. It’s considered expert to cast and adept to channel.”

“I’m sorry, that doesn’t mean much to me”, said Horace.

“Mh. Spells come in categories, from least difficult to most. Basic, intermediate, expert, adept and master. A beginner dealing with intermediate or even expert spells is rather discouraged. See, channeling spells can be very draining. Holding them active tires the caster until they are so exhausted that they can no longer stand or the effect is dispelled”, a hint of a fond smile crept into
Akande’s face, “He was a scrawny winglet, Ni. Passed out one day because he had cast Ratis on a ball to show off and then flung it skyward. With no way to retrieve the ball, it kept going until he ran out of power, mostly because he wasn’t aware of the techniques of spell cancellation yet.”

For a moment, the elf was swept in memories. “Ah, I wonder what he’s up to now. Said he wanted to join the military. Hum. Regardless, er... Rayla said that her summand seemed fine. That they had made plans to go for a bit of a midnight stroll and he was eag... what?”

Horace had snorted into his tea. “Go on, go on, don’t mind me!”

The elf gave him a bemused, somewhat confused look and continued, “Further, I’ve seen him draw a rune I’m unfamiliar with every day since we left Cardow. At first I thought he wasn’t getting it right because it dissolved under his hand but... It’s possible the spell was already active, draining him without his knowledge. However, this doesn’t readily explain his intense nightmares. Hm, perhaps the poison had something to do with it?”

Horace shook his head. “Doubt it. Read up on the stuff after his little adventure. It doesn’t induce hallucinations or dreams, nothing like that.”

“Good to know. Then again, I suppose depending on the spell...? Another friend of mine liked to play tricks on my summand and I, she referred to it as ‘freaking our beans’. Thanks to her I know of some illusory spells that will have terrifying impact on a person’s psyche. If he had somehow gotten hold of those powers, he might’ve gotten himself into a rather worrying menta--”

He closed his mouth as the door opened and the Medic and Rayla exited.

“His Majesty will nap for a while, Milady. I’m guessing he’s suffering from incredible stress, but...”, he shrugged, “Sorry to say I can’t do more, I’m a simple sawbones. His personal physician, Dr. Cardwell, is gonna be a fair bit more helpful to him.”

“Thank you. I’ll have an eye on him”, replied Rayla. She sounded tired and somewhat defeated.

“And that”, said the medic, pointing at her bandaged arm, “Bites this deep are nasty. Get infected easily and are a menace to keep clean. Least he didn’t bite through anything.”

The moon elf nodded weakly. Her summand had gotten into a lot of trouble since she had joined
him again. Turning to her father, she said, “He’s sleepin’ now. Can I talk to you two for a bit?”

“First, are you alright?”

“Come on dad, he didn’t do it on purpose, don’t give me that look”, groaned Rayla, the worried expression on Tinker’s face giving her a rather good guess at his feelings about the situation.

He sighed. “I just want you to be safe. It would make me rather upset to learn that he is abusive with you.”

“Pfft. Right”, smirked Rayla wryly, “He’s a total sook. Couldn’t take me, not even when he thought I was gonna kill him. Look, I’ve already forgiven the little idiot, so how about you do that, too? You’re not the one with the bite marks. I just hope he’s okay when he comes to, that’s all.”

Tinker bowed his head. “As you wish, Milady.”

“NO!”, she shouted, “Don’t ye dare! Take that back!”

Her father merely smirked at her, with an eyebrow lifted. “What was it that you wanted to discuss?”

The queen-to-be harrumphed and beckoned them down the hallway. Before they got too far, she groaned and spun to face the medic who had uncomfortably tagged along. “Thank you! Again! I’ll let you know if I need anythin’ else!”

“At your beck and call, Milady. Pleasant night from here on”, said the soldier, glad to be dismissed. He saluted and turned smartly, walking off down the hall toward the barracks across the courtyard.

Horace and Tinker were snickering under the unwilling royal’s annoyed glare.

Tinker, Horace and Rayla walked ahead for a bit until they unknowingly entered what had been Ezran’s makeshift office four years prior.
“I heard your little talk”, started Rayla, pointing at her ears with some of Nave’s exasperation in her voice, “Good theory. What do you know about star magic?”

“Star magic?!”, Tinker gaped, “But... what? That spell he’s been attempting is star magic?! I thought he knew only sky spells?!”

“When he, uh, died a little he had some sort of... enlightenment”, grumbled the queen-to-be, “He connected to the star arcanum on his deathbed. We kept it secret in Scotia but I ‘spose he got a bit careless after. Only other person that really knew what was goin’ on was Opeli.”

“So let me get this ray-straight”, said Tinker, “He... he `learned ` something while dying . Then, without considering what it might do, he cast the spell and made no effort to find out more about it!?”

“We know what it does, dad. It’s a spell called Acies. It lets him see, feel and hear what Viren sees, feels and hears.”

“The killer of Rex Draconis?”

“... and Ezran of Katolis... and Fareeda De Peverell”, Horace added hoarsely.

“Mh”, went Tinker, “Look, little sheep, some spells don’t just have a singular result. If what we believe is true, he has been supporting some sort of effect with the energy of his body. Given the extended duration of the channeling, I’d say it was not an extreme effect, but an effect nonetheless.”

“Got any ideas as to what that effect could be?”, Rayla asked.

“It could be any number of things! I know nothing of star magic and we’re rather far away from any university that would have materials on the inquiring arts.”

“Taog”, Rayla decided, immediately.
“Took? Took what?”, her father asked, confused.

“No! My friend from way back! Taog, who went to Zander!”

“Right, you saw him at Cardow. Yes, he might have access to more information. Moon elven colleges have a deep fascination with their astral companions.”

“Was that him you were trying to reach with that hawk arrow?”, Horace asked.

Rayla regarded the nosy old man with some bemusement and a hint of anger. He was old and human, it was forgivable. “Nah, that’s a letter meant for Honsa. She’s an ocean elf and she said she’s goin’ home, so I’m guessin’ she’s divin’ a lot right now. All I can do it keep tryin’. Has to surface sometime! But yea, I’ll write Taog a letter right now. He’ll find it interestin’ either way and be happy to help. He offered, cause he thinks he can get a paper out of it.”

Tinker snickered. “Ah, academia, how glad I am to be rid of it. Papers, ha!”
Callum woke to a dark room. He felt deeply relaxed, as though a weight had been taken off his shoulders. Yesterday was a blur in his mind, he had a vague idea of his dream and attacking Rayla, but it was washed out and faded. Whatever the medic had given him, it had knocked him out completely.

The King rolled over to find his bed empty. Guilt and worry made him sit up and move to leave.

“I’m here”, came a quiet voice from the opposite end of the room, “Did you sleep well?”

His eyes didn’t penetrate the darkness, the drawn curtains blocking the first light of morning. “Rayla, I’m really sorry. I don’t know exactly what happened, but... I... I think I hurt you. Did I?”

“And not just a bit.”

“Ugh... I don’t... I don’t know what to say... please forgive me?”, he choked.

“Nothin’ to forgive. You didn’t know what you were doin’. Otherwise you wouldn’t be so undamaged yourself. I decided to nap in this arm chair over here just in case. You know, so I wouldnae get nibbled again?”

Her bemused tone was balm on his soul. Quiet as the night around them, she appeared in his field of view and sat on the bed.

"What happened?", he asked.

When she was done recounting the events of the night, he groaned.

"I'm so sorry, fawn. I didn't think I could ever hurt you like that!"

She shrug-nodded. "Suppose it's lucky I wasn't the one havin' the terrifyin' dream, cause I know I could mess you up really bad. Just thinkin' about it makes me sick. I’m so glad you’re okay. It was
really, really scary."

She extended her wounded arm and pet his face.

Her voice shook a little. “Say my name.”

“Uh... Rayla?”

“Who am I?”

“Uh... where to begin? Resident badass, most beau--”

“What am I to you, I mean.”

His voice became a little wistful. “You... you’re my best friend. You’re my summand and future wife. My Queen. My family.”

She flushed.

“Eep... I was gonna say somethin’ all gruff, like ‘and don’t you forget it again’, but that was just too sweet, you big, dumb oaf”, she said as her lips found his, “Ugh, you need to stop worryin’ me like that.”

“I don’t do it on purpose, honest. It just kinda happens”, he said gently.

“Speakin’ of doin’ thin’s on purpose”, Rayla chided with a wry grin “You have a talent for ruinin’ the moment! First time you fill me with man juice, second time you make some stupid, historical, ground breakin’ discovery, third time doesn’t even happen cause y--”

She dissolved in crying laughter and Callum blinked, confused at the sudden outburst.
When she found the breath to speak again, she added, “Oh, A thought of the pun and just couldnae get it out! Ye said ye were gonna taste me... and ye d-did!!”, she lost her composure again, causing her summand to join her.

“I’m glad you find it funny, I’m not sure I could be so forgiving”, he said when they had calmed down.

“You weren’t in control, dummy. I have pain tolerance, you know? It just hurts a bit. And maybe I’ll get an infection. Big deal, guess I’ll die”, she said, flippantly.

“Don’t say that”, Callum reprimanded her, “It’s getting a bit too real for me lately. Almost glad to be in my golden cage again soon.”

“Fair enough, sorry. Hey, um, my dad had a really interestin’ idea.”

She explained Akande’s theory and that she had already written to Taog.

“Yeah. I do feel pretty stupid. Tinker’s right. I should’ve tried to find out more about the spell before doing anything with it. Really seems like I’m somehow lighter, so I’m giving his theory a thumbs-up. Ah, see this is why we need more elves to come teach primal magic, so dumb idiots like me don’t hurt themselves and the people they love.”

“It would be nice. We know a few mages, but not star or sky. Actually, I don’t think I’ve ever heard of another person connected to the star Arcanum. How about you do somethin’ sensible for once and hook yerself into to the sun and moon arcani?”

“Eh, they seem to come to me rather than the other way around. Wanna try helping me with moon this morning?”, he asked with a smirk.

“Pfft, what?! Ye seriously think A’m gonna risk gettin’ naked and close tae ye anytime soon?”

His mood took a nosedive. Of course that was expecting too much.

“Oh... uh, yeah... sorry, I wasn’t thinking str--”
She had pulled off her top and snuggled up to him, pressing her naked chest against him. “Seriously though, dummy, can we not make this whole sex-after-he-worries-me-sick a regular thin’? Ye don’t have to be so dramatic to get me to sleep with ye!”

He laughed, but his breath hitched when her hand found a way into his lap.

“Believe it or not, A like havin’ ye inside of me. Might be ‘cause A love ye”, she whispered in his ear.

“Love you, too”, he whispered back, “Are you still okay with me... using my mouth?”

“As long as ye don't bite me again”, she snickered nervously, “Just promise ye won’t be mad if A hate it or just get uncomfortable with it?”

“Of course not. Tell me what you like and don’t like. Either in words or sounds, up to you.”

With that, he slid off the bed and got on his knees in front of her. She seemed a bit confused but let him drag her to the edge of the mattress.

He bent over and planted a kiss below her bellybutton, then moved towards her feet, pulling her pants off, kissing every inch of newly exposed skin.

“Romantic”, snickered Rayla, “Ye know, that really doesn’t do much for m--”

When his lips had reached her foot and the pants were on the ground, he started kissing, licking and half-biting his way down on the inside of her thighs.

“Okay... that on the other hand...”, she smiled and reached out to ruffle his hair. Anticipation built as his lips moved closer and closer to her lap. She realized more and more that she needed his touch, the slow approach he made leading to her own lust skyrocketing.

Callum smiled as he noticed her breath quicken. His lips found her nub and he sucked it gently.
“Oh. That. Is nice”, Rayla breathed, lightly pushing his head back down as encouragement.

He used his tongue to trace her, from above her opening up to her nub and around it. It was a repetitive motion for the most part, but he mixed it up ever so often. The taste wasn’t entirely pleasant, but it was really the implications that made this palatable, not the culinary value.

Callum loved the noises his summand was producing, her quiet keening an indication of incredible satisfaction given. The sense of pride he felt was only compounded when she rocked and shuddered, pushing him away but getting him caught between her shivering thighs.

“You liked that”, he teased confidently.

“A did”, she panted, “But A would’ve liked it even better if ye had put yer fingers in there, too.”

Truth was, she felt painfully empty.

“Demaaaanding”, he went, “So, wanna return the favour?”

Silence settled and he regretted having asked the question.

“Don’t worry, I uh, don’t expect you to.”

“Sorry. Just... not... today. Ye didn’t even bathe.”

She sat up a little and pulled him into a kiss, tasting herself on his tongue. His description had been apt and she had a hard time suppressing her disgust.

Rayla settled for thinking of the pleasure rather than where it had originated. It wasn’t fair, in her mind. It couldn’t stand.

“Do ye...”, she started nervously, “Wanna trade for somethin'else?”
“Trade?”, he asked.

“Mh... ye could... uh... fill me again?”

His heart crashed into his socks. “Raayyllaaa”, he groaned, “Don’t tempt me! You know it would be ri--”

“Oh, shush!”, she said, “A’m sick of us t-traipsin’ around this! A think we talked it through as much as we can and we worse s-stuff to worry about! Again; It’s safe! Definitely safer than doin’ random magic and bitin’ yer assassin summund!”

He squirmed, uncomfortably torn between what he wanted and what he should.

The King remembered the feeling of worry after their first time, a constant reminder of his accident. He already knew that he’d be eyeing her stomach with constant alert if they were going to do this.

Still, she was right, they had talked about it. Probably exhaustively.

A look at her vaguely nervous but excited, expectant face coupled with his pushy body settled it for him.

In the end, it was like the dragon horn issue, one they had to take a calculated gamble on. She was ready for this, whatever it might bring. At the very least, he could live with possible consequences, even though it would be a challenge. After all, Rayla would be right there, with him.

More so than either summation or marriage, wasn’t this a true testament to their comfort, that they would together stare down this tiny risk for massive change to share a more intense time loving each other?

“You’re sure? If you even just say ‘I guess’ again, I’m not doing it”, he eventually asked.
“A’m... s-sure”, his summand quavered.

He heaved a sigh that turned into a snort-laugh. “Yeah, very convincing. But... okay. I... I won’t p-pull out.”

She tried ignoring the spike of adrenaline that ran through her from head to toe when his words rang out. “T-there, was that s-so hard?!”, she challenged him with fake confidence, “Where’s the gum grass juice?”

He walked over to his personal luggage and drew out the container, coating himself as he returned to the bedside. Rayla snatched it out of his fingers and blocked him from getting on the bed by spreading her legs.

“Liked your thrustin’ powers when ye were on the ground there, loverboy”, she snickered, dipping two fingers in the sap.

“Oh... sure”, he said, looking a bit forlorn while he waited for her. This gave her an idea for a tease.

With some worry about the pain she expected, she pushed a finger inside herself, spreading the slippery plant juice all over. Her summand seemed captivated by this which drove unexpected heat into her face. She focussed on his eager expression over the familiar coursing of her fingers.

“Enjoyin’ the v...view?”, she gasped, more for effect than actual need.

He simply nodded, tracking his gaze all over her and finally finding her eyes. She marveled at his shockingly green irises that were visible even in the brightening twilight of the breaking summer morning.

“Come get me”, she keened, a whisper of primal love, just loud enough for him to hear. The eagerness of the statement perfectly reflected her need.

She didn’t have to ask again as he moved between her legs, slowly pushing inside her. He pulled back every few centimeters to allow her some time to adjust.
He was going so slow, in fact, that it annoyed her. At the same time, she didn’t feel any pain, so she bore it with a smile.

The flicker of impatience did not escape his attentive gaze, however.

“Good King, knows what A like”, she breathed as his index and middle finger found application on her nub.

He lightly bit her neck.

“Why the bitin’? Feels nice...”


“Ye’ve been readin’?”

She shuddered a little, readying herself for a more intense impulse.

“A little. Want to be a good lover”, he said. With a growl that she found extremely exciting, he added, “Ngh, you deserve nothing less”

On the `s`, she came, sucking air through her teeth and shuddering while he pressed himself deeper inside.

“Oh, you feel amazin’”, she panted, “D-deep is sooo good while A’m cummin’!”

“Manual, tenth page...”, he snickered.

“Ach! How much did you read?!”, she laughed, “Must’ve taken ye ages what with the translation and all!”
“Skipped a few pages. Figured we knew how to get things started at this point...”

His pace was pleasurable but not as fast as she would’ve liked. “Ye can go a bit quicker”, she said.

He seemed hesitant, but sped up nonetheless.

“Come on dummy”, she demanded, “A said go harder!”

In his ears, the greedy request was sweet and sexy. It got him going, wanting more of her, but made him forget little of his worries. He plunged deep and hard into her, using the floor as leverage.

“Mmh, Wild”, she smiled at him.

“Yeah”, he grunted, not letting up, “Fawn...”

“Mh?”

“I’m gonna pull out...”, he panted, “...don’t want to risk it”

The pleasure radiating from his thrusts sent her over the edge again and for a moment, her annoyance was gone, there was only red-hot satisfaction filling her belly and radiating against her skin.

Still, he didn’t let up, her sensitivity reaching new heights. If he was going to keep this up, she was going to be raw like a fresh egg.

Luckily, concentration was chiseled into his face. He slowed a little, seeming out of breath.

“My turn”, she proclaimed, using her leverage on the bed and her steel-like core to drag him onto the bed and under her. He seemed rather confused by this turn of events.
“Ye okay?”

“Did... you just woman-handle me?”

“Aye, and A’ll keep on doin’ just that.”

She lifted herself up and dropped, letting gravity force him up and deep inside her where he hit something that immediately made her shiver, again.

“Ah, this isnae fair!”, she laughed, slapping his chest, “Not fair, not fair! A can’t keep up if A’m constantly quakin’!”

He smiled nervously, petting her thighs.

With some painful protest of her body, she picked up speed. After a moment, her fickle physique quieted.

His hands found the side of her neck and he pulled her closer to kiss her, then traveled further to lightly grip her horn.

“Callum”, she pled and stopped, “Please don’t yank!”

“I won’t”, he breathed, caressing her other horn, “I just need you to slow down a little, cause I’m just about there.”

“And that is a problem? A’ve been havin’ a grand time here, only fair ye should get yers!”

She put on a rather feisty grin and picked up speed, keeping her head static.

“Rayla!”, he groaned, “I’m really close... are... are you s... sure... y... I...”
The hesitance in his voice made her sigh internally. He was such a worry worm, even worse than herself.

Still, she wanted his permission, needed it.

Rayla slowed and bent down to lightly bite his neck. She moved on to his ear and whispered, “A want ye tae cum in me, okay?”

His hands came up to cover his face. After a moment, she saw his hair move in a silent nod.

With an odd triumphant and nervous smile, his Queen picked up speed again, moving his hands off his face. There was concentration in his expression, a delicate, almost searching mien.

In this moment, Rayla loved her King beyond reason. He was such a beautiful person, both inside and out. Her fingers traced the soft curves of his chest.

His adorable, sexy voice was driven into a groan that made her keen in response.

“A’m so close...”, she whispered serenely, “Callum...”

“M-me too”, he panted, gritting his teeth, “La... last... ch... chance!”

She felt him twitch inside her.

Any second now.

“Rayla, fuck!”, he groaned, shuddering and pulling her into his arms.

He pulsed, his entire body rocked into hers. His quiet, animalistic growls in her ear, the sopping wetness in her lap, the buildup she had experienced over the session - it was enough to shoot her into orbit.
Around the sun.

She forced him deep inside as thick liquid found its release. He felt her shudder against him, her skin slightly wet from sweat. She arched violently, crashing into his own throes.

“Dummy”, she sung, “Ah! Yes!”

Panting and shuddering, they held each other. The moment lasted and lasted and lasted, bliss and love washing away all thoughts of assassinations and dreams and war and dragon horns.

“Pheww”, Rayla went eventually, “That... that was somethin’ alright. That was gooooooood!”

Her summand snickered. “You’re so hot. Are you sure you’re not a sun elf?”

“Booo, get out of here with yer terrible puns!”, she went with a smirk, kissing him.

For a while they simply marveled at each other, her resting on top of him. In many ways they didn’t want to move, ever again.

This all changed when Callum’s facial expression changed to something containing amusement, disgust and worry. “Uh, fawn? I think it’s running back out. I can feel it between my legs”

“So what? It all washes in the bath”, purred Rayla.

“The sheets, though?”

“Gch”, she scoffed, annoyed. She wanted to lie here and let the stuff drip, “Doesn’t matter if we wash a towel or the shee--”

“Moot point”, her summand snickered, “Sheets it is.”
Rayla was happy.

Callum was happy.

Both were getting worried.

--

Five.
Crossings

Wynda watched as the foreign soldiers and their fraternizing sun elven guards marched across the bridge at Kincardine. She was glad to have this unfortunate assignment come to an end.

Her superiors had been insistent that she take it, to escort a person she hated through their domain.

It was a calculated move on their part as it had inevitably given them an excuse to demote her. For years now she had been a thorn in Legate Adamaris’ side. The woman had never liked her, had scoffed at her rise through the ranks and eventually dug her heels in when Wynda had announced her plan to succeed her.

Of course, the Legate had kept all this under wraps, so when Wynda had heard of her extreme dislike, it was already too late. Trusting one’s mentors was a mistake in an organization like the Lucid.

When the last foreign boot had left Scotian soil, the agent turned her mount nortward, toward the heart of the Wee Country.

Cranky old Adamaris with her stupid ochre familials would not take her hard won achievements away so easily.

Soren frowned over his shoulder at the border crossing. “Back in Katolis”, he griped, “Wonder if he actually came back. Feels like a wild duck chase.”

“A little”, said Jen with a smirk at his screwed up idiom. She was holding their daughter in the saddle in front of her. “It’s not all bad, I liked being back home for a bit. And we’ll get to see auntie Claudia soon, too. Are you excited?”

There was a moment of silence.

“Soren?”
“Oh? Huh? What?”

“Soren!”

“What!? I thought you were talking to Ames! You said *auntie*! She’s not *my* aunt!”

“Aha”, went his wife, “Okay, that’s fair. So; *Are* you looking forward to seeing her?”

“Phew, yeah, sure. It’s been a few months.”

His mien became pensive and a little dark. “You know... she was just... off’ last time we saw her. She used to make the best jokes when we were going after the princes and looking for mom... now she’s kind of... weird.”

“Really? To me, she’s always been this intense ball of nervous energy. Just thought she was really into her work.”

“My *dad* was *really* into his work, babes. Look where it got him. I don’t want that for her.”

“That’s funny coming from you. You’re *really* dedicated to your work, catching him?”

Soren nodded. “Sure, but... you know, I have you and Ames. Now that Callum’s gone, she’s alone safe for that icicle egghead. She’s doing all this dark magic, too. I just think she didn’t look healthy. Didn’t act like herself. All I’m saying is, I’m kinda worried what she’s gonna be like.”

Piper’s index was tapping rapidly on the table. “We got something here, boss. Something, something! The rat was *out*!”

“*Dead*”, said Claudia simply, grumpily sipping from a cup.
“The question is still why. Was it because the spell needs to be reversed before the normal life expectancy of the creature inside runs out? Do they even age in there? Was it because we botched the release... so many variable--”

“Okay, okay! You’re still excited, I get it! Pipe down!”, spat Claudia, then after a moment, the two women exploded in laughter.

“P-Pipe! Down!”, wheezed the scientists, “How h-have you n-never used that before!?"

“Oohh I don’t know! Wow, that was so stupid!”, said Claudia, wiping tears from her eyes, “Phew. I needed that. Last time I laughed like that, Callum was trying to show me how much he’d learned from Yasra. I’ve never seen a training dummy knock someone out since!”

“He is terrible at so many things”, Piper said with an odd edge, “Good thing he has magic, otherwise he’d be a nobody.”

“Pfft, that kinda goes for me, too”, after a moment, the High Mage sat up, fixing her assistant with a confused gaze. “Why do you always sound like you have a beef with him? Did he do something? I thought you were interested in him. Professionally, I mean.”

“Yeah. It’s crazy that a human can pick up primal magic and I wanna know how he did it. I just... eh, I don’t like him as a person. He’s mushy, meek and more than just a little ditzy.”

“That’s what I always liked about him. All the guys I tried to go out with were just not... you know.”

“Him?”

“I meant ‘soft’ and ‘artsy’. Don’t be stupid. I’m over him, it’s been four years.”

“Clauds”, Piper sighed, pulling up a chair, “Clauds, I think you’re lying to yourself. When have you actually confronted those feelings? Checked if they were still there? From what I know, you’ve literally done nothing but work since you both came back from the Breach.”
Claudia frowned. “I had vacations! Plus, I even went for dinner with him sometimes. There was nothing romantic about any of it. I’ve confronted my feelings, alright.”

“Dinner with him and us other courtiers, you mean. Look, I know that this is kind of an issue of self-respect for you. He went and got himself involved with that elf of hi--”

“Hey. Stop. I’m over him. Seriously. It was a teenage crush. I have better things to do.”

Anger was written in her face now. Why was Piper being so insistent? There were no feelings for Callum in her chest, nor elsewhere. Sure, she had spent a good year wrestling that monster of a childhood crush to the ground, but that was ancient history at this point.

Her friend smirked wearily. “You’re sure?”

“Yep.”

“Alright. Sorry, then.”

“Hum, what about you though? You’re here all the time. Got nobody coming after you?”

The scrawny scientist snorted. “Riiight. I don’t have time for that sort of thing.”

“Aha, what about that good looking stable boy I saw you talking to the other day?”

Piper’s mien sagged. “I was asking him about my stirrups! Bolt’s rusted out on the right side. Plus, uh...”

“Yeees?”

“I’m not into guys.”
“Ah, heh. Oops, I’m sorry”, said the mage with an embarrassed chuckle.

“I’m not really into anyone. I just wanna beat this stupid riddle. We’re close, I can feel it.”

“Sure. Okay. Work, yes”, Claudia enumerated, putting her cup down and picking up her notes. “So. This makes three dead rats. I feel as though we can discount the idea that they died while they were locked in.”

“Not necessarily. We need to build up a stock of rats. Make sure they’re well fed and are reasonably healthy. These ones we more or less just grabbed off the ground because someone had to ‘Try again with a little less Thrasher salt’! Twice!”

Claudia pouted. “You don’t have to make fun of me.”

“I don’t have to, you’re right. We have to do this methodically, as I warned you. If we had, we’d have a clear answer about the whole dying-in-the-coin thing.”

“Speaking of methodical - did you get any more out of Tyne?”

“Nope. Since that one time where we had them draw her, she’s been pretty closeted. Didn’t help that she didn’t trust us in the first place after we told her that you’re a dark mage.”

“Yeah, that tends to piss them off”, laughed the mage, “Wonder if she’s going to change her tune when we get her out?”

“Mmh. Sure”, said Piper, seeming distracted by her own notes, “Let’s catch ourselves some rats.”
Golden Cage

Callum bristled a little as an extremely familiar sight appeared on the horizon.

The Twin Towers seemed as eternal as the rock the great castle was resting on. It was as much prison as home to him, but he hoped that the coming years would turn it to the latter more than the former.

Next to him, Rayla seemed just as conflicted. Her mouth was a thin line as she stared ahead, clearly worried as to what would greet them as they landed. The King had prepared her a little, but things rarely worked out exactly as she expected and there was no predicting the reactions of the councillors.

From Zym’s back came a sigh of relief. Opeli and Lydia were smiling at the massive building with much different associations.

Below them they could see the Road of Five Kingdoms, bustling with traffic even at this advanced hour. Quite a few faces seemed to track them, people’s arms extended.

A few short minutes later, Zym landed, spraying loose gravel everywhere.

Callum dismounted, patting Isoros’ side. “Good boy, thank you for taking me all this way again.”

The animal whinnied as the King took in the upper courtyard. He’d spent a lot of time here, sparring with Soren. His parents had also used it to settle arguments.

Ahead was the entrance to the castle, a set of stairs leading to a platform under the King’s balcony. From there, a veritable column of people marched. The chief of staff, General Rhinehart, was commanding the castle guard to stand at attention and to fly the King’s banner.

When all the attendants and present nobles were lined up, silence settled over the place. Callum couldn’t help but steal a look at his Queen. She stood straight as a board with her hands clasped in her lap, staring straight ahead above someone’s head.
Three haughty looking figures descended the steps with less haste than the staff had, then settled ahead of the General. Among the uniforms, the members of the High Council in their colorful garb seemed out of place. Kingsley, the leftmost of them, timidly raised a hand in greeting.

Behind Callum, Opeli scuttled in a great arch to join Bertram of Rhodia on the right side of their lineup. Tinker, Horace and Lydia discreetly followed to head up the attendants’ formation.

Another person appeared in the shade of the balcony. Helmond caught Callum’s gaze and nodded, smiling slightly. In an odd way, the King felt gripped by this gesture of approval and welcome as though it was Harrow bestowing it.

Rayla joined her summand, and together they approached the High Council. The queen-to-be then stood back a little to wait for her introduction.

“Kingsley. Good to see you. Anything to report?”, asked the King while shaking his friend’s hand.

“Sire, I am about to cry tears of joy! You are home, and in a rather continuous piece! What I have to say can wait until after you have settled in, nothing too crucial.”

Callum nodded and moved on to the next person in line, Councilor Arntraud of Vedevis. She was old. Older maybe than even Horace. The green of her robes seemed dull and lifeless, as though she had worn the same clothes since birth.

“We come from The Bullwark, madame. It’s good to see the Breach in such good order”, said the King while he shook the woman’s hand.

Her voice was high, cold and snide. It fit her facial expression that seemed warped in permanent, slight disgust. “I’m sure, Sire. We do much to keep it that way, what with your brinkmanship. We have just managed to clear the last of the rubble. I’d like a word with you about more funding.”

“We’ll have a word, then! For now, a job well done, as I said”, said Callum and moved on.

The last man was dressed in a stark ochre with white and gold decor. He was also rather old, but still had color in his receding hair. Under his robes, he seemed muscular, unlike the other councilors.
“Bertram. How is Rhodia faring?”, greeted Callum.

His voice was quiet and high, surprising Rayla. The other thing she had not expected was to hear words leaving his mouth, but failing to understand them.

Callum frowned. “I’d prefer it if we could hold conversations in Common while the Lady is present.”

“I’d prefer if she returned to where she’d understand the conversations naturally, my Liege”, came the cold reply.

Kingsley badly suppressed a snort.

“Which is right here”, Callum replied with a dangerous glower at both of them, “where all words spoken while in her earshot are to be in Common.”

“As you command, my Liege. I’m glad to see you return. I’ve nothing to report”, said Bertram with a hint of defiance in his words.

For a moment, the King held his gaze, then he clapped his hands and put on a smile. Raising his voice so everyone present could hear him, he said, “Thank you all for your warm reception. I am pleased to announce the presence of an honored guest; His Xadian Excellence, the Prince of Dragons and friend to Katolis, Azymondias.”

As a guest, Zym was under no obligation to pay special attention to the internal divisions of Katolis, so he merely stepped forward, bending his head to everyone present. “If anyone here was worried by my approach, I apologise. I am a humble servant to peace and ask only that you accept me not for my fearsome appearance but for my gentle demeanor and friendly words.”

Callum smirked. Knowing his friend, this was very obviously a speech he had rehearsed. From what the King could tell by everyone’s expression, the words soothed few. Many of them only knew Dragons as voiceless murder, swooping at their towns and farmsteads.

Zym sat, marking the end of his introduction.
Callum’s voice once more rang out. “Further, I am delighted to introduce Rayla, Lady of the Crescent Reflection, second of her name, Queen-to-be of Katolis. While she might not wear her crown just yet, her word is to be as good as mine, as of this moment.”

This was the formula that sent shivers down Rayla’s back. It was her turn to speak, first to the councillors who would be advising her and then to everyone present. She stepped forward and stiffly extended her hand towards Kingsley.

“You are High Councillor Kingsley, right? Callum has nothin’ but good thin’s to say about you.”

The councillor eyed her distrustfully, then took the proffered appendage, shaking it. “That is gratifying to hear. Milady, If you allow me the remark, the King certainly has an artist’s eye. The near future will show if he also has a King’s.”

An exasperated smile spread on Rayla’s face. “You know, those are the first words said to me by someone who’s supposed to give me advice on how to be a good Queen. I really hope you’ll end up bein’ a bit more forward with your meanin’.”

Kingsley snorted. “Bold, aren’t you? I’m the head of the Covertway, Milady, I never say what I mean. I look forward to... er, working with you.”

Rayla nodded at him, then stepped sideways to take Arntraud’s hand. “Lady Arntraud. I’m sure you probably never expected to shake hands with an elf.”

“Milady, I’ve fought many banners. Whether the soldiers marching under them have horns or not matters little to me. If they want me dead, I shall wish the same for them. With that said”, a warm smile that extended to her eyes broke her snobby expression, “Welcome to Katolis. Judging by your reaction to Kingsley, I believe we shall get along famously.”

Her left hand came down on Rayla’s to support her right in sort of a clasping shake that she ended with a nod.

The queen-to-be hoped that confusion wasn’t too obvious on her face. Of all the people here, she had expected Arntraud to dislike her. After all, the stout woman represented Vedevis, the principality closest to the Xadian Border. Then again, she might have made good experiences with elves recently, given the successes of the task force.
Bertram did not take the elf’s hand and instead sneered at her expectantly. Rayla decided she was not going to take his attitude lying down. “Councillor, do you have problems with Common? If you want, I could teach you. I’m fluent in Common and Rune and speak a bit of Draconic as well as Sign. That way, there won’t be any misunderstandin’s from here on out?”

The man continued his disgusted frown. “You’ll excuse my reluctance to rise to such an obvious barb. You rising to mine merely confirms what everyone here already knows. You are not fit to be Queen. Your skin is the wrong color and your upbringing of doubtful quality. How you have wiled your way into Sir Callum’s good favour is a mystery to me.”

“Aha, you do know some bigger words”, laughed Rayla and moved on without giving the man another look.

Callum froze. Not ten minutes into her rule, she had already insulted one of the houses. This wasn't going to be easy.

His Queen threw an inquiring gaze at Opeli who motioned her along with an expression that looked like she froze mid-eyeroll.

Ugh, this was her least favourite part. Over and over, she had rehearsed these words and was hoping they’d leave her mouth willingly.

“Uh”, she went.

Nice, off to a great start.

“Thank you all for welcomin’ me. From what A’ve...”, nervosity drove her heart into her throat, “... I’ve heard, I’m steppin’ in footsteps that are too big for anyone to fill right away.”

She breathed in deeply to calm herself, then continued, “As Queen, I will serve you by my thoughts and actions. I swear to guard our country fiercely, but with compassion, against all enemies, both within and without. I’m countin’ on you to help me be the Queen Katolis deserves and to hold me to this promise. Thank you.”
The silence that followed gave no indication as to how her words had been received, but Callum had told her not to expect a reaction. The commoners weren't entitled to doubt her and the council would already have given her their opinions.

She stood by his side and hoped her heart would stop beating so hard.

With a pang of envy, she heard Callum's calm, firm voice rise. "Once again, thank you for your welcome. The next few weeks are going to be extremely busy, so we better all get a headstart. Carry on."

While the nobles strode back inside, the chief of staff spun and bellowed "Dismissed!"
When the courtyard had cleared, Helmond came down the stairs to join Rayla, Callum and Zym. Horace had dragged Tinker along, and Lydia had guided her attendants back to work.

After introducing the Legate to Zym, they also bid the hungry Dragon adieu. He was going to be back later to have a heart to heart with Bait. They’d have to find the old toad first.

"A pleasure to meet you again, Sicar... Excellence ", Helmond greeted Rayla.

The queen-to-be noticed how much the Ex-Legate had aged in her absence. Deep wrinkles streaked his face and his voice seemed slightly hollow.

"How are you, Helmond?", she asked.

"Your expression tells me that I’m getting rather noticeably decrepit, Milady", he quipped with a wry smile, "we have a few things to discuss, you and I, sooner rather than later, if it pleases you."

His voice was friendly and even, but Callum detected some kind of undertone that worried him. Helmond had spent a lot of time sharpening the King's senses for all kinds of elven social cues that somewhat betrayed the ex-agent’s true feelings now. Distrust. Worry.

“Do you have anything to report? Kingsley sounded like he might”, he said with an inquiring glance at his mentor.

They entered the castle and Callum led them up the spiral staircase that would eventually lead them to the royal quarters.

“I will give the same answer as he, Sire. Nothing that can’t wait until you have made yourselves at home.”

“In that case, can we have your opinion on something?”, asked the King with a sly, sideways smirk at Rayla, “My summand and I have a bet going, concerning her old dress. She believes it’ll fit perfectly, I think she will be disappointed. We need an impartial judge.”
“Ah, and of course you thought of me, the person least likely to have a sense of aesthetics? How little you know me. I’ll have you know I used to mime a tailor for a sky-elven Convocation. A long-term posting that left me with a great many skills”, the elder moon elf said.

“But then you’d still be the best judge”, Rayla said with an incredulous smirk, “Speakin’ of skills, I hear you’ve taught Callum a bit of Rune?”

“Oh, do not remind me of those wasted hours, he is as difficult a student as they come.”

“Hey! I can’t help it if your teaching consists of grumbling at me when I get things wrong! Rune is hard!”, complained the King, “At least I eventually picked up enough to read most of that scroll!”

“Most of it, excellence. Not all of it. Maybe with your summand present, you will have some more free time to follow your interests.”

The way he said it almost sounded like he doubted that Rayla was going to stick around. The undertone once more escaped the queen-to-be.

“Aye, I’ll help him out where I can. Hum, actually, I’m surprised we haven’t seen Claudia yet. I’m itchin’ to go see that coin.”

“Oh! Of course you are!”, exclaimed Callum, “Here I was all excited about the bet! I’m so sorry, fawn. We have to turn around, the lab is the other way.”

“If I may”, said Helmond, standing in his way with a double-edged smile, “The business I have with the Lady Rayla is of some urgency. Would you agree to see me after the high mage?”

“Oh, sure?”, said Rayla with a confused glance.

“Helmond, what’s wrong?”, asked Callum, “You’ve been a little off.”

“Off? Perhaps. I apologise, but answers will have to wait until I speak to the Lady. It’s best for
everyone involved, trust me.”

The King scanned Helmond’s expression, unsure how to react. He eventually sighed, “Alright then, keep your secrets.”

The ex-agent stepped aside and the royals passed him on the way down the stairs.

When they were out of earshot Rayla said, “Good start. Racists, secrets...”

“Heh. Worst part is, they’re actually leaving us alone right now. Just wait until they’re done giving us space. Tomorrow’s my birthday, but after that... yeah. You’ll wish we’d be running from Kel again.”

“Eh, at least words won’t chip my horns”, quipped his summand.

They arrived in front of Viren’s old study with the heavy double-doors.

“Ready to be friends with Claudia?”, smirked Callum.

“Let’s start with sayin’ `hello`”

Callum knocked. The sound was in-step with Rayla’s heartbeat. Today was rather stressful. First; public speaking, now; meeting an old adversary and possibly finding her mother in a coin.

A slender face with cropped hair appeared in a crack in the door. “Oh! You’re back! And you got your elf!”

“Hello Piper”, said Callum, wryly.

The nonchalant interaction surprised Rayla. She had expected the lanky young woman to bow and curtsy like everyone else had done so far.
“Is Claudi in?”

“Pfft. You kidding? She always is. Come on in”, said Piper without a single look at Rayla.

The door swung halfway open and the royals stepped inside the lab. It was dark and stuffy. There were tables lined up, a few cages rattled in the corner. The eerie purple glow of dark magic bubbled in flasks and tubes in experimental setups. In the darkest corner stood what Callum believed to be a mirror, covered in cloth.

The queen-to-be eyed all this with some measure of disgust. The cages especially turned her stomach. Upon closer inspection, they contained a rat each, nibbling on fresh vegetables.

In front of one of the experiments sat a mostly white-haired young woman, staring at the bubbles inside rise, following the steam with her eyes as it condensed and ran along a tube to drip into a flask.

“See anything good?”, Callum asked.

His friend jolted a little, then turned to face him with a growing smile. “Heeey! You’re back already! How’d it go?”

“It went well. Hi, uh, Claudia”, said Rayla, raising her hand sheepishly.

The high mage fixed her with an inquiring gaze, then smiled weakly. “At least some things are going right. How do you do, Rayla? Can I just say how happy I am to see you?”

“Huh? What's that supposed to mean?”

“Pfft, I meant it the way I said it. Callum’s been a big ball of sad ever since he came back from Xadia, so I’m glad you’re here, he already looks way better.”

The King gave her an exasperated smirk. “Yeah, yeah, yeah. Please, don’t let me stop you from telling her all about the crying and whining I’ve done over the years!”
“Oh it was terrible!”, laughed Claudia. She then crossed her eyes and mimed a crying baby, “Boo-hoo, I’m the most powerful man in the Pentarchy! Waaah!”

She snickered gratuitously at his annoyed expression, then asked, “How was the trip, anyway?”

“I, uh, don’t wanna interrupt you guys catchin’ up but... uh... do you still have the coin with...?”, asked Rayla.

“Ohhh! Right, right, the elf, hold on”, said the high mage and got up. She walked around a table toward the window with its drawn curtains. Moving them aside carefully, she picked something from the brightly lit windowsill.

She came back and extended her arm toward Rayla who took the coin from her. “Thanks...”

There was a feeling of adrenaline shooting through the elf as she turned the coin around.
Monsters and Beasts

Rayla stared at the elven woman in the coin, much as she stared back.

Eventually, the queen-to-be slumped onto a worn chair, tears in her eyes. “It’s her... It’s m-my mum...”

Callum came over to wrap his arms around her, but Rayla did not stop staring at Tyne over his shoulder.

“Hey, mum”, the queen-to-be breathed.

The woman in the coin seemed to touch its inside wall in a gesture of want. Her eyes were just as wet as Rayla’s.

Piper silently handed a wad of paper to Callum while Claudia handed Rayla a quill. At first, the queen-to-be was confused, then realization gripped her and she put the coin down to write a message.

As she quietly held a one-sided conversation with her mother, Callum turned to Claudia and her assistant. “I know you’ve been working yourself to the bone for an insane amount of time and I don’t wanna seem pushy but...”

“A few months”, Piper interrupted, “I think we’re a few months away from getting her out.”

“Optimistic”, grumbled Claudia with a sad look at Rayla, “I know what it feels like to know your mom’s out there but you can’t find her. It would be way worse to have her literally... in my han--”

The mage welled up, “D-damn you, V-Viren! You’re a monster for d-doing this! I’ll j-just have to... Pipe, can we...”

“He’s a monster alright”, Callum interrupted grimly, “But you can’t take responsibility for his actions. You’ve worked so hard already, it wouldn’t be fair to expect even more of you. I’m sure Rayla would agree with that, too.”
“But I don’t”, spat Claudia, a hateful expression consuming her face, “I have to fix this evil shit before I go crazy from trying!”

With that, the mage faced her experiment again, but Callum turned her around by her shoulder. “No. You don’t. As of this moment, you are on another vacation. A week at least. Hey, you can even help me prep the wedding if you absolutely can’t stop working!”

The mage gaped at him. “Wha... Callum! Look at her! Look at your Queen and tell me that you want me to walk out on her! Tell her what you’re doing!”

“This isn’t about her, or me, or Tyne. It’s about you. Have you two been outside since I left?”

Claudia stared at him, defiantly. “Yeah we have.”

“I don’t mean to walk between the buildings. I mean outside as in the forest or the town square.”

It was quite obvious to the King that she felt the desire to lie, his friend squirmed uncomfortably.

“Go. Outside”, he said firmly, “Into the sun. Buy a new cloak. Have a slice of cake. Play a game of chess. Do something with your life other than this”, he motioned broadly at the laboratory.

“And let her suffer?”, spat Claudia, “Let the elf and her daughter cry an--”

A four-fingered hand came down on her shoulder. “A need someone to show me around town. How’boot we three go for a daunner in the morn to pick out some gifts fer our King? A have a feelin’ A might be a bit behind on those.”

The mage turned slowly to face Rayla who was smiling at her, gleaming tracks of tears quite visible on her face.

Before Claudia could answer, there was an ear-piercing squawk from the window that startled everyone present.
“Oh!”, yelped Claudia, “I haven’t even told you! Pip came back, like, yesterday!”

“What?!”, Callum gaped, then made for the window and tore open the curtains for a mere second before Piper ripped them out of his hands.

“Are you insane!?” yelled the scientist, “We’re not sitting in the dark cause we’re a pair of dumbass goths! Sunlight destroys arc-bat blood! Go away! I’ll get the stupid bird for you!”

A moment later, Pip was sitting on Callum’s shoulder, very obviously enjoying the attention the King was bestowing on his feathers. “It’s... it’s l-like having a piece of my d-dad back”, he said, fighting for composure.

Rayla partook in petting the smooth feathers, smiling sadly at the animal. Pip didn’t seem to like her, clattering his beak at her and switching to Callum’s other shoulder where she couldn’t easily reach him. The bird’s disapproval hurt her more than she wanted to admit.

Instead, she spun the coin that contained her mother in her other hand. She would’ve given a lot to hear her voice, to feel her touch. It was an odd emotion, given how hurt the queen-to-be felt about her parents, how much her mother had just hurt her again. At least, if she was out, they could have argued it out. Like this, there was nothing to be done.

Suddenly, a stopper popped loudly out of one of the flasks and the bird flapped his wings, startled.

“Out! Out! We can’t have you ruin the work of weeks!”, Piper hissed while hustling the royals outside, “Be sad somewhere else!”

Stupefied, they blinked at each other. A moment later, Claudia joined them with a wry smirk. “Sorry about that. It’s how she deals with stress. Nothing more important than her experiments, hehe!”

Rayla nodded absentmindedly, back to staring at her mother. “Claudia, um, thank you for all your work. I’ve had some... issues with... you know, your kind of magic, and I still do... but... you honestly look exhausted.”
“Gee, thanks! I’m sure that’s not a polite way to say `freakishly ugly’”, snorted the mage, “You’re right though, my hair’s not supposed to look like yours. Dark magic is... is doing something to me. Something I don’t like. I’m honestly kind of looking forward to hanging out with you tomorrow morning. It’ll be nice, change of pace. Pipe isn’t much for going out.”

She flicked her hair as she spoke, to emphasise her dislike of its dead color.

“No offense, but you look good with white hair”, said Rayla with the hint of a smirk on her lips.

“Pfft”, went Claudia with a snicker and raised eyebrows, “Likewise, though I guess for you it’s a sign of good health. It’s weird thinking back to the last time I saw you.”

The mage nodded in Callum’s direction with an exasperated grin. “If I had this one pine over you for four years beforehand, I feel like we’d’ve gotten along a bit better. Tends to color my opinion of someone, hearing good things all the time. Last time I met you, you were so...”, Claudia sighed, “I shouldn’t even judge. Last time we met, I was a huge douchenozzle.”

“You were, but it was a long time ago. I figure we’ll let bygones be bygones, if that’s alright with you?”

The mage shrugged, a sudden, intense anger warping her mien, “If you say so. It’s easier for some of us to let go of the past, I guess.”

Rayla frowned at her. “Did I do somethin’ back then that you feel like I should apologise for?”

Callum watched them, tensely. There was a weighing of words going on in Claudia’s mien that he did not like. She was brooding over something, alright.

A moment later, a frustrated gasp escaped her. “No. Not really. I was totally on the wrong side of history then. That’s the worst part of all. I wish I could... I honestly wish I could blame someone else for stuff. But when I look for guilt, all I find is me. Well, uh, me and Viren.”

The next moment made Rayla bristle.
Callum had embraced his friend.

He had told her that they were doing this. She had allowed him to do it. Still, reading about it and seeing it first-hand were two different levels of the same challenge.

“Things were a mess. You were trying to be a good daughter”, said the King while Pip stalked over his shoulders to dodge Claudia’s hands.

The High Mage pouted and shrugged. “There are some days where I wonder, you know. Where I would be now if I hadn’t done what my dad told me to.”

“We all go through what-ifs”, said Rayla frostily.

“Yeah. Look, I think you two have a lot of work to do before tomorrow. I’ll probably see you then”, said Claudia in an obvious attempt at getting them to leave.

“Do we ever”, came Callum’s grumpy reply. There was no doubt in his mind that a stack of documents was towering on his desk for his review.

The two royals said their goodbyes.

“That was... interestin’”, said Rayla, still turning the coin in her fingers.

“It’s good to see the two of you getting along, sort of. To be honest, I was worried abo--”

“About us killin’ each other over you?”, interrupted his queen with a teasing smirk.

“I... uh...”

“Pfft! Wow, Talk about ego! She’s insanely smart and pretty, you know, she could probably have anyone she wants!”
“Even you?”

Rayla stopped dead in her tracks to gape at her smirking summand. To her dismay she felt a bit of a blush in her cheeks *and* felt the need to be honest, even if just to satisfy their summation vows. “Uh... m... maybe in a different life? We’re just so... different. As people, I mean. Dark mage and a magical creature... Yea, no, it’s a bit creepy. If she gets mad at me, she can literally use my arcanum to make moonshadow *pancakes*. But, uh, yeah, I think she’s *beautiful*. That’s really all.”

“Was *Dard* beautiful?”

This earned him a frown. “Callum, don’t be an ass. Of course I’d think Dard was pretty, I had a *crush* on her! Don’t make me regret tellin’ you!”

He snickered. “It’s fun to wind you up a little, sometimes.”

“Tsk. What would Prince Jorge think?”

Callum flushed a little. “Heh. What gave me away?”

“The fact that you cared about him recallin’ your little dance?”

“Wait, you remember that?!”

“I do. You forget that I read every single letter you sent a few dozen times. I might not be Miss Memory, but, heck, throw enough dirt at a wall and some of it’ll stick!”

He laughed and grabbed her hand to kiss it. “I love you.”

Pip squawked angrily on his shoulder.

“Love you too, King of razzes”, she left a pause for effect, “And King of Jorge’s crot--”

Rayla snickered, taking back her hand. The coin inside it poked into her awareness. “Uh... so... Tyne’s my mum. For sure, this time.”

Callum nodded. “Did you manage to talk to her?”

“Not really. I showed her a few messages, explainin’ what I was doin’ here and all that, you know. Introducin’ myself, I guess. She, uh... didnae take it so well”, the queen-to-be breathed out slowly, “Yeah... she stopped lookin’ at me after I told her I was summed to a human. Once she gets out, that’ll be a fun conversation.”

“Mmh”, went Callum, “You think it’ll be like Tinker?”

“Nah. Tinker never fought humans. My mum’s been wounded by Katolin soldiers and, well, locked in a coin by Viren. I’m not sure she’ll come around. Might be that that second I got with her when she first saw me and I saw her was the last good moment we share for the rest of our lives, heh...”

“Now you’re being pessimistic. Let’s wait until she’s out. She might appreciate the changes we’ve made since she was coined.”

Rayla shrugged, but was obviously distraught now. Callum decided to try and lighten her mood by kissing her.

Pip shrieked loudly, making them both flinch.

“What’s his issue?”, asked Rayla grouchyly, “Looks like your dad’s bird doesn’t like me.”

“I figure the last time he was around moonshadow elves, they... you know.”

“Right.”
Silence fell over them as they walked along a hallway. Rayla hated the fact that the two guards they passed stood at attention. The soldier in her wanted to return the salute and she had to make a concerted effort not to. Callum didn’t seem to take much note.

“Ah. Here we are.”

They had reached Helmond’s quarters and the King knocked.

“Go ahead”, came the tired invitation.

The Ex-Legate was sitting on the floor in a pose that indicated that he had been meditating. The glance he gave his young friends seemed hurt, somehow.

“Please, Lady Rayla, have a seat. Lord Callum, if you could leave us for a while, I’d appreciate it very much.”

Callum gave her an inquiring glance. She smirked at him, extending the hand that held her mother.

“I’ll find my way back, dummy, don’t worry so much.”

In truth, it wasn’t her skills as a navigator that worried him, but his mentor’s ridiculous behaviour. He took Tyne’s coin and sighed, thinking of how he would spend the time bent over his tower of paper.

“Alright. I’ll see you in a bit. Don’t make me work too late, Helmond. I’ll only stop once my summand’s with me.”

“You have my word, Excellence.”

After Callum had left, Rayla mimicked her elder, sitting across from him, cross-legged. “So. What is it that you wanted to talk to me about?”

He took a deep breath, then leaned forward to investigate her expression critically.
“Are you able to recall your dreams?”
“Do I remember my dreams?” asked Rayla, “No... I guess not. Why?”

“How long have you had this lack of memory?”

“Uh... I’m guessin’ one and a half, maybe two years?”

“And did you remember your dreams before that? As a rule, I mean.”

“Well, yea, mostl-- Helmond, I gotta ask... what’s all this about?”

“Milady, I do not know how to put this gently. Given what you just told me and the hints and whispers my Xadian contacts have shared with me, I have a rather dire conclusion to make”, he shifted uncomfortably. “It is very likely that you are a sleeper agent.”

Rayla was immediately covered by goosebumps. There was only one response that she could think of. “You’re kiddin’. I would know.”

“You are correct, you probably do. Everything they have done to you is in your head, ready to be unleashed, to make you believe what they want you to believe, to do what they want you to do. But, it is tucked away in the same corner of your mind as the memory of your dreams. Loosing them is a common side effect of the conditioning.”

"How do you know?"

"I do not know, per se, as much as suspect strongly. The moment we know for sure is the moment you act according to your conditioning. You might be perfectly fine for all we know, but the potential consequences are too dire to dismiss the possibility, especially given the evidence."

Rayla swallowed. “If it’s true, how... did they do this?”

“I am aware of the methods of detecting a sleeper agent. I did not spend enough time behind a desk
to wile my way into the secrets of the Gladii, but the scraps I have gathered over the years tell me that it is a mixture of social conditioning, drugs and magic. As to how they will trigger you; All I can tell you is that there is a very specific signal that will set you off, a visual cue, a sentence, something like that. You will then perform the tasks you were given, without your consent or conscious doing.”

This was her personal hell, the antithesis of her free spirit. They had taken her agency, twisted it to their will. “Can we make sure? Is there anythin’ we can do?”

“As I said, there is no way to be completely sure that I am aware of.”

Rayla stared at him, hoping to get some sort of hold on the roiling emotion in her stomach. “... that’s so evil!?”

“Indeed, it is one of the more insidious tactics our former comrades employ. Now, let us assume we have correctly detected their meddling, meaning we can take measures to prevent their plan from succeeding. We ought to find one of two pieces of information. Either we learn the details of their plan and can prevent them from having you execute your part in it, or we find the signal they intend to give and can trigger it in a context in which you would be unable to execute your mission.”

“Is that it?! We can’t... A dunno, de-condition me?!”

“I apologise, once more I have to admit that I am not aware of any such procedures. If they exist, only the Gladii Lucis would know them. It is unlikely we would be able to extract such knowledge from the inner circle of the Lucid. Now, as for the target, we can assu--”

“They... want me to kill... Callum”, Rayla gasped, her heart bruising itself against her ribs, “A’m... g-goin’ to... k-kill... my... family...”

Helmond’s hands gently grasped her trembling shoulders.

“Lady Rayla, please. You will hyperventilate if you do not calm yourself, and trust me when I say that panic will not improve this situation.”

The younger elf sought lessons from her training, distancing herself from the situation that caused
her to short-circuit. Rayla forced herself to breathe deeply and evenly. When she had calmed a
little, she nodded at the older elf and he continued.

"It is not clear that he is the target of this. Of course it is a good possibility. As such, we will need
to remove you from any possible targets, starting with the King."

She jumped up and started pacing. “A don’t wanna leave him again! We spent so much time apart!
How can A just go!?"

“If we wish to safeguard his life, this is one of the only ways we can guarantee it. You are a trained
assassin, Lady Rayla, you do not need weapons to kill, therefore removing them would not disable
you enough to permit you to stay.”

“Tie me up, then! A don’t care, A just don’t wanna leave!”

“That is an option, however, you have certain duties that would be impossible for you to perform”,
he sighed, “Do you think it would be better if we involved Sir Callum in this conversation? Given
your relationship, I wanted to broach the subject with you first, to avoid sowing distrust before we
had not collected more evidence.”

“He’s my summand! We better!”, snapped Rayla.

“Mh. I will fetch the Lord. Wait here, please.”

Helmond got up and left the room.

The sleeper agent was waiting for the sound of a key, locking her in. When it didn’t come, she
cursed the old man for being too trusting.

Anger and helplessness made her kick the solid stone wall. She just wanted to scream. It felt as
though she was destined to be someone’s tool, a cog in someone’s machine. She wanted control
over her life, her destiny. The fact that they could use her like this made her sick. The entirety of
her teenage years she had spent walking in the footsteps of her parents, believing in the mission of
the Lucid, the protection of Xadia and Scotian culture. Only when her and Callum had become a
couple had she realized how restricting and shackling their doctrine was.
Fierce hate was developing in her for the people she once called comrades. Wynda had stirred these embers, but this whipped them into a storm of fire that would turn the organization to ash in due course if Rayla was given the opportunity.

The door opened and a concerned looking Callum stepped over the threshold, followed by a somber Helmond.

“Fawn. Tell me”, her King prompted, offering her a hug.

Looking into his concerned, loving eyes, Rayla knew it. He would be defenseless if her attack surprised him. She would kill him. It was as certain as her next breath. Given the chance to, the command, she would. Her body would move in a way she had trained a hundred times.

She would bend his neck over her shoulder until it snapped.

And it would be easy.
Callum was sitting on the floor, mulling over what he had just heard from his summand. The story sounded outlandish, especially given what Taog had told him. Mind alteration wasn't a thing any magic could do. Abyssal calls merely made it easier to meditate, to find deep focus. Acies didn't show the contents of the target's head, only what they perceived using their senses.

If magic couldn't do this sort of thing, it was hard to believe that it could be done at all. Still, the King had no choice but to believe his mentor's hunch. He was the expert.

"We need a gentle approach that doesn’t raise suspicions. Telling people about this is only going to make them scared of you, fawn. We’ll act as if we don’t know, make sure there’s someone between the two of us at all times and find out what the Lucid is planning. Anything else might tip them off and ruin our advantage here", said the King.

“Advantage? What advantage? They know Helmond’s here so they’ll probably guess that he’d find out and warn us about this”, argued Rayla.

"Very true, we cannot discount the idea that they have already abandoned this scheme. Given the timeline of events it might be that they started it before my presence here was known to them. Or, worse, they do not see us knowing about the Lady's condition as a significant hindrance", Helmond said, rubbing his chin, "Either way, we cannot be sure of anything, so we must operate under the assumption that their plan is progressing as they expected. As for our current dilemma, I may have a solution, Excellences, but you will not like it. We could poison you, Lady Rayla. Incapacitate you with a dilution of leaf climb--"

"You want to put her under?! That's worse than imprisonment!", objected Callum.

Helmond shook his head. "I meant to restrain her. Make it look as though she is stricken with some paralyzing illness. Just dose her enough to take away the potential she has as a weapon. Of course, there is risk to this, as w--"

“I’ll do it”, said Rayla, not missing a beat, “It allows me to do all the Queen stuff and be with Callum.”

“Fawn! We don’t even know for sure if y--”
He was cut off as she darted around him, coming to rest in a pose that would allow her to apply shearing force to his head and body using her shoulder as a pivot. Helmond was reacting, but had also not expected her aggressive move.

“Don’t know fer sure !?”, spat the queen-to-be, “If this was serious , you’d be dead now! I’m not takin’ that risk!”

She let him go and he spun to embrace her with tears in his eyes. “You shouldn't have to take poison to be around me, it’s not fair!”

His Queen nodded stiffly. “It isn’t, but it’s what I choose. They’re tryin’ to make me a puppet and I won’t have it!”, she lifted his chin and kissed him. “It’s part of the ‘bein’ with Callum’ package, I guess.”

He broke into gasping sobs and Rayla realized how badly she had just wounded him. “I don’t want you to! I don’t! You can’t! If that means we can’t be close and you can’t marry me or be Quee--”

“I know what I want!”, she bellowed, interrupting him again. This startled him into wide-eyed attention, “Somehow, at some point, I let them get to me. Dropped my guard, like I did with Onni. Maybe it was her, who knows? Timeframe sure works out. Takin’ the poison and gettin’ sick from it... It’s only payin’ the price. Helmond, how does it work?”

The ex-agent opened his mouth, but Callum spoke overtrop of him. An exasperated frown started to manifest on the King’s mentor. Emotions were running high.

“How do you not see yourself as the victim here?!”, the hothead accosted his summand, “You’ve done nothing to deserve this!”

The queen-to-be scoffed, equally upset. “You’re right. I’m the victim. But knowin’ that doesn’t help right now. It’s not like I can drag the Lucid in front of an arbiter and get them all locked up, you know? I have to do somethin’ to make sure that I’m the last victim in this chain, and unless I wanna abandon you or rot in a prison some more, this is it.”

He watched her turn to face her elder, despair tearing at his mien.

“Well, Helmond?”, she asked.
“I will have to confer with Dr. Cardwell. He is the royal physician and has studied well on elven anatomy. Together we will be able to put together the potion”, said the Ex-Legate pensively, “Lady Rayla, I have to once more warn you of this. I am not quite sure if it can be done without lasting side effects. Imprisonment would pose less of a risk to your health.”

“Way I see it, that’s not really true. Imagine how people like Bertram of Rhodia would react if they got wind of this. If they had even a whiff of proof that I was out to kill my own summand, their King? I’d probably be dead before the next mornin’.”

“A grim but fair point, Milady”, admitted Helmond with a sigh.

Callum wanted to challenge her more, dissuade her from going through with this insane plan, but he too was stuck in a vise. They had set their marriage in motion, things were being prepared. Revealing that Rayla was sick would complicate things more than they were already but nowhere near as much as revealing that she was potentially deadly to the people around her.

The King straightened and smoothed out his clothes in a motion that brought some arrest to his emotions. “So, what happens if Rayla doesn’t show any signs of attacking me and we can’t figure out what the Lucid was planning for her to do? Do you just keep taking the poison? Forever?”

“I don’t wanna think that far ahead right now”, said Rayla with a shudder.

“You have to. This is your life we’re talking about. Your entire life”, he gave her a vicious frown. “As King of Katolis, I’m telling you both this; If you can’t figure out this mess to my satisfaction by July 23rd, I’m cancelling the wedding and then... I-I’ll exile Rayla to Xadia. I will not let you throw yourself into the grinder like th--”

“Hold on just a second, I sai--”, hissed Rayla.

“Silence!”, bellowed the King, “You do not cut off a King in his own Castle! Look! There’s nothing I’d rather do than hold you and care for you, the consequences be damned, but I can’t let you do this. You’re the kind of person who would take this poison for the rest of her life because you wouldn’t let yourself near me without it! But! You wouldn’t be happy, you’d want to go out and travel and train and be active! You told me you missed working out, back at Otark’s Barn, and that was only two weeks! Unless you actually get hurt, I don’t want you to have to deal with acting the part for eternity!”
“But I--”

“This isn’t a negotiation, Rayla! You’re not Queen yet, so I’m telling you, and you will do as you’re told! You can’t force yourself on me!”

Her mouth compressed into a thin line. She understood that his angry words came from a place of love, but right now she wanted to smack him and call him an idiot. Instead, tears started to gather in her eyes. “Callum... July 23rd... that’s a week. What... do you think we’ll be able to dig up in a week?”

His nostrils flared. “I know. We shouldn’t have hurried.”

“Ahem! Melodrama will not help us here, Excellences”, grumbled Helmond with obvious exasperation at the dramatic youths, “Do you not think that people would be receptive to postponing the wedding if we told them that the queen-to-be was sick?”

“The problem is still the same”, griped Rayla, “When do we stop postponin’? He’s right though, Callum, you have to at least give us a half year! At least!”

The King didn’t waste any time to nod weakly. “Yeah. Makes sense. You’re right, Helmond, I...”, his hands covered his face, “Ugh... I’m not thinking straight.”

“I cannot fault you for it, Sire, I doubt I would do much better in your situation”, his mentor lied, "Much thought will go into this and maybe a better path will emerge from them. As per usual, I recommend we keep the circle of the knowing as small as possible. Dr. Cardwell needs to know, but I believe we can safely exclude everyone else. I will get him filled in and set out to gather as much information as I can tonight”, the Ex-Legate sighed, “It is likely I will have to cut a few ropes as I cross them.”

“I will raise this with the Queen of Dragons, via diplomatic channels”, hissed Callum, “Maybe she can explain her agency’s behaviour!”

“I can not recommend that. There is no guarantee that she was not the one who ordered the procedure. It is impossible to say what Regina Draconis’ response would be. However, on that topic, my contacts have let on that there is some disagreement between the intelligence community and the civilian leaders at the moment. This might be an angle we can attack later, especially with
the Children of Elarion in play. Please, Sire, wait with any reactions until I have exhausted my resources.”

Rayla drew her summand back into a tight, desperate embrace. “Dummy... I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault, fawn, it’s really not”, he said, soothingly petting her hair.

Helmond languished as they caressed each other for a while. It started to bother the King eventually. “Didn’t you say you had work to do?”

“Apologies. You seem to be under the mistaken impression that I will leave you alone with her. I am sorry, Excellences, but I already had my issues with letting you wander the castle earlier. Now that we’ve spoken, I cannot justify being so neglectful.”

“So, what, you’ll lock her in here?”

“Unless you command me not to, I am afraid so. At least until the poison shows effect”, groused the ex-agent.

“It’s okay, he’s right”, sighed Rayla, separating from her summand, “Go ahead. I’ll come find you once I’m all... dosed up, I guess.”

Frowning, the King kissed his Queen and walked toward the door. “Love you, fawn.”

“Love you too, dummy. Don’t wait too long, you’ll probably need your sleep.”

He scoffed, walking outside.

Helmond gave her an apologetic look. “I am very sorry, Milady. It will not take me long to find Dr. Cardwell, I promise.”

The door closed behind the two men and this time, the key rattled in the lock.
Callum was trying to focus on the report of rebel activity in front of him, but the sentences wouldn’t stick to his brain. It was dreadfully late at this point. From his window, he could see that the lights of the capital were reduced to countable numbers.

There was a scratch at the door.

“Come”, the King simply said, turning to face the entrance.

Horace stepped inside with a tray of bread, cheeses and vegetables. “Sire, I saw your light still burning and wanted to see if you needed anything.”

“Just a lot of work to do. If you don’t mind, I’d like to get back to it.”

“Permit me two, uh, observations”, the persistent night attendant said, pointedly lifting the tray, “You have not eaten. Further, the bed seems empty, you are not whispering and I do not see the Lady Rayla anywhere.”

“Nosy old man”, smirked the King, “If you must know, she’s had some issues and went to see Cardwell.”

“Ah. Well, I can only pity the poor girl, I’d wager she has a lot of new sickness to get through. Anything she might need?”

“She’s gonna need you to not call her `girl’”, grumbled Callum. With a look at the snoring glow toad on his bed he added, “Has Zym shown up yet?”

The old man placed the food on the only free table space in the room; Rayla’s desk. “The Dragon Prince has not returned, no.”

The King sighed. “Here’s to hoping he’s doing okay. Thank you, Horace.”
“Pleasant night, Sire. Oh, er, by the way. Happy Birthday.”

The King gave him a tired smirk, motioning at his own, overflowing desk. “Thank you, especially for all these gifts!”

Snickering, the attendant left, closing the door behind himself. A moment later, it opened again and he stepped through once more.

“Horace, pl--”, Callum started with some anger in his voice, but he saw that the old man had gotten out of someone’s way.

Rayla wobbled into the room, supported by a cane on her left and Dr. Cardwell on the right.

“Dankschee, Horace”, said the doctor.

The King shot up to lend them a hand. He helped the queen-to-be to rest on their gratuitous bed. The physician gave him a grateful look and leaned onto the nightstand next to the bed, puffing and fanning his face.

“H-ey dafty”, she croaked with a strained smile, “If ye ever w-want tae feel old, A ken how ye can get the full experience.”

“How do you feel?”

“Mmh, like A need... tae sleep”, she said, her eyes already closed.

Horace had very slowly walked out and Callum made sure that he was actually gone before facing his personal physician.

The red-faced, rotund Rhodian looked rather shaken, an expression that wasn’t often seen on the optimistic doctor. His spectacles sat low on his pointy nose rather than framing his gray eyes. The man’s plump face with the fading red-brown hair was covered in light sweat from the recent exercise.
“Majestät, I have done as Herr Helmond häs bidden”, he said, “Not how I häd hoped meeting our Lady. Nästy business, but the Queen is physically very hälthy, I häve little doubt thät she will be alright once we stop giving her the... deifelszeig.”

“What are we giving her?”

“Ah, uh, Jungfrauspindl, err, you know, em...”, he snapped his fingers, looking for the Common translation of the word, “Ach! Virgin Spindle! It’s used medicinally in humans to treat heädaches, but for elfs? Oh! Uff! It häs a bäd effect! I think the closest compärison I can draw would be a really bäd flu. The joints ache and the muscles don’t wörk so well”, he motioned himself ahead with a turn of his hand, “the heäd hurts, food doesn’t want to stay down, the mood is terrible, sleep is, uh, needed... thät sort of thing.”

The physician seemed to puff up and scoffed, “Helmond knows his plänt weäpons , but really only the wörst of them all. I’m not going to poison my future Queen!”

Rayla snickered weakly. “See that’s how A ken yer a canny lad.”

"Die Dame vergebe mir, I do not understand."

Calem smirked at them both, “She thinks you're smart, Doc. You’re sure the poison isn’t going to hurt her long-term?”

“As I said, little doubt, but side effects häppen even with the most cärefully concocted medicines. She’s heälthy for now, änd we’ll häve a very close eye on her. I’m pulling the plug on this little ädventure if she gets äny wörse thän this. Two days without the medicine, änd she will be bäck to full strength. We did a few Ah-Beh tests”, he motioned the lifting of weights, “She’s, in her own wörds, a "wet blänket`. You will want to häve her food cut for her by the attendants.”

The doctor got up with a groan. “I recommend you go to sleep, Hoheit, it's important. Is there anything else I cán help you with right now?”

“No, doctor. Thank you and have a pleasant night”, said the King, honestly relieved at the probable safety of the tincture.
Cardwell nodded and bid his royals a good night.

Callum took off his crown and sat next to his Queen, petting her hand.

“I’m sorry”, he choked.

“Bah, we both are”, said Rayla with an amused glint in her eyes, “Take some advantage of the situation and arm-wrestle me, ye could win fer once!”

He playfully set himself up and she placed her hand in his. Callum didn’t even feel like pushing. There was no strength in her grip.

“Can I kiss you instead?”, he asked, trying not to sound too upset.

“Oh, please do.”

He snuggled up to her and was glad that she was here, even knowing that she might try to kill him. It was odd, drawing comfort from her disability.

“Not how A imagined our first night in Katolis”, scoffed Rayla. She smirked weakly. “Happy Birthday, dummy. A don’t have anythin’ to give ye just yet, sorry.”

“You have no idea how often I’ve pictured you asleep in this bed, fawn. It’s so awesome that you’re here, the best gift I could’ve ever asked for.”

Her brows furrowed with still more jest in her eyes. “Why would ye waste yer time picturin’ me sleepin’? Much more fun thin’s to do in a bed!”

The King snorted into her stomach. “You’re really cute when you’re asleep, you know? Mouth open, snoring, maybe drooling a bit...”

“Ha-ha”, she chortled, “Way to make fun of a poor, sick woman! Speakin’ of, A’m way past ready to open my mouth and drool a bit, if ye catch my drift.”
“Sounds good”, he hummed and got up to blow out the lanterns that illuminated the room until there was just one left on his nightstand.

When he turned around, she was in the process of pulling off her top, struggling with her clumsy extremities.

“Do you want help?”

“Ah, nah, A gotta figure out how to use these numb grabbers enough not to drop my food in front of the snobs...”

She eventually managed to dress for bed and brush her teeth in their bathroom with some assistance from Callum.

Yawning, she joined her summand under the light covers. Feeling them between her fingers, she sighed. “Everythin’s so fancy. And yet, not.”

“What do you mean?”

“Uh, we do have a lot of nice thin’s. These blankets, for example. Soft and comfy. But, the lamps are all just candles or oil-fed, there’s no hot water in the bathroom and the, uh, toilet is basically a hole to the outside, right?”

“Yeah”, grumbled Callum, “We have a lot to learn from Xadia. I just kind of hope we’ll get to that point.”

The queen-to-be snuggled up to her warm summand, her own body feeling cold and stiff. She didn’t want to let on how terrible the experience really was. “Yeah. A say we’ll get that done the day after tomorrow.”
Claudia watched her new friend carefully. The queen-to-be had insisted on not needing an escort, but Callum had forced her to take two members of the Crown Guard.

Five minutes into town, it was already obvious how needed those soldiers were. People were afraid of the elf, and they showed it. A scowl here, a frown there, a few words, hissed to another person behind a shielding hand. Who knew what would have happened without the soldiers present?

The steady ‘clonk’ of Rayla’s cane on the cobbled streets didn’t exactly help her avoid the stares.

“Are you sure you wouldn’t rather go back? You look miserable”, asked the mage.

“Are you kiddin’? I’m glad to be away from Callum for a bit, he’s fussin’ over me worse than any nurse I’ve ever had!”

The two women snickered.

Claudia leaned in. “It’s not just you I’m worried about. I’m sure you’ve noticed.”

“Yea, the folk don’t seem to think I’m too great. Can’t blame them too much, more likely than not I’m the first four-fingered, pointy-eared, blue-blooded, horn-toutin’ person they’ve ever seen.”

“You really do look noticeably different from us”, said Piper who was trailing behind them. “Still, I’m not sure I could take the obvious disgust of these commoners so lightly in your place.”

“Pipe, you’re not noble, what gives?”, asked Claudia with an incredulous frown at her shrugging assistant.

“Neither am I”, smirked Rayla, pointing at a store advertising art supplies, “Do you think we’ll get anythin’ he might like in there?”
“Uh, he probably has all that”, said the High Mage. She then snorted, “There’s a sentence I’ll say a lot today. It’s not easy finding a gift for a King.”

“I was guessin’ so”, grumbled the queen-to-be, “Do you have an idea of what to get him?”

“Last few times, he told me not to bother, so I didn’t. We could get him mage’s equipment, but he’s not that kind of mage. Pretty impossible to find anything other than dark magic kit this side of the Breach”, said Claudia, “Hey, didn’t he order us to eat some cake?”

She maneuvered her group into a tea house where Rayla stiffly shuffled into the wall-side seat of a booth so she could be shielded from prying eyes.

A cranky looking young woman approached their table. She perked up visibly when she noticed the fine clothes and even more so when her eyes tracked over the miserable looking elf. “Oh, uh, wow!”, she gaped before laughing at herself, “I’m so sorry! Uh, I’ve never, uh... served royalty before! I don’t know what to do!”

"Uh, just do what you always do”, Rayla grinned, hoping to look friendly, "I'm bettin' I'm newer at my job than you are at yours."

The young woman didn't seem sure how to react and Rayla felt bad for having put her in a bind.

Claudia took the initiative, smiling at the server, “Oh, how long have you worked here? I come here all the time!”

“Mmh, I think I started a year ago, Ma’am.”

The Mage frowned. “Wow. I really haven’t gotten out much. Do you guys still have that triple chocolate thing?”

The server’s eyes kept flitting to Rayla, her nervousness was palpable. It didn’t help the queen-to-be’s mood much to know that someone who very obviously wanted to talk to her didn't feel free to do so. At the same time, the queen-to-be didn’t quite know what to do to fix the situation. Did she have to actively give this girl leave to speak to her?
“Oh, the, uh, ganache stuffed brownies? Yeah, we do. I’ll put that down for you, then?”

"That does sound good, I’ll have that, too", agreed Rayla and sighed internally as the server nearly exploded with glee.

Piper simply shrugged her agreement.

The three of them tried to manoeuvre their two guards into having something as well, but were met with professional bemusement.

A while later, Rayla’s mouth told her brain that things were looking up. “I hope this isn’t gonna make me spew my guts up like breakfast did”, she sighed, sporting a dreamy expression.

Piper and Claudia snorted into their own deserts, the mismatch between her words and tone too much to bear.

“So, if you don’t mind me asking, what’s actually wrong with you?”, asked Piper.

"You mean health-wise or just in general?”, the queen-to-be shrugged with a bemused smirk. “Doctor says it’s a flu gone wrong or somethin’. To be honest, I have a bear of a time understandin’ him.”

“Yeah, his Rhodian accent is pretty harsh. I wonder how he got to be so educated without learning Common properly.”

“Pipe, that’s so rude”, her boss chastised with pursed lips, “I’m sure he’d think your Rhodian was terrible.”

The lanky scientist merely shrugged, taking another bite of her giant brownie.

Rayla asked, “What about me? I’ve got a bit of an accent.”

“I understand you, yours isn’t very thick. Cardwell sounds like an idiot. You sound kinda exotic”,
Piper answered while chewing.


They finished their meal, talking about possible gift ideas for Callum. It was a challenge. The conclusion was pretty clear.

“I think there really isn’t much we can buy for him. Hm... Did he ever mention something he wanted to do? Something he wanted you to do for him?”, Caludia asked, tapping her nose.

Rayla had a hard time not thinking of his request from the Breach. It didn’t strike her as a good idea to offer that sort of thing as a gift when she wasn’t even sure if the both of them would enjoy it. Not to mention that right now, walking was an effort. Heck, even biting through the fresh carrot she’d had with her breakfast had been a challenge!

Either way, it wasn’t something she’d discuss with Claudia of all people.

She chose to immediately change the topic. “Not that I remember, no. Actually here’s another good one. We have a bet goin’ and I think I’m gonna win, but I haven’t been able to think of somethin’ to make him do once he loses. He’s gonna make me do a life-drawin’ class with him.”

Piper snorted while Claudia gaped. “Wait, he’s asking you to pose for his class?!”

Rayla flushed, laughing. “No! Gosh, no! He wants me to come draw, that’d be embarrassin’ enough!”

“So how about, if he loses, he has to go pose?”

Silence settled over the table as Claudia and Rayla stared at Piper.

“Uh... or not?”

“Don’t get me wrong, that’s hilarious, but he’s the King. I don’t think he’d ever live that down”,
snickered the Mage.

“A-and the last thin’ I want is for more people to see him like that…”, stuttered Rayla.

"Sort of reserved for you, isn't it", said Piper.

"Yeah well, it’s kinda in my culture to not want to show everyone mine or his naked form!", replied the queen-to-be, “Uh, Piper, You really aren't one to mince words!"

"I find it easier to say what I'm thinking than leaving people to guess."

Rayla shrug-nodded, "Havin' spoken with Kingsley, I sorta see that as a good thin'."

The server came by to take their payment from Claudia, again very nervously excited. when they had all gotten up, she carefully approached Rayla, trying not to spook the guards. "G-good luck with everything!"

The words blubbered out of the young woman who immediately turned and scuttled into the kitchen.

While she still felt awkward about the interaction, Rayla was incredibly happy about the positive message.

The three courtiers stepped outside, enjoying the increasing warmth of the morning.

“Hey, uh, Claudia? Opeli’s been teachin’ me about royal behaviour and all that, but... I really wanted our server to be comfortable talkin’ to me. I don’t suppose you know what I should’ve done?'", the queen-to-be asked under her breath.

The Mage looked at her with a somewhat surprised expression. “Mh. You know, I think that’s really up to you. If you're okay with people just talking to you as they please, you can just, you know, let them, just like you did with her.”
“How does Callum do it?”

“I have no clue. He never got to go out with me like this.”

After a long pause, the mage hastily added, “The, uh, Council wouldn’t have it.”

Her tone was frosty and Rayla understood. She didn’t have a good way to move on from the topic and wasn’t comfortable talking about it, but her brain was now busy turning the situation over.

They hadn't made it too far from the tea shop when a familiar whistle sounded in the air.

Rayla looked around expectantly and found the Shadow Hawk as it hit the cobblestone.

Claudia saw her struggle to bend without falling over and picked it up for her.

"I’ve got it, Clau... Thanks. Ugh, this is super annoyin'!", grumbled the elf.

"Some flu! Are you sure you're alright?", the mage asked.

"Just achin' joints. I'll live."

She unrolled the letter and read it quietly.

Taog had found some rather alarming information about Acies.

"Uhhh... I need to get this back to the castle. Luckily, I have an idea for a gift now", she smiled slightly, "Let’s find a grocer."

Her entourage swiveled slightly to make a sharp right. Claudia leaned in.
“Also”, whispered the mage, “I had an idea for my gift. I just need to talk to you about it in private.”
Callum ruffled his hair in frustration. It was his birthday, but the amount of work that towered on his desk didn’t let him unwind.

It was such that, when the door opened, he immediately took the chance to be distracted.

“Hey fawn!”, he greeted his summand as she wobbled into the room.

Rayla made straight for the bed and sat, panting heavily.

“Hi”, she said tonelessly.

He sat next to her and rubbed her back. “Weird to see you out of breath.”

“Frustratin’ is more like it. I’m okay.”

“Mmh. How was your morning?”

“Surprisingly fun. Piper’s a rude butt, and I love her for it. It’s refreshin’ to have someone just say what’s on their mind. Claudia’s... I dunno, she seems friendly and all, but also kind of mad. Like she could explode at any moment.

“I know what you mean. She’s developed a mean streak over the years. I don’t know if that’s because she’s overworking herself or cause of the dark magic. Maybe both. What did you guys get up to?”

“We went to some stores, had some cake and laughed at me bein’ a dumb royal.”

“Did you at least keep the cake down? And what do you mean, dumb royal?”
“Eh, I haven’t laughed chunks just yet”, smirked the queen-to-be, “Most people just sorta gave me the stink-eye. There were a few who looked excited to see me. Those I wanted to talk to, but I... didn’t know how to, I guess.”

Callum snorted. “Well, you are kind of famous around here. People aren’t going to know how to approach you, you need to make the first step. What that looks like is up to you. I try to say ‘Hi, how are you’ and listen to their problems for a bit when I get the chance to go out. Plus, you can’t just talk to those who already like you, you should pick up conversation with people who look like they hate your gut. That’s the only way to get them to like you.”

“Oh, hate me more”, groused Rayla.

“Eh, hate happens automatically. It’s way easier than getting over that initial reaction of ‘oh no, there’s something different about that person’!”

“I’m an elf. We, uh, sorta kinda ethnic-cleansed your ancestors out of the east a bit. Pretty sure the reaction’s gonna be a bit stronger than that.”

“That was a thousand years ago! Lots of evil shit happened between our people before and since then. It’s childish to keep score across generations and I feel like we need to take today as today, not as today plus thousands of years of history. Otherwise things are going to get tangled and impossible. We’ll end up blaming people for things that happened so long ago that their great-grandparents don’t remember them. Uh, before you say it, I know that’s naive, people hold on to grudges for politic’s sake. Just... being a bit idealistic.”

She gave him a tired smile. “True, but I wish everyone was willin’ to start over, smarty.”

“Smarty?!”, he laughed.

“Hey, ‘dummy’ didn’t feel right there.”

“So, since we’re making new nicknames - You’re all grown up, should I call you ‘my deer’, then?”

It took her a moment to interpret the sentence. “Boooo! BOOOO!! Terrible puns!”, she laughed,
“Taog’s letter came to find me in town. Here, take it, before I find the strength to tickle you for what just came out of that mouth of yours!”

She passed him the letter and he unrolled it.

**Hey boss,**

**Sorry, it took me a bit to get back to Zander. Thanks for the excuse, I can’t deal with my parents for longer than a few days. It was also good to hear from you, even if the message isn’t super cheery. He’s getting more and more interesting, that human of yours. Hope he’s alright.**

**So, into the meat of things. Here’s what I found.**

**Star magic isn’t common, as you probably know. The material I sourced to get to the bottom of Acies is no more recent than 232 Luna Tenebris. I’m hoping this’ll be the last time I ever have to work with thousand year old originals, the archivers are very, very particular people.**

**From what I’ve been able to piece together, Acies is a master level spell from the Books of Farsight.**

**For about two thousand years, star mages were convinced that the original creator had fumbled the invocation somehow because it stayed active and tired people out over time. They didn’t even consider secondary effects until spell cancellation was invented and a mage named Orophobos managed to break the so-called ‘tail effect’ using Finite Incantatem Astra. I’ve attached the instructions for that one, by the way.**

**Lucky thing, too, it’s one of the few spells under the star arcanum that’s still documented really well. The Mage wars destroyed a lot of information from that time.**

**Unfortunately, Acies isn’t one of those and information about it gets a bit more sparse here. The only other thing I thought might be something of note was a short chapter in a book of collected letters and stories.**

**It’s an eerily similar tale of a star mage trying to find one of their enemies and their entire party being driven mad. The story ends with them all killing each other thanks to some extremely terrifying dreams. It’s anecdotal and I can’t find another source that speaks of this, so take it with**
a handful of salt, but supposedly, the mage they were looking for was Aaravos himself. We’ve been hearing that name a lot lately and it’s making people very uneasy.

Now, this is me speculating based on those snippets and my own thoughts, but what if Acies was a two-way deal? The first instant, you get insight into the person you’ve targeted, but then the long tail allows them to communicate those same pieces of information to you at will? That’s the only way I can see the spell having a maddening effect without violating Mens Petra. They just keep showing you the things that they feel you anxious over, constantly. It’ll at last put you on edge, I’m thinking.

I hope that helps. Let me know if you learn something new.

