Azure Moon: Cerulean Tears

by skywolf666

Summary

One had lost five years, and the other had spent them chasing, hunting, and wondering if this was the life they were destined to spend without their sibling. The day of the promise had finally come, and with it came the beginnings of the rebellion against the Empire and its allied forces. The Kingdom's prince was alive, but far from well. It would take all of them to bring Faerghus's future king back from the brink before they could even begin to fathom a world without war. (BL, AM, B!Sibling AU)
Genres/Rating: Friendship, Action/Adventure, History. (T)

Characters: Warin, Gilbert, Ashe, Petra.

Summary: They were tied together for two reasons, one to find his missing liege, and the other to fulfil a promise, five long years in the making. Though their motives differed, their paths lay side by side, and for the moment, that was enough of a reason for the trio to travel together. It would be a surprise, then, when they realized that they were not only hunting, but also were acting the role of prey for another that they had all believed was long gone from their world.
The Hunt

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Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ethereal Moon

Garreg Mach Territory Outskirts

Dusk

"So, he truly is circling back for the monastery after all... It seems that you were correct with your assumptions, young Ashe. I must congratulate you." Gilbert sighed tiredly as he leaned on his lance and took pause for a moment to catch his breath, glancing forward at the ruins of the monastery that were only now peeking out above the forest that he and the other two former students with him had been travelling through on foot for the past several days. Their movements had been heavily restricted due to the fear of being spotted by the Imperial troops that were still watching over the monastery, but their intelligence, however sparse, had already told them that the troops were a mere token force. The Emperor had more important things for her men to be focussing on rather than the wreckage of the abandoned monastery, but both he and Ashe had wondered if this would change considering the upcoming date, and all that it entailed. It wasn't as if the promise had been a secret, there had been no need for such things then, but did it matter to her, or would her mind be preoccupied with the war? It was gamble they all were taking, but one that had been agreed upon almost unanimously when the old knight had stumbled upon the two Blue Lions only a moon earlier in their travels during his search.

"I don't deserve any praise, Sir Gilbert. When I considered the date, it all made sense." Ashe refused the praise with a shake of his head, and though he stopped as Gilbert had, his bright, green eyes continued to scan his surroundings unceasingly. It had been long years since he had stepped foot in the forest surrounding the monastery, and while it didn't seem to have changed much since his days as a student... He still found himself on edge despite being in such familiar territory. How many times had he and his former comrades ran training drills in this very forest until their arms and legs ached with exhaustion and exertion? So many. It made his chest ache and his hand tighten on the handle of his bow without thinking as he mumbled to himself, "He may not realize it, but... Perhaps he is also remembering the promise, and that's why he's being drawn here."
A gentle hand placed itself on his shoulder and squeezed, and Ashe fought a smile at the comforting touch as he glanced over to see Petra watching him with concern painted clearly across her face. Her reddish brown eyes were watching his face worriedly, and he had to admit he was more grateful than ever that she had been the first old teammate he had run into when he had abandoned Kingdom territory in order to return to Garreg Mach. He had found her just as he had been, travelling alone and trekking across the wild for the monastery, and while their reunion had been short, he had to admit he couldn't have been happier to see her, even if he had been momentarily caught off guard by how much five years had changed her.

But couldn't the same be said for him? The five years of endless war had to have changed all of them. He was sure of it. He had grown taller and stronger, his hand steadier with a bow and a lance, and even his riding skills had improved vastly since his days as a student. He was well on his way to knighthood, even if the Kingdom was in no state for such things, and it made him both proud and profoundly sad. All of the teaching he had received, all of the training and the encouragement and the kindness had not been wasted, and though their professor was gone, he had still taken everything she had given to him to heart. It was why he had chosen to return, leaving his post in the north when that day had started to come too close to ignore any longer, and he knew Petra was not the only one who would be following in his footsteps.

Finding Petra had reassured him of that. When she had been questioned on why she was so far from Brigid, why she was alone in enemy territory, her answer had been refreshingly simple. She had made a promise, just as he had, and she was following her duty by returning, just as he was, to where it had all really begun for them. They did not know, nor did they really care, if they would be the only ones to return... but the sight of one another had lifted their spirits. Perhaps they all would come, their former classmates and friends, but what would happen afterwards was still a mystery. It was not as if they were not already fighting. They all had been, ever since the war had begun and Garreg Mach had fallen to the Empire. The Kingdom was broken, crippled by the coup, but it was not yet defeated. Not yet.

The smile came easily enough as he took Petra's hand in his own and squeezed, and her skin felt warm underneath his callused fingers as she offered a smaller, much more gentler smile at his contact. It made his face redden, reminding him that for the past moon she had been his constant, and only, companion in their travels, and he was quick to remember himself before he was scolded for touching the future queen of Brigid so casually. It was not good for a future knight to forget his place no matter how close they were, and worse, he could feel Gilbert watching them rather searchingly as he scrambled to maintain his composure as he reassured his friend, "It's okay, Petra. I think we'll be fine. And I think we'll find him, and the others, too."

"I am having the same belief. I just do not want you to be worrying, Ashe. We have come far together already. There is only of little more to go." Petra's reply was easy, and as gentle as her smile as he dropped his hand and turned away from her with his ears burning through his silver-grey hair. It amused her, how easily embarrassed he seemed to be over the smallest things, but she knew now was not the time to be teasing him. In any other circumstances she may have, but Gilbert's appearance into their lives had changed their light-hearted routine vastly. He was on the hunt, unlike their promise, and the news he had brought had shaken the two soldiers to their core. He still did not quite believe his own words, which only left Petra and Ashe wondering, but if he had come so far alone... There had to be some truth to what he had seen, and what he believed.

"I think it is time we continue. We can travel faster underneath the darkness... and it is still two more days before the date of the Millennium Festival." Gilbert spoke up as he watched the two friends interacting with a hint of a smile playing across his creased face. It was pleasant to see, even in the stress of wartime, how the youth managed to shoulder both the burden of being a soldier while still embracing their love for life. He had grown far too old for such things, but he
could admit freely that he was glad they were not falling into a veteran's old ways, even if they were battle-hardened themselves already. Perhaps it was their age, or their hope that made them that way, but he knew better than to wish it gone. It had carried them this far over the past five years, and he hoped it would carry them all the farther as he mused, "Should we continue at our current pace, we shall arrive there by nightfall of tomorrow... With time to spare for your friends to arrive with you, should they also be coming."

"They will be, Gilbert. I don't doubt it. All of them will come." Ashe reassured the much older knight, and he felt nothing but optimism and certainty at the thought of all of his friends. They would be there at the promised time, on the promised day. He knew they would be, even if it meant abandoning their posts that they currently were holding during the fighting with the Imperial forces up north. They all had their duties, their lives, but they had also been tied tightly together by what had happened to them five years ago. If he had come this far... If Petra had come this far... He did not doubt the others would likewise be following closely behind. They were Blue Lions no longer, not with the monastery gone... but they still all remained their professor's students. It bound them more tightly together than anything else could have, and his expression was serious and grave as he met Gilbert's stare and told him firmly, "We made a promise. Everyone will be there."

"It's good to see your optimism, lad. Then we shall-"

In a whirlwind, everything changed as Gilbert spoke, and it happened almost too fast for the eye to see. Out of the foliage came a sharpened gauntlet, and the nicked, but still keenly hewn blade slid almost effortlessly underneath Gilbert's armour to press against his throat. As Ashe's bow raised at the sight of the threat, a lance came flying from the same place as the gauntlet, knocking it uselessly aside and leaving him scrambling before he realized that their older comrade was being held at the point of blade and could not move to defend himself, or either of them. Only Petra remained with a weapon in hand, and she growled a curse under her breath as she changed stance almost instantly to face this unknown threat. But Gilbert's situation held her still just as it did Ashe, making her eyes flare with both anger and frustration, and she snarled into the woods at their unseen enemy, "Coward! Show yourself rather than hide like a snake and fight as a man!"

