Ripple Effect

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/21566881.

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning: Major Character Death
Category: F/M
Fandom: Fire Emblem Heroes, Fire Emblem Series
Relationship: Alfonse/Summoner | Eclat | Kiran, Alfonse (Fire Emblem)/Original Female Character(s), Implied Lif/Summoner | Eclat | Kiran, Implied Lif/Original Female Character(s)
Character: Summoner | Eclat | Kiran, Original Female Character(s), Alfonse (Fire Emblem), Lif (Fire Emblem), Hríd (Fire Emblem), Chrom (Fire Emblem), Eir (Fire Emblem), Bruno | Zacharias, Thrasir (Fire Emblem)
Additional Tags: Angst and Hurt/Comfort, Suicidal Thoughts, attempted self-harm, Anxiety, Intrusive Thoughts, Possession, Past Character Death, reference to self-harm
Stats: Published: 2019-11-26 Words: 7588

Ripple Effect

by EriiErii

Summary

Lif failed her once before. Whether or not it would ruin his plans, he had to know if saving Alice from harming herself would’ve changed the fate that befell his own Alice. While Lif guided Alfonse (in his own way) to fulfil his plans to find out such an answer, Alfonse tries to pick up the pieces of the aftermath.

Notes

Major spoilers for Book III.

This was part of a trade with Avistella and as such, features her OC, Alice (used with her permission).

Thanks for reading! For post updates, questions, art and general random silliness in between, check me out at eriisaam.tumblr.com for more!

"Wait… Alice… I’m sorry, but… may I trouble you for just a moment…?"

Eir just wanted to get things off her chest. That's all. She did genuinely come to trust Alice, but even when it was clear who Alice opened herself up most to, and even more clear it wasn't her,
there were genuine fears and woes in the look in her eyes. Maybe initially, she meant what she asked.

But… it only took a moment for that to change. Without warning, Eir turned on her, and Alice was no more.

Lif barely knew the finer details even at the time. Just when he needed her most, she was stabbed and killed. As if that weren't enough, when he searched her body for clues, the wrist of her dominant arm was torn and crudely tended to. Whatever hurt her, she didn't turn to a healer for help, but it seemed too far in the process of healing to be Eir's doing.

He knew her too much that it was no accident. This was deliberate even if he wasn't sure by who. He felt this was too much even for Eir, but did he truly believe it is beneath Alice as well, or was he trying to find something or someone to blame instead? Even now, he wasn't sure, and in the grand scheme of things, the answer wouldn't have brought Alice back to him anyways. Hel had her killed, he killed everyone else with Thrasir over a wager, and Hel made a spectacle out of killing Sharena in front of him. One by one, everything he held dear was taken away from him. Hel brought him down at the lowest point she could, and just when he lost all hope and desperately clung to any chance of salvaging any of this… well…

Nevertheless, it left questions burning in his mind even now, and even in spite of all this. When did Alice get hurt? Why? He didn't know if it was his grief of learning he clearly failed her at a time when she needed him, if he was still furious she was hurt at all, or suspicion of something else at work, but a familiar, protective feeling made him bristle up of that memory.

He may have retraced the events leading up to their journey to Hel's domain thousands of times in life and undeath, but as he recognized signs that Alfonse were reliving them and catching up to such a critical point, he made one last attempt to trace that event again.

Alice would've been hurt well before their final journey together, but he remembered her acting strangely just before. He was used to the dark circles under her eyes or her subdued expressions whenever she broke her serious resting look otherwise. He didn't hate them, much as he remembered wanting more than anything to heal her burdens and scars whether he could see them or not. Even now, he still did.

But… there was something different about her just before her death. She smiled more. Not the cordially cheerful smiles, not the warm smiles that followed how she dotted on their friends, but the intimate, vulnerable kind she'd usually hide. His past self thought that she held a confidence to her that left her smiling warmly and broadly. His past self thought that for her to share such a rare smile so radiantly and openly, she must have been confident.

*His past self was a complete fool.*

Seeing what he saw now, Lif tensed and dug the claws of his gauntlet into his palms, enough so to
briefly ooze luminescent blue blood that fizzled and withered into nothing as quickly as he allowed himself to bleed. What the Alfonse of the past was blind to, Lif saw for what it was now, and it made him hate himself of just how careless he was.