Taog

Ps. I just realized that maybe, ‘Mens Petra’ isn’t a term you poor non-scholars know, so here’s the full text of the axiom: ‘Magick is will and want made manifest in the world by spoken activation; Hence, no arcana, invocation or philtre enables the caster or target to touch the hollow of the mind as it is; be it to investigate, alter or consume the words and images therein; as this would expose or alter not the world but the will and want itself.’

Callum pensively studied the second page that described a gesture and activation phrase that would allow him to cancel Acies.

“Well. That’s kind of annoying”, grumbled the King, “So what, I hooked myself up to Viren and he sent us bad thoughts?”

“Sounds the part”, said Rayla, kissing his cheek, “Strange that he’d be able to do that. He’s not exactly a primal mage. Definitely not a star mage.”

“Yeah, but he’s a really experienced mage overall. Who knows, maybe he read the same story at one point or another. Either way, now that I know how to cancel the spell, I’ll look him up more often”, the King said, petting her thigh with his right.

“Maybe try it on me a few times, first”, said Rayla, watching his hand move.

Callum nodded, drawing the rune with his left hand. Before Rayla could look up to notice, he said “Acies Rayla” and she felt the prickles of frisson wash over her.
He seemed to faint, falling backward into the sheets.

“I didn’t mean now, dummy!””, the queen-to-be grumbled.

A moment later, the Mage opened his eyes with an expression of furious anger and disbelief, cutting the cancellation gesture into the air as he was sitting up.

“Finite!”, he activated, then whipped around to face his Queen. “Why didn’t you tell me?!”

“Tell you what?!”

“You’re in a lot of pain, Rayla! You’re even scared!”

“So what?”, she mumbled.

He stared at her, fuming. “You’re doing it again! Protecting me! Warrior Princessing your way through something we should be dealing with together!”

“I just don’t wanna worry you. You have enough on y...”, she stopped, her hand coming up to rub her forehead, “Ugh. I’m repeatin’ myself.”

“You really are”, he embraced her carefully, “Look, love, I don’t want you to pretend. You have to put on faces for other people, not for me, okay? If you’re miserable, I wanna know about it.”

“Uh-huh. Well, what if I didn’t like the way you handled me this mornin’?!”

“All I did was give you water after you threw up.”

“No, you held my hair while I was pukin’, then gave me water, then you hovered over me and made sure that I drank it all, then got Cardwell, then made sure I ate some more food... it... it was a bit much.”
He smirked sheepishly. “Best nurse-butler?”

His summand rolled her eyes at him. “Dork. Tell you what. You promise not to lose it over me and I’ll let myself gripe a little more, okay?”

“Hrr, all right.”

They kissed and gave each other a sad look. Then, they kissed again to make each other not see it.

Callum then said, “Wanna help me do some paperwork so I can relax a little at dinner? There’s a few letters to the houses that you could respond to about the wedding... and moving it to a later date.”

“Oh! By the by, letters! Can you help me with Honsa’s? I’ve been addin’ stuff to it, but I...”, she groaned, “I can’t draw a bow right now!”

“Yeah, sure! Hopefully it’ll end better than my first try”, he snickered.

They got up. Callum grabbed the bow and arrow that Rayla pointed out to him and walked out on their balcony where Pip sat in the sun. Noon was approaching and the scent of cooking wafted from the kitchens.

“Oh man”, said Callum, suddenly dizzy. He steadied himself on the baluster, “Acies is no joke.”

“Are you alright?”

“Just need a sec.”

He breathed evenly until the world stopped being so blurry, then straightened himself out and strode further onto the platform.
Pip eyed them curiously but didn’t let Rayla pass without clattering his beak at her.

Callum reached out and pet the animal. “Now, now. She’s gonna be my wife and the Queen of Katolis, you shouldn’t try so hard to get on her bad side.”

Pip squawked loudly and turned his back on the royals.

“He really doesn’t approve”, snickered Rayla.

“Well, it’s a good thing he’s just a bird”, grumbled the King, “Bad enough that you got glared at in town.”

“At least Bait likes me! I found him sleepin’ in the bend of my knees this mornin’!”

“Yeah he’s getting more snuggly as time goes on. Probably misses Ez more than I do, he spent all day and night with the little man.”

The two of them sighed wistfully. Thinking about the past didn’t serve them well.

Snapping out of his nostalgia, the King nocked the arrow and pointed himself eastward. “Honsa!”, he said and let fly.

The arrow dropped, clattering into the courtyard below.

“This is gettin’ stupid”, said the queen-to-be, “She can’t always be under water, I’m gettin’ really worried”

“I could... try Acies?”

The elf studied her summand for a moment. “Are you sure? I don’t want you to knock yourself out.”
“I figure I have one more in me. Don’t worry, I’ll be okay. It’s not just about Honsa, we’ll also see if the cancellation worked.”

Rayla sighed, then shrugged with wry smirk. “I guess I’ll sleep in armor, then. If you come for me while I’m a sook like this, you might murder me in the most ironic twist of fate”

His shocked expression told her that the prospect was about as appealing to him as the flipside had been to her.

“I... wasn’t bein’ serious. Doubt she’s gonna send you mad.”

Callum nodded, then looked at his hands, unsure what to do.

“Just go for it, dummy. It’ll be fine. If you can’t reach her, we know the cancellation didn’t work. If you can, you can just... cut her off, right?”

“Wow, logic!”, snorted Callum, “Alright.”

He sat on the ground, drew the rune and said “Acies Honsa.”

Deep Confusion, a hint of fear.

A sentence spoken in a language that Callum didn’t know, but felt like he recognized.

Coursing water in her gills. Pleasant cold. Webbed hands on her ears.

Nothing but darkness and an elven face, warped by the refractions of water, barely lit by a bluish-green source of light.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to powerofanime1 for inspiring the quip Callum makes about her nickname.
This reaches all the way back to Hard Priorities (Gave You Another Name)
“Hm. You might want to rethink that”, Callum chuckled.

“Wha’?”

“You wrote: ‘Although Councillor Bertram’s reception was not the most friendly, I would be delighted to welcome your family at our reception’”

“Well, that’s the truth though, isn’t it?”

Callum smiled at her as she crossed her arms. “You already offended Rho. You shouldn’t double down, I’m worried about what their response is going to be.”

“Not sure I follow? He insulted me! Betram was bein’ racist and awful and I’m just supposed to not respond to that?”

“You could’ve told him straight up that it was inappropriate, but he was... well, he was testing you. Seeing if you could be baited into being rude in response to him being rude. You allowed him to lead the conversation and now he has political power connected to that moment.”

Rayla blinked at him. “So what? Not like I handed him a blade? What could he even do with that?”

“I’ll give you an example. Rho is pro-peace but against elves. They say, make peace and then stop talking to them. The background thinking there is probably that they want to build up a bigger army to go fight later. You’ve just handed Betram the ability to say; Look at this elf, she’s rude and easily provoked. Why would we want a discourse with these people who think of us as lesser, have shown it through their actions a thousand years ago and again with me?”

The queen-to-be frowned. “So what should I have done, then?”

“You could’ve told him: Betram, it’s not appropriate for you to insult me, especially as a greeting.”
“Huh. That’s... really plain?”

“It isn’t as much fun as trying to pun and jest, sure, but it’s also not the right time to do that. The rules change a little if it’s in front of a crowd, then it becomes about embarrassing your opponent. That’s what you did, but nobody was there to jeer him”, Callum smirked, “I have to admit, I almost laughed my butt off. I loved to hear those words come out of your mouth and his face when you were done, but... yeah. Not the right arena for that sort of thing.”

“Alright. I won’t make that mistake twice. I’ll rewrite the letter.”

Rayla set out to do just that while Callum turned back to his own pile. He was dealing with the foreign nobles they had invited to their wedding. A smile seemed to persist on his lips, even though the work was boring. Having his summand in the room with him made the entire thing more bearable and he was honestly looking forward to hearing her thoughts on all the decisions they would have to make.

There was a knock on the door.

“Come”, said Callum, turning to face it.

Helmond stepped inside and stood at attention. “You asked to see me?”

They told him what they knew about Honsa and the agent’s ever present frown deepened somewhat. “Forgive me if I missed something here, but why don’t you simply keep casting this spell? Seems to me it is a rather convenient way to find someone’s whereabouts and status.”

“It knocks me unconscious and I get pretty terrible headaches from it. I don’t wanna overdo it”, said the King, “I’m not sure if it’s actually hurting me, it sure feels like it, though.”

“You’ve also been out for a bit longer every time you’ve used it”, said Rayla.

“Yeah but I think that’s because it’s super draining. I still feel like I need a nap, but there’s all this stuff to do. So Helmond, I’m sorry, but we’re still going to need you to go figure out what that could’ve meant. It’s always just glimpses.”
“A dark place that invokes mild fear. Probably staffed by elves. Elves that speak something other than Draconic, Rune or Common. Hm. Was the language more of a broken hiss or more of a flowing, continuous stream of words?”

“I’d have to say it was continuous.”

Helmond tapped his chin with two fingers. “Fascinating. What you heard might be Abyssal, then, an ancient language much like Draconic.”

“It was”, said Callum suddenly, “It’s the language used to activate Ocean spells, isn’t it?”

“Just so. So, I will wager she was under the influence of magic. Well, while all that sounds rather dire we mustn’t discount the idea that perhaps she is undergoing some treatment and the fear she felt is not from duress but uncertainty.”

“It was under water. So yeah, maybe. There’s a lot of dark places in the sea, she might feel at home there.”

“Either way, I will extend my feelers towards the ocean, see what I can find. In the meantime it would help if you could sense her ever so often and inform me of the result.”

“Mh. I’m thinking tomorrow I’ll start with Viren and do the second invocation for Honsa. Thank you, Helmond, I’m sure you have important duties. Don’t be a stranger at dinner.”

The ex-agent nodded his goodbyes and strode out.

“Interestin’. I hadn’t thought of that. For all we know, that was some kind of ocean elf hospital or somethin’”, Rayla said, kneading her lower lip, “I don’t know much about them, now that I think about it. Just that they like to wear crazy colors.”

“Hm, see but that makes me think it isn’t a good thing. If they dress crazily, wouldn’t you expect them to have their living spaces decorated in the same way?”

“Sure, but what if that’s not... I dunno, restful?”
Out on the Balcony, Pip started screeching like a maniac and Callum bent backwards to look outside. A massive sky-blue shape landed in the courtyard.

“Looks like Zym’s back”, said the King and got up.

A moment later, he stood in front of the dragon, cradling Bait in his hands. His eyes were wide with concern. “You don’t look so good. What happened?”

Rayla looked on from the balcony as Zym spread his wings to inspect himself. There were a few small holes in the flightskins. “Made a mistake, dude. Dumb one. I think I flew too far north and got to some hillbillies who didn’t know that I was here in peace.”

“Well, why didn’t you hunt near the capital like I told you to?! We have an agreement with the farmers here!”

“I know, you said so, but... you know... It was kinda late-ish and people were herding their cattle into barns and I didn’t wanna swoop them...”

“Okay, I appreciate that, but there’s also a lot of game everywhere!”

“I can’t eat deer! They’re too cute and I just... can’t get myself to. I don’t know why, but they have a special place in my heart.”

Rayla snorted on the balcony and Callum had a good idea as to why. Fawn.

“So what happened?”

“I went flying and found a herd still grazing, so I go for an old-looking thing with horns. No problem there, just dig right in, as you do, but then the farmer and his entire village show up with torches and bows and arrows and pitchforks! I didn’t wanna hurt them so I tried getting away. Not so easy when they keep swarming so you can’t take off! Eventually just jumped over a cliff and flew away, but they got a few good ones in. I’m armored, but my poor wings!”
“Is it bad, are you hurting?”

“Nah, bro, this is all just skin. It’ll scar and that’s that. Don’t worry. Dragons love their scars, makes me look dangerous and kinda hot, so I’m not complaining.”

To be heard over the din of Pip’s angry squawking, Rayla shouted, “So how do we find those terrified people to trade for the cow then, you big oaf?”

“Easy, just follow the angry yelling once the maniac bird shuts up”, replied Zym, “Why are you up there?”

“Don’t wanna go down those stairs! Just not feelin’ well, sorry!”

“Sorry to hear that! Feel better! Uh, what’s wrong with that bird, anyway? As I was landing, he just kept lobbing insults my way, telling me that I can’t attack Katolis without retribution, and now he’s just going off on Rayla.”

“What is he saying?”, asked Callum, a little amused.

“Oh, he’s being pretty rude. Something about moon elves coming to kill someone and to stay away from their son... That she doesn’t deserve to stand in ‘her’ place, maybe? Her? I’ve no idea who ‘her’... yeah he’s lost me... my bird is terrible and they always talk fast. And this one is just losing it.”

The King seemed a little tongue tied.

Bait wrestled himself out of his arms and flopped to the ground, hopping toward Zym. ”I see you brought good ol’ Bait. Hey, buddy. Long time no see.”

For a long while, Bait croaked and Zym answered in Draconic.

Eventually, Bait seemed to be done talking, turning to hop off toward the castle’s entrance. The dragon sighed and laid himself down.
“So, what did he say?”, asked Callum eagerly.

“He said they went to Taelin. That rebels surprised them. Ezran told his guards to stand down and then he left with Viren. That’s the last time Bait saw him.”

“Yeah. That... doesn’t help much at all”, said Callum.

“Why not try Acies?”, asked Rayla, quieter now that Pip had cried himself out.

Callum gaped at her, stricken by the realization that he hadn’t even thought to try it.

“Uh... Yeah, duh, of course!”, he said, excitement making his voice rich. For this, he was going to make an exception, bear the migraine and exhaustion if it meant news of his brother. Under the curious glance of Zym, he sat.

The rune seemed easier this time, perhaps his hands grew accustomed to it after the fourth use. “Acies Ezran”, he activated.

Nothing happened.

The rune simply faded.
So far, Callum’s birthday had not worked out so well. Rayla’s presence was about the only good thing about it, but even that was somewhat overshadowed by what he now knew to be a painful, depressed state.

Noon came and went with Lydia coming by to bring them some lunch which Rayla managed to hold on to.

They had just decided to take a break from writing letters to snuggle in bed when someone else knocked.

Callum sat up and grumbled, “Come!”

Opeli strode into the room and froze as she noticed them on the sheets. “And here I was, assuming you would be working on those letters! Postponing your wedding for an unspecified time! And all that after hurrying the preparations! You have not left a good impression!”

“We know and we were. You chose the exact moment we decided to take a breather to walk in here”, groused Callum.

“I can’t help it if I’m sick!”, complained Rayla.

“Of course not! It’s all very unfortunate”, the councillor shook her head and frowned. “I came here to serve you a complaint of house Rho, Majesties”

“Expected it”, smirked Callum, “Let’s hear it.”

Opeli cleared her throat and unfolded a piece of paper in her hand. “It displeases the councillor Bertram to know that the Lady Rayla, whom is to be his Queen, looks down upon him from her privileged position. The great and honorable house Rho concludes that it must remind you that it is a servant to Katolis and thus to her Majesty-to-be and insulting a servant is a mark of incredibly poor character. The slight shall be forgiven if the Lady gives her public apology by noon of the 23rd of July.”
With a huff that came deep from within her chest, Opeli brashly folded the letter back up. “Please try to be more diplomatic next time, or we shall have more than a simple complaint from them.”

“Callum’s already given me the lecture, Councillor. I’ll be _diplomatic_, alright.”

The cheeky smirk on Rayla’s face didn’t inspire confidence.

“They want a _public_ apology for something said in private?”, said Callum, “We’re not doing that, heh. You’re gonna have to say sorry to poor old Bertie when he shows up for my birthday dinner, but we’re not going public with this. Idiots.”

“It was kinda public”, Rayla quavered, “All the soldiers, the council and the attendants heard it.”

Opeli groaned. “Please, Milady! ’Council, soldiers and attendants!’ You can’t subordinate them! To your point, no, it was not a public setting. Public for our purposes means ‘anyone outside the castle’, so the _general public_.”

“Oh. Yea I’m not holdin’ a grand speech just to apologise”, said the queen-to-be.

“On that topic. You will want to start preparing your coronation address. While we’ve postponed the event, it’s still on the horizon and we should be as prepared as possible.”

The elf nodded. “Anythin’ you think I should talk about?”

Opeli regarded her for a moment, then said, “Were you not in the streets this morning? What was the mood?”

“Felt pretty cold. Got lots of stink-eye thrown my way. A Few people _really_ cheered me on, though. There was a guy who even whooped.”

“Interesting. Well, your experience covers quite well with the polls we’ve held. The majority is undecided, a third is on a racist bent and a growing minority is in favour of you. I believe we need to find out what we could do to win over that undecided majority. Any ideas?”
“We could hold a meet-and-greet”, said Rayla, almost instantly.

The two humans looked at her, confused.

She explained, “It’s a thin’ I’ve seen politicians back home do. They set themselves up on a stage, give a short introduction and then let people ask questions.”

“Very, erm... folky”, said Opeli, seeming very put off by the idea.

“I think it’s worth a try”, said Callum, “Rayla’s strength isn’t with the nobles.”

“Maybe... It’s... Well, I mean, A popular queen has as much power as a well-respected one”, the Councillor said.

“I’m hopin’ to be both!”, protested the elf.

“Ha! A feat not easily accomplished. The nobles loved Lady Sarai, oh my. She found middling purchase in the streets, however. Too... skittish, I would think. Almost put her blade through a pushy minstrel at one point.”

Rayla snorted. “There’s somethin’ I can relate to.”

“Please do not”, finger-wagged Opeli. There was a bemused curl on her lips, “Now. Unless you need anything from me, I shall endeavour to leave you to your... break-taking.”

“Thanks, Opeli”, nodded Callum.

The door closed behind her and the King flopped back onto the sheets. “How are you doing?”

“Mh. Been better.”
“See that sounds almost like you’re telling the truth now”, he snickered, extending a hand to intertwine her fingers with his.

For a moment, they simply stared upward, each lost to their own thoughts.

“I still haven’t tried that dress”, Rayla snickered quietly.

“Do you feel up for it?”

“Why not? It’ll be hard gettin’ into it, but I’ve got help, right?”

“If you want it.”

Rayla got up. “Where is it?”

“In the dresser, but hold on. Let’s finish the bet first. I said you have to come to a life drawing class with me. What if Helmond thinks it fits perfectly?”

“You know, I actually talked it over with Piper and she said I should make you pose for the class.”

He blushed. “Rayla! I’m... No, I can’t do that!”

His summand snorted. “Dummy, I’m a moonshadow elf! Why would I want you to show your cute butt to other people??”

“Fair enough. Uh, so, what do you want me to do?”

“If you lose the bet, you have to wear a piece of Scotian clothing for the rest of today. It’s called a Kilt. I’m willin’ to bet that Helmond has one, so you’re gonna have to go ask for it...”
“Uh... okay? Sure, that sounds fair. I guess I can only hope that he’s gonna give it to me, whatever it is.”

She smirked knowingly and started undressing.

“Ugh, this is such a chore!”, she groused after a moment, “Help me pull that off.”

He did as he was bidden and soon enough, she shook her hair out, which took his breath away.

“I’ll never get sick of that view”, he snickered.

“Wha’, me in undies? Pfweh, that’s nothin’! Get a load o’ this!”, she pulled down her underpants, bent sideways and made sure he got a good look. Then, while trying very hard to keep her wavering balance, she pulled them back up.

He had a sort of shocked flush on his face that made her laugh.

While she was snaking her way into the coral red dress, Callum eyed her stomach, trying to ignore the sudden tightness of his pants. He hadn’t thought much about the last time they had slept with each other, the worry of her getting pregnant quite washed away by other, more immediate concerns. Now it was back in full force.

If she was, would he be able to tell, yet? Would she? Was the nausea she experienced part of the fake sickness or a sign of other things?

She smoothed out the fabric, tugging at it to make it sit right, then spun in the mirror. “Fits perfectly, looser!”, she exclaimed triumphantly, stemming her fists to her hips.

“Yeah, you look awesome. But, Helmond has to think so, too.”

His expression and somewhat flat tone gave her pause. “Somethin’ wrong?”

“Mh. I was just thinking about getting you pregnant.”
She flushed. “Wh-wha-what?! Um, uh...”

“No, sorry!”, he laughed, “that came out wrong, I meant if I got you pregnant. You know, last time...”

She shrugged with a flustered smile. “I, uh, don’t feel any different. But then, it wasn’t even a week ago. Don’t say it like that, by the way. If anythin’ we got me pregnant. I did the coaxin’ and the ridin’... and... ah, let’s not go there right now, it’s makin’ me... bothered.”

“Did you want to do it again?”, his voice vibrated a little.

She tittered and leaned forward. “What, you think I was gonna let your birthday go by without us puttin’ on the matchin’ suits? Ah, but...”

A frown stole into her mien. “I... I don’t know how much fun it would be. I can’t... exactly do a lot. No woman-handlin’ this time.”

The King seemed a bit indecisive. “Okay, so, first I didn’t actually mean sex in and of itself, but, uh... filling you. Second, I don’t want you to feel like you have to cause it’s my birthday. If you’re not feeling well, maybe it’s not a good idea.”

“Ah... A did... like it. Aftermath was annoyin’ but A used some of my supplies for lady problems to... heh, stem the flood”, she said, now definitely feeling a little bothered. Her mind couldn’t not replay the finale of their latest escapade. Him coming at the same time as herself was a wish fulfilled that she hoped to make a regular thing, “A wouldnae offer it if A wisnae up for it. A just wonder if it’ll be fun for you, bonin’ a wet rag.”

“That wet rag is my summand”, he said quietly, pulling her toward himself, “She’s always fun.”

She snickered in his grasp and leaned down to kiss him. “It’ll be a full moon, too. So who knows what’ll happen with some... whooosh, moonshadow powers...?”

Unfortunately for Rayla, this had the opposite effect of what she had intended. Her summand let go of her. “Um... yeah. Maybe this isn’t a good idea, actually. We don’t exactly know if the moon won’t cancel out the poison.”
“Oh. That’s fair. Also makes sense for the Lucid to want to... ugh... use me durin’ a full moon”, she shuddered, all romance and lust falling off her to make room for dread, “We should probably lock me up. Just to be sure.”

He studied her depressed expression for a while, then shook his head. “No. We’ll just have to keep an eye on you. I don’t want you to go behind bars. What you’re doing to yourself is already bad enough.”

“Mhh. I dunno”, she sighed deeply and smoothed out her dress. “Let’s go find Helmond. Can’t wait to see you wear that Kilt.”

On their way downstairs to see the Ex-Legate, they stopped by the upper courtyard where Zym was still licking his wounds.

“How are you doing?”, asked Callum.

“Been worse!”, lied the dragon, “Gee Rayla, that color just hurts the eyes, oof!”

“Rude!”, snickered the queen-to-be, “I’ll have you know this is a four-year-old dress! And it still fits perfectly!”

“Oh? I’m not an expert on biped threads, but it seems kinda short to me.”

“Yeah Rayla, seems kind of short!”, razzed Callum.

“Don’t listen to the naked dragon for fashion advice!”, laughed his Queen, “How long are you stayin’, Zym?”

“Eh, I didn’t make firm plans. I don’t wanna stay too long, tho. It’s gonna cost you guys a fortune to feed me and I’m sure mother is going to lose it if I don’t come home soon.”

“It sucks that we couldn’t find out anything more about Ez. Despite what you said, I kinda had my
“Yeah well, Bait’s not a talkative old man. This bird on the other hand... yikes. He’s been cawing himself hoarse.”

“We heard. Has he said anything of interest?”

“Uh, well... I... look, man, he’s kind of got a screw loose. Not all there. A bit coo-coo. Keeps telling me to leave.”

“Well, he has no right to. I think I’m gonna move the mean bird off the balcony until you’ve left.”

“I’d like that”, groused Zym, “I could make things easy and just, you know, eat him.”

Callum frowned angrily. “Don’t you dare! He’s my dad’s bird!”

“Oh”, went Zym, ducking lower to the ground, “Sorry.”

For a moment, the King glowered at him, then sighed. “We’ll be out here again later for my birthday dinner. Don’t let the attendants bother you.”

“Eh, I won’t. I already had a few of them come by to say ‘hi’. Lydia is playing ambassador.”

“She is pretty good at that”, smirked Callum. The head of Rayla’s fan club was a valuable ally among the staff. “We’ll see you in a bit! Let us know if you need anything.”

A few moments later, the royals had called on Helmond to judge their bet.

The ex-agent took his time inspecting the dress, rounding the queen-to-be. It was obvious that he enjoyed the reprieve from his serious work even if he didn’t drop his gruff exterior.
“I’ll say this, Milady, the tailor’s work on the piece isn’t very good. The original creation was one made with penible attention to detail but... It looks as though it was altered hastily and with very... shall we say, unrefined resources.”

“That’s cause Honza put it together for me in like three days, in her tent, on the road”, snickered Rayla.

“Oh. I take it back, it’s well done for those constraints. My, my, the color is exquisite. I wish I had had access to ocean pigments for some of the work I did back in the day. It really is... eye-popping.”

“But, does it still look good on me?”, asked Rayla, slowly but surely losing her patience.

“Hm... it is a bit short”, said Helmond, rubbing his chin, “In fact, a few years ago, this amount of ankle showing would’ve given me cause to reprimand you on the streets of Scotia...”

“Come on, old man!”, growled the queen-to-be while Callum snickered.

The ex-agent tapped his foot, squinting. He hummed and hawed. “I do believe it still suits you, overall. If you want to leave it with me, I could try fixing the parts that do not.”

“Yes!! HA-HA!”, went Rayla, doing a victory dance, “In yer face, dafty!”

“Okay, alright! You won!”, grumbled the King, “You can stop rubbing it in.”

“Nu-uh! A still fiitt!”, she sang, still dancing.

The next thing she knew was Callum’s concerned eyes examining her as he gently lowered her to the ground.

“What?”, she asked, hearing her own voice almost getting lost in breath.

“You overdid it, I think. Just lie down for a bit. I’ll get Cardw--”
“No! A’m alright! Ye promised!”

Her King sighed, then put on a smirk. “Fine. Just promise me that you won’t wear yourself out like that again.”

“Mmmh, A can’t promise that, A have more victory-jigs tae dae! A mean, ye gotta grab and wear... the thing!”, laughed the dizzy queen-to-be. While her poisoned body refused to cooperate, she still wanted to have the fun she was owed.

“Uh... okay? Hey, um, Helmond?”

“Should we not help her?”, the old elf asked with a concerned look at his future Queen.

“You heard her, she wants to be stubborn”, groused Callum, “Um... so... do you have a Kilt?”

“A K--”, the ex-agent went. For the first time they knew him, there was an expression of utter and total surprise on his stern features, almost childlike in its severity. “Um... Milord, I... I am Bretani. Kilts are a Scotian tradition! Ho-however, err...”, he blinked, “Why do you ask?”

“Part of our bet. I lost, so I’ll have to wear one for the rest of the day.”

Helmond’s mien immediately changed to an offended gape. “Lady Rayla! You would abuse your own culture for a lark?! The Kilt is an ancient and respected tradition, a garment to be worn for special occasions!”

“Sure! A asked him to wear it for his birthday. A King’s birthday is a special occasion, isn’t it?”, Rayla smirked at them from the floor.

Her elder scoffed. “I’m sure that was... well, fine! Yes! I do have a Kilt! It is part of the Lucid’s gala uniform and I will happily lend it to you under one condition.”

Callum swallowed. “And what’s that?”
“You honor it. Treasure it as the cultural good it is. You follow the rules of wearing it and MOST importantly...!” he stabbed his index at the young man, “YOU. DO. NOT. SOIL. IT!”

“Uh, of course not?”, the King squeaked, having not expected the outburst.

Rayla was dying of laughter on the ground.

“In that case, the Lady will want to leave the room to give you a moment to change. I shall follow, after I have laid out said rules and expectations!”
Reflections

Rayla gaped at her summand.

It wasn’t fair that he should look so dapper in a gala uniform that was not made specifically for his build. The man wore the smooth dark blue and silver jacket and the matching Kilt with the white, silver and blue sett so well that she couldn’t see it as punishment for a lost bet.

“Well?”, he quavered, a light flush on his cheeks.

“I’m sure not regrettin’ this wager”, the queen-to-be smiled, “Not for the reasons I thought, though. You look amazin’, dummy”

They were standing outside Helmonds quarters, the Ex-Agent smirking at his King with something like grim satisfaction in his mien. “Now remember. I expect you to wash and iron it before returning it. Carefully, if it pleases you, I do not want to see any burn marks!”

“You sound like you’re, uh, very attached to it.”

“It suits me well and I have fond memories of…”, he stopped, then sighed sadly, “I… met Anzha, wearing it. At one of the few functions I was ever able to attend. It’s not like being an officer with the Auxilia, Agents do not get out much. It was a rather… fateful encounter.”

Callum’s mien froze.

“I’m… so sorry, Helmond, I didn’t want to… put you in a bind over this”, said Rayla.

“It’s quite alright. In fact - and forgive me if I’m being a bit old here - I am somewhat enjoying the idea of it being…”, he chortled, “… in use again. It hasn’t seen a great many dances lately. Either way, I do agree with Lady Rayla, you look quite dashing, Excellence.”

“Mmh”, went the King, stiffly walking down the hallway towards the stairs, “Thanks. We’ll dance. I’ll go drop off my old clothes. Fawn. Coming?”
The queen-to-be regarded Helmond with an inquiring look, but the old elf merely shrugged, so she turned to call after her King. “Actually, Callum, I’ll meet you at dinner. I’ve got to prepare somethin’ and it’s gettin’ time to start.”

Her summand nodded and lifted his right to wave, without turning his head.

“Why is he bein’ so odd?”, she puzzled.

Helmond smirked. “I have an assumption. It takes some time to get used to the sensation of wearing a Kilt, Milady. For one like he who has likely never worn anything other than pants, the breeze might be a little strange.”

"Fair enough. I wish I still had my Gala uniform. We could pull off a partner look."

Meanwhile, Claudia was hunched over her experiment again, in direct violation of her King’s orders. This was an unexpected boon of Rayla’s presence; he didn’t come by as often to chat or to check up on her.

Was it a boon?

The apparatus hissed and the mage scrambled to turn down the heat on the burner.

It was hard to say how she felt about things. If she was honest with herself, she wanted to blame Rayla for her missed relationship with Callum. The elf was doing it again now, providing a comfort to her friend which he had sought with Claudia before her arrival.

It would be easier if Soren was still around.

"Always second best", sighed the mage, unstoppering a vial and adding its contents to the liquid bubbling in the experimental setup.

On the other hand, Claudia couldn’t rationalize feeling this way, especially since Rayla had been a joy to be around in the morning. She wasn’t mean-spirited, hadn’t rubbed her success with Claudia’s crush in the mage’s face.
Viren’s daughter scoffed at herself. “How can you still be so hung up about that?! Second best?! Since when are we defining ourselves by other’s standards?! You’re freaking awesome, stop being an idiot!”

With careful tapping, she agitated the settling solids in one of the glass tubes, watching them being carried off into a mesh filter down the line.

It wasn’t that she still had feelings for him. Her inability to let go of that night at the Moon Nexus and her discomfort with their relationship stemmed from the fact that they were so intertwined with all the guilt and self-hate she was shouldering. It was hard not to project.

A cold prickle in her neck made her spin around.

There, the freaky mirror still sat under its cloth, seemingly feeding on her worried attention. The artifact was beckoning her to unwrap it and consider its enigma again.

“... Oh, duh”, she went, realization dousing her reverie.

Piper returned from her bathroom break. Wordlessly, the scientist sat next to her boss and leaned forward to watch the liquids in the installation percolate.

“I’ll be back in a moment”, said Claudia, getting up.

A few moments later, the High Mage of Katolis was face-to-face with a monster. Gigantic, standing at around three times her height, the intimidating fangs in its mouth showing in something like a curious smile.

“Your highness”, said Claudia, bowing slightly.

“Claudia, is it?”, asked the Dragon Prince, “Long time, no see. How do you do?”

“I’m doing well, thank you. Can I take a moment of your time?”
Azymondias shifted his position to have an easier time looking her way, then said, “Sure. Callum’s friends are my friends. Even if... you know.”

“First, um... I want to apologise for what Viren did to your father. And, um, what I almost did to you.”

“Thank you, but don’t. Wasn’t your fault. We all... look for ways to connect. I can tell you that I’ve done things for mother that... um... I wasn’t super happy with.”

Claudia was taken aback by how gentle the giant sounded. “I’ve taken to shouldering my father’s burdens. One of which is an item that you might know.”

“Oh? Mother said that we were missing a few things after losing my father. She wasn’t sure if they had been destroyed or stolen. The *item* wouldn’t be one of those things?”

“I’m pretty sure it is. I’d be more than happy to return it, but... I can’t help but be curious as to what it actually is. See, it’s this mirror...”

The Dragon’s eyes widened. “Ah, um... yeah. Sorry, I can’t really tell you *what* it is, but I *can* tell you that you do not want to mess with it. Please, please give that back. It would be *insanely* dangerous to be around it for long. Returning it to Xadia would mean *a lot*, and I do mean, like, a lot!”

“Are you sure you can’t tell me any more than that? Viren and I spent a lot of time trying to understand it. It wa--”

Azymondias had gotten up, staring at her with a snarl. “Did you figure it out?”

“Uh...”, went Claudia, surprised by the fear in her own voice.

“*DID YOU* ?!”, thundered the Dragon.
“I-I... not m-me personally, no, b-but... Viren might have? He spent a l-lot of time with it. Th-thought it was important.”

“Filius Canis!”, swore the Dragon Prince, starting to pace. The great predator was so agitated that Claudia had to actively suppress her flight response, “If he got to what’s inside that mirror, we are all in freakishly deep, capital `S` shit!”

Above them, a black-clad shape appeared on the balcony and asked: “What are you yelling about? Oh, hey Clauds. Nice to see you out!”

Both Zym and his visitor gaped at the King.

Eventually the Dragon Prince snorted. “What are you wearing, dude?!”

“I lost a bet”, said Callum, a little sheepishly, “It’s a traditional Scotian thing.”

“It really suits you”, said Claudia with a wry smirk, “But it’s not your usual look!”

“Haha, nooooo... Can we, uh, talk about why Zym is freaking out, maybe?”, pled the King.

The dragon’s bemused expression changed back to anger. “Your former High Mage messed with something he shouldn’t have, dude. I need to talk to you”, he swiveled to face Claudia, “Alone!”

“Zym, if it has to do with Viren, Clauds might be good to have around. She knows him pretty well.”

“Maybe, but this isn’t something I can risk spreading. You can’t, either.”

Callum apologetically regarded Claudia. “Sorry, Clauds. I’ll see what I can maybe tell you later.”

She nodded. It was extremely annoying not to be privy to this conversation in particular. She had spent so much time trying to unravel this mystery and now it seemed as though she would miss out on the explanation.
Worse, the mirror would remain a mystery since there wasn’t any doubt in her mind that Callum would order it brought to Xadia.

`Two roads from here`, thought the mage as she descended the stairs to the lower courtyard, `Either I hand it over... or figure out a way to hang on to it.`

She shook her head.

It was better to have the thing gone. Creepy piece of kit.

Or was it?
In the early evening, Lydia and her Attendants were busy setting up a long table in the courtyard. Zym followed their scuttling with some attention, but he was also lost in his own thoughts.

Aaravos.

The name made him itch. It was more important now than ever to find Viren. If the mage had somehow released this ancient terror, bloody times were on the horizon. Callum’s first use of Acies and it ending up feeding back on him was cause for dark premonitions.

The combined power of elven mages and Dragons had been just enough to subdue the archmage, they had not even managed to kill him. The resurgence of his supporters had been troublesome, but somewhat expected given what fascist manipulations of history Rayla’s hearing had unveiled.

Zym, in some ways, even empathized with the Children of Elarion seeing as he wanted the two federations to coexist. Their methods and view on dragons kept them firmly in the realm of enemies, however.

Rayla sat above him on the balcony, quietly talking to her betrothed. It was strange to be here, in this human structure where their journey had begun. Azymondias felt well and truly alienated by his surroundings, but their presence was comforting.

A slight tug at his conscience grabbed his attention. Ezran was trying to tell him something, once again. The feeling hurt, a constant reminder of his best friend’s uncertain fate. Zym tried his hardest to focus on the tentative connection. It was akin to a game of tug-of-war with an oiled rope.

His erstwhile foster parents did that thing where they touched muzzles. It was an odd sight to behold every time, but they seemed to enjoy it a lot. Their gentleness made him feel guilty. Guilty for having doubted her trustworthiness. Guilty for not being more capable of convincing his mother of Callum’s good intent. Guilty for making their lives harder by coming here.
The dragon rose and shook himself to settle the ruffled scales on his belly. “Hey, um... I think I’ve made mother wait long enough. I should get going. Get some air under me before the day is over, you know?”

Callum got up to lean on the baluster. “Oh, I thought you were gonna stay for dinner?”

“Ehhh, the more I think about it, the more I feel like I’m gonna make people nervous.”

Rayla’s face appeared over the ledge. “Hard to argue with that, as sad as it is to see you go. Six horns are gonna be more than enough to make this a tense affair.”

“Six?”, said Zym, “You only have two, though?”

“My dad, Helmond and I.”

“Ah, yeah, duh. Um, about before...?”, the Dragon Prince mumbled at Callum.

“I’ll have them bring it out on the lower courtyard”, said the King with knitted brows. He turned to one of the attendants in the courtyard, “Tuuri, please let the High Mage know that the Prince of Dragons is leaving and wants to take his item with him. Ask her to put it in the lower courtyard.”

The woman curtsied and strode off.

"So, um... are you going to tell her anything?", asked Zym.

"You know... maybe. I trust her and I get the feeling she is having a hard time letting go of a mystery once it's in her life."

"You trust her, even though she didn't tell you about the mirror? She knew where it came from.", chided the Dragon.
"I'll have to find out why. She's bound to have a few good thoughts about the mirror. She always
does. While Rayla wasn't here, she was my right hand whenever I could allow for it."

At this, the queen-to-be seemed to shrink a little.

“So, when do you think we’ll see each other next?”, asked Callum.

“I honestly don’t know yet. First I’m gonna have to see how mother feels about me... coming over
here, hehe”, the Dragon snickered sardonically, “I think I’ll be grounded for a while. Glad to be
bringing back something important, anyway. Might make her more forgiving.”

“Yeah. I’ll make sure to check if we have anything else that might be Thun... Avizandum’s”, the
King said, “Sorry, ever since I’ve learned his real name, I’ve been trying. I guess sixteen years of
calling him `Thunder` don’t pass by without effect.”

“It’s all good. `Thunder` was a good name for him. Descriptive and a bit scary. He would’ve been
okay with it. Mmh. I’m sorry to run, guys. I... kinda wanna get going.”

“Of course. Don’t be a stranger though? I’ll send you an invitation to our wedding once we know
when it’ll happen”, said Callum.

Rayla stabbed her index at Zym with a grin. “You better show up, twerp!”

“I’ll do my best”, snickered the Dragon. He seemed to think for a moment, then his eyes filled with
sadness. “Um... I... I don’t think I can say this enough... thank you. You know, for, uh... bringing
me home. I... um...”

He came closer to the baluster and whispered, “Love you guys. Good luck. I’ll see you soon.”

“Aww, Zym!”, went Callum, tearing up and leaning over the railing to pat the dragon’s snout,
“Getting you out of here was the best thing we’ve ever done. Love you, too, little big guy!”

Rayla’s hand joined his. “Aye, what he s-said”, she choked, trying her best not to lose her
composure but failing a little, “Fly safe and don’t let yer mum run ye ragged.”
After a moment, Azymondias stepped back and started walking toward the lower courtyard, ducking under the archway that stood over the ramp.

When his friends had vanished from sight, he turned his head to face forward. In the middle of the much larger lower courtyard sat a mirror, wrapped in purple cloth. Next to it stood Claudia, with her arms crossed.

“Thank you, High Mage. I’m sorry that I can’t be more open with you. The King speaks very highly of you and I’ll leave it to him to... let you know what you need to.”

She nodded. “I’m honestly glad to get rid of it. It’s been... investigating me lately. In a way it didn’t, before.”

Zym’s eyes narrowed. “How come you didn’t tell Callum about it sooner?”

The mage's expression became overcast. "I'm sorry. I wanted to figure it out and frankly, nobody came to ask, so I didn't tell."

"It's an interesting thing and, um... I guess it's a bit of a fly trap for people looking for power. I'm not super impressed with you, but at the same time I can't fully blame you either”, the dragon said. Then his voice became stern. "Unless you actually messed with it."

“Nope. Haven’t had the time”, Claudia smirked weakly, “Too much to clear off my desk. Speaking of, I better get back to it. If I may, it was... interesting, meeting you, Highness.”

“Likewise. I don’t deal with dark mages often, but you’re rather pleasant”, the dragon said, then scanned the human’s face. “Say... would you like to ride on my back for a few minutes? You seem like someone who might enjoy that.”

“Uhhhhh”, went Claudia getting visibly excited, “is... wow, is that okay?!”

“I did offer!”, laughed Zym, “I feel I did you a little dirty. If I can make up for it, even just a little, I’ll happily do it. Just hop on up and hold on tight.”
The high mage approached very hesitantly, then placed a hand around one of the spikes on Zym’s back and threw herself over his back, straddling the spike.

“Comfortable?”

“Y-yes!”, snickered the tiny figure, “I just hope I’m not g-gonna fall off!”

“Fall off?!”, went the dragon with mock offense, then took off rapidly, grabbing the mirror in his claws.

On his back, Claudia’s surprised scream turned into thrilled laughter almost immediately and she whooped as they attained cruising height.

The mage eagerly eyed the landscape below and noticed the purple cloth swaying in the wind. “Oh, why are you bringing that?”

“Worried I won’t take you back? Wow, first you go `whAt IF i FalL oFf`, now this!”, snickered Azymondias, “I just didn’t want to leave it there, without someone to watch it.”

Claudia breathed deeply, the wind whipping her hair and face. It was unpleasant but the view and the feeling of flight made it worth it.

Below her spread the capital, bathed in golden light from an almost setting sun. The streets were busy, but as people returned home, plumes of light smoke rose from buildings’ chimneys. Up here, the world was quiet, safe for the rush of air.

Suddenly, the Dragon tensed, his head whipped around to face north.

“Something wrong?”, asked Claudia.

Whatever it was that had his interest had him captivated. Without acknowledging her, his flight path changed northward.
“Um... are y-you okay?”, asked the human.

“I need to check this out, please bear with me”, came the curt, gruff reply.

The two of them set down in a forest clearing and Zym looked about while Claudia got off his back.

“Are you okay to watch the mirror for a moment?”, he asked.

“Yes, of course”, said the high mage. She was comfortable here, having traversed the woods a dozen times to find ingredients. Her discomfort stemmed mostly from the fact that she hadn’t planned on going for a walk today.

Zym sniffed the air as he ducked and wove around the trees. He could feel Ezran. He was here. He was hurt.

The pull was as strong as four years ago, no longer a tentative connection.

The Dragon’s senses were focussed, but it still was difficult to navigate under the tree cover.

It was such that the sun’s light started bluing and fading before he found the origin of attraction.

A tiny shape, lying unconscious on the ground between the trees.

He was clad in dirty Katolin Burgundy, wearing a crown that was too large for his head, even with the fluffy hair.
Callum was worried.

Here they all were, sitting at the table over an aperitif and waiting for the chef to make her grand entrance. A three-person band was playing quiet instrumentals, filling the evening with song.

Claudia’s assistant was here.

She was not.

It wasn’t the first time she had missed an official function - or something like it - but predictably, Piper and her had been brooding over work every time.

“How odd”, said Arntraud, looking toward the lower courtyard over Betram’s shoulder, “One almost wonders whether the Dragon had an appetite!”

“Don’t be crass”, scolded Kingsley sipping his lemon cordial, “He’s no animal, despite his appearance.”

“Tell that to my panicked countrymen”, scoffed Betram, “The Xadian Prince apparently deigned Middle Kingdom cattle too pedestrian for his tastes.”

“Did you send them payment as I asked?”, Callum asked Opeli.

“Indeed. The same courrier who brought the news left with a satchel worth two cows and then some. House Katol always balances the scales, Betram.”

“This much is true”, the Rhodian agreed, “After all, who better than you to spend our taxes?”

To Rayla’s surprise, everyone without horns at the table laughed. She was uncomfortably squirming in her seat at the head of the table next to Callum.
Arntraud leaned forward slightly to look at her around Opeli. “Milady, forgive us, we do enjoy our verbal jousting in the right setting.”

“And the right lube”, grinned Kingsley, lifting his glass.

“It’s new to me, I’ll admit”, said Rayla under the critical gaze of Opeli.

The Vedevian Councillor looked at her as though she expected more words and the queen-to-be began to sweat. What was she doing wrong now? “I, uh, learned that sayin’ the wrong thin’ has a bit of an effect. So, I, uh, try not to bumble and learn from the experts.”

Betram sneered at her. Receiving her apology earlier had made him smug and self-satisfied. Rayla’s mind churned. She wanted to wipe that expression off him.

And knew just the thing.

“Experts like you, Madame, Kingsley, Opeli and my attendant Lydia”, she said and earned a warning look from Opeli, “She added holsters to my clothes after an off-hand remark I made in front of her.”

Betram’s sneer had turned into something like a grim smirk. Acceptable.

Arntraud laughed, “Lydia is a blessing on all of us! Though I can see how, for a commoner, that must’ve been some experience! See, in the noble house of Vedin, we make it a point of raising our children as commoners. I have some appreciation for what you’re going through.”

“I like that. How are we gonna get what moves our people if we don’t understand their daily struggles?”, said Rayla, taking a sip of her drink.

“Would you agree, then, with your fiancee’s postulate that they should rule themselves?”, asked Kingsley.
“Eh, it’s only fair to give them a say at least. Do you like it when others make decisions for you?”

Kingsley blinked. “Uh... no, I suppose not.”

He sat back, seeming oddly pensive.

Bertram shook his head at the Tinesian. “Seems to me like the head of the Covertway hasn’t ever considered it from that more personal angle. Well, I for one didn’t expect any different, seeing how the elves have been fostering that system of government since long before Expulsion. I’ll say it was essentially the only good thing to ever come out of Xadia.”

The veiled barb escaped Rayla, but not Callum. It was so confounding, this way of speaking. On one hand, he was glad that Betram, for all his failings, had been supportive of the idea of giving the people a voice. On the other, the rude bastard had found a creative way to insult his summand again.

Tinker, Helmond and Piper were caught up in their own conversation. Rayla wished nothing more than to join them at the end of the table, but her place as Queen was here, next to the King and amid the leadership of Katolis. Further, Callum’s worried Gaze toward the lower courtyard made her a little spiky. She had enjoyed Claudia’s presence in the morning and felt confusion and a hint of worry about her absence.

“Should we send someone to look for her?”, she asked her summand, quietly.

“I was about to order it”, he answered, then waved at an attendant, “Kaneda, please find me the serving Captain of the watch.”

The man bowed slightly and walked off, just as the doors opened and attendants brought out bowls, covered by metal lids. They smoothly placed them in front of each person at the table, starting with the royals.

Lifting the lids gave Callum an immediate flashback to the feeling of sand in his socks. “You didn’t!” , he regarded his summand with a sweet smile.

“No, I totally did”, she smirked, glad that he had realized it immediately.
The soup in their bowls was a deep beige color, flecks of semolina and tiny pieces of caramelized onion were drifting in the savoury, thick broth. On an accompanying plate sat a wedge of sharp soft cheese covered in the tart white of edible mold.

“Now, uh, back on the plains, I didn’t have dipplings or allia root but they normally go in there. Today I didn’t have any, either, duh, but Chef said to use potatoes and onions instead. I’m excited to see how this... Xadian-Katolin rendition tastes”, snickered the queen-to-be.

“So that’s where you went off to after I put on the Kilt!”, the King was obviously seized by joy at her gift which made her heart grow three sizes, “Thank you, fawn!”

Kingsley smiled at them as Callum kissed her, “So are we to understand that this dish was prepared by our future Queen?”

“Yup. It’s fried grit soup”, said Rayla, “I hope it’s to everyone’s likin’”

“Unusual for a noble to do this sort of work”, noted Bertram with mocking intent, “but I suppose it had sentimental value for the Lord.”

Kingsley shook his head at the Rhodian. “A Queen’s time spent in a kitchen is a gift worthy of a King. You should be more grateful, being allowed to partake in it.”

They all started eating, Bertram sniffing and sipping the soup before acknowledging that it was more than just edible.

A few moments later, an officer of the watch approached the King and saluted. “Sire. You asked for me?”

“Indeed I did, Captain Tetsuo, thank you. As you can see we’re missing the High Mage. Please have her found and, uh, don’t forget to check in all the hidden passages.”

“As you command”, said the soldier. Ending his salute, he left. Rayla couldn’t help but notice - with some pride - that he gave the contents of their bowls a longing look.
“Speaking of your dress, Sir Callum”, said Kingsley, “I’m glad to see you’re also not one to eshew the pleasures of going pantless ever so often.”

Rayla had the hardest time keeping from snorting.

“It’s actually a Scotian Gala uniform”, said the King, “Honestly, I forgot that I was wearing it. I can see myself putting something like this on more often, it’s nice in the summer heat.”

Helmond nodded, a satisfied expression in his face.

Kingsley chuckled. “So, shall we attempt to make it a trend?”

“Oh please do not”, grumbled Arntraud, “The last thing we need from our aesthete King is more flaunting. Your spending habits are rather odd, throwing funding at beautification and random people’s hobbies!”

“Random people?”, said Callum, putting down his spoon, “Katolis has a lot of money that’s just sitting there, plainly put. It’s an investment into our future to spend some of that on patronage. I was actually hoping to increase the amount.”

“But... We are already... You wouldn’t rather build up more forces?”, asked Arntraud.

“Are we underfunding our military, Madame?”

“Well, not underfunding, no”, admitted the old warrior, “However we have not been growing it, either.”

“Either way, we are not able to muster a great many more forces as per the terms of our armistice with Xadia. Our policy of patronage has been attracting a lot of thinkers and artists. The military benefits from their labors, so does the general populace and, well, the spirit of our country”, said Opeli.
“It is true”, grumbled Arntraud, “Though I fail to see how plumbing and canalizations are going to assist us in fighting a war.”

“It’s a public health concern”, said Betram, “Fewer sick people, more people passing the muster. Don’t be short sighted, I am very happy with the reports I’ve seen out of Hohenfelde.”

“Yes, yes, your project city”, groaned Kingsley, “Spare us!”

“Spare you?! We nobles do not deal with most of the drawbacks of our creeping scientific progress! We have access to magic! But the people? The people suffer a--”

“As I said. Spare us! Ever since his Majesty filled your head with tales of Xadian advancements, you have been absolutely raving.”

“And for good reason! I refuse to accept that they have conveniences at large that we lack! It makes us objectively inferior!”, retorted the Rhodian Councillor.

“Not a fair comparison”, said Rayla, “We kept you down for a long time, didn’t share our secrets. It’s our sin, not a human failin’.”

“‘Our’?”, mouthed Opeli waringly.

“Uh, a Xadian sin, I mean”, added the queen-to-be hastily.

Kingsley eyed her worriedly as Bertram glowered once more.

Right, right. While around the councillors, `summand` had better be `fiancé` and `we` had better be `Katolis`. She couldn't believe how stupid she was, throwing away a perfectly good chance to earn some points.

Silence settled as people finished their soup, but afterwards a pleasant if high strung conversation about emerging art and philosophy started as Chef continued her culinary extravaganza. The sun had set and attendants had lit torches and candles to illuminate the courtyard.
As dinner continued, Opeli found herself approving of Rayla’s manners. The few lessons she had imparted on her future Queen seemed to have stuck.

The full moon was already above them and Rayla felt its power course through her in prickling waves. However, it wasn’t enough to break through the numb pulsing in her joints and she felt odd elation at the fact.

“Love”, she whispered, “Try it now.”

They had agreed on this course of action before sitting for dinner. He nodded, putting his hand into hers under the table. She pushed with all her might and he easily held his ground.

Safe.

Relieved, they both sighed quietly.

A while later yet, they were taking a short break between the main courses and desert. Horace had appeared in the courtyard, fumbling with something in the dark.

When the old man stood and gave a thumbs-up, Tinker rose and addressed everyone present. “I wanted to thank you, Sire, for having us. The company and food have been a delight. If it pleases you, I would like to offer a gift that underlines your arguments for peace and patronage.”

Horace fumbled with a candle. A loud whizz sounded, then something shot into the sky with a screech that startled everyone, leaving a trail of sparks.

Then, the people present jolted again as an explosion tore through the night sky. Red and gold stars flew outward in a circular pattern. The night attendant fired the rest of the devices, causing gapes and gasps among the councillors and staff.

In the light of the last explosion, Rayla spotted a dark shape above them. A second later, gusts of wind blew out the candles and made the torches flicker.
“Whatever that was, it was insane! Don’t do it again! I need help here!”, yelled a panicked Zym.

Rayla was the first to move, her unwilling legs tripping as she scrambled toward the two bodies on the ground to Zym’s feet.

“You!”, she shouted at an attendant, “Get Cardwell!”

The woman ran off as though the queen-to-be had kicked her in the rear end. The elf lowered herself to her knees, placing searching fingers on Claudia’s neck. She was alive, her wounds probably not as bad as they seemed at first glance.

Next was the boy.

“No... way...”, gasped Rayla.

Callum appeared next to her, falling to his knees to cradle the familiar shape. “E-Ez!”, he cried, “It’s Ez--Ezran!”

While his summand made sure that the little man was merely unconscious, the King couldn’t help but dissolve into sobs. He was disabled by a mixture of joy and pain that wouldn’t make sense to him for the rest of his life. "My litt--le brother's ho--home!"

“He... he’s so young... looks like the last time we saw him”, Rayla choked out, “What if... he’s an illusion?”

“Callum”, came a grim, shaking voice from above him, “No illusion. It’s him, I can feel him. They knew. He was a trap. They... used him to... I...”

The Dragon groaned, in mental anguish over what he had just done. “The mirror... th... i-it’s gone!”
The councillors, royals and Zym were sitting in the upper courtyard, having just heard Zym’s story about the flight and coming back to Claudia, finding her on the ground and the mirror gone. Cardwell and his nurses had examined the two and brought them to the infirmary.

“What’s so important about this mirror, anyway?”, asked Kingsley.

“It’s... a prison”, quavered Zym, “We managed to lock a really powerful startouched mage inside it. He learned to use all six kinds of magic and started a... well, a cult around himself. He wanted to reunite humans and elves. We think he had this whole reunification thing as a front. Hard to say what he actually wanted. His message was always one of peace and living with each other, but what he did was totally brutal. Picture him wiping out entire towns just cause they were loyal to the dragon canon. Almost destroyed the coexistence the dragons and elves had built together, that fear of being wiped out for saying the wrong words or flying the wrong flag. It’s similar today, I’m sure you’ve noticed. Hard to miss the Children of Elarion.”

Kingsley nodded. “A nasty group. Ruthless. They feel righteous and backed into a corner. Nothing to lose. It seems they have made some very good expansions into the pentarchy lately.”

“That’s news to me?”, said Callum expectantly.

“Well, I can’t very well...”, the spymaster said, motioning at Zym.

“No, you absolutely can, Kingsley. You already started and he’s a friend.”

The order was veiled but understood. With a sigh, the Tinesian Councillor faced the dragon. “We’ve found their mark over the bodies of a minor family of nobles, House Reman. They were known for racist and anti-Xadian sentiment.”

“So you see why the mirror is so important. If Viren joins forces with them and they manage to release Aaravos - and they have all the pieces now - things are going to even more bloody very quickly”, said the dragon.

“If that is indeed the High Mage’s plan”, said Opeli, her eyebrows knitted, “Hard to imagine he would cooperate with elves.”
“We don’t even really know if it was *him* who attacked Claudia and took the mirror”, argued Arntraud.

Rayla shook her head. “Viren’s the last person to be seen with Ezran. I’m willin’ to bet he was locked in a coin. Plus, if he is plannin’ to free Aaravos, he’s already workin’ with an elf.”

“Both fair points”, agreed the old warrior, then sighed, “About the Ki... oh, this is going to get confusing, um... about your *brother*, my Liege. How are we to proceed on this? You have been ruler for four years under the assumption that he had been killed. Now that he’s back...?”

The King shrugged. “Right now he’s unconscious. Who knows how long that’ll last? Cardwell said he’ll have a more complete picture tomorrow. Honestly, I doubt it would be a good idea to announce that he’s alive just yet. I’m not sure the instability is something we can afford right now. After he wakes up... assuming he wasn’t aware of time passing, he’s going to be confused and need a lot of help. Even if he’s okay in that regard, he’s got a lot of catching up to do. I’ll be more than happy to abdicate once he’s ready. He’s the rightful King.”

The silence that followed merely showed that people agreed but didn’t want to say it openly.

“The question is; what do we do about Viren?”, asked Bertram, “Search parties are not going to be all too helpful. Katolis is large and Viren has proven to be hard to find over the past four years.”

“It’s really all we have, Councillor”, lied Callum, “Unless you have a better idea, search parties it is.”

The discussion lasted for a while but went nowhere. The King was itching for it to conclude so he could take a peek at Viren without spreading knowledge of his new powers to people who might very well be at the receiving end of them at one point or another.

Eventually, General Rhineheart was tasked with drawing up a search. It felt as though they were slapping a band-aid on a gushing wound.

The King and queen-to-be withdrew to their chambers where Callum slammed the door shut as Rayla sat on the bed.
“Acies Viren”, he said after slashing the rune into the air.

Rayla’s mouth opened in protest, but it was too late. Her summand was already unconscious, dropping to the ground.

“At least sit your dumb butt down next time”, she grumbled, sitting next to him to cradle his head in her lap.

The elf watched on with growing anxiety as her King didn’t move a muscle. Minutes passed and Rayla was just about to get up to get Cardwell when his eyes fluttered open and he sat up to cancel the spell.

He was breathing heavily. “That... did not work. Not one bit.”

“Are you okay, dummy? Did you see anything?”

“I’m fine, yeah. But no, nothing. At first it was that normal tunnel effect I get, but then... just dark. It’s like when you’re running but you’re out of breath half-way to where you wanted to go.”

He paused for a long moment, then laughed.

It was a laugh, so drenched in happiness that it put a confused smile on Rayla’s face. He turned in her lap and threw himself at her, planting his lips firmly on hers, “Rayla! He’s alive! Ezran’s alive!”

He couldn’t stop kissing her and she couldn’t stop letting him. “Should we -- may---maybe go see -- -- him?”, she asked between kisses.

“Cardwell said he’s gonna let us know when he wakes up. That’s his way of telling me to stay out of his way and I’m not going to mess with him while he’s trying to help Ez and Claudia.”

“Fair enough”, said his Queen. Her hands were rubbing his back furiously, her own relief at Ezran’s survival discharging in restless excitement.
He snickered, getting up and offering her a hand to help her up which she declined, instead lying back to sprawl on the cool floor for a bit.

“T’m just annoyed that Viren’s so close and I can’t get eyes on him!” grumbled Callum, stepping in front of his desk next to her. The King was eyeing a map of the capital, “I wish we had other options... Corvus would be on him in sec–ooohhh w-what are you doing!?”

Rayla’s hand was rubbing him under the Kilt. She was sporting a bemused expression. “Nice view! And o-ho-ho, how easy of a target ye are! Shame you decided to wear somethin’ underneath. It’s not exactly part of the uniform code.”

His palms rested on the desk as he laughed breathily. “Am I seriously hearing moonshadow Rayla suggesting I go commando!?”

“Oh, but ye’re not showin’ anythin’ to anyone but me, so... it would’ve been fine.”

“Ah... mayb-e ne-next time?”, he breathed.

“Nah, how about now?”, she smirked, tugging at his underpants.

“Rayla!”, he laughed, slamming his hands to his thighs to keep them in place, “Please stop, I ca-ah-n’t get it even just a little dirty! Especially not like that!”

“Well ye better get rid of it, then, and get me a lot dirty instead”, his summand demanded.

She got up, using the desk to stabilize herself. When she stood securely, she turned him around, tugging the Scotian garment off him. While keeping him captivated in a long kiss, she unbuttoned the blue uniform and removed the jacket, then dipped her hands into his underwear to caress his lap once more. Pinned against the desk as he was, he couldn’t do much more than lean onto it.

He laughed against her lips. “Hey, it’s my birthday! How come I’m the one getting u-unwrapped here?!”
“A just thought A’d help where A can”, she said, a tinge of worry entering her tone, “Doubt A’ll be doin’ any ridin’ tonight.”

“Ah... don’t feel bad”, he breathed, petting her hair. Then, a decision sprung on him. Rayla suddenly found herself swooped off her feet and draped over his arms.

“Huh”, she went with a smirk, “Where are we goin’?”

Immediately a very stupid smile spread on his face and he obviously tried hard not to laugh.

“Wha’?”, she asked as he placed her onto the sheets.

“My brain went `to pound-town` and...”, he waved his hand away from his head dramatically.

“That's so bad!”, she laughed.

He leaned over her in his half-open dress shirt to kiss her. She used the chance to run her hands over his chest while he slipped his hand into her pants. She giggled at the sudden touch. “Ah, that tickles!”

Her bemusement changed to lust when his fingers nimbly curved inside of her, pressing upward.

“G-gosh”, she bit out, “A’m so ... that... that almost hurts, dummy, please be gentle!”

He smiled sweetly. “So much for you being wild. Can’t even take the fingers today. Tsk, tsk.”

She laugh-keened as he continued his gentle massage.

“Mmh”, she went after a moment and drew his head toward her chest for a hug, “A love ye!”

“I love you, too”, he said, wrestling his head out of her grasp to kiss her.
Rayla sat up to remove her top and bra, pausing for a moment to appreciate the coolish air hitting her skin and to scratch her chest.

“Aaahh, freedom. Sweet, sweet, un-sweaty freedom”, she smirked, then snorted sarcastically. “A’m sooo seexy!”

“You are!”, he agreed, leaning over to kiss her breasts. With gentle pressure, he pushed her back into the sheets so he could pull off her pants.

When he moved to kiss her legs, she grabbed his cheeks. “Nah, not today. Haven’t had a bath.”

He smirked a pouty smile and asked, “So what do you want?”

“Snuggly, gentle bonin’”, she snorted, tugging at his underpants, “Not like A need the extra stimulation.”

The King nodded, bending slightly to open the drawer of his nightstand where he kept the gum grass sap. She watched him coat himself, kneeling between her legs, nervous excitement pulsing all over her.

His fancy dress had been appealing. Since he had stepped out of Helmond’s quarters, her mind hadn’t been able to resist wondering whether he was wearing anything underneath. She had found the reveal strangely disappointing.

Still, at this point she couldn’t wait for him inside her, but at the same time worried about what the feeling would be like today.

His tip met her and she fixed his gaze, waiting for him to keep going. He smirked impishly, tracing himself all over her and playing with her, teasingly.

For a good five minutes he drove her nuts by dipping inside just enough to make her hope for more.
“C-ah-llum!”, she finally barked, “Ye’re so mean!”

“I’m not doing anything”, he snickered.

“That’s the problem! Do somethin’! Please!”, she whined, writhing a little. He couldn’t know it, but this was her attempting to slide downwards to find her own relief. It was frustrating beyond reason that her usually responsive body did not want to follow the command with the necessary force.

“Mnhhh... do you, uh...”, he stuttered, seeming flustered all of a sudden, “Do you wanna... see what happens if you... you know, turn invisible?”

She stopped shifting and laughed. Of course her magic loving summand would seize that chance.

“Only if ye stick that thin’ where it belongs, right now”, she demanded with mock anger.

Sweet relief struck her when he dove slightly deeper. She was thankful that he decided to take his time, not going all the way just yet. The feeling ahead was a bit raw, but as he worked his way inside slowly, the pain and pinching sensation went away to make room for electrifying bliss.

“Oh, wayyy better! R-ready fer some science?”, she said and he nodded, eagerly continuing his gentle strokes.

The cold of invisibility prickled over her core and limbs and Callum’s eyes widened.

“That. Is. So. Cool”, he gaped at where her head had been, only a shimmering outline of it visible in the semi-darkness. Then his gaze wandered downward.

As he entered her, he could see the same light blue outline of her walls where they touched, squeezing and guiding him. “That. Is. So. Hot”, he snickered

Her invisible hand extended to find his neck, pulling him in for a hug and a kiss. She keened in his ear and savoured his deep, slow strokes, trying to catch whatever detail she could.
“Ha... A l--ove ye s-so much”, she whispered with hitching breath as a wave of pleasure grasped her, bending her against his moving body. Even this felt odd, not as strong and sharp but more soft and complex.

He kissed her and pushed himself deep inside. “Love you too, my invisible cutie”

For a while, they snuggled while he continued his slow, measured stroking.

“Callum...”, she whispered, more breath than anything.

“Yeah?”, he asked, expecting a question. She enjoyed the light wobble in his voice that she had started to recognize as a sign that he was close.

“... ye feel amazin’”, she added, starting to consider his approaching release. Once more a tinge of anxiety colored her pleasure, his wondering from the afternoon tugging at her.

“So... do you”, he panted, withdrawing completely which she annotated with a surprised, breathy squeak. “I’m super close... are you?”

“Mmh... A just got there again... feels nice...”, she purred, petting his face, “Why’d you pull out?”

“As I said, I’m super close”, he said, leaning in to kiss her. Thanks to her invisible state, he missed her lips and caught her chin instead until she managed to adjust him. The smirk on her lips was at least palpable to him.

Her hand came up to caress his lap, stroking him very softly. He moaned quietly as she angled him downward to let his tip drag into her opening.

“Rayla...”

“It’s fine?”, she whispered, guiding him inside.
“Ah-- d-damn”, he twitched and groaned, sitting up a little to watch a jet of liquid shoot into her. The visual drove more pressure into his core and he rammed into her, pleasure buckling him against her. She kissed the top of his head while he came.

“Gosh ye’re so damn cute”, she said as he continued to shudder, “A can tell ye’re leavin’ me hours of trouble...”

Between his pleasure and lust emerged a snicker, robbing him of the last bit of muscle he had used to hold himself up. He slumped onto her, laughing and gasping for air.

Callum as a blanket? An outlandishly good idea.

They enjoyed each other’s closeness. He kissed her, this time finding her lips with more ease while she carded her hands through his hair. Thanks to the angled position of her hips, there wasn’t a concern of getting the sheets dirty just yet.

He then sat up a little. A look to where his hips met hers made him snort. “What? Where did everything go!? I’m gone, too!”

At the moment, the space right in front of his lap was totally empty, the sheets curved with an imprint of her butt. Where he entered her, a shimmering outline was visible, hinting at the shape of things.

“A’m guessin’ it follows food rules then”, snickered Rayla, sitting up a little to observe herself, “If I eat while cloaked, it takes a good thirty secs for the food to be totally gone, too. It’s kinda freaky.”

“Everything about this is! In the best way!”, said Callum, excitedly watching himself reappear as he pulled out of her. A glob of frothy white liquids followed with the sputter of trapped air.

“Ahhh!”, she laughed, becoming fully visible, “Why would ye do that!? Get me a... a thing , quick!”

He almost fell off the bed trying to fulfill her imprecise request. She snatched the washcloth out of his hands and ran it between her legs, bottom to top.
“Good thin’ I have a bit of butt for the stuff to trickle along otherwise we’d have to wash the damn sheets again!”’, she snickered, chucking the towel at her King, “Come back and snuggle, Mr. Fountain!”

“How many names do I have!?”, he said, embracing and nuzzling her, “I think I started out with stove boy!”

“Maybe? Was that... oh gosh, that was in the crack, wasn’t it!!”

“Yeah it was.”

They were lost in nostalgia for a moment as Rayla pieced together their time hiding from Kel and Ithral with his help.

“I was mortified, peein’ just around the corner from you!”, she laughed.

“Well, yeah I was, too! Still better than doing it outside and getting stabbed”, he said, thinking back to the uncomfortably close quarters they had shared.

“Almost glad we weren’t a thin’ then”, said Rayla pensively, “Holed up for three days with nothin’ better to do...”

“You had better things to do, though. You worked out”, he said, “And you posed for me.”

“I s’pose. Yeah... I just realized that since I won the bet, I’m not goin’ to that life drawin’ class... did you want me to?”

“Yeah, I’d love for you to come with”, he yawned, “I think we’re gonna have a busy day tomorrow... really, really busy.”

Rayla nodded, tousling his chaotic, slightly sweaty hair. Her body ached for sleep, the feeling of stickiness in her lap not ranking very high on her list of concerns right now.
She’d have to bathe in the morning.

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Sixty-four.
A Full Day

Callum’s morning routine at the Twins was much more joyful with Rayla around. For the second time in four years, he woke gently to her petting him and not to Opeli’s demanding knock. His bed head also told a story - they had fallen asleep quickly after making love, leaving him no opportunity to take off his crown. A defined, ringed imprint was left on his head that earned him laughs in their extremely necessary shared bath.

“Looks almost like a hair style”, said Rayla, flicking at his bangs, “I guess that means you had a good time, forgettin’ to take that thin’ off is kinda big for you.”

“I did have a good time, but I think I was also really exhausted from casting Acies. I meant what I said about feeling out of breath. Uh, actually, I have a question. Do you... feel, uh, my stuff inside you?”

“Nnnyes”, she said with a pensive expression, “Sorta, kinda, but not really. It’s more like... just more wet, you know? Why do you ask?”

“Just, um... if you don’t get anything out of it, why... why make me?”

“Weeell”, she went, leaning forward to kiss him, “I can’t feel much of it, but it’s still sexy. Also, I didn’t want to end a snuggly time like that with you a foot or two away from me”, a little more quietly, she asked, “Did you not like it?”

He shook his head. “I did, I was just curious... you know, having seen what it looks like on the inside.”

“Kinda nice that we can do that”, snickered Rayla, “I wonder if moonshadow couples...”, she flushed, “D...do it like... a-anywhere? I... I mean, nobody would know durin’ a full moon, right?”

Callum snorted into the bath water. He had a feeling that the answer was probably ‘some’.

At breakfast, the councillors bickered over minor issues in their respective principalities which the King and his fiance followed with little interest. They were too busy eating, intending to leave the mandatory event as soon as possible.
When the last bite of toast with egg vanished in Rayla’s mouth, they excused themselves to visit the infirmary.

“Gutâ Morgâ, die Herrschaftâ, what cân I help you with?”, came the greeting as they stepped across the generous threshold. Dr. Cardwell’s office and laboratory served as an anteroom to the castle’s hospital, the four double doors under his or one of his staff’s watchful eye at all times.

“Good morning, doctor”, said Callum, “Do you have anything new about Ezran and Claudia?”

“Unfortunately I don’t häve much about your brother. The Lord is stable but still unconscious. Lädy Claudia is up änd about, though. In fäct, she is häving a look at King Ezrän right now. Suspects some kind of hex. Please, go aheäid”, he waved them along, but then appeared to remember something, “Âhm, one moment, Lädy Räyla, while you are here, I’d like to give you a quick once-over, if it pleases you.”

The elf heaved an incredibly long sigh, hoisting herself onto one of the four examination tables in the room. “Aye. Go ahead, dafty, I’ll catch up.”

The King hugged his summand, then strode through the double doors on the other side of the room to enter the infirmary proper. The beds were mostly empty, safe for two near the entrance. They held guardsmen, lightly wounded in a scuffle between merchants and unhappy customers.

Callum ascended a long circular ramp that led him through another set of doors to a fancier looking, far more private area overlooking the rest of the infirmary.

Here, Claudia was sitting on a chair, its back between her legs so she could rest her chin on top. It was obvious that she was staring at the small bundle in a bed ahead of her. Ezran's hair poked out from under the blanket.

“Hey Clauds. How’s it going?”, greeted the King.

"Hey", she replied hoarsely, not looking at him.

When she didn't continue, Callum pulled up a chair and placed a comforting hand on her shoulder.
It was odd seeing her in her brightly colored pajamas. "What happened?"

"I waited with the mirror. Viren showed up. We had words. He asked me to just hand it over and walk. I didn't. So... um, he, uh", she started crying, “he a-attacked me, shouting about how I'm forcing his hand! My own d-dad t-tried to kill me! Worse, I wasn't even su-surprised! He had me backed into a c-corner and all I c-could do was... shield myself a-and hope like hell th-that he'd get bored of f-fighting! Nothing I s-said made him s-stop!"

Callum wrapped his arms around her shoulders and she cried into the bend of his elbow. “You were hoping he’d let you talk him down?”, the King asked gently.

His best friend nodded, then looked up at him with eyes that had obviously shed a lot of tears in the past night. Sniffling, she palmed at her face. “He’s figured your thing out, too. Came at me with primal magic.”

The revelation sent a jolt of adrenaline into the King’s stomach. Another human primal mage? And Viren of all people? “We’re gonna find him, Clauds. We’ll lock him up.”

She nodded slowly. “When you do find him, I wanna be there. You have to let me know, okay?”

Callum nodded, not sure what else to do. He wasn’t sure how smart it would be to take Claudia to fight her father, but at the same time understood that it was important for her to have a hand in bringing him in.

The steady `clonk` of Rayla’s cane interrupted his train of thought. He separated from his friend who seemed unsurprised but somewhat irritated.

The annoyed looking Xadian opened the door, breathing heavily and clutching her side.

“Are you okay?”, asked Claudia before Callum could.

“Another day, another dose”, she hissed through clenched teeth. When Claudia gave her a confused look, she quickly added, “... of medicine I mean. It turns my stomach right over.”
The elf slumped into another chair that was actually meant for visitors of Ezran’s bed, eyeing the puff of hair that was visible of the young King. “How’s he doin’?”

Callum shrugged. “I haven’t gotten around to asking Claudia what she found.”

“All I can say is that he’s under some dark magic spell or influence. It might just be the trace effect from coming out of a coin. I, uh, know that’s super flimsy”, looking at Rayla, she added, “Sorry, um, I kinda just ended up whining about my dad”, said the mage, wiping her eyes.

“Are you serious?”, scoffed Rayla, “He attacked you. Your dad attacked you. I know exactly what that’s like. Not your fault. Don’t say ‘sorry’, we’re goin’ tae kick his auld arse next time!”

Claudia snorted at the elf’s obvious anger, feeling that same comfort with the ex-assassin she had the day before. “Thanks. Um... if you don’t mind me asking, how do you know? How... fighting your own dad... you know?”

Rayla recounted her experience with Runaan on the battlements, but when she got to talking about his uncertain fate, Claudia interrupted her with a scream that startled everyone. “I forgot the most importaahhh--!”, the mage almost fell over, climbing off her chair to stumble to her satchel that hung over one of her bed’s head posts.

She rummaged in it to withdraw a small wallet that clinked as she dumped its contents into her hand. She held two coins. On them were the surprised faces of Amaya and a male elf who wore the same uniform as Tyne.

Rayla’s expression broke to pieces. “H-how... where...?”, she stuttered, picking the elf out of the mage’s hand.

Callum simply gaped at Amaya, whom he had believed dead, unable to speak.

"I'm honestly not sure what's going on there. When I came to, they were in my bag. Found them just now as I was pulling stuff out for Ezran's induction."

“That sounds to me as though Viren put them there!”, said Callum with alarm, “We should probably examine them, see if they’re illusions or something worse!”
Claudia shook her head with a sad smile. “Already looked into it. They’re real, alright. I don’t know who the elf is but I have a pretty good assumption.”

Rayla smiled at the coin, confirming the mage’s theory. “He’s not Runaan, he’s my father, Farouk.”

The silence that hung over the three of them belied the significance of this. Viren had returned Ezran probably out of necessity to lure in Zym. There wasn’t a straightforward explanation as to why he would leave the other two coins.

After a moment, Rayla looked about to try and find a pen and paper, but came up short. Then, she fixed Callum who seemed to converse with Amaya’s coin.

The two of them smirked at each other, going way too fast for the elf to follow. She resolved to ask him about it later. “Thanks, Claudia. For everythin’.”

“Huh? I didn’t... do anything? I just woke up with them in my bag, as I said.”

“That’s not what I meant”, snickered Rayla, heaving herself up and onto her cane, “You’ve been... ow...”

Clutching her side, the poisoned elf had to do her utmost not to puke.

Claudia shot up and approached her, but she shook her head. “I’m okay”

“Doesn’t look like it to me. Go sit. What do you need?”, asked Callum whose attention had been diverted from Amaya thanks to the mage’s rapid motion.

“I just wanted to grab a pen and paper”, grumbled his summand, slumping back into the chair and hating the fact that she felt better almost instantly.

The high mage rummaged in her bag and produced a small field notebook and a stick of charcoal.
Rayla went to work writing out messages for her father. Her mien quickly turned to shock.

“He didn’t like what you had to say?” asked Callum gently.

“Well, I told him... about what A was doin’... he...”, she swallowed heavily, “... he’s cryin’.”

Tyne’s anger had made Rayla defiant. Her father’s disappointment cut strangely deep, driving tears of confused shame into her own eyes.

Farouk had always been a guarded man, even for a high ranking member of the Lucid. Seeing him like this was otherworldly.

Bitterness made her shove the coin into her pocket.

“What about Amaya?”, she asked, putting on a brave face.

Callum sighed. “She’s confused. Won’t believe she’s been stuck in there for four years. I think she also doesn’t believe that I am who I’m saying I am. She says she doesn’t know anything about how she ended up in there.”

“Yeah, um, I actually think that’s a good thing”, said Claudia, “Think about it. If time doesn’t pass for them in the same way as for us, they might be way more comfortable than we think. Imagine if they felt every second of being locked in a small space like that.”

“I think we already know that time doesn’t work so well in a coin”, said Rayla, gesturing at Ezran, “He didn’t exactly grow a beard in there.”

“True. I have another question”, said Claudia, “With him back, what are you two? He’s the King, right?”

A wave of doubt gripped Rayla. She had ostensibly come to this foreign place to rule at Callum’s side, but with Ezran there, she wouldn’t get to, not in the way she had dreamed of. Dreamed of? Dreaded, too. Confused anger at herself joined the party. She didn’t want this ball of emotion, now feeling guilt toward the two brothers in addition to the guilt her father had imparted on her.
“We talked it over with the council. For the moment, we think it’d be better if we didn’t announce him being back. People are looking at Evenere right now, everyone’s nervous”, said Callum. He had placed Amaya in his pocket after signing an apology, then walked over to pet his brother’s hair. Touching it felt familiar. It made him smile widely, filling his chest with light.

“Don’t wanna drop a stone in that pond, mhm”, nodded Claudia, “So, what if he’s still unconscious when Rayla recovers? Do we just go through with calling it a royal wedding?”

“We won’t really have a choice”, laughed Callum, “If we wanna keep the charade going, anyway.”

Claudia nodded, nibbling at her thumb’s fingernail. “Kind of a big thing to keep secret. I’ll see what I can do for him. Hopefully I can fix whatever it is that keeps him out soon. The last thing we want is to be caught telling a lie like that.”

“Oh!”, went Callum, “Th-that! That’s his plan! Claudia, you’re a genius! He’s gonna try to make it look like we were always just hiding Ez! Drugging him or something! Making me a usurper!”

The King shot up and said, “I have to go talk to the council. I think we have to announce that Ez is back, after all, we can’t risk having him control that reveal. Rayla, have Lydia show you the castle, okay? I’ll find you after I’m done with them.”

His summand nodded weakly, watching as he jogged down the ramp. Her head spun with all the emotions that buffeted her. It seemed as though she had lost her status as queen-to-be and with it the permission to be included in these choices.

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Around lunchtime, Lydia finished her tour, leaving Rayla even more frazzled. The castle hadn’t been built all at once and was full of nooks and crannies that one could get lost in. She had a great sense of orientation, but even it was having a hard time scribbling a reliable map.

The attendant motioned at the doors of the eating room. “And that concludes the grand tour, Milady. Questions?”
“Aye, do you have a map?”, the elf asked wryly.

Lydia cackled. “Ha! I know it’s a bit intimidating at first. Don’t worry, everyone who’s new here has taken a wrong turn before. It’s fine to ask the guards.”

“Alright. Thanks, Lydia. I’m honestly lookin’ forward to havin’ lunch and a bit of a sit-down. Feel just about a hundred-and-ten”, smirked Rayla.

The attendant opened the doors for her and she shuffled to her seat at the head of the table where she had spent breakfast, as well. As it wasn’t quite time for lunch just yet, the table was clear and another person was using it to spread out a bunch of books to do a lot of cross-referencing.

“How are you, dad?”, asked Rayla with a smirk at Tinker, “I was gonna come see you in a bit. Guess what?”

Akande looked up just in time for the coin she had slid across the table to bump into his hand. “Oh. Oh! You... they found another one!”, he exclaimed, grabbing the gold piece and turning it, “Oof... it’s grumpy old Farouk!”

Excitedly, he waved at Rayla’s father in the coin who seemed furious. “When he gets out, we’ll be lucky to see the next morning”, hissed Tinker through his toothy smile.

“Yea. Him and mom both”, sighed Rayla.

The door slammed open and in walked Helmond with Callum in tow. “Akande, if you would please excuse us for a moment”, came the energetic request from the old elf.

“Of course”, said Tinker with a hint of annoyance. Some attendants had more or less shooed him out of the workshop to allow them to do a little cleaning while Horace was asleep and now he was being ejected from this place as well, “I don’t suppose you know a place where one might be left alone ?!”

“Private! Show our guest to the Library!”, ordered Callum, meaning the one crown guard who was posted next to the door. Rayla stiffened. He usually wasn’t so curt.
When the two men had left, Callum sat next to her and Helmond started pacing.

“Viren’s blocking my Acies somehow”, started Callum, “And Honsa... is... *was* in trouble. You’re going to love *this*. Helmond?”

“Milady, I have received news from my Xadian contacts”, said the ex-Legate.

“Woah. That’s *fast*! Didn’t even take a full day!”, gaped Rayla.

“Indeed. It has happened before, but in this case I believe the speed itself is *very* significant. One of my taps into the Scotian Privy Council has let me know your mission. They said it was less difficult to obtain the file since it was abandoned for some other, more guarded project. The Lucid planned for you to become Queen, then have you publicly murder Aanya of Duren, sowing *incredible* chaos. Further, they mentioned that ocean elves can *assist* in breaking this conditioning. This information on its own *sounds* rather trustworthy, given what we know of the Lucid’s methods and ocean elves’ ability to engage with the minds of others. However, Sir Callum’s spell revealed Honsa being left on shore by elves clad in the green of the Lucid.”

Rayla’s mind immediately stitched together an explanation. “They know we know about *me*. They have their *double agent* tell you that an ocean elf could help. It’s easy for them to guess who we’d ask. They condition *her* because they know she’s an *associate* of ours.”

Helmond clapped his hands together in a gesture of finality. “And, because she and I have no personal relationship, the Lucid assumes I might forgo questioning the counselor. So! We’ve come to the same conclusion. I believe we must play this game if we want to figure out what their plans are in earnest. As for her helpfulness to your situation, Lady Rayla, I will attempt to find out more.”

“You don’t seem too worried about your sources giving you bad intel”, grumbled Callum.

“Sire, the first rule of intelligence work is to only ever trust the person you see in the mirror”, said the Agent, “I *expect* my sources to be double agents. The art is to have many informants in different agencies of the Xadian state. It’s unlikely that they all send the same *fake* information, so if a piece of intel is corroborated by all of them, we can be rather sure of its veracity. For all I know, the source *was* truthful about the information they were *given*. It’s a terribly convoluted network. The only thing that will get us to some semblance of truth is evidence and a few good guesses.”
Callum shook his head slowly. “I’m glad I don’t have to understand the details of what you and Kingsley do.”

Helmond nodded. “You’ve done rather well on instinct. The councillor is a sneaky man, I know to supervise him. If you ever had doubts about my loyalty, he is supervising me just the same”, with a smirk, he added, “But you would rue the day he and I join forces.”

The King laughed. “Careful now, you’re ruining your image as Katolis’ most straight-laced elf! So. If Helmond can confirm that abyssal calls - ocean magic - can help you through this, our plan is to invite Honsa, do the obvious. At least she’s not nearly as dangerous as you.”

Rayla nodded, wanting to hold on to the slight relief of hearing that Callum wasn’t her intended target. Of course, there was no telling whether this was true.

“However”, said Helmond, “I want to assume reasonable precautions. She will not be allowed to be alone with the King or any other noble until we can figure out the Lucid’s plans.”

“Aye”, agreed Rayla, “I for one will be doin’ jumpin’ jacks when I can stop takin’ the stuff.”

“Trust me, we all will”, Callum said, drawing her into a kiss, “I’m hoping to write another letter to Taog. See if he can figure out a way to let me find Vir--”

The door had opened a tiny bit, then closed quietly. Rayla smirked when there was a scratch. It seemed it was time for lunch.

--

After lunch, Rayla really wanted a moment for her and Callum to talk. The day had already been so full of chaos and change and she wanted to make sure she understood where it was all going.

Instead, the King dragged his summand into the Throne room to make time for a few petitioners from the capital. He wanted to continue his father’s legacy of listening to the people and their issues. He told her he wanted her to observe and learn. A confusing demand, given her insecurities.
Rayla writhed in her throne, uncomfortable with people’s reactions to seeing her there. There was no measured or tepid expression among the crowd, they were either excited, scared or repulsed.

A scrawny young man stepped forward. He was the second-to-last person in queue. With a nervous, scared look at Rayla, he bowed. “My lady, I... my name is... Arno, I, um... I come from Aberg. For the... um, third summer in a row, our fields are burning. We don’t have any more food stockpiled and, uh... we were hoping for your help for winter?”