The challenge went unmet for a moment, and then their foe stepped out of the trees, his gauntlet still raised level with Gilbert's throat as he forced the knight to move backwards against the threat of having his throat sliced open by his bladed weapon. Cool, calm navy eyes held Gilbert's surprised stare as the gauntlet finally lowered, and the two former students looked to one another uncertainly as they were entirely ignored as the man responsible knelt down for his lance and picked it up in one smooth movement. He spoke idly, almost conversationally, as he rolled his head from side to side and retracted the blades on his gauntlets with a press of a button, "You're getting slower, Gilbert. If the kids hadn't been here, your head would have been on the ground already. Not a good look for a former Knight of Seiros."

"Warin... You're alive?" Gilbert wasn't quite sure what else to say as he took in the young man who had went missing shortly after his little sister had disappeared, but his eyes were not failing him, and he was sure Jeralt's eldest son was indeed the one standing in front of him now. He looked worn, ragged, but there was little doubt it was him. His clothes were dirty and his armour was dented and nicked in several places, and there were dark stains on his leather cloak that the experienced knight of the Kingdom knew for a fact were blood rather than evidence of travel. He had acquired a colder, harder edge to his face, as well as a prominent scar slicing down the side of his throat and disappearing underneath his collar, but it was him all the same. Those gauntlets were one-of-a-kind, specially forged by and for the man in front of him, and Gilbert had fought beside him long enough to know that nothing but death would have separated the former mercenary from his beloved weapons. "Where have you been? The Knights searched for you, after the fall of Garreg Mach... but they could not find you. We assumed you were dead."
"They weren't the only ones looking for me. I was running. Have been for the past five years." Warin's answer came curtly as he checked his gauntlets to ensure every blade had retracted properly before he hooked his lance back over his shoulder and into his belt so it would not be of bother to him. His weapons hadn't seen proper care for ages, and he was due to have them looked over or completely scrapped, but it was of little mind to him as glanced from Gilbert astonished glance and to the eyes of his sister's former students. Ashe was looking at him as if he had seen a ghost, but Petra had yet to drop her axe and was looking him over with suspicion and anger painted across her face. It almost made him smile. It made sense she would be more vigilant than the other two, considering he had just proved that he could have had all three of them dead and in the ground with complete ease, but he ignored her as he looked back to Gilbert and continued idly, "Little Miss Empress apparently considered me such a threat to her goals that I've been named one of the few men to be killed on sight by any and all of the Imperial Army should I be found. I've seen the orders on the strike teams I've slaughtered. She offered quite a bounty. I suppose I should be honoured."

Ashe looked from Gilbert and back to Warin in astonishment, but he knew almost immediately that there was no lie on the older man's face. He looked like a hunted animal, even if his eyes were as hard as stone, and his expression colder than the ice of the north. He looked as if he had been fighting for five whole years without a moment of peace, and from the state of his armour and his weaponry, Ashe wondered if he had truly been alone, alone and fighting, for all of that time. His professor's brother had always been a cold and distant man, but now there was an edge to him, a sharpness that could only come with harsh, unending trials, and Ashe had seen that look many times in his youth as a thief. This was a man who had been fighting for his life for far too long, and knew no other way of how to do so but through violence. It made him sad, both for him and for his sister, and his voice was quiet, muted with sympathy as he asked weakly, "You've truly... been on the run for five years? Fighting, for five whole years? All by yourself, Sir Warin?"

"Give or take a few moons. The Empress apparently doesn't take criticism very well. I think I made her and her little mage friend angry when last we spoke in Garreg Mach." Warin answered with a careless shrug, but the fire in eyes proved that even if he was speaking casually of what had happened to him since he had last been seen by any of them that it had not been an easy venture for him to have gone through. He was world-weary, moreso than he had been when he had arrived in the monastery, and the past five years had not been easy to him. He had had no allies, and had only known the hunt. Being chased down no matter where he went, endangering anyone and everyone he saw should he dare to take a step into a village that had even one Imperial soldier there to see him, and being forced to kill every squadron of soldiers who had been unlucky enough to find him and challenge him, even after numerous attempts to let them go to spare their families the pain of the coming slaughter. But it was much easier to shrug it away, to speak idly and lightly, than it was to ruminate too deeply on it... He had earned it, after all. He was well aware that he had.

"Ah, I see... So, you've come straight to me, then. That spares me time." Hubert's eyes were alight with bloodlust, and dark flames crackled in his right hand as he stood fearlessly at the foot of the staircase to block Warin's path forward. His expression was a sadistic and cruel smile, clearly pleased with the way the battle had been going, especially if one of his main targets had come right to him and vastly expedited the process of destroying him. He had his orders, and was perfectly happy, glad, almost, to be able to carry them out. And it showed as his fingers crackled with the magical sparks that danced about his skin as he mused, "I would almost call it a gift; you seeking me out like this."

Warin didn't bother him with a reply right away, and instead merely clenched and unclenched his hands as he looked over his surroundings. He had the height advantage, but Hubert was flanked by two other mages in Imperial armour, and farther behind were more soldiers that he would need to tear his way through once he was finished with him. It didn't concern him however, especially as
he shrugged his shoulders back and errantly wiped away a streak of blood that his last enemy foolish enough to block his path had left him as a parting gift. He was not at all surprised by Hubert's announcement, nor the near happiness he was showing at their coming clash, but he couldn't quite help himself as he questioned lazily, "Let me guess... Your master wants me dead?"

"Indeed she does. You are a threat to her goals... And therefore must be eliminated." Hubert found no reason to not entertain his prey, at least for the moment. He was a strong soldier, and would have been the perfect ally, but Edelgard had already come to the conclusion that he was a lost cause, and worse, a very real threat to her dream. It was only natural that she would wish him removed, and Hubert's only regret was that he had not acted first to remove him from the equation far before this stage of their plan had been enacted. Still, he couldn't say that meeting him in open combat would be terrible, as it was at least a chance to rectify his mistake as he told him flatly, "I will kill you myself for her, as I should have done before."

Warin's lips twitched into a smile as he watched the mages behind Hubert readying themselves at their master's orders... Of course Hubert would not come at him in a one-on-one battle. He was too clever for that, and too wary. Warin however did not mind. He had faced worse disadvantages before, and he was quite used to fighting magic-blessed opponents. It had almost become a talent of his, fighting against larger numbers, and against the magically inclined who suffered greatly in hand-to-hand combat. They needed distance and room, and he was currently in the exact position a mage could take great advantage of by being boxed into the stairwell. Still, he felt no concern. They didn't know him half as well as they thought if they believed he was already beaten, and he told them so with a cold little chuckle, "It won't be that easy."

"Now!"

Warin leapt the moment Hubert gave the order, and the blades on his gauntlets sprang free as he went flying over the mages' heads to have their back as the spot where he had been standing moments before was lit up in flames. The blades whistled as he swung his arms, and in an instant he had two mages on the ground, bleeding profusely as their backs split open underneath his sudden assault. Hubert was faster, turning and leaping away from him, but Warin had already anticipated that he would not fall nearly as easily as his own lackeys. He was stronger and smarter, but he was also proud... and Warin used that to his advantage as he shook the blood from his gauntlets and stepped forward, forcing Hubert to back up into the stairwell, "You know what will be easy, though? Putting a lance through your skull. Yours, and your mistress's. I don't fear you. You, or any of the people you're scraping before for power. But I will kill you. The lot of you. And I'll enjoy every minute of it."

"Impertinent...!" Hubert's teeth ground together as he sent out a fireball, only to watch as Warin took it head-on, crossing his gauntlets in front of his face to take the blow and guard himself from the majority of the blast. It barely made him flinch, and Hubert felt an icy chill go down as his spine as he wondered just how deeply he, too, had misjudged the elder child of the Blade Breaker. He had known him to be arrogant but powerful, but this was something beyond that. No, as Warin dropped his gauntlets, watching him with coldly amused eyes... Hubert knew better. Arrogance came from ignorance. This was not arrogance. It was confidence. He was the better fighter... and he knew it.