She smiled. Whether he was so desperate to see more to it than it was, or otherwise, he realized now it was so unusual from her typical, equally rare smiles because it wasn't one of what little subtle joy he could coax out of her. It was acceptance. It was the smile of someone with resolve, someone who just remembered they died a thousand times and accepted their inescapable fate to die once more. Instead of seeing it for what it was, Lif was so desperate back then that he missed the warning signs, and she walked right into death's open arms.

And he let her.

But this time, there was a way to answer the question still gnawing at the back of his mind. If he had gotten to her sooner, would it have changed anything? If he knew that was the last time he could spend time with her, to embrace one more chance to be together, if he could've been there for her just one more time right at that exact moment…

Would it have changed anything…?

Even if it did nothing or ruined everything for him, Lif wanted to know more than anything.

Lif was Alfonse all along.

More specifically, he was an Alfonse from a bleak future. He was the only survivor next to what everyone could already guess was Veronica. But with how he and Thrasir looked and acted, what kind of life was that?

It was to be expected that such a revelation wouldn't sit well with the Order of Heroes, particularly Alice and Alfonse. But with how quickly Lif's tone tensed, and with him gradually losing the nerve to look Alice in the eyes, even Lif knew there was no hiding now, and he told them what he could. He told them of the rite of heart. He told them of how Sharena and Alice paid with their lives for his mistake. The only thing he didn't clarify were specifics of how Alice died, so it didn't take long for the Order of Heroes to assume she died with everyone else from the rite. Alfonse and Alice could both pick up Lif didn't exactly show all his cards, so to speak, but both of them drew very different conclusions of what more he would've hid or why.
Alfonse took in Lif's guilt and despair. Even Lif knew he lost his mind to side with Hel of all people. Whether he acted on his own will, or Hel took control of him like Gustav, Alfonse didn't know, but it left his confidence in taking charge that much more fragile at the sheer magnitude of what would've been his latest screw-up if he didn't find some way to change their fate's course.

As for Alice? Well...

She failed him.

Alfonse turned into Lif because of her.

The obvious fact was enough to make her heart skip a beat. But as she unravelled the little tells in Lif's voice, or what she read from the looks in his eyes, she became critical, not at Alfonse, but at herself. She also wasn't as quick as the others to assume without any doubt Lif's Alice died from the rite, especially when Lif's choice of words to mention Sharena and her other self's deaths made her take pause, considering something else killed the two before the rite.

But was that why Lif was so vague about her death on purpose? Even if he was also vague of what happened to Sharena and where, he at least confirmed Hel was the one to personally kill her, and he even recalled her last words. For Alice? Nothing. She died, and not a single word more of it. Was that why Lif couldn't bring himself to look at her either? He still had grief, but there was something else she couldn't fully read. Or as a more cynical side to her would chime in, maybe it was something she didn't want to read, or accept.

Lif resented her. Surely, there is no other explanation. She was kidding herself to think otherwise, right? He hated her so much that the undead shadow of what her prince could've turned into couldn't bear to look at the summoner who abandoned him when he needed her the most.

As much as both of them had their differences, of course, there were a few times they shared similar quirks to one another. Unfortunately, the quirky this time was how much both Alice and Alfonse bottled up their feelings. Maybe this time it was much more obvious, given they all heard and saw the context, so it was practically expected. The problem, however, was that they were both quite good at hiding when they were on the verge of breaking, and thus, making it harder to predict when it all became too much for either of them.

Lif bided his time. Before then, Alice was fine. The point everything would crash and burn was the point all hope was lost, especially hers. Somewhere, in between the point she was the same Alice he always knew, over the Alice who smiled a hollow, dead smile, something happened. If he wanted his answer, he had to find that critical point where everything would've changed.
So he waited, and he watched. He knew the Order of Heroes would've deployed by now to chase him down, and he also knew he did more than enough to frighten Alfonse into forcing Sharena to fall back and Anna to protect her back at their base. He would, of course, try to order Alice to do the same, but it was a futile attempt, and she was not so easily swayed from Alfonse's side, matching his stubbornness. Lif watched from the shadows and confirmed to himself Alice was still safe, and she was practically guarded beside Hrid and Chrom. All of them were following Eir and Alfonse's lead as Alfonse masked his fears and woes to at least pretend he was calm with Eir as the two discussed plans together.

Lif remembered this. Alice was protected, the two were confident (or at least pretended to be), and Alice held unwavering resolve to stay by his side no matter what.

So why? Where did it go so wrong…?

Perhaps he was too early. The rational side to Lif knew this was likely still too soon. A more pressing thought, however, reminded him he was lulled into a false sense of security once before. It was why it slipped his notice until it was far too late to save her.