Rayla was startled to be addressed directly. Granted, the way Arno had queued up, she was the closer person. Lost, she looked at Callum. The King gave her a nod with a wink and a smile that said `yeah, give it to him`.

Turning back to the petitioner, she said, “Arno, ye’ve come a bit of a way. Doesn’t Aberg have ravens?”

“If my, uh, presence o-offends milady, I apologise, we do n-not”

“No! No offense taken!”, exclaimed Rayla hastily, then cleared her throat to keep herself from visibly cringing at herself, “We’ll send food. A-and t-two ravens?”

Callum nodded, “Arno, please talk to the quartermaster. She’ll be happy to set up all the details of the food deliveries and assign a crow handler that can teach you how to deal with the animals.”

The man smiled from ear-to-ear. “Th-thank you, Lady Rayla!”

He turned and strode out where an attendant took him under her wings so he wouldn’t get lost in the castle.

The last person was an older woman concerned with Zym’s presence. Callum explained to her that he presented no danger and - because she complained about having waited for so long - sent her on her way with dinner for her family.

Rayla sighed deeply when the doors closed behind the grandma, slumping into her chair. “Why didn’t you just let her talk to Zym? Would’ve made a good impression.”
“I don’t know about that. He’s pretty agitated. I helped him write a message to his mother while Lydia gave you the tour”, said Callum, taking a drink of water and sitting back down.

“Yea, about that”, said his summand, “I... need to know where we stand. You kinda made the decision of tellin’ everyone about Ezran. I agree, that’s not it, just... I guess I feel a little confused about what my role is now that I won’t be Queen.”

Callum nodded. “I have the same problem. Don’t get me wrong, I’m glad to see this crown as a temporary thing now, but... yeah. It’ll be weird”, he pouted. “Sorry for walking out on you. I should’ve involved you, your status hasn’t really changed just yet. Our roles really depend on Ez. If Claudia can’t get him to wake up, you’ll be Queen Regent. As soon as we announce him being alive, I’ll be ‘just’ King Regent. Even if Ez wakes up, we’ll still be close advisers to him, as Heirs Apparent, the Crown Prince and Princess.”

His expression became wistful. “Maybe we can even go back to traveling. I miss that.”

That Callum seemed similarly confused by the situation made Rayla feel a little better.

“Aye, I’d like that”, his summand leaned over to fix his flipped collar. “I figure we’d be runnin’ all over the place, actin’ in his name and forcin’ people to get along. Gallivantin’ is much more my speed than sittin’ here, noddin’ at people’s requests. Seriously, have you ever turned anyone down?”

“I have to, almost every time I do this. Today we got lucky, they were all pretty easy. Aberg is a bit troubling, of course. Back in my dad’s days we would send Viren out there to fix their problem more permanently. Now, we can’t really do that anymore.”

“See, if you were free to go, you could probably go and make it rain on their farms or somethin’”, snickered Rayla while motioning the falling of water by twiddling her fingers.

Callum shrugged. “Nebula could probably get that done, ye--”

The great doors swung open to permit a woman wearing a crown through, followed by a young boy, Opeli and Kingsley. Callum rose, Rayla followed his example.

Opeli quickly stepped behind the royals and whispered, “Marielle, Queen of Evenere.”
The King of Katolis stepped toward the woman, offering her his hand in greeting. “Lady Marielle. I’m so very sorry to hear about Jorge.”

“Milord, thank you for granting us asylum”, replied the Eveneran, “And for your sympathies. I hear your war council is preparing a meeting, I’d like to be present for it.”

“Naturally”, said Callum, “You have full access to our crows as well. I’m sure you have a great many letters to send.”

The Queen nodded. Rayla scanned her, noting how mask-like her cordial expression was. Whether that was because she hadn’t had a good night’s sleep in a while or because the presence of an elf upset her wasn’t clear.

“I’d be very happy to share dinner with you, Milady, but please don’t feel obligated”, said Callum, “I’m imagining the past week has been chaos.”

“Utterly so. I’m looking forward to a bit of quiet, Sire, I’d prefer a simple meal for me and Etienne.”

The tiny three-year-old boy was clutching his mother’s robes. Callum hesitantly crouched, unsure as to how to engage the young prince. “How are you?”

“Good”, the quiet, obvious lie stumbled out of the child’s mouth.

The Queen ruffled her son’s hair, “Etienne, these people are great friends. Remember, they’re letting us stay in their castle for a while until we can go home.”

“But, why does that one look like the bad people, Maman!?”, he asked, pointing at Rayla, who stiffened.

“I’m so sorry! `Bad People`!?”, demanded his mother sternly, “What does that mean?”
“Papa reads me stories from a book with pictures! Bad people have the two pokey things on their hair and they look all weird!”

Marielle opened her mouth to speak but Rayla beat her to it. “You’re right. There’s bad people that look like me, but also a lot of good people.”

She smiled. “I’m one of the good ones”

Callum wanted so badly to snort at the blunt statement, but it showed some effect with the boy who seemed slightly puzzled.

“Jorge held a dim view on your people, Lady Rayla”, said Marielle, “I’m sorry about this.”

“No, it’s fine. He’s a child, he doesn’t know better. How about you, though, do you hold the same views?”, asked Rayla.

Her summand spun, ostensibly to walk back to his throne, but also to give her a warning look. Pressing in this direction was apparently not a good idea.

“I do not have a personal problem with you, Milady”, said the Queen of Evenere, “I am indebted to you, either way. Among all the Pentarchy, Katolis seems to me the most stable at the moment. Thank you for welcoming us.”

“It’s our pleasure”, replied Rayla, the non-committal answer making her slightly uneasy with the visitors.

“Yes. We’ve had some quarters prepared for you, I hope they are to your liking. Councillor Kingsley, would you, please?”, said Callum.

Kingsley nodded. “If Majesty would like to see her quarters...?”

Marielle and her son followed the Tinesian, the boy staring backwards at Rayla who maintained her grin as long as he could see her.
Just before the door closed behind them, Etienne’s lips curled into a smile to mirror hers.

Callum sighed deeply, the sound turning into a groan halfway. “Rayla, you *can’t just ask* something like that! It’s so rude!”

“Her kid was bein’ a bit racist”, grumbled his summand, “I wanted to know where she’s at.”

“And do you know that now?”

Rayla shrank into her seat. “No.”

“Straight questions almost never get a straight answer, fawn. She’s a royal, from a noble house. She’s been *raised* to dance around her true meaning without necessarily lying. Plus, it wasn’t just rude as a question, but I mean... think about it for a moment. She just arrived at what she thinks is sanctuary. Exhausted, hunted by half her country, her husband is dead. Is she going to give you an honest answer that she knows you might not like to hear? Would she offend her host?”

Rayla shrank even further into her seat. “No...”

The King snorted. “Alright. School of dumb royal stuff is done. How can we help you, Opeli?”

The Councillor shook her head. “You’ve quite made my points, Sire. I’m oddly proud”, with a sigh, she motioned at the large round table that had been propped up against the wall to make room for the petitioners, “However, we should probably prepare for the council meeting if we want to finish before dinner.”
The gist of the war meeting was that Katolin soldiers had arrived on Eveneran shores, assisting the local garrison in containing the rebellion. Nobody in the room seemed thrilled about this, least of all Callum who had never imagined having to agree to using the military in this way. As the general staff filed out after Marielle, the High Council remained to discuss purely Katolin issues.

Kingsley had changed his stance on the whole democracy debate somewhat, a fact that Callum credited to Rayla’s plain point from the other day. It sounded like the Tinesian was now considering the idea rather than rejecting it outright.

As per usual, Arntraud and Opeli seemed to think that there was no way to make it work. The former believed that merit - not votes - should determine power. The latter worried loudly about the minor nobles not playing along with losing some of their power to commoners. To Callum, it sounded more like his closest adviser was worried for her own status.

Everyone argued around Kingsley since, if he could be convinced, the pro-democracy voices would outweigh the ones against.

The discussion only ended when the attendants announced the readiness of dinner after which Rayla and Callum dropped in on Zym who wasn’t sure what to do with himself. On one hand, he wanted to go home to appease his mother, on the other he believed that Viren was still close and wanted to help find him. He’d been circling above the middle kingdom for much of the day, trying to catch a glimpse of the man and his mirror.

Afterwards, Rayla found herself slipping into her pajamas and falling into bed exhausted and with her head spinning.

“What. A. Day”, she sighed, “I feel like my head is just goin’ to pop off! Aren’t you comin’ to bed?”

Callum shook his head. “Nope. I’m gonna go see Clauds and then get to the pile of paper on my desk for a bit.”

“Did you want help? With the pile, I mean.”
Her summand appeared in her range of vision to kiss her. “Thank you, but not today. You look exhausted. Maybe we can make tomorrow an office day.”

“Sounds suuper exciting”, Rayla laughed, brushing a few errant strands of hair out of his face, “Have we heard anything from the search parties?”

“No. As expected”, grumbled Callum, “I’ll try Acies again.”

“Better not”, warned Rayla, “Last night the third try didn’t go so well. I don’t want you to overdo it.”

The dire look on his face made her unhappy. “Dafty. You can’t control it all.”

“I... I know that”, he said, sitting down by her side. “I just... I wish I could be in more places at once, you know? I’m being a bad summand to you. I shouldn’t have walked out on you like that.”

“We talked it over, it’s all good”, she said gently.

He smiled. “Thank you”, he bent over to kiss her, “I love you. Get some rest”

“Boy, will I ever”, she yawned, “Love you, too.”

He got up, but his free spot was quickly taken over by Bait. “Oh, lookit, the old grumpy man has come back to snuggle”, laughed Rayla, petting the toad’s belly, “And where have you been all day?”

“Probably sitting with Pip in my old room”, said Callum absentmindedly, “I don’t wanna know how that bird would’ve reacted to what we did yesterday. Too smart for my taste.”

“Gosh, havin’ him or Bait around for that sort of thin’ would just be too weird!”, laughed his summand, “Especially with Ez and Zym around.”

She watched as he went around the room to extinguish all the lights to make it easier for her to
“Good night, fawn”, he said, the low, loving tone of his voice making her feel all fuzzy.

The soft, flickering light from the hallway illuminated his outline as he stepped outside. It was the last thing Rayla saw before drifting off.

--

Claudia found Callum waiting for her outside her laboratory. He wasn’t wearing his regalia, instead he was dressed in a simple cloak that shielded his face quite well.

“All set?”, she asked, similarly clothed to blend in.

Callum nodded. “Rayla’s asleep”, he looked around, “What about Piper?”

“Nah”, she snorted, “She’s just lost in her own little world. Let’s go. If we keep on standing here she might get herself undistracted.”

He quickly shuffled inside after her. They slipped into one of the many secret passages of the castle, past Piper who was captivated by the tiny amount of shimmering silver liquid their efforts were producing.

The place was damp and dark, but they didn’t dare light a torch. The walls of this passage had cracks in some places that could give them away if the light was spotted through them. It didn’t matter much, Claudia knew it like the back of her hand.

Callum’s fingers traced the wall until he stepped into a crossing. For a moment, he simply stood in the dark, unsure which path to take.

“Claudia?”, he whispered to get her attention.

After a long moment, her hand found his and squeezed.
“I was wondering when you’d have mercy on me”, smirked Callum, “It’s nice to do this with you again.”

“I missed it, too”, she whispered, “Keep it down, though, we’re right next to the kitchens. Wouldn’t want to cause a scandal!”

He huffed in a way that told Claudia that he was rolling his eyes with callumesque exasperation.

The passage opened into a small cave in the rocky base of the Castle. From here, it was an easy climb into the forest below.

Callum breathed deeply. “Ahh. Sweet, sweet freedom!”

The High Mage dragged him into the trees to their place, a clearing that they had visited regularly to escape from their respective duties. Here they could do whatever they wanted, undisturbed.

Claudia flopped into the moss and the King followed her example. Stars twinkled at them from on high where the Moon did not drown them out.

“I have to tell you something”, he started after a moment.

“Mh?”, she prompted.

“I... figured out a bit of star magic.”

Claudia shot up. “Whaaaat!? When?!”

He explained how he had come by Acies, leaving out the moment he had realized what his dream had meant. Pre-empting the obvious question, he said, “And no, I can’t keep casting it to find Viren. He’s figured out how to block me, somehow and on top of that, the invocation is... draining. Twice a day is what I can manage so far.”
“Ohh! Show me the rune!”, she demanded, excitedly clapping the tips of her fingers together.

He drew it for her and she hastily scribbled it into her field notebook. “Oh! Oh, that is wiiild! I think we might be the first humans to see this sort of magic, ever! Star magic is super rare!”

“Maybe. It’s not like the elves made an effort to show us. Clauds... I... don’t wanna pressure you or anything, but did you figure out Ezran’s problem?”

His friend tilted her head, slowly tapping the side of her nose. “You know... maybe? You told me that Viren tried to steal your voice, right? Well, the same thing can be done with someone’s consciousness. All you need is the shrunken head of a Lethean”, she screwed up her face as though she was a shrunken head and tugged herself along on an imaginary string attached to the top of her head.

Callum smirked.

In response, she laughed, shaking her head. “Wow, tough crowd! There used to be a time where that would’ve made you laugh!”

“Sorry! Don’t get me wrong, it was a good impersonation, but, uh...”

“Right, shrunken heads? Super serious topic! Lethean heads can bind conscience in the same way that the claw Viren used can bind voice. The easiest way to break a spell like that is to open the container the binding material is in. Here’s where it gets kind of neat. I think we can use the tether between Ez and his conscience to find Viren...? There’s a spell to identify the container of a binding hex. I was gonna start collecting the materials for it tomorrow. It uses those fluffy glowy things.”

“The ones you used to find us from Mount Kalik?”, asked Callum.

Claudia fell back into the moss, all warmth wiped from her chest. “Yep.”

Silence followed for a moment, then Callum said, “Sorry, I didn’t want to stir up old stuff.”
“It’s not old stuff, that’s the problem. Old stuff isn’t important anymore, this is. It’ll be old stuff once I manage to find Viren and get all of his victims out of their coins.”

“I know how important that is for you and I figure you’re pretty close. Still, I’m almost worried about what’ll happen to you once we get him locked up. What’ll you do then?”

She scoffed. “Learn primal magic.”

Callum deflated a little. “I’m... I’m not sure you can.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah!”, she went angrily, “We’ve been over this. You rejected dark magic, I embraced it. Yadah, yadah, ya-duuuhh!”

“I’m not saying this stuff to put you down, Clauds! All I know for sure about me being able to do primal magic is this one thing. Maybe it has nothing to do with anything. But I’ve shown you what I could. Every few months, when we manage to sneak out like this, I wonder if you’ll make progress.”

“Are you saying you’re not going to help me try anymore?”, she asked, sounding hurt.

“No, of course I’m not giving up on you”, he sighed sadly, “I just don’t know if this is ever going to work, you know? How am I supposed to know if I’m teaching you right if I don’t get my powers myself?”

She stared at him for a moment, then nodded. “You’re kind of an ass, Callum. But only cause you’re honest, I guess. Don’t worry too much about teaching, I’ll just have to be a really good student.”

“So do you want to try something different tonight?”, asked the King.

“Yes! What do you want me to do?”

“Meditate.”
Claudia groaned. “What’s that supposed to do?! It's so pointless!”

Callum gave her a stern look that almost made her laugh. “Fine! Fine! I’ll be a good student and”, she waved her hand through the air, sounding sarcastically convinced, “make my connection to an arcanum by sitting weird and humming!”

“Dingus!”, he scolded her with a smirk, “Sit comfortably, eyes open a little. Fix a point to keep them from wandering too much and try not to get distracted from your breathing. You basically want to stop thinking random thoughts.”

She scoffed, shifted in the moss until she rested on the most plush part of it, closed her eyes just enough to make everything blurry and focused a rock on the ground that was illuminated by the moon.

“Focus on your breath”, said Callum quietly, “Feel how it moves your body.”

He guided her through his own meditation routine. She had always had a hard time taking it seriously, the activity struck her as a waste of time. His insistence that it would help made her want to give it a fair shot, though.

Breathe in.

She was wondering whether Piper had gone to bed or was still staring at the distillate. A frustrated smirk spread across her face. ‘You’re not supposed to be thinking, Claudia, damn it! Breath, breath, focus on the breath!’

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

'The moss is so uncomfortable. Damn it!'
Breathe in.

Breathe out.

Breathe in.

'Was that a cricket? That's a bit early."

Breathe out-- damn it!

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

After what felt like an eternity battling herself for concentration, Callum’s quiet voice said, “So now, open your eyes and take in the world. Really try to experience it, not just see it.”

They were surrounded by forest. Well, no, trees. The sky above them was somewhat overcast, but allowed the stars and moon to shine through. Below her was the slightly damp, green moss, she could smell it’s slightly musty scent.

Was that enough experiencing? Her finger traced the rune of Aspiro, but nothing happened. She knew the simple motion well, knew what it was supposed to feel like. Distant memories of holding a primal stone in her father’s office bubbled up into her mind and made her sigh.

“Claudia”, Callum said, gently, “I don’t think meditating twice in your life is going to make much of a difference. It’ll take a few more tries for you to get anything out of it. You’re asking for too much.”
She reached for a small pebble and flung it at Callum, missing him. “Shut up!” she shrieked, shooting up from her position on the ground, “You figured this out in no time at all! In two weeks you went from holding a primal stone for the first fucking time in your princeling life to casting without one! Don’t talk to me about asking for too much, your Majesty!”

His expression was stern, annotated with a hint of fear. “Put the stone down. Now.”

His friend blinked, looking at her right hand. A large, jagged rock was sitting in her straining grasp, ready to be launched at the King. Aghast, she dropped it.

“I...”, she stammered, “S-sorry... I don’t know...”

“This isn’t like you, is it!?”, he asked, grasping her shoulders and shaking her lightly, “What is wrong with you!!”

“I...”, she started again, then dissolved in shuddering sobs.

Together, they sunk to the mossy ground where she started telling him about all the things she had avoided talking about to him, for fear of how he would react. She talked about the nightmares and visions she was having. About the whispers coming from dark corners at night. About the fact that she did not see herself in mirrors anymore, afraid that the person that looked back at her would start speaking to her in a voice she did not recognize.

Callum wasn’t sure he’d be able to sleep with those stories fresh in his mind. “Have you talked to Cardwell about this?”

She shook her head, palming at her face. “What’s he gonna do, send me with you to life-drawing?”

“Why not? Drawing some boobs might cheer you up”, quipped the King in an attempt to cheer her up.

To his delight, Claudia snorted. “That might work for you, but I... I don’t know.”
“I’m sure we can find something to help you. Could this be an effect of dark magic? You’ve been exhausting yourself on the regular with this stuff.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s right. So what? What can I do about it? Viren used to do a lot of dark magic all the time, too, and it didn’t turn him into a wreck like me. What did he do right that I’m doing wrong?”

Callum’s brows furrowed. “Maybe it’s... the fact that you feel like you are doing something wrong?”

“Huh?”

“He always thought that he was fine, that there wasn’t an issue with using dark magic to achieve his goals, right? What if what you’re experiencing is like... your mind telling you to stop because deep down you feel like you shouldn’t be doing it in the first place?”

Claudia bit her lower lip. “Yeah. I do feel that, so I guess that’s not a bad explanation. I... I wonder though, my hair...”, she ran her hand through it, “His was never so drained.”

“I can’t explain that”, said Callum, “If it helps, you look good with it.”

“I like my black hair better, but, heh, I guess you’re biased”, snorted his friend.

The King laughed. “I guess that’s true. Clauds, if you need anything, if I can do anything to help you with this, all you need to do is ask. Please don’t carry this on your sh... oh man. I can’t believe this.”

“Huh? What is it?”

“I’m just realizing that I have... a fiance and a best friend who both seem to not get the concept of sharing their burdens with me.”

“Pfft. Maybe we don’t feel like we need your help, oh wise King?”
“No, um, that’s fine! Like, if you don’t want my help, go right ahead. It’s not like I think I have some sort of special power to fix your problems. It’s just that I have a hard time watching people I care for suffer alone, you know?”

After a moment, Claudia sighed and nodded. “Makes sense. You’ve always been... mushy.”

Callum didn’t like that. “Mushy!? Mushy. I’m mushy!? ”

“Yeah! You are! That’s exactly why I had a crush on you, because you were not like Soren .”

“He can be mushy ! Did you not tell me that he loves poetry?”

“He does love poetry, but you’re actually good at writing!”, laughed Claudia.

“Good?! What?! I can’t write to save my life, Clauds!”

“But your coronation speech, it was s--”

“Written by Opeli!”, wheezed Callum, “I can’t believe you didn’t know!”

She gaped at him. “I guess I’ll have to re-evaluate your mushiness score!”

He nodded and silence spread between them as they looked upward at the coursing clouds.

“Looks like it might rain”, said Claudia, “Time to go back home? Maybe Rayla's pining for you already?”

“Oh no, she's out like a candle in the wind. But, is that a hint of jealousy I detect?”, he teased.
A moment later he added, “You know, um, according to Rayla, you could get anyone you wanted.”

‘Even her’, he thought, feeling a confused prick of misplaced jealousy.

They got up and set out toward the castle.

“She’s totally right!”, laughed the High Mage confidently, “Just haven’t found the right one yet. But yes, I’m a bit jealous. It’s kinda hard to watch you two be lovey-dovey. Not that you guys don’t deserve it, after all this time. I’m just... lonely, I guess. Her coming here and you spending time with her didn’t make that easier.”

Small drops of Rain started falling around them, rustling the leaves of trees and bushes.

Claudia sighed. "Piper’s a great friend and all that, but she doesn’t want what I want out of life. She’s probably okay just banging her head against work for the rest of it, like Horace, but... I... I want someone. At some point. Seeing you and Rayla... Soren and his wife... you know?"

The King nodded. “That almost sounds like you considered Piper.”

“Oh, I totally did”, snickered Claudia, “She’s good looking and smart. She’s also great fun. Loves playing chess and fences like a pirate. Just, um... emotionally, she’s not really wife material.”

They had arrived at the rock wall and started climbing, then quietly snuck into the castle through the dark corridor.

Claudia poked her head outside, then waved him through when she saw no trace of Piper.

“Well, um, have a good night. We’ll do this again, soon, okay? Thanks for taking me out”, said Callum when they arrived at the door.

“Shame we had to cut it short, it was a good time. Funny, I planned this to be kind of a birthday thing for you but in the end you...", she brushed a strand of hair behind her ear, avoiding his gaze. "Sorry about... all the drama.”
“Don’t be dumb. Talk to Cardwell, okay?”

“I’ll... try.”
The next day brought an unexpected, very welcome surprise.

When Callum walked into the lower courtyard, Claudia was busy squeezing the life out of Soren who happily returned the gesture. Next to them, Jen and Amelie on her arm looked on with a good measure of amusement.

“Soren! Jen! How are you guys?”, he waved at them.

When he arrived next to Claudia, she seemed confused, looking around. “Where’s Rayla?”

The King gave her a worried look. “With Cardwell. She had some trouble getting out of bed this morning so... yeah.”

Soren frowned. “If your fiance’s sick, shouldn’t you be there?”

“You’re one to talk!”, groused Callum, “She kicked me out, saying I had better things to do! I’m sure she’s gonna show up sooner or later.”

Soren nodded excitedly. “Has she, uh... talked about... me at all?”

“Soren!”, Jen groaned, “Come on! I doubt she’s going to be swinging at you, especially if she’s not feeling well.”

He seemed dejected. “I want that rematch! Last time we fought she just ran off, she can’t do that now!”

“Way to hold a grudge”, laughed Callum, “Did you guys want an early lunch?”

“I’m not opposed”, said Jen, nodding at Claudia and Soren “these two are planning on going out to find some sort of ingredient to snoop out Viren, but they don’t need me for that. I'll come along when it's time to sack the dude.”
“Huh?” went Claudia, “We... we weren’t going to come back to the castle just to cast the spell. He’s got a pretty big headstart at this point, so we shouldn’t waste time.”

“Oh. Right”, said Jen, “In that case, I guess, no.”

Callum fixed Claudia, “And when were you going to tell me that you’re going?”

“Um... as soon as I’m done preparing to leave? I was actually planning to leave this morning but I... I slept in a little, heh. You guys are a surprise, so... you can probably fit in a quick lunch”, with a worried look at her friend she added, “You’re... not planning on coming with us, are you?”

“I am”, replied the King, “Viren has a lot to answer for. I’m also bringing Zym. He can fly you guys there.”

Worried looks passed between Soren and Claudia. “Um, what if you get k--., uh, hurt ?”, asked the crown guard.

“It’s not a good idea Callum. Sorry”, said the High Mage, “We could bring a few guards and maybe Rayla if she wasn’t so sick. But, good point about Azymondias. Is he out patrolling?”

She held the King’s annoyed glower. He didn’t like it, but the fact that Rayla wasn’t feeling well and not married to him made him last of the line, yet again. They were right and he would be childish to force the issue.

A frustrated sigh escaped him as his arms fell to his sides. “Okay. Yeah. I’ll tell him to meet you here. And then I’ll go be useless somewhere else. ”

He stomped off toward the upper courtyard.

When he was out of earshot, Jen sighed. “Crazy to think that this kid is the King of Katolis.”

“Why? Cause he’s got bees in his butt?”, said Claudia.
“No. He’s just so... you know, he just seemed really *young* there for a moment.”

“No, babes, he’s just antsy cause he wants to be hands-on”, said Soren, reaching out to take his
daughter from Jen’s arms, “Stuck behind a desk like that, I’d go nuts, too.”

“That’s not really what I mean... he’s changed Katolis so much in four years. The art, the
technology, it’s all cause of him!”, to Claudia, she said, “Duren’s lagging *hard*. My own *family*
was talking about how I made a smart choice marrying a Katolin. Easy to forget that the King is...
well... a kid.”

Claudia snorted. “I see he’s got a *fan*. I’ll go get ready, you two grab some lunch.”

It took about half an hour for them all to reassemble in the courtyard where an agitated dragon was
already pacing, waiting for them. Claudia arrived first, then Soren and Jen joined them. Finally,
two soldiers of the crown guard in full war armor arrived as well.

“Is this everyone?”, asked the great predator, then stopped short, “Are... are we bringing the
baby!??”

Jen snapped out of her awe to roll her eyes. It was a shock to hear the same tired question from a
dragon child of all people. “Yes, we are bringing `the baby`. It’s totally irresponsible and we’re
such terrible pare-- can we skip this, please? It’s getting old. Her *name* is Ames, by the way!”

Claudia frowned silently. She didn’t like it, but she wasn’t about to mess with someone else’s
parenting. Instead, she introduced everyone and helped her family get settled in the harness the
dragon had put on once more.

During takeoff, Amelie and Soren whooped much like his sister had the first time. Jen simply
threw up. It was sheer luck that nobody got splattered. The two soldiers seemed a little green
around the nose, too. Flying wasn’t for everyone.

Zym had Claudia guide him to the spot where she intended to collect the living ingredient for her
spell. She dipped into the crevice and quickly caught a few wisps, shuffling back out in a hurry.
“Now, I’m sorry to have to do this right in front of you, but... that’s how it works”, said the Mage with a sigh. She laid out her ingredients. Curly hair from Ezran’s head, a container of freshly caught wisps, an assortment of flowers and a small vial of ground dragon horn. Luckily, there was no way for Zym to tell what the powder was.

The ritual made the wisps shudder and change color to a sickly purple. The dragon prince looked on with utter discomfort. Quickly, Claudia strapped herself into her harness and unstoppered the container. The corrupted wisps immediately took off north-east and Zym followed.

For a good hour, they traveled, following the tiny balls of light, twirling and winking out, one by one, as the spell consumed their life. The dragon felt sick, but determined to make their sacrifice count for something.

“Jen. What if Ames gets hurt?”, asked Claudia after a long silence. She was worried about her niece and realized that she had to ask the question.

The warrior sighed. “That’s a terrible thought. If it happens, we’ll have to deal with it. Regret comes with all choices that go wrong, no? We’re a family. I don’t want to lose either of these two idiots, so I have to be where they are to protect them.”

“Likewiseee”, said Soren, leaning over to kiss his wife, “Back when we decided to do this, we were like ‘If we’re gonna die, it’ll be a family activity’”

“You are a little insane”, grumbled Zym from ahead.

“... said the Dragon Prince who famously was carried across Katolis and Xadia as a baby “, laughed Jen.

“Well, YEAH! That was insane, too! Both of my foster parents almost died!”

“And now they’re fine”, said Soren, looking ahead where the two remaining wisps were now descending slightly, “Looks like we’re almost there.”

Zym watched the orbs vanish in the trees and made a beeline for that exact spot. “I’m dropping in on him!”, he warned, “Be ready!”
With a crash, they broke through the canopy, right on top of an old man and his horse. He did not look like Viren in the slightest, but the horse was pulling a small, covered cart.

Terror overcame both the horse and rider. The mount threw off the man and made for the direction opposite of Zym. The Dragon was faster, placing a paw on the cart and watching the horse struggle against its stirrups fruitlessly.

The old man jumped to his feet. The terror that had been so prominent on his face was wiped away by fury.

“It’s him!”, shouted Claudia, “He’s disguised!”

The guards jumped out of their harnesses and drew their weapons to shield the courtiers.

“Leave!”, shouted Viren hoarsely, “Why would you do this!? Come after me after I let you go the first time!? Do you think I want to kill you⁉️”

Then he recognized Soren, Amelie and Jen as they came into view around Zym. Horror gripped him and he started muttering. “N-no... no, we can’t... please, we have... we have to go!”

“Dad. You... you’re a grandfather”, said Soren gently. Despite his friendly words, he drew his blade, “Her name’s Amelie. Do you... do you want to hold her?”

Claudia could see Jen’s grip around her own blade tighten. The child on Soren’s back peeked at her father’s father with bashful worry that belied her sociable character.

“My b-boy”, cried Viren, sounding strangled and helpless, “You have to leave. Go! If you do this... if you stay... I will regret this more than anything I have ever had to do!”

“You don’t `have` to do anything”, said Claudia, “Except hand over Ezran and come with us. That’s all we want.”
“We’re not here to kill you. Give Xadia time to fix what we’ve done wrong. Please just come with us, stand trial. I’ll put in a good word.”

“A good word?! Are you insane, trying to lure me with a promise of lenience?!”, shouted the dark mage, “You’ve tipped your hand far too clearly, lizard! You planned to wipe humanity out! Every last one of us! I have proof! I have proof that your people are still working so very hard to destroy us, even executing a plot on our witless King and his disgusting Queen!”

“What are you talking about?!”, spat Zym, “We’ve stopped sending people to Katolis and I would know if...”

His eyes widened with a terrible suspicion and Viren laughed grimly. “Oh, but they never crossed into Katolis, now did they? Ha! I see you do not have your house in order! And now you bring my own family as human shields! My grandchild, no less! You really are a monster!”, he pointed at his children, “Leave. Please! Leave! You must see how this isn’t right! You... you can’t take his side against me!”

“Watch me!”, spat Claudia.

Without another word, Viren’s staff came up to launch a ball of solid ice at Zym who, surprised as he was, couldn’t move his head quite fast enough and was hit.

His vision swam as he stumbled, seeing the blurred shapes of his allies rush the High Mage. He fought hard to hold on to consciousness, but a second spell hit his temple and he fell to the ground.

It was now, as Claudia fought her father for the second time, that she realized how much power the man really had. He was casting dark magic while keeping them at bay with primal spells, freezing Jen to the ground and conjuring chains from thin air to bind Soren. When her father stumbled and fell over, Amelie slapped his cheeks, telling him to get up.

The guards held no value to Viren, and he made it obvious. One turned to ash in a blaze of solar heat, the other was bashed down by a bundle of vines, leaping out of the ground.

Jen watched with dismay. She decided that this was not a fight they could win outright, so they would have to play to the objectives.
“Keep him busy, I’ll get the jarhead!”, she yelled, using her sword to free herself.

Claudia threw fireball after fireball at Viren, but he seemed to simply slap them out of the air. It wasn’t a fair fight since he had full control of the primal magic she was merely faking.

A moment later, a gust of wind flung her into the trees.

The last thing Claudia saw was her sister in law, breaking something made of glass in the cart.

The last thing she heard were Viren and Soren’s furious screams.
Zym blinked. His vision was wobbly and unfocused. It was enough to tell that Viren and his horse were gone. Searing pain permeated his head and there was a crusty, sticky material over his right eye that seemed to seal it shut.

Getting to his feet, he noticed Soren, struggling with his chains on the ground. He couldn’t roll over to make it easier since Amelie was strapped onto his back, crying.

“Argh”, growled the Dragon, getting to his feet.

A determined bite later, Soren shook off the broken chains and, without a word to Zym, ran over to the cart. Behind it in the underbrush, the dragon could see someone on the ground. On the wooden vehicle sat a broken mirror and an equally shattered jar that had once held a shrunken head.

“Jen. Jen, talk to me”, came Soren’s frightened voice from where he knelt over the body.

With a sinking feeling in his stomach, Zym scanned the scene to find Claudia. He saw a dead guard tangled in a mess of vines and a heap of chunky ash that was slowly being spread by the wind. He’d seen those kinds of piles before, knew what they meant.

“Babe, please”, begged the crown guard, almost inaudible over the wailing of his child.

From between the trees, Claudia stumbled. Her white hair was reddened by a wound on her head that looked like it was still bleeding. “Hi. Where... where’s your... horn?”, she asked with a lilt.

“We...”, said Zym, but stopped short. Horn?! He whipped around, staring at one of the larger shards of the mirror.

There was his face. Three horns on the left. Two horns on the right. The largest had been cleanly cut off. The blood that had spilled from it covered his entire right side and he had been unconscious for so long that it had time to dry.

He snarled, the image making the pain he had assumed to be a headache so much worse. He had
been such an easy victim to the human. Even though he had known about Viren’s ability to perform primal magic, he was on a level that he had not expected. If he and Aaravos were to join forces, terrible times were at hand.

Claudia was now with her brother, trying to see what she could do for her sister in law.

“How... is she?”, asked the Dragon, joining them.

Soren’s tearful, furious stare over his shoulder told him everything there was to know. “She d-did... she did it”, he choked, “She b-broke the d-damn jar!”

“And the mirror”, breathed Claudia. It was obvious that she was not quite here, staring at Jen’s lifeless eyes.

“What the fuck happened?!”, yelled Soren. He jumped up and his voice doubled over, “Aren’t you supposed to be some kind of monster?! How the fuck did he knock you out like that?! We’re lucky he didn’t kill all of us!”

Zym bristled. It wasn’t fair that he should take the blame, but at the same time it didn’t feel like he could argue.

“Breathe some fire, asshole! Bite him! Break his back with your tail!”, screamed the crown guard, his fists raised, “Why didn’t you do something?! WHY?!”

The dragon didn’t know what to say. Guilt started to well inside him. “I... I’m so sorry”, he quavered, “I don’t know what... how...”

“Fuck!”, screamed Soren, punching Zym in the snout. This wouldn’t normally hurt the dragon, but in this moment, his entire head was tender. Then, the crown guard’s arms limped and he palmed at his face. His voice faltered. “Fuck...”

He lifted his child from his back and crumbled to the ground, cradling her and swaying back and forth. “Shhh, kiddo, it's gonna be okay...”
Zym looked between him and his sister who still sat by Jen’s body, staring.

This was, at best, a Pyrrhic victory.

“We... need to get back to the castle”, he rasped, taking a close look at the shattered artifact. He wasn’t sure what destroying the mirror would do to its inhabitant, but it was clear that it was beyond repair.

Just like the face that was staring back at him.

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A heavy, dismal atmosphere hung over the infirmary. In a chair next to Rayla’s bed sat Callum, holding her clammy, tensing hand in his. Across from him in another bed was Claudia, her bandages and washed white hair hiding her features.

The doors to the infirmary opened and Cardwell stepped through.

“How did it go?”, asked Callum.

“The Prince? Cleaned. Bandaged. Told him to rest. Don’t know if we have anything to help with his pain or get him to sleep”, the physician said, solemnly, “Severing a live dragoon’s horn! Tsk! Barbärian!”

His concern now shifted to Rayla. “How do you feel, Majestät?”

“A’m fine”, croaked the elf.

“Sounds like it”, said Callum, sarcastically. He was getting tired of her insincere protestations.

“It was too high a dose. I’m very sorry, we should not have refreshed it so soon”, whispered the doctor, dabbing his sweaty forehead, “Ach, I thought I was taking it slow already, but elves’ livers seem to work a little less aggressively?”
“Nice to know you’re learning from this”, hissed the King Regent, “Please try not to kill her.”

Cardwell seemed to expand a little. “I’m doing what I can! We can always stop and find another way!”

Rayla weakly shook her head. “This is fine. I’m fine. It’ll be good. Dafty, let him work on the other—”

In the bed next to Rayla, Ezran jolted awake with a scared yelp. “NO! VIREN, DON’T!”

Everyone gaped at him and he stared back.

“Hey, Ezran”, whispered Callum, letting go of his summand’s hand as he got up.

“Where...? Callum? Did you... get bigger? Why are you wearing the crown?”

The King Regent had to work hard not to laugh out loud with joy. His brother’s voice was like music in his ears, the questions asked with such childlike plainness that he felt transported back to a simpler time. Without answer, he embraced Ezran and started crying uncontrollably into the little man’s shoulder. “I missed you so bad!”

“Um... how long was I gone? What happened? Is that Rayla over there? Are you ok? Claudia... why... is your... hair...?”, he asked, then added, very loudly and matter-of-factly, “I’m going to puke!”

And then he did, falling into some sort of trance.

The next fifteen minutes were a scramble to clean up Callum, the floor, the bed and Ezran himself. The young King was unresponsive, emoting ever so often as his eyes darted, watching a spectacle only he could see.

Callum was growing more and more worried as time went on. Cardwell was baffled.
Rayla started to feel better about an hour into Ezran’s fit.

Finally, after a good two hours of worry, Ezran snapped out of it as suddenly as he had started.

Breathing heavily, the boy leaned against his bed’s headboard. “Wow. Okay. So. Lots of stuff happened while I was gone. I think Zym just... told me the short version. I’m still trying to... sort it all out.”

He looked around the room, finding both Callum’s and Rayla’s concerned faces. The elf had pulled up a chair and sat next to her fiance, her hand rested on his thigh.

“How’s it goin’ Ez?”, she asked.

“Uh...”, a big, dumb smile spread across Ezran's features. “Haha, eww! I totally saw you guys make out a couple of times!”

They both blushed and Callum snickered. “Yeah, you... um... sorry. I hope you didn’t see anything... um... too weird.”

Ezran rolled his eyes, “You two sucking face can be kinda disgusting to watch, but it wasn’t weird.”

“Then how about you don’t watch?!”, quavered Rayla, a deep indigo tone to her cheeks.

“Hey, I didn’t get to tell Zym where he looks! Or what he eats! I still feel bugs popping in my mouth!”, protested Ezran with a shudder.

Suddenly he became solemn, then cringing visibly, his right hand shooting to the top of his head. “Oh. I... I guess that happened today? Ugh... wow... um... How are Soren and his baby?”

Callum sighed sadly. “He’s been locked in their... his... quarters for a while. We should check on him.”
“It’s the middle of the night, dummy”, said Rayla quietly, “I figure he’s goin’ to come out when he’s ready. Give him space.”

Her summand looked at her with eyes that told her how much he empathised with Soren. How much he blamed himself. It was a blank gaze she had hoped never to see on his face again. She leaned over to kiss him and to pet his hair. “I know. We should’ve been there”, she said gently.

Ezran looked away, pointedly. “Um... what... what was she like? His wife, I mean?”

Callum took a deep breath. “She, um... gosh. I... didn’t know her super well, but Soren just gushed about her. She was so supportive of him... I used to wonder if she hoped to get this Viren thing out of their lives quickly so they could... move on, you know?”

“... me get them out...”, Claudia muttered and rolled over.

“Is she okay?”, asked Rayla with a concerned look.

“Cardwell says she has a concussion. Might take a few days, but she’ll be fine”, said Callum.

“I didn’t even get to ask yet - how was your night out?”, asked his summand with an odd undertone.

“It was short. We got rained on. But, um, fun. Tried to get her to meditate. Didn’t work”, he said. For a moment he considered leaving it there, but he continued, “Did it bother you?”

Rayla shrugged. “It’s... my flaw to beat, dummy. I trust you and I’m startin’ to trust her. Just can’t get over myself yet. Don’t worry about it.”

Callum nodded. “Please tell me if something we do makes you unhappy, okay? I don’t want that between us.”

Once more, she shrugged limply, then turned to Ezran. “So. You’re back. King again!”
The boy’s face compressed in an expression of annoyance. “Wooo”, he said, tonelessly, “I’m not really worth much without Corvus. Is he around?”

Callum shook his head. “Ez... we, um... don’t really know. He vanished at the same time as you. Aunt Amaya, too. We found her in a coin, so we can guess that Corvus is out there, somewhere, but... yeah, we don’t have him.”

His brother shuffled into the covers. "Great. I don't like this at all. Zym is holding back a lot of stuff about Xadia he doesn't want to show me. Feels pretty bad to know that he doesn't trust me."

"I know what you mean", said Callum, "But we have stuff he can't know, either. I'll fill you in when you're ready, okay? This morning we announced that you were back. The reaction was a bit crazy. Cheers mostly, but a few minor nobles are talking about this as some kind of conspiracy, the same crowd who was really annoyed at the two of us getting married."

Ezran scoffed. "I'm pretty sure I can guess who that was. Wanfield and Reman."

"Well... the Remans are sort of... dead. Killed recently by a bunch of terrorists from Xadia. But Wanfield is a bullseye", said Callum.

"Children of Elarion, right? I can get out there tomorrow. Show that I'm here and stuff", said Ezran. He fixed Rayla with a surprised glance, "Oh! You were going to marry Callum?! That means you'd be Queen!"

"Yea, not anymore, I guess?", she smiled.

"That sucks!", exclaimed Ezran, "That would've been awesome! Elf Queen of Katolis! Rayla?!"

"What?", she asked, her smirk only widening at the boys excitement.

"What's your title?!"
"Lady of the Crescent Reflection"

The excitement was wiped from Ezran's face. "What? You know she kinda killed a lot of elves, right?"

"Am aware. Took it to spite her."

Ezran nodded, slowly. "Yep. That, uh, sounds like you. It's still really neat that you're a Katolin noble now. It means I can ask you for help and not worry about people being weird about it."

"Oh, people are gonna be plenty weird about it", laughed Rayla.

The doors opened and in stepped Cardwell. "I can't believe this! Do you know how late it is?! My patients need rest!"

A sheepish look passed between Callum, Rayla and Ezran, then the two older nobles rose.

"Good night, Ez", said Callum.

"Aye, little guy, sleep tight", said Rayla, pinching his cheek.

"I'll see you first thing tomorrow", smirked the boy.

Cardwell shook his head, holding up a hand. "Lädy Räyla, I'd like you to stay the night. For observätion."

Rayla opened her mouth to protest, but the look she got from Callum disarmed her. His worrying was annoying, but at the same time she couldn’t blame him too much.

She sighed. “Ah... well, I guess I’ll see you tomorrow then...”
He embraced her. “Love you. Sleep tight.”
A few days later, they bid farewell to Jen. The pyre Soren and Claudia had built for her was beautifully decorated with flowers and some of her belongings. Normally, people said a few words at these ceremonies, but Soren was quietly watching the flames consume his wife’s body, the fire seemingly not merely reflecting in his eyes, but nesting there, finding kindling in his fury. Callum was painfully reminded of a younger self as he watched Amelie hold on to her father’s hand, wobbling on her legs. She was too young to grasp the situation completely, but Soren would have to find ways to make it understood to her.

The announcement of Ezran’s return and his appearance sent waves of enthusiasm through both Katolis and the Pentarchy. To the noble family of Katol’s chagrin, this was mostly thanks to the fact that people were happy not to have an elven Queen.

Opeli was glad that the royal wedding had been postponed since a Crown Prince’s wedding would work much the same way, just on a slightly less pompous scale. With Rayla still suffering from her mysterious illness, nobody thought of having the celebrations just yet, either way.

Zym and Callum were feverishly updating Ezran on everything that had transpired during his absence and the Crown Prince was about to hand over the crown to his brother. Ezran had listened patiently to the list of his projects, agreeing to keep all of them running.

When it came time to talk about the military, Ezran’s expression had grown a little annoyed. His brother had accepted too many concessions, leaving Katolis with what the returning King considered a skeleton crew. Ezran understood that the sacrifice had to be made to appease the elves, but still bristled at the idea of what might’ve happened if Xadia decided they would not stick to their agreement.

The public ceremony would happen tonight, on July 24th.

Callum looked at himself in the mirror, smoothing out a few creases in his suit. Behind him, Rayla was bent over with her hands raised to her right eye, trying to apply some eyeliner. “Human makeup is so... augh! Unrefined!”

“I’m sorry you feel that way”, smirked Callum, “You don’t have to wear any, you know?”

“I want to, shush it!”, she went, “It’s my first official time showin’ up in front of commoners. I
There was a knock on the door.

“Come”, Callum said, without breaking eye contact with his mirror image.

Helmond stepped inside and closed the door behind himself. He wore his gala uniform and the Prince had to admit that it looked even better on the ex-Lucid than it had on himself. “Excellences, Honsa has arrived and is waiting in my office.”

Rayla immediately dropped everything she was doing. “Great, let’s get this stupid crap out of my head!”, she grumbled.

“Lady Rayla, please temper yourself. While my contacts have corroborated the claim that she will be helpful in combatting your conditioning, we do not yet know her mission here”, warned her elder, “I would recommend caution until we do. Perhaps, allowing her to get this close to you isn’t a good idea.”

“Ye ken wha’ isnae a good idea?”, she hissed, “Me takin’ this stuff fer a minute longer than A have tae! Look at me! A can barely walk! A’m done with it! Let’s go!”

Callum groaned quietly, following her outside past a very confounded looking Helmond. “Fawn, wait. You’re being reckless.”

“Reck--!?” , she started, whirling around, “Ye’re the last person A expected to hear this from! Ye’ve been in this body, knows what A feel every second of every day! A say A’m done, so A’m done!”

Callum held her gaze, then nodded, sternly. She had been irritable over the past week, hadn’t slept well or eaten much. Thinking back to his moment of insight into her, this wasn’t surprising. The stubborn composure she put on every day masked her actual pain so well that he’d somewhat neglected to make sure she was okay. The realization of this now hit him with the force of a sledgehammer. Of course she would want to cut this experience as short as possible.

Together they walked down the corridor from their new quarters to arrive at where the Covertway had set up shop.
Helmond’s office was unsurprisingly spartan. The only thing that didn’t absolutely need to be in the room was a framed charcoal drawing that bore Callum’s signature. It showed Helmond, Anzha, Torlan and Noli in a family portrait that had never happened.

In one of the two chairs across from Helmond’s sat Honsa. She seemed much more herself now, having gained some weight and wearing a sky-blue travel dress with coral red riding pants and the same yellow boots she had worn last time they had seen her. Lastly, she had a large, bright purple water skin slung around her shoulder and waist.

“Hey Honsa!”, said Callum. His voice shook a little as though he expected the ocean elf to explode.

“Aloha”, she said with a wide grin and a wave of her hand, “I was wondering when your suspicious friend would finally stop grilling me like a shrimp skewer and let me meet the nobles I’ve come to see!”

“I’m not goin’ to be Q--”, started Rayla but Callum nudged her, saying “Ah-bap-bap! Still Lady Rayla, soon to be Crown Princess.”

His summand smirked at him gruffly, then turned to Honsa. “How are you doin’?”

“Better. I went home. Saw a healer who helped me out a bunch. Um... guys, I’m... really sorry about the way I treated you. You didn’t des--”, she stopped talking as Helmond came inside, carrying another chair.

He put it down, motioning for one of the nobles to take it and seated himself behind his desk.

“I’ve asked you a good number of questions already”, he said, sorting through the papers on his desk, “However it is time for me to tell you something. None of what you’ve just said is true.”

Honsa blinked. “Huh? No, I am really sorry for my behaviour! I... I didn’t mean to be such an ass... well no, at the time I did mean to be such an ass, bu--”

“Honsa, um”, Rayla started, placing a hand on her friend’s, “Thank you, but that’s not what he means. You and I, we, um... the Lucid’s usin’ you. Brainwashed you. Us. For somethin’ bad.”
Wide-eyed confusion grasped the ocean elf as Helmond and Rayla explained her situation. When they were done, she looked between them, then burst out laughing.

After a few moments of having nobody join in, her laughter stuck in her throat. “Yo! Dumb joke, okay?”, she said staring at them incredulously.

A moment of silence passed as Callum attempted to find words to convince her that this was quite serious.

“You...”, she swallowed heavily, “You mean that?”

“We do indeed”, said Helmond gently.

“Bu-- Okay. Look at-- I, uh, I get Rayla, she’s a murder machine - no off-- b-but ME?! Come on! I can’t kill anyth-- what? No! It’s stupid, there’s no way! How would you even know?”

Callum took her by the shoulders. “I know because I followed you around. I’m sorry, I wish I could’ve asked for your consent first.”

“You f--?”, Honsa gaped.

The Crown Prince explained his powers which finalized the ocean elf’s confusion. She was visibly done with this conversation.

“So let me summarize. I was kidnapped, stuck in some deep, dark hole that I can’t remember, told to kill someone - maybe - and all the while you were watching and...”, she regarded everyone in the room with an angry, tearful look, “You didn’t... you didn’t think to do something?!”

“What could we have done? I know exactly one ocean elf. I can’t dive for long enough to make a difference”, said Callum gently, “I’m so sorry, Honsa, really. It sucks that that is the best I can offer you. You don’t deserve this.”
She shoved him and both Rayla and Helmond twitched for a moment.

“Well! I guess that at least makes things simple!”, hissed the counselor, “I’ll just ride back across the Breach and stay as far away from you as I can!”

“What’s one more thin’... You’re the only one we have who could help me get rid of whatever’s in my head.”

“Ah, so that’s why I’m here! Not cause you invited me to your stupid ceremony thing!”, said Honsa, frustrated tears spilling from her eyes.

“No, we... Look! I was gonna invite you to the weddin’ in the first letter I wrote for you, way before this all happened. But you were under water and we couldn’t reach you!”, Rayla protested, “You’re a good friend, believe it or not, and without you, who knows where either of us two would be today. Look, I know this is scary a-and...”

Callum’s mien darkened as his summand gritted her teeth and tears of anger crept into her eyes as well.

“... and so, so infuriatin’, but you need us right now, too. You can’t think that once the Lucid tries to use you, you’ll get away. Even if you leave now... Honsa, you could die. Please don’t go.”

“Need you? What are you going to do for me!?”, scoffed Honsa while palming at her eyes, “Ever since I met you, you’ve been such a bad influence on my life! My mom killed an Interpreter for you, lost her position and then her life after years of listening to people tell her what a scumbag she is for helping you! Now this! Where does this end?”

“If I may say, you’re being rather unfair”, said Helmond with a grandfatherly gentleness Callum had never heard from him. The old elf rounded his desk and offered both Honsa and Rayla a clean handkerchief, “I don’t believe your mother would like you attributing her motivations to someone else. She made the choice to help. I’ve had the pleasure to stand with Lessa under Iowend and found her determined, intelligent and fiercely patriotic. She did what she did not just to safeguard the Lord and Lady, but I am convinced she saw it as her duty to foil the conspiracy she came upon.”

He motioned at Callum. “Sir Callum has done much to foster peace. Your mother wanted to support him. I am sorry I was unable to determine what exactly happened to her.”
Honsa’s gaze showed less fury now as she regarded Helmond. “That was you? The elf who went to figure out what happened? Why, um... why are you here? Working with humans? Wouldn’t you rather go home?”

The old agent sighed through his nose, surreptitiously. Only Callum noticed. “I no longer have that option. Not if I want to be alive for when this work bears fruition. It’s been the mission that has consumed me for the past four years. Peace. As ironeous as that sounds. I’ve tried my entire life to bring order to this chaos, balance to the scales of war. It took a blade shoved through my shoulder to make me realize how blind and misguided those attempts were. Imagine the shock”, he said with a smirk at Rayla.

“So yes, I miss Xadia. I wanted to be helpful to the project of peace but I saw no way to see it completed while I was at home. Further, my... my family was in mortal danger. Not that that matters now”, Helmond said while rounding his desk once more to sit down, “Tribune Lessa’s murder made me furious, not just because it jeopardized everything we had worked to accomplish but also because hers was another life wasted for nothing much. I wanted and still want answers. However, time does not stand still and other things happen that required my attention. I must ask your forgiveness for failing to produce results.”

A long silence followed in which Honsa studied Helmond’s face.

Eventually, she breathed out slowly, bunching up the handkerchief in her hands. “You tried. Not your fault”, she said quietly, “So, what’s the plan here, then?”

“We don’t know what the Lucid had in mind for you”, said Callum, “So we were going to ask you to stay with us, under house arrest. Until we can find out more.”

“You wanna lock me up”, said Honsa cooly.

“I don’t want to and I’m not forcing you, either. You are free to leave whenever you want.”

The ocean elf looked between them, then said, “I’ll try and help Rayla, but then I’m out of here. I’m not like uncle here, all mission-y and self-sacrifice-y. I’m honestly kind of done with the two of you.”

“Thank you”, said Rayla sadly, “Bu--”
Honsa held out her hands, impatiently motioning her closer.

“Now? Here?”, asked the moonshadow elf with a confused look at her friend.

“As I said. Doing this, then I’ll leave. I don’t plan on staying here longer than I have to”, said Honsa with a hard look.

Rayla nodded, a dire expression on her features. She sat in front of Honsa who placed her hands over Rayla’s ears. From the water skin slung around her shoulders, a thin stream of liquid flowed up the ocean mage’s arms and into her palms.

--

Soren was squatting in front of Amelie who was quietly watching him thread the last button on her tiny suit jacket. She had grown even more silent since her mother’s passing. Her father was hard pressed to make any kind of conversation with her seeing how his own emotional state hadn’t recovered.

“Dad”, she suddenly piped up, “Fya?”

“No, kiddo”, he said, grasping for composure, “No fire today. We don’t have a fire every time we put on fancy suits, okay?”

“Mh”, his daughter went, looking at him pensively. After a moment, she smiled and clumsily pet his cheek.

“Aww, you are my cuddly little mouse!”, he smiled, picked her up and rose, settling her against his side, “Are you hungry?”

Amelie shook her head.

“Are you suuuure?”, he asked and she repeated the gesture more forcefully.
“Even if I said that your snack would be a jelly tart?”

She seemed affronted, wrinkling her nose. “No.”

“What, you don’t like jelly tarts?”

“No!?” she went, mirroring his smirk.

“Hum! More for me!” said Soren and used his left hand to pick up one of the pastries on the table. As soon as Amelie saw it, her eyes grew wide.

“Aha! You just didn’t know what I was talking about!” he laughed, handing a piece of his tart off to her, “Jelly Tart.”

Her mouth was too full to repeat it back to him, so he decided to try again later. Walking outside, he almost bumped into Claudia who was just arriving in front of his door. She was wearing a smooth blue dress to rival his white-and-burgundy gala uniform.

“Good timing, Sore-sore”, she smirked, booping Amelie’s nose, “I was just going to come see if you guys wanted to take a bit of a walk through the gardens.”

“Funny, we were just on our way there”, said Soren, nodding his sister ahead.

They fell in lockstep next to each other while the toddler grabbed for more of the tart. Her father obliged, handing her a piece that was maybe a tad too large. She still shoved it in her mouth.

“Come on, kid”, Soren scoffed, “Not all at once. What did we say? Small bites.”

A few moments of silence passed as he observed the child, making sure she wasn’t going to choke.

“How are you doing, Clauds?”, he asked, nodding at her head.
“Oh, um, okay. Just, you know, using the ointment and having my stitches checked and all that. Thanks for asking.”

For a moment, the mage considered leaving it there. Was it the right thing to broach the topic or would Soren prefer not to speak about it? With an anxious look at him, she finally asked, “How about you?”

Her brother sighed. “Wanna scream till I can’t. Ames is keeping me going”, he kissed his daughter’s forehead, “Can’t let myself go. She needs me.”

“That’s true, but, if, uh, you ever need a bit of alone-time, I can take her”, offered Claudia, not sure what else to say, “Or, um, if there’s anything else you need...?”

Soren smiled at her, weakly. “Thanks.”

It meant a lot to him that she had his back, but it was hard to express it at the moment.

For a moment they walked in silence, then the crown guard sighed again. “It’s so weird to think that a week ago she was still alive. I... I know I keep saying that. Probably say it at the turn of the year, too. Y-You spend enough time with someone, you expect them to, you know, be there.”

He kicked a stone off the path, scuffing his nice shoes, “At the same time, we spent so much time apart, too, that I almost expect to get a letter from her.”

Claudia drew him into a hug and Amelie patted her cheeks while she was in range. When she pulled back to let him go, her brother held on to her.

“Clauds...”, he choked, “I can’t...”

For a few minutes, they stood and held each other, then Soren separated from his sister, surreptitiously wiped his eyes and sniffled.
“Viren’s going down”, he said.

--

Rayla’s mind showed her the image of a black landscape, only broken by a distant mountain range that was illuminated by blue light streaming down from above.

Thoughts were drifting by, but they didn’t concern her right now. Feeling around, she found what she was looking for, a closed box made out of pure crystal.

She opened it.

Immediately there was a flurry of impressions, drowning her. A glimpse here and there made her shudder. A great many of them were Onni’s face, quietly speaking to her in a droning tone, repeating instructions.

“Kill the Queen and then...”
“... kill the Durian Queen....”
“... after killing Aanya...”

“And then what?!”, shouted Rayla, but the memories didn’t tell her more.

Suddenly she was overtaken by a scene that slammed into her mind with the force of a galloping horse.

The feeling of being drowned repeatedly, a wet rag over her mouth and nose. Was this how they had broken her?

Then, merciful air, the ceiling of some thatched structure.

Onni. “Please stop! She doesn’t... I can still work it out! She has accepted the first part of--”
An unknown voice, sounding hollow and old. “Oh, either way it’s too late. Things have changed, they have turned one of us. The traitor is close to her and knows of this procedure.”

“Then why are you doing this at all?! Why torture her like this?”

“Her and I have a bit of personal history. But! Is that ‘righteous’ anger I sense? Time and time again I warned you, told you to keep your emotions in check, advance with haste. But no, you needed to be gentle. As for your cover story...”

There was a short scuffle sounding like there were more people in the room than just the old person and Onni.

The snap of bone, then Onni’s voice, screaming in pain.

“Silence! Be glad it was just your arm.”

“Fuck you! You’re a scumbag! I agreed to help you to get out of prison!”

“And you will. Maybe not quite in the way you imagined.”

A sickening crack and more screams from Onni that morphed into inarticulate whimpering.

“Be silent, wretch, or you will experience what she has.”

An unknown face appeared in her vision. It looked old, careworn and full of fury. “You and your disgusting human prince have cost me everything and now you deny me my rightful revenge! Stubborn runt. I will at least have you.”

A kitchen knife appeared in her wrinkled hand.

Rayla’s past self was drawing panicked breaths through gritted teeth as the rag was replaced on her face and searing pain shot through her chest.
Her eyes opened to find Callum’s concerned face to her left, Honsa’s terrified expression ahead of her and Helmond’s grim scowl to her right.

“Are you okay, fawn?”, said Callum. Through Honsa’s continuing spell, his voice sounded no different than normal. Considering what Rayla knew of how it worked, this made her smile a little.

This confused the people in the room even more and Honsa’s spell subsided, dousing Rayla’s faux uniform with water.

“Aahk!?”, she went as the liquid ran down the back of her collar.

“Sorry! Let me fix that!”, said the ocean elf, drawing a simple rune that looked vaguely wave shaped. “Travíxte to neró”

Rayla’s clothes relinquished the liquid and it vanished in the ocean elf’s water skin.

Becoming fully aware of her body, Rayla sniffled and used the handkerchief the elder elf had given her to dry her tears.

“So, uh, w-was that it?”, she asked shakily. Subconsciously, she grabbed for Callum’s hands, then flinched slightly when he moved to hold hers. He gave her an inquiring glance.

“We’ll know once you get a good nights’ rest, Excellence”, said Helmond, “I don’t suppose you’ve learned anything? I’m sorry to pry.”

“No worries. I was gonna mention it anyway. Does the Lucid have really old agents?”

“The Lucid has assets of all ages and tribes, yes. Why do you ask?”
Rayla explained what she had seen, trying very hard to not let on how disturbed she was.

“Your would-be killer”, Helmond said, getting up to pace, “Describe her.”

“Hm. Moonshadow. Silver hair, obviously. Cyan eyes. Had very thin ochre familials on her cheeks and around her mouth.”

Recognition grasped her elder, his mouth falling open with shock.
Viren watched. Watched as speech after speech was held, lauding the sacrifice that Callum was making and welcoming home the rightful King. A small smile played on the high mage's lips when the boy stepped up to the speaker's podium. At least under his rule, Katolis wouldn’t let their army wither anymore.

He pointedly avoided looking at Soren and his child. It was upsetting that this ruse of his had resulted in so much pain for them. An odd guilt beset him, After all, his son’s wife hadn’t even achieved her goal. The mirror was going to be mended. Not only had they left its pieces behind, as an added bonus, they would not search for it any longer.

His next glance was aimed at the moonshadow elf and Prince Callum. The latter seemed relieved to have left behind the responsibility of leadership. ‘Yes’, Viren thought, ‘Slink back into your brother’s shadow where you belong and take your exotic distraction with you. You will pay soon enough.’

“Are you enjoying the show?”, asked Aaravos.

“Testy, aren’t we”, whispered the woman who didn’t look at all like Viren, “Simply blending in.”

“I would suggest you stop ‘blending’ before they run out of air. Get what we came for before we are detected. We cannot hope to fight everyone here, even with the help of our allies.”

Viren chuckled. He enjoyed his partner’s nervosity. Star magic revealed the positions and line of sight of the guards. One of them was very firmly planted in his way.

Not a problem.

The high mage approached the guard and asked, “Sir, I’m sorry to bother you, but is there a lavatory nearby? The Lords and Ladies do like to talk.”
The guard smirked. “That they do. You’ll have to go do--”

His explanation was cut short. Viren had stepped into his personal space and placed a hand on his chest to release Aaravos’ petrifying spell. So disabled, the guard could move nothing but his eyes that were now darting over the woman in front of him with fear.

“Worry not. It’ll stop in a few hours.”

From a distance, it would look like the man was standing watch, not arousing any suspicion.

A few minutes later, Viren stood in front of an impressive experiment. Interconnected tubes of glass, flasks, burners and filters. “Oh goodness. What is my daughter up to?”

“Save your pride for later”, hissed Aaravos, “Find it!”

“Relax! I know exactly where it is.”

He vanished in the same secret passage that - unbeknownst to him - Callum and Claudia had used to abscond unseen by the staff. They had posted a few guards to stand watch over the outside exit for tonight, forcing Viren into this more dangerous retrieval mission.

The mage strode confidently down the passage, past the kitchens and into one of the shorter side paths that seemingly ended in a brick wall.

“Now let me remember...”, he said, touching a series of bricks in the wall, “Rock, rock, stone, stone, ro--”

“What’s the difference between rock and stone?!”, came the confused question.

“This needs some focus, be silent! Where was I... ah yes. Rock , stone, rock!”
The wall disappeared into thin air to reveal a cove. It was empty save for a small, rectangular box on the ground.

“And there we are”, said Viren, picking it up and stowing it in his sling bag.

In good spirits, he made his way back, strode into the lab and almost collided with someone.

The lanky, short-haired blonde woman in her white coat recoiled from him with a start. “Woah! Who the fuck are you !?”

“I’m lost”, quavered Viren, “Was looking for the toilet.”

“You have got to be kidding”, groaned Aaravos.

“Oh yeah, sure! Sure you did!”, laughed the woman gruffly, “in a secret passage!”

“Um”, breathed the mage, anxiety spiking in his stomach, “Okay, look, I’m out of excuses so I’ll make this simple. I’m an agent of the Covertway. I’m going to leave through that door right now and you will never see me again.”

“Nu-uh. You’re staying right here while I grab the guard so we can get you nice and sort--”

Viren’s fingers prickled, the petrification spell leaving an effect even on him.

--

Rayla woke to Callum closing the door. He apparently attempted to sneak through the dark.

“Forget it dummy, you can’t tiptoe on these floors”, she snickered hoarsely, “How’d it go?”

“Sorry to wake you”, her summand said over the noises of him undressing, “It’s weird, nothing was
stolen. Claudia thinks it was Viren who broke in. Says she cast an induction on Piper and found traces of earthblood magic.”

“Ah. She’s assumin’ that there aren’t more human primal mages out there and that he was disguised as the woman?”

“Yup”, he said while slipping into bed next to her and snuggling up against her, “How are you feeling?”

“If you’re askin’ whether I’ve dreamt anythin’, the answer is no”, Rayla replied, trying not to sound too disappointed, “Otherwise I’m just dead tired. As per usual. About the break-in, though, if he didn’t take anythin’ why did he bother?”

“That’s a good question that I can’t answer, fawn”, yawned Callum, “Claudia and Piper went over all of his old equipment twice and found nothing missing.”

“Did he drop somethin’ off?”

“Nope.”

“Well that’s just weird, then”, puzzled the future princess.

Her fiance’s cheek rubbed against her chest and soon he was asleep. For some annoying reason, she was unable to get back to sleep herself, the events of the day busying her mind too much. She tried to sort it out while tousling his soft hair.

Rayla had been tortured. Onni had caused her a lot of pain, but had acted under some coercion. Not that that excused her behaviour, it merely explained it. She had likely paid a high price for failing to turn Rayla.

Then there was the matter of that other instruction. Kill Aanya... then what?

“Ah, wouldn’t you like to know?”, asked a voice. It was old, hollow and hoarse.
The woman with the ochre familialis stepped out of the darkness next to her side of the bed. “Isn’t it so funny how the world of intelligence works? You set in motion a trap, knowing full-well that it will fail. You hand your adversaries the solution like a piece of hard candy, setting another trap.”

Wrinkled hands clasped. “Oh, poor little Rayla. One person’s treatment is another’s trigger. Ruses in ruses in ruses. What a gift for you to unwrap!”

There were tears in Rayla’s eyes. She wanted to attack her tormenter but her hands were already busy. Looking down at them, she found them wrapped around Callum’s neck, crushing her thumbs into his throat. He was struggling against her grasp, painfully clawing at her arms, but she did not relent. When his nails started digging into her skin, drawing blood and then tearing at the raw flesh below, the elf thought she would at least be able to scream, but nothing crossed her lips.

“I suppose this ought to satisfy your curiosity”, snickered the old elf with a bemused look at the dying Prince, “My, my, you two do play rough, don’t you?”

“No! Please!”, begged Rayla, “Please, don’t make me!”

“Make you? I think you misunderstand. All you have to do is let go, you’re in control here. This is exactly what you want.”

“How could I want this?! I love him!”

“Aw, honey, you really don’t. Onni and you were a cute couple, but we needed you to return to him”, said the woman with a sad smile, “It is such drama, breaking up a cute young couple to gain the tools one needs.”

Rayla shook her head wildly. “Bullshit!”

The old woman laughed. “Perhaps, perhaps. All I can assure you of is that if you were to return to her, you’d be just as overjoyed as her. I suppose that’s little comfort seeing how she’s dead, and he is... well...?”

Rayla’s eyes returned to her victim whose terrified defense had faltered. Her bleeding arms and his
blue lips and pallid face told the story of a horrifying death.

She shattered.

“Ah, for all your struggling and sacrifice... don’t take it to heart, dear. You never had a chance and others will judge you more harshly than you could ever judge yourself”, said the gentle old voice, “You can always claim that he attacked you. Tried to have his way with you. That generally garners quite a bit of sympathy.”

Rayla’s eyes were fixed onto Callum’s dead body.

She had murdered him.

“Then again... nobody is going to believe that excuse coming out of your mouth in particular. Look at you! So strong! So brave! So selfless! The warrior princess, never to be damseled!”

Her shaking hands came up to her face.

These fingers - dripping with her own blood - had just strangled her summand.

It felt as though her synapses were frozen, there was no emotion beyond horror, no thought beyond a mental scream.

Her first kill was the last person she would’ve ever allowed herself to harm.

The old woman’s small laugh filled the room. “Given your expression, maybe you’d like to consider suicide?”

--
The vial contained a clear, thick liquid. A sprig of crushed red coriander had been shoved inside heedlessly.

Claudia swirled the distillate in its container pensively. “Piper? What’s the herb doing in there?”

Her assistant blinked confusedly. “I have no idea? I didn’t add it.”

“Well... isn’t this stuff supposed to be golden?”

Piper leaned over her boss’s shoulder to look at the vial.

“Um... personal space?”, Claudia protested with an incredulous frown at her coworker.

“Mh”, Piper replied, tapping the long fingernail of her index against the vial, “What if the herb works as a vitalizer? Health potions often contain Red Coriander.”

“Okay, but those properties are tied to the anthocyanins in the petal so I’d expect the liquid to be... you know... red? Can you get off me please?”

Piper acquiesced and ruffled her own hair. “So, the only way I can think of this thing getting in there is...”

“Viren. He must’ve figured what we’re doing”, grim realization struck Claudia, “I guess this is sabotage.”

“Does that make sense? If he was trying to keep us from getting people out of the coins, wouldn’t he also break the experimental setup?”

Claudia blinked. “Right...”

The scientist picked up their test coin, spinning it in her fingers. “Didn’t you tell me he gave you
two of the coins for no apparent reason?”

“You think he’s helping us?”, asked the high mage, the prospect confusing her to no end.

“There’s really only one way to find out.”

She motioned Claudia along. Together they walked into the now empty lower courtyard. Away from anything flammable, Piper set the coin down and her boss dripped a small amount of the clear liquid onto the rat’s confused face.

They retreated to a respectable distance behind a wooden barricade that Claudia had appropriated from the crown guard after the last explosive experiment.

“Well. Here goes”, said the mage. From a satchel on her belt, she took a pinch of dragon horn.

“Nihtiw si hcihw taht eerf!”, she chanted. A stream of purple energy lashed out, branching like intelligent lightning.

Then, one of the tendrils found the coin.

Claudia’s world collapsed.

“Well then”, said a smooth, deep voice, “That didn’t quite work out the way you thought it would.”

--

Ezran startled. There had been a loud explosion outside. The young King rose from his desk and rushed to his balcony. Through the night, he could see smoke rise from the lower courtyard.

A moment later, he had thrown a bathrobe over his pajamas, put on his crown and opened the door to find Kingsley there with his fist raised to knock.
“What was that explosion?”, demanded the King.

“Seems to be one of Lady Claudia’s experiments gone wrong, Sire. You’ll get used to it. That’s not why I’m here. May I?”

Ezran stepped aside to let the councillor pass, then closed the door. “So this happens a lot?”

“Oof, yes! Just about twice every month”, the Tinesian settled in a chair, “I’m sorry to come by so late, but I need your opinion on a piece of information that has just come our way out of Xadia.”

He produced a scroll that had decidedly seen better days. Smoothing it out on Ezran’s desk, Kingsley said, “Now this is a map drawn by one of the agents we are recalling on Lady Rayla’s behest. She let us know that the Lucid is aware of the asset’s presence and has been using them to feed us false information. As such, we need to take this with a degree of doubt.”

Ezran sat and looked at the map. It was crude but effective. In the bottom left of the page was a dashed line, marked ‘POI-292’. It intersected a solid line in the middle of the page marked ‘POI-10’. A bunch of mountains were pencilled in. Within those mountains sat four square shapes.

Point of interest two-nine-two, that was the border with Xadia.

Point of interest ten, that was the Breach.

The squares were legions.

--

Rayla came to. She was on the floor, shivering and soaked in sweat. Above her she could see Callum’s blurry face weaving in and out of her vision. He seemed to be busy with her arms.

A scream escaped the future princess as she lunged for her summand, wrapping her arms around him. “Dummy! I dreamt! I dreamt!”, she sobbed, “Chalise made me k-kill you!”
He was oddly silent. After a moment he sighed and said, “I know.”

Rayla separated from him to look him in the eyes. His neck seemed a little red.

Her gaze wandered to her arms. They showed furious white-purple scratch marks.

“No”, she gasped, recoiling from the Crown Prince, “Please... A...”

His boyish smirk confused her. “Don’t. It’s not your fault, okay? Things went bad, that’s why you took the poison. This is the exact reason. I... I hope you’re okay. Looked pretty painful when I smashed you into the ceiling.”

“A tried to m-murder you!”, she sobbed, “I t-tried to murder you!”

“No, they tried to murder me. You didn’t have a choice”, he welled up, spreading his arms, “Please fawn, kiss me. This isn’t y-your fault, okay? Not your fault. P-please.”

“She said... she said Onni and I...”

“Don’t believe anything she put in your head!”, shouted Callum, “Stop it and come here! You’re okay! I’m okay! We’re okay!”

He grabbed her wrist and pulled her into a hug.

The door crashed open and a guard stepped in, his weapon raised. A moment passed in which he scanned the room to find the surprised Prince and his crying fiancee on the floor.

“Um”, he went, his eyes tracking over the clearly broken bed and parts of the stucco that had once been on the ceiling, “Pardon the, uh, interruption, I just... heard screaming.”

“It’s fine, private”, said Callum, having a hard time suppressing a snicker, “Thanks for checking on us. We’re okay, you can go back to your post.”
“At your... command?”’, quavered the soldier, “Sorry, uh...”

The door closed behind him and Callum finally released the snort he had held for so long. “Oh man, he must think the weirdest stuff right now.”

“Not as weird... a-as what a-actually ha-happened”, cried his summand into his chest, “Callum... I’m so sorry!”

“Shhh now. You didn’t do anything wrong, okay?”

His forgiveness was real.

It didn’t help her much.
Dear General

Rayla woke, wrapped in her summand’s arms. It was still dark outside and in their quarters. Her heart pounded in her chest and she moved to get up, waking Callum in the process.

“Mhagain?”, he asked with sleepy worry.

“Sorry”, Rayla sniffled, “Nightmares just keep comin’.”

He sat up to embrace her. “That’s good though, isn’t it? Mean’s you’re in the clear, if you can remember your dreams.”

She nodded weakly, once more looking at her shaking hands. She could still see the marks from where he had scratched her.

A hand entered her field of vision and gently grasped her, rubbing her palms. “I’m sorry I scratched you up”, said her summand.

Her voice was thick with rue. “You defended yourself. Against me...”

“Mh. Hey, fawn... don’t think about it too much, okay? This train of thought... it doesn’t go anywhere healthy. You’re no murderer. Just like you weren’t a cheater.”

Wasn’t she both?

“Callum...”, she started. He had deflected her the first time she had wanted to bring it up, but the possibility made her extremely uncomfortable. She needed to talk about it. “When I... attacked you... she said I was with Onni. That I had... given up on us.”

He sighed. “I’m surprised you pay any attention to her. Do you think there might be something to it? I mean, do you... do you miss her?”

Rayla shrugged. “No, but... if they can make me kill my summand, who’s to say they can’t make
me forget a lover? I know I... gosh. Even if it didn’t happen the way I remember... um... I let her snuggle me, didn't I?”, she buried her face in her hands, groaning angrily, "I don't know what's real anymore!"

The crown prince was silent for a while then renewed his embrace. “Do you love me?”

“So, so much…”, she breathed.

“I love you too. Look. I think Chalise was messing with you. You’re not the kind of person who would go behind my back. You would’ve broken up with me before getting with someone else. You were honest about the whole Onni thing as you knew it. Sure, you’re good at keeping secrets, but I think you’re not... you know, you’re not deceitful.”

After a long moment, Rayla sighed. “I can’t not have doubts. At the same time I know you're right. I really shouldn't pay attention to this cause of where it comes from. It’s hard to... trust myself right now.”

She groaned. “Honsa and Tinker were right about us.”

“Huh?”

“People around us keep gettin’ hurt. Onni’s kinda like that, too. In my memory, Chalise said that she was tryin’ to be gentle with me. Not applyin’ as much force as she could have. In a way, she still sacrificed for me, softened the blow.”

Callum nodded. “Sure. If she was really killed, we owe her. But, um, like Helmond said; In the end, you can’t own other people’s choices. Not that it makes a huge difference to them, but I am thankful to the old man, Honsa and Lessa. I suppose Onni too, in a crooked sort of way.”

“We need to start fightin’ our own battles again.”

“What do you mean?”

Her hands dug into the blanket. “I’m sayin’ I need to be at the front lines of this again instead of
hidin’ behind castle walls. Go after Viren and the people who are behind this whole brainwashin’ stuff.”

“Well yeah”, said Callum, his voice modulated by a cute, boyish smile.

He untangled her hand and kissed its palm. “Since Ez is back, we’re free to do whatever. Katolis isn’t going to fall to chaos if I die.”

He squeaked a little when Rayla embraced him desperately. “Nuh-uh. No more dyin’ for you.”

“As you order, Milady”, he snickered, kissing her.

--

“You should really stop doing thät”, said Cardwell gently.

Claudia blinked into the light of the window above her, the morning sun hitting her straight on. “Not doing it on purpose.”

“Sapperlot!”, laughed the doctor, “You häve not understood the meaning of the wörds `on purpose`, then! You are in here, what, once or twice a month?”

“Fine”, grumbled the mage, “Can I leave now?”

“As per usual, yes, of course.”

Ten minutes later, Claudia was exiting the infirmary, turning toward her lab.

“Ah, I was just coming to see you. Have you rested well?”, said a smooth, dark voice.

The mage spun in place to find the person who had spoken. The armored, stocky figure of General
Rhineheart observed her with a smile.

“Hup!”, she went, “I didn’t notice you there!”

“And, I’m sure it wasn’t for my subtle appearance!”, laughed the decorated soldier, “I hope I wasn’t out of line yesterday. Miss Piper asked for my help.”

“You helped carry me here?”

“Just so, just so. I saw you set up your experiment and came to observe.”

“Aha. Well, at least this time nobody got pelted with shrapnel!”, said Claudia with a small, nervous laugh.

“Mmmmyeees”, droned the General dismissively, “Milady, I have a request. Now that you have the ability to release the people in the coins, I hope you will prioritize Gener-- is there something wrong?”

Her face had slackened to an expression of bovine incredulity.

“It worked !?”, yelled Claudia.

“Well... your assistant said so, at the very least?”

Without another word, the High Mage turned and ran off toward her laboratory, leaving the Chief of Staff baffled.

When she tore open the door, she was disappointed to see the place empty. “Piper?”, she called out.

When there was no answer, Claudia made her way to Piper’s quarters where she knocked excitedly.
Her assistant opened the door, lack of sleep evident in her features. “Whassap?”, she slurred.

“It worked?!”, the mage asked.

A wide smirk spread on Piper’s face. “Yuh. Just need to reprodu--”

She was barrelled over by Claudia’s hug.

“Fuck! Ow!”, laughed the scientist, rubbing the back of her head, “Get offa me you cow!”

Claudia laughed. “And here I was, thinking you’d be a little less of an asshole when we finally figure this out!”

“Did we though?”, sighed Piper while they sat up, “Kinda doesn’t feel like it to me. Your dad handed us the last piece. Really unsatisfying.”

The high mage shrugged. “I don’t get it, but I’m not complaining. It’s great that we’ll be able to get the people out of the coins. Starting with Amaya.”

“Oh? I would’ve guessed you’d go for one of the elves?”

Claudia blinked. “Why’s that?”

“They’re way more interesting. I think we’ll have to set up in a cage or something so they can’t just murder us all!”

“You sound way too excited about that idea”, laughed Claudia, “Part of why I wanna start with Amaya is because she kicks ass. If we’re getting the elves out, she’ll be good to have around.”

--
When Claudia walked outside with another coined rat in one hand and the vial with the clear reagent in the other, she was surprised to find Rayla in the courtyard, without her cane. The elf was standing on the top landing of the main stairs, staring through the castle’s gate toward the capital.

She seemed distressed, her thousand mile stare prompting the mage’s concern. “Hey there Rayls. You okay?”

“Rails?” said the elf, snapping out of her reverie to find Claudia in the courtyard below her, “Uh, I’m okay.”

“Sounds like it”, said the mage sarcastically, “Callum give you trouble?”

It was a reasonable assumption, given that her plucky fiancee wasn’t around. Rayla shook her head, absentmindedly rubbing at the long sleeves covering her lower arm.

“Well, I’ve got some news for you!”, sang Claudia, “We’re starting to get people out of the coins tomorrow. Or today, depending on how well I do.”

There was a flicker of excitement on the elf’s face, then her features became overcast again. “That’s amazin’. Awesome work.”

The High Mage’s eyes narrowed. The lack of happiness on the stout elven woman worried her. She shoved the vial and coin in her pockets and ascended the stairs to stand next to Rayla. “Seriously. What’s wrong? I thought for sure you’d be happy to see your parents.”

A sardonic snort escaped Rayla. “Yup. I should be. I guess I’m already seein’ the arguments comin’. The fightin’. Honestly I haven’t got the energy to face them right now. I’m guessin’ I have a better relationship with them now than I will after we talk.”

“Why?”

The elf’s eyes locked with Claudia’s. The mage realized that Rayla was trying to figure out if she was going to tell more details about her this piece of her. Callum had told his friend how much secrets meant to moonshadow elves.
How prying could be seen as offensive.

Claudia held up her hands in a defensive gesture. “Uh, sorry, it’s totally fine if you don’t wanna tell me. I just know how it is to... not know where you’re at with your parents. Also know how it is to be alone with those feelings.”

A small smile appeared on Rayla’s lips. “Don’t worry, it’s fine. Thanks for carin’. Bit different for me, though.”

The elf leaned on the railing again, returning to her stare. “It’s not that I’m alone with the feelin’s. Callum always listens to me gripe. It’s just that they really won’t like what I’ve done with my life.”

“Getting engaged to a human?”

“Somethin’ like that, aye”, said Rayla. After a short pause, she added, “To elves, we’re a bit further along than that.”

“Right”, said Claudia, “What was that called, `summands`?”

Rayla shrugged.

The human continued, “So they’re gonna be angry. And? What does their opinion matter? They always say ‘Oh! YoU caN’T chOoSe FamiLy’, but guess what - you really should! Toxic people are gonna be toxic, and at the end of the day, parents are also just people. Sure, they’ve given up a lot to raise us... well, in the ideal case. At the same time, they made that call for their lives.”

A certain pain snuck into Claudia’s face. “I mean, look at my parents. My mum isn’t anywhere to be found. We haven’t gotten any letters or really anything from her. For all I know, she’s dead. As far as I’m concerned, Viren is.”

“Did you ever think to look for your mum more?”, Rayla asked sadly.

It didn’t escape Claudia that the elf had avoided picking up her point. Apparently she just wasn’t comfortable talking about it. “I did. Haven’t really had the time for a while but last time I went
“Are you...”, Rayla paused, seemingly deciding whether or not she was about to say something offensive, “Um... Are you two together?”

The mage snorted. “Funny, I thought Callum would tell you, he asked the same question. No, we’re not.”

“Mhh. I just thought cause you spend so much time together and the way you met.”

“For sure”, agreed Claudia, “It surprised me too, that she just decided to come here. I’ve since learned that she’s just so damn curious that she can’t leave things undiscovered. To be honest, I don’t know if we’d be friends at all if we didn’t have our work.”

“Heh, yea, she’s a bit... weird.”

“So are we all”, shrugged the Mage, “Moonshadow elf marrying a human, that’s weird. Dark Mage, wanting not to be one and trying to be friends with a Xadian. That’s weird.”

“Tryin’?”, said the elf with an honest smile, “I think we’re doin’ pretty good for ourselves, friend.”

Claudia snorted. “That sounded reeeaal official, Milady!”

“Heh”, went Rayla, returning her gaze to the gate.

For a long moment, the human waited for her friend to pick up the conversation.

When she didn’t, Claudia asked, “What are you looking for out there?”

“Ah. Nothin’. Just feel a bit cooped up.”
“We could go out again?”

Rayla shrugged. “I think I’ve done enough window shoppin’. Once I’m back to normal I’m gonna start lookin’ for Viren. He’s crazy and needs to go down.”

“No offense, but we’re going to have to form a pretty crack team to take him on. Otherwise more people are going to die.”

“Aye. Thinkin’ the same thin’. Last fight wasn’t what I’d call fair and Soren’s no pushover. Neither are you. From what I know of Jen - which isnae much - she was about as fierce as myself.”

“Yeah”, breathed Claudia, fighting the sudden knot in her throat, “She was.”

“I figure if the team is you, Callum, Soren, Zym and I, we can make thin’s happen”, said Rayla tonelessly.

“I’d bring a lot more soldiers this time.”

“Unless they have special trainin’ I don’t think so. I’ve seen them fight. They’re like the Auxilia. Great for combat with enemies that work the way they do, but sorta useless in not-so-normal fights.”

After thinking it over for a moment, Claudia found herself agreeing. The two guards they had brought along hadn’t contributed much to the fight other than a second of distraction. On the other hand, the cost to them had been terrible.

“Well, um”, said the mage, “Yeah, I s’pose you’re right. Maybe though by then we’ll have Amaya and two more badass elves on our team?”

Here was a last ditch effort to get the future princess to open up a little.

“Don’t hold yer breath”, shrugged Rayla, “There’s so much goin’ on with that. Even if they can look past my personal choices, losin’ face thanks to your da’ isnae goin’ to make them happy. My father especially. He used to be a Gladius Lucis. Elite of the elite of the Assassins.”
The elf’s eyebrows knitted in thought. “There’s also somethin’ that I don’t get, my mum changed her familial tattoos. Could be that they had a fallin’ out and she found someone else... had another child with them? It’s really confusin’.”