Still. The insult could not go unmet. Hubert would not permit it. Confident or not, better fighter or not, he was still completely ignorant to the truth of the world. His lady had told him as such. He knew nothing, and was not inspired to learn more, or willing to change it. He was a coward and a nihilist. An insult to all that his lady stood for. He needed to die. Hubert could not allow for his existence. His majesty's orders were absolute. He raised his hand again, eyes narrowing as again those dark flames began to wreath his wrist and fingers. He was not like the soldiers he had
brought with him. He was stronger, faster... He would not go down so easily now that he was aware of the extent of the threat Warin truly was.

"Too slow."

Hubert fell back with a snarl of pain, his cheek laid open almost to the bone from Warin's bladed gauntlets before he could even blink to realize the older man had covered the distance between them in a single bound before slicing down. It was a superficial wound despite the pain, Hubert had taken too many blows to overestimate his own injuries, but he still cursed quietly as the blood flowed freely down his face to stain his collar as proof of his misstep. He pressed against the wound with his free hand, eyes flashing with anger even as he understood with a painful clench to his gut that he was not going to be able to win.

Warin's eyes were alight with that cold, cruel mirth that made Hubert's spine stiffen and his skin crawl as he watched the dawning comprehension in his enemy's eyes. It was what he had been looking for. For that composed and arrogant facade to come crumbling down as he realized how useless he truly was against an actual soldier. He stepped forward as Hubert backed away from him, still hissing with pain and defiance that the older man ignored entirely as he took his turn to muse, "You're not used to fighting in true combat, are you? No, your methods are underhanded and shadowed, like some sort of stage-hand assassin. You don't know what it is to fight in real combat. To have your life constantly on the line, and one wrong move is all it takes to cost you everything. No, you're too used to slinking about in the shadows and taking your opponents in the dark, before they can fight back and beat you down. You're pathetic. You learned nothing here. You'll never beat me."

"Even if you should win here...! It matters not! I will chase you to the ends of the world until you are cold and buried! You will never know a moment's peace! I will never stop hunting you! You... You and all those like you... shall not be permitted to live in our new world."

"Why are you coming out of hiding now, then?" Gilbert's voice brought him back to the present, away from that moment he knew his fate had been sealed for catching the mage's ire so personally, and Warin looked back up at him with a carefully calculated stare. Of course the veteran knight would question his motives, especially after he had all but turned himself into a ghost for the past five years. His sudden reappearance was fair to question, even though Warin was aware the answer had to be obvious to others, even if it wasn't to his former fellow knight. But, he supposed, that wasn't really Gilbert's fault. It wasn't as if he had tried to ingratiate himself with the man when he had joined the Knights. He hadn't tried to be friendly with anyone. They only knew one another as soldiers, and barely as men.

Warin nodded towards the two young soldiers behind him who had now completely relaxed, even if Brigid's princess was still looking over him with sharp suspicion bright in her eyes. She didn't like the fact that she had been caught off guard so easily, especially with Ashe in tow, but he didn't mind her ire. It was only further proof of the fact that she was putting Ashe's safety above her own, just as she had been taught to do by his sister. Though he had seen her kinder glances from afar when he had been watching the trio earlier, and he was well aware it was nowhere near as innocent as friendship. It never was, even if Ashe was not yet ready to know or even think of such a thing yet. He answered the question with an idle shrug as he leaned back comfortably on the nearest tree, secure in the knowledge that the area was empty, and his sister's former students could handle anything if they chose to fight with him, "I'm here for the same reason as the kids are. I'm here to see how many of her students hold to it. Two is better than none, though I am hoping for more numbers."

"More numbers... What are you planning, Warin?" Gilbert was unsure of what to think of the
younger man's words, and it caught him quite off guard to hear him speaking of arriving students as if they would of use to him in some way. Despite how gently he spoke his sister's name, there was still a cold hardness in his eyes, like he was constantly calculating and processing information, changing a plan that he was carrying in his head as new factors continued to pop up. It was a look he had seen on seasoned tacticians many a time, but Warin was not a tactician. He was lieutenant and a mercenary, a fighter, and the words of "numbers" concerned him deeply as he wondered what plan the assumed-to-be-dead man in front of him had been conjuring up during the last five years.

"I could ask you the same thing, Gilbert. How do you think I found you so easily? It wasn't you I was tracking back to the monastery." Warin's answer came brusquely, and his eyes took on a colder edge as he looked Gilbert over speculatively. He was not naive. He hadn't found Gilbert and his sister's students by chance. They weren't the object of his search, though it was good fortune he had found them all the same... He knew who and what Gilbert's loyalty truly was to, and it was not the two young soldiers who had chosen to follow him thus far to the monastery. He had been watching over that subject himself for the past moon, close enough to watch, but far enough to avoid detection... He had no desire whatsoever to actually interact with the man in question. It would end poorly, for the both of them, if he had to.

"Then, you've seen His Highness?"

"His Highness...? Is that what you're going to call him?" Warin had to scoff despite himself, and he felt his disgust making itself known on his face without his consent. Calling that beast "high highness" seemed to be the height of hypocrisy. That wasn't a noble man. It wasn't even human. Not after what Warin had seen him do. It hadn't been hard to track him, he had done the same to rabid wolves and bears during his time as a mercenary, and this was no different. Perhaps that was what made it easier for him to pull away from the horror, to think so calmly about it, but he wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not as he spoke pointedly to the tangerine-haired man before him, "He's not a man anymore, Gilbert. He's an animal. I've seen the same things you have. I've even watched him do it. He might be alive, but any hopes you're having of bringing him home to Faerghus, you may as well drop right now. He isn't interested in becoming the focal point of uniting the Kingdom. All he wants is the Emperor's head on the end of his lance."

Gilbert hesitated for a reply as he saw the truth in Warin's eyes, but he knew there really was no choice in the matter for him. Hadn't he made the decision long ago, when he had first begun to suspect the truth behind Cornelia's lies? Even when he had come upon the horror himself... It was beyond him as a single man. It was for the good of the Kingdom entire, now, and it fell to him to find the truth, even if it was not one he wished to meet head-on. It did not matter if Warin was right. All that mattered was finding the rallying cry that the Kingdom needed to soldier onwards with, and he remarked quietly with a shake of his head, "It is fortunate then, that those two things will coincide..."

"You're a selfish arse, as well as a blind one. It's good to know that things don't change. Allow me to make things very clear to you, Gilbert... I couldn't care less about the Kingdom, or its delusional prince. I'm not here for either of those things. I've come to see who will stand against the Empire." Warin's voice dripped venom, and he shook his head as he mused that it really did not matter where the nobility came from. Their thoughts were all the same, and it was growing both tiresome, and extremely irritating to be exposed to it again and again in such times. It didn't matter... but he had long decided it was not his battle to fight any longer. He'd done enough. He could do no more. Not for them. "True, perhaps those things do coincide with one another, but it's best you remember where my priorities lie. If Fódlan's burning is unstoppable, I don't intend to risk my neck to try and smother the flames. It can burn to ashes, and the Emperor can rule for as long as she likes. She'll get a dagger in the back one way or another, in the end. It isn't my duty to save the world. I'm just a
Gilbert's eyes narrowed, and he was reminded of exactly why the Knights of Seiros had taken so coldly to the man in front of him at the end of the all the fighting. He had no loyalty to king or country, nor to Lady Rhea, and he had not been afraid to make that clear. When his father had died, he had lost his leash, and it have made every knight wary of him and his motives for remaining behind. Even if it was for his sister's protection, that did not endear him to his fellows. He was dangerous, to his enemies and to them, and no one trusted him and for good reason. Gilbert felt that same mistrust, especially now that Warin was voicing his thoughts so openly, so cruelly, yet his words were at odds with his actions, and he pointed that out with a cold glance of his own, "Yet you're hoping to find those willing to rebel?"

Warin turned away from him, as if he had had enough of chatting with the older knight who was clearly stuck in his ways. His eyes fell on Ashe, and the younger man snapped to attention despite having not yet been called upon. He couldn't quite help it, Warin's dark, navy eyes were commanding, and worse, they reminded him far too much of his professor. It felt instinctual to straighten his spine and stand at attention, waiting for orders even though he had no reason to believe they'd come or that he'd have to follow them. And Warin did not give him any, but instead merely gave him a question, though the weight behind his words were enough of a blow all the same when it came, "Let me ask you something, kid. Are you here for your king, or are you here for yourself?"