He tensed and remained vigilant. He wasn't close enough to overhear their exact words, but he didn't need to. He continued to bide his time to watch their body language and their movements as they explored the area together through fields, forests or ruins of Lif's past otherwise.

First, they remained close and almost shoulder to shoulder. Then Eir seemed to fall further back in formation while Hrid moved closer to Alfonse to talk. Lif recalled Chrom was the first to break formation completely, and sure enough, he moved ahead to scout the area. He completely disregarded how Eir would've been far better equipped to do such on her pegasus, and Chrom's hastiness combined with Alice's lack of input to stop him had left him to his own whims to check the area in the name of protecting the others.

Getting a different perspective of something Lif lived through for himself, he couldn't help but grow even more critical. Maybe he was overthinking it, but given what was at stake, perhaps it could be forgiven for such. He knew Alice to be overly cautious yet quick in formulating plans on the spot. Perhaps Lif was unfair to try to put his own ideas of what he thought Alice should've done, but seeing how passive she was this time to simply nod and let Chrom rush off, Lif's focus sharpened where Alfonse was too distracted with Hrid to notice.

Perhaps Lif was exactly where he was supposed to be after all.

He realized this was Alice's plan all along. He could feel the familiar chill and weight in the realm of the dead, but for once, it wasn't him the icy hands of death gripped and strung along. He
continued to keep himself hidden as he moved, just enough to keep out of its grasp to retain his will, but he was vigilant on who it was trying to seek out instead. He watched how Alice quietly stuck by Eir's side, looking up whenever Alfonse glanced back to her, and doing the bare minimum to pretend things were normal just enough to avoid suspicion.

The wheel of fate kept turning. To Lif, it was like a script he read over and over a thousand times until he could recall every word and every way the scenes would play out. Chrom would return, safe, but alarmed. He would find undead forces he would move as fast as possible to warn the others of. They would arm themselves, fight, do what they could to protect Alice while doing so as Alice gave orders and directions on where to position and what to face, and then they would move ahead with their plans.

And then Lif saw it. Alice positioned herself in the very back. It was a subtle process as she slowed her pace little by little while everyone else continued to move forward. The more the four grew distracted with their surroundings or each other, the more Alice added to the distance, until eventually she slipped away into the forest, right under their notice.

A flood of memories overwhelmed Lif as the implications of what happened to his Alice. While he was distracted by the road ahead, she left him. Something happened to her, and he hadn't even realized she was gone in the first place, much less what happened. Because their minds were focused elsewhere, they didn't think twice of one of their own going missing for such a long time, and by the time they would've, she would've came back already, but her fate would've been sealed.

Not this time.

He ambushed Alfonse. He made a greater effort to make his presence known while doing it. Swords were drawn and everyone were immediately on the defensive.

"Lif! Is there really no reasoning with you?!

"What more is there to discuss? Either I die, or you do. Until then, our battle will never end."

"Then that settles it, doesn't it?" Already, Alfonse found himself flanked on either side with support from Hrid and Chrom, the latter of whom was quick to take charge. "You want a battle? Then draw your sword! Now! "

"Hmph. You're so quick to turn a sword on me that you don't even realize you're missing one of your own."

At first, Lif could see Chrom and Alfonse quickly set to protest. However, between Hrid quickly doing a head-count, and Alfonse following suit mid-protest, what hostility and confidence they started with had quickly fizzled into panic and concern, especially when it dawned on them who went missing.
"What did you do with Alice?" A wave of panic overcame him. How long was she missing? Why didn't he notice sooner?! Is Lif bringing it to their attention to gloat?

"Nothing." Yet. That's what he would've said next, right? It didn't go past Alfonse's notice how Lif seemed slower to actually attack them this time, and while Alfonse could guess of multiple reasons why, he couldn't handle thinking too long on any of them. "If you hurry, maybe you might catch her. Unless you want me to find her first."

"Alfonse! Go! We'll hold him off!" Hrid could see how conflicted Alfonse was. He didn't want to leave Alice alone, especially when he wasn't sure for her safety. Yet he also hated to leave Lif for them to deal with while he himself turned tail to flee. So rather than stress Alfonse further and stall him, Hrid tried to preemptively ease Alfonse's guilt as he and Chrom stood their ground.

To their relief, Alfonse didn't question it or push further. Without anymore stalling, Alfonse ran and tried to find Alice.