Well, that was something, at least.

“Soon we’ll have those answers”, said Claudia with an encouraging smirk, “I’ll get to it, okay?”

---

The next day, July 26th, began much the same way as the previous day had for Claudia. With a pounding head and Cardwell’s annoyed reprimands.

As per usual, the mage shrugged off his ministrations, choosing instead to eat the lunch and part of the dinner she had missed the day prior.

While she was gorging herself, the door leading to the private section of the infirmary opened and Callum and Rayla strode in. The prince seemed nervously excited.

“Morning!”, he said, “How are you feeling?”

“Like I’ll be ready to knock myself out again in about an hour?”, smirked Claudia with a mouth full of roast beef.

The mage got an odd jolt from the expression on Rayla’s face. The elf still looked like yesterday, forlorn and sad. Was it just the prospect of seeing her parents?

“You sure you don’t wanna take a day off?”, asked the future Princess, “Can’t be good for you.”

“I’d rather get it all over with”, said Claudia, “But thanks for worrying.”
They sat with her and eventually got into bantering about nothing in particular.

Claudia laughed a lot in that hour.

By the end of it, she swung herself out of bed and smirked at her visitors. “Let’s get this done! Should we grab Ez?”

“He’s in another war meeting with Marielle right now”, said Callum, his mien sagging, “They’re looking to speed the campaign in Evenere.”

“Oh”, quavered Claudia.

Faster action generally meant more casualties. It made sense, the internal conflict was a problem with four legions seemingly waiting uncomfortably close to the Xadian side of the border.

“I’m thinking it might make sense for me to go”, said Callum, “If I can get Xadia to settle for an armistice, I might be able to talk some sense into the rebels.”

“Sounds like a plan”, said Claudia, “I’m guessing you guys talked, but Rayla and I were thinking of going after Viren when she’s feeling better.”

“Yeah well”, said Callum grimly, “We have no clue where he is at the moment. Zym’s doing the rounds again. The letter he got back from his mom basically says ‘find Viren or don’t bother coming back’.”

Claudia gave him a look that spoke volumes about how disgusted she was with this not so maternal threat.

“I know, right?”, replied the Crown Prince.

Together, they made their way to the lab and out into the courtyard where the blast shield still sat. Claudia placed the coin on the blackened pavement and trickled a little bit of the liquid onto Amaya’s curious face.
When she joined Piper, Cardwell, Callum and Rayla behind the wooden barricade, nervous excitement had a strong grasp on the mage. This was going to be her first actual human. Hopefully it would go just as well as the two rats.

“You guys ready? I’ve been through this a few times and she’s probs going to be super confused so don’t worry about me. I’m sure Piper and Dr. Cardwell are going to do what they have to, you two take care of Amaya”, said Claudia.

The prince and his fiance nodded in perfect synchronicity and Claudia turned toward the coin with an exasperated smirk. These two were just too adorkable.

The incantation flowed from her lips and the tendrils extended outward from her extended hand again, finding the coin.

A loud explosion reflected off the walls of the courtyard and Rayla winced with a quiet exclamation of pain.

Callum watched as his best friend stiffened like a board and fell backwards into Piper’s already waiting arms.

“Is she okay?”, asked the Prince, his heart pounding.

“Fine, fine”, Cardwell grumbled while moving the mage into a stable, sideways position, “At least this time she told me to be here beforehänd!”

Rayla was rubbing her ears to make them stop ringing and followed her summand who was stepping around the blast shield.

On the ground in front of them sat General Amaya. She blinked into the light of a nice, warm summer day, seeming confused beyond measure. Her armor was scuffed and she sported several shallow wounds and bruises.

‘Hello Aunt Amaya’, signed Callum when he was close enough for her to see his hands, ‘How are you?’
Amaya lifted her hands, but froze when she noticed Rayla. Her right hand flew toward her empty scabbard.

‘It Rayla’, signed the elf hastily, ‘No attack, please.’

Callum knelt down in front of his aunt who was staring down his fiancee. When he started signing again, her focus shifted to him.

‘Do you remember our conversation in the infirmary?’

‘Conversation? No’, signed the general with narrowing eyes, ‘This might be kind of like a dumb thing to ask, but you are Callum, right? You look like him but you’re also a little taller than I remember.’

‘It’s me, yes. You were locked in a coin for four years.’

Amaya blinked again, confusedly studied the ground for a moment then took in her nephew again with a frown. ‘You’ve grown up.’

‘Didn’t have a say in that’, smiled Callum, “I’m glad you’re okay.”

They hugged each other. The prince had to work very hard not to lose his composure.

‘The last thing I remember is getting my cheeks handed to me at Taelin by some dark magic’, Amaya’s frown deepened, ‘Is Ez okay? Gren? Corvus?’

‘You can say ‘ass’, I’ve known that sign since I was ten’, snickered Callum, ‘Ezran’s fine. He was coined, like you. We only got him back a week ago. We don’t know what happened to Gren and Corvus. Can only hope they’re also in coins and we’ll be able to get them back.’

For a moment, the General stared at the sky, seemingly collecting her thoughts. Eventually, she exhaled sharply.
“They were fighting right next to me, so yeah, let’s hope. So much happened here while you were off in Xadia, dropping off their prince. Good to know you two made it back”, her face contorted in an expression of concentration. “Wait, so, if he wasn’t there... you’re King, not Ez? Did you manage to get the Xadians to stand down?”

‘Callum did peace paper. Works well’, signed Rayla.

The general snorted. ‘Peace paper’! She means an accord? Armistice?’

Callum frowned at his aunt. ‘Armistice. I negotiated it as King, but abdicated when Ez came back. By the way, Rayla went through a lot of trouble for all this. Sacrificed a lot. She learned sign whenever she could, though, just for you.”

Amaya raised an eyebrow. ‘Why?’

‘Wanted good meeting’, signed Rayla sheepishly, ‘Last was bad.’

‘At the time all I could think of was to protect the boys’, Amaya shook her head lightly, ‘You were nothing but an assassin in my eyes then. That’s different now, so I’m sorry.”

A quizzical expression now replaced the rue in her mien as her eyes tracked over Rayla, then her nephew. ‘Are you two still together?’

‘Yes’, smiled the elf.

Amaya nodded curtly, ‘Asking cause Callum’s got a circlet but I don’t see one on you. So you’re not married? Taking it slow?’

The prince and future princess gave each other a resigned look, then Callum signed, ‘As I said. Rayla went through a lot. We were going to get married but things got more than a little complicated again. Still, we’ll get to it soon.’
He got up, ‘Look, I know you probably have endless questions, but why don’t you clean up and get yourself checked out by Cardwell before we get into all that?’

‘Sounds good, I look like shit’, signed his aunt with a smirk. In truth, she felt just the same.

Rayla extended a hand toward the General who took it with the merest hint of reluctance. Together with Callum, she hoisted the armored soldier to her feet and supported her on her way to the infirmary.
Rayla blinked.

Her entire body ached from sleeping in an awkward position.

There was another knock.

“What’s up?”, she asked groggily.

“I, uh, need to use the toilet”, came Callum’s voice from outside.

The future princess sighed and dug herself out of the bedding she had stuffed into the claw-footed bathtub to sleep in.

From outside the bathroom, the key rattled in the lock and the door opened to reveal their chambers, lit by the blue light of Sunday morning.

And a very miffed looking Prince.

“I think it’s time you stopped this”, he said while his summand passed by him.

“Go pee”, she grumbled.

“What did you dream?”, he asked defiantly.

She sighed, rolling her eyes. “I dreamt of you in a kilt. Then about me as a Queen, askin’ for everyone’s head. It was a really weird dream, people had playin’ cards as bodies…”

“So there!”, Callum said, “You’re dreaming; you remember; you’re fine!”
“Ugh”, went Rayla, “Look, can you please just lock me in the bathroom for another night or two instead of givin’ me a hard time every mornin’? I need to be sure I’m not comin’ after you again!”

She could feel his annoyed gaze on her back for a moment, then he huffed and closed the bathroom door behind himself.

The future princess gazed longingly at her bed. She walked over and flopped into the soft sheets, face first.

“Today’s the day”, she said into the mattress, to no-one in particular.

Today was indeed the day, the 30th of July.

Today, they were going to let Tyne out of her coin.

Claudia had taken a longer break after releasing Amaya, mostly due to Cardwell’s insistence but also because Rayla had pressured her to delay for a while, ostensibly to give Amaya some time to get caught up before throwing two elven assassins in the mix.

Two extremely skilled elven assassins who were likely going to be very angry.

Rayla sat up and ran her splayed hands through her hair to get it out of her face. The long, thin strands started to annoy her. Maybe it was time for a change.

Her thoughts wandered. “Hm... the 30th...”

Adrenaline spiked, hard enough to leave an afterimage in her chest.

She jumped up and walked over to her desk where her little calendar-slash-diary sat. Rifling through it, she found the day of their crossing into Scotia, June 28th.

Her stomach sank even further.
“Okay, okay! That’s like, four days, it’s fine”, she said under her breath.

Her mind corrected her, ‘Actually, five days - isn’t that almost a week?’

She shot back in a furious whisper, “A’ve missed it before!”

“Missed what? Sorry, are you talking to me?”, asked Callum, confusedly closing the bathroom door behind himself.

Rayla whirled around.

The next burst of adrenaline didn’t feel so bad since she was starting to get desensitized.

Should she tell him? How would he react?

His angry face appeared in her mind, telling her off for telling lies of omission.

She swallowed.

Her summand came closer, his mien full of concern. “Rayla, what’s wrong?”

“Ha”, she went and slumped into the chair in front of her desk.

Then added a breathy “Ah.”

“Ooookay! You’re speechless”, he snickered and knelt in front of her, “That’s new.”

When she didn’t return his quip, his face grew concerned again. He extended a hand to brush some more of her unruly morning hair behind her ear. “Hey. What happened? You look like you’ve seen
a ghost... Is this cause of your birthday tomorrow?"

“Mh”, she went. On one hand she didn’t want to worry him, on the other she knew he would want to know.

Her gaze darted to the ceiling. “A... A, um... A should be bleedin’, but... A’m not.”


Rayla stuttered, “N-no, A’m not. This sometimes... uh, happens with these d-dumb lady parts. A’ve missed a round before. Without anythin’ bein’ wrong. I-it’s just a few days overdue. That’s all”, she laughed awkwardly, “Nothin’ to get worked up over!”

The prince took a deep breath, then eyed her, almost suspiciously. “If this is so normal, why are you so worried?”

“Um, well... it’s not like ye and A were sleepin’ with each other the last time A missed it”, she admitted quietly.

“But you said there was basically no way you’d get p-pregnant”, Callum said and it was hard to tell whether he was accusing her of something, “When will we know for sure, then?”

“Um”, Rayla quavered, “A mean, A hope it’s when the blood starts flowin’?”

“So you don’t really know?”

The elf was glad to hear his usual gentleness return to his voice. For a moment, she had expected an argument.

“No, A really don’t... A know sorta what happens in the rough thanks to Zala, but A’ve never really bothered to look up any timelines or whatever...”
Callum bristled. “Yeah, me neither. We’ll make a trip to the library after breakfast, okay?”

She nuzzled his hand and kissed him.

A sad, sardonic smile played on his lips. “Gah, never a dull moment. Are you okay?”

“No! No, A’m not! If this is really happenin’, A’m gonna freak out! How does a wean fit into this!?” she motioned frantically at her surroundings but really meant herself, “A’m not ready for this! At all!”

Callum’s gaze lowered to the ground. “We shouldn’t have been careless.”

Seeing him like this made her feel worse. After all, this was probably nothing and he was feeling down for no reason. It was obvious that he was shocked, looking to her for reassurance and answers that she didn’t have.

“Hey”, went Rayla, gently lifting his chin so she could look him in the eyes, “It was so much fun dummy, don’t say that! No Regrets about that stuff, okay? The risk is so low, I don’t think this is anythin’. It’s just my body bein’ dumb, as per usual.”

“I don’t think it was just your body being dumb”, he said with a rueful, even scared expression.

--

Drops of sweat followed the momentum of Soren’s blade as it collided with the wood and straw of the training dummy.

He breathed heavily and stood straighter. To his right, Claudia was playing with Amelie in the grass.

Pride filled the crown guard as his child rose to wobbly feet and made a single, unsupported step before falling over into her cooing aunt’s arms.
General Amaya jogged through the gate, entering the upper courtyard. She lifted her hand in greeting and stopped next to Soren. With a smug smirk, she bent over to pick up a wooden training blade and assumed a challenging stance.

The crown guard blinked confusedly. "You want to fight?"

Amaya shrug-nodded and waved her blade at him.

Soren smirked. "I just worked myself to the bone, granny, this wouldn’t be a fair f--"

The flat of her blade hit him on the outside of his left thigh. She didn’t seem too impressed with his choice of words.

"Okay. You’re on", said Soren.

They started sparring, gently at first to get used to each other’s motions, looking for the others’ limit.

After about five minutes, they got into a rhythm and picked up speed.

A jab passed by Amaya and she tried grappling his arm to make him drop his sword, but Soren’s knee shot upward, making her jump away.

"Nice moves", said the crown guard with a cocky smirk, “Granny! ”

The General assumed a stance that screamed ‘Oh you!’. Then, she beckoned him over in a gesture of challenge.

Soren charged his superior and feinted to her left, but she saw his eyes dart to her right which gave his plan away.

So, she stepped left, went low and swept his supporting leg out from under him.
With a yelp, the younger soldier fell on his back. He didn’t stay there. It only took him a moment to jump back to his feet, much quicker than his opponent had expected.

From the sidelines, Claudia watched on as her brother and Amaya battled. They seemed fairly evenly matched even though the General’s experience made Soren a rather transparent tactician.

For fifteen minutes, the fight went on, both the combattants were sweating and panting. It looked as thought they were getting more and more relentless with each other.

Then, Amaya deflected one of Soren’s incoming swipes. The parry was clumsy and the vibration hurt her hand, twisted her wrist.

She waved at Soren to stop, shaking the pulsing hand to make it stop smarting.

“Had enough?”, he panted.

The General gave him a thumbs-up with an expression that indicated that she was satisfied with his performance.

They replaced the training swords in the rack and Amaya went back to jogging while Soren dried himself off with a towel.

Claudia and Amelie were smirking in his direction as he walked over to sit with them.

“That looked like a good fight”, said his sister.

“Did it? I feel like she’s a little out of shape. Used to whoop me good as a kid”, said Soren.

“Maybe you’re just better now?”

“Yeah. No doubt.”
He seemed to sag into himself a little.

“What’s up, Sorebear?”, prompted Claudia.

“Oh, um, you know…”, he went, “It’s just that Jen and I used to spar a lot. This was the first time in years I did that with someone else.”

He sighed deeply. “Sorry. Don’t mean to be a downer.”

“Don’t be silly”, the mage said gently, “Was it at least a little fun?”

“Yeah. That’s the problem. I don’t know if that’s… okay.”

“What, having fun?”

“Having fun doing things without her, yeah. I feel kinda guilty.”

Claudia shook her head. “I really don’t think she’d like hearing that. If the roles were reversed, wouldn’t you want her to have fun sometimes?”

“Totally”, he agreed laxly, “Just another thing I need to learn to deal with.”

His sister embraced him, trying to ignore the fact that he was sweaty.

--

Horace yawned loudly. It wasn’t normal for him to stay up this long past sunrise, but this project of his was just too close to complete.
Piper and him had fashioned a long, smooth metal tube, then filled it with some of the explosives that Tinker had developed with the night attendant.

After packing the powder down, the young scientist carefully dropped a cast iron ball into the tube.

“Ready to give it a shot?” she asked.

“Miss Piper, I did not stay up this early to chicken out at the last minute”, smirked the old man.

Together they made their way into the lower courtyard where the blast shield still sat. Piper set the tube up a ways away from the thick wooden construction while Horace ran a length of oil soaked twine behind the shield and into an opening of the tube.

They made sure that the yard was clear, then hid behind the blast shield. Horace lit the twine and waited.

A loud bang reverberated in the courtyard, then the sound of small metal pieces hitting the ground.

When the scientist and attendant poked their heads out of their cover, they saw pieces of the tube strewn everywhere, but also something far more interesting.

The iron ball was stuck in the castle wall, about half an inch deep and quite deformed.

Smiles spread on their faces.

The experiment had sort of worked.

--

Opeli’s index traced the spine of a red tome. It wasn’t the book she was looking for.
“What good is a librarian if she won’t organize the stacks?!”, hissed the councillor under her breath, “Why bother with the Duro-decimal system, eh?”

She walked further down the aisle, carefully studying the books. “Encyclopedia of Bovine Health, come on, already!”

“...cramping, fatigue, nausea, headaches, constipation, mood swings, dizziness—”

“Okay dafty, I get it, it’s not a good time!”

Opeli’s ears itched. The prince and future princess were just around the corner in a reading nook, having an obviously emotionally charged, whispered discussion. Surely, it wouldn’t hurt to listen in.

Just in case they would need her help.

Just in case.

Rayla sighed. “Says here it can take up to eight weeks to show anythin’.”

“For humans, you mean. Might be different for you.”

There was some quiet, but this exchange alone had the High Councillor gritting her teeth.

“Okay, so this sounds like superstition, but apparently it works in like seven out of ten cases”, said Callum, “You have to pee on some wheat and barley and if either sprouts, you might be—”

“You cannot be serious!”, Opeli charged around the corner, facing two very startled looking teenagers, “Please tell me this is research for mere curiosity’s sake!”

“Ye spied on us?!”, hissed Rayla. The elf rose, obviously furious. She pointed to where she knew the doors to the library were, “Bolt, ye boot!”
Opeli wouldn’t have it. “That’s no way for you to speak to me, Milady! You gave me your word!”

“So A did!”, spat the future princess, “Accidents happen!”

“Pah! Accidents! Accidents!”, scoffed the councillor. With a furious, disappointed look between them she continued, “I thought you understood your responsibility! Your place in history! Children are not to be taken lightly, especially ones as monumental a sign and gesture as yours will be!”

A figure strode into their view from behind one of the stacks.

“Ahem!”, went the librarian, “You’re in a library!”

“We’re well aware”, spat Opeli, “You ought to act the part, Lucille, and put the books where they belong! Make yourself useful and find me Adalbert’s Encyclopedia of Bovine Health!”

The librarian bristled at the rough tone. Normally her and Opeli got along swimmingly. With a hurt expression, Lucille spun and strode off to find the stupid book.

“Look, councillor. We are very well aware of `our place in history`, as you put it”, quavered Callum, “We’re also not sure about this. Just trying to figure out if we can be.”

“Ye’re a woman”, grumbled Rayla, “Ye know how it is.”

Opeli deflated a little, falling into the only remaining chair in the reading nook. “I do.”

She rubbed her eyes and groaned the groan of a century. “I know this is such an awkward request to make, but will you let me know if... you know... your monthlies comes in next week? We will need to get you two married as soon as possible otherwise, which means we have to hurry the preparations again which means we’d be throwing more political capital out of the window.”

“We can do that”, agreed Callum under the furious glare of his summand.
“Oh, that’s yer choice to make, is it?”, she spat.

“You don’t agree?”, he asked with knitted eyebrows, “This isn’t just our problem, you know? Opeli is doing her best to keep our public image squeaky clean.”

“A don’t give a damn!”

“Be serious! You can’t honestly want to go out there with an announcement like that where people are already pissed cause you have horns and no pinky!”

Rayla huffed, crossing her arms. She fell into her chair and stared at the book she had consulted.

“Fine”, she spat.

A deep sigh later, she added “A can’t believe this. This is so dumb. Where can we find some wheat and barley?”

Decisions were easy.

It was the consequences one had to worry about.

--

Torch light glinted off the golden surface of Tyne’s coin. It was sitting in a locked dungeon cell underneath the Twin Towers, a precaution that Rayla had urged them to take.

Claudia sighed deeply. She wasn’t looking forward to losing her conscience again, but at the same time every person she was able to release from their prison meant another massive load off her shoulders.

The mage breathed, nodded at the small group of people observing her and chanted the incantation.
In the dungeons, the loud bang seemed much more powerful, it made dust drift from crevices in the walls and purple smoke filled the hallway in a snap.

To everyone’s surprise, Claudia was still standing, breathing heavily and coughing in the dusty air. The mage stumbled but managed to sit herself down as Dr. Cardwell rushed in to check on her.

Rayla stepped forward, to where the metal bars of the cell were barely visible in the clearing smoke.

“Mum?”, she called out, “Tyne, are you okay?”

The answer was silence.

“It’s me, Rayla. Don’t worry, you’re with friends.”

A moment later, a searching hand grabbed for the bars and Tyne emerged, holding her head with an expression of pain. When she looked up and saw Rayla, the woman froze, her mouth agape.

“Hey”, smiled her daughter, “It’s a long story, but you were sorta locked up in a coin for at least four years. I, uh... grew up a bit.”

“R--Rayla!”, cried Tyne, sticking her arms through the bars to embrace her daughter, {I am Tormont (whose smile challenged the sun)!}

The future princess welled up, mimicking her mother’s awkward embrace. For a moment, they stood like this, then separated.

{Why these bars?}, Tyne asked with a smirk, {Am I among the Locked of Ramsa (group of POWs during the mage wars)??}

“Would you mind speakin’ Common?”, sniffled Rayla, “Then I won’t have to translate everythin’.”

{Translate? For whom?}
Her daughter’s stomach cramped. {Do you have memories of our first conversation? When I showed you my thoughts in ink?}

Tyne slowly shook her head. {My mind is void of this.}

Rayla felt like she was going to have a heart attack. She knew exactly how her mother would react to hearing this story again. Regardless, she had to get through it.

Better to tear that band-aid off in one go right now.

“Callum?”, she said and extended a hand toward her summand who was waiting out of sight.

The Crown Prince stepped forward, taking her hand in his. {Hello. I am Callum, next-in-line for the Land of Saskia.}

It was immediately obvious that Tyne was fuming. “A give nary a feck aboot who ye are or how ye speak! Take yer hands off my daughter, Mink!”

“Mum”, said Rayla, her throat dry, “Please, don’t be mad. Look at our hands.”

Her mother did, her eyes darting between their bond wreaths. She took a step away from the metal bars, seething with anger. “A dinnae understand. Did ye hex her or somethin’? Drug her up?”

“No”, said Callum gently, having expected this exact point, “She’s here of her own free will. A lot’s happened while you weren’t around. There’s an armistice between Xadia and the Pentarchy, my brother and the two of us worked to make that happen.”

The elf stabbed her index at Rayla. “Ye mean tae tell me that this is my daughter!? She sure looks like it, but there’s no way my flesh and bone would share secrets with a Mink!”

“Mum, please! If ye’re so sure A’m not me”, cried her daughter, “Why don’t ye just try an’ figure it oot!? There’s gotta be somethin’ ye can ask to be sure! What aboot... what aboot Muriel?”
Tyne’s hands slammed into the bars. “It disnae matter! No daughter of mine would sell herself to a human! To a Katolin Prince, of all devils! Go oan, get lost!”

“How aboot `NO’!”, yelled Rayla, “A didnae go through all this shite to hear ye yap and whine like a racist pup! A know ye like walkin’ out on me and lettin’ others pick up the slack, but not today! Ye deh get tae get rid of me today!”

Tyne scoffed. “What? Are ye goin’ to lecture me aboot duty or loyalty now?! Better not, ye blood traitor! What would yer father say?! Summed with a Mink! My own...”

She drew a deep breath that was filled with pain instead of using the word she now seemed to dread, “Shame on ye! Shame! Shame!”

“Shame?!”, screamed Rayla, “A was gonna mention what a shit parent ye were to me, but sure, ye wanna talk to me about shame?! All Xadia thinks you and Farouk bolted when the Pinkos murdered Avizandum!”

Tyne blanched, then slowly slumped to the floor.

The silence that followed was only broken by the elven women’s agitated breathing.

Callum looked between them, opting to hold his tongue. He didn’t understand this dynamic and didn’t see a way to mediate. Tinker had been open to measured conversation, here he was out of his depth.

Without saying another word, Rayla’s mother started unclasping her sky blue armor.
“What are ye doin’?”, asked her daughter angrily.

“Was wounded by his ilk”, she threw a hand at Callum, then hissed with pain as a bloody gash emerged from under her torn arming shirt.

“I’m sorry. The mage who did this to you, we’re looking for him as a criminal. He’ll be tried by Xadian justice”, said Callum, “Do you need bandages? Alcohol?”

“Shut yer gob, Mink!”, spat Tyne, tearing her uniform’s sleeve off to fashion a crude bandage.

“Ye could just say `yes`. Didnae even need a thank-you!”

Tyne ignored her daughter’s reprimand, angrily dressing her wound. “Ye haud yer wheesht, too! A deh take help from humans! Gads! Even if yer father and A would’ve died defendin’ the King, with ye doin’ this, the family’s well and proper disgraced. A canny be wearin’ this anymore!”

Her shoulders slumped and tears started flowing from her eyes. She whispered, “Ma own flesh and blood a Mink-baggin’ traitor! They killed an arch dragon! A canny believe they won that fight! A canny believe A let that happen! A canny believe this is real!”

Seeing her mother dissolve in tears of anger and shame, Rayla couldn’t help but soften.

“Aye, they killed him and took his son”, she said quietly, “But the new King of Katolis, Ezran, Callum and A brought him back home. Mum, Xadia killed their da’ in retribution, and they still helped me.”

She launched into a rough explanation of what had happened, assisted by Callum’s excellent memory whenever hers faltered. To their right, Claudia, Piper and Cardwell had walked outside, not wanting to intrude.

When they were done, Tyne was slumped over speechless for a long time.
Eventually, Rayla sighed. “Look. A get that this is way too much for anyone to take in. How about A bring ye some food and you mull it all over? Quietly. A’ll be there.”

Her mother scoffed, but didn’t say or do anything else.

Rayla turned to face Callum, helplessly. The Prince’s gentle squeeze of her hand was small comfort.

“Maybe we should pick this up tomorrow”, he said gently, more to his summand than her mother.

Rayla nodded sadly and they turned to go.

“Where’s yer da’?”, asked Tyne quietly.

“In a coin, too”, said Rayla, facing her mother once again, “The mage who’s gettin’ everyone out of the coins is ruinin’ herself for it. She can only do yin a day.”

For a moment Rayla wanted to keep walking but the pressure to ask was too strong. “What happened with yer familials?”

Tyne didn’t look up. Tonelessly, she said, “A was gettin’ ready for a covert mission for the Lucid. Afterward A would’ve fixed them. Didnae get the chance.”

Her cold, even hateful stare hit Rayla. “Maybe for the best, now. Who would wanna be lumped in with ye?”
Even if Rayla had wanted to talk about her mother, she wouldn't have known what to say. Worse, she knew that her father would likely have a similar - if more temperate - reaction.

Callum had wanted very badly to cheer her up, but the pressure of everything that weighed on her shoulders brought his summand to an early bed.

A fitful rest later, she was twenty.

"Good morning!", sang Callum.

She blinked and sat up in the bathtub to find him standing in the doorway, holding six wrapped items.

"Happy Birthday, Fawn. I figured I could also give you the solstice gifts you missed."

He was adorable.

He was adorable and cheerful and beautiful.

Rayla couldn't be upset in his squeaky presence right now.

A wide smile stole onto her face as she shook off the sheets. "Well, aren't you giddy!"

"I am! I can't wait for you to open all these!", he bobbed on the balls of his feet.

She patted his head with her left and rubbed her eyes with her right. "Can I maybe sleep a few more hours first?"

It was a bit early, but Callum hadn't been able to stay in bed, especially since she hadn't been there.
"Nope!", he grinned and shoved his gifts in her arms.

A moment later, they were sitting on the floor in their bedroom and Rayla unwrapped her first gift. It was a book.

"The Noble House of Katol. A History and Exploration", read the future princess, "Useful. Thanks!"

He motioned her along and she tore open the second, vaguely book-shaped item.

"The Art of Conflict", Rayla blinked, "Strategy and Tactics of the Pentarchy!?"

"This one I got after General Rhinehart explained how my mum and dad split their duties. I, uh... I thought it was kinda romantic. The implication, I mean."

His summand laughed. "You mean you want me to run the army? I don’t know if Amaya would like that. But still, it is kinda romantic, thank you!"

The next package she picked up to study was smaller. She opened the box and took out an ornate golden thing with a leather sheath. Pulling the handle, she made a surprised sound. "Oop! It’s a fancy dagger... looks a bit dull, actually?"

"Yeah, about that, I um... I used to wear it before, but I don’t feel super confident I’d even be able to use it if I had to. I figure you’d know best what to do with it”, quavered Callum, "It, um, it used to be my dad’s."

Rayla’s hands fell to her lap. “Dafty, awww! Thank you, that means a lot to me!"

She moved to embrace him, but he smirked and shoved another package into her arms. “Sorry, too excited!"

“Oh you”, said the elf and undid the ribbon. It was another book, smaller this time, “Plying the Herbs of Katolis!”
She immediately started thumbing through the guide. Now here was something that piqued her interest, she knew comparatively little about the exploitable flora around here.

“I figured you’d like that one”, he snickered, “But here, this kind of goes with the book.”

He leaned over to grab something hidden under the bed and pulled out a very well crafted sling pouch. “If we’re going out there again, you’ll need this.”

“Oooohh”, she went, “This is you makin’ me ready to scamper through the Pentarchy, is it?”

He nodded giddily and passed her a small wooden box. “This is from when I thought I was going to come see you. I wanted it to be something tiny in case you needed to hide it.”

Rayla unclasped the latch and inspected the contents. It was a finely crafted platinum broach in the shape of a Precious White. With a smirk, she put it on. “Bit on the nose, isn’t it?”

“Hey, you gotta have something that isn’t Katolin”, snickered Callum, “Okay, so, here’s the last one. I had just finished these before going to get you.”

He bobbed up and down while she sheepishly opened the shoe-box sized gift.

“Huh”, she went, “Horn sheaths?”

“Yeah! I’ve never seen you wear any, so I thought maybe you’d like some”, he said expectantly.

Rayla studied the silver ornaments, the etched design seeming vaguely familiar. “Thanks, dafty. You’re right, these are the first ones I’ll own”, she paused, wracking her brain about the decoration.

Eventually, she gave up. “I feel like I should know these shapes, but I can’t say from where?”
Callum snickered. “It’s the same design as the headrest of the first bed we ever shared.”

“Oh man, the place in Larwein!? You’re such a sappy prince!”, she smiled and wrapped her arms around him.

He laughed out loud, “That sounds way better than ‘Sappy King’!”

Rayla kissed him, then whispered against his lips. “Ezran’s gonna make this a big deal, isn’t he?”

“The little man loves birthdays, you have no idea”, smirked Callum, stealing another kiss.

A deep sigh escaped Rayla. “And what… we throw a party with my mum locked up?”

The soft warmth that had filled the moment dissipated and Callum eyed her, shocked.

“Now I feel kinda dumb. I’m sorry. Of course you wouldn’t wanna celebrate after… that.”

“Don’t be daft”, she smirked, “There’s a lot goin’ on with us right now, but it’s not just us. Ez needs a break, too, and if my birthday can give him one, all the better.”

Callum shook his head, incredulous. “Warrior Princess.”

“Nah, just regular Princess”, she put on a snobby expression, “Full’r grace and selflessness!”

When he blinked at her, she started laughing. “… and maybe also full’r shite! What’s with that look?”

“Mh, nothing, it’s just… I don’t know. You normally don’t like it when I call you by your title and stuff.”

Rayla shrugged. “Oh, we were just havin’ a laugh, though. I don’t like all the airs these councillors
and Marielle put on - hard to want to be like that. I’m no better than anyone else.”

“Fair enough”, said Callum, enthusiastically tapping the books he had gifted her, “Maybe you’ll find a royal you can respect a little more after you’ve gotten through these?”

“Pfweh!”, she went, “That’ll take me a bit.”

She pressed a final kiss to his lips and got up to stretch. For the first time in quite a while, she didn’t feel sick and it seemed as though strength was returning to her extremities.

“Dafty, I wanna change this mop on my head”, she said when the thin white strands fell haphazardly over her face, “I’m guessin’ just snippin’ it off with my blades might be seen as a bit... un-princessly”

“You can totally do that if you want, but Lydia is a great hairdresser.”

Rayla didn’t seem pleased with that. “You sure you don’t wanna give it a shot?”

“Don’t be weird, I’d turn your head into a horror story”, laughed Callum painfully, then put on a shrewd smile, “She’s gonna love having you stuck in a chair for a while. I’ve considered making her chief interrogator.”

“Pleasant”, smirked Rayla and made for her dresser, “I’ll see what she thinks. Breakfast’s in...”

She whirled around and stemmed her fists to her hips. “A canny believe ye woke me three hours before breakfast on my birthday!”

---

Ezran and Zym were snickering at each other. Every day, the little man would take some time out of his day to sit with the dragon. Today, the target of their amusement was Rayla.

At first, her haircut had thrown everyone off. She had cropped the flowing white mane to a short,
defiant looking wave that was accentuated by her new horn sheaths.

Now, she was attempting to work out a suit of Katolin ceremonial armor, Ezran’s gift to her. While it was very clearly made for her, she wasn’t at all used to its heft.

So, as she was trying her best to walk in the richly decorated suit, Callum tried to talk her through it.

It wasn’t as though he had fared any better in his when he had had to put it on for his coronation.

“I heard she didn’t have a good time with her mom”, said Zym suddenly, the smirk he had worn wiped from his face, “There’s something I can understand.”

Ezran sighed. It didn’t need words to understand how Zym felt about his mother, it was too complicated to speak about anyway. “It sucks. She’s great, so I thought her parents would be the same.”

“Moonshadow elves have this whole thing about honor and stuff”, said Zym, “Mother says that a few of her Moonshadow Dragon Guard actually killed themselves after my father was murdered. Couldn’t bear the shame.”

“That’s dark”, swallowed Ezran, “Do you think Tyne might do the same?”

Zym’s expression turned to stone. “Oh. Good point”, he quickly rose, “Let’s make sure that doesn’t happen. Can I fit into the dungeons?”

Ezran smirked sadly. “No, you’re waaaaay too big. I’m sure we can bring her out, though.”

“Mhr”, went the dragon, “I’d be careful with that. Make sure you get some elite soldiers on her. She isn’t a Dragon Guard for nothing.”

“I’ll ask Soren and Aunt Amaya to be there”, agreed Ezran sternly and got up.
Ten minutes later, the Dragon Prince was sitting next to Rayla and Callum in the grey light of an overcast sky. It was going to rain, his gut said, and it was always right.

Ezran had wanted to be there, but Callum had talked him out of it. If anything went wrong, he was the first person Tyne would go after.

Rayla tensed as her mother appeared behind the bars of the dungeons’ gate. The elven woman’s hands were cuffed, her legs chained together so it was impossible for her to run.

Soren, who was next to her, unlocked the gate and him and Amaya transported the elf through.

When they arrived in front of Zym, Tyne lowered her head. “Praestes Tyne, Excellence. A’m sorry, A canny bow like this.”

“You have leave to speak, Praestes”, said Azymondias gently.

To everyone’s surprise, Tyne started crying, “A failed ye and yer parents! A’ll take any punishment, A deserve it!”

“Please, don’t. You’ve done nothing wrong”, said Zym, “You fought to defend Avizandum.”

“But A didna--”

“Would you have died if it meant that he would live?”, interrupted the Dragon Prince, knowing full-well what she was going to say.

“Of course!”

“Then you’ve done nothing wrong”, he repeated as though it was an easily understood fact, “Even if you had acted disgracefully in the first place, your daughter would have cleared your name.”

Conflict raged at once in Tyne’s mien. “She’s done well, savin’ ye and bearin’ out her sentence.”
“I’ve heard you had less than kind words with her yesterday”, said Zym, sounding about as non-judgmental as his growling voice allowed.

“Aye”, spat the dragon guard.

There was a protracted silence, then Tyne added, “That's... personal.”

“Oh, it’s personal alright”, scoffed Rayla.

All she got from her mother in return was a glare.

“A wish A could at least understand”, pled the future Princess.

“Understand?” scoffed Tyne, “What, are ye daft? Ye knew this all yer life, Minks make for horrible neighbors and worse enemies, and ye go and summate with one? A... A honestly don’t know how ye canny understand that yer mum would be... frankly, a wee bit sick from that? It’s disgustin’, is what it is! They're not...”

Her facial expression changed, it reminded Callum of his own mother’s mien when he had done something extremely stupid, something that had the potential to seriously hurt him. It was equal parts love and anger.

“...they’re not... they’re not people the way ye and A are. They don’t think or even feel the way we do, they can’t! It’s not their fault but... what without an Arcanum, how could they ever understand anythin’ about each other and the world? They're floaters, not connected to anythin' or anyone! No matter what ye think he feels, it's all facade!”, she threw a hand in Callums direction, "There's nothin' in there, he's just... empty flesh and bone!”

Callum felt hot anger rising in his chest. He lifted his finger to draw a spell. “Fulminis”, he activated, seeing surprise and the increasingly familiar searching for a primal stone in Tyne’s face as lightning crackled into the sky.

“Don't bother looking, I don't have a primal stone”, he swallowed his anger and forced himself to be diplomatic, “I respect you, Tyne. You worked hard to wear that uniform. Probably harder than I
"Oh please!", spat Tyne, "A don't care fer yer respect, it means nothin' to me! So what, ye figured out some prestidigitation to woo shits-fer-brains!"

"It’s not a parlor trick! I have an arcanum", said Callum, unable to keep the edge out of his voice, "Humans have the ability to connect. Even by your standards, that would make us worthy of personhood."

Tyne snorted. "If a Skulk learns to open doors, does that make it people? Ye may be able to use magic, but that's all it is! It's not a part of ye, can't be!"

Zym growled. "This has gone on long enough, Praestes. You are to put on a more respectful tone. Your daughter and her summand aren't just dear friends, in a way they are my foster parents."

Tyne once again bowed her head. "A'm sorry it had to come to that."

She made a noise that sounded like she was going to throw up. "If A hadnae failed, none of this would've happened", she fixed Callum with a hateful glare, "None of it."

"Well boohoo", went Rayla angrily, "It's good ye failed, then, cause the world's better fer it! We've got peace, mum!"

"Peace! Don't make me laugh!", scoffed her mother, "Give the Minks a few years, they'll slap ye aboot the heid with yer 'peace'!"

"Ah, is that so!?", asked the future princess, "Right now it looks a lot more like Xadia's the one to do the slappin' what with those legions parked snug with the border?!!"

A beat of shocked silence followed.

"We’re not accusing you of anything”, sputtered Callum, turning to Zym, “But, uh, it looks like Raszagal is amassing troops near the border.”
“Ah. Cool, cool, cool, cool, cool. Yeah, totally cool. I’m guessing this is my mother having a moment. Um... why didn’t you think to talk to me about this?”, asked Zym angrily, “Not like I knew anything about it.”

“I was going to bring it up with you”, he continued with a disappointed look at Rayla, "once we had verified that information .”

Tyne cackled, "Oh not so nice now, is he, yer Mink?"

Rayla sheepishly opened her mouth to answer, but drew air through her teeth instead as a sudden, stabbing pain pierced her lower body and she flinched slightly.

Everyone present looked at her, expectantly, but she just waved a hand. To Callum, her explanation carried the air of one of her half-truths. “Stomach actin’ up. Breakfast was maybe a bit too rich. Speakin’ of...”

She opened the satchel that Callum had gifted her and pulled out a wrapped pastry which she offered to Tyne. “A don’t want ye to go hungry, mum. Please don’t do this to yerself. Even if ye never wanna see me again, please take the food and the medicine we’re offering.”

At first it seemed like the Dragon Guard was going to make a scene, but Zym stared her down. Looking annoyed, Tyne took the pastry from her daughter with both her chained hands.

“Are you going to attack us if we take those off?”, asked Callum, pointing to her shackles.

The dragon guard didn’t answer right away.

“Tyne?”, Zym growled warningly.

“As ye wish. I won’t hurt anyone”, Tyne ground through her teeth.

Then she fixed Rayla with a frustrated look. “When’s yer da’ comin’ out?”
“Probably tomorrow”, Rayla said, “Claudia’s not feelin’ well.”

“Mh”, went Tyne.

‘So, what do we do with her?’, asked Amaya.

“Pu--”, started Callum, but Rayla was already signing, ‘Rear tower, tip. No walk away without Zym or guards seeing.”

Amaya blinked at both of them, then smirked wryly. ‘As you wish, Milady.’

The future Princess didn’t respond with more than a half-hearted grin.

Soren unlocked Tyne’s handcuffs. “Okay there, angry lady, you like my baby so please don’t hurt me, I'm all she's got left.”

“Yer baby?”, asked the dragon guard curtly but with obvious confusion.

“When we found you in the coin, you watched me walk her around and smiled like an idiot”, said the Crown Guard.

Rayla’s mother frowned sadly, looking at her own daughter.

“A guess. No matter the parents”, she said, “A bairn’s somethin’ special, somethin'... innocent.”

The future princess froze. It was almost as though Tyne knew.

Callum extended a hand toward the upper courtyard, "I'll show you to your quarters."
The group started moving in silence.

When they arrived in the upper courtyard, Zym said, "I obviously won't fit in the tower. Praestes Tyne, I'm often outside your door. If there's anything you need, come see me", turning to Callum he added, "I'll get out there, now. Wherever he's going, Viren is getting out of my range. I figure I'll fly for another day or two, then call it quits and see what mother is up to."

"Sounds like a good idea. No matter whether they’re there or not, tonight we’ll sit down and talk about those legions. We need to get a handle on this before it blows up in our faces", the Prince groused, "Either way, Rayla and I are going to try to settle things in Evenere, Marielle has given us a royal edict so we can speak on her behalf."

"Oh, interesting!", went Zym, "when are you leaving?"

"As soon as we can. Tomorrow, even."

Rayla nodded slowly, "I need to see my dad free, but then... then we gotta steer this into safe harbours. I really don't like how ominous this all feels", to Callum, she added, "I'll talk to my mum a moment longer. Meet you in our quarters?"

He shook his head. "Gonna go talk to Ez, get him up to speed."

They kissed, causing Tyne to grit her teeth. Rayla grimly motioned her mother up the stairs that led into the tower's interior and up into one of the smaller guest quarters the Twins had to offer.

When they arrived, Rayla bode Soren and Amaya wait and closed the door behind her mother.

"Mum", she said without preamble, "A think ye might have a grandchild on the way."

She had hurried the words off her tongue to avoid the sudden feeling of trepidation that hit her now.

Tyne scanned her expression, then asked gently, "How long have ye known?"
"Uh", stuttered the future princess, "Just realized A was missin' my bleed yesterday."

Tyne shook her head and scoffed bemusedly. "So, at most four weeks? Then it's way too early to tell anyone about it. Ye ought to wait at least twelve weeks. Until then nothin's tied to the hawk. Why did ye feel the need tae tell me?"

"A... A guess A just didnae want ye to find out... from someone else. A-and down there in the yard, it almost seemed like ye knew already."

Sighing, Tyne put down the pastry and spread her arms to offer her daughter a hug.

Rayla haltingly stepped into her reach.

"Oh, ma wee lass... It's a bit scary when that stuff happens, isn't it?", asked the elder elf while stroking her daughter's newly short hair, "Did ye try fer it or...?"

"Nah. Took the plants", a measure of fear snuck into her voice, "A canny have a wean right now! A'm not ready! The world's not ready!"

"Ye're fine, wee sheep. Trust me, gettin' knocked up isnae as simple as they make it seem. Ye took quite a few tries, too, and A wisnae even on the sludge."

Rayla swallowed. "Mum, A, uh... A don't get how ye're so nice all of a sudden..."

"A love ye, Rayla", said Tyne and tightened her embrace, "That'll always be true, no matter what sort'r gobshite ye get up tae. A'm sorry A was a waner yesterday, A just... Gads. A round quadrant, lost tae me. The Dragon King, dead on my watch... How do A stomach that on top of... ye and him?"

She snickered. “Almost glad ye didnae tell me this yesterday, A would’ve pushed up banther lillies!”
For a moment they stood in the embrace silently, then Rayla said, "He's a good man. Really."

"A know ye think so. A canny see him as anythin' other than...than a Mink. He's a Mink and somehow A've lost ye to him."

"Lost? Without him, A'd be dead. He's one of the reasons A'm even still here."

"Is that why ye're summed with him? Cause ye feel like ye have tae pay back a debt?"

"Nah, he owes me his hide a few times over, too. A just... A just love him."

Tyne separated from Rayla to give her a bewildered look. "Sure ye do."

Without breaking her disapproving gaze, the elder elf unwrapped the pastry and took a bite out of it. "Not half bad", she admitted begrudgingly, "So what, ye’re a Mink princess now?"

“Almost?”, Rayla sighed and found a chair, “But yea, eventually.”

“How’s that make ye feel?”, Tyne asked while sitting down on her bed.

“Ye saw me doon there. Babblin’. Callum wasn’t bein’ harsh, A should’ve kept my mouth shut.”

“Talk is harder than brawlin’”, nodded Tyne, “Not like we taught ye much of that, either. Yer da’s a real politician at times.”

The Praestes’s hand holding the pastry came to rest in her lap and she whispered, “A’m sorry.”

“What aboots?”, asked Rayla. There were a great many possibilities right now.

“Not bein’ a great parent. Somedays A wish A had never been promoted. Stayed in Cardow.”
“Well that didnae happen, did it?”, scoffed her daughter, “Ye know, it’s fine, in a way. A grew up with people who loved me. A missed ye bad, but... A also understood why ye were out there, ken?”

“Speakin’ of yer fosters... what happened to them?”

“Runaan’s either coined or dead. Tinker’s here.”

Tyne’s gaze snapped to Rayla’s. “Akande is here?! He came with ye!? To Katolis?!”

“Yea. He also bonded Callum and I.”

For a moment, her mother just gaped, then went back to eating. Shaking her head she said, “World’s upside doon.”
Claudia was happily swaying in the band's music and took another sip of her drink. It was the evening of Rayla's birthday and Ezran had kitted out the banquet hall with decorations, a buffet of fancy canapes and a wild-looking band that consisted of five tweens.

They knew what they were doing, playing danceable song after danceable song. This lively, even exuberant playlist lead to a great many pairs of people fanning their faces and drinking their sweat back in liquids of considerable toxicity.

The crowd was composed of young nobles from all over Katolis and a few from the rest of the Pentarchy.

It was a loud and raucous affair and everyone present seemed to have a good time.

Claudia noted with enthusiasm that even Soren wasn't entirely lost in gloomy thought as he absentmindedly bounced on the balls of his feet while talking to Amelie on his arm.

The only person who didn't seem too thrilled was Amaya.

The general had her eyes closed, a slight frown on her lips.

Claudia approached the Soldier and waved at her interpreter who turned to tap Amaya's shoulder.

"You doing alright?", asked the mage.

'I gather the music is good.', smirked the general.
For a moment, Amaya looked conflicted, as though she was wondering if she should say more. Then, she sighed. 'It never bothers me much, that I can't hear. Except for when I see people lose it like this. What is it about music that does that?'

"You can feel the drums, can't you? The rhythm?"

'Sure, but it doesn't do much for me.'

To both women's surprise, a third person joined the conversation.

"Would you like to dance, General?”, asked Helmond, signing as he spoke.

A curtesy for Claudia’s sake.

'Dance!? You and I?’, gaped Amaya, 'What are you playing at?'

“I was not meaning to offend, I'm simply glad to see a friend released from captivity and --”

'Not the problem. I mean, we can try, but you better wear some sturdy shoes!', smirked the human.

The elder elf extended his hand regardless and Amaya took it, leading him onto the dance floor.

Claudia watched them bow to each other, then started in a tentative circling of one another, perhaps to suss out each other’s style.

Suddenly, the elven agent stabbed his hand at the general and she dodged, seeming confused at first.

A minute later, Claudia was enraptured in their motions, it was a fight more than a dance, but one in which they did not touch each other, flowing and weaving around each other.
Amaya might have been a terrible dancer, but she could fight like no second person in this room.

Safe for maybe Rayla.

The future princess was talking to her foster father, seeming not very animated. Claudia scowled.

Where was that no-good prince of hers? Why wasn’t she having a good time? The party was great, the drinks were tasty, the music good.

Determined to fix the situation, Claudia grabbed a cup of spring wine and strode over.

“... won’t work so well with him, Tyne at least...”, said Rayla. Then she noticed the approaching mage and stopped talking.

“Hey birthday girl!”, hollered Claudia while handing her the cup which she accepted with an odd moment of hesitance, “Here’s to you!”

She expected Rayla to toast with her and have a drink. The fact that the elf merely looked even sadder didn’t sit right with Claudia.

“What’s wrong? Not your kind of party?”, she asked.

Rayla shook her head and put on a smile as she scanned the room. “Nah, it’s great! Havnae ever had such a crowd show up for my sake. I don’t know them, but so far they’ve all been real nice!”

For a moment, Claudia considered telling her friend that these young nobles were mostly here to curry favour with the Katolin court, but chose instead to stow the politics.

“Then what’s wrong?”

“Oh, um... you know, what with my mum and all that...”
Viren’s daughter crossed her arms. “Yeah, It’s a mess, I feel sorry for you. She’s kind of an ass, right? I can’t help but notice how she hasn’t thanked me at all. Amaya almost broke my back with her hug.”

“You won’t get her thanks”, said Tinker with a sad smile, “She’s not that sort of person. Best not to press the issue.”

“I mean, It’s not super important to me. I’m doing this for myself more than anyone else”, said Claudia and sipped her wine, “Are you not drinking, Rayls? I’ve heard stories of weird beers and moonberry spirits...”

“Oh, I, uh, I don’t feel like it”, quavered Rayla with an odd glance at the cup. After a moment, she seemingly perked up, “Not like it’s hard to have a good time without the stuff when the party’s goin’ like this!”

“In that case, how about you dance with me? If Callum isn’t giving you a good time, someone has to!”

The elf blinked. “You want me to dance with you!?”

Claudia smirked wryly. This was just too similar to Amaya’s reaction. Had Callum inadvertently picked a woman to match those he had been raised by?

“What’s wrong with that? Friends can dance with each other here, is that different in Xadia?”

“Oh”, said Rayla with a thinking mien, “You know, I think the tribes really have different ideas on that. I kinda had a personal thin’ about it for a bit, too...”, she sighed and regarded Claudia for a long moment, then threw her hand over her shoulder. “Eh, screw it, this is Katolis and Callum won’t mind. Plus, I owe you for helpin’ my mum, no matter how atrocious she’s bein’. Dad, do you want this?”

She handed her unwanted drink to Tinker who quickly emptied his own. The two women found a free spot and Claudia asked, “What would you like to do?”
Rayla pensively listened to the music for a beat. “Sounds to me like...”

The mage found herself dragged into a dance she had never performed before, but Rayla was a competent leader, so it was easy enough to just follow her movements.

*Let me sing, make me dance, twirl me round, all around*

*A wild step to the left then a dive into your arms!*

The song was rhythmic, stompy even.

“You’re so damn good at this!”, laughed Claudia, feeling a little breathless already.

“Yer pretty graceful for someone who’s never seen this one, too!”, smiled Rayla, “This band’s fantastic, too!”

*Through the sky, over clouds, fall below them in play.*

*Spread your wings, do not wait, I’m soaring by your side!*

The song went on for a good while and when it ended, the elf led her partner back to where Tinker was still waiting. He had, in the meantime, had most of the spring wine which suited Rayla just fine.

Claudia fanned her face and took a good swig of her own drink. “That was awesome, thank you! What was it?”

“My pleasure for sure!”, laughed Rayla and grabbed a glass of water from one of the buffet tables, “It’s called {Passtime of Laryss (where the folk have wings of leaves)}. It’s a forest elf dance I learnt from Zala.”

“Okay, that was Rune, right? I’m not even going to try to pronounce that! What’s a forest elf? Never heard of them.”

“Oh, they’re a sub-tribe of earth. You know, sorta how... Rhodians are Katolins, but a bit
“different?”

“A bit different is right”, laughed Claudia, “Has Bertram been leaving you alone?”

“Aye, since I won’t be Queen he’s been way less annoyin’. Hasn’t really had an opportunity, either, though. Barely seen him lately. Callum and I aren’t doin’ much with the council these days.”

“‘Independent advisers’, was it? Ah, where is the Crown Prince, anyway?”

“Good question, he said he had to get somethin’ ready”, shrugged Rayla, “I’m glad he wasn’t around. That way we had a chance to dance!”

“Oh”, went Claudia, suddenly looking a little uncomfortable, “Would he have a problem with this?”

The elf smirked and shook her head. “I doubt it, I’m the moonshadow elf in the relationship. But, either way, I’ll tell him what a great dancer you are, then we’ll know for sure.”

The band finished another song, then assumed a more relaxed stance as though they were waiting for something.

Just on cue, the doors were flung open and the crowd first parted, then gasped quietly and bowed respectfully.

Suddenly, Callum was by Rayla’s side, pulling her to the front of the room with a mischievous grin.

Through the corridor the revelers had opened, two diminutive but commanding figures approached the Princess and the taller one extended a hand.

“Queen Aanya of Duren, Lady of the Bloom”, offered the blonde fifteen-year-old, “It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lady Rayla.”
“Yea, welcome and thanks fer comin’!”, said Rayla with as much enthusiasm as she could muster. Her brain was critically eyeing her every word and as soon as the greeting had left her lips, she thought it sounded idiotic, “A wisnae expectin’ a Queen to come all this way for... this!”

Aanya laughed, “I didn’t come here just for your birthday, Milady, but I’m glad to be here for it, regardless.”

Next to the Queen of Duren was Ezran, beaming at the crowd and Rayla, “Are you having a good time?”

“Yes! Thank you for settin’ all this up!”

“Oh, bah”, went the little man bashfully, “Callum did a lot of the footwork to get everyone together. The band’s his favourite, too.”

Aanya smirked at Callum, then turned to Rayla, “I hear you were fond of a gift I once bestowed on your fiancee, so I’ve taken the liberty to provide you with something similar. Now, I understand that it might be a little... well, infantile, but I hope you like it nonetheless.”

Through the open doors came a towering structure of whipped cream and chocolate with a beautiful design executed in the heavy sweetness of dulce de leche.

The four attendants wheeling the cart wore masks of strain under the sheer weight of the cake.

Rayla instantly erupted in laughter. “Ah! That’s brilliant! Thank you so much!”

“As you can see it's not quite as large as his”, smiled Aanya, “So, please accept this gift as well.”

A Durian attendant stepped forward and presented the elf with a bouquet of flowers.

Rayla accepted it with thanks.
Time seemed to stand still for an instant.

One of the attendants had climbed a ladder to the top of the cake and had started slicing it.

From her right, Lydia was already offering to take the flowers to put them in water.

To her left stood Callum, smiling at her excitedly and with bright eyes.

Ahead, Ezran had a similar, if more boyish reaction, his balled fists half raised in a gesture of perfect excitement.

No matter what Tyne or anyone else said - hers was a good life.

--

“You danced with her!” asked Callum incredulously.

They had retreated to their chambers after the party had ended and were in the process of dressing for bed. The fact that outside, the sky was bluing let on how well the party had gone.

Rayla had not expected the anger in his voice. “Uh... yea... I didn’t think it’d be a big deal?”

“Rayla - you’re a moonshadow elf! How is it not a big deal!? You said it yourself - It’s our thing!”

“Since when are you so...”, she started angrily, then bit her lower lip and sat on the bed. “Sorry. I just thought... you wouldn’t mind. This stuff never used to be an issue for you, always just me.”

Callum shrugged mechanically. “I think it’s out of character for you”, his mien filled with confused anger, “I mean, every single person you ever had a thing for were women! As far as I know, anyway! And this! First you tell me you think she’s pretty, and now...”
Rayla blinked. “You’re jealous?”

“I’m...”, he slumped into his desk chair, “Yeah. I guess?”

His hands came up to ruffle his own hair, “Honestly, it feels more like I’m... worried.”

“About?”

Callum regarded his fiancee with a sad, conflicted glance. “All this stuff... you know, the things that have been happening lately, with the poison and Honsa, your mum... and you missing your period - they wouldn’t have happened if you weren’t with me. I’m scared for what your dad is going to say...”

With a shuddering sigh that sounded like he was going to cry, he scanned the wooden floor, "Rayla, I’m so scared about being a dad.”

She walked over to sit in his lap and wrapped her arms around him, “You really are a dummy. A stressed, worried dummy. We’re gettin’ to be friends, Caludia and I, that’s all. And sure, You can point to all the stuff that happened cause we’re a pair, but you shouldnae filter for just the bad thin's.”

She tightened her embrace, “I love you.”

He sniffled and nuzzled her, “I love you, too. Sorry to ruin your good mood.”

“You didn’t”, smirked Rayla, "Plus, I think you'd be a much better dad than mine. I see how you are with Ez."

She got up and cut off his doubtful reply, “Was the cake I got as snobby as yours?”

“Pretty similar, yes”, nodded Callum, giving her a wry look, “I didn’t get flowers though. Having the Queen of Duren give you some is a huge honor. Lady of the Bloom and all that. It means a lot to me that she’s pretty well given her blessing in the Pentarchy’s meetings and now, in front of so many minor nobles.”
“Really?”, Rayla cringed, “Augh, I should’ve thanked her better!”

“No, you did fine”, snickered the Crown Prince, “Aanya’s not a snobby Queen. If that had been Marielle, I’d agree. Even just assuming that she was here for you would’ve made her angry.”

“It’s like navigatin’ a spike trap!”, huffed the future Princess, “This noble wants that, that noble wants this! How do you do it?”

“You’ll learn those things, as I keep saying.”

He got up from his chair and bent down to continue undressing.

Sudden silence on Rayla’s part made him look up.

She was leaning against a bedpost, watching him with a look that Callum could only describe as lecherous.

“Um... hi?”, he went.

“Keep goin’”, she said huskily.

Confused, he stood straighter. “Um... do you... do you want to?”

Her eyebrow rose. “It’s my birthday. I had a good time. Interstice’s over, so I feel limber and happy and am not in any pain from stupid stuff I had tae swally. ‘course I want to. You don’t?”

He took a slowl breath, his eyes darted as if looking for the answer. “It’s not that I don’t want to, it’s just that... I mean... not to put too fine a point on it, but I just got done telling you how I feel about kids.”

Rayla snorted. “Dafty! If I am preggers, it disnae make a difference! If I’m not, the stuff works as
it should! So! If you want some of this, come get it!”

--

A great many people had taken to drinking, even the attendants and off-duty guards.

It showed.

Lunch was breakfast and the castle was oddly quiet.

Afterward, Rayla and Callum met Claudia and her concerned entourage at the dungeons.

“Are we all ready for this?”, asked the High Mage, her demeanor happy and relaxed. It was obvious that this was a huge load off her shoulders.

“Not really”, groused Rayla with a smirk, “Thank you so much for doin’ this, Clauds.”

Claudia merely nodded, then said, “Maybe this time, though, go alone first? Having Callum with you didn’t turn out so well.”

“Good point”, agreed the Crown Prince, “If you want, I can wait out here.”

“Yea. I’ll get you when he’s gotten his bearin’s.”

Together with Claudia and Cardwell, the future Princess descended into the damp prison, walking past empty cells and a few that held actual criminals.

She placed the coin in an empty prison and stepped outside to close the door.

“You ready to tell the whole story again?”, asked Claudia nervously.
“It’s gettin’ boring, isn’t it”, snickered Rayla, “Go for it, if you’re ready.”

A moment later, the dungeon was once more filled with a deafening bang and acrid, purple smoke. To Rayla’s surprise, Claudia stumbled, but managed to walk away from the cell and into Cardwell’s waiting arms.

Shifting her focus, the elf approached the bars.

“Farouk?”

From inside the cell came a cough, then a rasping breath.

“Ty-ne... help...”

Rayla unlocked the cell door in a hurry and dove inside, slamming the bars closed behind herself. Searching the ground, she found her father.

He was mortally wounded, it didn’t take a doctor to see it. His hand was clasped over a wound in his side from which blood was already pooling beneath him.

“Get my mother!”, yelled Rayla, “Doctor! In here, now!”

“Tyne... what’s going... on?”, asked Farouk.

His voice send cold shivers over Rayla’s back. He sounded hollow, confused, powerless, so unlike the boisterous rock of a man that had sang her stories of grand battles and heroic deeds.

“It’s me, Rayla. Sorry, this is all crazy and confusin’, but please just let it all happen for the moment! There’s a human here who’s gonna try’n help!”

“A hu--”, he said, but then snapped his gaze to hers, “Ry!”
Tears started collecting in his eyes, “You’ve... grown so much...”

“Long story, like A said”, she replied, her throat constricting.

Cardwell appeared from the smoke and knelt down to get to work immediately, not sparing a word.

“How I wish...”, Farouk gasped with a glance at her right near his face, “… how I wish I could have seen you bonded... I’m sure she’s wonderful...”

He groaned as the doctor removed his armor, “I... have to ask you... for vengeance! There was a... human King... he fought with... the power and viciousness of a... wounded animal... kept... shouting about retribution for his... his... wild-fae or something... this wound... is his doing...”

His left came up to pull at her jacket, he suddenly seemed agitated, “The King! The King! Is Avizandium alright?”

“N-no, he’s dead”, cried Rayla.

Against her better judgement, she launched into a short explanation of what happened, leaving out her relationship with Callum.

A smile spread on Farouk’s blanching mien. “You... make me... so proud... peace... a worthy goal... but... the minks... won't ever let ye have it”

Behind them, hurried steps could be heard. A moment later, Callum and Tyne stepped into the cell, leaving four guards outside.

Rayla’s mother fell to her knees next to her summand. “What the feck happened tae ye!?"

“Got ran through”, chortled Farouk, “Ah... I thought this day would... come sooner. Glad A get tae go with both of you around.”
“Ye deh get tae go anywhere, ye minger!”, shouted Tyne, tears in her eyes, “Ye fight, A tell ye!”

“The lass tells me... we were out four years... A figure that’s longer than anyone else’s ever lasted in this state”, smirked Farouk and closed his eyes, “A ken ye’re alive, Ty, and Ry is taken care of... the name’s clear... A can go happy.”

“Go happy’? My arse! She’s bonded to this feckin’ mink! Same kind that did this tae ye!”, hissed Tyne with a gesture at Callum, “Same kind that murdered the King! How’d ye expect to be avenged when she’s baggin’ the wanker she ought tae be murderin’?!”

Farouk’s eyes opened and fixed the human. “Are ye Prince Callum?”

“Yes, sir”, said the Crown Prince hoarsely, “I’m sorry for all of this.”

“Oh, don’t be”, hissed Rayla’s father, “War’s war. A forgive ye. A hate ye, but A guess ye canny be all bad... after all ye’ve... done...”

“How tea feck can ye say that?!”, yelled Tyne, “Absolve him!!”

“A’m feckin’ DYIN’!”, spat Farouk and dead silence fell on the cell.

“Ty... this is on us... We dinnae teach her right...”, he whispered and closed his eyes again, “If she wants to be with him... that’s on us... weren’t there... A’m sorry, Ry. We’re shit parents...”

Rayla didn’t know what to say. “It’s okay... really. This is how it should be. Ye have nothin’ tae be sorry fer. Like ye said... A’m taken care of...”

Farouk cried, but smiled serenely. “Good. A love ye both.”

Then, he slackened.
Cannon to the Left of Them

Tyne stared ahead blankly, her eyes glistening in the dim flicker of torches.

Ahead of her, next to Farouk’s unmoving form sat Rayla, who silently wept in Callum’s arms without looking away from her father’s pallid features.

Suddenly, the Crown Prince’s chest pulled painfully.

*Turn upward at the stars,*

*Look around to find the moon,*

*Look to where our life was ended,*

*You take your leave of me.*

Tyne’s quiet voice recited the verse more than she sang.

Hot tears welled in Callum’s eyes and he fell in with the mournful song that was seared in his memory.

*Bright light gift to me a token,*

*Remind me of laughs we shared,*

*But now, with my embrace around you,*

*You take your leave of --*

Rayla’s voice had joined his, but Tyne screamed, “How dare ye!? Spit on him, will ye!? How *dare* ye break into this moment!?"

Dirt and pebbles pelted Callum and Rayla. As the Dragon Guard’s blind rage boiled over, she threw whatever she could find on the floor.

“Mum, stop!”, yelled Rayla, “Ye’re not the only one who’s grivin’ here!”
A guttural scream escaped Tyne, “Ye’ve no right to grieve! Ye won’t take even revenge on them who took him!”

Suddenly, she was on top of Rayla in a surprise attack that the Katolin nobles hadn’t expected.

“Stop!”, yelled Callum who scrambled to his feet.

Tyne’s fist rammed into Rayla’s cheek. The younger elf cracked her own knuckles against her mother’s temple and rolled out from under her to take advantage of her assailant's stumbling recuperation.

The dragon guard lunged for her daughter and evaded a jab aimed for her throat, then slammed her knee into Rayla’s stomach with enough force to crash her against the bars of the cell and leaving her gasping for air. The future Princess immediately sprung forward again, poised to pummel her mother in white-hot fury.

“I said STOP!”, yelled the Crown Prince, clapping his spell-charged hands together between the brawlers. A shock of air blasted outward, knocking over Rayla and smashing the older woman into a nearby wall. Her horned head hit the unforgiving rock and Tyne fell into the dust where she splayed out, unconscious.

The following moments were consumed with shallow, ragged breaths from Rayla.

“Are you okay?”, asked her summand, offering his hand to help her up.

“She went-- for my stomach”, gasped Rayla, her voice unsteady. Fury and fear battled for dominance in her features.

Crackling frost filled Callum’s veins as he realized why this fact in particular upset her. “Let’s get out of here. Cardwell is probably already at the infirmary, looking after Claudia.”

“What about my dad?”, cried his summand. Then her expression shattered and her breathing sped, in a way that Callum knew all too well from himself, “A’m goin’ mad, Callum! A c--anny do this anymore! A don’t w--ant tae do th--is anymore! A want thin’s to be f--air and good and ri--ght!”
He took her by her hand and led her out of the cell where he embraced her. “I’m right here, we’ll get through this. You’re gonna be okay.”

“No A won’t!”, she shouted, struggling out of his grasp to accost her unconscious mother, “A want my family back! Like ye used tae be! A’m yer daughter, fer feck’s sake!”

The her voice became strangled as she found her father’s lifeless features. “... yer daughter!”

--

Cardwell sat in his dark office, the smell of mint and rubbing alcohol saturating the air. A cup, the source of the minty scent, steamed enticingly in the light of a flickering candle.

With a sigh, he closed the medical file that was growing with concerning speed and placed it into its proper place next to the others he kept on the royal family.

“So - that’s it?”, asked the Prince quietly from across the desk.

“Sire, neither I nor my stäff cän tell you if your fiancee is with child. I also cän’t tell you whether her mother’s ättäck was vicious enough to harm it at this stage. It’s simply too eärly to know äny of it. What I cän say is that her mental state is more wörrying to me right now”, Dr. Cardwell whispered.

He got up and rounded his desk to place a hand on Callum’s shoulder. “She needs to rest. Recuperate. Find her center agäin. This litany of stressors...”

“I’d like her to make that choice”, said Callum, his voice cold, "She's strong. Stronger than I am, so don't paint her with the same brush!"

Cardwell frowned. “I see. Well. Safe for the bruising, she’s physically fine, of course. Ås such, I think it’s safe for her to sleep in her own bed, I don’t see how keeping her here would help.”
The Crown Prince rose. “Either way, thank you. You’ve been great, as per usual.”

“Oh”, said the round-faced man without joy, “I’m not sure the Lädy's father would agree.”

"You can't hold yourself accountable for that."

"I cân. I do. But thät cân’t be your problem", the doctor smiled sadly, “I alreädy see righteous änger... äh, *bubbling* in your eyes. I häve wäys to self-cäre. Don’t wörry."

He motioned his superior toward one of the beds on the lower level of his office where twilight ruled.

Under the thin sheets, he found Rayla, curled up but obviously awake.

“Hey”, Callum said and sat on the bed, in the bend of her knees.

She sniffled as answer.

“How are you feeling?”

A long pause followed.

“A'm a failure”, whispered his summand, her voice heavy with tears.

“How so?”

“She got me. In the stomach. A didnae protect it at all. Was more concerned about my head”, her teeth gritted, “Great mother, A am. Puttin’ myself first.”

Callum gently started, “There's nothing wrong with that. We don’t even know i--”
“Nothin’ wrong?!”, spat his summand, "A don’t wanna be like her! A need tae give a damn! There’s a possibility! A need tae give a damn! ”

"What would m-my da--”, she curled up tighter, wracked by silent sobs. “Callum, my d-dad…”

Bitterness spread over the Crown Prince. “It was... It was Harrow who killed him, wasn’t it?”

It was just like fate to serve them this disgusting dish. Farouk and Harrow had faced off. One to defend his King, the other to avenge his wife and believing that he would end the war by striking the head off the Xadian state.

Neither man was here now to see or suffer the consequences of their actions.

The two of them, however, were.

“I’m sorry”, Callum whispered hoarsely.

“A know”, she choked.

He extended a hand to caress her shoulder, but she shrank from his touch. “Please don’t.”

A feeling, heavy as lead, sank into Callum’s stomach. “Sorry. Do you want to come sleep in our room?”

“No”, came the answer, delivered without a second’s hesitation, “A’m good here. Ye go.”

The Prince swallowed a few times to maintain his composure. “Is there anything I can do for you right now?”

“Please... just leave?”
Callum sat. He didn't know how long he had spent staring down Tyne who was facing away from him.

The guards had removed Farouk’s body while she had laid there, unconscious. A fact that added to her ever mounting fury. She should be allowed to adorn his pyre. Light it. Say her goodbyes.

In private .

Eventually, the elf groaned. "What is yer issue, Mink, ye've been sittin' there, mum and mute for who knows how long! Get it out already or bol--"

"Is it normal for you to beat your daughter if she does something you don't like or was that more of an improvised parenting strategy?"

Tyne turned halfway to lean against the cell wall. It was obvious that she had been crying. "Neither. A feckin hate meself, ye have no idea."

"Huh? Why? Didn't you do everything right?"

Tyne scoffed, "Sarcasm sounds odd comin' from a baby face like yers. Oh, A failed her. Completely. If A had a better mother, we wouldnae be sittin' here, havin' this discussion. She'd be happy, summed to someone normal."

Callum barely held on to civility. "Maybe she would. But every single human would be dead, along with an insane number of elves and dragons and other creatures. Maybe she'd be dead. Let's not speculate, you can't know what would have been, so focus on what is! "

Silence followed.
"I can't imagine why you would want her hurt", said Callum.

"A don't. She's my daughter, A love her tae bits", rasped Tyne.

"Sucker-punching her over her father's dead body was just so motherly, a perfect way to show her how much you care. She told you about what's going on with us yesterday. You knew. You knew, and still you kneed her in the stomach. She’s devastated."

Tyne drew a sharp breath through her teeth and pulled her knees tighter to her chest. “Believe me, I didnae do it on purpose. Just happened. In the moment. A wisnae right in the heid. Lost it proper.”

“Right, right, that makes it better”, he got up and approached the bars, crouching to face his would-be mother in law, “I’ve never seen her so upset, and I carried her as she was dying as a sixteen year old kid. She was so collected then, so strong and resigned. Told me to finish the mission. Now she can't even look me in the eye.”

His voice turned hard with controlled fury, "If she is pregnant and she loses our child, is that what you’re going to tell her? ‘Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to?’"

Tyne’s hands slammed into the bars, her rage-filled face as close to his as was possible. “Lecture me more, will ye?! A know! Gads, do A ever know! A screwed it up! Even if hers looked like ye, A wouldnae ever try to hurt it!”

“Even if it looked like me?!”, spat Callum, “Tyne, she's your daughter! Baby or not, she deserves better! And let me be clear about this; your grandchild will absolutely look like me!”

"Deh be so cock-sure aboot that! Dead Minks canny be fathers”, hissed Tyne. Her tone of voice left no room for any kind of charitable interpretation.

“The world changes”, Callum continued as though she hadn't said anything, “and either you change with it or you fight everyone and everything in a no-holds-barred struggle to keep things as they are, miserable for everyone, because you have gotten so used to and comfortable with the status quo, shit as it may be! Who cares how many people die at the Breach as long as Praestes Tyne can live her racist, ugly ‘defender of the olden-days’ fantasy?!”

His fists hammered against the bars, “What, you think you’re going to keep her and I from forging
a lasting peace?! From trying to make the relationship we share a normal, everyday thing?! We’re a Prince and Princess! My brother’s a King! One of my best friends is the Dragon Prince, Tyne!"

Once more, the iron rang under his punch, “Give it up already, you stubborn asshole! You’re stuck in the past! Wake up and accept this! You don’t stand a chance! You’re going to lose the last bit of family you have to dead ideals, if you haven’t already!”

Tyne merely gritted her teeth.

The Prince rose and kicked the cell, making the entire structure clatter. “Fucking fix yourself!”

He made to leave but stopped dead in his tracks when Tyne snorted incredulously.

“There’s a true Mink in ye, after all! Anger, anger, always just anger! The fury of an empty husk, lookin’ to fill his existence with somethin’!”, she got up and moved as close to him as the cell’s circumstance allowed, “My summand would’ve slaughtered the wretch tae put a hand on me! What sort’r weak piece of slimy shite are ye? Get at me, if my daughter means anythin’ tae ye!”

Callum whipped around. “You have some gall, accusing me of being controlled by anger after punching your own child! She doesn’t need me to fight her battles! If she decides to, I’m sure she’ll come to give you the beatdown you seem to want so badly! Maybe you’ll even give her the courtesy of a fair fight!”

He turned to leave again. When he was almost outside, Tyne’s breaking voice asked from down the hallway, “Is she alright?”

The door closed behind him.

--

As Callum was crossing the lower courtyard, a figure approached him in the dark, grabbing him by his mother's scarf. A struggle ensued.

"You liar! You promised me!"
The crown prince stopped his instinctive defense. "Akande? What's going on?"

"You promised me that if I came here, none of what I worked on would ever harm a Xadian! I helped Horace understand the wonders of blackpowder as propulsion, and the next thing you have him do is build weapons?!"

"What? I don't know what you're talking about. Horace messes with a lot of stuff, without me saying so."

Tinker's red-hot features cooled slightly. "You will stop him from doing further research."

This obviously wasn't phrased as a request. The Crown Prince had a hard time controlling his already tumultuous emotions.

"I will talk to him about it, yes, but ultimately, I'm not King anymore. Ezran is."

"Your word wasn't worth the air you wasted to give it, then", Rayla's foster father spat and let him go. "Where's my daughter? I looked for you at your quarters! She'll want to hear about this, I'm sure!"

"She has worse problems right now!", hissed Callum. He explained Farouk's passing and Tyne's reaction, leaving the sun elf stunned.

"Is she okay?", he rasped.

"No, I really don't think so."

Silence fell as Callum stared defiantly at Tinker, waiting for whatever came next.

The elf eventually avoided this gaze, looking shell-shocked. "Hard to believe he's dead. Even harder to believe Tyne attacked her own daughter. Say what you will about their presence in her life, they loved her unconditionally."
Callum scoffed. "Looks like that ended when you put those wreaths on us."

Tinker regarded him for a moment, his brows furrowing. "Why do I get the feeling you're regretting your choices?"

A sardonic snort escaped the Crown Prince and he looked ahead as though he could see the words he was about to speak in the distance. "How couldn't I? I miss my parents, I know what it's like, that loss. It's worse for her cause her mother’s alive and..."

Silent tears trailed over his cheeks. "Our relationship means so much pain for her, because of who and what I am. Is it worth it? Can I keep putting her through this? When we were kids, the world was full of danger, but it was simple danger. We held on to each other and it was fine. Now that... that love... is hurting us both."

He sunk to the ground and pulled at his hair, "It's hurting her, to be here. Hurting her family. It damages my political power, my standing and security. I know that sounds heartless and awful, but it has real consequences for everyone here... I'm shocked that nothing happened during her birthday party! Did you know that we wore armor that entire evening? This life, in the public eye, is so, so dangerous. I brought her here. This is all on me."

"Now, now", said Tinker gently. He crouched and embraced his bond-son, "Callum, you have a good heart. You worry about her, I'm happy to see it. But please don't ever pretend that she has no agency. She's not here because you told her to come, she made that choice herself, no? What about you? I want you to tell me, right now... can she count on you to help her bear these burdens or are you going to fall to depression and what-ifs whenever hard times befall you?"

"That's what I promised when we summed, didn't I? To be there for her? The problem is, she doesn't want me to! She was always there when I needed her, but now... she doesn’t want me..."

"Maybe not right now. After something like this, I'd wager she's going to need a moment to think, to make sense of her own world."

The young man’s breath was ragged with suppressed tears and Tinker patiently waited for a reply.

"Y-you’re right. She told me some of this herself, not too long ago. How this was also her choice... but...", Callum choked and finally started crying in earnest, "Akande... What do I do if Tyne
killed... our child? I-if my father's actions come to haunt us through time like this? How do I hold on to her then? How do I hold on to myself?"

The elf blinked. "Your child? Do you mean to tell me..."

"We don't know. I t-thought Rayla had told you."

Tinker's voice was gentle and caring, it filled Callum with light. The Prince felt as though this wasn't an entirely natural effect. Without doubt, a certain amount of sun magic was at play.

"She has not and I don't blame her. It's such a private thing. Frankly, if you don't know, it's far too early to concern yourself with an outcome so horrifying. The thought alone makes me sick. There isn't anything to be done, so you would merely drive yourself insane."

Callum palmed his eyes and returned Tinker's embrace.

"I guess, but how can I just...", his breath hitched.

"You won't escape the worry for now, I'm sorry. But, I'm sure my daughter will come to see you when she's ready."

"A-again, I think you're right and I...", said Callum, breathily, "Oh man... I should really try to get some sleep..."

A frown reasserted itself on Tinker's face. "I agree. However, um... About the weapons..."

"I'll get a handle on it, right now. That's.. That's at least something I can do", said Callum and dusted himself off. He scanned the elf's expression, unsure about what he saw there but finally turned away.

"Thanks, Tinker."
The Crown Prince failed to find Horace in his beloved workshop. One of the other night attendants pointed him towards the rear of the castle.

The siegeworks.

Horace and Piper were directing work in the heavy weapons factory.

Following their orders were a number of people, arguing over chunks of a reddish metal and building moulds.

His tired eyes full of worry and wonder, Callum stepped across the threshold and looked for the elderly night attendant.

When he found him, he had to shout to be heard over the hiss of molten metal. "What is that I'm hearing about weapons?"

"Sire!", Horace went with unbridled enthusiasm, "It's something that'll make Xadia think thrice next time they come for us! Look here."

He guided his superior to a blueprint on the wall that showed the specifications of some kind of mould. In a corner of it was a drawing of the finished product. It looked vaguely like an insanely thick-rimmed, extremely elongated cauldron with wheels.

Seeing his Prince’s face in the light of the nearby lamps, Horace’s enthusiasm gave way for paternal worry. “Are you alright? You look terrible, frankly.”

“Fine”, replied the young man with a strained smile, then motioned at the blueprint, “What am I looking at?”

For a moment, Horace very obviously considered asking more questions. With a sigh, he turned to the technical drawing.
We call this a 'cannon'. A weapon that we predict will have much greater range and potential to damage than a mounted ballista, however as you can hopefully tell, it'll be much more mobile. We're building a few small ones right now to figure out the right bronze."

"That's a lot of material and personnel”, groused Callum, "Who's paying for this?"

"Uh, it’s mainly just copper and tin to make bronze. The people are bellmakers from the capital", said Horace, "The King has allocated a budget"

"What!? Ezran knows about this?"

"He asked me to hurry the prototypes’ construction, yes?"

---

Callum couldn't sleep. His mind was blank with worry and he couldn't fathom why his brother of all people would encourage the development of devastating new siege weapons.

He rolled fruitlessly in the sheets for hours until suddenly but silently, the door opened and a shape entered the room on feet light as breath.

Rayla crawled into the covers and carefully nestled against her summand. Over the course of ten minutes, she became more and more urgent about the contact, pressing herself into his side.

Wordless, Callum embraced her.

He wanted to talk it through, but Akande’s words stuck.

He would wait until she was ready.
Ezran whistled a song he had recently learned from a certain songbird as he walked down the hall to meet the council.

His brother came into view around a corner, leaning against a wall.

"Hey Callum, good morning!", called the King. He ran into the Prince's much larger frame and wrapped his arms around him.

"Ez, what's going on with those cannon things?"

His brother sounded tense and unhappy, a tone of voice that Ezran had always hated in him.

"Um, I said 'good morning', you big jerkface! I, uh, told Horace to make some."

"Why?", asked Callum and crouched, taking Ezran by the shoulders and shaking him lightly, "Did dad's letter mean nothing to you? `Narrative of love` and all that?"

“Don’t be dumb”, frowned Ezran, “You know that’s dad talk for ‘be nice’. It’s not like I’m planning on taking those cannons to go hunt dragons. I talked to Arntraud and Aunt Amaya. They think it’s a good idea.”

An excited gleam appeared in the King’s eyes, “Plus, I think I can get crotchety old Arnie to agree to putting together a parliament.”

“What?”, went Callum, “How?"

“Scheming, bargaining!”, exclaimed the little man, proudly puffing out his chest, “Yesterday, during the war meeti--”

“What war meeting?! When?! Why didn’t anyone tell me?!"
“We tried, but the attendants... um... They didn’t wanna interrupt you. Rayla's second dad told them you were down in the dungeons, having a pretty terrible shouting match with Tyne”, said Ezran guiltily.

Callum scoffed. “Great, so that's how Tinker knew. He has a really bad habit of listening in. Anyway. War meeting?”

“So, um... yeah, uh, the cannons came up, Arntraud was just drooling over them, even just hearing how they work. So, I was like 'We’re not getting those because my brother and I wanna keep the armistice going and the Xadians won’t trust us with weapons like that. Buuuut if we made it a little harder for us to use them...’”

“You basically told her that she could have the cannons if she put them under parliamentary control?”

“Yeah! She didn’t like that!”, Ezran laughed, mocking Arntraud’s voice, “She was like 'But now that those things exist, someone is going to build them and use them!' And I was like 'Yup, so you better sign this into action so we can build them before those other people do!'”

Callum was thunderstruck. “Wow. Um. So, what are you planning to do with the cannons once they figure out the details?”

“Park them by the Breach and hope that Zym can keep the legions on the other side”, groused Ezran, “He knows. About the cannons, I mean. Says he gets it. He told me that he doesn't trust his mom either. Said he wouldn’t put it past her that she’d order a random attack.”

"He thinks she's that far gone?"

"You have no idea how sad he is, Callum. He loves his mom, but she's getting more and more... I dunno, evil?"

They were interrupted by Rayla who soundlessly stepped up to Callum to kiss his cheek. As the King watched on, he felt as though this person wasn’t like the Rayla he knew. She seemed gray somehow, as though there was no presence to her.
“Hiya little man”, she said quietly to Ezran, then turned to her summand and added, “I’m all packed, dafty.”

“Woah, hold up”, went Ezran, “You’re going?! Today?!”

Rayla nodded. "Gonna send off Farouk, then get goin'."

“Um, we need something to do, to get our minds off... stuff”, said Callum.

“You mean the rumours?”, asked Ezran confusedly.

"Rumours?", asked Rayla.

"That you're gonna be a mom and that your mom is trying to kill Callum?"

"Rumours ", whispered Rayla. She turned and walked away hurriedly.

Ezran watched her palm at her eyes, an expression of confused worry assembling in his mien. He moved to go after her, but Callum drew him into a hug, instead.

"Yeah", the Prince said quietly, "As I said. Trying to get away from stuff."

"What happened? Wait, is... is it true?", Ezran gurgled, "You're gonna be a dad ?!"

Callum's expression twisted his little brother's stomach. It was obvious that the Prince was searching for the right words, and it was a difficult experience.

So, Ezran cut him off. "Ugh! She's not happy, you're not happy, and I feel like I need to go do the jerkface dance for you both!"

"Save it for when we're back from Evenere", Callum smirked weakly, "Maybe I should have told
you more. We're okay for now, nothing's set in stone. Look, I promised Tinker that we won't use his tech to hurt Xadians. The cannons fall under that agreement."

"Um... sorry if this makes me an even bigger jerk, but that cat's out of the bag. Arnie is right, you know, it won't take long for the other Kingdoms or even the elves to get the plans. Katolis needs them first, they're really powerful. Well, if Horace is right. He usually is, though, so..."

Ezran raised his eyebrows in a way that seemed apologetic and inquisitive both. His elder brother gritted his teeth. "I hate this. We used to have all these ideals, Ez!"

"We still do!", said the small boy emphatically, "But just cause you and I try to be good doesn't mean we can trust others to be that way, too. Being too soft is dumb - I’m the best example. Maybe I should've let my guards fight at Taelin. I probably wouldn't have ended up in a stupid piece of gold that way. Callum, think about it! If I’m gone and you’re gone, who’s going to be left to be nice? Are Bertram or Arnie going to go easy on Xadia?"

Ezran rolled his eyes and scoffed. “Fat chance.”

He hugged his brother and continued, “I don’t like it either, but I’m the King. I have to defend my people. Corvus told me that the best way to lead soldiers is to make sure you don't waste them. If those new weapons can help me do that, I'll take them."