Ashe bit his tongue before he could answer, and he felt himself tear in two as he struggled to find the truth of what he wanted to say under that familiar, painful gaze of his professor's elder brother. He owed him the truth, though he admitted he wasn't entirely sure what the truth was. He had abandoned the Kingdom and its war to come to the monastery... That alone had to be answer enough. Yet it felt more complicated than that, and he winced as he thought of his friend, who he had mourned when he had heard he was dead, even when the circumstances were incredibly suspect. His words came slowly, hesitantly as he shook his head and stared at his boots, "I... I'm here... because I made a promise. A promise to someone very dear to me. Professor... She saved my life. More times than I can count. When I lost everything, and could have very well lost myself, as well... She was there to help me. I... I am not here for the Kingdom. I am here for her. For her and my friends."

Warin nodded, both pleased and grateful for the answer despite the way Ashe's shoulders slumped when he finished speaking. It was clear he was still torn, he wished to be a knight above everything and anything else, but his personal loyalties had come before his knightly duties, and knowing that was indeed a burden he had to carry. Warin however did not have time for his concerns, as his own were far more pressing, and he turned to Petra, who was still regarding him with a fair measure of suspicion and dislike in her adust eyes when his gaze fell on her. She, too, stiffened, and her hand tightened on her axe, but he ignored both as he questioned her simply, "And you, princess?"

"Brigid wishes to stand alone, and with pride... It cannot be doing so in the shadow of the Empire. And it cannot endure forever." Petra's reply came slower, and the weight of her duties to her country lay heavily on her shoulders. It hadn't just been loyalty that had kept her firmly rooted beside her professor when the Imperial Army had invaded Garreg Mach, there had been a fair amount of pragmatism at play, too, but that had been five years ago. Brigid still remained in a precarious position, just as her professor had predicted it would, but she did not regret her choice. It was a step on the path to being equals, to no longer being under the yoke of the Empire, and that was far more important than anything else. Yet... Ashe's words brought a small, painful smile to her face, and she shook her head, too, as she admitted wistfully, "But more than that... I am of like Ashe. Professor was kind, and strong... I wish to be like her. To follow of her footsteps. To fight... for what I wish to be fighting for. Without having regrets."
"If the rest of your class proves to be of the same mind, then perhaps we can get somewhere. If not... I'll take what I can get. Alone, I can't do very much other than perhaps a suicide attempt at making for an assassination. With real numbers, a true, concentrated rebellion isn't impossible."

Warin remarked with a roll of his shoulders, but he was pleased nonetheless by the answers he had gotten. Even five years later his sister's grasp on her students remained strong, and he was proud of her, and of the young man and woman in front of him who had admitted how deeply her influence had changed them. One year of teaching had been carved deep in their being... and he did not see that changing with the rest of the students she had taken under her wing. It was a good sign. A promising sign. And it gave him hope for the first time in five years since the hunt had begun, and he had found himself to be the prey for the first time in his life.

Gilbert however was unsure of what to think as he heard Petra and Ashe voice their true thoughts aloud for Warin to hear without very much hesitation or remorse. He had known why they were on their journeys, and why they had chosen to follow him as far as the monastery, but it still made him pause all the same. He had not known their professor long, though he did admit she was a rather singular creature, from the short time he had fought alongside her. She inspired hope and confidence, and was as stubborn as a mule, yet also as fearless as a lion. She made an impact on anyone she had met, and it was clear her brother was aware of that, and wished to take advantage, which made him wonder as he asked him openly so to hear the exact truth from his mouth, "You hope for a rebellion?"

"Don't you? Why else would you be tracking him, knowing what he's become and what he wants to do?" Warin's reply was biting, but it was also completely truthful and Gilbert could not deny it. He would not, as it would only make him a hypocrite, and Warin was more than aware of that as he explained with a bitter smirk and another scoff, "You want to use him as a figurehead, and if so, you're more than welcome to try. It won't be inspiring, and it'll likely scare off more men than you'll hope to have... but at least you have a legitimate claim to taking back the Kingdom, even if it's built on false hope. He won't rule. He can't rule. Trust me on that. Even if the whole of Faerghus was to rally behind him, he'd throw them mindlessly at the Empire until they all fell, and he along with them. If that's the man you're going to place your faith in... You're going to end up dead."

"Then who do we look to, if not the king?"

Warin shook his head, wondering what it would take to get through to the older man before him, and realizing that any attempt he made would never dent his will, or his feelings of loyalty. It almost disgusted him, how blind he was to everything but his liege, but there was little he could do about it. His own plans were far more important, but he couldn't leave Gilbert without an answer, even if it was so painfully obvious to him. He spoke sharply, no longer having the patience for his nonsense as he answered without preamble, "To yourselves. To your own will. You're a knight, not a slave. You don't need a king in order to hold yourselves together as one and come together for a greater purpose. You may need a leader for that, but anyone can become a leader if they're willing to take the burden. Find like-minded men. Arm yourselves. Steel your will. And march."

Ashe wondered at him as he listened intently to the exchange and heard the disgust dripping from Warin's voice, and a quick glance over at Petra proved that his words were ringing true with her as well. They were cold words, cruel words, but truthful all the same. He didn't need or want something to rally about when his goal was clear, and Ashe marvelled at his will. He hadn't thought beyond the day of the promise, but someone clearly had, and it gave him both hope and fear as he understood perhaps it was his way of stepping in for his sister. For doing what she would have done, had she been the one to survive and he had been the one to be lost. He had to ask though, had to hear the words, and his voice was quiet but earnest when he questioned, "Is that what you plan to do, Sir Warin? To find men like us... and fight?"
"It is. I haven't just been running around to avoid capture or battle for five years. I've searched for allies, too." Warin told him with a nod, and he reflected on all he had seen in his five years of travel and hunting, and what he now knew for certain. Claude had dismissed him outright when he had extended a hand, too busy with his plots and schemes and his own self-interest to listen, and so he had written off the Alliance leader without delay. But Claude was not the Alliance, and a cursory look about the fractured territory had told him all he had needed to know. The Empire was also in shambles, but Edelgard was hiding it much better under the threat of force, but there were dissidents, even if they were hiding so deep in the shadows that it seemed they were not there at all. The Kingdom had proven to be the most ferocious in their attempts to fight back the Empire's influence, and he had known without needing to search he would find allies there, if his sister's students had the mettle he believed they had.

Warin took a breath, cracking his knuckles as he glanced about at the three before him, and he was well aware his thoughts were far and away from the reality of where he stood. Still, they wanted to know what he was thinking, what he was planning, and he would not keep them in the dark. He spoke slowly but truthfully, bluntly but honestly as he explained, "If, and only if, we are able to rally a sizeable enough force to become a true threat... There are allies out there that we can pull into the fold against the Empire, and form a true rebellion that might even become enough to unseat the princess. The Alliance is fractured, and Claude is a coward who will wash his hands of this mess the first chance he has, but the soldiers there are formidable, and proud. He may run, but they won't. It's possible we may find aid from them, should we ask for it and provide in return. And there's unrest within the Empire, too. Not everyone is quite so happy to be underneath the princess' boot. The only problem is unification... and with everyone having spent the last five years fighting only for themselves and their homelands, it's no wonder the Empire has managed to spread its reach so far. It's about time to beat her back, if the will can be mustered to do so."

"You say you do not care of what becomes of Fódlan... But your actions do not have matching with your words." Petra spoke up for the first time since she had been addressed directly, and her eyes were shrewd and calculating as she looked Warin over sharply. She saw the dichotomy in his words and actions as easily as anyone else, but she was also unafraid of being the one to call him out directly on it. He was much like his sister, saying one thing and yet doing another, but at least her professor's words and actions had come from disbelief in herself, and not a general sense of apathy and distrust in humanity. She watched Warin closely, head tilting slightly to the side as she asked him pointedly, "You would find more friends, more people, to fight the Empire, even if you are not caring of the world about you? Why?"