Just as Lif wanted.

To Alfonse's party, Hrid and Chrom tried desperately to hold Lif off and give Alfonse a head start, with Eir assisting them, albeit much more passively compared to the other two. Lif obliged, and he focused entirely on them, not to kill them just yet, but to at least ensure they would keep their distance and stay out of this. He strung them along, and just when he felt he kept them busy long enough, Lif eventually made his retreat while narrowly missing Chrom's reckless attempt to run him through with Falchion.

Realizing too late how much time Lif wasted, Hrid and Chrom tensed. They tried to search for the two, but the realization dawned on them that Alice's safety was entirely in Alfonse's hands.

Lif was what Alfonse could've been.

No… Maybe it was much more accurate to say that Lif was who Alfonse will be. And it'll be all her fault.

As Lif predicted, Alice found just the opening she needed before slipping away. Those thoughts were getting heavier, to a point it felt almost suffocating.
Why wasn't she there for him? What happened? *How did this happen?!* Lif performed that rite with Thrasir, he paid such a heavy price, and now he was following Hel's whims like a lost, starved puppy, feeding off her hands with promises even her Alfonse knew was completely ridiculous to think Hel was capable to ever fulfil, let alone want to. Even if she did, who would stop her from bringing everyone back to life just to immediately kill them all and grow stronger? What other outcome was Lif expecting?

So Alice knew this wasn't a decision he made with reason. It reeked of the most blind sense of desperation as to leave her scared. What could've made Lif's version of Alice fail him just enough to leave Alfonse desperately clawing at the tiniest sliver of hope no matter how painfully obvious how fake it was?

Maybe it wasn't what she *didn't* do. Maybe it's something she *did* do.

She blinked. Was it a voice of reason? Or was it an intrusive thought? Such a tiny suggestion was like a whisper in her ear.

Maybe… *she* caused this.

Maybe. She nodded slowly at nothing in particular, thinking this much was sound. The cogs were turning, and at such a small, simple prompt, it took very little for her mind to pick up and assemble the other pieces.

It wasn't her neglect. It wasn't her falling short of her duties serving by Alfonse's side. If it didn't make any sense that she wouldn't be beside Alfonse just as he needed her the most, then the next logical answer is she directly caused their downfall. Right? *Right?! That's* why Lif couldn't bare to look her way, right? *That's* why he could barely bring himself to speak directly to her, *right*?! She did *something*, and after everything, he hated her!

**You know what to do…**

"I know what to do…" Yes… she knew *exactly* what to do… The air felt very cold and still all of a sudden, but what did that matter?

She had those dueling knives. Bunches of them. Hundreds of bunches of them. She was suddenly *very* aware of how many of those things she accumulated in her convoy.

**They won't care. They won't notice. Surely**
"Nobody would notice if I borrow one…" She finished the thought out loud, thinking little else of it as she had. And now there was a knife in her hand. Just like that.

Maybe she got into an argument at just the exact wrong time. Maybe she gave him a plan whose logic fell just too short to notice a critical, fatal flaw. Regardless, the conclusion with Lif was clear.

**It was almost as if you pushed him off that cliff yourself…**

**So if you were part of the problem…**

"So if *I* was part of the problem…"

"Alice!"

**Then you know exactly how to solve this…**

"Then I know exactly how to solve this…"

"Alice, what are you talking about?! Is that a- *Alice please don't!* Alice!"

**You just need to remove yourself from the equation. A lynchpin to be pulled and nothing more.**

"I just need to remove myself from-"

" *NO!*"

Alice blinked. It was strange how everything around her was like a dark blur a moment ago. She was vaguely aware of the way something grabbed one of her hands and forced her fingers to unfurl. She heard a very soft thud as something fell onto the grass below her, of which she was barely aware she held something in the first place.

But her eyes drifted down to her hands. One was extended enough to expose her wrist. The wrist of her dominant hand, specifically. She realized how her other hand was unfocused and moved out of position just a moment ago, but she slowly recognised the glove hands that held hers, having previously fumbled to pry her hand open. Why…?

"Alice, what were you-?! And that- w-why did you…?!"
As Lif planned, Alfonse found her in time. Just barely. He had so many accusations and remarks born from panic that he wanted to shout, but his words tumbled out before he could collect his thoughts properly or knew which to filter out entirely.

So many arguments died on his tongue when he saw the slow, sluggish way she turned and the look in her eyes when their eyes met.