It annoyed Callum to know that his brother had a point. He himself had, after all, ordered troops to Evenere. Troops that had been fighting - dying - since.

It was a terrible feeling that was only compounded by the fact that he was having the emotion. What right did he have to regret sending these sons and daughters to their deaths while he lived in comfort? Was he wasting those lives for a dead cause? He would have to face the consequences of his choices on this envoyer.

For the moment, he had a more personal responsibility.

"I'll have to talk to Tinker, then", he sighed, "He's not gonna be happy."

Ezran nodded pensively, then fixed his elder brother with a confused, slightly distrustful glance.
“Um, Callum... how... can Rayla be a mom if you’re not married?”

“Huh?”

“Well”, started the little man, “Dad said, babies happen when two people love each other and then get married and then maybe they have a baby or adopt. You’re not married.”

“Heh. I remember him giving me that explanation when I was your age, too. There’s a bit more to it”, went Callum sheepishly. He motioned at the door to his quarters. “Um... Do you have a moment? I wanna read you an old letter from Amaya.”

Here was the dichotomy of Ezran: A great King. A young boy.

--

Rayla knocked on her father’s door and waited patiently for the sounds of all sorts of items being moved on the other side.

The door opened and Tinker blinked at her. “Little sheep. How are you doing?”

“Not here about that”, replied his daughter.

She brashly stepped past him and he closed the door to face her, question in his features.

“Cannons”, she said curtly, “They’re holdin’ on to them.”

Tinker scoffed. “Of course they would. What do you intend to do about it?”

“Nothin’. I agree with their decisi--”
“What?!”

Tinker’s skin seemed to erupt, white-hot lines streaked across his face. “How can you stab me in the back?! Of all people?!”

It was odd. He expected her to shout, flare like she usually did when challenged so personally. Instead, she rolled her eyes and droned, “Look across the Breach. Four Legions. Unprovoked. The humans have been showin’ their gullet this entire time and Xadia’s gettin’ ready to pounce, months ahead of the armistice runnin’ out.”

“Did Callum send you to give me these news becau--”

“I’m not his puppet. I’m here cause you and I can talk in a way that he can’t. Took a while to convince him. What, did you forget your own lecture? He told me everythin’ you told him yesterday, includin’ the whole thin’ about me makin’ my own choices.”

For a moment, she simply stared, then added, “Thank you for that, by the way. My big dumb human needs a good talkin’ to ever so often. He likes to blame himself a lot and yesterday wisnae a good day for either of us.”

Akande’s rage was not subsiding, but his expression softened. “He still broke his word.”

“Sure, and he would stop them building the weapons if he could. Callum was a big softy as Kings go. While he was rulin’, they had tae twist his arms to keep the army staffed at all. He thinks the world’s just gonna do what he says if he says it nicely enough”, Rayla tilted her head slightly, “Huh. Might be why he’s in love with magic, cause that’s exactly that, isn’t it? Point is just cause he promised then doesn’t mean he has a say in it now. That’s not how they’re set up. His brother’s the King now, Ez calls the shots.”

“Oh, and his child brother won’t listen to the Prince’s counsel?”

“Ez is more mature than a lot of adults I know. He also listens to more people than just Callum.”

“So you’re fine with this? Completely fine!?””, shouted Tinker as he started pacing.
“Don’t. Yell. At. Me”, enumerated Rayla, anger creeping into her soft, neutral tone, “I’m not fine with this. This is really far from fine. But it is what it is and I see why they’re doin’ what they’re doin’. I don’t like it. But I agree with it.”

For a long moment, her father stared at her, angrily. She held his gaze, unfazed.

Eventually, he sighed. “I should have learned my lesson with the Xadian military, should not have trusted a politician. I won’t work with Horace or anyone else here again.”

“Fine”, shrugged Rayla gruffly, “We’re leavin’ for Evenere after Farouk’s pyrin’. See you there.”

She turned to leave, but Tinker said, “Rayla, wait. You’re not yourself. What happened?”

“You already know, snoop”, Rayla said. Without turning back, she strode through the door and closed it behind herself.

--

Soren fumbled. Ever since their sparring session, he wanted to learn to speak to Amaya directly. He had realized how much he missed Gren’s ability to mediate a conversation between him and her and making it an altogether pleasant experience.

It was much harder than he had made it look.

The book with the signs sat on Soren's crossed legs as he attempted to form the figures with his hands. The whole thing was complicated by the fact that Amelie was toddling about the library on shaky legs, demanding part of his attention to keep her from hurting herself.

“How do you do, Sir Soren?”

The Crown Guard looked up to find Opeli standing at the end of a stack of books, holding a thick tome. ‘Encyclopedia of Bovine Health’. 
“Oh, just putting a knot in my fingers”, replied Soren laxly and extended a hand to stop his daughter from tipping over. She blew raspberries in response.

The counsellor came over to glance at his book and nodded sagely. “Learning to speak another language is a challenge.”

“Can you sign?”, asked Soren.

“Oh, not to save my life”, smirked Opeli. She looked around sheepishly, then cleared her throat, “Er, have you... have you had good luck finding people to care for little Amelie when you're indisposed?”

“Claudia takes her. They love each other”, said the Crown Guard, noticing an odd glint of disappointment in Opeli’s eyes.

“Oh, that’s fortunate! Well, I’m glad to hear it.”

Awkwardly, she turned to walk away, but Soren said, “Was that you asking if you could have her for a bit?”

Sheepishly, Opeli faced him again. “That sounds like you... um... she isn’t a thing to be loaned, of course. Just, if the Lady Claudia is ever unavailable, don’t hesitate to come to me.”

“Would’ve never guessed you liked kids”, smiled Soren.

“Well now! I’ve taught you, your sister and the Princes, too! Personally, I haven’t really had the time to... consider my own progeny much. It’s too late for me now, but let’s just say... recent events... um... have re-ignited my interest”, a certain bitterness entered the woman’s mien, “I wonder if soon, I won’t have more time on my hands than I know what to do with.”

“I think she could learn a few things from you that I can’t teach her”, snickered the Crown Guard, “Thanks, Councillor, that means a lot to me. I’ll let you know?”

Opeli nodded with a nervous smile, then strode off, her arms firmly wrapped around the
“Aren’t you my little super star?”, Soren asked Amelie.

“Dadah!”, she went, excitedly trying to pick a massive green book from the stacks.

--

Bertram of Rhodes was taking a stroll. It was a nice day to gallivant the gardens.

A bench came into view. On it sat the future elven Princess of Katolis, a basket of flowers and reeds in her lap. She was staring off into the distance to her left. Eastward.

"Miss home?", asked the Councillor with some mockery in his voice and no preamble.

Rayla faced him, exasperation adorning her features. "Bolt."

"I'm sorry?"

"I'd like you to move along", repeated the elf, "Not in any mood for talkin'."

"Oh but all I did was ask a friendly question?"

"I don't miss home. Go away."

Bertram scoffed bemusedly, took a right turn and was soon gone from view.

Rayla took a deep breath. Her prior thoughts erased thanks to the unwelcome distraction, the elf began wondering. *Did* she miss Xadia?
It was a beautiful, wondrous place. Colourful where the Pentarchy was more gray and plain. But that was the landscape. What of the people?

Recent experience didn't make Scotia a place worth missing. She did, of course, miss its history and familiarity. Still, the mindset...

As a child, when they had made her a soldier, she hadn't been equipped to seriously question the actions of her country. Her parents had looked like shining heroes to her, their values sacrosanct and serving everyone's protection.

In was easy to see then: Humans were evil, Elves were good. Simple.

Maybe this was exactly why the Tribes were so happy to guide children as young as twelve into military service. A young mind could be pressed into a mould for life. Her mother and father certainly had never escaped theirs.

Horrified, Rayla realized that if Xadia and the Pentarchy came to blows, there would be kids among the front of the Auxilia. Kids who, like her, hadn't had a chance to see the other side of this conflict and didn't have the perspective to question the orders they had been given.

Hell, the only reason she had gotten a choice was because of her parents' supposed cowardice. If she hadn't joined Runaan's band as a trainee, if they hadn't granted her special leave to go on an actual mission - perhaps she would've ended up a willing, convinced servant to the Xadian warmachine.

On this side of the Breach, the muster of children was outlawed. Well, safe for Del Bar.

Her hand came to rest on her stomach. If here grew a child, and she was its mother, she was glad to be in a place that held childhood as something more worthy of protection.

--

Tyne ascended the ramp to the upper courtyard, closely followed by the human general and her favourite lacky. She was once more shackled and couldn't blame the Minks for doing it, given what had transpired between her and her daughter.
In the middle of the upper courtyard that was, for all intents and purposes, reserved for royal functions, someone had already piled up an orderly pyre. It was unadorned and bare, waiting for Farouk’s remains.

Bitter tears welled in Tyne at the sight of it. It made his death real.

She had cried a lot these past few days, probably more than she ever had in her entire life. Still, she had more tears to spare for her summand who did not deserve this end, to leave this plane of existence in a foreign place among the people who had killed him.

Prince Azymondias was waiting for her, his gaze full of steel. “Praestes. You’re a disappointment. I take a dim view on what you’ve done.”

“So do A, Excellence”, cried the elf.

“Rayla wants you to know that she is willing to stand by you to bid her father farewell”, said the Dragon angrily, “She asks that her summand be allowed to attend.”

Tyne scoffed tearfully. “This disnae concern him. He’s not family to my summand. Why should he be here?”

“He’s bonded to Rayla”, said a hollow, quiet voice to Tyne’s left. Helmond stepped onto the courtyard and lifted his hand in greeting. “I do believe that makes him part of your family. It’s his duty to bid farewell to his bondfather.”

“And who the feck are ye?”, spat the Dragon Guard.

“Helmond. Formerly Legate of the Lucid.”

Tyne’s eyes narrowed. “Legate Helmond. As in, the agent who single-handedly broke the siege of Tarsonis?”
“Crediting me alone doesn't reflect the truth, but yes.”

“Okay”, said Tyne tonelessly, “World’s really upside doon, isn’it? What are ye doin’ here?”

“Attempting to ease some very old wounds”, Helmond replied. The old man was now standing right in front of Tyne who looked at him with something like defiance.

“Ye’re workin’ with the Minks. A somehow canny believe A don’t feel more surprised.”

“It was a long journey for me to get here. However, my professional affiliations aren’t the cause for my being here. Have a look at this. I’ll share a few of my secrets with you now.”

He lifted his left which held a framed picture. From it, the faces of Helmond’s family, rendered in charcoal, stared at Tyne.

The dragon guard scanned the image, confusion writ large in her mien. “Yer family?”

“All dead”, said the agent pointedly, “Gone before I had the chance to truly repair my relationship with them. Torlan, dead at the hands of a human bounty hunter, his murder abused as war propaganda by Zeratul and Selendis. My summand Anzha, Interpreter to Triton, ravaged by Kindulathin’s Affliction over years and years while she toiled, in many ways for me, yet far from me. My daughter Noli, taken by the same disease, mere months before her mother. A difficult child who never gained the ability of speech. I abandoned each one of them in one way or another. Regrets that I will carry to my own pyre.”

Tyne’s expression was blank, but her voice rough with empathy. “Why are ye tellin’ me this? This is... this is yer innermost, isn’t it?”

“Don’t let it get to your head. You have your daughter. You may disagree with her choices, but she is still your child. Make peace with her. You, unlike me, have the chance. Don’t squander it.”

Helmond withdrew the picture and strode off, not waiting for an answer.

Tyne watched him leave. She felt this pressure, of wanting to reconcile with Rayla. She loved her
daughter, despite everything. Shame gripped her once more as she replayed the previous evening. Never before had she suffered such a break in her self-control. It was a small miracle that Rayla would give her a choice now, extend an olive branch. Was she really ready to squander it over the Mink prince? Risk her daughter hating her until one of them burned?

She had stared at the door Helmond had left through for a long while before addressing the Dragon again.

--

From the gardens, Rayla had brought her haul of flowers and reeds. She was now standing in front of the door to Tyne's room on the top floor of the rear tower.

She knocked. After a moment, her mother opened the door. The two women looked at each other for a moment, then Tyne welled up.

"A'm sorry. A'm so, so sorry..."

"Let's just get this done", droned her daughter, "Did ye talk to Zym?"

She walked into the room and set down the basket, picked up a reed and a few flowers and started weaving them together to make a wreath.

"Bring him", said her mother helplessly.

"Are you going to try and punch him out if A do?"

"No... Ry, A didnae... A just..."

"Don't make excuses. Help me put these together. And don't call me that, I'm not twelve anymore."

Tyse sat and grabbed a few reeds and flowers to start work herself. The two elves worked for a while in silence.
"Are ye... alright?", asked Tyne eventually, trying to find some way to connect to her daughter.

Rayla's hands holding a half-finished wreath fell to her lap. "I don't even know how to tell you how mad I am. I could show you, but I think we've brawled enough. You've never hit me before! Never! You chose literally the worst time possible to start a fight!"

Tyne nodded quietly. “A’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

“Let’s just hope that’s enough”, said Rayla, resuming her fidgety work.

A few minutes of silence passed, then the future Princess spoke up again, “You left bruises. Neat little purple imprint of your greaves’ top rim right above my navel.”

Her mother cringed visibly. “A got ye that bad? Gads, Rayla...”

“Yeah, `Gads` is right”, scoffed her daughter, “Here A was waitin’ with baited breath to start bleedin’ and now A feel like if it happens A’d blame ye for killin’ a child A didnae even want. It’s an insane feelin’, to hope that if it’s there, it’s okay, but hopin’ it isnae there at all?”

The green reeds crackled under Tyne’s increasingly pain-filled grasp. The weight of what her daughter had just said was crushing.

“Did ye do it on purpose?”, asked Rayla quietly.

Tyne shook her head, she was crying too hard to speak.

“Are ye sure? Only thin’ worse than a Mink bondson is a halflin’ grandchild, no?”

“Please”, choked Tyne, “A didnae mean to! Any wean of yers, A’ll love, no matter the father!”

Rayla scoffed and shook her head. She finished her wreath and let her mother run out of tears
“So. This is where I’m at. If it’s just me you beat, I can forgive that, just this once. Anger makes people do really stupid shite. But, if... I get the feeling you hurt someone other than me... we’re done. Fer good.”

With that, the future Princess got up, touched her mother’s shoulder for a second, then strode out.

--

Another damp cave. At least this time, he was not going to be alone with the annoying mage in his head.

Viren set down the piece of orange rock he had taken from the Twin Towers. It was unlikely that humans would follow him here, after all the task force did such a good job with keeping people out of the demilitarized zone around the border.

Not necessarily a hindrance for someone as skilled at disguise as Aaravos.

From ahead, a figure appeared from out of the darkness. “Lord Viren. Strange to be working with one as opposed to Elves as you.”

“Oh, please! I am not one to judge based on ones race. I have a quarrel with Xadia, not with you”, scoffed the mage.

The woman ahead of him studied Viren’s face for a moment, then turned to scan the fragments of Aaravo’s mirror. “I was able to procure the item you asked for, however it seems you’re no longer in need for it.”

“Oh, the mirror? It’ll be mended soon. Show me, please.”

An old, wrinkled hand dove into a sling-bag to withdraw a small cube, the emblems for the primal sources carved into its six sides.
“Wonderful”, said Viren, “I can see this will be a fruitful collaboration, Madame Onni.”

“Ah, I suppose I should come clean now that we are in this together”, smiled the old elf with the ochre familials, “Pleased to truly meet you, Sir Viren.”

She extended a hand to shake his, displaying her knowledge of human customs. “Cognitor Chalise. The Lucid and the Children of Elarion are at Aaravos’ service.”
The March of Time

It was odd to stay in one place for so long. Soren had gotten used to being on the road as he had hunted for his father. The task still called for him, but without his wife, he had no-one to help him with Amelie. She was his first priority now.

“Fya”, said Amelie and pointed.

“Fire, kiddo”, her father corrected darkly.

Him and his daughter were watching on from a tower on the other side of the castle as another pyre was lit in the upper courtyard. Even here, in the heart of Katolis, death was an ever-present companion.

A gust of wind tore at Soren’s uniform and he stepped to the side, into the windshade of a double-wide merlon. Through the embrasure, he spotted a small troop of soldiers accompanying a few ununiformed people outside the castle walls. With them on the forest clearing were three tarp-covered pieces of equipment. It looked as though the troop was just getting done building a short section of palisades.

What were they defending against? The river, running far below? Unlikely.

This had his attention, especially given that on the wall below Soren, six figures appeared, clad in richly decorated, colorful robes.

Ezran and Aanya together with the high council.

The soldiers uncovered the first piece of equipment. They messed with the oblong, red-golden shape for a moment, then everyone scuttled into the trees.

A moment later, the thing went up in a cloud of smoke, throwing pieces of itself in all directions. Soren blinked as the sound of a distant bang reached him a split-second later. “Huh? Are they messing with magic?”
The soldiers busied themselves with the second machine now and the whole spectacle repeated. Though it seemed as though this time, the rupture was even more violent, the pieces smaller.

Faint shouting and whooping reached Soren’s ears as the third cloud of smoke filled the clearing without the strange piece of kit going with it. Then, a display of what was obviously discussion over it.

A glance over his shoulder told Soren that the pyre was still burning but nearing the end of its life.

Another bang grabbed his attention.

The palisades were simply gone. Splinters and chunks of wood were still tumbling over the cliffside and splashing down in the river below while the soldiers in the clearing appeared to dance over the sheer destruction they had wrought.

Below him, the councillors could be seen congratulating each other haughtily. Soren was guessing that their contribution had been to agree to see this apparent demonstration.

Ezran and Aanya however were leaning on the wall, seemingly in critical conversation.

“Well!”, went Amelie on his arm.

--

When Callum finally closed the loop on his saddle bag, it was already past noon. Rayla was next to him, going over the list of items they had packed to see if anything was missing.

“I think that’s it”, she intoned.

“Fawn, are you sure you’re good to go? This was a lot and I’m not su--”

She kissed him. “Thanks for being there.”
“Well, um”, he said with a small smile, “That doesn’t answer my question, but I’m still glad you did it?”

“It did answer your question”, said Rayla flatly and tested the seat of her blades in the holsters under her shoulders. Then she nodded in his direction, “Lookit.”

Callum turned to see Ezran and Opeli approaching them from across the lower courtyard.

“Off to save the Evenerans from themselves?”, asked the councillor, apparently in high spirits.

“Please make sure you’re coming back safe”, Ezran’s mien was grim, “Man, you guys should’ve seen that. Cannons are really freaking scary.”

“Then don’t build too many”, groused the Prince and extended his arms for a hug that Ezran took full advantage of, “Love you, little man. Keep Katolis safe and make sure the old people don’t poop in that smart head of yours.”

“Eww, thanks for that picture”, laughed Ezran.

“I do believe us old people are quite housebroken”, smiled Opeli, “However, er, I have one last thing to clear up with Lady Rayla. Since, presumably, you will be gone for some time...?”

Rayla shook her head with the same blank expression she had worn all day and Opeli’s mood immediately worsened. “Well! I suppose I will have to get back to planning this wedding in a hurry, then. We can set it for when you return from your envoy in a week.”

“Let’s get it done. Try and keep it...”, Callum said, then stopped short.

Keeping the wedding small was a personal wish of his and Rayla’s. Both of them were rather aware that to further their cause, a bigger celebration was a better idea.

“...classy”, he finished instead.
“Naturally!”, said Opeli, seeming slightly offended.

Ezran stood on the tips of his toes to hug Rayla who gave him a small smile and ruffled his hair.

As Callum smirked at them both, he found himself thinking that she looked quite motherly as she did it. Not a terribly strange thought, given that compared to her twenty-year-old self, he looked tiny. Perhaps this impression was why Rayla herself had remarked on him probably being a good father?

His line of thought was broken as Claudia poked her head out of a window some ways above them. “Oh! I thought I heard you getting ready to leave!”

“We are! Are you not done saying goodbye, then?!”, yelled Callum.

“Bring me back a few glass tubes and Erlenmeyer flasks, will you? Evenere has some really famous blowers! Have fun, and come back safe!”

“Really!?”, shouted Callum, his arms outstretched in a gesture of affront, “You’re giving us a last-minute shopping list!?"

Claudia laughed and waved as she closed the window.

Snickering, Callum mounted Isoros.

“Okay then. See you in a couple of days”, he told Ezran who looked close to tears, “Pay some attention to Tyne. Don’t want her stabbing you.”

“I don’t think she’s gonna be doin’ that”, mumbled Rayla from her saddle.

Her mother had been outright disabled by grief as they had bid farewell to Farouk. The emotional impact on Rayla had been somewhat muted, a point of worry on her part. Was it normal to see your dead father and to think about how you never had the chance to give him a real birthday gift?
When she bounced back from her reverie, her hand was mechanically waving at Ezran who was getting smaller and smaller below them as their Perytons lifted them into the cloudy sky. Something caught her attention to her left. There was a clearing, covered in pieces of wood and some blackened, jagged shards.

“What’s that?” she asked her summand who was looking ahead with the expression of an escaping prisoner.

“Oh. They were testing those cannon things today”, a grim shadow fell on his features, “Looks like they work pretty well.”

--

Tinker knocked on Tyne's door and took a deep breath in preparation for what was about to happen.

"Ah. It's ye", said Rayla's mother as she opened the door, "Thank ye fer comin' to Farouk's sendoff... Sort of not the best way tae meet again."

The woman's face was drawn and pale, her eyes swollen. Akande found himself surprised at how emotional she had been - and continued to be. Further, her reaction to himself was much more muted than he had expected.

"I'm sorry, Tyne. Really."

"Aye, that's the word of the week, isn't it? 'mon in."

When they had both settled in their seats, awkward silence hung thick in the air for some time before Akande said, "So. Katolis. Interesting place."

"Why'd ye come here?", asked Tyne.
"After Runaan's passing... Cardow had little appeal. I thought I could learn and grow some more here. Of course, Rayla coming here was the first impetus."

"Sounds like it's not all ye thought it would be."

"Politics is the same everywhere, Tyne. On either side of the border, I found myself running afoul of the powers-that-be."

The Dragon Guard eyed him suspiciously. "Meanin' what, exactly?"

"Well, over there, the Lucid commissioned a good number of high-performance syphons from me. They said they would be used in the fight against the Children of Elarion."

"Oh. They're back? Grand!", said Tyne sarcastically.

"Sadly, yes. Anyway, I improved on the Lucid’s design to allow the devices to absorb more primal energy, but they didn't think it would be enough. I was a little... aghast."

"What factor are we lookin' at here?"

"Point four."

Tyne whistled through her teeth. "Tink, A always knew ye were a canny lad, but... point four? Might as well start fightin' with my fists. That’s much better than even high-class faeshield."

“I’d bore you with the specifics, but the point is, a syphon like that starts to be dangerous to the most prolific of mages. Why would they need even stronger ones?”

“Hm. If the children are back... what about Aaravos?”

“Oh... good point, his name’s been more prolific these days. Scary. Good point though, if the Lucid knew he might return, ridiculously powerful syphons would be a logical response.”
“So they commissioned ye, and then stiffed ye on the trade?”

“No. They were generally just very rude and demanding. It all culminated in a certain Agent Wynda showing up at my home, demanding I hand over every last project I had in progress.”

“Well that’s not fair, is it!”?

“I set most of them on fire after sending her off with the syphons.”

Tyne laughed. “HA! Read the ashes, bawbag! Nice work!”

Then, she sighed angrily. “Sounds like thin’s have changed over there, too. Lucid I knew was secretive, sure, but dealt fairly with other elves at least.”

Tinker nodded. “Runaan would be ashamed of them. I’d much rather have traded with the Auxilia or the Dragons.”

“So then, what happened over here?” asked the Dragon Guard. 

“Back in Xadia, Callum wasn’t just a Prince. He wore the Katolin Crown. As King, he promised that if I shared any technology with them, they wouldn’t use it to harm our people.”

“He didn’t keep that promise, did he?”, assumed Tyne darkly.

“Well... technically, he did”, quavered Tinker, “You see, Callum’s brother reappeared and... being the good sport he is, the man abdicated to return power to his father’s lawful successor. Ezran is the one who made the choice to... ignore his brother’s promise.”

“Ye sound like ye’re fond of the Mink Prince”, growled Rayla’s mother, “What, ye like bein’ lied to?”
“Of course not. I just... don’t know if he deserves my full ire. Callum has been in the thick of peace negotiation for the better part of his life and if Rayla is to be believed, at great cost to himself.”

Tyne nodded and leaned onto her folded hands. After a moment she asked, “Tink, do ye enjoy livin’ here?”

“Hum? I haven’t had much time to really live in Katolis. I’ve been mostly inside the bastion’s walls. Everyone here seems perfectly alright with me, but Rayla’s short experience on the outside was less positive.”

“Right. They’re afraid of us, aren’t they.”

“That and... well...”, Tinker scoffed, “They are humans... you know?”

Tyne nodded sagely. “About Callum, do ye think he might be lyin’ about other thin’s?”

“I do not feel comfortable making assumptions”, said Tinker pensively.

“Ah, so the answer to that is ‘he probably is’. Not surprisin’, to be honest. Again, he’s human, he’s bound to have thin’s goin’ on. What about his brother?”

Tinker hummed and scanned the ground. “I don’t know him at all. Helmond says that he’s a competent leader, if inexperienced. His strength is apparently that he listens to his staff.”

“That guy’s an interestin’ fellow too... ex-legate... and the dragon prince... isn’t it weird that they all just sorta hang out here?”

“Huh? The two of us also ‘just sorta hang out’ here. What’s your point?”

Tyne smiled sardonically. “Not sure A have one. A just wonder. Azymondias disnae trust his mother, actively hides stuff from her. It... sorta feels like they’re... comin’ together for somethin’ here, Tink. Like they’re up to somethin’.”
“Up to something”, repeated Akande, his eyes narrowing at her, “You think they’re scheming.”

Tyne shrugged. “A don’t know. I also don’t wanna go around accusin’ people, even if they’re Minks and collaborators.”

Tinker frowned. “I’m no collaborator.”

“A know, otherwise we wouldnae be talkin’”, snorted the Dragon Guard.

He nodded, then looked around at Tyne’s small quarters. “How are you finding it?”

“Oh. It’s bearable. Feels a bit like campin’ out in a shack, what with the backwards tech these Minks have. Wound’s healin’ slower than it could, too”, she hung her head and sat back in her chair. After a long pause, she added quietly, “A miss home. My summand. My daughter. Do ye know how long she’ll be gone?”

“Maybe a week or two?”

Tyne sighed deeply. “That lass. A canny ever forgive myself for letting her go so hard off the right path. And oh, gads! Have A ever messed it up with her!”

“What exactly happened? All I know is that you fought and injured her. I don’t know why.”

Rayla’s mother told the tale with many breaks in which she wrestled with her shame and grief. When she had finished, Akande seemed furious.

“A know what ye’re gonna say. A wish A could undo it”, whispered Tyne.

“Your reaction was... untenable, but Callum had no business singing! It was such a personal moment! He made it about himself!”

“A don’t know about sun elves, Tink, but in our tribe, when someone in yer close family passes, ye better be there. A was totally outta line. He’s my b-- ugh... he’s my bondson, that’s just what it is.
He had tae be there and... he was in the right. A buggered it up...”

She started sobbing and Akande extended a hand to pat her back.

--

It was a strangely familiar, even soothing experience to set camp with Callum. Rayla enjoyed the darkening open sky above and around her and found herself reveling in learning about the plants and herbs of Katolis.

Except maybe for that one. It was a bulbous green thing with a fat, greasy looking seedstock.

“Ew! That’s Virgin Spindle? I expected something kinda innocent lookin’!” gagged the elf as she read the common name off the pages of her book.

“How come?”, asked Callum as he set a pot on the glowing embers of their small bonfire.

“The name! When I hear `virgin’, I think of somethin’ fresh and untainted, not something that’s sticky and... looks like a bunch of zits!”, grumbled Rayla and poked the plant. Next to it swayed the jagged edges of Owl bear mint and the elf leaned down to smell the fragrant leaves.

Bemused, she caught herself grabbing air trying to hold back the long strands of her hair that no longer existed.

“Not sure I agree. I sure wasn’t fresh and untainted when you got to me”, snickered Callum.

“That’s... a really horrible joke!”, scoffed Rayla with a smirk. She picked the mint and closed the book to join him by the fire. The pot already contained a few diced carrots and onions, simmering in a generous dab of butter.

“Ooo... rations are always best at the start!”, said the elf appreciatively, “You haven’t cooked for me in... four years. This’ll be special.”
“I also haven’t cooked in four years. So maybe not”, laughed Callum.

His summand snuggled into his side and rubbed a mint leaf between her hands, cupped it over her nose and inhaled the releasing oils.

“Mmmhh, oh I love this! Almost like Lemon Leaf!”

“Oh, mint? Didn't you already have mint tea?”

"The tea doesn't do it justice."

He stirred the pot and added some water.

“Hey, fawn... how are you feeling?”

“I’m... pretty alright”, said Rayla quietly, “Stomach’s kinda sore. Not too bad though. How are you?”

He smiled sadly over his shoulder, “I’m happy to be out of the castle, actually, just the two of us.”

Rayla nodded and returned to smelling the leaf.

After a long quiet, she asked, “How did you... deal with losin’ your mum’n dad?”

The question was as expected as it was painful. “Still am”, he sighed, “Death is just... weird. One moment to the next, this person you knew is just gone and you’ll never ever talk to them again. It’s just so final, you know? Whatever your relationship was at that second in time... that’ll be it. Forever.”

Rayla’s throat tightened. Her father had chosen to spend his last minutes with uncharacteristic forgiveness. He had probably known this truth so intimately that he had not wanted to chance sullying her remembrance of him.
But still. Was this him, having an honest change of mind, or was it a cynical attempt at preserving his image? Should she feel like he had accepted her choices?

Callum continued while she thought all this, “My mum... I was a kid. Didn’t quite get it then, and I still sometimes have moments where I think about all the things I didn’t get to tell or ask her. My stepdad... wasn’t... as bad, in many ways. I kinda knew it was coming. I had our mission to keep me focussed, and he left us a letter. We had time to say goodbye. I got closure for him, at least.”

Callum stoked the embers forlornly, “...I don’t know how he dealt with my mother passing, honestly. So much pressure as a King and then... that. I know he held himself accountable for her death, too. Worst of all, he was right to.”

A long pause followed in which Callum’s excellent memory tortured him before he could wrest control from it, “You know how I reacted to learning that Ez died. It was... just insanely painful.”

Rayla let her head sink into his lap and extended a hand to wipe away his tears. For a moment, she pet his face and smiled at him sadly, an expression he eventually mirrored.

“So then... do you think I’m... broken?”, she asked.

The Prince frowned at her, surprised. “Why would you say that?”

"I just sat there when he died, right in front of me. And then I just... stood and watched him burn...I was sad and it was terrible, but...”, she struggled for composure, “I feel like I should’ve had... a worse reaction? Like... you did with Ez? Did... did I hate him?”

Callum shook his head. “Everyone deals with it differently, fawn. There’s no right way. You’re not broken, and I don’t think you hated him. I wonder if you haven’t really... gotten it yet. Or maybe, you’re already done grieving from when we didn't know they were still alive. I don't have those answers. All I know is that you are not broken. What’s important is that you can move forward. I’m not saying ‘move on’, I’m saying you’ll figure it out, what his death means and how you really feel about it.”

She sat up to rest in his lap, to hold him tighter as he looked over her shoulder to make sure their food wasn’t burning. It was as though the moment had handed him the perfect metaphor.
“I mean, look at us now. I’m sad, you’re sad, we’re both crying and upset and giving each other comfort... and here I am, stirring the pot. No matter what happens, life just keeps going and someone’s death is still just an instant in that. It leaves a mark... but in the end, you have to stir the pot.”

Rayla snorted tearfully. “True.”

A moment of comfortable silence followed in which they reveled in each other’s closeness. It felt strangely right for them to travel together again, to have a clear, tangible goal ahead.

Then, the future princess sighed and wiped her eyes to put on a weak smile. “Ugh. Sick of cryin’. Crazy couple of weeks we’ve had... crazy life, actually...”

“Don’t you wish you’d be at the beach right now? I sure do.,” smirked Callum, “But you’re right. If you had told me about all the stupid shit we’d go through back in the bed at Larwein, I wouldn’t have believed it.”

She nodded. “Weird, how that all feels like it happened a lifetime ago.”

Rayla nuzzled Callum’s shoulder and mumbled, “You know, I had a thought about my trial the other day as I was sittin’ in the gardens, takin’ a break.”

“What’s that?”

“If we had summed back then, I would’ve walked free.”

Callum tensed. “What?”

“Mmh. Think about it. The whole argument that the arch dragon of the moon brought was that I told you things I shouldn’t have. If we had been summed...”
“... that would’ve been expected ...”

“It’s so crazy to think that if... Raszagal hadn’t interrupted us... I...”, she groaned, “You know, this is all super pointless. It didnae happen that way. Pinin’ for a past that could’ve been is pretty dumb. After all, they could’ve probably found somethin’ else to pin me down with.”

Callum nodded slowly. “Almost wish you hadn’t told me.”

She separated from him and gave him a sour look. “Sorry to bother you?”

He smirked. “No, I mean, I already had a bundle of weirdness and regrets stored up about that particular topic. I didn’t need more.”

“Oh?”

Sighing with the mien of a man who was about to reveal a stupid thing, he said

“Do you remember me walking off to take `bathroom breaks` whenever we had snuggled for a bit?”

Despite herself, Rayla started laughing. “No way dafty! In the bushes?!”

“I was fifteen! ”, complained the Prince. He was glad to have distracted her and her laughter was music in his ears, “It didn’t take much and that was a lot! Our entire trip, I snuck off ever so often to... I mean, Ezran caught me having... dreams while you were away, fighting Corvus! It was all so damn awkward!”

His summand could barely breathe from laughter. When she had settled down, she asked, “So what did you tell him?”

“That it was a dream about sandwiches”, deadpanned Callum.

“About sandwichhh--?”, sputtered Rayla and started laughing again.
Her laughter arrested when the timelines snapped back into her mind.

“Oh. That wisnae a dream about me though, was it?”

Callum snorted. “No. Not at the time.”

“Aw! Now that’s clouds over my round!”

“I’ve had many dreams since. And a good chunk of them have come true”, hummed Callum, playfully nipping at her earlobe.

Rayla smiled at her summand, then pressed herself against him to kiss him.

“Bit too true”, she said with some reprimand.

“Mh”, grumbled Callum and stirred the pot.

A few minutes later, the soup was finished and the two of them had just started eating when Rayla asked, “So... why didn’t we? We never even talked about it much. If you were so gung-ho, why didn’t you ever ask?”

“Well, um... I did, that one time”, Callum said and blushed, “No offense, but you seemed kind of... not ready for it. You knew next to nothing about it.”

“So you are tellin’ me that if I had been more savvy, you would’ve found it within yerself to ask me for a lay?”, Rayla said and her eyebrow lifted.

Callum laughed. “No. I’m saying if you had been more savvy, you would’ve started something.”

“Pressssssssumptios!”, hissed Rayla through a smile, her eyes narrowing.
They snickered and returned to eating.

Something cracked, off in the woods. A split-second later, the bolt of a crossbow impacted Rayla’s chest and she tumbled head over heels into a standing position, one of her blades drawn, her mien one of fury and pain.

--

Cognitor Chalise watched on as her newest ally worked. He was undertaking the arduous task of puzzling together the broken mirror he had carried all the way from Katolis.

“I’m sorry Cognitor, but could you perhaps say a few words? I am not comfortable with having you simply *stare* at my back for hours.”

Chalise snorted. “Very well. I myself am happy to wait and see, but patience isn’t everyone’s strength. Do you have a topic in mind?”

“Several, in fact. How does the head of the Lucid justify helping a human to restore an arch enemy of Xadia?”

“I would be more precise and call him an arch enemy of the *Dragons*. My motivations are simple”, she smiled toothily. “I am an old and bitter hag who has spent all her life servicing the Lizards. In the end, all it got me was disgrace and exile. Before I go, I swore I would see them... reduced, at least.”

“A simple goal. So simple one might call it *petty*, even”, said Viren and carefully picked up a small piece of glass with a pair of tweezers, “But the plan you’ve chosen seems... elaborate.”

“I’m delighted to see that under all the pretense and grandeur you have a sense of humor”, smirked Chalise, “From what I know, you are no stranger to scheming, you know how it can be. A feint turns into tactic, an opportunity reveals a new strategy. My plans are convoluted, I’ll grant you that. That’s why I am so pleased that we were able to connect, I was beginning to think I wouldn’t be able to see my efforts bear fruit.”

For a moment, she picked at her fingernails, then probed, "Have you heard any news of recent deaths at the Katolin Court?"
Viren stopped his work and fixed the Cognitor with an inquisitive look. "No. Should there have been such news?"

"Ideally. Ah, it appears another of my plans has failed...”

“What business would you have with the Katolin Royals?”, asked Viren.

Chalise scoffed. “The elven woman that now lives there under her Abuser summand’s wing - they were in no small part responsible for my exile. Again, this is all about revenge. I attempted to plant a suggestion in the assassin’s mind, to kill her own lover. I took great pains to hide the trigger and waited for the perfect opportunity to activate her.”

Pouting, she shifted her position, “It appears unsuccessfully so. Years of wasted effort. Well. I mustn’t dwell.”

“You’re awfully comfortable speaking of such things”, said Viren with a cold smile, “What if I was somehow beholden to them?”

“What have I to lose, Sir Viren? If things were as they should be, I would likely be dead already, pyred in high honors. In many ways I feel as though I am alive by sheer spite.”

The human smirked. “Well, you’re in luck. I, too have something in store for them. Perhaps I’ll be luckier.”

“Oho? Do tell!”

“I can’t credit them with destroying my life, no, that honor goes to your kind. But they irk me. She has no place at a human court and he has neither heritage, wit or perseverance to be of any rank. Most of all, they are disgusting together, it’s making my blood boil to know that my King and friend’s assassin is now to be a part of his family!”

With that, Viren got back to his fiddly work.
“Fate has granted us this alliance, I’m sure of it”, droned Chalise.
Uncertain Allies

Altina Sirta floated in midair, held up by her own magic and wings.

The Dragon Queen's Interpreter's brows were knitted as she jotted down notes on a pad held up by her tightly wrapped legs.

"So, in conclusion, while intelligence says that the Kingdoms are mustering forces, our scouts see no evidence of this. Since our agreement with the Katolins doesn't expire until early next year, we must seriously re-examine a preemptive strike."

The Sunfire Prime Legate was finishing their report and clasped their hands behind their back. Their features were even and smooth, leaving no guess as to how they felt about the prospect of having the Pentarchy's duplicity destroy four years of tentative peace.

"If that is all, Prime Legate, you are dismissed", growled Raszagal and the Soldier saluted, turned smartly and left the cave that the Queen of Dragons called her home.

The great beast let out a series of short growls, a sign of exasperation. "Sirta, what shall I do with scouts who have no eyes to see what my gut tells me is true?"

Sirta merely smiled. Her opinion wasn’t actually requested.

“So the Lucid sees the humans muster troops by the thousands while both the Auxilia and my own son believe the Abuser’s assertions of the contrary”, continued the Queen, “I suppose I shouldn’t be too surprised given that the Auxilia seems to have a weak spot for cooperation. It allows them to be lazy and... well... alive. Azymondias, of course, is in the human prince’s thrall. That boy!"

Agitated, the sky Dragon started leaving her nest, walking with heavy steps to the platform outside her dwelling. As always, Sirta followed.

“Why did he go to Katolis? I specifically told him not to! And then he allows Aaravos’ Mirror to be lost into the hands of a known criminal! Worse, he brought it to him!”
A guard came up to Sirta to whisper something in her ear. She nodded, then turned to her Queen.

“Excellence, permit the interruption? Triton is here to see you.”

Raszagal’s massive head whipped around. While Sirta thought that the scars the Queen had received from Sol Regem in his last battle were disfiguring, the dragons seemed to enjoy them quite a lot. ‘Every scar a story’, as they said.

“When did he arrive?”, snarled Zym’s mother.

“About an hour ago.”

The dragon Queen nodded and Sirta bowed her head, then turned to fetch the Lord of the sea.

As she passed by the Fountain depicting an elven family, a voice reached her ear, quiet but intense.

“How may I assist you?”, asked the sky-elf.

“I have information you need to pass on to the Dragon Queen. The Lucid and especially it’s Cognitor cannot be trusted. She isn’t who she says she is.”

“Okay. First. Who are you?”
The moon-elf bit her lower lip, obviously worried whether revealing her identity was a good idea.

Eventually, she sighed and said, “My name is Wynda. I am... was ... attached to the Scotian Privy Council.”

“Wynda... Former Tribune Wynda, once assigned to a Katolin delegation?”, asked Sirta.

“Unfortunately. So you’ve heard.”

The Interpreter snorted. “You failing to safeguard a high-profile, foreign dignitary inside our own borders has a way of... making the rounds, yes.”

Wynda cringed, “Please, you have to believe me. I haven’t any proof other than what I’ve heard and seen myself. The Lucid is playing its own game, they’re working with the Children of Elarion to bring back Aa--”

“I’m sure. You will want to report this through the proper channels, Wynda, I have places to be.”

“No, please! You have to believe me!”, Wynda begged, “The Queen is in serious danger! Xadia itself i--”

“Listen! I can see this is very important to you, but I can’t help you smear your former commanders. Please understand that there’s nothing coming out of your mouth that I can bring to her Excellence’s attention without looking like a fool entertaining a slanderer. Bring me proof, and I’ll do what I can.”

Wynda’s expression hardened. “I see. I’ll have to try and find something, then, won't I?”

The agent turned, then hesitated.

“I understand your reasons. Distrust is a valuable skill in our lines of work. If I’m not back within a week, you may assume I was killed in the execution of your orders. Until then.”
The agent fell into a hard sprint and was soon gone from view, hidden by bushes and trees.

--

Two more bolts came whizzing out of the bushes, both were aimed for Rayla who spun and rolled to avoid them.

“I’m out! Get the bruiser!”, someone yelled.

Immediately there was movement deeper inside the forest, dark shapes moved on their campsite quickly.

“Callum, hide!”, whispered Rayla tensely. She assumed the attackers were focussing on her because they hadn’t seen him.

The Prince dropped his soup and dragged himself behind the tent to wait for his cue. His heart pounded in his throat as he looked for Rayla. She was taking cover behind a tree and snapped off the bolt protruding from her chest. Her faeshield chestplate had kept her from most harm, but who knew how well it had actually deflected the projectile. Getting hit always hurt, no matter whether the bolt actually penetrated. Regardless, she gave him a thumbs-up, meant to signal that she was fine.

Rayla listened intently for the attackers who sought to encircle her now. She counted four pairs of clumsy, booted human feet and one that either trailed far behind or belonged to a smaller person.

“Gotcha now!”, shouted one of the two men among the troop, coming around the tree with his hatchet already tearing down towards Rayla.

She bent over backwards and watched as the blade embedded itself into the soft bark, then kicked the simply clad Katolin in the gut. As he snapped forward reflexively, her other knee came up, clocking him in the head. With a sputter, he collapsed.

Unfortunately, since she had been distracted by this attacker, another had had the chance to come around her back. A wild stab with a short blade missed Rayla narrowly as she dropped forward
onto her hands, then flipped against the tree to gain leverage. She jumped off, leaping several feet away from the beleaguered tree.

As she landed, she saw that her evasive maneuver hadn’t been necessary. Callum’s controlled Fulminis spell had shocked the machete wielding peasant into unconsciousness.

The other three shapes who were still among the trees didn’t seem quite so sure about themselves now.

“I am Callum, Crown Prince to Katolis! Declare yourself or face the consequences!”, yelled Callum angrily. He opened his sling pouch and pulled out his circlet that gleamed in the light of the fire.

“Oh fuck”, the tallest of the three figures whispered and they all dropped their blades.

“You ok?”, whispered Callum.

Rayla nodded tensely. “Don’t think it went through.”

They stepped into the circle of firelight. To the elf, it was immediately obvious that this was a family - or at least a band - of hunters.

One of the two men on the ground carried a terribly shabby looking crossbow while their three teenage compatriots had all the tools of a hunter distributed among them; Blades, hatchets, traps, pre-made slings and loose rope.

All three of them now knelt after some prompting from the tallest one among them.

“We’re sorry, Mylord. All my father saw was... a thing with... um, antlers , and um... well, elves... d-don’t... uh, n-normally come here”, stuttered the oldest kid, “I’m, uh, Dana, this is my sister Braelin and my brother Lucas.”

Rayla grimaced. “Nice. So all ye need tae see is a pair’r horns and you’re all ready to kill whatever’s wearin’ them?”
“We’re really sorry!”, sputtered Lucas, the youngest, “We didn’t know!”

“Better to shoot first and ask questions later. You could’ve been a couple of moonies, here to find some fresh blood to drink... or whatever”, grumbled Braelin.

“Moonies’?”, said Rayla, “I’m a ‘moonie’ alright, and I havnae ever drank anyone’s blood!”, she turned to Callum and threw a hand out at the kids, “Is this what yer grand public education teaches?! Still with the blood drinkin’!”

Callum looked as though the comment was personally insulting.

“We, uh, don’t go to school”, quavered Lucas.

The Crown Prince returned Rayla’s gaze with an expression that basically equated to a defiant “There’s your answer!”. He had fought hard to keep his father’s public education project funded and prospering.

“Shh! Luke, come on!”, hissed Dana, “So... um... are we okay to... leave?”

Callum noticed with some annoyance that they all looked at him for the answer, so he motioned at Rayla with a frown. “Nu-uh, don’t look at me! She’s the Princess with the bolt in her chest!”

“Princ--”, gaped Dana, “No way, seriously?”

“Don’t be an idiot, idiot!”, snapped Braelin, “She’s even wearing royal colors!”

“B-but she’s an elf, Brae!”, quavered Lucas.

“When was the last time you guys were in a larger town?”, asked Callum. It baffled him to learn that these people hadn’t heard of Rayla, after a good year and a half of him advertising her.
“Uh, boy, probably, like... a year ago?”, said Dana and scratched their head uncomfortably, “You’re saying we might’ve missed a few things out here?”

“I’ll say”, snapped Rayla, “You tubes have been livin’ under a rock! I’m fine by the way, thanks fer askin’!”.

She wedged her blades crosswise over the remnants of the bolt so the flat of their tips would work as a lever against her ribcage. A determined push later, the piece of splintered wood with the iron cap fell to the ground. It wasn’t bloody and Callum breathed a sigh of relief.

“Ach!”, went Rayla and examined the hole in her clothes and armor, “It’s gonna take days for that hole to knit itself! You, with the crossbow! Next time you might wanna wait until ye see who’s gettin’ the business end of it!”

The man she had kicked in the stomach was stirring and spat on the ground before sitting up with a groan. He spared a worried look for his shocked companion, then said, “Any bruiser deserves the business e-- ow! What the heck, Dee?”

“Dad!”, hissed Dana, who had jumped up to kick the man in the shin, “Read the fucking room!”

His father blinked, followed his child’s pointing finger and froze as he noticed Callum’s circlet. “Well.... bugger that. I’m sorry, Sir...?”

“Callum”, said the Prince frostily and nodded at the unconscious man, “Before you ask, he's fine, just out for a bit. You are?”

“Sorry, Sire. I’m Adney, the bloke on the ground is my husband Walcott, Sire. I can’t tell you how sorry I am for... this ... Sire.”

“ I’m the one with the hole in her chest!”, objected Rayla and stepped closer to Adney, “Try that apology again, eh?”

The discomfort that came with the group’s silent stares at Rayla hung thick in the air. It was obvious that these people did not really want to talk to her for any reason, even if it meant appeasing a possibly pissed royal.
“Sorry”, grumbled the man.

“Thanks”, grumbled Rayla, “Now get lost.”

Callum wanted to intercede. This seemed like far too little. These people should have to learn a lesson, but the Prince saw that Rayla had made her call and, after all, it was hers to make.

The hunters’ family gathered the equipment they had dropped, then Adney hoisted Walcott over his shoulders and nodded at Callum whose lips curled with disdain as he copied the man’s gesture of goodbye.

When their footsteps had faded into the night, Rayla relaxed a little and turned to look for Callum as she holstered her blades. The Prince was busy cleaning their dropped soup bowls and spoons. He seemed angry.

“Good call, thanks”, said Rayla as she received her cleaned cutlery back from him, “You look a bit sour. Do you need to talk?”

“These people!”, exploded Callum, “Sight unseen, they shoot at what looks vaguely like an elf, Rayla! These are my people! People I defend and feed and am supposed to have a grip on! People like them murdered Honsa’s mother!”

“And people like my mum killed people like you. Your point?”

“I don’t get why you let them walk off so easily! He wasn’t even sincere!”

“Funny”, said Rayla and sat down to have some more soup, “I would’ve thought you liked how that went. Nobody died and in the end we talked it out?”

“You didn’t though! You let him walk off! Why?”

“I canny change people’s minds by beratin’ them, dummy. That’s your thing”, snickered Rayla, “I
know how to knock their heads in and be done with it. And o boy, did I ever wanty. What a gaggle of goons.”

“Berating?!”, flared Callum, “I berate people?”

“Yer doin’ it right now”, said Rayla, her annoyance with his anger growing, “If you wanted to converse so badly, why didn’t you? They sure wanted to talk to you!”

“I thought that if I said something, I’d take away your right to defend yourself! But you didn’t! They just spat on you and then walked off!”

“Oh, is that so?! Well next time someone ‘spits’ on me, maybe ye can help poor, dumb Rayla with yer words?! What good is ye gracefully lettin’ me make my own choices if all ye got for me after is lectures about how they’re wrong?!”

Callum’s hands balled into fists, but he slumped onto the ground opposite her and ladeled the last of the soup into his bowl. Rayla realized how angry he was then, it wasn’t like him to take the last bit of food without asking.

Quietly, they ate the meager leftovers.

“Sorry”, Callum ground out eventually, “I could’ve been more... constructive with my criticism.”

“Oh, that’s what that was? Criticism?”, asked Rayla and shot him an angry look, “I just got nailed with a bolt, and all you seem to be worried about is the way I handled myself after?”

The Prince sighed angrily. He knew that he was probably in the wrong, but at the same time it felt equally wrong to admit it. Rayla wasn’t the type to let others waltz overtop of her like this and he was wondering why she had allowed it now. That she didn’t seem to have a good answer drove him nuts.

“I’ll be back”, he spat and got up.

As he walked off into the dark forest, Rayla scoffed and shook her head. “Aye, real mature, walkin’
Grumbling, the elf collected his bowl and spoon to wash them once again. Her own anger was less seething and more confused. Not only had she just survived her first instance of a very expected kind of attack, her summand was tilting over it. It wasn’t like him to blow her off in a moment of danger. To walk off into the forest when they didn’t know what the band of hunters was going to do was downright idiotic.

Gradually, Rayla’s thoughts changed. Her big dumb human had a point, in a way. She had let them go, just like that. And why?

Possibilities?

To show that she wasn’t like her mother?
Because there was nothing she could have said to make them not-racist?
Because she was afraid that they would start to fight in earnest if she accosted them too harshly?
And in that vein - because she felt responsible for more than just herself and Callum at the moment?

He’d said it: These were his - and by extension her people. If she had to fight them any more, wouldn’t that make her a terrible ruler?

Further, if anyone could figure out how to put Evenere back together, it was the man who had accomplished a mutually respectful armistice between Xadia and the Pentarchy. Hundreds of thousands of lives were potentially attached to them reaching their current goal, so trying to keep the peace seemed like a good idea.

And, of course, there was also the matter of...

Annoyed, she realized that her hand was resting on her midriff.

“So stupid worried cow, it’s nothin’”, she scolded herself, then unholstered her blades, snuffed out the vestiges of their bonfire by covering it in dirt and went after her summand.

---

Ezran and Aanya were sharing a late dinner.

A moment of silence passed as the attendant who had brought them dessert slipped outside.
Aanya regarded the little man pensively, then picked up her spoon to dig into the chocolate mousse.

“I have to say, Ezran... it’s an odd situation, this.”

“What do you mean?”

“When last we met, you were nearly the same age as I. I was looking forward to becoming something like best friends. When I heard you had died...”

She suddenly looked sour, put down the spoon and leaned backwards in her chair. “What a terrible time that was.”

“From what I know, you made the best of it!”, smiled Ezran, “You held down the Breach all by yourself. I can’t thank you enough for being part of this peace process.”

“It’s thanks to your brother that we have this brief respite, without the threat of immediate conflict dangling overhead”, said the Lady of the Bloom, “I had very little to do with the armistice itself.”

“That’s actually something I wanted to ask you about. Callum said you eventually gave up and never came back to the table”, said Ezran.

Aanya snorted. “I did more harm than good after a point. It took... a certain... stubborn flexibility to accommodate the demands of Xadia. I did not have it. I’m not sure I could have settled the issue as well as Sir Callum.”

She frowned at her dessert. “I still grapple with some of the concessions we had to make.”

“The military?”, assumed Ezran, “Yeah, my brother’s real quick to make people put down their weapons. I get why he thought he had to.”

Aanya nodded shallowly, then said, “At the same time it appears he’s not really in need of much
hard power, either. Fostering the natural sciences and patronizing art of all kinds has made Katolis the cultural envy of the Pentarchy. My own court scientists have started studying Middle-Kingdom dialect to be able to more comfortably read what Katolis is writing. A few of my courtiers are wearing burgundy and gold...”

Ezran eyed her suspiciously and put his spoon down. “I feel like there’s something you want to say. How about you get it over with?”

“I’m a little surprised, I suppose. Frankly, I thought his policies would collapse Katolis’ power rather than expanding it. Sure, the military might of the Towers has waned in the past few years, but it seems like the cultural influence you’ve started to exert on your neighbors is more powerful than your armed forces ever were.”

“You don’t like it.”

“Well... I’d like there to be cooperation between Duren and Katolis, but there’s something to be said about your culture disrupting or, to be alarmist, extinguishing ours. As I said, my courtiers are assuming your values rather than exploring their own!”

Aanya started drumming on the table, “Ezran... Duren isn’t Katolis and I feel it shouldn’t ever be Katolis. Diversity is what strengthens the Kingdoms from within. And then there’s this worrying talk of democracy. What qualification, what birthright do the people have to rule?”

Ezran ran his hands through his hair in a gesture of thought. “Kind of funny that you of all people think that birthright matters. Weren’t you adopted?”

“A... a fair point, actually”, grumbled Aanya, “I don’t... care much to think about or discuss my own heritage, but... yes, fair point.”

“I get why this stuff worries you”, the Katolin King said, “Look at it this way; If Xadia decides to attack, we’ll lose a lot, maybe everything. If they settle for peace, we’ll lose them as an enemy. Just to be nasty for a moment, people might stop worrying as much about them and look at other stuff that bothers them. Big, big changes are coming for us either way, Aanya. My brother and I want to try and ride that wave of change. It’s better than holding our breath and hoping we won’t drown in it.”

He picked up her attentive gaze and held it, “I want to share what we find. We’re friends, so I want
you on board with this all. I think we can to find a way to split the culture from the knowledge, if that makes sense... I have to do what we can to keep Katolis stable and peaceful and if that means building cannons and allowing our people some power, that’s what it’s going to be. I can see why you wouldn’t want that spilling over, but it’s pretty clear that what happened over in Evenere has everyone watching and a lot of the people out there like what they see, especially the minor nobles.”

The Queen of Duren sighed and grabbed her spoon. “I know, the voices at my own court are already loud enough for me to hear. In a way, I’m even willing to entertain them... I’m just not sure it’s a good idea. Maybe if Katolis’ experimentation works out, I’ll more seriously consider it.”

She moved to eat some more, but then sagged into herself a little. “Thank you for the offer to share your achievements in a less influential fashion. After seeing those weapons in action today, I have to say I can’t help but worry about how they’ll be used.”

“Aanya, c’mon”, smirked Ezran, “You know me.”

“Do I? You are still that kid from back then, are you? Well, in my world, four years have passed and if you really are going ahead with chartering a parliament, it won’t be you making the decisions anymore!”, angrily, the Queen stabbed at her mousse, “I understand your desire to go on ahead and make progress your primary goal, but it leaves some of your secondaries bleeding out in the ditch! There are people like Florian who do not approve or understand!”

“Oh, I’m sure that Del Bar is pretty mad”, said Ezran, “They’ve always been a bit...”

“Conservative?”

“Let’s... call it that, yeah. I’ll have to face that eventually. Maybe it’s a good time to talk it over when we meet the others about those Xadian Legions on the border.”
Callum felt increasingly stupid as he wandered through the dark forest. It was only thanks to Rayla that he had the orientation skills to know that he wasn’t lost.

Thoughts raced through his mind as he tried to suss out the reason for his heated, angry *re* action to her *in* action.

Before he could find it, a dark shape dropped down on him and pinned him to the ground where he struggled against his attacker's vise-like grip on his wrists.

"*Now* do ye get why walkin' off like that is a feckin' stupid idea!?," hissed the shape and pushed his hands to the ground to kiss him angrily.

“Damn! You scared the life out of me!”, complained Callum and pressed what he could move of his body against his summand to get her to leave.

“Now, *now*! Let’s not be hasty here just cause I kissed ye”, snickered his attacker sultrily, "And talk about scarin’ people, I had a banther of a time findin’ yer daft arse in this place!"

“Rayla!”, he shouted, “Get off!”

“You’re gonna have tae do a lot more than clothed buckin’ fer *that*!”, laughed Rayla, “What are you gonna do, eh? I can hold you down there until you’re worn out, ye wee sook dafty!”

Despite himself, the Prince started laughing. Her exuberant, dirty humor was thoroughly disarming. Plus, it was too true, she was like iron shackles against him.

Relenting to her force, he slackened and hoped for another kiss. Maybe more.

“So!”, came her voice from above in the dark, “Done floppin’ about like a fish out’r water? Ye
wanna tell me what in the blazes got inty ye?”

“I was trying to figure that out. It’s like I got angry at you for no good reason”, said Callum, “I’m sorry for all that.”

“I thought you might be, but that’s not an answer to my question.”

Her adorable features appeared in the dark as she bent over to kiss him again. It couldn’t escape the Prince’s attention that she still showed no intention of releasing him.

“Can you... give me my hands back?”, he asked between her teasing kisses.

“No”, she said simply, “Until you tell me what got into you.”

“You’re being really distracting!”, laughed her summand.

“Distraclin’ ?!”, she asked with mock offense as she ground her lower body against his, “A’m not doin’ aaaaaaanythin’!”

“Ah, stop!”, he pled but didn’t really mean it.

She did, regardless. The word counted for much between them.

“Do you want me off?”, she asked earnestly.

“Mmh”, he went, “No. Not really. This is... weirdly fun .”

“Aye, I sorta kinda enjoyed stalkin’ ye a little when I finally caught sight of ye. I’m serious about wantin’ an answer, still. You’re normally good at figurin’ yerself out.”

Callum bit his lower lip and tried to establish a chain of reasoning.
Rayla thought this expression was pretty darn sexy.

She had been shot.
In that moment he had felt... Excited. To get into a fight.
But also... Scared. For her life. For his life.

Nothing strange here.

When the group had ignored her...?

With a dry mouth, the Prince quavered, “I put so much effort into making people comfortable with this idea of you and I. I guess I was being an idiot to think that everyone would even hear about it.”

“And that made you mad... at me?”

“No. Erm, in that moment, when you let them go... I thought they needed to be set straight. You let them go without, you know, giving them what’s what.”

“I let them go cause I’m their ruler, Callum. I canny be goin’ around beatin’ up my subjects.”

“That’s true, but I’m not saying you should’ve kicked their butts, fawn. I wanted to at least... dig into them a little. Figure out what their misconceptions are. Show them that they’re wrong, like you did with the blood-drinking stuff. That’s sort of... our side-mission. I thought that was implicit. Show people that elves are not just scary warriors from across the Breach.”

Rayla nodded. “I see yer point.”

“So, why didn’t you talk to them more?”

“Didn’t know what to say to put them at ease with me. Was thinkin’ they’d start fightin’ if I said the wrong thin’.”
Callum hummed. “I see your point. And, I guess you already answered the question as to why you didn’t wanna fight.”

“Sorta”, sighed Rayla, “I’m findin’ myself bein’... a little clucky . Better not to fight. You know... just in case.”

“I was about to mention something about that, too”, she could feel him tense under her, “I had this weird feeling of needing to protect you.”

She smirked and renewed her grip on his wrist. “Protect me?”

He got more agitated, “I mean, that’s so silly coming from me, right? You’re the one protecting me most of the time. My dumb brain is giving me this weird feeling that you count for two of my family right now, and boy-oh-boy am I ever going to fight if it means not losing another part of my family!”

His intensity made her laugh. “Come on, ye’re beein’ so cheesy! How many times do I have to say this before you believe it? I am one, not two!”

“I think it would help if you believed it.”

She groaned. “I do. But I don’t feel it, okay? I know I’m not makin’ a tiny Rayllum down there, but I feel like I might be.”

“Is this crazy feeling just going to follow us around for a month?”, he asked quietly.

“Gads I hope not! Bleed already!”, she yelled at her stomach then cringed and added sadly, “Actually, no! Don’t! Not yet!”

“Huh?”, went Callum.

Rayla shook her head. “Just... want enough time to pass so it won’t feel like Tyne... A could never
forgive her that .”

Her grip on him faltered and he pulled her into a gentle hug.

Rayla barked out a strained laugh. “No! Don’t hold me like I’m about to sob again! I’m done!”

Wriggling out of his grip, she added, “Right now, we need to move camp, in case those knobs come back!”

She got up and helped him stand. Hand-in-hand, they walked back to their tent and mounts.

Thanks to their experience, breaking camp was quick work and raising it a ways further north was equally fast.

They settled into their tent where Callum lit an oil lamp and dimmed the flame.

“Let’s have a look at the damage”, he said with an encouraging smirk at his fiance. She had been fairly quiet as they worked.

Rayla nodded absentmindedly and pulled off her faux uniform. On her left side, a single plate of the cloth-wrapped faeshield was marred by a circular indent. At its center was a small hole. It was tiny enough to repair itself over the next few days.

The Prince helped his summand unclasp the armor, feeling reminded of the first time he’d done this, when she had suffered a broken rib.

She pulled off her undersuit’s top half and Callum sucked air through his teeth. “Ooh, ow!”

A shining, dark purple bruise was already growing on her chest. She eyed it with an amused glint in her eyes.

“Nice shot. He’s a hunter, alright. Do we have anythin’ in our kit to soothe bruises or nah?”
“I think we have a cooling mint rub?”

“It’ll do. Plus, I’ll smell nice for you.”

Callum gave her a wry look. “For me?”

She returned his gaze with one saturated with carnal lust. “Yea. You know, for when I push you back down and have my way wit’ ye?”

He laughed, equal parts excited and scared.

--

The next few days passed in a hurry for everyone.

Ezran and Aanya were on their way to the Hall of Meeting. The little man was excited for the possibilities of the summit, having decided on some joint declarations with Duren. Its Queen, however, wasn’t as positive. She worried loudly about the reactions of the other leaders.

Amaya, Claudia and Soren - which obviously meant Amelie, too - had decided that their skills were best used at the Breach since Zym was now permanently on hand to keep an eye on Tyne.

The Dragon Prince had finally given up the search for Viren, convinced that the criminal was out of his range at this point. This meant that it was technically time for him to return to his mother.

Luckily, since Tyne needed supervision, the dragon stayed put, glad for the excuse. He wasn’t eager to face the music just yet, especially since reports from across the breach indicated that the four legions had withdrawn out of the DMZ.

Tinker had become secretive, shutting everyone out of his activities. He was clearly working on something new in his quarters. Horace had tried reconciling with the elf, but had only met angry denial.
Callum had taken up a new habit. He would use Acies to check on Ezran and Amaya from a distance. The three of them had agreed on a schedule to prevent any possible awkwardnesses.

He couldn’t, for obvious reasons, resist dropping in on Tyne ever so often. She seemed bored and distrustful but it didn’t appear as though she was scheming.

Rayla had written another letter to Zala in which she went into some detail about her life. The woman meant a great deal to her. Writing it, she had remarked on how quiet Taog had been and resolved to write another message to him.

--

On August 5th, the shores of Evenere came into view.

“Land!”, smiled Rayla, glad to leave the Valmar Bay behind.

“It’s not too far from here to La Dorée”, said Callum and pointed north-west, “Should be getting there by the end of the day.”

They followed a mostly deserted road. Around mid-day, Rayla nodded due north. Thin wisps of smoke drifted on the horizon.

“That’s not the capital”, said Callum sadly, “Must be some village. Looting is pretty common during civil war. Both sides are strapped for supplies.”

“Let’s check it out. Maybe we can help?”

Callum nodded and guided his mount into a soft, northward descent. “Do have the flag handy?”

Rayla unclasped the burgundy-gold-white-green banner at Andris’ side and raised it over her head. The emblem of the Twins was emblazoned on Callum’s personal colors.
“Am I goin’ to get one of these at some point?”, asked Rayla with an upward gaze.

“This one belongs to both of us”, snickered Callum, “You wanna change the colors?”

“Oh. Well, erm... I was thinkin’ we could add somethin’ to the towers. Right now it looks Katolin, and nothin’ else.”

“Oh! That’s an awesome idea! Maybe something Xadian. Precious White?”

“Stop it!”, laughed Rayla, “You gotta be more creative than that stupid flower all the time!”

They landed, kicking up a small cloud of dust.

Side-by side with the banner held high, they approached the thin column of smoke. It was a village, sitting neatly tucked inside the bend of a river. From the cusp of a small hill they were on, they could easily see over the Palisades surrounding the village. There were maybe fourteen thatched houses, two of which looked as though they had recently been burned down.

A few peasants were out on the streets, cleaning up debris.

As Callum and Rayla came closer, people started pointing. A few of them started running, others seemed to grab whatever stones or farming implements they had lying around.

“I don’t like this one bit”, hissed Rayla.

“Me either. Get ready to run if things turn sour.”

“Run?”

“Run. We’re not here to fight, even if it’s to defend ourselves.”
A rock, flung at Callum, thumped uselessly to the ground next to Isoros who squeaked worriedly.

“Roo, rooo”, cooed the Prince and caressed his skittish mount’s neck.

Addressing the gathering, angry crowd, he shouted, “I am Crown Prince Callum, here to speak to your leaders!”

“Go away, Crown Prince Callum!”, shouted a woman in the crowd. Her common had a strange accent attached to it that tickled Rayla’s ears, “We have had it with you Katolin fils de pute!”

A cold shiver went through the Prince and he shouted, “Did my soldiers do this?!”

“Vouz avez plein de merde!”, shouted the woman, “Don’t act surprised!”

“They DON’T have permission to do this!”, replied Callum angrily, “Who did this to you?! Tell me, I’ll have them locked up!”

The crowd started arguing among themselves in more or less hushed tones.

Finally, someone separated from the villagers and walked toward the waiting Katolins. When she was close enough to get a good look at both of them, she skittered to a halt and blanched.

Repeatedly shrieking “Bête à cornes!”, the panicked woman ran for a nearby rock protruding from the marshy roadside, presumably to hide ineffectually. The crowd behind her screamed almost in unison and dissolved in utter chaos.

Confused, Callum and Rayla watched on.

Dead silence now settled over the road safe for the scared sniffles of the woman behind the boulder.

Under his summand’s watchful gaze, Callum dismounted and approached her.
“Are you one of them, too?!”, screamed the woman, “Where are your horns!?"

Rayla’s stomach sunk. She had just single-handedly messed up a diplomatic situation just by existing in it.

Callum’s soothing voice had an almost curative effect even on her as he said, “Don’t worry, she’s great! Have you heard of Rayla, who helped prevent a war with Xadia?”

The woman looked up slowly from her cower. She was probably around mid-twenty, had coarse, dirty blonde hair that was tied in a loose bun on the back of her head. Her heavy-set body belied her callused hands’ strength. There were flecks of light brown wood in her hair and some chips of it stuck to the woman’s thick apron. A woodcutter? Carpenter?

For a moment her lip quivered, then she choked “I’ve not heard the story, monsieur.”

“Either way, this is her and you really don’t have to be scared. She's on our side. I should know, we saved a Dragon together and she’s going my Princess.”

The words showed immediate effect. It was almost pitiable, how childlike the peasant woman's reaction was, her eyes widened and an incredulous expression of interest consumed her features.

“Oh, how romantic! I understand the choice, she is a beauty, monsieur.”

Callum couldn't help but think about Opeli's words at Arrias about the marketability of Rayla’s appearance.

The woman seemed to grapple at words for a moment, then asked with a worried look at Rayla, “But you are sure she is not going to suck my blood?”

The misconception was almost funny at this point.

“We don’t do that”, Rayla snickered while rolling her eyes, “Don’t have the teeth fer it.”
The woman jolted. “You *speak common!*”

“We can learn *languages*, yes”, snorted the elf, “I’ll say this: Yer’s sounds kinda nice, even though you shouted.”

The woman smirked nervously. “Ah, sacre bleu..., Im sorry, madame... for the things I said... Euh...Edmée. My... my name is Edmée.”

Callum offered her a hand and helped her stand. “Good to meet you, Edmée. Pretty brave of you to walk out here by yourself.”

“Brave? Stupid? Both are true. I’m the only one who speaks common here and also *very angry!*”, exclaimed the peasant, “The soldiers, they came through yesterday, demanding food! We’re a small village and can’t spare anything right now!”

She threw her hands up in the air, “When Gautier, the elder, told them as much, the leader of the soldiers bashed him with the stock of his lance and then they set fire to his house and my workshop because I translated for him!”

“Is anyone hurt?”, asked Callum gravely.

“Well, Gautier is. Nobody was in the h--”, her gaze flicked to Rayla, and she whispered, “You’re sure she isn’t going to drink our blood?!”

“Ab-so-lutely”, smiled the Prince, “Can we see the elder? We have a few medical supplies, maybe we can help.”

It was obvious that Edmée wasn’t a huge fan of the suggestion, but she nodded slowly. “If the elf stays outside the palisades.”

“No”, said Rayla sternly, “He’s not leavin’ my sight, Edmée. I protect him.”
“It’s true”, smiled Callum, “We’re joined at the hip.”

“Aahh, euh...”, quavered the Eveneran, “It will be fine to come inside, maybe? The people are, how do you say... worried. Scared. Angry.”

“Nothin’ new here”, grumbled Rayla, “Trust me, Edmée, we’re not here to mess thin’s up for you.”

Edmée nodded slowly, her inquisitive gaze tracking over the elf’s equipment.

“This commander you spoke of, did he give a name?”, Callum asked.

“Mayoor Abeer... Amir? Somethin’ like that.”

“Major Asier”, grumbled Callum, “Tinesian piece of work. Thank you Edmée. We’ll drag him back here for you when we find him. Now, about Gautier?”

Edmée huffed, threw a worried glower at Rayla and then spun to walk towards the village, waving them along over her shoulder.

“That went well”, said Rayla critically.

“It did, actually. She’s pretty soft for a peasant. The real test comes now”, said Callum and mounted up.

Confused, he watched as Rayla dismounted instead. “Hop off the Peryton. We’re leaving them here, they’ll get spooked if the Villagers start shoutin’ again.”

“Oh. Yeah that makes sense”, putting on a stupid expression, he warbled, “ShOULD’vE bRoUGHt hOrSEs.”

“Then we’d be less than half way here, dafty!”, laughed Rayla.
"For the record", said Callum lamely, "When I talk like that, I'm not being serious."

"Oh, I know. When I talk like this, I'm teasin' you", smirked Rayla.

They tied their animals to a young tree nearby and made their way to the roughly hewn palisades meant to shield the village from wild animals and unequipped human attackers.

The streets were dead, but here and there a face could be seen peeking out between half-closed shutters.

Rayla’s presence was incredibly reassuring. She drew most of the attention and bore it with a stony but not unfriendly face.

Edmée led them to a house with closed windows. The Eveneran tried to open the door, but it wouldn’t budge. With a sigh, she knocked on the door and had a short, curt conversation with a young sounding voice inside.

The movement of a wooden latch could be heard, then the door opened and Edmée beckoned her guests inside. “This is my brother’s place. He and his wife are away at the market at La Dorée. The little boy’s name is Brice, my nephew.”

The ceiling was so low that both Rayla and Callum had to duck a little. The place was dark and shabby. Rayla instantly felt bad for these people. If this is how most humans lived, she was with Bertram. This had to change, and fast.

A scared whine could be heard from a little boy cowering next to the fireplace, in the darkest place he could find.

His aunt pointed at a cot at the back of the room where a man was resting, his head bandaged.

“How do you say ‘Please don’t be scared’, Edmée?”, asked Rayla quietly as Callum inspected Gauthier.

Edmée had to repeat the phrase a few times before the elf could manage it in one go. When she did,
Brice was already watching on with more interest than fear.

He bashfully mumbled something in reply and Edmée smirked. “He is asking if he can touch your horns.”

“As long as he disnae yank or stroke them”, Rayla smirked painfully. This was not what she wanted but if it put the tiny, scared child at ease and helped smooth over her impression with Edmée, she’d deal with having her privacy invaded a little.

To allow the tiny Eveneran to reach, she had to kneel and bend over.

Tiny hands soon rested on her horns, the pressure of the curious touch gentle and careful. This kid was great.

He snickered and said something that apparently caught his aunt’s ire.

She told him off and he let go of Rayla’s horns so she could get up again.

“What’d he say?”, asked the elf.

“Oh, children. You know how they are”, the Eveneran smiled awkwardly, “He said your horns feel like slimy snails made out of rock. Not exactly polite, is it?”

Rayla snickered, “It’s not a terrible description though. How’s Gauthier, dum-- er, Callum?”

“Big old bonk on his forehead. I think he’ll be fine”, said Callum, “I’m just going to apply the mint cream and put on some fresh bandages. These have seen better days.”

“It’s what we had”, grumbled Edmée.

“Not a criticism”, said Callum gently, “I know you did what you could.”
When Rayla joined her summand, her breath stuck in her throat. This man was \textit{at most} fifty-five years old.

“Vous dites qu’il est un \textit{père} ?”, elle s’exclama.

“Oui, il est le plus âgé ici. Sa femme est décédée... euh, deux hivers auparavant. Elle était un an plus âgée que lui”, dit Edmée.

“C’est normal ?!”, demanda l’elfe, maintenant manifestement bouleversée.

“Vous ne voulez pas dire que les gens ne vivent pas à soixante ans !”

Edmée fronça les sourcils. “Nous avons des pères, comme je vous l’ai dit.”

“Sixty isnae auld, Edmée!”, s’exclama Rayla, “\textit{Vingt} est vieux pour un humain! Sixty is \textit{half} of what elves expect to see!”

The information didn’t seem to mean much to the Eveneran peasant. “Oh. It must be boring, living for so long. Year in and year out...”, elle haussa les épaules, “Sixty seems plenty.”

Callum sourit tristement à sa fiancée en se mordant les dents.

“Alright. Well, that’s all I can do for him for now. Again, I’m sorry this happened. We’ll be back soon with Asier. For now, please take this.”

Il donna à Edmée deux rouleaux de gaze fraîches, enveloppés dans du papier paraffiné.

Elle acquiesça avec reconnaissance et ouvrit la porte aux Katolins.
Outside, a crowd had gathered, talking excitedly. As soon as Rayla stepped into the sunlight blinking, the people quieted down.

Nobody moved. Her and Callum were encircled.

Edmée stepped outside, eyeing the crowd.

“Should we be worried?”, asked Callum tensely.

“*They* don’t even know that yet”, said Edmée, then raised her voice to address everyone present.

Rayla thought she could pick out her name as well as Callum, Brice and Gauthier in her speech. A few unsure and angry questions were thrown at Edmée which she at first returned with emphasis but no anger. After some time of this it was clear she was starting to get annoyed.

Eventually, Edmée pointed away from herself and barked something like a command to which the crowd started dispersing reluctantly.

Edmée escorted her guests outside the palisades and took a deep breath. “Well. Merci beaucoup, monsieur, madame. Today I’ll remember.”

“Thank you, Edmée. We’ll see you later, as I said. This won’t stand. Katolis isn’t here to mess with honest folk”, said Callum.

“I hope so”, said the woman and bowed.

When Callum and Rayla were mounted up and ascending to look for Captain Asier, the elf turned to her summand.

“Is this what it’s like for *our* people, too?”

“Yep. It’s pretty bad, isn’t it?”
“Yes! Sixty, Callum! They don’t even make it to sixty! What’s worse is; she didnae even seem tae mind!”

Callum scoffed. “For them, life is nothing but work, fawn. They live with the seasons and every year is more or less the same. Sure there’s festivals and community and all that, but they really don’t have much perspective. Most can’t even read. It’s not even just that they don’t grow old, a lot of them die during childhood and child birth because of illness or lack of food, clean water and real healthcare.”

He grasped Isoros’ reins harder. “That’s why science, art and education are so, so important to me. One makes people healthier and the others give them something to aspire to. You can work hard all your life and live, but it’s only worth it if there’s something to see, to hear, to surprise you ever so often. Do you think that if Edmée had access to books and could travel, maybe, or go to see some crazy ahead-of-the-curve art, she’d want to live a little longer to have more of it?”

Rayla smiled sadly at him, remembering her own considerations from two months ago. This could have been her, sort of, if she hadn’t taken the chance he had presented. “Xadia is way more advanced than the Pentarchy. They always taught that to us... but this... I had no idea. I know what it’s like to live the simple life, but... even Arrias has healthcare, both physical and mental, a school and a library, and that’s a prison!”

“Pretty shocking, right? Coming straight home from Tiram-Veltis and its weird, impossible architecture and magic machines and busy, colorful streets - stepping into the Twins’ welcome hall felt like I wandered into a cave. It was... sort of that moment when I decided that weapons weren’t going to fix this.”

He gritted his teeth. “And now there’s cannons in Katolis. I can’t wait for the first time I have to visit a place like this village and take responsibility for an asshole with cannons.”

Rayla nodded gravely.

Chapter End Notes

Here’s how I'm imagining Callum's personals:
https://imgur.com/YV2tty4
Amaya had barely settled into her old quarters when there was a knock at the door. The general smiled widely as she recognized Janai.

“General!”, exclaimed the Prime Legate, “I heard you were back!”

The human’s smile kept up as she picked up a piece of paper and a piece of graphite to be able to converse.

‘Sorry it took so long’, she wrote, ‘I’m here to replace Fen. How are you? What’s the situation?’

“I’m doing quite well, thank you. The situation is... well, border patrol, really. We’re fighting bounty hunters every few days, either on their way to or from Xadia.”

‘Are you seeing more of them lately?’

“Sadly. As the Pentarchy is running out of substances we control under the terms of the Accord of Taelin, their value has skyrocketed. What happened to you?! I heard you ran afoul of Viren himself?”

Amaya shook her head. ‘This isn’t a story I’m willing to spend time writing down. I’ll find my interpreter.’

She moved toward the door but Janai stood in her way, tears of wonder in her eyes.

“I didn’t think I’d get to see you ever again. There’s something I have to tell you, should have told you four years ago when I first recognized what I felt. It was cowardly to withhold it and I’m sorry.”

The human crossed her arms and nodded her elven counterpart along.

“Right now, I have some time”, said Janai without hesitation, “Since my heart already belongs to
the both of us, I would like to at least share your bed, if you’d like. Obviously, I’m hoping for more.”

Amaya’s smile turned to an incredulous gape.

Sunfire elves were insanely forward.

--

Soren and Claudia had unpacked already and were now strolling through the streets with Amelie in the Crown Guard’s arms. He hadn’t worked much with elves, but there were quite a few here, speaking to and interacting with the human soldiers like one would expect long-term comrades in arms to do. Next to him, Claudia was lost in nostalgia as she pointed out this detail or that person she recognized from way back.

The place brought back a few memories, good and bad, for the siblings. Their flight across Duren, the terrible message they had passed along. Soren’s search for Viren and Claudia’s struggle with the coins had started here.

“Sir Soren. Ma’am”, came a staccatoed greeting from their right. General Fen walked up to them, his hands clasped behind his back, “Long time, no see. Doing well?”

“Fairly”, smirked Claudia, “You?”

“Grand. On my way out. Looking forward to seeing family”, said Fen and turned to Soren, “Heard about your wife. Please accept my condolences. Understand your want for something to do, Guardsman, but the Breach isn’t a place for kids. Ought to find a sitter or take some leave.”

“Yeah, no”, grumbled the Crown Guard, “I can’t leave her at home but I’m going nuts hanging out all the time. She’s fine with me.”

“Fine now. Might not be, later. Have been seeing more and more conflict out here.”

“How come?”, asked Claudia.
“Bounty hunters. Dark Mages’ fault, really”, smirked Fen, “Gotta have your ingredients, don’t you?”

“I only use the legal stuff”, lied the High Mage. She was suddenly very conscious of the bottle of dragon horn dust in her sling bag.

“Right”, said the General, sounding like he believed her about as much as she did herself, “My watch is done for now. Back in another six months. Nice, having General Amaya back. Rhinehart’s a competent leader, but he never came out here in person. Doesn’t wanna be in the thick of things, maybe?”

“Maybe?”, said Claudia, remembering the grey-haired, well put together commander who had carried her to the infirmary with something like bashful shame.

Fen said his goodbyes and moved on to speak to his soldiers who were sad to see him go but happy to see Amaya.

“Nice to know the Breach is in good hands”, said Claudia appreciatively.

“No place for kids. No shit”, grumbled her brother, “Wish I had a better solution.”

Amelie pulled his slicked-back hair out of order.

“How do you mean?”

“She’s my daughter, Clauds. If she can’t live with me, how is she going to grow up like my daughter? You heard about Rayla’s problems with her ‘rents?”

Claudia understood his point and nodded. “Yeup. Yikes.”

“For the record. You’re here. That’s why I felt okay with bringing Amelie. If I have to go fight, you guys can get out of here. I’m just a regular guy who needs something going on, especially right
now. But I can’t forget her over what I want, either. I made her. She’s part of me, part of Jen!”

“It’s a shitty compromise”, said Claudia. She was just as torn over his choices as Soren himself, but she also felt it wasn’t her place to tell him how to raise his child.

--

It wasn’t long before Rayla spotted a moving column of soldiers below, clad in Katolin armor. On Callum’s behest, she flew their colors again and descended straight toward the front where the commissioned officers rode. There were about seventy soldiers following them. Apparently, the company had suffered a not insignificant number of casualties.

As they got closer, they could hear a series of commands making its way down the line. Obviously, they had been spotted.

“Company! Halt! Present --- arms!”

The man who had given the commands now got everyone to dismount. It wasn’t proper to speak to a royal from horseback. His dark features were sharp and only underlined the impression of intelligence radiating from his steely eyes. Standing ahead of his officers, he waited for his superiors to land.

Rayla studied the soldiers rather than their commanders. They were clearly battleworn, a great many of them looked winded and underfed. Regardless, discipline was excellent, the armor and weapons clean.

As a response to the ‘present arms’ command, the pikemen were pointing their polearms upwards from the edge of their boots at a perfect fifteen-degree angle. It was a means of showing respect to the arriving royalty.

“Sir Callum?”, the man said and saluted smartly when they were in speaking range. It was immediately obvious that he was rather more malnourished than everyone else around him.

“Major Asier, is it? I know you’ve been stationed away from home for a while, so let me introduce Lady Rayla, the future Crown Princess.”
“Charmed, Milady. I’ve made good experiences with your people in the DMZ and am happy to finally meet your Majesty in the flesh”, said Asier and bowed.

Rayla’s eyes narrowed. This greeting, delivered in the rolling ‘r’s and airy ‘s’s of the maritime dialect sounded sincere.

Surprised, Callum let her take charge as she pointed eastward, “Thanks for the welcome. Did you clock a guy in the head and burn down a few houses this-a-way?”

“We had to ply the villagers. I didn’t like having to do it, but it’s better to have two groups go hungry than watching my column be wasted by starvation.”

“What happened to all the supplies we sent after ye lot?”, barked Rayla.

Asier sighed and started turning his helmet in his hands. “My company has been in the field since this conflict started. We’ve not been able to take on any shipments as we’ve been engaged with rebels near Bonaventure. We’re on our way to Port-Cartier, Milady, to resupply.”

“What?”, scoffed Rayla, “Why were you so far out from the supply lines, Major? What was yer quartermaster’s opinion?”

“We were dragged out of position, Ma’am, trying to snuff out a cell of rebels. As for the quartermaster, she was killed in action.”

“Ah”, went the elf, suddenly feeling annoyed at herself for asking the question to brashly.

She couldn’t hold on to the mollifying emotion right now though. Edmée’s face swam on her mind and the resulting anger was too strong. “So, what were your thoughts on supplies when you saw that you were gonna be out there longer than you had planned for?”

“I failed to have any, Ma’am. I relied on Quartermaster Terese to make those decisions. When she died, it became a blind spot that I failed to address. To make matters worse, the rebels captured one of our last stocked supply carts. I withdrew. I should have done so sooner. My mistake”, the Major said, his voice rough, “I was overextended.”
“You could’ve also sent us a raven, Major”, said Callum.

“Quartermaster Terese’s cart held the animals. They were all lost in the same ambush.”

“How much stuff did you steal from that village?”, asked Rayla.

“As I said, the bare minimum to hopefully get us to Port-Cartier. I have foraging parties out to supply us with more food and water and sent a few scouts ahead to hopefully get suppliers from Cartier to meet us half-way.”