"It's what my sister would have done, and what she would have wanted. I'm here to see that through, to the best of my ability. But, as I said... It's only if you play your part, as well." Warin answered honestly, and he had to bite the inside of his cheek to stop himself from smiling at Petra's bravery. Both Gilbert and Ashe continued to hesitate to confront him directly, too intimidated by his nature and his words to speak to him as an equal, but Petra did not have such issues. He wasn't sure if it was her personality or her upbringing, but at least her professor's words and actions had come from disbelief in herself, and not a general sense of apathy and distrust in humanity. She watched Warin closely, head tilting slightly to the side as she asked him pointedly, "You would find more friends, more people, to fight the Empire, even if you are not caring of the world about you? Why?"

"Yes. I accept it. For the professor." Petra replied after a moment to digest his words, and she nodded in acceptance before looking over to Ashe to gauge his reaction. His eyes were brilliant and harsh, full of that same fighting-spirit she had so admired since they were students, and she was proud to see that Warin's words had stirred him enough to throw himself fully behind him. For their professor, they would do anything, and it was clear that her elder brother meant every word he had said. They did not need more to rally their spirits, or to throw their loyalty behind. Warin knew it as well as they did. He had counted on it. And it made her smile grimly as she answered again, now
knowing that Ashe was fully behind her, "We both accept."

"Warin... I must ask you something. For five years you've fought alone... Why?" Gilbert spoke up again, pulling everyone's attention back to him as he looked Warin up and down and took him in. He was scarred, inside and out, from his five years on the run... but Gilbert did not understand why he had took on such a monumental task on his own. It was true that teamwork did not come naturally to him, he was much more efficient as a solo soldier, but still, his actions defied logic. He had been alone for five entire years, allowing former comrades and people who could have helped him to believe him dead rather than risk reaching out to them, and had instead turned to strangers. It made little sense to the veteran knight, and he made it clear as he continued, "Not once did you contact the Knights of Seiros, or even your sister's students in Faerghus. What made you choose to shun the help you could have received had you reached out to us? Why did you choose to go it alone for all of this time?"

"Difference of priorities. The Knights are searching for Rhea... and I'm not interested in getting in their way, or being conscripted into the hunt. And as for my sister's students... They had their territories and families to look after. I knew about the promise. I could bide my time to see if it would hold out." Warin replied curtly, and his eyes had taken on a hard shine as he spoke of the activity the Knights had been up to in the last five years. He understood why they would be searching for the archbishop underneath Seteth's leadership, but he had no interest in joining their forays. He didn't care what happened to Rhea. She had been missing for as long as he had, and he had removed her from his chessboard long ago. She did not matter anymore to the picture he was now seeing, and hoping to combat. If she was dead, it would be a blow to the church, but not so much to his own goals. And should she live... Perhaps he could finally wrangle answers from her if he would be lucky enough to find her once the Empire came crashing down. "Clearly, my patience paid off. Five years is a trifle. I want to know what happens next, don't you?"

"Indeed..." Gilbert could agree to that much, though he admitted he still had many reservations about allying with the man before him despite knowing their goals were truly well aligned. He saw the truth in Warin's eyes, that he had seen the prince himself and knew exactly what he had become with his own eyes, but it did not change the older man's resolve. The Kingdom was in dire need... They had no one else to turn to with the Empire slowly but surely clawing their way deeper and deeper in. He turned his head towards the remains of Garreg Mach, wondering if they would find what they sought there, and he questioned as he straightened his clothes and armour, readying himself once more for the long march ahead, "Then, you will join us in returning to the monastery?"

"That is my intention. From there... We'll see." Warin replied, and he adjusted his worn gauntlets before likewise following Gilbert's gaze south. That huge, sprawling building in the distance called to him, called in a way he had not felt in almost five years, but he did not trust himself to believe in the pull that came from somewhere deep in his chest. It had been too long. He had been alone for too long. He let out a breath as he glanced to his unlikely friends of fortune, but it was better than anything else he had known for the past several years. He couldn't complain. He would not complain. There was only the way forward, and that small, faint flicker of hope that he had to cling to with both hands... He'd have gone mad without it, perhaps... and the thought steeled his spine and locked his jaw as he took a step forward once more, "Let's go... and lets see who'll be waiting there to meet us."

Chapter End Notes
And so begins Azure Moon! Of course, I had to start a tad earlier than canon since I wanted to reflect on what Warin and a few others had been up to, and also make clear how the world's changed not just him but everyone before diving on in with Raine. As with my previous collections, this will serve a lot more like a companion novella rather than a retelling of Azure Moon (barring a few incidents that are subject to change and revision), but I hope that I do it well enough to make it enjoyable to read!

As I've said before, I am super excited to get into the real meat of Three Houses, as well as the more mature aspects of the War Phase. There's a lot to cover and a lot to write for, but I'm eager for it. Now, mind, I do want to address that since the third wave of the DLC has dropped, and since this began before the DLC dropped, I'm not really going to include anything that's been added in it here. The same can probably be said for the fourth wave of DLC that comes out in April (depending on how long this goes on for) as that involves changing way too many things on the fly, but we'll see what happens if I end up finishing this early enough to adjust to it. Anna will just be a normal merchant, Jeritza isn't even available on this route anyway (I'm still salty about that, poor Mercedes deserves better), but things shall continue as if the DLC really didn't come out. Though, maybe I'll write some sauna and cat and dog shenanigans... That's harmless enough, ne?

I am taking into consideration what you guys want to see for this collection, so please drop me a review and tell me what parts in particular (or characters) you'd like to see mentioned, touched upon, or focussed on as Azure Moon starts to play out. If there are couples you'd like to see, moments you want mentioned, events changed, or anything of the sort, don't be afraid to let me know! Even throwing out guesses of where I intend to go or what I might be changing is welcome! I cannot promise to do all of it, as I do have a general sense of where this story shall be headed, but I do like to know what my readers like to see!

Thank you very much for reading this far, and I hope you'll stick with me as AM starts to kick off and go crazy. I've been really excited to get to the M-rated stuff (and I'll be leaping right into it, don't you worry), but I do apologize if that ends up not being your cup of tea. Each chapter really will be earning it's own individual rating despite the overall rating being "Mature", but if there will be graphic content of either a violent or sexual nature, I will be sure to note it in the beginning with a warning, so nobody will be caught off guard. I'll likely be tweaking the little introductory notes with little summaries of what to expect for the coming chapters, and I'd like feedback on how that looks, or if it works in the future, too!

I'll see you guys all soon, and I hope you have a good one!

Mood: Sore.

Listening To: "Skyfall" - Adele

~ Sky
Lost Time

Chapter Summary

Genres/Rating: Family, Hurt/Comfort, Angst. (T)

Characters: Raine, Warin.

Summary: She had lost five years entirely, and he had spent his on the run, suffering from violence, and regret and guilt... Much had changed since they had last seen one another, and much would continue to change from here on out. But one fact would always remain the same; they were family. And neither would ever turn their back on the other, now that they were together again.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Guardian Moon

Garreg Mach (Outer Halls)

Noontime

Five years.

The two words rang out constantly in her head as Raine forced herself to go through the motions of clearing out rubble, piling books and weapons into their appropriate places for transport later, and taking notes of damaged sections of the monastery that would need proper attention later by someone with the appropriate tools and skills. It felt good to put her body to use, but she was well aware that her spirit was not in it as she listlessly heard the words her students had all been saying repeating themselves over and over in her ears. Five whole years. She had simply been gone for five entire years. She didn't doubt it. Their growth, their changes, the monastery's state... Everything made sense when she took their words at face value, and yet... She didn't want to believe it was true.

What was she meant to do with such information? The world was falling down all about her ears, and what had she been doing the entire time while her students, her friends and family, had been suffering and fighting? Sleeping? It made her sick to her stomach to imagine. Her brother didn't look the same. He was rougher about the edges now, something she hadn't believed to even be possible, and the scars he was hiding under his cloak and gauntlets... He had seen more battle than he was admitting to. Far more... His eyes were cold and distant, like a predator in waiting, and his manner was clipped and efficient. It was if all warmth had been drained from him, and she ached with sympathy for what he had been through, and what he was not telling her in order to spare her from the details.