"Alfonse…? What are you doing here…?" They were glossy. It was like she barely woke up from a dream. With the confused, lost look on her face as she took in her surroundings, it was as if even she may not have known for sure where 'here' was.

"A-a breath." He knew that didn't exactly make sense, but in a panic, he rushed to step right in front of her and grab her free hand in both of his just as she would've looked down. In confusion, Alice stared up to Alfonse's face, to which he tried to look far calmer than he was. He tried very subtly to press a foot against the flat side of the fallen blade to obscure it more.

"A what…?"

"We were out here to take a breath of fresh air." He couldn't let her know. He didn't need to remind her. There were so many thoughts running through his mind that were plagued with his guilt and shame for letting her experience such thoughts at all. But with all the tells in how she looked and carried herself, Alfonse wondered how much someone else was trying to force her hand right then. He refused to let her spiral into guilt over that. "A-and maybe we should retreat back to our Askr to gather our bearings soon."

"Al-"

"Alice! Alfonse! Are you alright?!"

To Alfonse's relief, Chrom and Hrid arrived soon after. As usual, Chrom was the loudest, and didn't think twice to call out to them. It was apparent Eir followed from behind, but she was very subtle in the way she hid back behind Hrid, as if hoping nobody would notice her. They stormed in just in time to interrupt Alice before she could think to protest or question Alfonse otherwise.

"Y-yeah…” Alice redirected her answer to them. She gave a passing glance of uncertainty and suspicion to Alfonse, telling him enough that this discussion was far from over, but as hesitant and almost uncertain as her tone was, they took enough comfort that she so far appeared no worse for wear. To Alfonse's relief, Hrid, Chrom and Eir seemed fine likewise.

"Thank goodness Alfonse found you. What a relief the both of you are safe as well." As much as Hrid eased, he had similar ideas running through his head that they probably should retreat anyways, be it for rest or to form a thorough battle plan.

"Let's head back." With Alfonse's earlier push for the idea, Alice agreed with it enough to echo it, and nobody opposed the idea.
Only Alfonse thought to drag his heels just a little, and just long enough to wait for everyone to turn their backs on him just long enough for him to swipe the blade underfoot and hastily hide it in his convoy. With it hidden, he was hasty to stick by Alice's side and stubbornly remain such the entire trip back, too scared to drift even a little and lose sight of her again. Unfortunately, as safe as Alfonse kept her the entire trek home, it left Alice anxious and barely able to hide such when Alfonse's own anxiousness was rather poorly hidden.

Bruno urged his horse to continue on the trail with slower, cautious hoofsteps. Every so often he had to urge his horse to slow down whenever he got too anxious and clearly wanted to bolt as quickly as possible out of the forest. The path grew less clear and stable, and while his horse might have little problem to rush through the uneven ground and extended thickets, Bruno was less than confident he wouldn't slap himself a couple of dozen times through the thickets and low-hanging branches if he didn't proceed with enough caution.

As if to confirm his doubts, he cursed under his breath when a branch was low enough to snag a part of his cape, and then stubbornly held him in place even after a few good tugs.

Thrasisr watched cautiously. There he was. This world's version of her brother. She knew the rules. If Hel kept her word, all she had to do was use her tome to kill him, right then and there, and she'll have her own brother back.

He tugged stubbornly against his cape.

Yes… just one shot is all it'll take.

His horse huffed and dug the tip of his hoof against the dirt impatiently.

Oh, but she had to be painless. It was still her brother, after all.

"Come on… blasted thing…!" He was getting easily frustrated in his growing annoyance.

_Come on…! What are you waiting for?! Kill him!_
simply shredded the cape free. It looked awkward having a noticeable chunk gone, but at least he wouldn't have to be held hostage by a dead shrubbery of all things. With that, he continued on his way, if also feeling rather moody on the rest of his trip.

Thrasir's hand trembled. She had her hand extended and held up, clearly ready to throw a spell at him, but her tome was never active. She knew deep down, her heart wasn't really in it, so her tome didn't follow through.

In her frustration, her hand clenched into a fist, and she slammed it down as hard as she could against the trunk of the tree she hid beside, leaving a noticeable crack against its bark. She was vaguely aware of the sound of rustling, and given the distinct lack of life in this place, she knew exactly who to expect.

"Shut up."

"I hadn't said anything yet." Knowing Thrasir knew, Lif didn't even bother to hide himself as he reunited with her.