“All that still doesn’t explain why there are two smoldering ruins. I’d guess burning down one house would be more than enough to make your point”, said Callum angrily.

“I can only agree”, Asier said and grabbed his helmet tighter, “A group of soldiers decided to go back for seconds on their own accord, unhappy with the prospect of quarter-rations for a few days.”

“I can see their problem!”, spat Rayla, “These people are under yer command, but they’re also in yer care, Major! You failed them, not makin’ sure they had enough food to march on!”

The soldier hung his head. “Yes, Ma’am.”

Callum bent forwards in his saddle. “Who were the soldiers who left the for--”

“Callum, no”, said Rayla quietly, “Don’t ask that.”

Her summand sat up and blinked at her. “Why not?”

He had done this quite a few times during his rule. What was her issue with it?

“Chain of command. We’re responsible for him. He’s responsible for them. We talk to him. He
“talks to them.”

“Why?”, asked Callum.

“Later”, said Rayla.

“They’ve already been punished, Sire”, said Asier quietly.

“Right, punishment!”, sighed Rayla, “Do I have a free hand here or...?”

“ You’re the princess”, said her fiancee confusedly and nodded, “Just keep it... non-corporeal, yeah?”

“Duh”, went Rayla, then frowned, “Damnit, Callum what’s the rank below a Tribune in Katolis? It’s on the tip’r my tongue!”

“It’s `Captain ``”, replied the Prince.

“Thanks. Major Asier, you’re demoted to the rank of Captain ”, the elf told the soldier, “Is there anyone here who outranks you now?”

“No, Ma’am”, said the Captain, a frown etched into his features, “My second in command, Captain Iban, fell defending the aforementioned supply cart. We’ve also lost two of my closest Lieutenants.”

“Whoever’s next in line here, step forward”, shouted Rayla.

A young woman with short, curly black hair and brown eyes stepped forward. On her uniform was a pin that sported a yellow design familiar to Callum. “Lieutenant Second Class Carola di Vedevichi, Ma’am.”

“Carola. Your great aunt wouldn’t be happy if she knew I met you without giving you her regards”, Callum smiled, “She’s bound to be proud of your achievements so far.”
“Thank you S-Sire”, the Lieutenant replied nervously, “I’m ha-happy to do my part in whatever i-it is you need.”

“How old are you, Lieutenant?”, asked Rayla with narrowing eyes.

“Seventeen, Ma’am.”

The future Princess turned to Callum, “If she’s a second Lieutenant, she’s been at this for a bit - isn’t this sorta kinda illegal? Child soldier and all that?”

“My dad mostly just didn’t want the army drafting the children of peasants”, the Prince replied sadly, “She’s a noble, from house Vedevis. Arntraud’s people make it a point to enlist early.”

“Ma’am, if I may, I’ve worked hard for this rank”, blubbered Carola, “Did you yourself not join the Assassins at a much younger age?”

“How do you know about that?”, asked the elf grumpily.

“Well, Ma’am, we in the ranking staff took an interest to your history when it became clear that you might one day lead”, said Asier.

“Right. Sensible, I guess”, grumbled Rayla. She then sighed deeply and scanned Carola’s youthful face. The young Vedevisian looked stern, eager and the elf couldn’t help but see herself there, given how few years actually separated the two of them. If she had been able to lead her band of trainees on short stints to hunt for food in the cathedral forests of Scotia, this second Lieutenant could probably get her people walking in a straight line.

“Take your people to Port-Cartier, Carola. No detours. Don’t burn any more villages”, the elf ordered, then turned to Asier, “You, oan yer cuddly! You’re gonna have a word with those villagers!”

She turned her mount and rode to the center left of the column, where the eyes of the soldiers were on her.
“What’s a `Cuddy`, Sire?”, asked Asier confusedly.

“Your horse, Captain”, said Callum with a barely hidden smirk.

Then, he trotted after his summand, assuming a position slightly to the left and behind her. She was running this show and so far, he was nothing but impressed.

Whatever Amaya had imparted on his fiancee in the short week they had been together, it had stuck. Or maybe, this was just Rayla’s Xadian military training coming to the fore. Doubtless, the sheer amount of reading she had been doing since coming to Katolis played a part in her apparent confidence as well.

“Anyone here want to help fix the disgrace ye’ve all brought to yerself, yer comrades, Katolis and the uniform ye’re wearin’?!”, shouted Rayla, “It’ll be a solid bleedin’ job and you’ll probably be starvin’, but there’s reward comin’ for each and every person who steps forward now !”

Embarrassed silence hung over the company, but a few pikemen disengaged from the troop. They seemed especially flustered by the stares everyone threw their way and Rayla assumed that these were the culprits of the second instance of arson.

“Alright! All ye other folk, good marchin’ and stay safe! If the scouts havnae already, we’ll get someone at Port-Cartier to meet ye half-way!”

She saluted and the column followed suit. From ahead a somewhat insecure female voice shouted her first order. “Company! Report --- l-left! F-forward --- march!”

Their heads turned to face Callum and Rayla as long as was possible, the column continued ahead.

Asier and his four remaining soldiers looked forlorn in the landscape and Callum felt pity for the already under-fed looking men and women.

Rayla apparently had the same impulse as she pulled out some hard-tack from her saddle bag and handed each of them a packet. It looked like she was giving away most of her own supply.
“We’re gonna go back to that village now”, she said sternly, “Where you lot will help them rebuild the houses you’ve burned down. When you’re done with that, I want you to report to Port-Cartier. Understood?”

Asier nodded and eyed his packet of dry bread. He tore it open and passed a slice to each of the soldiers, leaving him with only two for himself.

“This is my mistake. I should be lucky to survive it.”

“Eat yer horse if ye have tae, ye big drama sponge”, hissed Rayla.

Her and Callum trailed slightly behind the marching soldiers who were slowly eating as they walked.

“You seem pretty mad”, said the Prince.

“After seein’ how those villagers live? Ye bet yer cute ass I’m mad at this loser who ‘parently canny read a supply report!”

Callum smirked. “Is this your elven sense of paperwork rearing its ugly head?”

“Wasn’t so ugly tae ye when you needed me to fill them out in the first place”, she smirked wryly.

“ **Shocker**, the dumb artsy-fartsy Prince can’t do math”, grumbled Callum.

"It’s not that you *can’t*, dummy. It’s that you *don't want to*."

"Heh. Its hard knowing the difference sometimes. So, um, what about that whole `chain of command` thing?"

Rayla looked into the distance. “Back when I was a trainee, they’d group us kids up and send us on
a week’s survival trainin’ every half-year. Group would pick a leader. Shocker, as Runaan’s charge I got picked a lot. One time, one of my bandmates messed up and almost got us all killed. Tried to hunt a banther kitten, the daft arse.”

Callum cringed.

“Aye, that’s the face”, smiled Rayla, “So when we get back to the meeting place, Runaan starts givin’ me a lecture and I’m all like ‘whit’s yer issue, he messed up!’”

She now looked a little forlorn, the memory clearly affected her. “Runaan said that... since I know the boy and we’ve fought, hunted together, him and I have somethin’ more connectin’ us than Runaan and him. Runaan and I have rapport, he knows I could’ve done better. He doesn’t have rapport with the idiot lad and doesn’t know squat about what’s normal for him. Same here. We weren’t there in the moment, so we shouldn’t act like we know what would’ve been best. We can hold their commander to a higher standard, but not them.”

She stayed silent for a while, then added with a smirk, “Also... we’re so much higher up in rank than the enlisted folk... Amaya said, the taller the seat, the harder the shite splatters.”

Her Prince snorted loud enough to make the soldiers ahead perk up.

Evening had come when they arrived back at the village. The crowd of peasants assembled again and was apparently poised to pummel the Katolin soldiers they recognized. Apparently the only thing barely keeping them at bay was their thoroughly superstitious fear of Rayla.

“Edmée!”, Callum yelled, “Where is Edmée?”

It didn’t look as though the woman was around. Even if she was nearby, the crowd didn’t move to find her. A pickle, to be sure. Without her, there wasn’t a way to talk to the villagers.

Carefully, Callum and Rayla withdrew their band further back down the street.

“Great”, said the elf with an annoyed look in the village’s direction, “Guess we’re campin’ out here for the night.”
“Ma’am, if you permit the comment, I’m worried to enter the village. Who’s to say we won’t be lynched?”, asked Asier.

“Should’ve thought of that sooner”, replied Rayla.

Callum lightly tapped her arm and said, "Can I talk to you for a sec?"

When they were out of earshot of the soldiers, the Prince looked over his shoulder to make sure that they were still sitting on the ground looking miserable, then whispered, "Look. I get that you're mad, and rightfully so, but you could stand to be a little nicer. We're not going to leave them to face mob justice here, are we?"

"Course not", smiled his summand, "But he doesn't need to know that. He messed up, big time."

"Everyone makes mistakes. You demoted him already. Punishment needs to be fair."

"Fair?!", hissed Rayla under her breath, "Dummy, the guy burned someone's house and knocked a man unconscious!"

"Yep. If this was Katolis and he was a civilian, I'd have him locked up. But, this is a warzone and they were desperate for food and water. You said it yourself, he's responsible for the wellbeing of his soldiers. I think he knows that, which is why he did what he did. You have to factor that in."

"A crime is a crime, don't make excuses for him! If he had withdrawn sooner, none of this would've happened!"

“If I wouldn’t have sent them here, none of this would’ve happened, either.”

Rayla crossed her arms. “You feel responsible.”

“Duh, of course I do! I thought I was, according to what you said about the chain of command! Why aren’t you taking me to task? I keep telling you, if bad things happen on my watch, I feel that! I’m still not even sure if they should be here, fighting the people of Evenere who kicked out a ruler they didn’t agree with!”
His summand studied him, then sighed through her nose. “Ok. I see what you’re sayin’. He’s got enough punishment for now, I suppose, given the circumstances.”

“Thank you”, said Callum and kissed his Princess.
Callum woke. At first he didn’t know why, but a moment later he felt four fingers in his pants, searching.

Smirking, he cleared his throat.

Next to him in the dark, Rayla snorted into the bend of her elbow. “Almost time to get up, dummy. Thought A’d make it more fun fer ye...”

“You’ve been pretty aggressive lately.”

“And that’s a problem, is it?”, said the elf and withdrew her hand.

“No, but isn’t that one of the signs o--”

She climbed halfway over his hips and bent over to silence him with a kiss. “Ssshhhhhut uuuup! I’m a confident young woman in love, nothin’ more.”

Her protestations once more left doubt in his chest, but he wasn’t about to test his luck.

He moved to kiss her and sat up. This actually imbalanced her, making her flail as she dropped forwards to this left side. She came to a not-so-graceful rest on her belly and snorted into the ground.

“Bit’r warnin’ next time?!!”

“Warning?”, he asked playfully, then swung himself across the small of her back and sat to keep his Princess pinned while he tickled her sides.

She struggled against him, but the weakness of laughter and weight kept her from successfully shaking him off.
“A’m goin’ to feckin’ k---kill ye if --- ye d-don’t take y---er grabbers off!”, she gasped with suppressed giggles.

“I can put them elsewhere”, he smirked and ran his right into her underpants, over her butt and between her slightly parted legs.

“Ah! Callum!! ”, protested his summand under him and kicked her legs.

“What? What’s the problem?”, he said and leaned sideways to whisper, “You’re pretty soaked... had a few nice dreams?”

“Eep, don’t say - ah! - stuff like that! That’s so --dirty !”, squeaked the elf, “There’s soldiers outsi- --de!”

“Oh! Oh, are there really?!”, whispered Callum, “If that’s a problem, then why was your hand in my pants ?”

She snorted into the ground again but seemed to have no answer beyond a quiet gasp of enjoyment.

Even though she knew that nobody was going to just waltz in on them, a certain fear of discovery made her heart thrum against her chest. With intent, he caressed and nudged all the spots he was starting to know so well.

“Ah... yes! J-just... a little more”, she breathed and felt herself rise against his grip, her toes digging into the soft ground below the tent. She bit her lower lip in anticipation of bliss.

Callum withdrew and wiped his fingers on her underwear on the way out.

“Let’s save it for when we’re actually alone, fawn”, he whispered, barely able to keep a slightly sadistic grin off his face.

She gasped. “No! No way! That’s so evil , dafty!”
“Let this be a lesson for you not to start what you can’t finish”, he smirked and got off her back.

Rayla rolled over, laughing frustratedly as she came to rest on her back. “Oof. 'Can't finish' is right! Ah... ye big jerk! A'm so... flustered !”

“I can tell”, he grinned.

With an impatient grunt, she pulled down her pants and moved to push her own fingers inside herself, but Callum was over her at once, grabbing her wrist.

“Whyyy?!”, she whined breathily, actually a little upset. He had stopped in the exact instant that had promised to unravel the tight, throbbing knot in her core. It was painfully pulling at her from the inside now, crackling with electric dissatisfaction.

Safe to say she didn’t like this game.

“ You’re not allowed”, he cooed and brought her wet fingers to his lips, “You’ve toyed so much with me lately, I feel like I need to make up for all that work you’ve put in.”

The blush on his face as he sucked them was too adorable for her to really be mad at him. “Eww! Really?! I’ve been days without a bath! Damn ye, Crown Prince Awful! What’r ye doin’ tae yer lovin’ summand?”

“Oh... You’ll find out... later ”, he smirked with a charged smile that made her blush even harder, “Let’s get this day started, hm?”

Rayla felt as though she wanted to strangle the man who would leave her hanging like this. The errant thought turned her stomach though, for how real his blue, dead face still was in her mind’s eye. She swallowed heavily.

A few minutes later they had dressed for the day and were breaking camp. The soldiers in their single-person tents were still asleep which suited the royals just fine given that it meant a few more minutes of personal time.
“I’ve been mulling this over”, said Callum as he dug into his breakfast which consisted of a fresh carrot, a couple of hard-boiled eggs and hard-tack, “We should stay here for today. Help them rebuild. As I said, I feel kinda responsible and I also wanna show these people that not all royals are aloof pieces of work.”

“You totally are, though”, smiled Rayla and ruffled his hair, “Sounds like a plan. Maybe it’ll also help people get a grip on themselves over this whole elf thin’’”

"Here's to hoping, anyway. Edmée better be back from whatever she was doing."

The two nobles shared a few more rations with the soldiers who were out of their minds over relatively fresh vegetables. Callum felt confident that him and Rayla would be able to restock their supplies in or around La Dorée, no matter the Rebels' attitudes.

While the pikes ate, the Prince, future Princess and Captain Asier made their way to the village.

For a change, there was no mob waiting for them. Out in the fields, people could be seen ripping weeds out of the ground. Rayla noticed how few people there actually were compared to the houses and used farm land. She surmised that a lot of them had been drafted into the army at this point.

In town, they found the remaining villagers busy removing the rubble of the burnt houses.

"Edmée?", Callum asked a distracted man with a blackened wooden stud on his shoulder.

The peasant looked up, found Rayla and froze in place. With an expression of fear, he shakily pointed at Edmée's burned workshop with his free hand.

"Thanks, maybe", smiled the Prince and set out for the ruins.

They found their contact busy stripping the branches off a tree. She startled when the group turned the corner.
"Sacre bleu?! You actually come back!", she exclaimed and put down her hatchet to dust herself off, "They told me you were here while we were hunting. Before you get angry - Thanks to you, we didn't have much choice. Our grain is not ready to be taken out of the earth and we were counting on our stores. The land is empty from war."

"Hunting, eh?", said Rayla in an attempt to be friendly, "Anythin' good?"

Edmée laughed joylessly. "Right, I would make sure to tell you."

The elf was a little affronted. This felt like a verbal slap.

"They'd be in a lot of trouble with the nobles here if they poached anything from these forests", said Callum in explanation.

"What?!", exclaimed the future Princess, "How is that fair? They live here, don't they?"

Callum gave her his patented `tread-lightly-here` frown. Probably not a good idea to inspire anger in the people loyal to their supposed allies.

"Oui bien!", went the carpenter with a sigh and turned to Asier, "I see you have brought Mayoor connard back with you."

"We did, yes. Here's Captain Asier, ready to make amends."

The Captain stepped forward awkwardly and said, "I have made many mistakes that left my soldiers hungry. I made you pay for it. Please, accept my sincere apologies."

"No thanks", hissed Edmée, "Words are not repair these hou--"

"We're here to help rebuild them, if you'll have us", said Callum, "It's the least we can do."

The woman gave him a look as though he wasn’t real. “Pardon? You are offering your help? Or his?”
“Ours. We have four more soldiers waiting to help outside the palisades”, said Callum, “As I said, we’re not going to let this stand. Katolis isn’t here to step on you, Edmée.”

A good minute passed as the carpenter simply stared at Callum, her eyes narrowing. Rayla thought she could see the wheels turning in the peasant’s mind.

“So you are expecting to be fed? Or paid?”, she asked eventually.

“Nope”, said Rayla.

“Oh”, went Edmée.

Then she started laughing. Wheezing, the Eveneran leaned on a nearby sawhorse.

"Katolin royals! With horns! Building a peasant house! Le monde est à l'envers!"

A few confused onlookers were assembling around them and Rayla eyed them distrustfully, a look they returned with abject fear whenever their gazes met. A strange mixture of confidence and annoyance hit the elf. It was nice to be respected, but she would have preferred if that respect wasn’t born of fear.

When Edmée had recovered, she took a moment to fill in the present folk who seemed equally bewildered at the prospect of having a literal Prince offer his own hands for help. A few argued, from their gestures it was obvious that Rayla’s presence upset them. Edmée eventually silenced them.

Just like that, work resumed. The Katolins removed their ornate coats and most of their weapons to be able to work through the growing summer heat.

“Alright”, said Callum, addressing his not-so-merry little band, “Edmée said that we’re best used as carriers, so if you have to lift something extremely heavy, call me over. I’ll make things lighter on you. Let’s get to work.”
The four pikes and their Captain nodded and together they all trudged over to where a few villagers were busy scouring the woods for suitable trees to make posts and joists.

The day passed insanely quickly for how monotonous the work was. Thanks to Ratis, the Katolins made short work of even the heaviest trees.

They were so quick that by mid-day, when the villagers were sitting down to have some lunch, Edmée had all the logs she would need stacked in a neat pile next to where her workshop once sat. Nothing but a black smudge remained of it on the packed dirt.

Callum made sure the Soldiers and Asier still had some food left. It wouldn’t feel comfortable to eat while they starved. Him and Rayla were themselves going through the last of their own rations. They had meant to last them all week.

The locals had gathered in the middle of the village where someone had set a pot on a good-sized firepit. In it bubbled a simple grain-and-water slurry that smelled and tasted like slightly sweet mud.

Not that anyone was eager eager to invite the Katolins to try it.

Listening to the laughter and talk coming from the villagers made Rayla wistful. This had been her life for four years. In some ways it was hard not to miss it a little. Her social circle had shrunk markedly.

“What’s wrong?”, asked Callum quietly.

“Oh, um... just thinkin’ about Arrias. Zala hasnae answered yet.”

“Neither has Taog. You think they’re okay?”

“Arrows flew, didn’t they?”

“Fair enough.”
Then, the Villagers started singing. It was a simple, happy one, the words obviously totally unrecognizable to the Katolins. Still, hearing so many voices raised in song always had an effect.

Callum brushed some dirt and pieces of bark off his naked shoulder and Rayla felt her stomach lurch. The elf’s eyes automatically tracked over her summand’s toned arms. To his muscular chest, visible through the neck and arm of his undershirt. To his lips, slightly parted in thought or wonder. Their gaze met and he smiled sweetly, glad to have her attention.

Her cheeks flushed and she decided to quickly have the rest of her cheese and hard-tack. It wouldn’t do to show that sort of emotion around others.

The feeling of hollow need from this morning returned full-force and Rayla tried to steer her mind away from it.

Her Prince casually leaned over and started to pet her thigh, running his hand along the inside of them surreptitiously. He knew what he was doing, the jerk. Worse, he smelled of sweat.

Worse yet?

She found she liked it.

How could one person be so soft and raunchy at the same time?!

The villagers ended their song and Callum smirked at his summand. “Wanna pull out that singing voice of yours and show them up?”

While she understood why he suggested it, frisson at once spilled over her. The idea of drawing the attention of these people who obviously didn’t like her very much didn’t appeal to her.

Callum saw the hesitation in her mien. “You can always beat them up if they get uppity.”

It made her snort, that sentence. “Awright. But only if you sing, too.”
“Uh!”, went the Prince, suddenly seeming not so sure, “What song?”

“Why don’t we just do ’Plume of Feathers’? That’s a Common one?”

“I know it”, nodded Callum and cleared his throat hesitantly.

Smirking at him, she hummed the first note until he started the first verse and she joined in with the words.

Find me this morning
Bathing in the sun’s first rays.
Chase me and love me
This night I will have gon’ away.

Rayla tried not to look around, but from the silence that she could hear in the breaks of their song it was clear that people were listening, probably staring, too. This way, she could always hope that the looks they were getting were friendly smiles.

Follow me further
Away through hill and dale.
There we’ll falter
And hide away from work.

The soldiers fell in now, too, taking some of the awkwardness away. Luckily, the enthusiasm they brought didn’t wane until the song ended.

There wasn’t any applause this time, just an excited jumble of speech.

“Well”, smiled Asier, “Majesties, I’ve not heard such tones since I’ve left home. Thank you, you have successfully made me miss my wife and children.”
“Uh... sorry?”, said Callum awkwardly.

“It’s not something to apologise for. In the field, I don’t allow myself to become too wistful. It clouds the mind”, he scoffed, “For all the good it did...”

Three Villagers approached and Edmée, who was with them, nodded at the Katolins in greeting.

“A beautiful song. I hope I can remember it. Thank you for it and all your help so far. This was very fast, you are very good workers.”

“As I said, it’s the least we could do”, smiled Callum, “Is there something you need?”

“These two here, Albert and Collete, want to ask you to help with the cutting. Euh... cutting the wood into the right shape?”

“Sure!”, said Callum and rose, “Time to get back to work, everyone. Edmée, can you help them find something to do?”

“Oh, naturellement!”, smirked Edmée dangerously, “You can help weed the fields, or...”

Not stopping to listen, the Prince followed the two Evenerans.

Rayla also got up and dusted off her pants. As she brushed over her thighs where his hand had just rested, a semi-angry smirk crept into her mien.

She closed with her summand and planted a kiss on his cheek. Close to his ear, she hummed, “Ye are all kinds’r evil. A would’ve never thought!”

“Yep, yep. Full of surprises”, murmured the Prince, the corners of his mouth twitching, “But not as full as you’ll be when I’m done with you”
She froze in place, the boldness of the statement entirely unexpected. After a moment, she closed again and boxed his shoulder, perhaps a little harder than intended. “What’s gotten inty ye?!”, she whispered incredulously, her cheeks flushed once more.

“Me? I told you! This morning was the last straw! I’m just sick of being in your thrall all the time, I wanna be in charge for once.”

She shook her head, smirk-pouting. “Ye have no idea how bad A’m wantin’ to be `thralled` at this point, O Prince!”

They arrived at their place of work and Callum took in the gigantic, rusty drag saw they were supposed to operate, two people on one side, two on the other.

Rayla eyed it with worry. This was going to be a back-breaking job, if the tool would even hold up to it.

“I’m going to try something here”, he said and limbered up his hands. He waved the Evenerans aside who were more than just a little confused.

Drawing Ratis, he touched one of the tree trunks that had already had their branches removed. Like this, the massive log weighed close to nothing and Rayla helped him position it securely on three sturdy looking saw horses.

The villagers seemed confused. Technically, it should have taken all four of them to do this.

At the cut ends, someone had drawn guidelines to mark out the required shapes they were looking to get from the piece of wood. Callum rubbed his hands together. Deftly, he drew Aspiro with a much harsher upward curve which expanded into a circle. With the rune glowing before him, he touched the edge of his hand to the bark, aligning it with one of the coal-drawn lines.

“Aspiro taverit”, he activated. Magical breath filled his lungs. As he blew, the air spiraled down his arm, then coursed along the middle of his outstretched hand. The high pressure of the focussed wind cut easily through the wood, throwing sawdust and splinters every which way on the opposite end. Not ten seconds later, a slice of wood clattered to the ground.

The villagers stared. Then Collete turned around and repeatedly yelled, “Edmée! Edmée!”
While she was looking for the carpenter, Callum made short work of the tree.

The commotion was once again attracting people's attention. And when Edmée joined the group, everyone was ooooh-ind and aaahh-ing whenever Callum finished another cut.

Rayla was busy stacking the resulting dimensional lumber. The elf couldn't help but feel proud of her smart mage and relief at not having to try their luck with the grizzly saw. Whether it was because they were distracted by his magic, appreciated their song or the help she had provided, the looks Rayla caught from the crowd were more often unsure rather than hostile or afraid.

"We've heard of magie noire, but to see it...," gaped Edmée, "I thought it would be... more afraid-making."

"It's primal magic", smirked Rayla as Callum continued his work, "It's not gonna be scary unless you need it to be."

It didn't seem as though this meant anything to Edmée.

Evening came in a hurry and in the end, they had just barely started working on the actual structure of the houses when it became too dark to do much of anything.

Besides, everyone was exhausted, first and foremost Callum who had expended himself thoroughly with magic.

Since there was no more food in the royal’s bags, the two of them set out to find something edible in the surrounding area, making a point of going the opposite direction of the pikes who were doing the same. Success wasn’t likely so close to a permanent settlement, but it sure beat sitting around with a growling stomach.

The marshy landscape was bathed in a dusty orange glow and Callum started reminiscing about their travels in Xadia. His train of thought was eventually torn to shreds by his growling stomach.

Callum groaned. “Hoooh boy, this is awful. Me and my big mouth! We shouldn’t have given so much food away...”
“Poor dafty”, smiled Rayla, “This is probably worse for you than it is for me. Doubt you ever went hungry like this.”

“Yeah no”, admitted Callum, “Can confirm, am pampered Princeling. Funny, didn’t even starve in Xadia, thanks to a certain someone knowing every edible thing there is.”

“Well lucky for you, that certain someone…”, said Rayla and crouched, pulling him down with her, “… sees a rabbit over there.”

“A rabbit-- Rayla, what? You’re going hunting?”

“My bad conscience beats you bein’ hungry”, she said.

“No! No, it doesn’t!”, squeaked Callum, “If we won’t have food for two days I might rethink that, but no! Don’t kill the rabbit!”

Sighing, she embraced him and kissed the top of his head. “Just don’t want you to suffer.”

He snorted into her chest. “Suffer!? I’ve had worse, and I mean that. Let’s keep looking, okay? There have to be some sort of edibles around here somewhere.”

After an hour of foraging, they had just enough to find relief from the gnawing sensation. It was an eclectic meal of small mushrooms, a bundle of herbs, a barely ripe wild apple and some grainy tasting nuts off a bush that Rayla identified as edible using her book. It didn’t look as though the villagers had taken any of it which was strange considering that they had eaten even the cat-tails growing near the river.

When they had finished eating, Callum heaved a deep sigh. “We need to move on tomorrow. Get to La Dorée.”

“So, we’re leavin’ the boneheads here?”, asked Rayla and picked a sharp piece of appleseed out of her teeth.
“Yeah. I talked to Edmée and she agreed to give them a meal a day starting tomorrow, to keep them going. It’s not much better than what they would’ve gotten on the road.”

“I see why ye told me to dial back the anger a little”, admitted Rayla, “This really sucks. We at least get to go where there’s actual food.”

“Ah, um... I don’t know that, I just hope so. Might be that the capital is totally exhausted”, he yawned, “Woafh... just like me.”

He crawled into Rayla’s arms and snuggled his cheek into hers, savouring the smooth, if dirty, texture of it.

A moment, he rested. Then a smirk spread on his lips.

“I owe you a thralling .”

She snickered. “Disnae have to be tonight, daf--”

He pushed against her, toppling her over to the ground, which here, next to the coursing river, was mossy and plush.

“You want to?”, he asked, his voice a low coo.

She snorted. “Ye have not the faintest how bad A want ye right now, ye bawheaded tease!”

“Didn’t you just tell me how important it was to dial back the anger?”, snickered Callum and ran his hands over her dirty undershirt, then dipped below it to trace her bra to the point between her shoulder blades where their clasp sat. With a slight jolt, it came apart and Rayla’s breath sped.

“A was watchin’ you all day”, she smiled and pet his face and back, “bein’ all sweaty and muscly and magicky... teasy... dirty .”

“You liked that, did you?”, he snickered, “I admit, I felt a little mean.”
“Oh, you were”, replied Rayla as she started pulling her undershirt and bra over her head.

“No sense in stopping now!”, he said and tickled her sides.

She burst out laughing. Rolling around, she tried to get him to relent and to lose the restraining garments, but he only stopped when she was on her stomach again.

“I thought it'd be right to pick this up where we ended it”, he snickered, sat in the small of her back and kissed her neck. He started tugging her pants down.

“Eep!”, she went, “It’s actually kinda coolish like that!”

“Don’t worry”, snickered Callum, “You’ll get warm in just a second.”

He wet his index and middle finger and slipped them inside her.

She groaned happily.

Once again, his deft strokes were just right and she was glad to feel the release she had missed so badly this morning approach with incredible speed.

“Callum”, she purred, “A love ye, even if ye’re a huge jerk...”

“Huge jerk!?”, exclaimed her Prince and withdrew his fingers, “Insult after insult here, sheesh!”

“Did ye seriously just take yer fingers oot again!?”, she laughed, but her breath hitched in surprise.

“That’s not yer...? Eep-it-is, ah!”, she gasped as Callum slid into her. His hand, still slippery, came around her hips to lift them up a little for a better angle.
Cupping her lap, he applied gentle, round motion to her.

This moment was nothing but white-hot bliss for Rayla. With effort, she pushed herself backwards, taking him whole, faster than she had thought possible. Shuddering, she clawed at the soft ground, her mouth open in a silent cry of pain and all-consuming lust.

Callum watched as his summand writhed in his grasp. His only regret was that he couldn’t see her face. Still, here was the payoff for all the scheming he had done all day.

When Rayla regained a sense of reality, she started laughing incredulously. “A... canny... believe... how... insane that was!”, she gasped and shuddered again, a mere echo of the main event.

“Dafty! Gads!”, she laughed breathily, “A think - nhh - A fainted for a sec there! D-day’s worth of teasin’, worth it!”

“I’m glad you liked it”, he said gently and bent forward to massage her shoulders, then ran his hands over her defined ribs and finally grabbed her butt.

Then, he started to thrust.

Rayla was already getting over-stimulated. The insane crackle between her legs reduced her to shambles, making her lose any notion of self-control. Her entire focus rested on his even, smooth strokes, rippling through her.

Relief of a strange sort washed over her. The past days had brought with them a sense of great power she had never experienced before, but also one of accountability. She loved her Prince so much and was glad to release any responsibility she held in this moment into his capable hands. His teasing, grabbing, squeezing and circling hands. This was a great way to de-stress.

With every forward motion of his hips, he felt her soft curves’ impact, saw the play of muscle and sinew in her straining back. It was a display of the peak of anatomical mechanics, one that he would draw in some detail at a later date.

Every coo and moan she let him hear brought him a sense of satisfaction as it was near impossible for her to do much - so everything she felt was his doing.
The actual feeling of her around him wasn’t much, she was so slick that there was barely any friction for him to feel anything.

“Gee, I’m kinda jealous. You look l-like you’re having th-the time of your l-life... feeling th-thrallled yet?”, he panted and she laugh-keened as answer.

She lifted her hips off the ground and extended a hand downward between her legs to caress his crotch. The fact that she could do this didn’t surprise the Prince - What did surprise him was how good it felt, to have her wet heat on one end and teasing, cold, slender fingers on the other.

“Rayla…”, he breathed.

She felt him twitch and gripped him carefully. He thrust slower and slower.

“ Rayla ?”, he whimpered and she tightened her grasp slightly.

" Rayla !?", he groaned intensely, then jolted forward which drove him deep inside her.

There was a feeling of fullness building in her, one that she had missed the last time in the forest. His texture and detail was washed out by liquid. There was his voice, moaning her name again, this time in adorable, high-pitched bliss.

He drew a sharp breath, moved backward to get out of her grasp, withdrew and a thin jet of burning hot liquid splattered on her back.

“Ah, fuck!”, he swore.

He collapsed on her back and wrapped his arms around her to cup her breasts. Under his weight, she sunk to the moss and took a moment to simply breathe.

“Phheewww”, went Callum and nuzzled the nape of her neck.
“Good Prince”, cooed Rayla.

“Dumb Prince”, countered her summand, sounding vaguely sour, “I... kinda did the thing again.”

“Ye didn’t just kinda do the thing”, laughed his summand, “Ye made a bawfin’ mess, is what ye did! Why’d ye even bother pullin’ oot at all? All that did was spread thin’s around!”

He groaned and rolled off her, leaving a sensation of cold, wet slickness on her back. “I wanted out, but you held me there!”

“Excuses, excuses! A didnae hold on with any sort’r force”, smiled Rayla smugly and turned on her side so she could pet him, "Ye like doin’ it. Don’t lie."

"I do, and that you held me... was super hot ", the Prince's hands came up to rub his face. "Fffuuuuuck", he groaned painfully.

There was no point in trying to dissuade him from worrying. She herself couldn’t get herself to. At the same time, it was hard to feel anything but bliss after so much relief and anything but defiance toward her own body. The numbers were firmly on her side. Maybe it was just her elven sense of paperwork, but she trusted the numbers.

Hence, she snuggled up to him and rested her cheek on his wet, dirty chest. “We’re pretty nasty, but A canny get myself tae care...”

His hand came up to stroke her horns gently, from tip to base. It was an almost painful sensation, given how sensitive she was at the moment.

After a few minutes, his arms slacked and regular breathing showed her that he had passed out.

“Pfweh!”, she went bemusedly and he jolted awake.

“Ouh...”, he groaned, “I’m sorry, fawn... I think we need to get cleaned up so I can collapse somewhere near our tent instead.”
A moment later, she had helped him onto his feet. The river was nearby, so this would be simple. For him, at least.

“River?”, he asked drowsily.

“Aye”, said Rayla, mindful not to drip on their discarded clothes.

Callum carefully slipped into the cold stream, looking for a safe footing. It was about knee-high here, so it wasn’t too bad.

“Alright, I’m ready fo--”, he started but she was already next to him, looking puzzled in what little light remained of the day.

“Oh! Um, uh, thanks, dafty, but I’ve gotten much better about the whole water thin’”, she smiled and started washing herself.

He followed suit. The revelation that she had, in fact, changed a little in four years brought the relative recency of their meeting back to the fore.

“Last time we bathed in a river together... that was... right before we saw the dragon queen.”

His summand nodded slowly. “Aye. I recall that. We’d just heard about Ez, too, so everythin’ was a mess.”

The river’s water was cold, but not unpleasantly so after the day’s heat.

“Hey, Rayla?”, said Callum quietly.

“Mh?”, she prompted and paused her wash.

“Thank you for being there in the worst moments of my life. In so many ways, you’ve been the
best part of it all... there’s so much stuff I remember well because of you. I lost a huge part of my childhood to negative feelings because my parents died... but everything after meeting you... is just a lot more hopeful, even though some of it was awful."

In the dark twilight, he saw her glistening body shudder slightly.

When she didn’t answer, he added sheepishly, “So, uh, in not so many words? I love you.”

She sniffled and palmed at her eyes. “Dafty! Ye c-canny just make me white-out, pump me full’r cum and th-then make me s-sob! It disnae fit!”

He wheezed and embraced her, pressing a kiss to her wet lips. “Sorry to be so inconsistent. Just... yeah. I’m getting weirdly nostalgic around this time of year.”

“A love ye tae bits, ye big, dumb human”, she whispered and sniffled again, not quite sure why she had gotten so emotional.

They stood in the river and kissed for so long that the goose-skin they both developed in the night air was dry when they left the rushing water behind.

When they walked past the village gate, Edmée was just stepping through.

“Oh! Here you are!”, she exclaimed and waved them over, “I spoke with the others and they said you were going to find food. I do not think there is anything out there for you.”

“We did find a few thin’s”, groused Rayla, “Not a whole lot, but enough to not feel hollow for tonight. There was this bush with nuts in it. Kinda grainy but, eh.”

“Nuts?”, went Edmée critically.

Rayla showed her the drawing on the plant.

“Oh. It is food?”, asked the villager, “We did not know and nobody was brave enough to try.”
Callum frowned. “Can anyone here read?”

“Euh... I don’t think so?”

“Okay. Well”, sighed the Prince, “Have this. For the soldiers’ rations and maybe a book if you find that someone can.”

He handed her a few golden Merlons which she took into the palms of her hands. “Mais, Monsieur!”, she exclaimed, “This is too much! You cannot help and pay!”

“It’s fine, Edmée”, smiled Rayla.

The villager scoffed, whipped around and stomped inside the village proper.

“Interestin’ reaction?”, the elf blinked.

Callum yawned. “Yeah well, I’m going to keel over now.”

With that, he turned to go, but Rayla grabbed his sleeve. Edmée was coming back, and she was holding a loaf of bread along with a small satchel.

“Here, take it!”, spat the Eveneran, “I cannot take this much without giving something back!”

If they hadn’t been as hungry, they might have turned her offer down, but like this, they had nothing but thanks for her.

“Do not thank me”, smiled Edée, “We aren’t noble and you have brought... euh... sunshine into our lives. Please, go safely.”

With that, she left them standing and vanished in her brother’s house.
“That was...”, said Rayla, sounding upset, “They’re such good people, dummy...”

“They can be”, agreed her summand, “I think we did our job here. What did she actually give you, there?”

Hungrily, Rayla opened the satchel, then froze. “Oh. I think this is dried meat.”

“Whew”, went Callum and swung the bread, “Weapons’ grade.”

They frowned at their food, looked at each other, then started laughing.

Rayla wheezed, “Look at us bawfin’ snobs!”
Amaya sat atop a watchtower that still bore all the signs of a dragon attack. Four years hadn’t repaired molten, cracked stone. The structure wasn’t what she would call sound, but safety wasn’t the point. Up here, she was alone with her thoughts.

The general scanned the other side of the Breach, illuminated by the red of magma bubbling below. There was movement there, in the open.

A smirk stole into her features. For her, it wasn’t too long ago that this would be unthinkable. Subterfuge had ruled on both sides.

Stretching, Amaya felt pride in her nephews’ accomplishments bubble up in her chest. Sarai herself would be more than proud of who her sons had become, there was no doubt there.

Ezran was a King, through-and-through.

Callum was an accomplished diplomat and capable mage.

One of the distant figures seemed familiar. It was probably not Janai out there this early in the morning, but some other sunfire elf. At this distance it was hard to tell.

Amaya’s brows knitted. The Golden Knight had left her quarters with a simple apology when she had turned her down, the elf’s offer too startling to even consider in the moment. To her credit, Janai hadn't been awkward about being rejected at all.

Amaya's fingers started drumming on her greaves.

Janai, eh?

It had been almost a decade since she had let anyone get close. Gren didn't count. He was basically half her age and what she had with him ran deeper than any romance ever could. Not only had they fought together, he had also been her voice for over twelve years. At this point, he was basically another limb to her.
Her hands slapped the metal on her arms and she gritted her teeth. Gren had to be alive.

Had.

To.

Be.

He was technically a soldier and, as such, death was a calculated professional risk. However, Gren was a soul of a person who refused to carry a weapon, even for his own protection. Nothing bad should ever come upon him, he did not deserve it.

The freckle-face had to be alive. Otherwise, Amaya swore, she would personally tear Viren apart.

Being understanding, boyish and generally a ball of supercharged positivity, he'd have something helpful to say about her current predicament.

Wistful, she recalled the way Soren and him had looked at each other whenever the rare chance arose. If Gren had been, like her, locked in a coin, she would like nothing better than for those boys to meet again.

Was this an insensitive thought, given what Soren had just gone through?

The confusing part about being locked in time for four years was how people and the world changed so drastically in what, to her, felt like the blink of an eye. Soren’s grief - she understood it all too well. He had lived an entire life with his wife inside the time she had been suspended. It was hard to take in.

Sighing, the general wrested control from this train of thought that would inevitably lead to a familiar pain that still cut deep. She would love to hear her sister’s opinion on everything that had happened.
Sarai, being more of a homemaker than her, would also have some insight to share on love.

Romance hadn’t really ever been at the forefront of Amaya’s thinking at any point in time, but it wasn’t as though she had never toyed with the idea of running into someone one day.

And maybe holding on to them.

Did that someone really have to be an elf, though?

Amaya sat back, a sardonic smile on her lips. What would Callum say if he knew about that thought?

It was still so, so strange to see him kiss his horned fiancee. And not just because he, in some ways like Soren, had turned from 'young man' to just 'man' in an instant.

No matter what she had written in her last letter to Xadia, it was a little uncomfortable to actually see them interact. Rationally, Amaya knew that theirs was a good relationship. They had been through insane circumstances and even after years of not being able to see each other, they stuck together like magnets.

Still, the General had a hard time picturing herself in her Nephew’s shoes.

An elf …? Really?

Rayla had been an interesting addition to the family, to say the least. She had been attentive and serious after asking Amaya to explain Katolin military doctrine ahead of their mission to Evenere.

The strangest thing about her… what was the word? ‘Niece-in-law’?


The strangest thing about her niece-in-law was how un-strange she was. Calling her an elf almost seemed outlandish to Amaya, given what the word actually represented.
The general rose and started slowly pacing along the merlons of the tower.

Elves.

A menace at the border, baring their perfect teeth and letting anger bubble to the surfaces of their smooth skins in glowing hot magma.

Ah. There was some *bias* in those thoughts, wasn’t there?

Janai *was* intelligent. Full of fight. Mysterious and... well, *beautiful*.

Amaya bit her lower lip, frustrated with herself. If Rayla was not outwardly different from a human, would her and Callum’s relationship still seem weird?

If Janai wasn’t an elf, would she have rejected her attention?

It didn’t matter. They *were* elves, there was no way around this fact. They had a finger too few, wore horns and sported strange skin-tones.

But should the *fact* matter?

The General rubbed her chin.

Then, she started drumming on it.

Finally, she huffed and placed her right foot on the wall, to lean on her leg.

No?
No.

No!

No, it shouldn’t!

A person’s actions and intents ought to determine ones reaction to them, not who they loved, who they were and what they looked like.

There was something there. Respect. Trust, grown under difficult circumstances. A physical attraction. If she was human, Amaya realized, she would give her a chance.

So! The sunfire elf deserved a chance, at least.

An incredulous smirk snuck into Amaya’s features.

A chance, sure, but at a slower pace.

---

Rayla trudged through the bushes, back to where Callum was waiting for her. He was staring into the distance from the back of Isoros and only returned from whichever faraway places he had been thinking about when his princess put a foot into Andris' stirrups.

"How'd it go?", he asked.

A, mischievous smirk spread on Rayla's face. "Oh, I didnae have any trouble peein'! Thank you so very much fer askin'!"

He didn’t seem to like her quip. “Not funny. You know what I meant!”
“And you know I’d tell you, you don’t have to ask every morning. Nothin’ new on the blood front”, said his summand, then asked, ”What’s up?”, as she pulled herself into her saddle.

Conflicted emotion seemed to boil him alive for a moment, then he sighed and gave her an angry but apologetic look.

"Sorry. I’m being a stressed idiot”, he said and watched her accept his apology with a bemused nod, “I’m just going over everything I know about this conflict. We’re going to reach the capital soon. Hopefully, they’ll be receptive.”

They spurred their animals and ascended.

“Wanna bounce some facts my way?”, asked Rayla, “Not sure I can keep it all straight like you.”

“Mmh”, Callum went, “Sure. This all started way back. Fareeda de Peverell and her King are killed when Viren sends out dark magic gestalts of...”

“...my bandmates, aye”, said Rayla angrily, “For that alone A’m goin’ to kick his arse inty the moon!”

“I can’t wait”, Callum smiled weakly, “So now, Jorge gets to power, makes a hubbub at the Breach, gets everyone annoyed with him and then finally falls in line when he gets that he’s being played. He then proceeds to marry Marielle and has a son.”

“They went quick!”, smirked Rayla.

“Funny”, grumbled Callum, “Wanna be a bit more self-conscious? They had Etienne in wed-lock, they were fine.”

“I’m not pregnant!”, she replied flippantly.

“Let’s not get into it!”, hissed the Prince.
“No need! I’m not!”

“Let’s - not - get - into - it!”, he repeated angrily, “Aaaaanyway, they treated their people with some respect, though there were a few incidents where the royals went too far.”

“Right, err, Jorge raised troops by force?”

“Yup. That’s not the most infuriating part, though. He instituted a draft that was totally unconcerned with who they were getting. Recent parents, community leaders, linchpin farmers, that sort of thing.”

“What’s a linchpin farmer?”

“I was there when Opeli told you about those!”, groaned her summand.

“Okay dafty. I get this is not a good time fer ye, but I’m runnin’ out of rope”, warned Rayla, “Lookin’ at a bit of a learnin’ curve here, so please, have a heart!”

He sighed, took a moment to collect himself, then groused, “Sorry. Stress.”

“Excuses, excuses”, Rayla said sternly.

“Is that your catchphrase now?”

This sounded to her like banter. So, she bantered back. “Linchpin farmers, Mister Fountain?”

He gave her a stern, flustered look, a panicked glint in his eyes. It was then Rayla realized how much their actions from the night prior stirred him.

 Probably not something she should tease him over.
“Um, sorry”, she mumbled and grabbed her reins more tightly, “Linchpins?”

“Right, err, they’re a strategic asset. Their food holds up large parts or even an entire community of people. So, removing them for military service isn’t smart.”

“Thank you.”

“Sure. So, um, the people sort of explode when all of that happens. The Covertway says there’s some evidence that they were also encouraged and funded by someone behind the scenes. Widespread fighting breaks out, the army is outmaneuvered and Jorge is killed in La Dorée. Marielle flees and the Pentarchy sends troops to help hold the Kingdom in her name.”

His mien darkened. “Keyword there being hold. Not plunder.”

Rayla sighed deeply. “And we’re supposed to fix this by talkin’.”

“Yes. If we can even get anyone talking to us. Hence, I’m having a bit of the flutters.”

Silence followed.

And then more silence.

“Callum”, said Rayla quietly, “You really don’t have to worry so much about... this”, she placed a hand onto her stomach, “It’s either too late or everythin’s fine. Why are you so ups--”

“I don’t think straight in those moments!”, shouted her summand angrily, “I know it’s wrong and stupid and all that but it feels right and really good. You feel amazing, okay!? It doesn’t help that you’re encouraging it! I don’t get it! It’s my fault, don’t get me wrong, I had the opportunity to slow down! Pull out! Make sure this won’t happen, but every time I have the chance and you hint that you might want it I--”

His nose wrinkling in furious self-deprecation, he grit his teeth. “I don’t get it. Why am I so dumb?!”
Rayla steered Andris closer, staggering her wings with Isoros’. “Daftyyyyy! Nothin’ bad happened. We had fun! It’s fine, please trust me.”

A confused, cold smile curled his lips. “I wanna trust you, and that’s just it. You’re the one with the first-hand evidence of being pregnant. Are you in some sort of denial? It doesn’t bother you at all?”

"Dummy, no! Don't be that way. I explained it to you. Even my mum doesn’t think I should worry, and she’s probably terrified of the idea. I do still worry, but I just... I just don’t believe. And in the moment, it... I just don't care.”

“Huh?”

She looked at her hands and a small smile appeared on her lips. “Losin' myself in the moment and... you know, just bein’ with you and makin’ love... It's the easiest thin' I've done since leavin' prison. Clears my mind. Takes the edge off. I feel safe with you, no matter what. So, I want you close.”

His confused stare softened slightly. "You big mush. But, a kid would make all the things that aren’t easy even harder."

“Sure, but it...”, she took a beat, then squeaked, “It’s also, um, a weirdly cute, sorta, um, soft thought. A tiny... us.”

His eyebrows lifted. “Did you change your mind?”

She shrugged. “Dunno. Some days, it’s easier to think about bein’ a parent than others. We’re young, there’s a lot of time before we really have to make a final choice. But I’m sorta, uh, resigned to the possibility at this point. Not like I can undo the times we slept with each other.”

Smirking, she added, “And before you ask, yeeees, this is me, makin’ things seem ‘worse’ than I think they’ll turn out so I won’t feel bad if they do.”

Tight-lipped, he sighed through his nose. Obviously, there were ways to end a pregnancy, but they
had talked this through after their first, messy encounter. It wasn’t something they wanted to explore.

Or was it?

Callum shook his head to make the intrusive thought dissipate. On this, at least, they had made a pretty clear decision. Plus, theirs was a privileged position. To them, an unplanned child wouldn’t mean life or death.

Or maybe it would. After all, there were a great many people who would see a halfling as an abomination.

Even if he was comfortable with the idea of fatherhood, wouldn’t he be plunging a new life into a world full of fresh hate?

“How far along are we now?”, he asked quietly.

Rayla took a deep breath and pulled out her little book. “Today is the seventh. We first did it on July 13. I know because I put down a note in my calendar about your whole... uh... dream... thing. So at the wide end we’re lookin’ at... three weeks, a month?”

“Oh, see, in a way that makes me feel a little better. Supposedly by now you should’ve seen all kinds of symptoms. Tenderness in your chest, cramping, vomiti--”

“Aye”, she cut him off, “I remember the book, but none of that is super helpful right now, either way. Wearin’ the chestplate all day’n night does tend to make my paps a bit cranky and I do have sort of an upset stomach.”

The sharp breath he drew drove bemused annoyance into her mien. “Oh no, dafty! Don’t panic! I think it’s cause of the weird stuff we had for dinner.”

“That’s like two things, on top of your grabbyness! Plus, how would you know how bad the symptoms have to be to count? You’ve never had a kid!”, he panicked, “Rayla! I feel fine, and I had the same food!”
“It’s an upset stomach, Callum!” said Rayla, an exasperated smirk playing on her lips, “See, this is why I don’t tell you stuff, cause you always have a reaction.”

“A reaction!?”, he yelled, “A reaction! You’re not taking this seriously!”

She snorted, trying to suppress it but doing a terrible job.

“How is this funny?!”, yelled the Prince.

“It’s funny cause you just got done grousin’ about not thinkin’ straight and now you’re not thinkin’ straight. I gave you good reasons for why I have those ‘symptoms’ but you’re just too sure that the least likely thin’s the reason for them. That’s a little funny! It’s like me droppin’ a rock on you and you then sayin’ ‘gee, do A ever have a gammie heid, must be the weather!’”

She snort-laughed at her own metaphor while he stewed angrily in the realization that she probably had a point.

After a moment, Callum pinched the bridge of his nose. “Aaarrrghhh... fine! Okay! You’re right!”

Breathing deeply, he tried to get a handle on himself. “Okay. Fine. Yes.”

Rayla leaned over to poke his side and to press a kiss to his cheek. “Worry worm.”

“Woah there, captain Rayla”, he warned, “Don’t want you crashing into me up here.”

She nodded. “Risky kiss. Worth it?”

“Maybe”, Callum smiled.

An hour went by until Rayla pointed to a black spot on the horizon. “Is that it?”
“Pretty sure”, groused Callum, “We better show our colors.”

Once more, the elf unclasped the clips that held the standard to Andris’ side and wedged the pole in the bend of her elbow and knee to brace it against the wind.

They landed some distance away from the gleaming golden towers of the capital of Evenere, spraying mud from the soft, waterlogged ground.

As the two Katolins made their way across the bare field, Rayla noticed the eery quiet. The other thing that was pressing on her consciousness was her increasingly unhappy stomach.

“This is a farm, right?”, she asked, the question ending in an odd, breathy hiccup.

“Looks the part”, said Callum, “Are you okay? You’re kinda pale.”

“Stomach”, said his summand and stopped her mount, “Oh... it’s actually sorta... horrible .”

“Are you gonna lose it?”, asked the Prince sternly.

“Ugh, uh...”, went Rayla, swallowing heavily.

“I’ll take that as a `yes’”, said her summand and hopped off his mount to extend a hand her way, “Come on down?”

“Not... the best place...”, she said queasily.

“No, but it’d be kinda bad to meet the people we’re supposed to talk to while you’re puking”

“Fair”, she choked out, but the word was sort of cut short by her bending away from him and retching.
“A’ll be back!”, she gagged, jumped off Andris without a care for the colors and raced behind a nearby bush where the contents of her stomach returned to open air, audibly.

Callum dove for the banner pole and caught it, a sour expression of worry on his face.

Pregnant?

Or food poisoning?

Which was more likely?

He’d eaten the same stale bread with enthusiasm, the same dried meat a guilty pleasure for his growling stomach. In fact, right about now would be a perfect time to have some more of it.

So - why was he unaffected?

Elf stomach, human stomach?

With some queasyness of his own, Callum remembered the day after having Anzha’s dippling soup at Otark’s farm. Perhaps the Eveneran nut-bush they had foraged for food yesterday was as inedible to Rayla as the Xadian root was to him?

“Perfectly reasonable”, mumbled the Prince and watched as his summand stood up and wiped her mouth with her sleeve before turning her gaze skyward to take a few bracing breaths.

“A think A’m good”, she said breathily as she entered speaking range.

They both mounted up again, Callum holding on to the colors this time.

Slowly they made their way along the road.
“Feeling better?”, asked the Prince gently.

“Not really”, said Rayla smally, “But fer now, A think A’m puked oot.”

“Let’s hope you didn’t catch a bug or something?”, worried Callum.

“Dunno. Just got way worse when we landed, is all. Probably the smell of the swamp.”

It was true, the morast had an unpleasant, decomposing odor here.

After a few more minutes, they spotted a party of riders, exiting the city in their direction at a gallop.

Callum breathed in and out, slowly. “Here goes.”

As the other group got closer, the Katolins stopped to appear even less hostile.

Finally, the riders slowed a few feet away and approached carefully, their spears held laxly or slung across their backs.

“Bête à cornes!”, shouted one of the riders, the tone clearly showing that they meant it as a warning to their comrades.

Weapons were drawn.

“We’re here in peace! She’s no danger!”, shouted Callum.

“Qui êtes vous, connard? Who crazy enough go with elf bitch?”, asked the armored leader gruffly from inside his closed helmet. He was making his horse dance in a show of readiness.

Rayla immediately wished she was feeling better. This wasn’t like with the villagers, these people
seemed poised to kill both her and Callum. Still, her summand had asked her to keep her weapons holstered as long as possible, so she kept her hands on the reigns instead of following her defensive impulse.

“Callum, Crown prince to Katolis. This is Lady Rayla, future Crown Princess. We’re here to talk to your leaders, to try and find some solu--”

“She!”, yelled the leader and pointed his lance at Rayla, “No welcome in Evenere! Leave!”

There was more activity at the gate. Another group of riders had set out in their direction.

“Callum”, said Rayla tensely to get his attention.

“I see them, don’t worry”, calmly, the Prince tried again, “Please, she’s here with me and not going anywhere. All we’re looking to do is talk. We’re not going to make trouble for you. Can I get your name?”

“Non! Leave!”, hissed the rider.

“Do you want this rebellion to be a success?”, asked Callum firmly, “Do you want peace with the other Kingdoms?”

“Do no want dirt Xadienne!”, spat the rider and lowered his lance, “Dernier avertissement! Allez-Vous en!”

If this got any more tense, the Perytons could panic and Callum knew enough Eveneran to know that this was his last warning. “Alright. We’ll leave. Thank you for listening.”

With that he started backing away, slowly and carefully at first, then he whipped around his mount and set Isoros into a hard gallop. Rayla followed him closely. Soon, the stopped group of riders was out of view and they allowed their animals a bit of respite.

“Oof. That was not a good start”, said Callum.
“You are a marvel, Crown Prince Callum”, smirked Rayla, “Pissin’ yer pants all day and then boom! Steel in yer veins when it counts!”

He snickered weakly. “I get all my worrying out of the way beforehand, I guess.”

“Aye”, Rayla sighed queasily, “Me bein’ here really mucked thin’s up, twice now. This wisnae the best idea. Could’ve probably stayed at the Twins to have an eye on Tyne.”

“Sure, sure”, grumbled Callum, “And leave all this racist bull untouched. You and I, we’re doing this together, okay? You have as much right to be here as I do, don’t forget that.”

She wanted to reply, but her stomach performed an impressive somersault. This time she didn’t have a chance to find a bush.

“Oh, shoot!”, exclaimed her summand and caught Andris’ reigns to pull her to a stop, “Again?”

“Sorry”, gagged Rayla, then bent over for more.

At this point, she was losing nothing but bile. When she sat up straight in her saddle and wiped her mouth, Callum’s concerned green eyes were already scanning her features.

“A’m f--”, she started but her summand cut her off.

“You’re not fine, Rayla. Sheesh, with the warrior princess thing, again?!”, he smiled and extended a hand to caress her cheek, “Let’s just find a safe place to camp and call it quits for today, hm?”
Callum was mindlessly counting the shadows of leaves, projected onto their tent by the afternoon sun.

Draped over his right side, Rayla snoozed peacefully. Her quiet snores filled the air.

It would have been a very enjoyable moment if it didn’t feel so foreboding, and his stomach wasn’t so empty.

It growled again, ending its cacophony of angry grumbling with a high-pitched whine.

The Prince giggled quietly. At least it was sort of amusing.

“Hungry, hungry dummy”, beeped Rayla groggily, stretched, and rubbed her head against his chest, “Wan’go look f’ food?”

“Hey there, sleepy head. Did that wake you?”

“Was loud enough to wake the dead”, she snickered, then a stab went through her heart.

Farouk’s face came bubbling up, unbidden.

“Feeling better?”, he asked and lifted his right to pet the long tuft of hair between her horns.

A tight-lipped shrug was her entire answer as she snuggled closer.

His hand brushed her forehead. With alarm, he rested it there for a moment, long enough to make her look up.

“A’m a bit warm. A know”, she mumbled, then sat up, “It’s fine. Let’s go find food.”
Callum smirked wryly. It was pointless to try and approach her with less than firm rejection.

“Your'e no good to me sick”, he said sternly and got to his feet.

She didn’t take this well, dejection spreading over her like cold water.

Frazzled, she smacked her lips. Her mouth tasted like bile. “Why so angry, oh summand?”

“I’m not angry”, he said and bent down to kiss her hot forehead, “Just worried that you’re going to do that ‘ra-ra-ra, warrior princesses feel no pain` thing.”

All the explanation did was to make her frown a little less.

“What’s wrong?”, asked the Prince gently, “Beside the obvious, I mean?”

“Eh. Feelin’ useless and sad about my dad.”

Her summand fell back to his knees to scoop her into his arms. “I’m sorry.”

Tightly, her arms wrapped around him. She took a deep breath, taking in his scent. Now that they had been on the road for a bit, the artificial smell of his perfume had waned. It was as though she was sixteen again for a moment, holding him in their much smaller, shared one-person tent.

“What do you normally do to fix an elf with a hot head and a bad tummy?”, asked Callum and got up to strap his blade to his hip.

“Um... cold rags for the heid”, rasped Rayla queasily, “and... um... Pirin’s root... um... tea...ugh--”

She dove for the tent flap and barely made it outside before another wave of sickness turned her insides.
“Auugh”, she wailed, “A’m si-hi-iick !”

“Is that right?”, Callum asked with a sad smile, “If you admit it, it has to be bad.”

“Havnae been sick fer ages!”, groused Rayla, “So unfair! Just got off the poison!”

“Just hang in there. I’ll try talking to the Evenerans again. They’re bound to change guards sooner rather than later”, said Callum, “If they blow me off again, we can think about going home or at least to Port-Cartier. I’ll go find us food for now, then check their posts.”

The future Princess huffed frustratedly and wrestled herself to her feet. “You’re not goin’ out there without me!”

Worried, he watched as she holstered her blades and ducked through the flap to walk outside, carefully stepping over a particular wet spot in the grass.

“Eech”, she went sourly, “It’s all bile, too. Wanna wash my mouth oot.”

“Be my guest”, said Callum, exited the tent and handed her a canteen of water.

She swished the liquid in her mouth, spat into a nearby bush and slipped the canteen into her own belt. “Better not pass this on tae you.”

“Don’t worry, you won’t”, her summand said.

“Tsk”, went Rayla. A shadow of doubt creased her forehead as she added, “No way you get this sick from bein’ preggers!”

“You sound very sure of that”, he said sarcastically, “I actually didn’t mean that. Just mean I’ve been doing fine so far and we had the same food.”
“A’m shocked”, said his summand with a sardonic smirk, “You didnae take the opportunity to flip out!”

He snorted. “We can’t both flip our lids at the same time! We wouldn’t know which one was whose!”

With this, he took her by her hand, pulling her along towards the road where their animals were tied up in the thicket.

They had just made their way through the bushes by the roadside when Rayla dropped Andris’ lead and drew her weapons.

The Prince looked around to find two riders approaching at high speed.

“Let’s get back behind those trees. I don’t wanna be charged”, said Rayla and pointed to her left. Quickly, Callum followed her into the shrubbery and waited, tensely. Behind them, the Perytons were growing restless.

The first rider had his visor closed, just like the last person they had interacted with. Their partner however, wasn’t wearing any armor. Instead, their lithe figure was dressed in the black and green of Eveneran nobility.

“Bonjour, bonjour!”, yelled the noble, “Are you Sir Callum?”

“The same!”, yelled Callum, glad to hear the less thickly accented and friendly greeting.

The riders slowed to a stop close enough to speak comfortably. Rayla had tucked herself into the background, both to calm the animals and because she was wary of messing up another meeting with potential allies.

The noble’s features were fine to the point of surreality. It looked as though someone had spun this person from strands of glass. Their high cheekbones and light, auburn eyes stood in some contrast to the graying, long hair that flowed over shoulders no wider than Callum’s broad sword.
It was impossible to even guess at how old this person was.

“Modeste de Vaudeville, your Majesty. I am Speaker to the first Parliament of Evenere. Charmed to make your acquaintance. I’m sorry for the greeting you received earlier, I hear there was a silly misunderstanding.”

“Don’t worry. Nothing happened, so it’s no big deal”, said Callum, “Not everyone is lucky enough to speak Common as well as you.”

“Just so! Frankly, I’m glad to have found you personally, the Freedom Fighters are rather... on edge.”

“How did ye find us?”, asked Rayla, stepping into view just barely.

“Quel choc!”, the Speaker’s eyes widened excitedly, “Bon! Bon, bon, bon! not a misunderstanding after all! When I heard there was an elf with you, I had my doubts! We are so out of step with the rest of the world! Good tidings to you, milady, charmed to make your acquaintance.”

“How did ye find us?”, repeated the elf, more gruffly.

“Oh bother, fine, fine! I see there is good reason that Xadians are infamous for their rudeness!”, grumbled Modeste.

However, their sour mien changed at once back to jovial excitement as the Speaker took a deep breath. “We detected you by sheer luck, imagine! Lilian and I were on our way back from rounding La Dorée, looking for any sign of you - et voila!”, hey threw their hands out at them, “There you were!”

“I guess I’m glad we stood out, then. Didnae mean tae waste yer day like that”, said Rayla sternly.

“Please, it’s no waste!”, the noble protested with a pout, “However, it would be if I failed to persuade you to join me for dinner and beyond. It won’t do to have high guests such as yourself spend the night out here. I’m surprised you have no entourage.”
“Thank you for the invitation, Speaker”, smiled Callum, “We would be happy to accept, but we didn’t exactly get the impression that staying at La Dorée would be safer for us than sleeping in the wild.”

“Bien sûr!”, nodded Modeste with an irritated huff, “Ruffians abound in these days! Ah, however - It’s in everyone’s best interest to see this coming to some sort of amicable solution, ideally before winter returns for another round of death and decay.”

The noble’s nose wrinkled, apparently the idea of having to experience another frost under these circumstances did not appeal to them.

Then, Modeste steered their horse a little closer. “I’m glad, Sir Callum. The fact that you were the one chosen as a mediator already speaks of respect for our cause. Not only have you achieved much in the field of diplomacy for one so young, from what I hear, you have been championing the people’s right to govern in Katolis. In your position as King, that can’t have been easy.”

“I’m not King anymore. My brother, Sir Ezran, has recently returned”, said Callum.

Modeste's eyes widened and they bent backwards in their saddle. "Oh my, has he really! You must tell me all about it over dinner! Sacre bleu, one wonders what else we have been missing!"

“If it’s alright with you, I’d like to keep out of town for the moment. Security concerns. Would you agree to meet here again at a later time?”

The noble nodded slowly. “I appreciate your situation, yes. In that case, why don’t we reconvene here tomorrow morning, at... eight? I’m rather tired, you see. I can’t stay out for too long a time, my body does not permit it”

“Sounds good. If I may, I have another request”, replied Callum.

“Anything, monsieur, to repair our prior mistake!”

“Are there any farms around here selling food?”
“You are running low?”

“We're looking to stock up.”

“Oh. I will take care of it. Expect a servant here with a basket. For now, I trust, you will be nearby?”

“We’ll be around, yes”, said Callum.

Modeste smirked. “In that case, have a pleasant night. I’ll speak to you tomorrow.”

“Until then”, smiled the Prince.

The glass person and their guard turned toward La Dorée and fell into a comfortable trot.

"Better", said Rayla.

"Maybe", said Callum doubtfully, “It’s not a good idea to be too trusting, I think.”

Together, the two Katolins made their way back into the trees, to a spot where they could easily see the road and anyone approaching from La Dorée.

Rayla sunk into the leaves and sighed. “So. I’m infamously rude.”

“You could’ve at least said ‘hello’ before asking questions, fawn”, snickered Callum.

About half an hour later, another rider approached. Callum gently woke his summand who had fallen asleep against his shoulder. The more she slept, the more worried he got.

Before Rayla even had the chance to rise and without a single word of greeting, the servant scrambled off his horse, dropped a basket on the ground, jumped back in the saddle and tore off
Rayla watched him vanish in the distance, shaking her head. These people were apparently just as scared of her as the villagers.

She sat up, startling when there was a wet *shlop* and a slimy sensation spread on her thigh.

“Oh. You put a cold rag on my head”, she said, picking the lukewarm, wet cloth off her pant leg, “I didn’t even notice.”

A smile appeared on Callum’s handsome features. “Had my handkerchief and that canteen of water. You were kinda passed out. Don’t worry, it’s clean.”

The best nurse-butler lifted the book in his hands and continued, "I've been looking through the herb book, trying to figure out if Pirin's root grows here. Doesn't look like it, but there *is* a type of Ginger."

"Ginger, eh? Time to make some beer", snickered the elf, "The stuff that grows in Xadia has use as an analgesic, so I see where you're comin' from."

"This one...", said the Prince glumly, "The book says there's evidence that it might, but nothing strong"

"Bah, scientists", huffed Rayla, "Always with their weasel-words. I’ll take my chances."

About an hour later, they had broken camp to move it away from where the Evenerans had met them as a precaution. The basket that held the food was sitting tantalizingly in the middle of their tent and Callum made to open it.

There was some bread, as stale as the one they had had yesterday, a few slices of cheese and a half-empty jar of what the Prince's nose told him was raspberry jam.

"Whew", went Rayla, "That's not a whole lot for two. You think they might be runnin' low?"
"Either that or they want us asking for more. It's enough for now”, said the Prince, then quipped, “Unless its poisoned, then it's enough for the rest of our lives.”

"Well, I don't feel much like eatin' anyway", groused the elf and gave the cheese a queasy look.

“You should, though”, said Callum, even though he was probably hungry enough to eat all of it by himself.

"N-nah", quavered his summand and crawled over to the tent's flap, "I'm gonna go and see if A canny find that Ginger."

"You're sure you don't want to lie down and rest?", Callum asked gently, "I'll go find it, you stay here."

"Ach, don't do this tae me! We had a deal!", groaned the elf, "I let you know when I'm not doin' well and in turn you don't act like I'm made'r glass!"

The Prince blinked at her, then smirked sheepishly. "Yeaaahhh... I've been pretty clucky, haven't I? Do you want me to come with, at least?"

Shaking her head, his summand ducked out of the tent.

“Not fair! You didn’t let me go out by myself ei--”, he yelled, but was interrupted when she poked her head back inside and barked: “A’m not some wee sook, dafty!”

With that, she stomped off.

With a heavy sigh, Callum turned to his meager dinner. Even though she had just more or less insulted him, it didn't feel right to watch her go out by herself while she wasn't feeling well.

Especially in a country where both her Katolin clothes and Xadian skin tone gave people a plethora of reasons to hate her.
The Prince balled his fists.

Especially because, no matter what she’d said, she counted for two in his mind.

He knew she was probably going to be fine. She was, after all, rightfully confident of her own prowess in battle.

But it was still hard to sit here.

--

Claudia picked at a piece of basalt that was poking into her ankle.

The high mage of Katolis was sitting on volcanic rock, her legs crossed.

The slowly moving magma far below sputtered angrily, but from up here it looked nothing but mesmerizing. The weird, swirling patterns of molten rock drew her in.

To her, the Breach was the beginning and end of the two current chapters of her life.

In Claudia’s mind, here was where her childhood had breathed its last.

Being back here with many solutions to the problems she had carried around since then was nothing short of powerful.

After releasing Farouk, the weight of the world was lighter on her shoulders.

His was the last spell she had cast. Ever since, she had started sleeping better, heard fewer voices, picked up fewer shadows out of the corners of her eyes.

She had done much of what she set out to do and felt it was alright to take a break and a chance of
scenery. Coming here also served another purpose; Helping her brother to navigate his own sorrow. Poor Soren needed some distraction, and getting into skirmishes with relatively unskilled, skittish bounty hunters certainly served as such.

She breathed the air, laden with the rancid smell of rotten eggs. It didn't bother her much, the fumes that her kind of magic produced were much less palatable.

Her eyes followed a hissing, bubbling piece of rock that she had just dropped into the magma stream below. It rolled over, then exploded, pieces raining down all over.

Smirking shrewdly she thought that, in an odd way, she saw herself there. Ground up and burnt by forces outside of her control, yet so driven and empowered by them at the same time. Dark magic had made her someone. Had gotten her respect and standing, but also a sort of responsibility to do harm in the service of a sometimes more, sometimes less nebulous greater good.

Piper, who knew no scruples, never aligned with her on those points. Callum was too far on the other extreme and Soren... Soren didn’t really understand.

Or so she thought, at least.

She cleared her throat. Ostensibly, she had come out here, far away from any bastions and soldiers to meditate. At the moment, she was doing a terrible job at it.

Ever since Callum had told her to try it, she had dabbled. Set aside a few minutes every day to attempt untangling her thoughts and herself.

Her efforts weren’t crowned with much success, but at least there was a sort of inner quiet with her while she attempted it.

A few minutes went by in which her mind was still. The thread was broken when she caught herself reflecting on her success.

"Tseh", went the mage, smiling.
On the other side of the border, a figure appeared. They were dressed in a heavy cloak and seemingly hadn't noticed their human observer. It wasn't surprising, given that the elf was apparently very keen not to be seen by soldiers on the far side and was scanning the landscape in their direction.

This did not serve to make Claudia feel better about this wanderer. The mage rose and quickly returned to the bastion. The elves should probably check him out.

When the mage arrived at Amaya’s quarters, she knocked. A split second after she had finished, a low groan rose in her throat.

Duh-doy. Knocking on a deaf person's door, really?!

But; the door opened, startling Claudia.

“Ohhello”, blurted Claudia, “I’m actually, heh, looking for you. There’s someone on the other side of the Breach, looking pretty shady if I do say so myself and I have some experience with shady people, you know, my father’s name is Viren and he’s just not a very nice person so yes I do know abo--”

“Why did you knock?”, interrupted a confused voice, “If you have something you’d like to tell me, could you slow down a little and keep it to the essentials?”

In front of her, with a puzzled expression, stood Prime Legate Janai.

The High Mage blinked. “Sorry, um, uh, you sort of, uh, intimidate... me... um, a little?”, she blurted.

Janai bent down and smirked. “Good. Now. You said, there was someone of doubtful repute on the Xadian side of the border? What makes them so distrustworthy?”

“Civilian in the DMZ”, said Claudia, “Looked like his head wasn’t screwed on right, the way he just looked out for guards.”
The elf nodded slowly. “I was just leaving, so this is good timing. I’ll have them look. Thank you.”

With that, Janai stepped past Claudia and left her standing in the open doorway.

In a doorway inside her quarters stood Amaya, leaning against a wall with a bemused expression on her face.

“Hi”, squeaked Claudia and pulled the door closed.

The General had not been wearing armor, just a comfy sweater and linen pants.

Like some sort of... *normal person.*
Callum, Rayla and the Speaker of the House were sitting on blankets, to the side of the road. At this point, it was past five in the afternoon, the discussion was winding down. The Speaker had written pages upon pages of notes.

Rayla sipped her ginger tea, glad for the filling, soothing sensation it caused in her stomach. She had eaten a measly dinner and lunch, and thanks to the plant had kept them down, too.

“It’s at least good to know that her Majesty is open to change”, said Modeste, “It hasn’t quite come through to us, that stance. The campaign run against us here is rather brutal.”

“The responsibility for that falls on all of us. Her. Me. You”, said Callum and felt it all too keenly, “Violence begets violence.”

“While it is true that we were the first to use force, we were left with no choice. We originally attempted to throw off the yoke placed upon our necks by working with the royals. They never paid any heed”, said Modeste and studied the royal edict Callum had handed them at the beginning of the conversation.

When the noble was done reading over their notes, they sighed deeply. “You and Madame Marielle are offering us little for what we have lost, Sir Callum. It appears to me that no number of hours spent talking to you will change that. What am I to make of this?”

“She’s giving you what she can without losing face with the rest of the Pentarchy”, said Callum, "And I'm trying my best to mediate. I can't give you more than she is willing to surrender.”

“Speaker, from what I’ve seen, this war isnae goin’ well for anyone here. Front hasn’t moved in a while and Xadia’s knockin’ on the front door”, rasped Rayla, “Somethin’s gotta give. Guaranteein’ the royals some power is a surefire way to get the rest of the Pentarchy on board.”

Modeste shook their head. “Parliament will not accept these terms. Installing the Queen as a head of state with veto rights essentially restores the status quo.”

“I don’t agree. She used to have the power to do anything she wanted, but she is giving you the exclusive right to make law”, Callum argued, “Sure, she can technically veto everything, but ask
yourself how likely that really is. Issues need solutions. As Queen, she knows that better than anyone. Being a roadblock out of sheer spite doesn’t strike me as something she’d do.”

Modeste gave Callum a wry look. "Then you do not know the royal house of De Peverell. Pettiness is their hallmark."

"Under Jorge, sure. I think you’ll find his wife to be equally picky but a lot more cooperative."

The Speaker smacked their lips, then sighed and turned over their shoulder to where their guard sat. “Lilian, on devrait rentrer. Voulez-vous préparer les chevaux, s’il vous plaît?"

“Oui, Président”, came the reply. The armored knight got busy unhobbling the horses.

“Have you had a chance to stock your food supply?”, asked Modeste, turning back to the Katolins.

“Not yet. We’ve been lookin’ around, it doesn’t look like anythin’ is left. Well, safe for a bunch of ginger”, smiled Rayla.

“It’s not what I’d consider haute cuisine”, snickered the Eveneran, “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Are your stores empty?”, asked Callum.

The Speaker seemed to hesitate for a split second, then said, “No, we are well-stocked. Perhaps not with the finest of goods, but nobody will go hungry.”

“I was considering ordering some relief shipments from Port-Cartier”, said the Prince and Rayla heard an odd tone in his voice, “I’m glad to hear that that won’t be necessary.”

Modeste nodded quietly, then rose and dusted themselves and their blanket off. “Speaking of Port-Cartier, you might be better served to go there until Parliament has made a decision. It could be a few days. Well, that is, unless you are looking to speak to them personally.”

Callum shrugged. “Can you guarantee that we’re not going to be attacked?”
“You, yes”, said Modeste, then nodded at Rayla, “Her, no, unfortunately. My personal guard can not hold their own against a city of frightened people should they decide to attack Madame Rayla.”

“Then, unfortuna--”

“Ye should go speak to them”, interrupted Rayla, earning a surprised glance from her summand.

“Ah, please”, smiled the Eveneran, “I do believe this conversation is not for my ears. You could let Lilian know either way when she comes by later with food. A short note will do.”

“Of course”, said Callum and offered his hand. Modeste shook it cordially and moved on to Rayla’s extended appendage with equal pleasantness.

“Oh, delightful!”, exclaimed the Speaker, “I’ve never touched an elf before and I have to say - apologies, this might be rude - you have the most startling texture, Madame. Like polished soap stone.”

“It’s either that or you humans are all made’r grainy dough”, replied Rayla dryly.

Modeste laughed and took Lilian’s proffered support to get into their saddle, “It was a pleasure, Monsieur, Madame. It’s thoroughly unfortunate that we must be on opposite sides of this discussion. Adieu for now.”

“I think we’re all on the side of peace. We’ll hopefully see you soon. Thank you, Speaker Modeste”, smiled Callum.

They watched as the Evenerans rode off toward the capital.

"So, are you gonna go talk to these people?", asked Rayla.

"Not if they can't deal with you being there", replied Callum.
"Dafty, be reasonable. As much as I want them to be okay with me, I canny put that over them findin' peace. They're dyin' by the dozens."

"All the more reason for them to be more accepting of you and I", grumbled her summand, "I think they are running low on food. Just the way the Speaker hesita--"

"Why are you so stubborn on this?"

"Racism! I can't go and help them without enabling them to be racist unless you can come, safely! I'd feel like I'm condoning their behaviour. This is about you being able to go where you want to and to be who you ar--"

"In aaaaaany other situation, I'd be right with you, dafty", interrupted Rayla with a loving smile, "but we're in a war zone. I think you have the tools to end this. Go do it. Think of Edmée and her nephew! I can live with not seein' the inside of the Eveneran capital fer now. We can always come back when they've settled all their other issues."

Callum stared at his Princess with mounting consternation.

"So, you're okay with letting me go into the Banther's den without any backup?", he asked, knowing full-well that he was yanking her chain.

Rayla crossed her arms. "Oh come on! You got safe passage from someone high up and the guards didnae even have an issue with you in the first place."

A moment of silence passed as the Prince tried to figure out how to convince her. Since nothing came to mind, he surmised that she had to be correct.

With a sigh that turned into a groan, he threw his hands up and walked over to where their mounts stood to grab a drink of water.

"So what, you just sit out here for a week?!", he asked angrily.

“Nah”, said the elf, “I’m gonna go to Port Cartier. I hear there’s food there. I can bring some back
for my poor, starvin’ summand.”

She embraced him and pressed a kiss to his cheek. “Please. A don’t wanna feel like I’m the reason why you canny do your best.”

“Don’t say that”, Callum said and caressed her back, “You’re sick and in a country that’s hostile to you. How can I just... let you go?”

“By sayin’ ‘Have a good trip, Rayla, A love ye and don’t eat tae much when ye get to Cartier’?”, she smiled.

While annoying, his worrying still meant a lot to her.

As she was kissing him again, something strange happened to the east.

Callum noticed it first and his slackening expression made Rayla turn around to see what had him so captivated.

In the distance, the sky had darkened to a sickly purple. A wave of crackling energy was arcing within the clouds.

“What is that?”, asked Callum as the calamity passed overhead, “It kinda looks like dark mag--”

Their stomachs lurched so violently, it seemed as though the entire earth had dropped out from under them. It felt like someone had reached inside both Rayla and Callum and torn something out only to put it back, dirty and crooked a split-second later.

They both collapsed, curling into themselves under the influence of a violent shock that set all their muscles on fire.

The Perytons were affected in the same way, whinnying in pain and fear.

A moment later, silence fell over the land.
The air itself had stopped transmitting any sound. From the sun glistened no rays, it was a perfect, dim disk hanging limply in a blank, pale sky. There were no clouds, no wind. A moment prior, the grass and trees had been a vivacious green, now their leaves appeared gray and lifeless.

Suddenly, the sky seemed to lurch and the light of the sun was devoured by the westerly horizon.

Silence ruled over the land.

Ghastly, dead silence.

--

Dim blue light split the dust.

There was glass, sparkling. It covered the ground in shards as fine as elven hair.

Heavy, pained breaths filled the darkness.

The human mage was staring at his shredded hands as they were bleeding, his clothes and skin singed where he had touched the key to the mended mirror.

Behind him, the elf lay unconscious in a puddle of her own vomit.

A pitiful glance tracked over them, cast by black eyes with yellow irises.

“Thank you, Viren”, said a smooth, deep voice. It was full of elated disbelief. Then followed the patter of naked feet on wet rock.
“Let me help you.”

Aaravos’s four fingers delicately cradled the human’s grey and bloody hands.

“Totus animo”, came the gentle activation and vines burst forth from the ground to remove the shards and to wrap and stitch Viren’s wounds.

He hissed, the pain this brought was excruciating.

“I am so sorry. I did not know that this would happen.”

“It’s nothing”, lied Viren and looked at his friend, giving a strained smile, “You’re finally free.”

“Yes.”

The elven Archmage’s smooth fingers moved from the human’s hands to the ground.

“It’s been so long that I’ve felt unpolished stone under my feet!”

He caressed the rock, wistfully.

“The earth. Solid and unmovable.”

He straightened and took a deep breath, “The sky. Like an embrace of breath upon our plan--”

“Not to interrupt your philosophizing - would you object terribly to putting on some clothes?”, grumbled Viren.

Aaravos snorted, then laughed heartily.
“I will do as you say. And then I will go see the sun...”

“It’s... night”, noted Viren.

The star touched elf strode over to where his compatriots had laid out a set of simple black robes for him and pulled them on.

“You say that as though it was an unshakeable truth, friend”, breathed Aaravos as he pressed the rough linen of the robe into his face and rubbed his cheeks on it.

How boring the best of silk was compared to this texture.

“What about... her?”, asked Viren.

“She will be around again soon. I suspect much of Xadia will look the same as her right now”, Aaravos walked over to the fallen elder and crouched to study her face. A moment later, he had pried open her mouth to pull out her tongue, ensuring that her airways were not blocked.

“Her state is evidence of what I warned you of. My return to this plane drew violently on the primals. To the world I was like an empty vase, dipped into a tub of water. Doubtless, the Dragons are already swarming to find me at the swirls’ center. We must move.”

“What if they find her? She’s a valuable ally!”

“I wasn’t suggesting we leave her”, said Aaravos with some amusement in his voice.


A few vines worked their way out of the ground, snaked into the Archmage’s robes and entangled the now floating body of Chalise with his outstretched left. He tugged at the tether and waved at his human friend.

“I’m sorry, Viren. We can rest later. If you wish, I can carry you in much the same fashion as her.”
“Thank you”, hissed Viren, got up and dusted himself off, “That will not be necessary.”

Together, they ascended through a shaft that led outside their hideout.

When they entered the open air, Aaravos spread his arms and twirled in the expended light of a glum half-moon. The start should be visible but were not.

A sweet laugh broke over the Archmage’s lips. To his human friend, the sound of it was childlike.

“Viren, look! Look at this world and its infinite wonder!”

“At the moment I am slightly distracted by my hands”, replied the mage sourly, “Further... do you hear anything at all?”

Aaravos smiled at him. “I did mention how my resurgence has diminished the primals. It will take a few days for them to find their equilibrium again.”

He took a deep breath. “However, I... I am not in the mood for night, either way.”

The fingers of his right started dancing through the air, writing out a set of intertwining and curling runes that glowed a fiery black. Viren attempted to follow his movements, but after a minute, he lost track.

“Ferte Planetarum”, spake Aaravos and at once the night sky became a blur. The entire world seemed to lurch and the sun exploded over the horizon.

The arch mage blinked into the light, smiling. He now sounded very, very tired and close to tears. “You will have to excuse my indulgence. I am sorry about your hands, Viren. But I’ve yearned a thousand years for six of my limbs.”

August 9th was going to be the shortest day of the year.
Unless Aaravos decided otherwise.
"What in the blazes would wipe the sky like this?!", gasped King Ahling. The old man was staring at the horizon where moments before, a beautiful sunset had taken place. Now it looked as though it was the early morning.

Next to him stood Queen Marielle, Queen Aanya, King Ezran and Minister Arcanus Solveig. The latter was here in stead of King Florian who apparently had taken ill.

"Hm", grumbled the rough-hewn Del Barian bannerman, "Nothing has this kind of power. Safe for maybe..."

"Dragons", said Marielle angrily, "So this is how it all ends. They will destroy our crops by drowning out the sun."

"Woah, assumptions!", exclaimed Ezran and crossed his arms, "Can we at least try to find out more before losing it? I don’t think the sun was `diminished`, it’s still warm and bright!"

Solveig's one eyed glare found the young King. "Trying to hang on to your brittle peace, are we? No offense, but I know primal arch magic when I see it! Even if the efficacy is not entirely clear, what does it matter?! They are toying with our environment! It's a show of force we can't let stand!", he spat and strode towards where his entourage was settled, "Del Bar will immediately begin an emergency muster to raise the forces we've been denied these past four years!"

"Are you insane?!", shouted Aanya, "The five of us together will barely be able to hold off a Xadian attack, if that! Evenere is in shambles! Have you learned nothing in four years!?"

Solveig laughed. "Whoever here is of sane mind will join Del Bar right now and put Katolin advancements to good use. Everyone else will either fall in or be wiped out without a chance to fight back. Xadia has shown their readiness. Twice. Let's not dawdle at the eleventh hour."

The massive warrior had not stopped walking.

Marielle scoffed and addressed Ezran. “Here’s to hoping your brother and his... `fiancée` can convince my traitorous peasantry to fight for their lives at least.”