Then there was Dimitri. Her stomach twisted with such pain that she had to reach out for the nearest object, a broken chair, to steady herself. The man was practically unrecognizable. His hair long and unkempt, his armour dented and pierced, and that wild, brutal look in his one eye... It had made her blood run cold when he had spoke of hunting the thieves out of their den, comparing
them to rats crawling about the walls of Garreg Mach, and the glee he had shown in cutting them
down, one by one without an ounce of mercy... No, he was not at all the man she had once known,
and the guilt that tore at her innards was too much for her to stomach. If she had just been there... If
she hadn't been so foolish that day...

"So, you all agree that we must fight back. And you see how that woman... how the Empire cannot
be forgiven. That we must wipe them all out until not a single one of them remains..."

'No... I was too late, even before this mess...' Raine squeezed down on the chair, closing her eyes as
she fought a wave of nausea. Those words, those cruelly spoken words of setting flame to the
Empire and leaving none to survive in his wake of war... It had made her blood run cold with
dread. He had meant it. She knew he did, and that horrified her almost more than anything else.
Even before she had been lost in the fighting, she had held onto a sliver of hope that somehow,
some way, she could manage to help him from falling further into the cycle of revenge. That was
far beyond her now. Whatever he had suffered these past five years, living as the dead, fleeing
Imperial soldiers and staining his hands with blood each time he tried to survive... It had changed
him, and she was deathly afraid of who he had become, and how far out of her reach he now was.

If there was any solace to be had, she supposed it was the fact that not everyone had changed so
drastically, or so violently. Her students, for better or for worse, were all mostly the same. It was
true that war had hardened them, that they had grown into better soldiers in the past five years, but
almost all of them were as she remembered them being as students. That much had been proven by
how she had been greeted, when the fighting had died down, and they all had been given a moment
to catch their breath, and finally see one another without the fear of battle weighing them down.

Annette had nearly knocked her clean off her feet in her race to hug her, and only Mercedes'
laughing aid had kept her from going down into the muck with the tangerine-haired mage on top of
her. Then Mercedes had embraced her, too, her voice tight with tears as she expressed her relief and
gratitude to be seeing her again after so long. Even Petra and Ingrid, usually polite and somewhat
formal had given in to their baser desires once Mercedes and Annette had let her go, and Raine had
been forced to stand awkwardly yet happily in their arms, wondering at their growth, and moreso at
their obvious heartache for what they had seen as her loss.

Even Felix had looked at her warmly, or with what she knew to be his version of warmth, before he
had made a snide remark of her coming back only when she must have assumed it was convenient.
She had been greatly amused to see Mercedes pinch his arm reproachfully in response, and had
been forced to bite the inside of her cheek when it had worked in subduing the normally so fiery
swordman. He had shrugged his shoulders and averted his eyes, taking one large step to the right
and away from the blond healer before continuing on in a subdued voice that, regardless, he was
glad to see her again. It meant the tides were turning, if she was there amongst them, and he took
comfort in that much, at the very least.

Sylvain had followed the girls' example in sweeping her up in a hug, and she had barely a moment
to breathe between his tight squeeze and his delighted exclamation on her appearance. In five years
they had all grown and changed, embracing both their duties and their passions, but she was still
the same as ever. His smile had been broad and honest, almost sweet, when he had noted that their
professor was still as they remembered without a single hair out of place. It was good to see her
that way, in the midst of all the chaos, and it made him remember better days when war had been a
distant thought, and not a way of life.

Raphael on the other hand had taken her clear off her feet, earning laughter from most present
when she had gasped in alarm, and when he had set her down she could only look up at him with a
mixture of amazement and shock. How had he grown even larger since she had last seen him? It
didn't seem like it should have been possible. He was now wearing much more comfortable-looking clothing, and his hair had grown into a wild mess, but his smile was still the same as ever; warm and earnest and gentle when he had told her how happy he was to see her again.

Ashe had been hesitant to embrace her, but after everyone else had done the same, Raine had chosen to follow their example and hadn't wasted a moment in pulling him close for a quick hug. Whatever reservations he had had melted away almost instantly when he answered, chuckling at his own embarrassment before he looked at her with such kind warmth in his eyes that it had made her ache. He had spoken for all of them, explaining how sorely they had missed her, and how glad they were that she was back, and that she was unhurt. That above all was their chief concern and source of joy, and it had both hurt and made her smile, knowing that their love for her ran as deep as hers did for them.

Warin had approached her last, looking as if he had see a ghost, and she had been all too eager to throw herself into her elder brother's arms for a fierce hug. He had only hesitated a moment before returning it, squeezing the breath from her lungs, and following it up with a nuzzle and a shaky, tired sigh that told her of too much grief, too much fighting, and a well-earned chance of hope and peace. He had been loathe to let her go, likely why he had been the last to come to her after her students had all finished with their greetings, but he had promised her they would talk, and talk at length, once they had the time to do so. Considering the state he looked to be in, battered, weathered and exhausted, Raine hoped that time would come quickly, if not for her own sake, than most certainly for his.

With the addition of the Knights of Seiros, who had seen the gathering and come to investigate, it truly looked as if the beginnings of a rebellion was forming. Seteth had been more than happy to give her command of the men he had been watching over in Rhea's absence, though she had initially balked when she realized he was expecting her to lead. It was true, that Rhea's last words had been a passing of the torch, but Raine still wasn't sure that such a thing was a duty she could carry. If anything, it should have fallen to Seteth himself to lead, or even Gilbert, as there was no question that Dimitri was unfit to have such a burden on his shoulders. It was true that they were obeying his wishes to march against the Empire, but his bloodlust had made everyone, not just her, uneasy to trust his judgement.

Which meant that the role of leadership was falling to her, and she hadn't known what to make of it when Seteth had said so. Even if Rhea had put her in charge at the last, she hadn't been there to do a thing before she, too, had gone missing in the chaos of the battle. She had been gone for five years, and much had changed in her absence. How could she be expected to lead, when she barely knew the most basic details of the war that was raging all about them? She felt like she had when she had been brought on a professor, far out of her depth and grasping at straws in a vain attempt to keep afloat, and those expecting looks she had received from both her students and colleagues alike... It was too much.

It made her grateful that Warin had spoken up then, turning everyone's attention to the state of their "home base" and its dire need of repair and reconstruction. It would be impossible of course for them as they were in their small numbers to really do much to restore Garreg Mach to its prime, but they could at least make it liveable again if they all turned their attention to cleaning and repairing what they could. Word would spread of the monastery being occupied again, and with it would bring allies and enemies alike to their doors, and in the precious time they had to prepare, it was best they spent it on fortifying what would be their home for the battle, and the living to come in the days ahead.

She was glad for the menial work, as it allowed her to evade the weight of responsibility for the time being, and gave her time alone with her thoughts. It had all happened in such a rush that she
was still drinking all of it in, still aching with the thought of her five lost years, and now trying to balance out the new weights that were being tossed so carelessly on her unprepared shoulders. She was at a loss, scrambling for solid ground, but there was little doubt that she was needed. Her former students looked to her so hopefully, and even Seteth had chosen to hand over the reigns of leadership to her, and how could she toss any of it aside when she was there? Hadn't she, at the last, wished she could have done more? Was it not her chance now to undo all of her former mistakes?

The thoughts made her head spin, and she stopped her moving entirely as she forced in a long, shaky breath despite herself... She had wanted to work, to exercise her lethargic body and put her thoughts deep and away, but she was proving incapable of even such a minor task. She could make a laundry list of why she was so easily distracted and unable to keep her mind on task, but it didn't really matter. She had been given a chance to work, and it was work that needed doing. She couldn't simply put it aside, just because her mind wouldn't quiet for her to focus. That would be unfair to everyone else.