"Good. You're far from the one to give me lip of it, anyways." Why did she have to be so weak even then?!! She had a golden opportunity, and she let it slip through her fingers! But for as much as she came to respect Lif now, she didn't spare him of her old habits to snap at just whoever when frustrated. "I noticed you let your summoner slip out of your hands, too."

Lif said nothing. Not a peep or even a sigh. She expected to get under his skin a little, so when she couldn't, it annoyed her more.

"You took all that time to watch and wait for her to step away, and rather than kill her, you sent your more annoying self to come to her rescue. You know what's going to happen to her anyways, and you know what it'll take to bring your own summoner back, so why?!"

"For the same reason you couldn't bring yourself to kill your brother a moment ago."

She glared. To see Lif so calm and resigned, she wanted so much to slap that look off his face, with words or otherwise.

But deep down, she knew he had a valid point. That's what angered her about all this even more.

"...You will have to kill her eventually, you know that."

"But not like that."

"And if she lives long enough to screw with us?"

"I'll handle her." He still remained calm in countering her points. "You know our deal. I won't interfere with Zacharias, and you won't interfere with Alice. It is my risk, so leave those concerns
"Tch… Whatever…"

Without much of a leg to stand on, Thrasir left in a huff. As for Lif, he knew and saw enough of his
glimpse of the Order of Heroes returning to see Alfonse reached her after all.

He knew Thrasir was right. He knew she had to die eventually.

But… He at least wanted to kill her in a way that didn't make her suffer more than she had to. For
now, this wasn't the right time for her.

He made his own retreat soon after.

Thankfully, Alice proved she remained herself from the point they arrived back in their Askr, to
well after the point Hrid, Chrom and Eir parted ways with her and Alfonse. At first, Alice
continued to reassure everyone she was fine, saw the three off like always (even if Eir seemed to
linger just a little longer than usual), and in general, it was like what happened earlier never really
happened.

And then after everyone left, but before Alfonse could swoop in, Alice hastened her steps to go off
on her own again to wrangle her thoughts.

As if Alfonse could afford to be *that* optimistic…

Despite Alfonse's efforts, she remembered what she did, and she saw enough hints to draw a clear
picture of what more she could've done, had Alfonse never intervened. It may have taken a little
while, but the memories did return eventually in all its bitter glory.

She had much more clarity now of what happened. It was like someone whispered in her ear. She
was like a puppet moving on another's whim, of which she lost all control.

Or… well… no. She had to be honest. She had *some* control, deep down.
It would've been easy to blame what she did entirely on that voice, wouldn't it? That would make the guilt easier to sweep away and pay little mind of it, but... the truth was, that voice wasn't completely wrong. It was easier to be lulled by that voice's suggestions because, in part, Alice agreed with it. She felt it and resonated with it as her mind briefly took a dark turn at that very moment. The one who tried to control her capitalized on such a golden opportunity, but the sentiments of those thoughts were there from the start.

And even now, it was hard to brush away the guilt she was still left with. Was she right the first time? That she failed Alfonse at some point to turn him into Lif? Was she right the second time that she did something to secure that fate for him instead?

"Alice... um... may I have a word with you?"

She stiffened. She turned to Alfonse with a slight delay, and smiled to him in a much fainter way than usual when her mind was still split of what to feel anymore.

"Yes, Alfonse." No, not really. But would he listen and leave if she said what she really felt? From his worried look, she knew the alternative was a waste of breath, and she feared she would make him immediately hate her then and there.

She didn't really want to hear of it. She already did a fine job punishing herself as it is. She didn't really want to hear Alfonse bring it up further, be it to admonish her or in a tone of pity otherwise. But she knew exactly what to expect from Alfonse from his meek and softer tone, to the slower, hesitant steps he took to move closer to her. She feared any protest, however, would make him resent her and abandon her, even if she didn't know how much more she could bottle things up to discuss what happened.

But... Alfonse knew too what she expected. He saw the way she seemed to look down and find any excuse of something to focus on beside him. The way her shoulders slumped and how she looked more obvious than usual in her efforts to mask her real feelings were all signs told him just in time she didn't need to be reminded further of what happened.

"...We... hadn't spent much time alone together lately, have we?"

So it caught her off guard when he took a different approach to this. He felt a little more hopeful when Alice slowly looked up to him, allowing their eyes to meet. He smiled at her, but it was faint and timid as he tried to pick his words carefully, especially now that he got her attention.