“I’d like to add to this that your husband was the one who acted out of order and became a traitor to his people”, said Ahling.

The Eveneran Queen threw a bitter look at her allies. “The incident you refer to only happened because you people would not supplement your forces. You left him no choice but to increase our own border guard quickly.”

“It’s not the mainland’s duty to shield Evenere from harm”, hissed Aanya, “Don’t you dare attempt to shift blame for your inept polici--”

“Can we not?!”, interrupted Ezran loudly, “Del Bar is dragging us into war with Xadia! I think that’s the bigger problem right now!”

“I agree”, frowned Ahling, “I fear the Bannerman has a point, however... this sort of magic does not bode fell for us. Even if its only effect is to terrify our people. It can’t stand.”

“Then we talk to the Elves!”, protested Ezran, “Find out why they did it!”

“If Del Bar attacks, Xadian wrath will pour over them and then us all. We either stand or die. Likely both”, groused Aanya.

“Then we don’t attack!”, yelled the Katolin King, sounding incredulous, “What, did you all forget how this went last time!? We were at war! The only reason nothing really happened was because we talked!”

Marielle scoffed. “Nothing happened, you say? The truth is that we’ve given Xadia time to prepare. We’ve stood by while they’ve moved soldiers close to the border, inside the supposed demilitarized zone. It ca--”

“They called those back!”, interrupted Ezran angrily.
“How far!?” barked Marielle, “If all they did was to pull them back a few days’ travel, their withdrawal counts for little! Have you managed to find any trace of them?”

“No”, spat the young King.

“This being what it is... I... I, um, say we prepare”, said Ahling with an apologetic look at the Katolin, “It will take some time to raise troops and build a respectable number of cannons. In the meantime, we can still talk. I will send Ebro to the Breach.”

“We all agreed that the cannons were going to be used for defense!”, shouted Ezran, “Are you really just going to ignore your promises?! We had a deal!”

“They will be used defensively!”, the Neolandian King replied, “I will take your lead as I always have when it comes to the Xadians! All I’m saying is that we need to be prepared!”

With this, Ahling stomped off, muttering angrily.

Marielle took a deep breath, then turned to Ezran, who was stewing with fury. “I appreciate all you’ve done for me, Sir Ezran. I won’t be a burden on the Twins any longer. King Ahling has offered to host me.”

“How did this decision come about?”, asked Aanya, “Has the Katolin court done something to offend you?”

“No. In fact, you have been a great help to myself and Evenere. It’s merely... Katolis is closer to Xadia than Neolandia.”

“You’re running from what you think will be the front!”, spat Ezran, “Makes sense! Well have fun at Ahling’s court, then!”

Marielle curtsied, nodded at Aanya and went after the Neolandian King.
Ezran slammed his fist into the balluster of the ramp they were standing on. “Feels like we’re back to where we started!”

Queen Aanya nodded. “Yes.”

Her tone didn’t inspire confidence in the Katolin King. “So, what are you going to do?”

“I... frankly, I’m not sure yet”, said the Durian, “I think I have to talk to my advisers. I want to maintain the armistice, obviously, but... They have not made it easy to trust them, Ez.”

“No. No they haven’t”, admitted Ezran, “But there’s so much bad blood between us... we had to give up some things to get anywhere.”

“We have. Perhaps though... too much”, she motioned at the sky, “And this... this is just so foreboding and close to home. I’m not even sure I could accept an explanation if they gave one. It would have to be flawless to convince me that there’s no threat in removing the clouds from the sky and stopping the wind.”

--

A hail of arrows was arriving from all over the Federation. The Queen’s Noticars were busy cataloguing them and putting together a report that summarized them for her.

Altina Sirta floated nervously between their desks, reading over the odd shoulder whenever a word caught her eye.

Apparently all Xadia had been affected. The shock to everyone’s Arcanii had killed many sick and elderly. There were reports of panic and unrest that were causing even more damage. Here and there was a military report, noting that the troops were ready for action.

The Interpreter collected a stack of reports waiting for her on a table at the front of the room, then hovered outside while reading.

What caught her attention immediately was the fact that the first page in the pile was an original,
not transcribed or shortened by the scribes.

A report sent by a Prime Legate Janai at the Breach.

Sirta’s eyes flew over it as she hurried her way to the Queen’s den where the great Dragon waited for her.

“Excellence”, said the elf as greeting.

“This is the end of my patience”, shouted the Dragon without preamble, “This is the last straw! Dark Magic at such a scale! A totally indiscriminate attack on our entire society! Sirta, the General Staff is to put into action our plan for a preemptive attack!”

“I’ll pass down your orders, Excellence, however I would urge you to read this rep--”

“I am done listening to cowards trying to save their own hides!”, yelled Raszagal, “The Auxilia is to fight the enemies I order them to, not fabricate ‘facts’ that challenge my assessments! I will not wait a day longer for the humans to make the first obvious atta--”

Outside the den, a massive shape crashed into the ground. It was another dragon, performing what Sirta had learned was an emergency landing from high speed.

Green scales shimmered as Karmanor stepped into the cave.

“Excellence”, said the Lord of the Earth, “Aaravos is free.”

Raszagal snarled and Sirta scrambled for a nook that she could duck into for what would predictably follow.

“What are you talking about?!”, shrieked the Dragon Queen, “My own son told me that Aaravos’ mirror was shattered!”

“Be that as it may, the signs we see point to his return. I’ve organized a search for him, but so far
we have not had any succ--"

“You’re trying to distract me!”, interrupted Raszagal and rose abruptly, “You are in cahoots with the humans, are you not?! You have always loved them, just like your friend Triton! My son would not lie!”

“I resent the accusation!”, hissed Karmanor, “If you are so intent on listening to Azy mondias, you also ought to heed his words and actions about humans! He hasn’t returned, has he?! He trusts the pink-skins, perhaps more so than he trusts yourself! Be rational, Rasza--”

With a furious roar, the Dragon Queen attacked.

--

Callum finished reading the message he had just received from Ezran, detailing the other leaders’ reactions and the assumptions everyone was making.

“So they think Xadia did this”, frowned Rayla from where she was sprawled out on the mossy ground, "Doesn't make sense. It was dark magic, like you said."

“Just great, isn’t it?”, sighed her summand, “How do we prioritize here? We should probably be at the Breach for this.”

“How long do you think you’ll need here?”, asked Rayla breathily.

“Fawn? Are you okay?"”

“Um... A was queasy before all this, but now I’m really birlin’”, hiccuped the elf, “A’ll be okay, just need a bit. How long?”

Callum sighed. “They’re eager to settle. I’d say a week or two until I have something I can bring to Marielle.”
“That disnae sound like a long time for all the stuff they got goin’ on.”

“As I said, they’re eager and I doubt this whole nature-shutting-down- maybe-it’s-xadia thing will hurt that. I don’t know if we have that much time though. What if Del Bar goes wild while I’m busy here?”

"Don’t call it that, it wasn’t Xadia. Ye don’t think Ez is gonna be able to manage thin’s at the Breach?"

"He’s new to this. It was my gig for the past four years, people know who I am and I know what’s going on."

"I guess the other question is, do ye think that the Kingdoms can win a war without Evenere?"

Callum nestled next to his summand and cradled her head to his chest. "No. But I’m also not sure if we could hold out with everyone on board."

Silence followed. It was still eerily quiet.

“Dummy”, said Rayla quietly.

“Mh?”

“I love you.”

He kissed her hair as answer.

“Are you as scared as I am?” he whispered.

“Nah. Probably a lot less, ye wee sook”, she quipped and poked his side.
His embrace tightened for a moment, then he rose to lean on his elbow.

“Okay. Here’s what I think. I’m going to give them five days, then we should go to the Breach.”

“Mh. That’s enough time to ride down to Cartier, get some convoys rollin’ their way and then come back. If that’s still what ye want.”

“It is. No more direct way to people’s hearts than their stomachs”, smirked Callum, “No offense, pukey.”

“Ha-ha”, went Rayla dryly. Then she sighed and her expression evened out, “Seriously though... If they start fightin’ again, all this was fer nothin’. We spent our entire lives on this peace, Callum.”

“Yeah”, he said, rose and extended a hand to help her to her feet, “Let’s make sure we don’t have to start over.”

His summand’s eyes tracked over his adorable features and she nodded. “I guess this is goodbye for now?”

“It’s pretty terrible, right? I don’t want to be away from you right now.”

“D’aww, dummy. It’s only five days!”

Frowning, he accepted her kiss and her mollifying words, “I’ll miss ye too.”

They pet each other for a while until Rayla separated from her lover.

“Whew. If A wisnae feelin’ so queasy, I’d jostle yer bones somethin’ fierce right now!”

He snickered. “You’ll get your chance when you come back. We’ll meet here in five days, okay?”
“Aye. Don’t make me wait”, she smiled and brushed some of his more and more unruly hair behind his ear.

They shared a last kiss, then Callum grabbed his sling bag and mounted up. Next to him, Rayla did the same.

“See you soon. Love you”, he said and smiled at his summand.

“Aye. Love ye too. Don’t you dare get hurt while I’m not around”, she wagged her finger, then turned to face due north and spurred Andris.

Callum watched her lift off with a knot in his chest, then clicked his tongue at Isoros who fell into a comfortable trot toward La Dorée.

--

Rayla took a deep breath, mostly to stem that terrible feeling of loneliness that snuck up to her, unbidden. This was a foreign land and she was not welcome in it.

Below the elf passed a landscape of dark greens and browns. Even in the mounting summer heat of the magically shortened day, Evenere looked drab and a bit depressing. The effect was only compounded by the freakish light the ray-less sun cast over the landscape from its cloudless, grey sky.

She had been flying for a few hours when she noticed something odd. On the ground in the distance were some burgundy and gold splotches.

With a bit too much speed, the elf landed in the midst of what had obviously been the scene of a battle. Andris protested loudly as she dismounted.

“Sorry, little lady. A know, that was a bit too much”, cooed the future Princess and patted her mount.

There were bodies all over the place, most of them wore Katolin colors.
“Gads”, gasped Rayla as she scanned the dead.

Their positions showed quite clearly that these soldiers had tried to run. No kind of formation had been kept and Rayla couldn’t make out any sort of frontline that indicated that the Katolins had stood their ground at all.

From the state of the bodies, the Xadian was guessing that the fight had taken place maybe a day ago, so she was going to make sure that there weren’t any survivors before moving on.

Rayla’s blood froze in her veins when she noticed a dead officer’s familiar face.

Second Lieutenant Carola di Vedevichi was laying on her impaled back, her arms contorted in a way that made it clear that she was grabbing for the blade that protruded from it. The marshy ground’s wetness was soaking into her uniform, her empty eyes and mouth wide open in a grotesque mask of pain.

This was Asier’s column.

The need to retch bubbled up in Rayla’s throat. She had subordinated these people to an inexperienced commander. There was a good chance that Carola hadn’t managed to marshall her troops when they had come under attack which would explain why their lines were so disorganized.

“One”, whispered Rayla, then turned to the next body, shaking, “Two... oh shit...”

She counted all of them, every dead person’s number like a sledgehammer against her skull.

When the elf was done counting, it felt as though she was going to weep, but the tears wouldn’t come. The last body she had found was sprawled out underneath a solitary, white-bleached tree.

“Feck!”, she yelled and slammed her fist into the barkless, dead wood.
Seventy-six.

Here was the entire column, wiped out.

“FECK!”

Another punch followed. It was hard enough to numb her entire arm.

For the first time, Callum’s words made perfect sense. She felt responsible, was responsible. Her choices had led these people to an unceremonious, unhelpful, unstrategic death.

She had wasted them.
She could feel the shift in the magma below. Something was happening to the bubbling mass. Was it solidifying?

Claudia hummed with quiet annoyance as her mind tried to steal her focus.

At least this time it had good reasons.

From her right approached a human Soldier.

“Lady Claudia”, he said, “General Amaya would like to speak with you.”

The mage rose to follow the guard but somehow couldn’t help but throw a wistful look over the edge of the cliff. The magma looked normal, swirling hot and mesmerizing as per usual.

Why did it feel as though she’d had some sort of insight into what was happening below the surface?

Shaking her head, she went after the soldier.

“Probably going nuts out here”, she thought.

As they were trudging back toward the human bastion, the mage mulled over the past two days.

Whatever the magical wave was that had passed over them, she had felt its sickening influence keenly. Unlike the other humans at the Breach, she had even spent some hours in the infirmary under the investigating eye of the local sawbones.

The elves on the other side of the Breach had been a little worse off yet. At first there was panic until Amaya and Janai had managed to settle everyone. Neither leader believed the other side was responsible, at least outwardly.
Still - since then, the Xadians had been standoffish.

General Amaya was waiting in the courtyard, accompanied by her interpreter.

“Reporting as ordered, Ma’am”, goofed Claudia.

‘You should work on your salute’, smirked Amaya, ‘So - the person you saw across the Breach. They caught him before the wave.’

“Interesting! What was he doing out there?”

‘That’s just it, Janai says they didn’t spend a whole lot of effort on getting it out of him at first, busy with other stuff. But apparently he’s refusing to say anything unless he gets to speak to a mage. A human mage.’

“Ookay? Why are we entertaining a trespasser?”

Amaya shrugged. ‘Janai wants to know what he has to say that was worth trudging all the way out here. So do I. Just seems odd timing, what with the wave and all that.’

“Mh”, went Claudia.

The three Katolins made their way through the gate.

Walking in silence past the sputtering and bubbling streams of molten rock once more made Claudia’s hair raise. Something was going on here, but she couldn’t put her finger on it. It was almost like watching her brother’s nose wrinkle just so when he thought of his wife.

The magma, the rock underneath... was... hurt?

The High Mage was jostled out of her confused reverie when the interpreter snickered.
“Ma’am, are you alright? You’re making a face.”

“Oh, heh”, went Claudia with some embarrassment, “Nah, it’s nothing. Just nervous, probably.”

Janai received them, a scowl on her face. Without a word of greeting, the sun elf leaned in and whispered, “Keep a low profile. My people are very on edge. There is talk of some sort of coup.”

“Coup!?” whispered Claudia forcefully.

“Nothing concrete”, said Janai and shook her head, “Let’s first get this mysterious wanderer out of the way.”

The four women made their way toward a tent containing a row of cages. Only one of them was currently occupied.

On the straw-covered ground sat a muscular, young moonshadow elf.

Claudia caught herself appreciating his well-defined, bare arms. Suppressing a snort, she called herself to reason. It was wholly inappropriate.

This was an elf.

A trespassing elf.

Okay, fine, a hot trespassing elf.

“We brought a mage, as you requested. Now let’s talk”, hissed Janai.

"Heyyyyy", went Claudia happily.
There was the feeling of a cold egg being cracked onto her neck.

Luckily, it didn’t seem like anyone had noticed her tone. The young man simply shook his head.

“I want to speak to her alone for a moment. I promise I’ll be completely open with you later, but I need to make sure you also get her perspective. Please, I mean no harm, but I can’t prove anything unless she is allowed to hear me out without bias.”

Janai huffed in annoyance, then waved curtly at Amaya to follow her. On the threshold of the tent, the Legate spun and pointed at the moonshadow elf.

“You better be worth all this, rafiki!”

Amaya patted her shoulder and together, they ducked outside, leaving Claudia stewing in her own, confused embarrassment.

“Thank you for coming”, said the elf and scooted closer to the bars of his cage, “My name is Taog. I’m a student of illusory magic from Zander.”

“What do you want?”, demanded Claudia. The name and occupation alone already prodded at something in her brain, but she couldn’t quite recall.

“Can we, uh, start with your name, maybe? I’m sort of putting my life in your hands here. No offense”, squeaked Taog.

“Claudia”, said the mage and raised her eyebrows, expectantly.

“Right. So, um, Claudia, you’re a dark mage, yes?”

“Last I checked.”

“Okay well, I have a request. Do you know how to perform induction?”
Of course I do.”

Taog breathed a sigh of relief. “That’s good news. Look, I came here because I didn’t really know what else to do. I’ve been digging in the archives of my university for anything I could learn about dark- and star magic for one of your Kings - I, uh, think he’s a prince n--”

“Wait a sec, you’re that Taog?”, interrupted Claudia, “You’re the guy who works with Callum? Rayla’s old friend?”

“Oh. You know them?”

“Yeah, I’m High Mage to Katolis, they’re friends of mine.”

“Well that’s a pure belter!”, exclaimed Taog, “Gotta be fate! Go through that, she wrote me a letter not three days ago!”

He pointed through the bars at where his stuff had been thrown, haphazardly. Among his belongings, Claudia found a letter from Rayla, asking how he had been and why he wouldn’t answer her last correspondence. The mage didn’t doubt the letter’s authenticity. Nobody else could have this particular chicken scratch.

“Okay, why didn’t you show them this instead of calling me over here?”, asked Claudia.

“They saw it, but there’s more than one person named ‘Rayla’ in this world”, grumbled Taog, “Look, I think found something and it almost got me killed. I took an early morning walk because I couldn’t sleep, but when I got back to my dorm, the place was trashed. So I bolted, and, the idiot that I am, didn’t think to pack anything beyond food and wat--”

“So you’re telling me you walked all the way to the border because someone wrecked your room?”

“No, no, no, I wasn’t finished! They killed my roommate, he was burnt to a crisp!”
“Sorry to hear that”, said Claudia.

“Yeah, feck, he was a massive douchebag, but he didn’t deserve that!”, rasped the scholar, “I didn’t think I could go to civil protection at that point. Let’s just say them and I had a tad’r trouble last year. They would’ve liked nothing better than to have a reason to lock me up.”

“So... you tried to flee the country?”

“Damn right I did! Couldn’t go back to my ‘rents, they would’ve probably dragged me to CP themselves!”

Claudia crouched down to be on a level with the prisoner. Distrustfully, she scanned his features. The two startlingly cyan eyes on each side of his beak-like nose looked oddly small since he was squinting a bit. This led Claudia to think that he was used to wearing strong-ish glasses.

“What do you want from me?”

“Uh... just this”, he said and motioned at his belongings, “I brought a sock.”

“What?!”, snorted Claudia.

“A s-sock”, went Taog nervously, “It’s my roommate’s! I want to know what killed him and for that I need you to indict it!”

“Oh. He was killed by magic?”

“I don’t think they doused him in oil and set him on fire and it just didn’t happen to spread to the rest of the room so they could turn it over! It was definitely magic!”

Claudia sat on the ground, still eyeing Taog. “Why don’t you indict it yourself? You’re a mage.”

“I can’t. Without... um, star mages, we’ve lost access to... investigative magic for the most part”, groused the elf, his eyes dashing bashfully between her features and the ground.
He was being adorable.

“Oh, really?”, smiled the human and absentmindedly twirled her index into her white hair.

“Y-yeah... really”, said Taog breathily. He squinted and leaned forward, “Um... hey, why... why is your hair... white? I’ve never seen a young human with, uh, white hair...?”

“Dark Magic”, said Claudia, “Don’t like it. Used to be black.”

“T-that would probably look j-just as amazing”, blurted Taog, then blushed slightly and sat up, straight as a board.

Claudia’s cheeks felt hot and she smirked. “What, you don’t think the way I got it is disgusting?”

“Uh, nah, uh, Interesting is more like it. I’ve never met a true dark mage. Somehow I thought you’d be less... err, well, charming, I guess? The long-term effects of using that sort of magic aren’t super-well understood because of the moral panic. I’d love to study you a little, given the chance.”

After a beat, in which his eyes widened slightly, he coughed and snickered sheepishly, ”Um, sorry, I didn't, uh... uh, that came out, uh, suggestive!”

“Oh, really? What are you... suggesting?”, smiled Claudia flirtatiously, then froze.

They stared at each other with startled expressions.

For a second it looked as though Taog was going to say something, but Claudia beat him to it.

“Ohooookay!”, she laughed, “Phew! I better get on with that induction.”

The human rose, leaving Taog looking a little disappointed.
Her ever-present mage’s sling bag yielded a pinch of dragon horn dust and the leathery, dried leaf of a Xadian plant called an ‘Eye-Stalk’.

She laid the ingredients next to the sock which she now realized was pretty singed and dirty.

“I’m not sure I’ll get a clean reading off this thing”, she said, “It’s in pretty rough shape.”

“Yeah tell me about it”, scoffed Taog, “He washed his clothes, like, once every `never` days. I’m just glad it’s not one of the crusty ones.”

Claudia shuddered but also couldn’t help but snort, feeling a prick of shame about the amusement she derived from a dead - if disgusting - person’s sock.

Thanks to the insane potency of the dragon horn, she would be able to forgo a large part of the normally time consuming ritual and so stepped right into the last invocative cycle.

“¿etaf ruoy depahs lliw tahW”, she chanted.

The leaf flared up with purple flame and a hole was burnt into it, its outlines crisp and well-defined.

“Well. That’s... ”, said Claudia confusedly.

Taog leaned forward to glimpse the leaf.

It sported the odd, twisted signet of dark magic.

"Huh. Will you look at that", he said coolly, "This at least proves that I didn't kill him. The question is, who did?"

"Could be a human bounty hunter", offered Claudia.
"It’s one explanation, sure. Right now, though, it’s actually the least likely to be correct. The border is closed tightly and bounty hunters wouldn’t find much business in town. Here’s a more likely suggestion. It was an elf."

"Elves do dark magic?"

"We technically can", said Taog angrily and got up to pace in small circles, “It’s obviously frowned upon and even more obviously it’s pointlessly cruel because we have access to Arcanii.”

“Aha - What about investigative spells?”

“We do fine without them for the most part”, grunted the elf snobbily, “It’s not something to ruin ones’ social standing over.”

“I’m sure it’s better that had to come all the way here and ask a lowly pinko for help...?”, led Claudia.

“I... uh... w-wouldn’t be so quick to judge yourself. Anyway, uh, the Children of Elarion used to get accused of using dark magic as a crutch. Nothing substantiated, but...”, he sighed and ruffled his hair, “I just don’t get... why they would come after me? Cooperation is what they want, isn’t it?”

“Maybe your roommate was the target or it’s someone impersonating them. Viren suggested that the Lucid was behind the attempt on Callum’s life in Cardow...”, said Claudia.

“Inter...estin”, mumbled Taog and rubbed his chin, “I hadn’t considered the former and can’t fathom the latter.”

The human watched on as he sat back down and crossed his legs.

“Do you want your glasses?”, she offered after a moment.
Nodding absentmindedly, Taog said, “Please. I’m sick of everything being a blur two feet out.”

She passed the spectacles through the bars and he fiddled them onto his face.

“Thanks, that’s b--”, he started with a smile at her, then his mien sagged, “--etter”

“Something wrong?”, she asked and looked around to see what had him startled.

“Well”, he squeaked hesitantly, “I..., uh, I do enjoy seeing you a bit more clearly.”

“Oh”, flushed Claudia.

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“Va te faire foutre, monstre!”, sneered a woman and spat vaguely in her direction.

Rayla avoided looking at her accoster and walked a little faster, the tone of her voice let the elf fathom the contents of the words she’d said.

The mud of the road sloshed beneath the future Princess’ boots as she made her way through the rain.

The narrow street opened up into a plaza that currently had a farmer’s market going on. Few patrons were braving the rain. Luckily, most of them were too busy haggling or inspecting the wares on display to take much note of the slightly different person mingling among them.

Then, a little girl pulled on her father’s shirt and pointed. “Regardez! Regardez papa! Elle a des cornes!”

Predictably, the father scooped up his daughter and watched on fearfully as Rayla hurried by, shouting some threat or warning.
The elf had been at Port-Cartier for a day, talking to this officer and that quartermaster to organize a number of relief shipments to the capital.

While the Katolin servicepeople running this bridge-head were nothing but professionally cordial, she had to walk the streets.

There was no room to spare that was fit for a royal to sleep, they said. Rayla thought this sounded a bit convenient.

The base commander had been overly apologetic and pointed out a few places he thought she should avoid. Dark passages, rougher parts of town around the docks. It wasn’t in Rayla’s interest to stir up trouble, so she took the scenic route whenever one of the no-go-zones was in her direct path.

This, however, still meant hearing threats and insults, the fearful cries of young children when they noticed her.

She didn’t want to let it get to her, but it did.

Port-Cartier was nothing to write home about. A large-ish coastal town, receiving shipments for military use from the mainland, it was well-fortified. That was just about the best feature of the place. The roads weren’t paved in any way and people didn’t seem to understand even the most basic rules of sanitation. All sorts of litter and muck was lining the muddy streets and passages.

Rats squealed in dark corners and under garbage containers. Small herds of them could be seen skittering all over the ground, especially in the twilight of late afternoon.

Compared to this, the Katolin Capital was a model city and Veltis-Tiram a glimpse of the Beyond.

With a sigh of relief, Rayla’s hand reached out to grab the handle of a door. She pushed and strode through, hearing the noise of rain and people subside a little when the door closed behind her.

A tall wooden clock ahead of her was in the process of ringing out the nineteenth hour of the day. To her right was a counter, currently unstaffed. The rest of the room was taken up by two worn sofas and a low table.
Here sat two old men and an even older looking woman who all startled when the soaked elf’s gaze tracked over them, their conversation choked when she had entered.

“Evenin’”, said Rayla quietly.

None of them said anything or dared to move while she took off her boots and stood them up next to the door to avoid tracking mud everywhere.

The Katolin noble sighed through her nose and stepped up to the counter, mindful of the fact that she was dripping water on its worn wooden surface.

“Hello?”, she called, bending over to glimpse around the corner behind the counter.

A chair was moved and muffled steps followed as a stocky woman tottered around the corner and stopped short as she fixed the elf with an insincere smile. “Lady Rayla. You want the key?”

“Aye. And a towel, if you have one.”

“Of course”, said the innkeeper.

The woman vanished under the counter and reappeared with both a key and folded, yellowing towel. “I’m sorry, they don’t look very clean. I promise they are.”

“That’s fine”, said Rayla and watched on, expectantly. When the innkeeper didn’t move, it dawned on the elf that there was a step missing.

“Oh. Sorry”, she sighed and rummaged in her pouch for the still unfamiliar metal that would get her what she wanted, “Here’s... four silver ones?”

The innkeeper nodded eagerly, dropping the key and towel on the counter and motioning for Rayla to do the same with her money.
Grumpily, the elf let the coins tinkle onto the wood. She was getting the feeling that four silver pieces were a steep price for a dirty towel and a room as small and dingy as hers, but she wasn’t entirely sure and so had decided to let things be as they were.

At last, she closed and locked the door behind her that sealed away all the racism and purposeful inconveniencing she had experienced ever since coming to the Pentarchy. While it was tiny, dimly lit and in a bit of disrepair, the room was at least clean.

Clean and private.

She pulled off her soaked clothes and dried herself off, then rummaged in her saddle bag for something else to wear.

Equipped with plain white linen, she crawled into bed and heaved another sigh.

In the silence of her solitude, she could hear the howling of the wind outside, modulated into an odd whistle by the dump-hole of the small outhouse that was connected to her room by a door opposite the foot-end of the bed.

Of course, the amenity was shared with the room across the hall, but lucky for her, that was not currently taken.

“Feck”, said the elf.

She dragged herself over to where her old clothes were hung up over the foot-end of the bed and dug into her pants’ pocket to retrieve the letter she had been saving for a private moment. Zala had replied to her news and Rayla was excited to hear from her prison-mom.

Further, she bent over the wooden board to pull a cheese sandwich from her sling-bag. It was Katolin cheese, sharp and hard.

Reading the mundane report on life at Arrias soothed her prickly nerves. The only thing that seemed out of the ordinary in Zala’s world was the fact that the storm appeared to have lost some of its ferocity.
Then came a passage about Rayla’s worries.

*Pregnancy, especially in your situation, is a scary thought, yes. Still. Don’t worry too much. Your mother is right; It’s not as easy as you might think. You’ve taken your medicine, penibly, if I know you at all.*

*I was terrible at keeping my dosage consistent, and I never had a child. Thank fuck for that. I can’t imagine what it would have been like to have someone like him as a father. So again, don’t worry too much.*

Rayla smiled, despite the dire message. She could still hear Zala’s gruff tone in her head.

*You’ve spent much of your letter on worrying about it. You’d do well to trust your elders, Rayla.*

*I’d rather hear a bit more about your travels around the Pentarchy. It’s exciting to get a glimpse into a life as important as yours.*

*I suppose I’m being a bit selfish here.*

The smile dissipated.

Important?

Important.

Her hands sagged, leaving the letter and half-eaten sandwich out of focus as she stared into the distance.

*Carola’s horrified expression.*

*Farouk’s serene smile.*
Tears beaded into her eyes. There had been so much death.

What connected the two occurrences was guilt.

Guilt about not feeling more intense grief as her father had passed in front of her.

Guilt about sending so many people to their deaths - and then, when she had found them, she hadn’t even taken the time to give them a burial.

Of course, it was an idiotic demand of herself. One person couldn’t very well bury almost eighty on her own and make a five-day schedule.

Worry seeped in with the guilt.

Was he doing okay?

Her mind immediately went a step further.

Was he still alive?

“Of course ye would, ye div”, she hissed at herself.

Angrily, she took another bite out of the sandwich. Her nausea, at least, had subsided.

She picked up the letter and continued reading.

_Harvest season is coming up soon, but Konar doesn’t seem up for it. I think his time is slowly but surely running out. Just be prepared that my next letter might have bad news about him._
You’ll be happy to hear, though, that someone else fell into the river lately and got worse laughs than you did. There’s talk of renaming the plank to honor the better belly-flopper.

We also have a newcomer...

Rayla remembered how straight-forward living at Arrias had been. It seemed as though the past two months had been more eventful than the four years that had preceded them combined.

Was she happier now?

Angrily, she shook her head. A day such as this, without much positivity in it, was not a day on which to evaluate her life. Once she was back with Callum, at least, people wouldn’t be quite so open with their hate. Maybe then, after she had talked through all her feelings, she’d feel better about things.

The twinge of worry reappeared.

The last piece of Sandwich disappeared.

She finished the letter and snuggled into the threadbare comforter and worn sheets.

Frisson washed over Rayla.

When the sensation waned, she smiled into the dark and rubbed her cheek on the admittedly plush pillow.

“Checkin’ up on poor old me, are we?”
The dark air was wet with screams and the clamor of metal.

Another blade found its mark and purple life ebbed into the open air.

Aodhan looked up from his latest victim across the field of battle. There, he found his summand engaged in furious combat with a Milite.

She was skilled, a true beauty in motion. The soldier stood no chance.

With a clatter of armor, he fell under her attack, a strangled cry marking the end of his traitorous life.

She looked about for the next soldier but found only her summand watching her instead. A breathless smile flickered on her lips.

“They really put up a fight today!”, Naves shouted, sheathed her blades and approached him.

Flames illuminated her, painting her surreal, warped shadow on the Palisades of the Auxilia post.

Aodhan stepped into her embrace while their comrades in arms started claiming their spoils.

As they held each other, a figure stepped into the light of the many fires that burned where the Children’s fire bombs had cut a path through the lines of the Auxilia.

Aodhan sprang away from his summand and drew his blade.

“Ye better stand and deliver, or else”, he threatened.

“You call yourselves the Children of Elarion?”, asked the cloaked figure, sounding perfectly
revolted, “How have you earned that name? What right do you have to it?”

“A deh answer to shysters”, scoffed Naves and drew her blade, “Last war--”

The two elves were thrown back by a blast of searing hot air. It blistered their skins and made them drop their rapidly heating weapons.

“You do not take her name in vain!”, hissed the cloaked figure and reached for their hood.

Where there had been anger and defiance in the warrior’s faces, it was replaced by respect borne from fear, even teary-eyed wonder. Many of the Children who had drawn their weapons dropped them. A few knelt.

“B-but”, breathed Naves as she scanned the star elf’s features, “You were... killed! ”

“A lie”, said Aaravos coolly, “Do not expect the dragons to ever speak the truth. It does not come to them easily.”

Two more hooded figures now stepped out of the dark. One was clearly hornless, judging by the way the garment draped smoothly over their skull.

“I’ve been watching you. Begging for your help in any way I could devise. But you were too preoccupied with killing each other”, continued the arch mage, “Look around! What are you but brigands, bringing shame to yourselves and her whose name you carry to justify self-righteous slaughter!”

“We f-fight tae free our people frae the clutches of Dr-drakes!”, protested Aodhan, ”They destroyed both the person and the town! What other name sh--”

“What do you know of either?”, seethed Aaravos, “None of you were alive to witness the injustices she suffered! None of you were alive to watch as Sol Regem played our human friends for fools and steered our races into eternal conflict! Elaron, the town, was named for Elarion, the woman, because her and I were the first to bridge the gap! We sheltered those who saw past the horns and fingers! We proved that our races could create healthy families!”
Furious, the archmage threw out a hand. “Then the lizards took both her and our community from me! Burned our houses! Slew our halfling children!”

Aaravos motioned at the bodies on the ground. “Yet here you are! Fighting the beasts in their fashion, killing others for their sins! It is the opposite of what she stood for!”

“How so? Isn’t this what ye did, too?”, asked Naves angrily, “There’s stories! Of ye burnin’ and murderin’ yer way to influence!”

“I took lives where I had to, yes”, said Aaravos, “But I was not the one to throw the first punch. My campaigns were of vengeance, I vanquished those who had assisted the lizards in their genocidal ambitions. No more, no less.”

“Same here, we have no choice other than to kill their agents”, said one of the kneeling fighters, “We do not stand a chance against them!”

“If us humans can manage to kill an arch dragon, so can you”, said the smooth-headed figure flippantly, “They are a threat. To your freedom and our existence.”

Aaravos took a deep breath. “Whatever you were before tonight... you are no longer. Swear your fealty to me now and be absolved or lay down your weapons to be judged by your peers when the dust has settled.”

“What if we want neither!”, shouted a sun elf.

"Then your life ends here", said Aaravos matter-of-factly, "You are free to leave or to join. You are not free to continue to disrespect Elarion’s memory with your infinite bloodlust."

“So you’re looking to control us, just like the dragons!”, spat the sun elf and grasped his spear more tightly.

“I seek to free both halves of this continent”, said Aaravos, “Control is for the weak.”

Disbelief in his eyes, the sunfire elf charged.
He did not see the next morning.

--

Rayla startled awake. Her internal clock told her that it was way too early.

There were quiet voices, right outside her door, whispering energetically in Eveneran. An argument, to be sure.

The elf rolled over, exasperated. Why couldn't people settle their issues in private over here?

A door creaked and someone sat on the dump hole with a satisfied, overly loud groan.

That did it.

Rayla rose and got dressed, intent on leaving this dismal town as soon as was possible.

She tore open the door, interrupting the hushed argument that had been taking place in front of her room. Unfortunately, the arguers were blocking her from leaving.

With a sinking feeling in her stomach, Rayla recognized the woman who had threatened her in the street the day prior, saw the way these people wielded shovels, a hatchet and a pitchfork.

“Comin’ fer me, are ye?”, growled the elf, “Ye better think about this!”

Her words didn’t find any purchase on these people, probably because they didn’t understand a lick of Common.

The woman with the seething hate in her eyes swung her shovel at Rayla. Due to the tight quarters and the heft of the luggage she carried, the elf couldn’t move as far as she would have needed to escape completely. Pain flooded the future princess’ arm as the tool crashed into her shoulder.
There was no doubt that it had been aimed for her head originally.

Their argument, whatever it had been, was apparently decided as two of the other people moved on Rayla.

She dropped her bags.

The first peasant found her knee in the pit of his stomach and buckled over, sputtering. Number two’s jaw cracked under the force of the jab the elf dealt the man.

With them wailing and rolling on the floor, the angry woman and her male friend apparently decided that beating her to death from a distance was a better idea.

The man stabbed his pitchfork at her center, but impaled the wall beside her instead as Rayla slammed her right vambrace into the tool to redirect it.

This had the helpful side effect of also stopping the woman’s next attack as the shovel crashed into the handle of the pitchfork and rang to a harmless halt.

Before the peasants could react any further, Rayla had punched out the man and shoved the woman to the ground.

At this point, the commotion had woken the entire inn. As doors were flung open, angry and confused voices sprung up all over.

Rayla decided not to take any chances.

She grabbed her bags, ducked under the handle of the pitchfork, stepped over her attackers and ran outside into the continuing rain.

She found herself slipping on the muddy ground, but didn't dare stop. Who knew how the people at the inn would react? Four of them had been easy enough to hold off. Rayla didn't want to try with more.
Crossing the marketplace was simple enough, deserted as it was.

In the narrow street tumbled a number of drunkards, singing in rough tones. When they noticed the running elf, their songs turned to fear- and hateful shouting. A few of them even tried getting in her way.

So, Rayla kept running until she reached the doubtful safety of the makeshift Katolin barracks at the docks. At least here, her burgundy uniform and provisory title counted for something.

Behind the wooden gate, a lone guardsman was keeping a bleary-eyed watch.

“Private!” shouted Rayla breathlessly, “Open the gate!”

Tortoise-like, the guard approached the blockade and peered out between the rough timbers. “Who there?”

“Lady Rayla, future Crown Princess to Katolis!”

“Eww, it’s the bruiser”, whispered someone else.

“She has good ears, the bruiser”, barked Rayla and kicked the gate, “Go oan ye waners, test yer feckin’ luck some more!”

Stone-faced, the two guards opened the gate and watched as the royal stomped through.

“Ranks and names!”, demanded Rayla, seething with anger.

“Private Paris”, mumbled the guard who had uttered the slur.

“Private Lovepreet, Ma’am”, said the sleepy one.
“Aye, well, aren’t ye two just proper fucked!”, shouted Rayla, still somewhat out of breath from running.

With that, she whirled around to find that the base commander was already poking his head through the door of his roughly built office.

“Good morning, Milady. Having a bit of a problem with the guard staff?”, he asked, a shallow grin on his lips. The man's name was Dario and he wore a green pin whose design was vaguely familiar to Rayla.

“Yin disnae know how to keep his eyes open, that one’s a shit-fer-brains!”, Rayla yelled, then did a gaping double-take toward the mostly empty carts sitting near the water.

The elf exploded. “Get those bloody thin’s ready before A forget meself, Captain!”

“Please, Ma’am, we’re working on it. There’s no need to be unrea--”

Rayla stepped into the man’s personal space. She was a little taller than him and stared down, her violet eyes dripping with murder. “Ye aren’t about tae call me `unreasonable`. Ye canny be that stupid.”

"N-no, Majesty", rasped Dario, now sounding quite Vedevian.

“Ye’ve got an hour. A’l expect that convoy packed and ready on the south-west road out of town”, hissed Rayla, “Ye had a whole day to prepare and I see nothin’ done! Move yer arse !”

With her gaze boring into his, she stepped back.

Quietly, the base commander slunk into the relative dark of the base to wake a platoon of soldiers for convoy duty.

“Private Paris!”, shouted Rayla and the young woman jumped, “A word!”
The future princess watched on as the guard walked over, looking like she was about to be launched into a pit of tar. Motioning at the commander’s office, the two women stepped inside and Rayla sat down at the overflowing desk in a move that respected what Amaya had described as ‘cheek rank’.

If you were comfortably seated while others had to stand, the hierarchy was painfully clear.

“Paris, relax”, said Rayla and put on a forced smile, “I’m not aboot tae set you up for latrine duty. That’s up to your Captain. All I wanna know is what made you say what you did.”

“I’m... very sorry and ask that you, um... forgive me ”, cringed Paris, the idea of apologising causing her apparent distress.

“Not lookin’ for platitudes”, ground the elf and placed her elbows on the desk to lean forward, “Not lookin’ for excuses or apologies. I want an honest answer. Again, why did you say what you said?”

“W-well”, quavered the Private, “Y... you’re an elf?”

“...and?”

“Elves... uh... aren’t known to... uhh, be very nice, `Ma’am`. ”

“Right. But what about me ?”

“Pardon?”

“You’re human, Paris. You’ve been a real stinker just now. How does that reflect on, say, my su-err- fiancee ? He’s human. Should I be mad at him for somethin’ you did?”

“... probably not?”, grumbled the soldier and avoided Rayla’s stare.
After letting the uncomfortable moment drag on, the elf nodded with a sigh. “I think you know that the answer is ‘no’. I think you even knew that before I came through that gate tonight, so let me be real clear here. There’s a history of hate against elves in the Katolin forces, and that’s fine. *Hate* is perfectly fine on the battlefield where it’s either you or them. *Racism* though? *Racism* isn’t fine, ever. You don’t get to hate me, who’s done nothin’ to hurt you, just cause of who I am. You don’t get to hate everyone who looks like the foreign soldier who’s out tae kill you or your bandmates. Clear?”

The only thing that was clear was that Paris was really working very hard not to speak her mind as her lips and nose twitched into a micro-second sneer. “Yes, `Ma’am`.”

Rayla shook her head. “Sounds like ye have to think about it some more. On your feet, marchin’. You’re with me on convoy duty. Till then, you’re dismissed.”

“Yes, `Ma’am`.”

The soldier stepped outside and Rayla kept her facade for a moment longer, then the stress and fear drove tears into her eyes.

“How often can that sort of thin’ happen before I wake up dead?”, she whispered at herself, ruffling and grabbing at her own hair.

A few minutes passed in which she fought and finally won her composure.

Not a moment after she had taken a last bracing breath, Captain Dario stepped through the door, saw her behind his desk and let a frown flicker across his face.

"Milady, we are loading the carts as ordered", he said, "I thought you might want to know that during the night, a pair of scouts arrived from a column caught outside supply lines. Major Asier is requesting we meet him as soon as possible, so we have diverted some resources for them."

The elf’s throat constricted. Before her brain had time to really figure out the sentence, she hiccupsed, "Not necessary, they’re dead."

Confused, the commander blinked. "Ma'am?"
Rayla considered lying. She also considered telling the whole story.

Given how her night had gone, neither option was overly appealing.

"On my way here", said the elf, "I came across his column. They were... wiped out by rebels."

"Wiped out?", whispered the commander.

He swallowed hard, then repeated "Wiped... out."

He sagged into a chair, apparently wrestling for composure, "I... m... my daughter Carola was with them... I..."

Rayla immediately regretted telling him anything. She didn't know how to respond here and could only think about how much he would hate her if he inevitably found what had happened.

Still, her moral core told her that he deserved the whole story.

"There's... more to it", she admitted.

Starting from when they had found Asier's crime to her coming across the dead soldiers, Rayla recounted the entire ordeal.

When she was finished, tears were threatening her eyes once more.

"I'm sorry", choked Rayla, "I didn't mean for this to happen."

Dario's face was hidden in his hands. "You gave her a command. You gave command over an entire column to a seventeen year old second lieutenant."
"There wasn't any other choice. She was the ranking officer."

"Asier was the ranking officer", cried the Captain quietly, "But he was busy building some random peasant woman's house."

"A house he ordered burned down", said Rayla, "I'm sorry. I didn't think they'd run into trouble on the way here."

"There's no reason you should", seethed the Captain, "After all, this isn't a county in a state of civil war and we're not at all close to the front!"

He shot up, "You would not have let this happen if they had been elves!"

With that, he stomped out and slammed the door shut behind himself.

--

"He’s fine! He didn’t do anything”, protested Claudia, “Plus, he’s an old friend of Rayla. Do you really want to get into Katolis' bad books over something like this?”

"Something like this` possibly being murder, Lady Claudia?'”, asked Janai with an exasperated smirk.

The Prime Legate, Amaya, her interpreter and Claudia were standing in Janai’s tent. August 12th had arrived with the same dead sky as the day before.

"He didn't kill anyone", repeated the high mage crossing her arms.

"Or so he says", smiled Janai, "We don't have any proof either way. All we know is that he tried to run."

"We know that he almost got killed trying to help us out", disagreed Claudia, "I really doubt he's a user of dark magic."
“Nevertheless, he’s a student of it. I’ll have to defer to Civil Protection in Zander.”

Claudia opened her mouth to protest, but Amaya lifted her hand to silence her.

“Master Claudia”, said the General’s interpreter in translation, “It’s clear that you’re very convinced of Taog’s innocence. However it’s not really our business. The elves have him, the elves have to do what their laws say.”

“But he didn’t do it!”, groaned the high mage.

Janai’s smile was fading and Claudia started losing her bluster. The sun elf really made her nervous and now spoke with a voice that showed how close to the end of her rope she was with the uppity mage. “Amaya is correct. We’ll handle our citizen. Rest assured that we will find the truth.”

“Bu--”

“Thank you”, said the Prime Legate pointedly.

Claudia stared between Amaya and her for a moment, then whirled around and power-walked out of the tent.

When she had left, Janai fixed Amaya with a tired frown. “Well. She has quite a temper.”

‘She fears and respects you’, said the General, ‘Otherwise she might’ve not given up so easily. Be serious though, do you think he did it?’

“Does it matter?”, asked the elf.

‘Matters to me . ’

Janai scanned her human partner’s face, then shook her head, lightly. “I don’t think so. He doesn’t
give me the vibe of a killer. Or a liar.”

‘Alright. Well, I don’t really feel entitled to an opinion. For now I’ll go ba--’

The tent flap opened and a breathless young earthblood elf took in the two female leaders.

“Yes, Noticar?”, prompted Janai.

“Message for you, Prime Legate, highest priority!”, said the messenger.

‘Right, that’s my cue. I’ll see you later, Janai’, smiled Amaya and together with her interpreter, she left.

Janai watched her appreciatively. It was a great courtesy not to try to snoop on elven military business, especially given their strange close-but-not relationship. Humans apparently liked to do things slowly rather than jumping into the thick of things. The sun elf played along, out of respect for Amaya, but was still confused by this. What better way to find out if someone was worth your time than to give it your all right off the bat?

“Well, let’s have it”, she said and waved the Noticar over.

The young man handed her a rolled up letter.

Reading it, her eyes widened. Then, she blanched.

When she had finished, she rose and nearly barrelled over the Noticar as she stepped outside.

“Temek!”, shouted Janai.

Her earthblood Lieutenant looked up where he sat on the floor with his foster daughter Honsa. They both seemed somewhat annoyed because their game of Caesar was interrupted by Janai’s approach.
“Princeps”, smirked Temek, “I’m off duty and for once I’m winning. What’s the emer--”

“Please, I can’t deal with your clowning right now”, said Janai, her mien serious and fearful, “Take three Octuria. You’re going to the Sibling Towers of Katolis to escort Azymondias home.”

Honsa rose, a frown on her face. “Why?”

Janai shook her head. “He has been recalled. I don’t doubt you will hear the details sooner rather than later, but I cannot tell you. On that, Temek, a word.”

Her Lieutenant followed the Prime Legate, leaving his daughter standing next to the game board on the ground.

When they were out of earshot, Janai handed the letter to Temek.

He went through much the same stages of emotion as his superior.

“Gone”, he rasped, “And... and he does not want it?”

“Apparently not”, whispered Janai.

Temek scoffed, incredulous. “Unprecedented.”

“Can you blame him? Nobody should want to under these circumstances!”

“Azymondias, though...”, said Temek and sighed.

“I know”, replied Janai.
Callum was growing tired of the discussion. It didn’t help that the Evenerans seemed to care little about the fact that he did not speak their language. A rapid-fire argument was unfolding to both sides of the aisle.

Next to him, Modeste watched with great interest.

The Katolin Crown Prince and the glass-like Speaker were seated on a shoddily built, raised platform inside what Callum assumed had once been Jorge’s throne room.

To its left and right were benches on which around a hundred people sat, all arguing with each other and the party on the other side of the room.

Callum couldn’t help but notice that while the crowd was pretty well mixed, there weren’t any peasants. Nice threads and well-fed faces made up the bulk. These supposed democrats had skipped over the most disenfranchised of their society and used their existing power to place themselves at the helm.

Modeste raised their voice to calm the situation down.

After a moment, everyone rose, grumbling and dissatisfied.

“Are we taking a break?”, asked Callum.

“Yes. This isn’t going anywhere”, sighed Modeste and motioned for the Prince to follow.

Together, they vanished in the Speakers’ office - probably also formerly Jorge’s. Modeste offered Callum a chair and busied themself with a thick binder on one of the shelves.

“Good grief”, sighed the Speaker, “It’s as I said. The left wing refuses to give any status to the queen, the right wants to make her a figurehead to end the unrest.”
A loud ‘phoomp’ announced the uncorking of a large bottle. Modeste poured a generous glass for both themself and Callum and passed the amber liquid to the Prince with a flourish.

“To secret stashes of sixty-year-old good stuff”, they smirked and took a swig.

Callum sipped the bourbon, thinking that it tasted about as vile as the moonshine he’d had in Scotia. He didn’t say anything to the effect though, not wanting to offend his host. “Do you see any way to compromise? Both between the parties and between them and the Queen?”

Modeste took another thoughtful drink, then stared off into the distance. Callum thought they looked as though they were reading the titles of the books, sitting in rows on the wall.

“Frankly, the only way I see this working is if the Queen settles for a sort of... ambassadorial role. She can’t seriously expect to keep control over the military. That would give her the power to take back the country”, said the Speaker eventually.

“What if you shared control, though?”, said Callum and took a larger drink, hoping to get it over with, “For example; She gets the power to declare war on foreign nations, but can’t use the army in the interior. That would allow Evenere to be reactive to Xadia but also maintain internal order.”

Modeste pursed their lips. “I’ll suggest it. Perhaps it would be better if we forbade the use of soldiers inside the borders altogether and created a police force instead.”

“I’ll leave the details to you”, said Callum defensively, “All I can say is that Marielle will not accept a position as a figurehead.”

“Obviously”, agreed Modeste.

The speaker blinked drowsily, then nodded. “I believe we should call it quits for tonight, Majesty. I’m just about ready to fall out of my shoes.”

Callum rose and emptied his glass. “Of course. I’ll be in my room if you need me.”

“Thank you. Pleasant night for now.”
The Prince nodded his goodbye and left the Speaker’s office, turning left to walk down a long hallway that would eventually take him to the room they had given him.

As he was passing by a set of windows that allowed him a view of the city, he stopped and looked outside.

Unlike the Twins, this castle stood in the midst of the capital, overlooking the spires of other nobles’ villas, towering over the small houses of the citizenry and the hovels of the poor. From where he stood, the separation of wealth was quite clear and once again, the Prince felt the sting of guilt.

No matter how hard he worked to elevate people of lesser means, he still had so much compared to them. Even if his mother hadn’t caught Harrow’s eye, Callum would have grown up privileged.

“Puis-je dire un mot, Prince Héritier?” asked a gruff voice.

The Katolin spun to face the speaker and found a soldier, clad in heavy armor. Next to him stood a much younger man.

“Sir Valérian would like to speak to you, Sire. My name is Soan, I am his squire”, said the teenager, “I’ll mediate, if it pleases you.”

“Thank you, Soan”, smiled Callum, “What can I do for you?”

“The Sir wishes to know why you were traveling with an elf”, said the squire with an unsure look at his master, “He says it’s unusual and worrisome, even more so that she isn’t with you now.”

“Was Sir Valérian the rider who held us up on the road?”, inquired Callum and crossed his arms.

Soan nodded, then translated the question for the knight.

“He was”, said the teen, then Valérian interrupted his squire. When he was done speaking, Soan
added, “He would also like to note that he does not approve of your misdirection.”

“It’s not misdirection. I want to know who’s asking me rude, probing questions”, said Callum, “As for the elf - she is a Lady of Katolis. Her name is Rayla and she is my future Princess.”

Soan blanched and translated the explanation with a stutter.

Valérian showed no reaction to the news, other than losing the last bit of warmth in his gaze.

A short argument unfolded between the noble fighter and his squire which was quickly decided by the boy’s master.

“Sir Valérian demands a duel, Sire”, grumbled Soan, “He calls you an honorless traitor to humankind...”

“A duel?”, gaped Callum, “That’s ridiculous. I’m here to mediate peace, not to enter in a jousting tourney!”

“Be that as it may”, squeaked the squire after translating, “the Lord refuses to allow you to leave unless you agree to it.”

“I’d like to see him stop me. Good night”, said Callum and turned to leave.

He had taken a few steps when he heard a blade being unsheathed. This had to be bluster, there was just no way the knight was actually going to come for him.

The assumption didn’t hold for long as the clatter of armor indicated that Valérian had entered a threatening lumber.

Callum turned and stopped, watching as the Knight approached.

“Combattre comme un noble ou mourir comme un roturier!”, spat Valérian.
“He says to accept his duel like a noble or be struck down like a commoner”, quavered Soan.

“Tell him that actually swinging for me will be the last thing he does this week”, said Callum calmly. “I don’t accept his duel. I don’t recognize his authority in denying my title and branding me a traitor.”

Cold fury burst through Valérian’s irises when Soan finished his shaky translation. With a growl, the Knight charged and Callum’s eyes widened.

He evaded the blade’s swing and drew his broadsword. Not that he’d use it offensively, the last thing Callum wanted was to fight in close quarters.

Instead, he shouted, “I was granted safe passage by Speaker Modeste! Is this how the Eveneran democracy keeps its promises?”

Soan translated loudly while Valérian’s blade whirred toward Callum. The prince deflected the strike with the wide of his sword, redirecting it for the most part. Only the sharp outlier of Valérian’s blade’s handle tore into his sleeve. The faeshield vambraces the Prince wore screeched, but held up perfectly to the damage.

With quick strokes, Callum slashed a rune into the air and activated, “Aspiro!”

The narrow corridor was filled with wind, pushing and toppling the Knight into his squire. They both went down, seeming utterly confused.

“Please stop before I have to zap you”, said Callum.
Trials and Evidence

Rayla peered across the muddy landscape, scanning the horizon for any sign of rebels. Next to her, Private Paris held her pike laxly.

“Looks clear in the distance”, said the future Princess, “You’ve fought the rebels before, Paris. What are their tactics like?”

Paris spat into the grass, then nodded toward a stand of trees near the road about twenty minutes from their current position. “The roaches like that sort of ground, ‘Majesty’. Don’t got the numbers, so they try’n get the jump on us whenever’s possible.”

“Slash-n-dash?”, smirked the elf.

“If you wanna call it that, sure”, shrugged Paris, rolling her eyes.

As her superior, Rayla could very easily punish her in some fashion for her constant lip, but the events of the past week made her want to try something else. “Ever done any scoutin’?”

“You’re seriously sending me out there?”, scoffed the Private, “Should’ve guessed you only dragged me out here to get me killed!”

“Pfweh”, went Rayla with a wry smirk, “Not about to send you anywhere on your own, ye wee sook! You know, Paris, it sort of feels like you’re tryin’ to goad me.”

“Me? Why, never!”, droned the soldier. She then scratched her nose and said, “I’ve been scouting before, yeah. Round the Breach, actually. Shanked a fair few of your buddies, too.”

“Great, so you won’t be totally useless. You and I are going to go over there, together. Check it out before leading the carts through.”

“Just the two of us?”
“Yep. It’ll be romantic. Don’t worry, I’ll just use you as a messenger raven when things turn sour. You know how tae run, right?”

“Fuuuck”, grumbled Paris and dropped her pike. It would be unwieldy in the trees.

Rayla dismounted and called over another soldier to hold Andris’ reigns.

Together with Paris, she ducked into the high grass on the side of the road.

“So you’ve seen some international action?”, asked Rayla.

“Yup”, replied the Private, “Did two tours, one at the Breach, the other near Torre Elfica on the Vedevian border.”

“How old are you? You don’t look a day over twenty-five.”

Paris snorted. “Next thing you’ll tell me that all humans look the same! I’m thirty-six!”

“Ah, yer just a wee one.”

“Low blow”, smirked the diminutive woman, “Guess it’s a fair one, though. I’m pressure-packed piss and vinegar, ‘Ma’am’.”

Rustling, the two Katolins made their way along the treeline, peering between the many trunks.

“Looks clear”, whispered Paris lazily and shrugged.

“We’re only about half-way round, Private”, said Rayla, “keep lookin’.”

Another few minutes passed, then Rayla heard something. “Shh”, she went to make her companion stop where she stood.

“I hear somethin’, so shut it”, said Rayla.

From a distance, a quiet conversation held in Eveneran reached the elf’s sensitive ears.

“There's somebody talkin’ in the trees”, said Rayla and pointed vaguely.

“Well fuck”, scoffed Paris, “Let’s grab the rest of the kids and clean up!”

“Nice to know you and I agree fer once”, said Rayla, “but give me a moment to actually see if they’re armed or just civvies out for a stroll. Go back to the carts. Tell them to make ready for a fight but sit tight and wait for me.”

The elf snuck forward carefully, peering upward into the trees.

On two lower branches, she saw a lightly armored archer each. From there they would have excellent sight of the road without having to fear being spotted. This, of course, had the downside of them not really being able to see into the dense underbrush that Rayla was lying in.

The scouts were set up in a way where they covered each other, so it was impossible to take out one without alerting the other.

Rayla scanned the surroundings. If she had one of her old bandmates with her, this wouldn’t be a problem, but with only the common soldiers at her disposal, there was no way to perform a safe, stealthy double-takedown.

The elf stayed in her prone position, looking for any signs that these two rebels had any nearby support. It wasn’t pleasant work, dragging herself through the muddy ground and getting leaves and dirt all over her. Now more than ever, she was glad to have cut off her long hair. It would only tangle around the thin branches and twigs in here.
Eventually she heard more quiet conversation and smelled a thin waft of smoke from a constrained bonfire. Peeking between two leafy ferns, she found the speakers.

Around twenty-four people had set up camp on a wide clearing, shielded on all sides by dense foliage. They wore a wild assortment of armor and weapons, some of it looking very improvised. Rayla’s side had the advantage in both numbers and equipment, but still, if the scouts were able to alert this larger troop, the Katolins would be dragged into a major fight.

Rayla’s gears started turning. The convoy could turn back and take a different route. There was no guarantee that any other path wasn’t being observed in this same fashion. They could wheel the carts off the road and take their chances in the marsh. Neither option was all that great. With an internal sigh, she acknowledged that the best way to approach this was probably an overpowering assault involving most of the convoy’s guard.

The camp was in shouting range of the scouts’ post, so they would have to attack both at the same time if they wanted to keep the element of surprise. In the ideal case, the rebels would see that they were encircled and surrender without a major battle.

About twenty minutes later, Rayla was back with the carts and she dusted herself off as well as she could. The faux uniform had suffered rather badly. Paris sneered from where she was seated on a largish rock. Apparently the soldier was enthused by the idea of a noble being just as dirty as herself.

Rayla stepped up to where the officers of the column were waiting, “We’ve got some Evenerans in those trees over there. Two lookouts ahead, about thirty fighters in a camp a short distance away. I want to take them down, preferably without killin’ them.”

“Why?”, asked one of the officers, “They never take any prisoners.”

Rayla knew the stocky Captain’s name was Miles. He was the highest ranking soldier here, taking command over the convoy under her.

“There’s two reasons. First; We’re not them and killin’ is a last resort. Second; The Crown Prince is negotiatin’ peace with their leaders right now. I don’t wanna make thin’s harder than I need tae”, replied Rayla, “I think the best way to get at them would be to pincer them, so we’re gonna split up. Keep an eye on your rear, too, in case there’s more there that I havnae seen.”
An Eveneran Lieutenant who was attached to Miles spoke up. Rayla couldn't recall her name, even though they had all been introduced to her.

The woman was muscular; her features permanently altered by a wide scar over her blind left eye. “The strategy is simple enough, but do we spare them even if they run?”

“Stop them... by any means if they try to get away and obviously defend yer own lives”, nodded Rayla, her eyes hard with discomfort, "Captain, pick some of your people to come with me. The rest stays here to watch out for the carts."

"Yes, Ma'am", said Captain Miles with a hint of annoyance, then he turned to the Lieutenant, "Lutece, I'd like you to lead our forces under her Majesty. If we're to keep this bloodless, we ought to have someone capable of speaking to the rabble."

Rayla repeated the name over and over in her mind, trying to make sure it wouldn't fall out again.

"Of course, Monsieur", agreed the attachee, "I hope this is agréable to you, Madame Rayla?"

"It makes perfect sense", smiled the elf, "Captain, can I talk to you for a moment?"

"Ma'am?", prompted Miles when they were out of earshot.

"You have an issue with my orders?", asked Rayla.

"In a way, Ma'am. It’s hard for me to justify the additional risk of capture rather than neutralization, but I understand your reasons. Further, I fully agree with your encirclement plan, however... If I may be so bold; It, um, is normally expected that travelling nobles discuss their intents with the p-present leading officer first - before having them turn it into action."

Rayla's mood fell. "Oh. I expected you to bring up any issues you had without me promptin’ but I can see how you might not feel comfortable givin’ a piece of yer mind to a... a noble. I’m new to the whole procedure. I’m sorry, I’ll be sure to ask yer opinion next time."

The officer's half-worried glance turned into a small smile. "Thank you, Ma'am."
As the troop made to encircle the rebels, Paris fell in next to Rayla and Lutece, scanning the elf with something of an annoyed frown.

"What's the matter?", prompted Rayla and Lutece blinked at her conversational tone.

"You're confusing the shit out of me", said Paris, "What do you care if we shank some random Evees?"

"Cause I'm a bruiser, ye mean?"

"That, and you're supposed to be a bigshot too, 'Princess'. How come you give a fuck about these peasant roaches? They'd probably find the most shameful, gut-tearing way to conk you out if they got the chance."

"Far as I know, they didn't really torture anyone they killed", said Rayla, the question implicit in her tone.

"Far as you know, heh", mocked Paris, "I've heard stories that made my ass hair curl."

The elf bit her lower lip to keep from snorting, "Uh-huh, like what?"

"Fat merchant's body was found with his unmentionables shoved in his mouth, to shut him up while they sacked - pun intended - his house", she spat into the high grass, "Boyo! And he was human! Can barely hold on to my lunch, thinking of what they would've done with one of your sort."

"Try not tae sound too sarcastic, Private", said Rayla, hoping that this was just a story. She didn’t want to know that humans could be so cruel, “Here’s your spot. See you on the other side.”

“If you say so, ‘Ma’am’", drawled Paris and stopped.

When she was out of earshot, Lieutenant Lutece prompted, “Madame. A word?”
“Go fer it”, said Rayla.

“That Private’s insubordinate beyond belief. Why do you allow it? I’ve never heard a noble treated in such a fashion!”

“Honestly, I’m sorta hopin’ she’ll come around somehow. Kill her with kindness.”

“Permission to speak frankly, Majesty.”

The elf annoyedly motioned for her to go ahead. Twice inside ten minutes was a bit much.

Lutece nodded, then sighed and looked about as she spoke. “You’re... somewhat new to leadership, right? At least where humans are concerned?”

“You’re right. I put a lot of time into learnin’ this past month, but I’m not a fully trained officer.”

“I, um, heard about Captain Dario’s daughter”, quavered the Lieutenant.

Rayla stiffened slightly. Was this officer about to lecture her about her terrible decision, too?

When she didn’t say anything, she continued uncomfortably, “I can’t imagine having something like this happen so early in one’s career is very... healthy for one’s self-confidence.”

“Mind gettin’ to the point?”, the elf said, curtly.

“Frankly, Lady Rayla, I’m not sure yours is a fitting attitude for a military situation”, said Lutece, “You’re allowing a Private an improper measure of... familiarity and lip, and I think it’s because of some... perhaps m-misguided feeling of guilt over a decision gone wrong. This is dangerous, not just for yourself. Being too easy with the lower ranks leads nowhere good. We ought not to be friends with the people we lead into battle.”
“I see your point, but my interest with her isn’t friendly, it’s professional. She’s a racist, and a convinced one at that. I’m not gonna get anywhere by denyin’ her the ability to say what she thinks. All that’s gonna do is make her hide who she really is. In so many ways, she's a test subject fer me tae see if I can't convince people not to hate my gut as soon as they see my horns.”

The officer watched her for a moment, then said, “I see. Well, I, uh, certainly can't speak to politics, however I think my point still stands. She is a soldier, not a guinea pig.”

"Fair enough. If I see it becomin' a problem, I'll be sure to let you know. For now, let's do this . Wait for my signal."

"Of course, Lady Rayla."

They had arrived next to the first soldier they had left in the forest. They were boredly peering into the underbrush.

“Alright, let’s move”, said Rayla and the command was passed down on both sides of the ring.

In relative quiet, the Katolins tightened their encirclement.

When Rayla heard shouting coming from the direction of the scouts, she sped up, pulling her side of the circle in quicker.

The rebel’s camp came into view, the people there were in a frantic rush to put on pieces of armor they had been cleaning.

Their expressions spoke at length about their emotions when they noticed the burgundy-and-gold crowd that was showing up between the trees all around them. There was anger, fear but a good measure of shock, too.

“Ne vous battez pas! Vous ne serez pas blessé!”, shouted the rough voice of Lieutenant Lutece over the clatter of pikes being lowered all around.

Tense quiet fell over the forest, deep enough for Rayla to hear gut wrenching cries of pain coming
from the scouts’ post.

The rebels looked at each other, some with fierce determination, others with fearful resignation.

From their perspective, this had to look like an almost hopeless situation.

From their perspective, they were totally surrounded, by forces who were more numerous, better equipped and trained for battle.

There was something else, though.

The Rebels started backing away from the Katolin lines as the personification of evil broke through the underbrush, stepping into the clearing alongside the foreign soldiers. The weird light of the rayless sun carved razor sharp shadows into the entity’s face, her monstrous horns clearly contrasted against the green of the forest. The purple-skinned demon was towering a full head over most of the present rebels and soldiers alike.

Inhuman, violet eyes scanned the scene and her four-fingered fists tightened around her blades, their alien form and material gleaming like bloody fire in the shock of sunlight.

Someone cried the magic words.

“Bête à cornes!”

Farming tools and mismatched, looted weapons started clattering to the ground as the hapless Evenerans surrendered.

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Callum was flabbergasted.

Valérian had just jumped up in the middle of proceedings to repeat his challenge for a duel, and he had done it in broken Common. Modeste was frozen in the process of pointing at him to give him
the floor, mouth slightly agape.

The other delegates were equally surprised, but as Valérien continued to speak in Eveneran, their miens became grim.

Modeste sat back as the angry knight continued his tirade, leaned over to Callum and explained: “He is accusing you of being a traitor due to the fact that... sacre bleu!”

The speaker shouted over Valérien, apparently some sort of reprimand that the Knight accepted with little grace. As he continued to speak, Modeste bent back toward Callum, “Apologies, I had to call him out for his choice of words. An insult too crude for me to translate, safe to say he is not happy with whom you share your bed.”

“That’s...”, started Callum, but couldn’t quite find the right words to express his anger.

“I know. It’s not what should have our attention at the moment”, frowned the speaker and scanned the room, “However, the delegates seem to unfortunately disagree. Valérien is arguing that one who... ugh... ‘lies’ with elves cannot be allowed to speak for Evenere. He’s challenging your honor and demands you face him in a duel to the death since you... cheated your way out of it the other day?”, the Speaker finished, their eyebrows raised in surprised question.

“He held me up after we spoke and I blew him down the hallway with magic!”, spat Callum, “I’m not going to kill him! That’s not why I’m here!”

Modeste nodded glumly and sat up to give the message to the delegates. There was sporadic laughter and one of the nobles fixed Callum with a smug smile. “Monsieur, nobody here could best Sir Valérien and there are veterans of stature sitting here.”

“Nice to know you speak common”, grimaced Callum, “Again, it doesn’t matter whether I’d be able to beat him! I’m not here to fight him!”

“Well, then we are at somewhat of an impasse”, shrugged the noble, “The way we see it is that you insulted the honor of one of our most dear comrades. We can’t very well give you the power to speak for people you disrespect so deeply.”

“I didn’t insult his honor!”, said Callum, “I refused his duel; he then chose to draw his blade
regardless! I defended myself!”

“That is not the tale he tells”, said another noble, “You attacked him without warning. And with magic, no less. It demands satisfaction.”

“Oui, satisfaction”, another delegate chimed in seriously, “Without the cheat of magie.”

“You want me to fight him to the death without using magic?”, gaped Callum.

“It’s only fair”, replied the first noble, nodding gratuitously.

The Katolin looked at him, then at Modeste who was stone-faced, then let his gaze rest on Valérian.

Then, Callum shrugged. “Fine. I suppose this parlance is over, then. I refuse to duel a man who would stab a foreign dignitary in the back. Over something as silly as who that dignitary chooses for company. Especially with an handicap designed to give him the upper hand.”

Rising, the Prince continued, “Now that I know that you all are quite capable of understanding me, let me say this: By the end of the day, I will have packed my bags and I will have walked through the city gates of La Dorée without any mandate from your side. I imagine this treatment of myself will be received splendidly on the Pentarchy’s side.”

He rounded the small table he had sat behind and descended the platform to walk the aisle between the benches on which the delegates sat, watching. “Speaking of treatments, my elven Princess is on her way back with a shipment of supplies for you, but given that I am no longer welcome here, I can’t imagine she will be allowed to enter town with it. On the other hand, I’m sure the convoy’s staff will be rather happy to distribute those goods to the Pentarchy’s nearby forces instead.”

On the threshold, he spun to find a wild mix of expressions in the crowd. “Funny. The only reason I’m even here is my Princess’ grace. I wanted us to return home as soon as it became clear that your small-minded racism would keep her out of this town, but she insisted I try. So, if you come to your senses, please come find me”, the prince slowly shook his head, “It’s sad that you should stake the success of your entire revolution and all of your lives on what might or might not go on between my bedsheets. Quite pointlessly so, I should add, since her and I aren’t even married yet.”
With that distortion of the truth, he walked out.

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Janai knocked on the door and waited.

A moment later, it opened to reveal Claudia who immediately seemed to shrink by an inch.

“Oh. Um, hello. What’s u- can I do for you?”, asked the mage.

“I thought you might want to know that we’ve decided to postpone Mr. Taog’s return”, smiled the sun elf, “I don’t want to spare anyone to escort him at the moment. I’m sure he’d be glad for some occasional company and you’re welcome to visit.”

With a threatening gleam in her amused eyes, Janai added, “As long as you won’t attempt to break him out!”

Claudia attempted to fake a genuine laugh. It didn’t go well and only left the Prime Legate to give her a bewildered smirk.

“Sorry”, coughed the mage, “Um, did you come over here just to tell me that?”

“No”, said Janai and her eyes darted in Amaya’s quarter’s direction meaningfully, “But, having delivered my message, I will get on with it. Good day, Master Claudia.”

When Janai had left, Soren’s door across the hall opened further to reveal a very smug looking crownguard. He had been listening, the jerk.

“Ooouuuu”, he cooed, “Looks like you’re gonna get a chance for smoochies after all.”

“No”, shouted Claudia. She then blinked and looked about to find Janai staring at her from down the hall. Her cheeks burned, and Soren’s teasing grin didn’t improve the situation.
“Hey, it’s all good”, smiled her brother, “I actually just wanted to get Ames back from you. I’m done for the day and all set for lunch.”

“Are you just saying that so I won’t feel bad handing her over and going over the Breach right now?”, asked Claudia.

“Yep”, came the smug answer.

Ten minutes later, Claudia was scampering down one side of the Breach and up the other. Once again, she noticed the odd vibe under the bubbling rock that felt like she had grown some sort of invisible fifth appendage which extended below it.

The guards gave her a stern glare, but didn’t hold her up and so she found herself taking a deep breath in front of the prison tent.

Claudia pushed aside the flap and stepped inside, the smell of hay filling her nostrils.

In his cage, Taog was lying on his back, lazily picking at his toes. When he noticed his visitor, he almost smashed his face into the bars, trying to get into a more dignified posture.

“Hi!”, he said and ruffled his hair to get rid of the bits of straw that had nested there with little success, “What brings you here, Claudia?”

“They said they’re going to take a while to ship you back to Zander and I have permission to come visit”, smiled the mage and sat on the ground in front of his cage.

He seemed shocked. “Wha... they’re taking me back? They think I did it ?”

“Oh”, went Claudia, “You didn’t know?”

“No!”, said the scholar and got up to pace, “Ugh! What a mess!”
The human wasn’t sure what to say, so she stayed quiet while Taog walked in circles. Eventually, he leaned against one of the iron bars and sighed.

“I was so naive”, he whispered and sank to the ground, “I could’ve saved me all this trouble and just...”

Claudia reached through the bars and placed a hand on his. He looked up, surprised.

“There’s always another way”, said Claudia, “You’re a mage. Do some magic. You’re a scholar. Do some research.”

Taog swallowed heavily and withdrew his hand, a heavy blush on his face. “Um... Sorry, I’m... uh, not comfortable touching you out in the open like that.”

“Sorry”, said Claudia, placing her offending hand in her lap.

“No, please - I appreciate the gesture. The message, too. You’re right, I can’t just give up. It’s just that... well...”, he took a deep breath, “I wish I was free to... go pick some flowers, is all.”

“Ah”, went the human and blushed, well aware of his implication thanks to Callum’s verbosity.

For a tense moment, they looked at each other, then Taog cleared his throat. “Right, so... magic. These cages are warded, meaning I can’t really cast in here. But, you gave me an idea. Do you think I could ask for political asylum from the Pentarchy?”

Claudia blinked. “I really don’t know, but I can try to find out.”

--

Callum was just putting the last of his papers into a binder when someone knocked on his door. The Prince quickly hacked a rune into the air and buffered the spell in his fist. This was not a time to take chances.
When he opened the door, he found only the grim visage of Speaker Modeste.

“Bon soir”, grumbled the dignitary and nodded at the saddle bag next to the door, “I see you are making good on your threat?”

“I’m not a fan of idle words”, said Callum coolly.

“May I come in for a moment?”

“Please.”

The Prince stepped aside to let Modeste pass, offering his visitor one of the two chairs in the room and quietly cancelling the lightning out of his fingers.

With the door closed, the Eveneran’s mien lightened a little. “I am... mortified. A thousand apologies, Sir Callum, the behaviour of my colleagues is without a doubt the dumbest thing I’ve ever had the displeasure of witnessing.”

“That’s saying something considering who ruled this place before you”, scoffed Callum.

“Oui”, sighed Modeste, “I have done my best to guide them to some sort of useful resolution. Hence my late visit.”

The speaker unfurled a long piece of parchment on the table between them and turned it so Callum could read it. It was a list of demands and offers to Marielle.

“Let’s just say your speech has hurried proceedings a little.”

“That’s... unexpected, actually”, admitted Callum and started reading.

“These are fairly reasonable, too. What gives? What’s the catch?”, he continued after finishing the letter.
“No catch. Valérian and his supporters had to concede the majority vote.”

The news genuinely surprised Callum. “This is... really fast, Modeste. I’m impressed.”

“You give us too much credit”, groused the Speaker, “I do believe the keyword here was ‘supplies’. It pains me to say it, but we are on the brink of starvation. That we still exist is only thanks to the fact that a huge number of people have abandoned La Dorée. An empty stomach has a way of accelerating decisions, especially for people who are not used to such states.”

“Don’t I know it”, smiled the Katolin Prince, remembering the searing hole in his belly from the day spent working at Edmée’s village, “This is good news. I’m glad you were able to steer the conversation.”

Modeste gave him an empty glance, then shrugged. “As am I. Frankly, I’m more than a little disillusioned. More than a little tired, too. I think I ought to retire for now”, they rose, “Sir Callum, thank you for being as gracious as you’ve been. My colleagues have been rude beyond measure, even before the topic of Lady Rayla came into focus.”

“Yes, they were”, agreed Callum, “But they could make up for it by allowing her to deliver her supplies in person.”

The Speaker nodded, wearily. “I will see if they can be persuaded. Just be aware that my warning still stands. I can’t warrant for her safety inside these walls.”

“Then, I suppose, she will have to stay outside until you can”, said Callum, losing his smile, “Well, until tomorrow. Thank you, Modeste.”

The two of them shook hands, then the Eveneran departed.

--

Ezran blinked drowsily at his dinner. He had just arrived at the Twins and was looking forward to a bath and a bed. Still, hunger had driven him to ask the staff for some leftovers and as he dug in, he was glad to have done so. Mashed potatoes and a vegetable gravy next to a heap of honey-
glazed carrots made for an excellent midnight snack.

When he was half-way through his dinner, there was a knock at his door and Ezran’s eyes rolled with exasperation. Without swallowing, he called, “Come in!”

The door opened and in strode Helmond with an apologetic, “I’m sorry to disturb you, Excellence. I just heard you had returned and wanted to raise two matters to your attention.”

“Uh-huh”, went the King and grumpily shoveled another spoonful of potato mash into his mouth.

“First, I’ve been monitoring a worrying amount of chaos on the other side of the border. It seems something monumental has taken place.”

“Wave?”, asked Ezran.

“I will get to that in a moment, however, there’s some good evidence that...”, the Agent waited for the little man to swallow, then said, “... that the Dragon Queen was killed.”

The King’s eyes widened and his spoon, already laden with more mash sunk back to the plate.

“Who did it?”, asked Ezran breathily.

“I’m afraid I have no details”, admitted Helmond, “The Lucid is running an exorbitant amount of interference. It’s a tactic of theirs to mask events they cannot keep quiet. They will inject rumor after rumor into the populace until nobody knows how to separate out the truth.”

“It wasn’t us though - right?”

“I see no evidence of it”, nodded Helmond and Ezran heaved a sigh of relief, “Still, this would explain Xadia’s sudden interest in escorting Azymondias home.”

“He’s the heir”, surmised Ezran, “hm... but why don’t they just call him back? Flying’s way faster.”
“For this, I do not have an answer either. Regrettably. However I’ve managed to find an interesting report connected to the wave itself. Shortly after the event, I acquired a report from Civil Protection in Zander, detailing a suspected murder at the University there. It claims that the scene of this crime was at the center of the phenomenon and involved Dark Magic, cast by an elf to consume another.”

Ezran’s face contorted. That was a gruesome image.

“Now, this report... at first it didn’t hold my attention. It is an obvious fake, thrown in the mix to confuse and misdirect people such as I. Imagine my surprise when, this evening, we received a Raven from the Breach that referenced this same crime.”

Helmond lifted his hand in which he held a couple of lose pages, “Master Claudia is inquiring about the possibility of extending political Asylum to a certain Mr. Taog.”

“Oh, the student Callum works with?”, asked Ezran, his eyes wide with recognition.

“Indeed. Mr. Taog claims that he returned from a late-night stroll to find his roommate dead. Not trusting the local authorities due to some... past encounters, he made his way to the Breach, hoping to cross unseen. Now, two things strike me abou--”

“The timeline is all wrong!”, shouted Ezran excitedly, “The wave came way too soon for Taog to be able to walk to the Breach from Zander!”

“Exactly, it is this glaring error that makes me inclined to believe Mr. Taog. The Lucid doesn’t do something like this lightly. In my opinion, they fabricated this report not just to add to the noise around the chaos that appears to be consuming the Xadian republic, but also to have probable cause to arrest our studious quasi-collaborator. In his first meeting with Master Claudia, he states that he thinks himself a target due to his research.”

“So he thinks he’s in trouble because he helped my brother?”

“Indeed.”
Ezran got up and tore his oversized napkin out of his collar. “Let’s go talk to Opeli.”
When La Dorée came into view late the next day, Rayla couldn't help but smile. She was looking forward to this reunion. Behind her trailed the officers, then a number of soldiers, a group of prisoners, more soldiers and finally, the carts bearing enough supplies to sustain the capital for a week, if not comfortably.

The sky bore another set of the same black, jagged clouds that had wept on Port Cartier the other day. Mist-like rain fell limply over the gray, lifeless ground. It was a dismal picture.

As the convoy closed, a few riders exited the gates of La Dorée and Rayla stiffened, lifting a fist to command her column to stop.

“Captain, you take point”, said the future princess.

“Ma’am?”, asked Captain Miles from behind her.

“We've met. I don't need to muck thin's up. They won't like me.”

Her second in command appeared at her right, scanning her features and finding nothing but angry resignation. Then, startled recognition.

One of the riders had lifted a banner, it flew burgundy-gold-white-green. A second later, Callum’s smiling, excited face became recognizable among the Evenerans.

“I think you might be wrong”, smiled the officer.

“Captain”, asked Rayla through her teeth, “Can I squeeze the life out of my fiancee or is that unprincessly?”

“Let’s just say that nobody here is expecting you to shake hands”, he started with good humor, then his mien froze and he avoided her gaze, “Though... they... might not appreciate... um... anything more.”
Right. Knowing that an elf and a human were a pair was one thing, seeing the relationship in action might spur some more concrete thoughts.

“Seein’ is belivin’, right?” groused Rayla, “Handshake it is.”

Callum swerved to come to her left. She smiled at him and wiped her right on her pants, making ready for the most awkward handshake of all time.

What happened next would be part of minstrel’s songs for some time to come.

Her arm at the ready, she watched as her Prince approached. Without slowing much, he grabbed both her hands and pulled her backwards out of her saddle into his lap.

Rayla’s surprised yelp was silenced by his lips on hers as he squeezed the life out of her.

When he released her, he brought his mount to a halt and said, “Hey. I’m glad you’re back.”

“I love you, you mad lad!” laughed Rayla, then froze as she realized their predicament.

Almost a hundred pairs of eyes were staring their way, it was impossible to read the emotion in the rear, but the soldiers closest to them were somewhere between bemusement and disgust. Paris’ face stuck out to Rayla, her eyes full of revulsion.

“Oh, sorry”, quavered the Prince and lifted his arms to signify that she was free to go.

“Um, it’s kinda late fer that”, she smiled nervously and nodded in the soldiers’ direction.

Callum scanned the crowd, then pointed. “Huh? Who are they?”

“Rebels. Picked them up on the way here. Did our best to leave them in one piece, but one of them was killed”, Rayla replied, a clump forming in her throat, “C-Callum... Asier’s people... ugh... it
was my fault.”

“Fawn”, the Prince said gently and pet her cheek, “You’ll have to tell me later in private, okay? For now, let’s get those wares into town. We’re invited for one last meeting. Both of us.”

The news made her feel a little better. La Dorée’s newfound acceptance was nice, even though it was probably bought with supplies and spurred by Callum’s tenacity.

Her summand turned Isoros around so he could face the troops more easily, “Soldiers! Tonight, we unload these carts, and then we celebrate! Thanks to you, nobody will go hungry here! Thanks to you, there will be peace! Thanks to you, the Pentarchy will be made whole and you will get your well-deserved rest!”

The unit cheered as one, but Rayla suspected it was mostly thanks to her summand’s promise of a party than anything.

“This is a bit undignified”, she whispered critically and bent over to kiss him again.

Snickering, Callum delivered her back to Andris who seemed rather annoyed at Isoros and the Prince for having removed her rider so brashly. The doe huffed and puffed while the future Princess climbed on her back. As soon as Rayla had settled in her saddle, she gave the signal to move and the column followed.

The four Evenerans who had accompanied Callum fell in with him once more. Among them, Rayla recognized the wry smirk of Modeste and the anonymous visor of their ever-helmeted bodyguard. There was also a teenage boy who seemed extremely uncomfortable and another Knight whose coat of arms Rayla thought she recognized.

Her summand seemed at peace, his boyish features tired but content. The elf closed the distance between them a bit further and gave him a warm smile which he returned.

"How are you feeling?”, he asked.

"I'm...", she started. It would be easy to say 'fine', but the truth was that she felt a chaos of emotion. It would be good to voice them all later, when they had a moment to themselves.
For now, she settled for the obvious. "I'm healthy. A-and, heh, glad tae be with you."

This was true. It *was* good to be home.

--

Janai always thought it was weird seeing Amaya without her armor. She looked like a plucked bird. Perhaps though, she was making the same impression on her human partner? Her quarters were reasonably comfortable, certainly nicer than a standard issue tent and cot.

Still, the request that had just skipped off the human General’s hands left Janai wondering if it had been translated wrong.

“*Political Asylum*”, said the Prime Legate, barely able to hide her surprise, “But why? As I said, my gut tells me he’s innocent and he protests it so. He’s not being persecuted as an enemy of the state, he’s sought as a person of interest in a civilian murder case.”

‘Our spies have found evidence that he is being framed for the Wave’, Amaya said and her interpreter followed suit, ‘I have a copy of it here.’

The General handed her partner a piece of paper which the elf took with great interest.

When she had finished reading it, Janai started pacing. “The details are all wrong. If he is being framed, it is sloppy work indeed.”

‘Do you see why you have to let him run? He’s not going to get a fair trial.’

“Amaya”, the sun elf ground, “I... I can’t do that. This is... *evidence*, sure, but...”

Sighing, the golden Knight fell into a chair, her hands clasped over her mouth. “I can’t be sure that it’s not a trick. I’m sorry. Where spies are involved, I cannot trust anything. I trust you, but you might not have been told the truth.”
‘I get it.’, smiled Amaya and knelt in front of Janai to take her hand. She kissed it, then the General made her partner rest it on her cheek to continue signing, ‘It’s a good concern to have and I won’t press this with you. Just consider it. Maybe you can find something else.’

“Perhaps”, smiled the elf and leaned in to kiss Amaya’s forehead, “I am sure of one thing. This mess is thanks to Master Claudia’s visitation rights.”

The General snickered. ‘Yup. I get the feeling those two crashed into each other a little.’

“It’s the only reason I gave her permission”, shrugged Janai, then continued more wistfully, “I simply thought... that there can’t be enough... feeling between our peoples.”

‘You know she’s Viren’s daughter, right?’

“I do. A dark mage, befriending an elf? Almost as unlikely as a human general and the Golden Knight of Lux Aurea.”

Smirking, they kissed each other, then Janai clapped her hands to her knees. “Well. I better return. It’s getting late and I wouldn’t want to stir any... unfounded rumours.”

Amaya raised her eyebrows. ‘You think it would be trouble if they found out?’

“It’s not about them finding out, dear”, laughed Janai, “They know. They just can’t ever be sure, that’s all. I feel it would undermine my command if it became known that I cast a ray across the Breach.”