Gritting her teeth, Raine shook her head hard from side to side before squaring her shoulders again defiantly. She would box it all up and put on a mask, a familiar, cold mask if need be, so she could do the work she had been assigned. She wouldn't leave it all in others’ hands, no matter how tired or frazzled she felt. She was needed. She was being called upon. It was only natural that she respond to that call, no matter how ill-prepared and equipped she felt for it. Had she not pulled through then, when she had been made a professor against her will? She had risen to the task then. She could do so now. It wasn't as if she had much of a choice in the matter anyway.

Raine turned back to the rubble, kneeling down to gather stone back into her arms to clear out the pathway, only to be stopped by the sound of approaching footfall. She stood at once, recognizing the sound of heavy boots, and she turned to see her brother appearing from around the corner with an overlarge armful of books being carefully cradled to his chest. She still paused at the sight of him despite his familiar face, as everything else about him had changed since she had last truly had a good look at him.

His clothes now mimicked what their father had worn, fur lined garments of dark grey and black, and sturdy, leather-bound armour for his shoulders, forearms, and legs. Chainmail peeked out underneath his tunic, a favourite of most mercenaries capable of bearing the weight, and Raine knew full well that Warin was more than capable of it. He had taken the chance of the returning merchants and blacksmiths to see to his gear, which had been in a horrid state when he had first arrived, and now his gauntlets and lance were in top shape, and still carried on his person even though there was absolutely no threat of battle breaking out inside of the monastery. Old habits seemed to die hard, but the weight of his weaponry and armour didn't seem to be a bother to him as he handled his overlarge load with ease, but Raine still couldn't help but notice the scars that were peeking above his collar, and sleeves.

His forearms were a mess of criss-crossing blade wounds that had made it through the metal of his gauntlets, and though he covered it well with his weapons, she had caught a glimpse of them all the same when he had been equipping himself earlier in the market. His hands were of the same shape, darkened with cuts and one or two magical burns, and she mused he was lucky that he had all of his fingers still, if he had taken so much damage over the past five years. She could imagine that his chest and legs were of the same sort, scarred deeply by his years of battle, but she hadn't had a chance to look, nor did she want to ask. That scar on his throat, a long, dark mark that slid just under his ear and down his neck and towards his collarbone had spoken of a near-fatal injury, and that was more than enough for her to see to know she wanted to know nothing else of his collection of wounds.
Still, if any of this was a concern to him, he didn't seem to notice, and that only drew her attention to a new addition to his scars. He was sporting a cut lip, as well as a rapidly forming bruise on his lower jaw, and her eyes narrowed as she stood and forgot her work to approach him without thinking. Such an injury was not new to her, she had been around mercenaries all of her life and she knew a face that had been punched when she saw one, and she looked at him with both concern and exasperation as she cut off his greeting with a tired, "Did you already get yourself into a fight with someone? You've been here two days, Warin. Two days! Who did you anger enough to have them throw a hand at you, and do I want to know what they look like if they managed to land it?"

"I'm fine, thank you for asking..." Warin couldn't help but chuckle at his sister's concern, and she shook her head as she fought valiantly to keep herself from rolling her eyes at him. He turned slightly to set his load of books down on a nearby table, and he rubbed absently at his still aching jaw as Raine looked at him expectantly for an answer. He was glad to see that despite the growing weight he had seen crippling her shoulders that she still seemed to have her old spirit, and it reminded him that if he was best to help her shoulder the weight that he should act as normal rather than anything else. Seeing her again had been a shock to his system, a douse of icy-cold water to bring what had been nearly dead roaring back to life, and she made it easy, too easy, perhaps, to fall into old patterns as he explained idly, "It wasn't a scuffle... and this one, I actually earned. So, don't go worrying about it."

Raine didn't answer for a moment as she took in his words and wondered at the mystery of them. Her brother was a scrapper. He always had been, ever since he had been a child. He had been forced to prove himself as a soldier early amongst their father's men, and he had earned their respect with his intuition and his skill on the battlefield. While he wasn't quick to fight unless someone brought up their mother, his attitude always did have a way of provoking others into wanting a piece of him if they could have it, but usually most learned that they were biting off far more than they could chew once the gauntlet was thrown and Warin was fighting in earnest. It was unusual though, for him to be sporting an injury and not explaining how it happened, and she looked at him closely as she mused, "Still... That looks like it hurts. Do you want me to fetch someone for you?"

"No, there's no need for that. It does hurt, but I expected it to happen, and I earned it. It's a good reminder of the fact that I'm an arse." Warin replied with an errant wave of his hand as he continued to rub his jaw with the other. It certainly did sting, and he imagined it would take a little while before it stopped, but he was well aware that leaving it to a healer would only make him seem weak, and unapologetic for the behaviour that had earned him the punch. And he was certainly apologetic, though he couldn't quite admit he regretted it. Still, he shrugged his shoulders a bit as he mused with a trace of a bitter chuckle, "Shamir has quite an arm. I shouldn't have been surprised she could put me on my back with a punch."

"Shamir punched you in the face?"

The look of utter confusion and shock on his sister's face was enough to make him want to laugh when it was combined with such an outlandish-sounding statement. It did sound a bit outside of the realm of belief, especially when so many crucial details were lacking, but Warin wasn't ready to share such things with her just yet. She had more than enough on her plate without taking his personal life into account, and he still wasn't sure where it was going yet, either. It was better to keep the details to himself for the time being, if only to prevent her from worrying too much, and he shook his head as he reached out to absentingly ruffle her hair in a fond gesture, "Yeah. Long story."

"I can imagine..." Raine agreed with raised eyebrows, but from his tone and the somewhat distant, pained look in his navy eyes... She decided it was best to leave the matter where it was. Whatever
had happened between him and the Dagdan sniper was not something she should wade into carelessly, and even if he was her brother, she wanted to respect everything that had changed him in the past five years. If that did happen to include the fact that a woman was becoming a major factor in his life... Well, she would watch, but keep her opinions to herself until he was ready to tell her about it of his own volition. "I won't ask, then. Just... Don't get into anything you can't handle, and don't get yourself crippled. We'll need you for the days ahead."

"Unfortunately getting into things I can't handle has become a practise of mine these last five years." Warin remarked wryly, and he watched as Raine immediately averted her eyes to the ground as if the words hurt her. His own eyes narrowed, and he sighed inwardly as he realized this would become a taboo subject between the two of them, if he permitted it to linger. He reached for her shoulder, squeezing carefully before he began firmly, but not unkindly, "Hey... Look, I know. You've a lot on your plate right now, and it's difficult for you. I'm not about to pretend otherwise, and I'd prefer that you don't, either. Things have changed. People have changed... but that doesn't mean that you or I have. We're still siblings. I'm still going to be looking after you. Hide whatever it is you want from the kids, if you want to do so... but don't hide from me. You're a poor liar."

Raine let out a tired breath, understanding exactly what it was he was trying to get at without needing more to be said. It was irritating, how well he could read her, but at the same time, it gave her comfort in what was a strange and unsettling time. Everything was both so new and so familiar all at once, and she needed the grounding quite desperately. If anyone was to give that to her, it was her brother, and she was grateful that he was so willing to indulge her despite what had to be an awkward and painful topic for him, despite how cavalier he had been treating it. "Is it true, then? That you were being chased by Imperial forces for the past several years?"

Warin raised an eyebrow at the question, and though it wasn't as if he had no intention of answering it, he still had to take pause at it being asked. He knew already for a fact that she had been in conversations with Gilbert, Ashe and Petra since her return, and he also was well aware Gilbert at the very least would have told her everything he had said, ad verbatim, to boot. He wondered if she mistrusted them, or if she simply didn't believe he had told them the truth, and he tilted his head to the side to look at her closely as he answered her question with one of his own, "You've already heard the story, haven't you? I imagine Gilbert filled you in. Or Petra, or Ashe at the very least. Why do you want me to repeat it?"