"We were so focused on chasing down Lif and Thrasir, we barely spent much time to collect our thoughts, much less spent any time for leisure."
Alfonse? Talking about leisure? Alice rose an eyebrow. Was this really her Alfonse, or was it Loki taking pity on her for once?

"Doubt me all you like, I understand, but… Come with me, will you? Even just for a moment… please."

He held out his hand. The entire process he brought it out was slow and well-telegraphed as if he worried that act alone could scare her too. It didn't, of course, but even Alice held her hand out in such a slow manner with her doubts.

"But what of Lif and Thrasir? What of Hel?"

"I have it in good faith they're regrouping to lick their wounds, just as we are. We still have time to find them once we have a stronger plan of action." She had to give him credit that as much as this reeked of a general excuse, Alfonse tried his best to dress his excuse up to be fairly convincing and sound all the same. He urged his hand closer, if very slightly.

"So… what say you, Summoner?"

She huffed faintly before she could help himself. Initially, Alfonse deflated when she was quick to shake her head, but was left confused when she did so with a smile that slowly strengthened on her lips.

To his relief, she did take his hand to hers, and with his hands now bare, he took in the chill of her skin while she took the warmth of his.

"Alright…" Maybe it was a bit of a selfish excuse, but maybe that's exactly what they needed after all. It left Alfonse brightening just a little more in his smile as he held her hand tighter and helped her on her feet. He may have shifted how the two held hands, but in lacing his fingers with hers, he took full advantage of leading her onward.

Maybe much of what he thought was an excuse, but… A part of him did feel like Lif genuinely would've backed off. It didn't go over his head how Thrasir seemed to have less interest in hunting them down directly compared to Lif. He also had the realization dawn on him that if Lif hadn't ambushed and threatened him, he would've been too late to stop Alice from getting hurt.

Maybe… he wanted this. It was like his moment of solace, much like how he took the time to carry flowers to his Askr's remains for his Sharena and the people.
Alfonse wanted to help distract Alice's mind to more pleasant things anyways, but... maybe he could grant this much to Lif's wishes as well.

He led her to the gardens in the castle. More specifically, he led her to a grassy hill high enough to oversee a bed of flowers. The flowers weren't what he aimed to focus on, however, but rather, he took advantage of how it was still so early into the night.

Just in time for the stars to luminate at their brightest, and the vague shapes their positions 'drew' to be just a little clearer.

He settled a blanket out along the grass before Alice settled onto it. With little hesitation, he settled beside her midway of unfurling another, thicker blanket to wrap the two together with and ward off the chill of the air. (After all, he wanted to help ease her mind, not help make her sicker, faster.) Already, he was hopeful that his plan was working when her attention was drawn to just how bright and clear the view of the stars were compared to the skies of her home world.

It wasn't quite enough to distract her all on its own from her thoughts, but it was just enough of a first step to his plans to keep helping her. And besides... seeing the way she stared up to them, it made him realize how much he took such a sight for granted.

"I think I understand now why the Aether Raids were so popular in ancient times." He tried not to keep Alice alone with her thoughts too long. She glanced his way, but while she still looked up, she did clearly listen to him. "How many times did they look up and want to just reach out and touch the stars? Or at least dare to try…"

"You said they used the Aether Keeps to fight over the heavens, right?"

"Yes. It was why they were left in disarray before we found the ruins and built over them. But... I wonder how many of them started using them simply to bring themselves closer to the stars and heavens before it turned into a war to lay claim on them..."

She nodded slightly. How many indeed. At least now the skies weren't so chaotic, and it held enough peace to once again show itself in its full glory why it was worth fighting for in the first place, but it was bittersweet how it came to such an end.

"...Do you have constellations in Askr?"

"Ah, yes. Do you?"

"Mnhmm... We dedicated so much research to them in our past as well. Everything from the dates we calculated, to the art we drew depicting what we saw... It's a bit sad that by my time, the skies weren't nearly as clear like here to always see them, let alone the shapes they could draw."

"Really..." Alfonse's tone dipped a little and weakened. The feeling was stronger in regards to how
he took the stars of his world for granted when Alice's world almost lost sight of them, from how she worded it. "So what constellations did your world have?"

"Well…" She tried to focus on the stars just a little closer, fully taking in their positions this time than a simple glance from afar would've noticed. With the abundance of stars, she did find it easy to pinpoint all manner of familiar shapes, but it was just a matter of picking which one to point out first.

Settling with one arrangement that stuck out most at the moment, one of her hands slipped out from under the warm cover of the blanket the two huddled in.