‘Not sure what you mean’, smiled Amaya, ‘Everyone here works together to keep out the bounty hunters. Nothing wrong with having long strategic meetings with your fellow commander.’

Janai nodded, grinning, then bid her farewell.
Aaravos smiled at his swelling numbers. Ever since running into the group at the Auxilia outpost, he had been busy collecting bodies. From the other side of the Breach, Viren informed him that he was also seeing good return on his investments.

Oh how liberating it was to move about, to use one’s own voice to speak and one’s own eyes to see. See the progress his old plans of revenge were making. See the eager gleam in his compatriot’s eyes to serve the dragon’s destruction.

“Grand Master”, said a voice from the entrance to his tent and he looked up from his maps to find Cognitor Chalise standing there, “I have collected one of my former students. It appears she was attempting to spy on us.”

“Why do you tell me this?”, asked the Arch Mage, “Do what you see fit.”

“A free hand?”, smiled the old woman, “My, my, one might feel an odd sense of trust.”

“You’ve proven yourself. Don’t play games with me.”

“It’s all I know to do. Fine, I will deal with it myself. Thank you.”

With that, Chalise turned and made her way down a small incline where the four guards who had captured the interloper still stood surrounding her.

She stepped into the circle and smiled at the bleeding and battered elf on the ground, “My my, aren’t we in trouble?”

“L...legate Adamaris...”, coughed the wounded woman, “You... will never... get away with this...”

“Oh, dear!”, Chalise laughed and bent down to grab her victim by her left horn, using it to turn the woman’s head to face her. The Cognitor flashed her teeth in a frosty smile, “You will help me reach my goals. As for me getting away? Take a quantum of solace in the fact that I am not planning to survive this year, Agent Wynda.”
Callum wanted nothing more than to wrap his arms around his summand and spend the next few hours listening to her talk about all the things that had happened to her while she was gone.

Sadly, matters of state were still calling and so they rode slowly toward the palace, side-by-side. The streets were mostly empty. A large part of the populace had high-tailed it out of the city as the rebels had moved in. The desertion was welcome to the Katolins as it reduced the number of scared and hateful stares they were collecting.

Rayla reminded herself of all the thanks and well-wishes that people had left her with as she handed them bags of flour and potatoes. Having her help distribute some of the aid was a transparent publicity stunt, but it still felt good to have something positive to fall back on.

“So what do they want from me?” she asked Callum.

The question snapped him out of a forlorn, loving stare he’d been giving her. It made her smile.

“They want to check you out. Meet-and-greet, right?” he grinned, “So be on your very best behaviour.”

Rayla rolled her eyes, “Yea, cause I’m soooo rambunctious, normally, Prince Horse-puller!”

“Now you’re stretching it”, he snickered.

“I’ll stretch it as hard as you stretched me”, she replied with a slightly painful smirk and rotated her shoulders.

When they arrived at the gate, the two guards stationed there accepted their mounts and one of them led the pair to the throne room where chaotic chatter received them.

As soon as the door closed behind Rayla, she felt trapped. The atmosphere in the room was extraordinarily hostile, the sudden quiet underlined by hateful stares.
Next to Callum, she climbed the squat platform at the front of the room where the Speaker sat, the only friendly face in the room.

“Welcome and thank you. Your aid will keep La Dorée alive”, said Modeste, then turned to the delegates, “I am happy to introduce Rayla, Katolin Lady of the Crescent Reflection, Second of her Name, Promised to Callum, Lord of the Winds, Crown Prince Master of Katolis.”

Even Callum seemed a bit surprised at such a wordy introduction, but he stepped forward. “Thank you for allowing my fiancee to introduce herself. It means a lot that you would give us the opportunity to change misguided preconceptions. Questions?”

A hand rose and Callum pointed.

“Delegate Laravell”, said the man in introduction, “How often do you drink blood to sustain yourself?”

Rayla snorted. “That’s a myth. We don’t drink any b-blood. I’m mostly a vegetarian myself.”

“When was the last time you killed a human?”, asked a woman in the crowd.

“I’ve never k-killed anyone, elf or human.”

“But isn’t it true that you were among the assassins of King Harrow? Do you not accept culpability for this?”

“I didn’t kill him. I doubt I’d be here w-with his son i-if I had.”

Callum nodded. “She tried calling the attack off, but her commanding officer would not permit it.”

“Sir Callum”, called a voice from the back and the Prince blinked, not having expected questions directed at himself. “You’ve bargained quite unfavourably with Xadia to achieve the armistice. Wouldn’t you say you’ve been softer on them than on us?”
“I’m... not sure how that plays into this, but I’ll humor the question. When brokering the Armistice, I had a free hand. I can’t offer you what I don’t have. Marielle gave me guidelines, those I stuck to.”

Angry murmurs broke out amid the delegates and Rayla suddenly felt a memory well up, of a grand hall in which haughty, self important voices sentenced her to imprisonment. Anxiety nestled in her neck.

“Have you not just used food as leverage to get us to accept your Xadian... ‘companion’ into our midst? I did not see you use similar cruelty against the Xadian state!”, the same angry voice shouted, followed by more murmurs of discontent.

“Inviting Rayla in was not a requirement, I thought I had made that clear!”, hissed Callum, looking for the speaker “Frankly, I needed you to make a decision that did not involve my private life!”

“What happened?”, asked Rayla under her breath.

“They were being insanely rude. More later”, whispered Callum over the din of the angry delegates.

Modeste shouted, “Mesdames et Messieurs! Order! This is not an inquiry! Have some respect!”

“Respect is earned!”, yelled the male voice, “Valérien deserves his duel!”

The room exploded in shouting, some arguing against, some for the speaker.

“Duel!?”, asked Rayla critically and Callum quickly filled her in.

“Silence!!”, screamed Modeste, “What happened here in the past four days is an outrage! I will not tolerate such disgusting behavior!”

Dense silence settled over the room. For some reason, Modeste held abundant respect here and
Callum was glad for it.

“I do believe we found a resolution”, continued the Speaker sternly, “The duel was not accepted and it is not proper to press the issue. Once our guests leave, we will discuss an amendment to our procedures, to avoid such inexcusable lack of decorum in the future!”

They turned to the Katolins and sighed. “I am so sorry about this.”

Rayla shook her head. “It’s not your fault. Whoever posed those questions from the crowd, you’re a coward for hidin’. Come on out, so we can talk face-tae-face.”

There was silence in the room as the elf scanned it. When nobody moved, she sighed and continued, “Alright. Well, let me say th-this. Callum’s not yer enemy. He’s here for peace, nothin’ else. Him and I know that the Pentarchy is goin’ to have to stick together for what’s next, no matter if we can figure out a way to make this peace last or not. Where I’m c-concerned, I just wanna make sure you know that... there’s elves who want you dead, but I’m not one of them. I want nothin’ more than to see people live the lives they want, in peace. We’ve lost so many people. Both sides. It needs tae stop.”

She grasped Callum’s hands and gave him an inquisitive glance that he answered with a smile and an approving nod. Then, he spoke up, “We will deliver your message to Marielle and argue in your defense, because this conflict needs to end just as badly as the war with Xadia. The freedom fighters and loyalists are going to face similar issues in reconciliation, too.”

The room filled with murmurs of agreement.

Callum smiled intensely at his summand, a look that she returned as he continued, “The parallels are closer than some of you might realize. Understand that our relationship only works because humans and elves are precisely not as different as you think. They love their families just the same and strive for a life in peace just the same. All I can ask of you is that, when the time comes to reconcile with Xadia, you don’t judge them any different than the loyalists who you will have to re-form a society with. For now, we bid you farewell and good luck.”

A few delegates clapped, a few seemed supportive or at least doubtful. There still were a great many angry stares among them.

Modeste escorted Callum and Rayla out of the room and shook their hands.
“Thank you both, for everything you’ve done”, they said, “If this was another time and the situation was a little less dire, I would invite you to feast. The most I can offer is a glass of spirits and interesting conversation.”

Callum threw an inquisitive look at his elf who shrugged.

“I... I think we’re tired from all this, Modeste. Thank you for the invitation, but we’re going to go back home early tomorrow morning”, he smiled and the Speaker nodded.

“I understand, of course. Pleasant evening. I will do my best to come see you off tomorrow.”

They said their goodbyes and made their way downstairs.

It was only when they were in their saddles again that Callum next spoke, “So... that’s been my last five days. I came here to talk about getting them acceptance and they’ve given me nothing but grief over us.”

Rayla was tight lipped, feeling the annoying emotion of having made his life more difficult again. He ranted about his presence here and she listened, frowning at all the small cruelties the rebels had inflicted upon her summand.

"... so then, this morning, Modeste comes back and says they like the idea of having you in for a bit of question and answer. The rest you know. They’ve been difficult and unmoving this entire time and I hate how this agreement came to be.”

“It’s not ideal”, agreed Rayla, “but it’s not like they gave you a lot of other optio--”

She turned in her saddle to watch the darkening street behind them.

“What’s wrong?”, asked Callum.

“Not sure. Look.”
The Knight with the uncomfortable-looking squire was slowly catching up to them on their horses. In the twilight, the torch his companion carried threw flickering blue shadows in all directions.

“Great. It’s Valérian”, hissed Callum and stopped. His hand traced fulminis and the spell slipped into his fingertips, weak and quivering like a candle in the wind. Ever since the wave, his magic had been tenuous and more difficult.

Rayla noticed his tense tone and leaned forward to have better access to her blades.

The riders closed, then passed, the squire nodding uncomfortably in their direction.

When Valérian was several horse lengths away again, Callum relaxed. “Harrowing”, he said and spurred Isoros, “I thought for sure he was going to attack me ag--”

With a loud ‘YAH!”, the knight had whipped his horse around, spurred it into a break-neck gallop and lowered his lance.

The distance was too short for evasion, Rayla recognized this fact immediately.

He would hit Callum. He would kill Callum.

With a swift motion, she jumped up to stand in her saddle, cut her summand’s saddle brace, and kicked him in the side, sending him flying off Isoros into the gutter where Valérian could not reach. Then, she drew her other blade and leapt off her panicking mount to the right, out of the attacking knight’s right-handed, horizontal range. A few feet to her left, Valérian skittered to a halt with his lance, his charge foiled.

Behind Rayla, the two Perytons were panicking, running from the loud noise and charging animal.

“Xadian dog!”, yelled the knight, dropped his lance, jumped off the horse and drew his blade. The street wasn’t wide enough to give him any advantage on horseback.
To Valérian’s left, Callum was groaning, reassembling himself on the ground. Swift steps brought the Eveneran in arm’s reach, a move Rayla had not expected him to make. It was heinous, he should have gone after the biggest threat, which was her, not the helpless Prince in the gutter.

“HEY!”, she yelled and started to sprint, closing the distance rapidly. Her heart pounded, not from exertion but fear. These past few days had taught her something of humanity’s capacity for petty evil and she knew that this Knight was not to be trusted.

Her boots fell loudly onto the cobblestone, spraying dirty water. Valerian’s blade rose to strike, the point aligned with Callum’s neck.

Rayla leapt.

There was a disgusting, slimy sound of metal screeching through armor into flesh, a groan of pain.

“Throw it away”, panted Rayla, her left blade protruded from Valérian’s shoulder, her right was threatening death across his neck.

He didn’t move.

“DO IT !!”, screamed the elf, and attempted to kick the backside of Valérian’s boot to make him kneel, but the armor he wore made the attack pointless.

“Please, don’t!”, begged Callum on the ground, eyes wide and focussed on the Knight’s blade, dangling over his throat.

“Xadian bitch... i-if he live”, Valerian groaned, “You still kill.”

“A won’t! A won’t! Please! A don’t want tae kill ye!”, panted Rayla, wishing so hard for this to end.

The Knight tensed, the pommel of his sword rose by an almost imperceptibly small amount, but Rayla reacted.
With a noise so final as to join Callum’s scream of agony over Ezran, her blade slit Valérian’s throat.

The knight’s weapon fell onto its tip, next to Callum’s head, bounced and splashed into the gutter. Its owner was grabbing for his neck, panic in his eyes, and Rayla could not help but watch, frozen in place, as he suffocated, going limp in the fine mist of rain.

Total silence followed his throes, his empty eyes and mouth wide open in a grotesque mask of pain.

From the ground, Callum gaped at his summand, whose dark silhouette stood over him, unmoving. “Rayla?”, he whispered.

“No...”, she breathed, “No... no, no, no...”

Her blade clattered to the ground, she whirled around and started running.
Callum jumped up, the bloody water of the gutter sticking to him with a disgusting metallic smell that struck some primal fear in his mind. He had to work for a moment to suppress a rising panic.

From down the road, he heard a quiet cough. Rayla had captured their wild running mounts, but now stood frozen in the middle of the road on her way back to where he was. Her face was obscured by shadow, but Callum believed that he had an inkling as to what was going on in her heart and mind.

Rayla's head was filled with chaos. She couldn't lock on to a single thought, they were crashing down on her and making it impossible to move.

Catching the Perytons now seemed like an excuse not to have to see her victim more than anything. Carola and Valérian had both worn the same expression and Rayla couldn't help but feel like she had caused both deaths.

A rough, hot hand lifted her chin and glimmering emerald eyes caught her gaze. Her dry mouth opened but she couldn't manage to form any sensible words.

"I'm so sorry", Callum's voice broke as he kissed her.

Where his cheeks touched hers, she could feel hot tears that weren't hers. She couldn't cry. There was no way to temper the horrific guilt she felt at the moment. Still, Callum was alive and unharmed, holding her tightly. It made the feeling worth something. The clop of hooves approached, slowly and carefully. Rayla broke the kiss to watch as the Squire, Soan, dismounted next to his master's limp form and examined the body.

Then, the boy turned to face the two entwined lovers and stuttered, "Y-you seem... d-disturbed... are you... not both warriors?"

"A've n-never k-killed someone...", said Rayla, the sentence drifting off into a sharp inhale, almost a sob.

The Squire understood and a scheming wrinkle of the nose manifested in his youthful face. "Hm... euh... I, uh... I say, erm, you, uh, still haven't!", he said empathetically, "Uh, if I may be so brash,
uh, Sir Callum should take the blame, Madame."

"Wh-what? He didn't...", said Rayla confusedly.

Callum nodded slowly, and smiled sadly at Soan. "I'm assuming this means you won't report what happened here?"

"On one condition. You tell them that it was an honorable duel", said Soan coolly, "The Squire of a gutless Putain like him won't find others to employ him."

“I thought he was well respected?”, asked Callum.

Soan scoffed. “His public face is but a mask. He’s a drunkard and a brawler. His wife and two daughters might not even cry for him, Monsieur.”

The Prince scanned his face, as though he was trying to detect any ulterior motives. The boy looked nothing if not determined, and Callum had noticed the persistent annoyance he had been displaying with his master.

“Alright”, said the Prince after a moment, “It makes sense. I’ll take the blame. Say I beat him fair and square.”

“Why?!”, asked Rayla, distress and confusion thick on her voice.

“Because otherwise this is the end of the peace process here and we’re going to have to run to get you out of town alive”, said Callum gently, “Thank you, fawn, thank you so much. I’m losing count of how many times you’ve saved my life at this point. You can’t take the blame for this.”

She gave him a disapproving stare and separated from him. Bending down to fix Isoros’ saddle brace, she felt his concerned stare in her back.

“This disnae feel right”, said the future princess when the leather strap was secured, “We have to at least go tell his family.”
“I’m not sure...”, said Callum with a glance at the body, “Soan, who do we report this to?”

“I will... ride to get Speaker Modeste. They will appreciate the heads-up and set everything in motion”, said the Squire, “As for you, Majesties... I don’t know.”

“We’ll come with you”, said Callum.

Rayla gave him a furious look and he added, “… after talking to the Knight’s family.”

“They live near the Château anyway”, said Soan, “Fourteen Rue Charpentier. For what it’s worth, Majestés, I’m sorry for what happened here.”

“Not worth a lot”, seethed Rayla.

“Thank you, Soan”, said Callum, giving her a sad glance.

When the Squire had moved ahead a bit, Callum tried to embrace his summand, but she pushed him away and mounted her Peryton.

“Let’s get out of here”, she rasped.

“We can’t just yet”, said Callum sadly and nodded toward the dead Knight, “We can’t leave your blades like that.”

“A hate this”, came the freezing cold answer, “Me, killin’. Ye, politickin’. Lyin’.”

“I know. I hate it, too. But what do you want me to do, let them lynch you?”

Tight-lipped, Rayla stared ahead.
Callum knew; a part of her told her that she deserved to be lynched.

---

Janai was busy reading supply reports, an activity she despised beyond reason. She had just finished thinking that any interruption would make her happy, when a shape, clad in dark blue, slipped into her tent and announced themselves.

“Greetings, Prime Legate. I have a transfer order for one of your prisoners.”

The sunfire elf received the papers and read them over quickly. When she was done, her gaze bored into the as yet nameless agent. “Interesting. You got here quick. How does the Lucid know to look for Mr. Taog here, Agent...?”

“I was nearby, and knowing is our business”, came the nebulous answer, “Please give him into my care. The papers are in order.”

“They are”, said the Golden Knight and rose, “I will bring him. Please, have some refreshments.”

“I’m afraid I don’t have time for niceties. Mine is an urgent business”, the masked Agent said, “I will come with you.”

Janai sighed, gesturing lamely at the tent flap to indicate that she was waiting on the agent. The woman passed through and Janai followed, pointing at the prison tent. “We keep him there.”

Together, the two elves made their way to the tent and inside where Taog seemed to sleep soundly on the clean hay of his cage.

Without preamble, the agent kicked the bars. “Up with you, scum!”

Taog jolted and scrambled to his feet. “Who are you?!”, he asked.

“I am taking you to face justice, dark mage”, the agent said, “You will follow without issues,
otherwise your sentence is death. Do you understand?”

“What has he done?”, asked Janai sternly.

“That is none of your concern”, came the spiky reply, “He is sought by the Lucid. That is all you should need.”

“I’m afraid you have me all wrong”, smiled Janai dangerously, “I do not take kindly to orders I don’t understand or disagree with. I’m sure you know how I chose my side four years ago.”

“Oh, I’m aware of who you are, Prime Legate”, the agent whirled around, “Rest assured that if I had been in charge of the investigation into your activities, you would not be standing here! Now get me my prisoner so I can be on my way!”

“You will tell me what he’s accused of”, said Janai and crossed her arms, “I will not cooperate with a masked person simply because they have the right papers.”

“You will n --?!”, the agent gaped, “You are a soldier! It’s your duty to follo--”

“... follow orders? Yes! Those that I can trust! I’ve learned my lesson well, Agent! Get to it, or we will be here until next year!”

“I am not under orders to share anything”, said the agent.

“Then I will not release him.”

“It’s not your choice!”

“Oh, but it is.”

The officer of the Lucid quaked with anger. “We will see about that! I’m reporting you!”
“You’re welcome to”, laughed Janai, “It will take days for your message to reach any ear capable
of pinching mine.”

“He’s a murderer!”, spat the agent, “Now release him!”

“Agent, come now. All you have to do is to give me the reason you were sent out here to fetch him
and not some beat cop from Zander.”

Groaning with frustration, the masked woman stomped past Janai and outside the tent.

Taog stood in his cage, backed against the far bars. His eyes were full of fear. “I swear. I didn’t do
it.”

“I believe you didn't kill your roommate. They don’t send agents for simple murderers”, said Janai
brashly, “What have you done?”

The scholar shook his head. “Research, just research! That’s what I keep saying, I must’ve found
something of significance to them! Uncovered something that makes no sense to me but offends
them!"

Janai leaned in. “Are you absolutely sure that you do not know what that something could be?”

“No! No! I don’t... I really don’t know!”, squeaked Taog and started pacing, “I researched star
magic and the Archmage, Aaravos. From there I hit upon some very old texts about dark magic and
how the two interrelate. But there’s nothing but pieces of a few spells, meaningless without the rest
of the words and concepts! Nothing actionable!”

“Nothing... actionable”, said Janai and rubbed her chin, “Interesting choice of words.”

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As Soan had predicted, the Knight’s wife had taken the news of her husband’s passing with a
surprised expression, but nothing more. The lack of emotion she’d shown was mirrored in Rayla
who swayed back and forth in her saddle as the trio descended from the Palace, Modeste’s frazzled
The Speaker dismounted and examined the body in the gutter, producing a noise that was vaguely disgusted. “Bon Sang... An ignoble end to be sure. His compatriots won’t be happy.”

“He got what he wanted”, said Callum sternly, “Shouldn’t they be glad he managed to force me to do his bidding before I got to ‘run away’?!”

“C’est ça, c’est ça”, agreed the Speaker and sighed, “I will have him cleaned and laid out at the mausoleum so they may inspect him.”

Modeste rose and threw Callum a respectful look. "I have to say, monsieur, I did not think you had it in you."

"I don't", spat Callum, "And I’m not proud of it, either, it doesn’t deserve respect. Can we please get this over with?!"

"Naturellement. I will take care of things. Feel free to return to your room at th--"

"No", Rayla interrupted them tonelessly, "We're leavin' tonight. I'm sick'r this place."

Modeste held her gaze, nodding apologetically. "Very well. I can't say I blame you, such unpleasantness. Sir Callum, I hope next time you and the Lady Rayla grace us with your presence, we will show a more welcoming face. Until then."

"We'll be back once the dust has settled a little, Speaker Modeste. I'm sorry for the mess we leave in our wake."

"It is our mess", smiled the lithe person sadly.

The Prince said his thanks to Soan once more and then the two Katolins spurred their mounts. The cold, mist-filled night was unpleasant to ride in. As they closed on the city gates, the guards there locked their halberds to deny them exit. Luckily, this didn't last. As soon as they recognized the riders, the guards stood aside and the Perytons blew past them like a whirlwind in a bottle.
Callum watched Rayla, her face illuminated just barely by the torches flickering by the roadside. Her expression was completely blank. The two riders only slowed when the Katolin camp came into view, lit by many fires. Rough song and slurred laughter echoed over the landscape. Apparently the party was still in full swing.

“Do you want to join them?”, the Prince asked gently.

Wordless, Rayla forged ahead, into the darkness between the trees.

“Should’ve guessed, sorry”, said Callum and dismounted to follow her.

They walked for a long while, pulling their mounts along behind them. Finally, Rayla stopped and hobbled Andris. Her summand pulled their tent from Isoros’ saddlebag and started setting it up while Rayla gave the mounts some water. Tired, the two nobles crawled into the tent, shucked off their dirty clothes and rolled themselves into their sleeping bags.

A few minutes passed in quiet, then Callum asked, “How are you doing?”

Rayla didn’t answer.

Helpless, the Prince decided to let her be. She’d give him an opportunity to speak when she felt the time was right.

He was drifting in and out of an uneasy sleep. Suddenly, pain shot through his stomach and he shot up to find Rayla kicking and punching wildly, yelling something incoherent about Farouk, babies, pitchforks and Carola.

“Rayla! You’re okay!”, he shouted over her and she limped, breathing heavily.

“G-gads”, she gasped, “What a dream...”

Callum closed the distance between them.
“I hate you so much”, she whispered, then started crying.

Callum’s eyes filled with tears as he pulled her close. He pet her hair and kissed the top of her head.

“I'm sorry! I didnae mean it!”, sobbed the elf, "N-none of this is yer fault... I k-killed him!", cried Rayla, “A-and I killed them ! I sent them off tae die!”

“What are you talking about? What happened?”

She told him how she found the young Lieutenant and her soldiers, at times barely able to form a coherent sentence. When she had finished, Callum wasn’t sure what to say. He’d been there, and all Opeli had had to offer was that he `cared too much`.

“That’s terrible”, he whispered, “They didn’t deserve to die, no... but... you didn’t know this would happen.”

He lifted her chin and smiled sadly at her tearful eyes, “It’s really important that you hear me say this and know that it’s true: You didn’t kill them, okay? You didn’t. You sent them off with an inexperienced commander. I didn’t see the problem, neither did you. We thought we knew the run of the frontline, but we didn’t. It’s a tragedy, and we’re responsible, but we didn’t kill them.”

Her lower lip quivered and she blinked more tears out of her eyes, then shook her head. "I canny do this, Callum, I'm sorry. I canny lead or be a Princess... I can't. I'm not made for it. You're gonna have so much trouble cleanin' up after my messes all the time..."

"Hey, hey. You've been at this for a month. Let's not get ahead of ourselves", he said gently and wrapped his arms around her, "It's been so crazy, too. I thought coming here would give us a bit of distance to our personal problems, but that was pretty stupid. I'm sorry."

"How can ye ever look at me without seein' all this blood?!", shouted his summand and recoiled from him, sobbing, "Blood! Blood! I’ve always meant to be spillin’ this stuff!"

Her tone changed to a hoarse, intense whisper, “Callum, Callu-- Dummy! I don't want ye tae hate
“I won’t, Rayla”, Callum choked, “Not ev—”

“Ye’re sayin’ that *now*!”, sobbed his summand, her voice doubling over, “How long b-before you’ve had enough of p-people comin’ at me with whatever weapon’s closest!? How long before A actually get our baby killed?!”

“What are you saying?”, whispered Callum.

“Nothin’, feck! Nothin’! A don’t know *anythin’!*”, she screamed and slammed her fist into the soft, marshy ground, “I’m *not feckin’* pregnant! A’m a murder machine, right Honsa?! A canny *create*!”

Her tone was hysterical and the Prince was starting to be scared for her. “Rayla, please calm down! Please!”

“Shut up! All my life I was meant to be this! Killin’! Pretendin’ I value life and waste it with a clean conscience like my entire feckin’ family! A was bred for this! AND YET!”

She grabbed his wrist painfully. “For feck’s sake, Callum! After meetin’ you *I stopped eatin’ meat!*”, she screamed, “*You had tae kill Kel* cause I was too caught up with this pacifist bullshit tae fight my own battle!”

“Y-you fought her”, groaned Callum, “You tried to spar-e her - Rayla, you’re hurting me!”

“*WELL THAT’S WHAT A DO!*”, screamed the elf, “A strangled ye! A feckin’ killed ye, too, but ye just don’t stay dead! You died so much! Why won’t you stay dead!?!”

In the darkness, her tearful eyes turned to a mad glare and Callum’s eyes widened with honest fear. “Rayla. You’re okay. Breathe.”

The violet of her eyes pierced him like icicles, sending frost into his veins. It looked more akin to the evil glow of dark magic than the color he’d seen in his most treasured memories. She licked her
lips as though to moisten them for a kiss, but even this gesture contained a threat. Her other hand came up to rest against the side of his neck.

“Rayla?”, whispered Callum as her thumb caressed his throat.

“You’re gonna die and it’ll be my fault, too. And then I’ll be all alone”, she whimpered.

“I’m not dying...”, said the Prince, hoping she would remove her uncomfortably placed hand. She tightened her grasp instead, “Rayla... please, I don’t want to have to hurt you...”

“H-hurt me?”, she hiccuped.

In the distance, the party was still going. Insects were singing in the high grass. Somewhere near the river, a bird let out a mournful, soothing cry.
“Rayla? Let me go”, Callum said firmly, “I will defend myself if I have to.”

“Okay”, Rayla whispered tonelessly and released his wrist and neck.

“Do you want help?”, he asked, now sounding painfully gentle again.

“No”, she replied and got up.

The way he flinched and the scared look he threw her way told her everything she needed to know. He was afraid of her, now that she was a killer. She’d given him every reason.

“Don’t worry. I’m leavin’”, she whispered and bent over to collect her clothes.

“Where are you going?”, he asked.

“Don’t know. Not like I’ve got anywhere tae go. I'm sorry. About everythin’.”

“Rayla, don’t. We’ve been thro--”

“Shut it! Shut! It!”, she screamed and he flinched again.

Breathing heavily, Rayla stared at him, then started crying, “Don’t do this tae yerself again! When we were kids, you threw yerself in front of me when I tried to break it off! You could’ve had such a great life!” she swallowed and started dressing, “I-if not fer me!”

“Bullshit!”, yelled Callum and jumped up, ”My life is so much better with you in it! I don’t know about the other way around, though! You've gone through hell lately and it’s my fault! If I hadn’t been so stubborn about you, maybe you could’ve found someone else who made you happy! Someone whose people don’t hate your gut! Someone who doesn’t have so many burdens on his shoulders and is so eager to throw them at you when you’re not ready!”
She stopped pulling her pants over her leg, but didn’t look at him.

“So you do regret bein’ with me”, she whispered.

“Not one bit!”, Callum cried, “I regret having pulled you into this!”

“Right, right”, Rayla seethed, “Cause poor, dumb Rayla disnae make her own choices! Ever! Did you not hear what Tinker told ye?”

“That’s not what I’m saying! Be honest! Would you be here right now if not for me?!”

“No!”

“Then why don’t you understand my view?!”

“Because I had a **CHOICE!!**”, screamed Rayla and threw her pants at him, “I HAD A CHOICE! BETWEEN YOU AND LITERALLY ANYTHIN’ ELSE, AND I MADE IT!”

Breathing heavily, she looked down, tightening her fists. “Just like tonight. Just like with Carola”, her voice turned a hoarse whisper, “I... I made a choice... a-and... and maybe... maybe I just always choose wrong... maybe you were the wrong choice, too.”

Callum’s heart froze over. “That hurt a lot”, he whispered, “but you’re right... I could’ve been the wrong choice for you. Do you regret it?”

“No, no, no! I care so much about you it makes me wanna puke!”, she yelled, tears running over her cheeks, “You’re such a precious man, Callum! You deserve better! I canny ask you to deal with my bullshit all yer life! I'm messed up!”

“You let me decide what I’m willing to deal with, okay!?!”, hissed the Prince.
She wasn’t even listening, had continued rambling, “...a-and I messed up so bad over here with all the--”

”No you didn’t! We won here! Evenere is going to find peace! We did that, Rayla! We made a huge difference!”

“It’s a piece of paper!”, she cried.

“I know, I know! But this piece of paper means that Edméé and Brice won’t go hungry another harvest! This piece of paper means that when we meet Xadia in negotiations, we’re coming in as the Pentarchy, not as the Four Kingdoms! It’s huge!”

“The queen still has to agree to all of it!”

“She will! We’ll convince her, if she’s too dumb to see what a sweet deal this is!”

Rayla stared at him for a moment, then sagged to the floor, wiping at her eyes.

“I’m s-so tired”, she whispered, “I havnae slept a full night since leavin’...”

The Prince carefully scooped her into his arms and held her, quietly. She didn't seem to pay him any attention.

“I tried to... convince some random soldier to like me”, Rayla whispered hoarsely, “She called me a Bruiser in a moment where I really didnae need tae hear it.”

Callum waited for her to keep talking.

“I saw her in the ranks when you pulled me out’r my saddle. Still hates my guts and, judgin’ by her face, she’d like to stick us both with her pike. So much fer me changin’ minds.”

When she didn't continue, Callum softly asked, ”What happened to you in Port-Cartier?”
Rayla scoffed and wiped her eyes. “They tried to kill me in my sleep is what happened! I wanted to board at the bridgehead but they told me to find better accommodations in town. Sure didnae want me around. So after the peasants come to off me in the middle of the night, Paris chucks the ‘Bruiser’ my way and I find out the hard way that the base commander there is Carola’s dad of all people...”

“You told him?”

“Feck, yes, he deserved to know!”, cried Rayla, “If he hated me before... his face, Callum... gads, his face... A won’t ever forget that! I didnae look that way when my dad died! I should have, but I didn’t!”

"Rayla, no... there’s no right way to grieve. To be honest, I think you still are."

The elf scoffed. "I never got tae really know him, Callum. Farouk was half a stranger to me. I don't know how they could've taken their work so seriously if I had been worth their time. Sure... it was an honor for them to be chosen and I got that. It was an honor for them to go and to leave me behind was the right thin’ for them to do... and... I grew up okay. I was fine."

“But now you’re not?”

“Feck no!”, her eyes filled with tears again, “I’m on the other side of this honor shit now! I see it as what it really is, a knapdarloch on the arse of tradition! Honor!? Is it honorable to leave your feckin’ toddler daughter and go stand watch over some overgrown lizard? Is it honorable to take that kid and shove a blade in her hand and point at someone and tell her to go shank’em!? It’s shit! Shit! Shit! The whole society is shit, Callum! I grew up in shit!"

She looked at her splayed hands, “And now... A am what they wanted me tae be! I shanked’em”, fury made her spit, “Oh, I shanked’em good and proper! The bastard who didnae want tae take ‘no’ fer an answer! The bastard who wanted to take...”

Her head turned to face her summand and she breathed, “You”

She grabbed him and forced a needy kiss to his lips, weeping as she did it. His eyes were wide in surprise but he didn’t move away. Rayla didn’t release him, renewing her kiss over and over until his face was wet from spit and tears. Her hands were in his lap, tugging at his underpants and
making his head spin from the raw emotion she was pouring out.

“Rayla”, he panted, “What are you doing?!”

“I’m tryin’ tae make love to you”, she cried, “I missed you so bad! So, so bad! I love you, Callum, okay? Don’t listen tae me when I’m tellin’ you tae leave!”

She ground against him desperately, kissing him like she was trying to rob his soul through his mouth.

“STOP !””, he shouted and she froze.

Breathing heavily, he brought up his arm to wipe the wetness from his face.

“Fawn”, he said softly and carefully brushed away her own tears, “You’re really... intense right now and I think this isn’t going in a good direction.”

“You don’t... like it?”, she whispered.

“It doesn’t feel right in here”, he said and tapped his chest, “We’ll save it for another time, okay? Right now, I think the best thing you can do is try and get some rest. Is there anything I can do to help you with that?”

“U-um...”, she mumbled hoarsely, “there’s a recipe for a sleep tea in the book...”

“Why didn’t you use that before?”

She snorted sardonically. “Around those people? Tsk! I didnae think I’d wake up again if I knocked myself out...”

“Mmh”, the Prince went, “I’ll put it together for you, okay? Just get comfy. I’ll watch over you tonight.”
Rayla nodded, starting to feel embarrassed about the whole thing.

Her summand rose to his feet and gave her a soft look as he embraced her. “I feel terrible for you. I’m sorry. I love you.”

Then, he dressed and turned to leave. “Rest. I’ll be right back. Don’t you dare go anywhere or I’ll come find you, okay?”

"O-okay."

--

Claudia was startled out of her sleep by a strange urge. She shot out of bed and, without putting on more modest clothes, ran out onto the battlements.

“Get off the walls!”, she shouted at the nightwatch, “Off the walls! Right now!”

The soldiers gaped at her, but reluctantly followed her order. As High Mage, she held authority, even when wearing nothing but a simple black night shirt. Not two seconds after her words had rang out, a loud bang tore the night in half. The entire world seemed to lurch and then sag as magma bubbled up from the crack in the earth. Hot rock shot into the sky and pelted the walls like a hail of fire arrows. Claudia was confidently stepping into places that she knew weren’t going to get hit. She couldn’t explain how she knew. On the other side of the Breach, she could see dark figures scrambling for safety, away from the tents.

Away from Taog, trapped in his cage while the border between his and her world tried to kill them all.

Claudia started running. She swung around a baluster to descend into the courtyard and took the steps three at a time. At the bottom, she ignored the sharp rocks, piercing her naked soles. Shouts and orders echoed in the courtyard as General Amaya was starting to organize an orderly withdrawal. As Claudia passed through the gates, she could see the damaged tower to her left collapse with the earthquake’s rumble. Amaya wouldn’t be happy to have her private thinking spot ruined like this.
The mage’s lungs burned halfway across the Breach, but she felt safe, for whatever force was breaking the earth also held a hand over her, allowing her to step where it was not causing mayhem. Flecks and drops of magma hailed down around her, sizzling and sputtering as they hit the ground. Before she knew it, she was in Xadia and hurrying up the narrow pass that made up the other side of the Breach. At the top of it, she allowed herself a second to catch her breath. Her lungs felt bruised and there was the taste of iron on her tongue.

Taog cowered in his cage since it was all he could do. The tent was already on fire. Suddenly, there were naked, bloody feet in his cone of vision and he looked up. The view made him shout and cover his eyes, but the mayhem drowned it all out.

Claudia’s left hand rested on the lock of his cage. She hadn’t thought to bring her mage’s satchel and was looking around to find some kind of material to consume for a spell or something to break the lock when the tent’s flap flew open and Janai stepped inside, her features lit up by streaks of flaring heat.

The elven General gaped at Claudia - an expression she was starting to get a little annoyed with - then caught herself and strode over with a few long strides.

“What are you doing here?!”, she yelled over the commotion.

“Saving him!”, replied the mage, “Unlock the cage!”

Janai looked around. “The keys aren’t here?!”

The two women started searching frantically but came up empty-handed. Meanwhile, the tent was roaring with flames and other parts of it had caught fire from the raining embers. Taog watched with fascination as Claudia dashed and ducked out of the way of the hissing droplets falling through the tent’s burning roof. His mien suddenly froze, mouth agape.

“Claudia!”, he screamed and she whirled around, “Come here!”

The mage pushed herself up against the bars to be able to hear him better, but he grabbed her hand and arranged her fingers to make her index point. “Draw!”, Taog shouted and guided her hand. Embers started falling onto his back and pain pelted his mind.

Wide-eyed, Claudia watched as her finger traced a glowing white-orange line into the air, a solid shape that extended into what could be interpreted as a hand.
“Cl-augh!-aw, fingertips touching! Say ‘Ignis Acri’”, shouted Taog, agony chiseled in his features as his back started to burn. He forced her hand into the shape, then thrust it upward as she stuttered out the words.

A spike of blue flame hissed from her hand and hit the lock, making it squeal and melt into a bubbling puddle on the ground. Taog kicked open the door, grabbed Claudia’s hand and dashed past Janai who was once more gaping at them both. The mage returned the baffled look as long as she could before the tent flap fell closed.

Before she knew it, Taog had thrown himself to the ground to put out the fire, then had picked her up, his muscular arms making short work of her. They were descending into the Breach and he shouted, “Where do I go!? Point at what feels good!”

Still startled, Claudia followed his instructions, leading him all the way to the other side unharmed. The human bastion was deserted and very much on fire, so the mage merely waved at Taog to keep running. His breath thundered in her ears, next to her heart. Everything was happening far too quickly to really keep track. The heat slowly lessened and the smell of smoke and sulfur made room for fresh air that made them both cough.

Gasping for air, the moon elf fell to his knees and dropped his saviour in the process. There was cool dew-wet grass on the ground and they both panted, reveling in the joy of life.

After a long moment, Claudia sat up and brushed a strand of her hair out of her face to look at where the Breach was continuing it’s explosion. They were still a bit close for comfort.

“We need to keep moving”, she coughed and rose, helping Taog to his feet.

“Your feet!”, he gasped, “I can still carry you!”

Claudia nodded, the pain was getting pretty bad now that the adrenaline had had a moment to subside. Taog gingerly picked her up and started walking down the path towards Taelin.

It took a while until Claudia broke the silence.
“So... what...”, she started, examining her hands, “What did you do? With my hands, I mean?”

“You didn’t know you could do sunfire magic, did you?”, the scholar smiled, “Ignis Acri is one of two spells I remember from the Book of Helios. Some light reading I did before bed one d—”, he started wheezing with airless laughter, “Light reading?!”

Claudia didn’t know how to answer beyond a confused snicker.

“But yeah, I saw you weaving out of harm’s way there in the tent and figured I’d try it before I burn to death”, he said.

She blinked at him, still lost for words.

“So, um... you kinda saved my life. Thank you. Now we have a problem though, right?”

“M-more than one”, Claudia choked out, a sudden flush climbing into her cheeks.

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Callum watched his summand sleep, his broad sword resting across his lap. She had insisted that he have it ready, just in case. If he was tired, he couldn’t feel it, the events of the past day too dire to allow him sleep either way. Outside, the first birds of the day had started singing, promising that today’s sky might sport a sun with rays.

The Prince’s ears picked up a sound, a twig, snapping. The Perytons snorted with alarm. He rose.

“Oh, calm down you stupid Xadian cows”, a female voice whispered angrily.

Callum stepped outside, his blade at the ready. There in the twilight stood a Katolin soldier, laxly holding her pike. When she noticed him, she bowed deeply.

“Your Majesty. Hope I didn’t wake you.”
“What are you doing out here? Who are you?” demanded Callum.

“Private Paris, Sire, out from Port-Cartier. I... erm... I heard there was trouble in town and wanted to... wanted to make sure you had someone to stand watch.”

“Didn’t want to party?”

Paris gave a short snort. “The rest of ‘em can’t keep up with me, Sire. I’m shitfaced, alright, but I know the balance of my pike, where my feet are and how to piss without falling over. Thought I’d make sure my Princess doesn’t get a rude morning visit by some fucking Eevies again.”

“She spoke about you, Paris. Didn’t think you like her much”, Callum led distrustfully.

The Pikewoman scratched her cheek, then shifted her weight to her right leg to lean on her weapon, “Permission to... say what I want without getting the stick, Sire?”

“Go ahead.”

“Right. I used to think she’s a Bruiser cunt who I figured had no business being a Katolin Princess. But she is, and I swore an oath. Make matters worse, I got to see her in action and she’s a fucking saint. Damn near sobbed over a scout we offed cause he wouldn’t come peacefully. Put the fear of the lovely companion in these roaches just by walking out of the shrubs and fondling her razors. Surrendered on the spot!”, the soldier laughed quietly, “Pays to be on her good side, methinks.”

“So you came out here... why?”

“Like I said. Heard the night watch talk about you two tearing out of town like your horses were on fire”, she blinked, “Well... those horsey things, anyway. Figured I’d come stand watch until you wake up, just in case you’d got someone mad at you.”

Callum scanned the woman’s expression in the dark blue of the early morning, finding nothing but professional boredom. She was so pointedly relaxed that he couldn’t help but feel at ease. The Prince moved to Paris’ side and looked between the trees, out into the landscape.
“We’ve been through a lot with people like you. Nice to know that your loyalty runs deeper than your racism”, he said soberly, “Thank you. For coming, I mean. I know it’ll mean a lot to her to see you here.”

The soldier shrugged. “You people treat us lot with more respect than the other fucking kingdoms combined. Her telling us to spare those rebels tells me she’s gonna be good to us, too, Bruiser or not”, she cleared her throat and spat into the underbrush, “Shit. This deployment gave us all some serious perspective. Seeing how these Eevies live? Feels like we’re fifty, maybe eighty years ahead. Heh. They probably don’t even know how to count that high.”

“All this... it’s thanks to her, you know? If she hadn’t stood by the King and I, he’d be dead and I’d probably be killing Elves rather than trying to talk to them. I would’ve never gone to Xadia, never learned how much they have and how badly we compare.”

Paris nodded sagely, but stayed quiet. Callum felt that the atmosphere was rarified. He found it refreshing that this simple footsoldier was so candid with him.

“I know this is rude as shit, so I’m sorry or whatever”, the Private said after some time, “But... I saw you kiss her and... ugh. Dunno, it’s like... watching someone kiss their dog. How do you do it? Live with an elf like that?”

“She’s way smarter than any dog I know”, Callum smirked, “Seriously though, those questions don’t really make a lot of sense to me. Rayla... is Rayla. I don’t see an elf when I look at her, I see a person I love.”

“But she is an elf. They killed the King. How do you not hate them for that?”

“My father actually told me to forgive. Because he couldn’t, and it got him killed. Yes, he was assassinated, and yes, Rayla is the same kind of elf as the people who killed him. When I think of her, that’s not the first thing that comes to mind though. She’s Rayla first, and an elf somewhere down the line. If I knew you better, you’d be Paris first and then a soldier somewhere down the line. Do you see what I mean? There are things that define her more clearly than her race or culture.”

“Mh.”
More silence followed. The sun poked over the horizon and Callum eventually found himself a nice, thick branch to whittle while Paris looked on.

“Sword’s not a fucking carving knife, Sire”, the soldier smirked.

“It’s a `fucking carving knife` if I use it like one”, Callum replied.

He set the blade against the wood and started chipping away at it, mindlessly, keeping it close to the swords’ handle.

“Shit, that actually works!”, laughed Paris, “You haven’t been in a whole bunch of fights, eh?”

“Probably not as many as you, no.”

Minutes passed, then Callum asked, “Do you ever resent that? Us sending you to do this?”

“Bah. Everyone hates their job sometimes. It’s a living. I like it well enough, otherwise I wouldn’t have signed up for more tours after the Breach. Boys back home need to eat and someone to keep their asses safe. Best way to do both those things is join the army.”

“So you have family?”

“Yarp, two boys, one kinda little, one not so”, smirked Paris, “Looking forward to telling them about this trip. Not every day that you get to wag chin with the Crown Prince.”

She grew a little wistful, “Ah, grandma’s gonna be glad to have the little gremlins off her hands for a bit, too. Kids are a beautiful fucking pain in the ass.”

“Oh - dad’s not around?”

Paris eyed the Prince. “‘Dad’? Try ‘dads’. Nah, they’re not ‘around’ Do I look like I need the help?”
Callum shrugged. “Sorry. Just figured I’d ask.”

He hesitated for a moment, then said, “You know... um... we think we might have kids some day. Any pointers?”

“Oh man”, Paris went and scratched her head, “So - hold on - you’re boning her down? Does that even work? Like, the bits fit?”

Callum couldn’t help but laugh. “I can’t be doing anything like that with her until we’re married.”

“Riiight, riiight. I’m sure you’ve been following that tradition”, droned Paris, “Pointers? Uh... well if the bits are the same, you’re basically set. Just... you know, plant the seed and anything after that is kinda up in the air.”

“Oh?”

“One kid’s not like the other, believe it or not. If you two manage to pop one out... hell, that’ll be a freakshow - no offense - what, halfling with pointy ears and five fingers? Anyway, they are all a little different, so you gotta feel your way through. Plus, you’re a fucking Prince, don’t you have people to do this shit for you? I’m just a random Pike, not a fucking nurse or maid! I don’t know if I’m raising my boys right!”

She shrugged angrily, “Right now I’m not raising them at all. Shit mother, I guess, but we all gotta eat. Not like you get paid to be a parent.”

Callum looked up and smiled at her. “Now there’s an idea, ‘random Pike’.”

Paris opened her mouth to reply, but the tent flap flew open and Rayla scrambled outside, fully armed but still in her underwear. When she noticed Callum, her scared expression immediately softened.

“Here you are!”, she smiled, looking exhausted. Then, she realized that Paris was standing next to her summand. “What are you doin’ here?”
“Standing watch over us”, smiled Callum, “but I think we’re good now, Paris.”

“Yeah, probably”, said the Pike and took her weight off her weapon, “I’m guessing you’re off to Katolis soon, so, um... I just need to get this off my fucking chest, Ma’am. I’m sorry for what I said. You’re okay in my books, for all that’s worth to you.”

Rayla stared at the soldier, her eyes starting to glisten. “No, it’s worth a lot, Paris, ye have no clue. Thank you.”

“Sure”, replied the Pike uncomfortably, “I can tell... um... I’m kinda in the way of something so, uh... see you when I see you.”

“Hold on”, Rayla said, “We could use someone to stand watch. He needs some sleep, too.”

Paris looked between the two royals, then shrugged. “At your service, Ma’am.”

Callum rose and brushed the bits of wood off his pants, then went to embrace his summand who was still standing there, looking after the Pike who was retreating to a spot out of earshot.

“See, you’ve changed her mind”, smiled the Prince.

Rayla nodded, then sunk into his arms. “Feels great. Sucks that I’m still so tired”, she whispered, “Wakin’ up without you there... thought I had scared you off.”

“Sorry”, he said, holding the tent flap open for her. They snuggled up under their blankets and Rayla fell asleep almost immediately.

Callum on the other hand watched on as the light of the new day grew brighter.
Zym blinked into the sunlight. The warmth of the day felt real today. In his claws, he held a dead stag. It was old and looked a little sickly. The dragon was as happy as he could be with his prey. As he approached the walls of the Twins, a series of banners caught his attention. Around thirty elves were resting in the lower courtyard.

He landed in the upper courtyard, let go of his breakfast and swung about to walk down the ramp into the lower yard, but Ezran was already waiting next to a bulky-looking earthblood Legate under the arch. Next to the smiling, dark-skinned commander stood a smaller figure clad in insane colors.

“Hullo”, said Azymondias.

“Hey Zym”, Ezran waved.

“Excellence”, the earthblood elf saluted, “I am Legate Temek under Iowend, sent to escort you home. This is my daughter Honsa.”

“Hey there Temek, Honsa. Why do I need an escort? I can fly”, the Dragon Prince said.

“Erm”, Temek uncomfortably looked at Ezran, “My apologies, Excellence, but would you mind giving us a few minutes alone with the Prince?”

“Sure. Let me know when you’re done, I’ll have the kitchens start something for your people”, said Ezran, “Zym, where did you find breakfast?”

“Ah, don’t worry, no upset farmers today. This time I grabbed something from your hunting grounds.”

The Katolin King smirked. “You mean my personal forest. Don’t think I’ll ever actually hunt in there. I’ll see you in a bit. Honsa?”

The Ocean elf bowed to Zym and followed Ezran down into the lower courtyard. When they had left, Zym fixed Temek with an inquisitive look.
The Legate sighed and crossed his hands behind his back. “First, Excellence, I am sorry to have to report that I am here with bad news only. My condolences, Prince Azyondias, your mother has been killed.”

An icy cold brushed over Zym’s spine and grasped his heart. Ezran had warned him about the rumours, so this wasn’t a total surprise - but the confirmation still hurt.

“How... how did it happen?”, rasped the Prince.

“The Lord of the Earth, Karmanor, came to visit her Excellence on the Shortest Day. He rightly assumed that her mind was set on blaming humans for the Wave. From what Interpreter Sirta has told us, the Queen almost immediately attacked Karmanor and they battled”, Temek shifted uncomfortably, “Lady Raszagal did not survive the wounds of the encounter.”

“But, if Karmanor killed her in fair combat, wouldn’t he be King?”, choked Zym. He was trying his best to keep his composure.

“The Lord does not want the position, Excellence. He did not intend to challenge Raszagal's rule in the first place.”

Zym started pacing. "So what, I'm King now? That's not gonna work. The other Archdragons aren't going to accept it.”

Temek sighed again, "Erm... for better or worse, the other Dragons are somewhat preoccupied. They say that the Archmage Aaravos has returned."

Azyondias froze mid-step. "What?! But... but I've seen the broken mirror! I helped smash it!"

“We’re not sure about the details. The other Archdragons say they recognize the Wave as one of the signs of his reappearance and have begun a search for the terrorist under Karmanor’s guidance.”

The Dragon Prince continued pacing. He wasn’t sure how to deal with any of these news. “So why the escort?”, he rasped.
“Interpreter Sirta was concerned about your safety. With the primal sources in disarray, a long-distance flight would have been more difficult. It was decided that you should walk. Plus, this is all secret to the highest degree. We didn’t dare send a letter.”

Zym nodded. “The chaos isn’t as bad today, but she’s right. I would’ve had to take more breaks. Secret, secret... meh. The humans already know a few things, Temek. If Aaravos really is back, we’re gonna need their help.”

The Earthblood shrugged. “It’s not my place to discuss policy, Excellence. I’m here to bring you home safely, that’s all. That is, if you want to rule.”

“I...”, Azymondias started, but trailed off. He was overwhelmed at the moment. Did he want the proverbial crown? Was it even a good idea? There was no question in Zym’s mind that if he chose to succeed his mother, the other Dragons would come to fight him. Even if Karmanor and Triton supported him, there was no accounting for Amaterasu, the new Queen of the Sun. She hadn’t been in power for long enough to show her hand. She was young, but still more powerful than himself. Then there were the Moon Dragons, Selendis and her mate, who had motive to come after him. He was not nearly strong enough to stand up to them just yet.

“I’m going to think about it. Give me today, Temek”, he eventually said.

“I would be happy to, Excellence, though I’m worried about overstaying our welcome”, the Legate replied uncomfortably.

“I’ll have a word with King Ezran. I don’t think it’ll be a problem. Thanks for now.”

Temek saluted once more, then spun and walked off. Zym immediately turned inward and tugged at Ezran’s string. He imagined them meeting in the upper courtyard and got a warm smile back which meant as much as ‘Be right there, buddy’.

When the door to the keep opened a few minutes later, Zym hadn’t stopped pacing. The little King gave his Xadian friend a look that told the Dragon how much Ezran already knew or at least suspected.

“So, is it true?”, asked Ezran gently.
“Yep”, choked Zym. A moment later, he started sobbing uncontrollably and fell into the dust.

The little man walked over to hug his snout. “I’m so sorry, little big guy.”

As small hands caressed the scales on his muzzle, Zym’s innards writhed with confused agony. He’d loved his mother, but she had alienated him a lot these past four years. His mind replayed the good and bad. Her explosions of anger and tirades, distrust for him and everyone around her. Her loving gaze and warm words of encouragement, her lessons and the soothing feeling of a gigantic tongue, keeping him clean.

“What do I do?”, Zym cried, “I wish I could ask her, Ez! I have so many questions!”

Cyan eyes, filled with tears, found the Dragon’s helpless gaze.

“I have the same problem, so I’ll tell you what Corvus told me back when I first started ruling. ‘You can’t ask the dead for help, so the living and your own heart have to be enough’. When it comes to choosing stuff, it’s important that you get help from people who know what they’re doing. It doesn’t have to be your mom. In the end, you make the choices, right?”

“That’s true, but... I should’ve gone to see her. She died thinking I hated her.”

“Did you?”

“No. Not really, anyway. She did a lot of bad stuff, Ez. I never hated her, but loving her was pretty hard.”

“Rulin’s disnae always lend itself to carin’”, a quiet voice said and Tyne stepped outside the tower, “A’m very sorry, Excellence. A didnae mean to eavesdrop. Just wanted tae make sure ye were alright.”

“It’s okay”, Zym sniffled and sat up, “I wanted to fill you in on this anyway. I figure if anyone knows what I should do, it would be you.”
Tyne lifted her hands defensively. “A’m just a soldier, Excellence. If ye need tactical adv--”

“You’re also someone who spent a lot of time around my parents”, Zym interrupted, “You were there when the Dragons made decisions. I need you right now.”

“Uh…”, the Dragon Guard went, “Yes, Excellence.”

“Ez, can you get me Helmond?”, asked the Dragon and pawed at his eyes.

“Sure. Give me a moment”, Ezran said and walked toward the keep.

When he was gone, Tyne spoke up. “Are ye sure this is the best place to talk? A don’t trust these pinkskins.”

“I know. That’s why you’re valuable to me. If anyone here thinks like a Xadian, it’s you. I trust Ezran, because I know what he thinks and how he is. I trust Helmond because of our history. I trust you, because you’ve always worn your heart on your sleeve.”

Rayla’s mother blinked, scrunched up her face and finally asked, “I don’t get it.”

“Oh. Human expression. It means you say what you mean.”

“Ah. Suits them”, said Tyne, her nose wrinkled, “It’s a gruesome image.”

“I don’t think it’s meant to be literal”, said Zym as Helmond and Ezran returned to the upper courtyard.

“You asked for me, Excellence?”, the old moonshadow elf bowed.

Zym filled his three companions in on everything Temek had told him, knowing full well that his mother would hate to know that he’d shared the information with Ezran. When he had finished, Tyne had her hand clasped to her mouth, Helmond seemed deep in thought and Ezran was pacing. It almost made the Dragon laugh - his confidants represented his own feelings pretty well.
“Aaravos”, Tyne said voicelessly, “Gads. This is the end. We’ve got no-one to stand up to him and the Children of Elarion.”

“Taking this theory of Lord Karmanor’s into account, a few things are starting to make sense. However, it also gives me reason for even more questions”, Helmond grumbled, “Why would the Lucid be running interference for the Wave if he was the source? There’s no benefit to Xadia hiding him from the humans. Not one I can see, anyway.”

“Maybe they just don’t wanna let on that thin’s aren’t under perfect control. Ye know better than anyone how the cloaksters get with news like this. Anythin’ to control the message, no matter how useless the effort”, Tyne said.

“Hm. You may be right on that, Praestes”, Helmond conceded.

“We’ve got to do something”, Ezran mumbled, “You need to take the throne. We can work together to beat him.”

“Throne, ha”, snarked Tyne, “There’s no throne, just the mountain. And not everyone over on our side’s as willing to throw in with ye as my daft lass!”

“You’re not the only one who thinks that”, the Katolin King said soberly, “There’s no way we’ll get Del Bar to stand next to elves to defend the Dragons.”

“I’m not sure it’s in our best interest to have Azymondias take power”, Helmond said, “If you do decide to, Excellence, our first battle will be with the other Archdragons. Selendis won’t miss the chance to exact her revenge.”

“That’s not a fight ye’re gonna win, no offense”, said Tyne.

“Yup, thought the same thing”, Zym said, “We can count on Karmanor, Triton and their mates, but everyone else is probably going to make an attempt on me.”

“What makes you trust Ocean and Earth?”, Helmond asked sceptically.
“Triton’s a friend. We’ve been on the same side in every single argument mother and him ever had. I don’t see that changing. Karmanor isn’t happy about killing her and wants me to rule.”

“Couldn’t you just hand the reigns to Triton if Karmanor doesn’t want them?”, Ezran asked.

“I could”, Zym said, “But... that’s like suggesting you give your crown to Opeli. You trust her, but still...”

“I see what you mean. I trust her, but she’s not me and I can’t be sure what she’s gonna do. Four years ago, she sneakily tried setting herself up as regent. Can’t forget that”, Ezran said, “So, if we can’t work with the Dragons, what about the Assembly?”

“Those stinkers don’t get tae meddle in Dragon’s affairs!”, Tyne spat, “Independent oversight! That’s the whole idea behind the Canon!”

“While that is technically true, in practice the senators have a tendency to be more cooperative with leaders they agree with”, said Helmond, “I can’t imagine Azymondias’ closeness with King Ezran is going to help him gain approval among them.”

“Politics is a mess on this side of the Breach, too”, Ezran said, “Queen Aanya is going to be happy to deal with you, Zym, and Neolandia promised to follow Katolis’ lead when it comes to Xadia. Evenere and Del Bar are a problem, though. Okay, Evenere is weak right now, but Del Bar’s dangerous. I really don’t have a good handle on them.”

“Our spies tell us their emergency muster is proceeding”, Helmond said grimly, “We can assume they will quickly build a force able to threaten the Pentarchy’s internal and Xadia’s external borders.”

“Internal? ”, Ezran intoned, “That’s new. You’re saying they’re gonna attack us?”

“Piecemeal information I’ve just started correlating, Excellence”, the spy said, “We’ve intercepted a series of battle maps that show the north-western border of Katolis, where it meets Duren and Del Bar. It’s yet unclear what they’re for, but my gut tells me they aren’t being drawn up for no reason.”
Tyne snorted and shook her head. “Great, so Aaravos disnae have to do anythin’ at all for the world to go to shit. We’re all workin’ hard to make it happen without him.”

"Tyne, don’t give up so fast", smiled Ezran, "Look at what we have. We have the future King of Xadia. We have three of five Kingdoms and three of five primals. Most of the power is on our side, because there’s no way the other Dragons are gonna side with Aaravos and Del Bar isn't going to help him either."

“Grand. So in the best case, we’re looking at a four-way fight between Aaravos with the Children, Del Bar, the unfriendly Dragons and... some insane alliance between Katolis, Duren, Neolandia and whoever Xadian’s weird enough to join?”, Tyne groused.

The little man looked around, then said, "Not sure if that’s really the best we can do. Tell me if this sounds good. We're going to get everyone together. The Dragons, the Speaker of the Assembly and all the important nobles of the Pentarchy. We're going to explain the situation and ask for a solid truce until we can get rid of Aaravos. Zym can either rule or not, as long as the other Dragons agree to wait to fight over it until everything’s figured out."

"How are ye goin’ to convince people to show up for that?", Tyne asked, a pitiful smirk on her lips, “You’ll say the word `meeting´ but the Dragons are gonna hear the word `trap´.”

"How about `party´?", smiled Ezran, "My brother's got a wedding coming up."

“No!”, Tyne exploded, “Ye canny be serious! Over my dead body does this get to be blown up for everyone tae see! Bad enough that all Cardow knows!”

“If you’re worried about people finding out about Rayla and Callum”, Ezran said calmly, “It’s a bit late. Rayla’s trial was a pretty huge deal. Most elves probably already know or at least heard the rumors.”

“Doesn’t seem likely to me that the Dragons would come to Katolis for a human wedding, anyway”, Zym said, cutting off Tyne’s angry reply.

“No, sorry, I mean we move the ceremony to the Border. Have it all play out on neutral ground in the DMZ”, Ezran said, “If they want, even in Xadia.”
“I still agree with the Prince, Excellence. Given the current state of things, Lady Rayla and Lord Callum’s ceremony is unlikely to find much interest with the Dragons”, Helmond added, “Though I think that this isn’t true for our kind, Tyne. There are those who would flock to an event such as that, even just to sate a sort of morbid curiosity.”

“Aye, that’s exactly my feckin’ problem!”, hissed the Dragon Guard, “We’ll be busy makin’ sure nobody tries to kill my daughter!”

“It’s a huge risk for both of them, yeah. We have an advantage there, too. My Aunt and the Elven commander at the Breach know what the place looks like and we can use the task force to run security. About the dragons - aren’t they going to want to see Zym?”, Ezran said, “Kid or not, he’s the Archdragon of sky now, right? If I know anything about politics, the other Dragons are going to want to talk to him, at least. To see where he stands with them.”

Zym and Helmond exchanged unsure glances.

“Hm. Could work”, Azymondias nodded, “I probably can get the Dragons to at least send their interpreters, but Callum alone could get the Speaker of the Assembly. Him and Senator Rasha have some history.”

There was a moment of silence as everyone wracked their brains.

“Daft plan”, said Tyne.

“I tend to agree”, Helmond nodded, “However, I say we attempt it. It doesn’t lend itself to inflaming the situation further. If anything, it’ll allow us a much clearer picture of where we stand with all the factions involved. Frankly, having even just that hashed out would be a blessing. My head is starting to spin.”

“I’ll send a message to Callum and talk to Opeli. She’s been planning the wedding, and I’m sure she’s gonna be soooo happy when I tell her that everything’s been changed again”, laughed Ezran.
Claudia sighed loudly and rolled over. Her feet were bandaged and she had spent most of the past two days rolling about in a bed that wasn't her own. Most of the soldiers from the bastion at the Breach had left Taelin as soon as Amaya had given the all-clear, but she had been kept here by an uppity doctor on account of her torn up soles.

Boredom was threatening to make her day incredibly long again when, mercifully, the door opened and Soren stepped through, his daughter in his arms.

"Hey Clauds", her brother said.

"Oh Sore-bear, you have no clue how much I needed someone to walk in here right now!", smiled Claudia and sat up, “I’m so bored! ”

“Well good news, I’m staying for a bit”, Soren sat next to the bed and allowed his sister to take Amelie from his arms. “How are you holding up?”

“I still can’t really believe any of it. It’s totally crazy”, said Claudia and watched as her niece extended a grabby hand towards the vase on her nightstand.

“Ooh, `who` brought you flowers?”, Soren teased, closed his eyes and used his hands to fan the fragrance into his face dramatically, “Ah!”, he grinned, “Smells like soap!”

His sister cocked her head and gave him an eye-roll. “Soren! Don’t give me that stupid grin! You know who!”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Where did he even go?”

Claudia shook her head. “Sorry, can’t tell you. We need to figure out what’s gonna happen to him. Did you hear anything from the other side about him yet?”

“Can’t tell me?!”, her brother frowned, “I’m not ratting out your boyfriend!”
“Shh! He’s not my boyfriend!”, the mage whispered tensely and waved a hand at him to shut him up, “He’s cute, okay, but... but I don’t know yet!”

Soren searched her expression for a moment, his left eyebrow raised. Then, he shrugged. “Sure, you’d mess up your feet and almost die for any old moonie, right?”, he nudged her with his elbow, then quickly continued to keep her from saying something, “But yeah, I got something from the elves. Here.”

He pulled out a letter and handed it to Claudia. She unfolded it with her Amelie-free hand and read it over. It was short and written in common, but the letters were a little uneven, showing how little training the writer had.

“Master Claudia. It wouldn’t surprise me to learn that you’ve taken him across the border. If so, keep him, but be warned. The Lucid has sent an agent to take him in and they’re not going to stop looking for him at the line, no matter what our agreements say. If he is over there and you have a way to contact him, tell him to find some thick walls to get behind, as far away from the border as possible.”

Claudia looked up from the letter, but Soren nodded at her to get her to read the rest.

“I’ve told the agent that he resisted and I threw him into the magma, but I doubt she believes anything I say. It would still be best if we all acted as though he was dead. Please destroy this letter. Janai.”

Soren sat back laxly and threw a hand out at the letter. “So yeah. Amaya handed this to me and told me to burn it as soon as you read it and to stay with you.”

“They’re worried the agents are going to come for both Taog and I. Great. I was guessing this would get complicated.”

Claudia blew an errant strand of hair out of her face, then asked, “Did anyone else get hurt?”

Soren shook his head, then put on a reprimanding, slightly smug frown. “Just you. Remember when we first got here? I told you to run with Ames and leave me behind if something went wrong”, he snorted, “Turns out, you’re way better at fighting earthquakes!”
“I'm sorry, I know how it must've looked. I should've checked on you.”

Her brother’s hands came up in a defensive gesture. “No, don’t worry. You were yelling loud enough to wake the whole place!”

Amelie shrieked, making her dad and aunt jump.

"Yelling!", the kid said proudly.

--

“So let me get this straight”, Callum said, “You’re using our wedding to lure people in to have a roundtable on Aaravos?”

Ezran patted his brother’s shoulder then said, “Wish you would’ve written me a letter back.”

“Letter, letter!”, scoffed Callum, “This is you saying you were hoping not to have me sitting here, being angry at you in person, isn’t it?”

“Sorta”, smiled the King. The attempt at humor fizzled and set the tone for the conversation. Frowning, Ezran took his hand off his brother’s shoulder and made to step around his desk. Callum and his fiancee were both still wearing their travel clothes. The two of them had just arrived and had immediately demanded the King’s attention.

“Ez, be serious”, said Rayla sternly.

“I’m sorry! We couldn’t come up with a better excuse, okay?”, the little man said, sat down and shifted in his chair uncomfortably.

Callum stabbed his index at his brother. “You can’t just decide this over our heads!”
“I’m not!”, said Ezran, “I mean, that’s why I sent the letter, Callum! I was thinking you’d tell me if you have a smarter idea!”

“How about we just tell them what the meeting’s really about?”, Rayla asked.

“Getting everyone together like this is not going to spread around the news that we know Aaravos is back and are trying to work together to beat him. We know he’s got ears everywhere ‘cause of the Children of Elarion. Keeping this secret-ish is going to be super difficult either way, but I think we need to try everything we can”, Ezran said apologetically, “Look, guys, um... I don’t wanna ruin your wedding. I’m really excited for it, too! It’ll be my first ceremony and stuff! Opeli said she’s going to do her best to keep things split up, you know, keep the party to one side and the conference to the other.”

Rayla exhaled slowly as Callum threw her a worried look. “Ez... we’ve had an insanely stressful time lately and when Marielle answers our endorsement letter, we’ll get right back into it. I was hoping the wedding could be just for fun and now you’re telling me Opeli already changed the plans?”

“Bah”, went the future Princess, “It’ll be stressful either way, dummy. I’m already quiverin’ in my boots about the whole thin’.”

“I thought you were going to Evenere to take your mind off things?”, the King asked.

“We went to Evenere to make peace there! It wasn’t a vacation!”, Callum said tensely, “Long story short, turns out they’re even more boneheaded and racist than our people an--”

“And I killed one of them and a bunch of our soldiers!”, spat Rayla.

Ezran’s mouth fell open slightly and he searched her furious expression for some explanation. She didn’t offer it, and he decided not to press her yet.

The King cleared his throat and said, “How about you take some time off for real? You guys go to the beach house, like Callum promised, and we deal with Marielle and all the wedding prep. Relax for a bit.”

“You telling us to take a vacation doesn’t really address our issue”, said Callum, his arms crossed.
"If you want your wedding to yourself, let me off the hook and just say so", Ezran replied, sourly, "I gotta ask again; Do you have a better idea?!"

Rayla looked at her silent fiance, a tired frown on her face. "What did Opeli say? A puppet, puppeteerin'?"

"No!", shouted Callum and jumped up, "We've sacrificed enough! Find another way!"

Ezran rose, standing to his full height. He leaned broadly onto his desk and fixed his brother with a slightly cold, superior glance. This was the look that Callum couldn't master, commanding respect and a pinch of fear. This was the look that made people shut up when his little brother walked into a room. "Don't shout at me, Callum. You're going to think about it and let me know for sure after dinner. Now get out, I've got other things to do."

Callum frowned angrily at the King, then whirled around and stomped out. Rayla on the other hand stayed in her seat. When her fiance had slammed the door behind himself, she shook her head. "He's been through a lot. Don't take it too hard."

"Yeah, I figured. Not like him to yell at me", said Ezran sadly and settled back down, "Do you wanna tell me what happened over there?"

The future Princess quickly explained, stuttering her way through their last night on Eveneran ground. When she finished, Ezran had turned away, looking outside toward the upper courtyard where Zym was grooming himself. He said nothing for a long while.

"Ez?", Rayla prompted.

"Sorry", said the King and turned around to study his sister-in-law's sad expression. Another moment passed, then Ezran sighed and shuffled back into his chair.

"Your story makes me think back to all the stuff that people told me when I lost all those soldiers at the Breach. Corvus, for example, told me that the best way to honor a soldier is not to waste their life. Opeli said that even the best plans are made with old information. I think you made the right choice for the soldiers with what you knew."
Ezran took a sip of water, then continued, "You couldn't know what was gonna happen and you didn't send them to die. Sometimes, that's all you can ask. It sucks, and it probably doesn't make you feel any better, but..."

Rayla gave him a sad, blank look and the little man ruffled through his hair. "I'm sorry. I don't know if I'm helping. It sucks that you had to kill someone, I can't imagine how that feels. Do you plan on seeing Cardwell?"

Rayla scoffed. "Infirmary's my second home at this point. Yea, I'll go talk to him, for whatever that'll do."

Ezran nodded. "I know it seems dumb, that's what I thought. I went to go talk to him after the Breach and after I... after Zym told me everything I missed. I still have nightmares about the Dragon attack and Viren sometimes."

“Oh, Ez”, Rayla went and leaned forward to take his hand in hers, “This is all so fucked.”

He blinked at her, then frowned sheepishly. “Rayla, language...”

“I know, I know”, she smiled sadly, “Easy tae forget you’re a kid and not supposed to hear those sort’a words. Seems kinda silly because you’ve seen a lot of horrible stuff, too.”

“ Comes with the job”, said the King, “But, uh... Opeli always says I have to try and be as much of a child as I can be. I don’t really know what she means by that, but... uh, I gotta listen to advice, you know?”

Before she knew it, there were tears in Rayla’s eyes again. “I know exactly what she means, Ez. I was allowed to be a kid until I was about twelve. You’re ten.”

“Fourteen, actually”, Ezran snickered.

The elf snorted and palmed at her eyes. “I guess technically. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m okay. How about you?”
The future Princess heaved a deep sigh. “I’ll be okay. I think. Just a little much right now. I wanna talk to my mum, see how she dealt with... with this. I canny imagine she really enjoyed killing. It feels terrible. To... to have someone’s blood on your hands.”

Frowning, the little man walked around his desk to offer her an embrace which she haltingly took. He couldn’t think of anything helpful to say and was glad that she at least allowed him to express his support this way.

“If I can calm down yer brother, can we make dinner plans?”, Rayla asked and they separated.

“Yeah, duh! I told the kitchen to put on a bit of a feast for you now that you're back! We’ve also got some guests, did you see them?”

“I saw some Milites, yea. Anyone we know?”

“Honsa and her dad are here, commanding them.”

Rayla’s mien darkened a little. “Honsa, eh?”

“What’s wrong?”

“Oh, nothin’. I just gotta talk to that ocean elf about a few thin’s. Where is she quartered?”

“Remember where we had Marielle set up? In the lower tower? There.”

Rayla nodded. “Thanks. I’ll see you later, okay?”

Ezran gallantly opened the door for her and bowed slightly as she passed, returning his quirky grin. It felt strange to be back at the twins, almost like she had entered into another life. The burgundy runners on the floor dampened Rayla’s steps readily and everything was scrubbed clean. It was a far cry from the total disarray of Evenere. Rayla noticed that she felt comfortable here, especially given that the Crown Guard that were posted stood at attention as she passed by, giving her
nothing but a professional smile. She also walked by a few people who were apparently measuring
the hallway and drawing up some kind of plan, talking about pipes.

Finally, she turned a corner and found herself in front of her and Callum’s quarters. Stepping
through the door, she called out for him.

"Here", he replied angrily from the bathroom.

The door was open and he was standing in front of the mirror wearing nothing but a towel. Half his
face was covered in thick white foam. He put down his razor and looked her way, waiting for her
to say something.

"Sick of the stubble?", smiled his summand.

"Yep", grumbled Callum, "I'm waiting for them to heat some water for a bath. Can't wait to be
 clean."

"Mmh", went Rayla, "How mad are you right now?"

Her fiance shrugged grumpily. "This is the first time he's acted like a King with me and it really
pisses me off. 'You're gonna think about it', his majesty commands! That's not the Ez I know!"

"Funny, he said somethin’ similar about you yellin’. Maybe he thinks you need a good long
moment to think about this?", said Rayla and walked over to caress his bare chest.

"Look, I don't care what he thinks I need! This is our wedding! We can't always tack on matters of
state to everything!"

"Are you a Crown Prince or nah?", his summand said softly.

"So what?"

"This weddin’ thin' was always gonna be a whole affair, dafty. Look at it this way, it'll help show
off what we’ve got to Xadia and the Pentarchy both. Wasn't that what you wanted?"

Callum frowned at his mirror image. He looked tired and tense, the worry over Marielle's response plain in the lines under his eyes. "That was before all this. Before your breakdown. I'm worried about you. Worried about us."

"About us?"

"Back there, we both cried about how much we hurt each other. You tried to walk out on me again."

"And then I tried to bonk you", she smiled, "If you remember the bad, remember that, too."

He couldn't help but smirk a little.

"I know I snapped, and I'm sorry. It was too much and I was scared I’d hurt you", said Rayla and kissed his freshly shaven cheek, "I already feel a lot better bein' away from the disgustin' swampland. Gonna see the doctor, too."

"That's a good idea", Callum said, "So, wait, this sounds like you're okay with Ez's plan?"

"I don't wanna make a choice for both of us. You should figure out what you want. I'm good either way. Disnae matter to me if it's more or less stressful."

The Crown Prince inspected his fiance, then shrugged half-heartedly, "Guess to you it never meant as much, anyway."

Rayla cocked her head. "It's not like it means nothin' tae me, dafty. At the very least, I'll be a real Princess after. I'm also excited to see a bit more of your culture. Especially somethin' so grand and festive."

"Mhm", Callum hummed. He gave her a sweet smile and draped his arms around her waist, "You're gonna have to start putting together your half of the wedding party. Do you think you could find four bridesmaids here or should we go with fewer?"
"Bridesmaids?", Rayla asked.

"Yeah, um... people you trust who will be there for you during the ceremony. Special guests of honor."

"Hum. Maids - they have to be women?"

"Uh, no, traditionally it's assumed that they're there to help you get dressed and all that, but you can choose whomever you're comfortable with or have the attendants help you."

"That's daft! I can dress myself!"

Callum snorted. "I think you're going to have second thoughts about that when you see the costume. It's pretty nuts."

"Oh? What's it look like?"

"Well... I don't actually know any details of it beyond what Opeli told us back in the desert. I remember my mum's, yeah, but yours is gonna be different. I'm not allowed to see it before the day."

"How no'?"

"Tradition."

Rayla scoffed. "That's not really an explanation."

"You're not allowed to see my costume either. I think it's about getting an honest reaction out of us when we meet."

"Meet?! As in, we don't go there together?!!"
"Welp", laughed Callum, "It's a good thing we started talking about this. Tell you what - I'll finish shaving and then I'll explain the rest."

"Mh", went Rayla and stepped out of the room to allow him some space.

She had barely left when there was a scratch at the door. Horace and four more attendants had brought hot water for Callum's bath. When they had filed out, Callum called her back into the bathroom where he was just letting himself glide into the generous tub.

“Looking forward to when they put the plumbing in. It’d be so neat to just turn on a tap like we did in Xadia”, he smiled, remembering the magical white-tiled bathrooms of his fiance’s home.

"Mind if I join you?", asked Rayla and pulled off her top.

"I'd love that", he smiled and shuffled around a bit to make room.

She slipped into the hot water between his legs. Sighing contentedly, she leaned back onto his chest. A few moments passed while they pet each other, enjoying the warmth and privacy.

"I love you", said Rayla, "And I'm sorry about bein' so crazy. I hope that was the last time I snap like that."

"I love you, too. Don't beat yourself up. I think we both could do with a good rest."

"Yea", smiled the elf. After a moment, she added, "I really wanna go to the beach. It's late August already, might be our last chance this year."

"You're right. It'll be a bit of a pre-honeymoon."

"A whatnow?"
“Oh. Uh, it’s a special vacation newlyweds take. Go somewhere nice, enjoy each other.”

Rayla smirked mischievously and kissed his cheek. “We don’t really have tae go anywhere to enjoy each other, do we? We can enjoy right here. Right now.”

--

Tyne was reading a book, comfortably lounging in a chair in front of a window. Her relaxation was broken when there was a knock. Frowning, the Dragon Guard rose and opened the door.

“Hey mum”, said the visitor.

Tyne immediately dropped the book and threw her arms around her daughter. “A’m so glad ye’re alright!”

The future Princess blinked, then returned her embrace. “Something wrong?”

“A’ve feck all tae do but worry my arse off!”, her mother laughed and tightened her hug, “How are you feelin’? How was the trip? Hows... how’s yer tummy?”

“Uh”, went Rayla, “One thin’ after another. I got a question first.”

“Awright. Sit for a bit?”, Tyne prompted and motioned at her comfy corner by the window.

When both women had settled down, Rayla rubbed her hands together. “Ssssooo, er... I’m guessin’ you weren’t too happy about Ez’s plan?”

Tyne gave a short laugh. “Daes my nut in. Hopin’ ye won’t go along with it, but A think A know better.”

“Well, Callum sorta agrees with you. He’s mullin’ it over. I think it’s a crazy plan, too, don’t get me wrong, the idea of havin’ a big ceremony where everyone can see gies me the boak. But... ah, I’m also proud of us and this gives us a way to show that elves and pinkos can get along real well
without all the dragon killin’ bunk.”

“Real well’?”, her mother crossed her arms and smiled sardonically, “In yer case, that’s a wee bit of an understatement. Ah... anyways, Ye wanted tae ask me somethin’?”

“Aye, um... I want you to be part of my weddin’ party.”

“Yer what?”

“It’s a group of honored guests at the ceremony. I was thinkin’ of ask--”

“Lassie”, Tyne interrupted, a sad glint in her eyes, “How can A support ye doin’ this? A feel like A’m failin’ ye all over again...”

“I thought you’d say that. I was just hopin’ you’d think about it at least. It’ll happen, whether you’re there with me or not. I’d like you to.”

The elder elf got up and strode over to where four full bottles and a pitcher sat on a silver tablet along with a few overturned goblets. Her hand went for the pitcher, then stopped short and grabbed one of the bottles. “Ah, who cares... water’s not right for this.”

She didn’t bother with a goblet, instead taking a deep swig from the ornate bottle. Almost immediately, Tyne started coughing. “Ah feck! Mink stuff’s worse than Moonshine!”

“Do you think it’s a good idea to drink right now?”, Rayla smiled doubtfully.

“Oh, spare me, A’ve no’ touched the crap up till now! Honestly just wanted a nip to take the edge off’r what A’m gonna have tae say!”, she slammed the glass and cork stopper back into the bottle, wiped her mouth with the back of her forearm and frowned at her daughter, “A’ll dae it.”

“You’ll...”, gaped the future Princess, shocked by the easy win.

“Aye, `A’ll`! A canny change a thought once it’s nestin’ in yer thick skull! So! Ye’re gonna be
prancin’ aboot all day, exposed tae Minks and Waners both and A don’t trust any of ’em to keep their blades in their sheaths and their hands off’ ye and yer..., she opened and closed her mouth angrily, then spat, “... *summand!* Better tae be close tae ye!”

“If body guardin’s what gets you to come, fine! But! You’re gonna have tae fit in, ken?”, smiled her daughter, “They’ve got all the costumes picked out and you gotta play along if you’re part of the party!”

“Gads”, groaned Tyne, “Well, what do the rags look like?!”

“Dunno yet. It’s all very hush-hush. Meant to make thin’s interestin’ for everyone.”

Rayla’s mother scoffed. “Interestin’s right. Well! As long as nobody calls me ‘Praestes Tattyboggle’ afterwards, it’s a price A’ll pay.”

The future princess laughed heartily, then said, “Bah! Ye won’t look like a scarecrow if you put on a happier face, mum! Thank you so much! Worth a hug, if you want it”, Rayla said and got up, her arms spread.

Tyne stepped into her embrace with a small smirk on her lips and pulled her daughter close. For a few seconds, they held each other, then Tyne’s breath hitched. “Ah, shite, A’m gonna greet...

“What’s wrong?”

Her mother’s eyes watered. “Rayla, gads, A love ye like no second person. A’m standin’ here, on what’ll be yer ground soon and all A can see is that little wean, chasin’ after and wallopin’ that heid-the-baw Rumaan with a stick. Ye’ve done so, so much with yer life and... A wish...”, she started crying and threw her hands out in a gesture of confusion, “A wish I could feel prouder! A missed yer bondin’ and now... My daughter’s gonna be a Princess and she saved the Dragon Prince and...”

“Mum, it’s fine”, Rayla smiled and pet her mother’s arm, “On this trip I’ve learned somethin’ about people changin’ their minds. It’s hard and it takes a while. It means the world tae me that you’d be part of this. It’ll be good.”

Tyne nodded and palmed at her eyes. Then, she let herself fall into her comfortable chair again.
Rayla sighed deeply and sagged into her own seat. “It was a messed up time, mum. I... I killed a man.”

Weighty, cool silence replaced the warm atmosphere as Tyne studied her daughter’s distant glance. She didn’t say anything, but leaned forward to touch a bracing hand to Rayla’s knee.

After some time, Rayla took a deep breath and asked, “How... how did you deal with it? Killin’ for the first time?”

Tyne shook her head. Her voice was gentle and low when she asked, “Before A get inty any of that - how did it happen?”

“There was this Knight... Valerian... he came after Callum and wouldnae let up. Tried disarmin’ him, but he didnae let it happen. Was too afraid of me. Thought I’d kill him either way.”

“See, this is why A had tae ask”, the Dragon Guard said softly, “My first kill was in a hackit, bloody fight, Rayla. Skirmish with brigands near Cardow when A was sixteen and a bit. A killed a few people right there, didnae have the time to think about each and every single yin of them. What you’ve got tae deal with is worse. Mink or no, ye ended a person, ye even knew his name.”

Rayla’s glistening eyes darted over her mother’s gentle smile. “So how did you deal with it?”

“It’s easy tae get over killin' someone who's comin' tae kill you when there's a bloody mess of blades and bodies flyin' everywhere. Has a way of erasin' the personhood of your enemies. Yer da would be better tae talk to, Ry. He was an assassin, he knew a lot about his marks before even strikin' out.”

Rayla started crying silently and Tyne rocked her chair closer to pull her close. "A know. Shouldnae have mentioned him. A'm sorry."

"It's okay", Rayla whispered.
"Nah, it's not. I miss that bastart all day long. Left us too soon. Ry, A canny... shit, ye asked not tae be called that... sorry. A canny tell ye how tae deal with it. Ye feel what ye feel, I feel what I feel. A've never had a problem killin' my enemies cause it was always do or die. A bit like that here, too. Ye had tae keep him safe, yer... Prince. Think aboot what if you hadn't."

Rayla nodded. While she regretted having killed Velérian, the alternative was even worse.

“Thanks”, she choked out and let her mother cradle her head to her shoulder. Then, sudden realization jolted through Rayla, “Ah, ssshhhhhit! Over all this I...”

The two of them gave each other a startled look, Tyne’s more questioning, her daughter’s more scared. “Been forgettin’ tae take the plants since...”

Tyne burst out laughing. “Ah, gads! Life’s such a bitch to us women! Why don’t ye get him tae wrap up, hey?”

“Mum! That’s my innermost!”

“Feck, come now, Ry, it’s not like A wanty have tae think aboot it, either! Still! Make the lad take some of the doonside!”

“A’m no’ gonna ask him to slip his banger inty goat gut, maw!”

“Guts?! The feck?! Is that what those Minks use?!”

“Aye!”

“Ewch! Gads, they’re savages! Make ‘em learn aboot rubber! Better yet, have them bring ye some from ‘cross the border, just tae be safe! Ah, shite. Ye had better thin’s tae think aboot, don’t worry too bad. You’ll be back on track in a week.”

“Y-yea”, Rayla smirked smally, glad that the adventure in the tub hadn’t ended with her getting splashed with anything other than water.
“How’s your stomach, anyhow?”, her mother asked ruefully.

“It’s okay. Bruise’s mostly gone. Still not bleedin’ though.”

“Mmh. Wait and see, kiddo”, smiled Tyne and brushed at the tuft of hair between her daughter’s horns, trying to get some order into the wild mess.

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