“Like that one, for example. You could almost see a spoon or a pot there. We called that Ursa Major, the Great Bear, but because of its shape, we also called it the Big Dipper. Our Ursa Major would point the way to the North Star, Polaris…Although… yours has a star a bit like Polaris as well.” Almost. It was smaller and just off to the side, but the coincidence was near-striking. “There is a similar constellation we call Ursa Minor, the Little Bear, but… the story behind the Great Bear was there was a god who would lust after a beautiful nymph, who made his wife jealous. The nymph had a son the wife believed was the god’s, and so in a fit of jealousy, she transformed the nymph into a bear, as to no longer attract the god. Just before her own son would’ve shot and killed her in a hunt, that god took the two into the skies, where they became Ursa Major and Ursa Minor.”

“Ah… That’s so… I see…” Would it count as bittersweet? He wasn’t quite sure. But his interests perked nonetheless. “I do see what you mean of its shape. Our constellations can vary like that, too. They do it a lot between worlds, in fact. I heard in other worlds, they consider that the mark of Armads, for its axe-like shape, but for us, we called it Glitnir, after the legendary axe used by two rivalling gods who were brothers. Supposedly, the other god had once carried the legendary weapon, Forseti, and upon his defeat, he retreated to one of the nine realms, taking Forseti with him. But nobody knew what became of him, and some questioned if it had any relation to the ancient dragon of the same name. My father’s own axe was named after Glitnir likewise, who he took up upon ascending the throne.”

“So your constellations are rooted more to the legendary weapons of the worlds, I take it?”

“Yes. Quite heavily. Like that one. You see the sword-like shape? Most considered it the Fang of Naga, to represent the many incarnations of Falchion.”

“But in Askr, it has another meaning, I’m guessing?”

“Two of them. There are two constellations reminiscent of the heavenly sword in the sky, one we call Fólkvangr, and the other, Sökkvabekkr.”

“Yours and Lif’s swords…?”

“Aha… y-yes… Perhaps he named his own sword for a similar reason of how I named my current one. I can certainly see the reason for the change, given its context… Fólkvangr and Sökkvabekkr were considered the swords of the divine lands and seas, respectively. The former was said to carve out lands that later turned into many of the kingdoms of Zenith. It was a sword of light that became a beacon to lead lost souls fallen from the wars the whole of Zenith survived.”

In hindsight, Alice could see now why Alfonse previously held his sword to such high regard for the way the stone in its hilt glowed with a white flame.
“The latter was like its shadow. It was its opposite as an incorporeal sword kept in the lands of the dead. It was said to have created the sea of souls, and with its own light, was like a lantern to guide the souls of the departed to the thereafter. A-at least, it was how we came to know of it before we encountered Hel and her realm directly, and… you know…”

Understandably, the subject was still a tense one in light of recent happenings, but it was easy to see why the Alfonse of the fallen Askr thought to take up a sword with such a name as he became Lif. Still, the point to this outing was to distract from such an unpleasant thought, and while Alfonse was too caught up as to let his judgement lapse to brush against such a dark subject, he hastily cleared his throat to try to salvage the moment.

“Oh! But did your world have a constellation like it?”

“It does look a bit like Cygnus. Rather than a sword, we thought of it as a swan, or what we also called the Northern Cross. The brightest star of it is Deneb, ‘the tail’, as the name meant. It’s what was located in… well… the tail of Cygnus.”

“It’s amazing how even when our worlds share the same constellations, we have vastly different meanings and symbolism we drew from it. Heh~ And it’s even luckier for me you know so much to share, too, Alice.”

“I could say the same for you, Alfonse.”

And indeed, there were even more constellations that transcended worlds, despite carrying vastly different stories of how they supposedly came to be. What Alice knew as a chariot was a divine shield to Alfonse. What one pointed out as the suit of a legendary hero who walked among gods and slain all manner of mythical creatures was a chalice whose contents, when drunk, could be either a blessing or a curse based on the weight of the drinker’s darkest deeds.

They were so caught up in sharing the tales of their respective homes, they didn’t even think twice about how one of their hands moved just above the other’s, or how one inched just a little closer to the other’s side within the blanket. They were so carried away, neither could even remember dozing off together as they had, until their disappearance was quickly noticed by Sharena and Anna when either of them failed to report that morning. Their panic spurned them to search the entire area inside and out, only to find the two had dozed off side by side in the fields, huddling together in the blanket and resting fairly peacefully.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!