Raine scoffed, shaking her head at the reply that told her nothing. It wasn't as if she didn't believe her students, or Gilbert, but she was well aware of her brother's real nature. What he had told them, and what they had told her in turn did sound true enough, but she doubted it was the whole of the matter. Warin was a blunt man, but he was also incredibly private. He would only tell them the bare minimum of what they needed to know, never the whole of it, and she did not want to coast by on a second-hand account. It was not nearly enough for her to believe, especially when he was standing in front of her as he was, and she explained that with a slightly edged tone to her voice, "They told me what you told them... but I want to hear it from your mouth. The whole story. I know you, Warin. I won't be satisfied until you tell me what happened, in your own words. I won't believe a second-hand account, even from my own students. Not when it comes to you."

Warin sighed, and he absentely scratched at his cheek as he wondered where it was best to begin. She had the broad strokes of the story, and she did clearly believe it, but the details of it all... Sometimes it still felt as if he was still processing all of it, and it had been five whole years of living on the run. Putting it all into words, especially for her, was not easy for him, and he knew that showed clearly enough on his face. She was patient, however, and there was no look of judgement or unhappiness for his pause, and that, at least, set him more at ease. He began slowly, hesitantly as he wondered just how much she really wanted, or needed to hear just yet, "For the most part, I have been on the run for five years. Ever since the fall of the monastery, if you want to
be exact. There were orders, explicit orders, for the Imperial troops when it concerned me. The princess wanted me dead in that battle, and she wanted my head delivered to her to prove it. I was essentially chased out of the monastery, before the troops took it, in my efforts to get away clean. But they pursued me, quite doggedly, I might add... I had to run quite a ways before I could turn back around to take them all in. The hunts started soon afterwards."

Raine's eyes narrowed, and she wondered at what exactly her brother had done to warrant such an extreme response from Edelgard. She had been aware already that the two had their differences back in the academy, yet to know she was so personally invested in seeing him dead... She wasn't quite sure if it impressed or worried her. She, herself, had already seen how deeply Edelgard hated her. Comparing her to her allies, to those pale-skinned monsters who had provided her with power before she had been crowned, had been a potent trigger for her rage. It was very likely she thought the same for her brother, and she shook her head as she muttered under her breath, "A waste of men, if she actually knew you... but personal orders for your head? For five years? Did she really brand you that much of a threat to her? A single man? Even if you are my sibling, that seems a bit much for someone waging war on the entirety of the continent."

"I'll be honest, I don't know if she gave those orders personally for the hunts, or if came from Hubert acting as her mouthpiece. I saw the orders myself on the first strike team that came after me, but it's not as if they were signed." Warin admitted with a vague gesture of his hands, and he shook his head as Raine eyed him with a speculative look on her face. She was thinking hard, drinking in his every word in order to piece the puzzle together, and he took that as a sign to continue, and did so without delay, "What I do know however is that every Imperial soldier I came across in the last five years made immediate attempts for my head when they realized who I was. We can speculate all day on why that is, but it is what happened. The hunts continued for almost three years, unimpeded, before they started to taper off. That was when the invasions started to become more frequent, and the fighting more intense, so I imagine they were tired of committing men to chasing me when they were needed more at the front... It didn't help that none were returning from their missions. I imagine that was a dent in someone's ego."

Raine said nothing, watching as Warin absently rubbed at his forearms at his words without seeming to notice as he spoke. His eyes were distant with memory, but his body was tense, as if he was expecting an enemy to leap out of the nearest corridor without warning. She had noticed already he had developed a penchant for keeping his back to the wall, and his eyes were constantly scanning, unceasing and wary, for all exits and entrances as if he simply could not relax. Five years of being chased had changed him, had turned him hyper-vigilant, but moreso than that... Raine shook her head as she spoke very quietly, "That must have been difficult... Having to kill to many soldiers all by yourself."

"It became easier, after a time... but truthfully, I didn't care for that. I've been a mercenary all my life, but killing should never be easy." Warin agreed with a sombre shake of his head, and he found himself squeezing his right arm tightly as flashes of faces tore through his mind like a racing stallion. All of them were burnt behind his eyelids like portraits, visiting him even in his dreams, and robbing him of even a moment of rest. He was tired, down to his very bones, but he could not allow himself to show it. He dropped his hand with great effort, shaking his head again as he sighed heavily, "I had to numb myself to it... Especially after the first time. I let one man go, from the first team that chased me. I thought perhaps if I sent a message back, that I was only going to cost her men in the long run, that perhaps she'd forego hunting me... But he returned with a second team, and I earned this for my act of merciful pragmatism. After that... I couldn't afford to allow anyone to live again. What was the point, if they'd just be turned about and sent back to me? It was easier, both for them and myself, to aim to kill from the outset. Trying to save someone, anyone, would just put me into the ground."
Raine watched as he lifted a hand to his throat, a nail scratching down the length of the scar on his neck in memory, and she winced as she imagined how heavily that had to weigh on her brother's shoulders. It was a tactic their father had employed many a time when they had been up against a much weaker force, and more often than not, it had served them well in preventing needless bloodshed... but knowing that following so closely in their father's footsteps had almost led him into an early grave... It made her stomach twist. He had nearly died, trying to save future men, and it hurt as she murmured, "I'm sorry, Warin."

"Don't be. I made the choice to continue as I did... and luckily enough for me, the hunts eased enough that I could begin to move more freely again once the war turned more chaotic." Warin shook away her apology even though he appreciated the empathic place that it came from, and he reached to squeeze her shoulder before he continued with his story for her. He knew the details were disturbing, he knew she didn't like what she was hearing, but he owed her the truth, and he would hide nothing as he explained, "That was when I began to have hunts of my own... I remembered your promise with your house. And I had begun to wonder... Was it possible a rebellion could be started, if enough of your students returned? I didn't see why it wouldn't be, even if it was just your house and no one else to serve as the backbone... However, my idealism wasn't quite shared with those I sought out."

"I'd heard that much..." Raine said with a sigh of her own, and she shook her head with both annoyance and exasperation at her brother's exploits, and how poorly it had gone for him. On one hand she understood why he had failed so spectacularly... He was not a charismatic man, despite the fact that he was likely one of the better soldiers of the age. He was simply not diplomatic enough, and his harsh words and manner of speaking didn't endear him to many. Especially to nobles, who were used to more respect than Warin was ever willing to give. Still, it was disheartening to know that those he had approached had turned him down so coldly, so effortlessly all the same. "Claude shot you down immediately, didn't he?"

"He barely looked at me, for all the trouble I went through to find the damned brat." Warin answered with a poorly hidden snarl of irritation, and he had to take in a deep breath to remember that it wasn't his sister's fault that the leader of the Alliance was such a self-centred coward. It had not been one of his finer moments, either, realizing that the young man cared nothing for him, especially if he could offer him nothing of substance but a simple idea, but that was beyond the point then. "I had nothing to offer him, so to him, I wasn't worth wasting time on. Mind you, now that you've returned, he may very well change his mind if approached again... but I wouldn't trust him as far as you could throw him. He doesn't care about the Alliance. He'll drop his facade of a scheming, well-intentioned leader the moment it becomes convenient for him, and he'll leave it, and Fódlan, far behind him when he does."

"But you also said you didn't believe the Alliance as a whole was lost. Did you mean that?"

"I did. Claude only speaks for himself, not for the whole of the people he leads. The fact that the Alliance is still fighting a civil war right at this moment is proof of that." Warin replied firmly, and that was the one saving grace of the failure his trip into the east had been. He had seen the loyalty of the true Alliance army. They fought not for their leader but for their homeland, and even should their commander leave it, they would never follow in his footsteps. Their history was a proud one, and they were a proud people in return. They didn't trust their young leader, but they did not need to in order to fight a war to defend their land and people. "He will leave them, but they won't leave their lands or their people. If you appeal to the masses and not to Claude, you will find allies willing to lend aid to the rebellion... but Claude will try to use you if you do. Whether or not you're willing to become a pawn for him is up to you to decide, but I'm aware that there may not be much choice in the matter."
"No, there may not be... We're so few, and our resources are even less. We need more men, we need more supplies, and that means we will need to reach out to anyone who can provide us aid eventually... But I won't look to the Alliance for it first. Not with what you've told me." Raine agreed with a nod, but she still looked tired with the knowledge she was quickly putting into place for future plans. She already was aware of the houses in the Kingdom who were still loyal to their liege, and they would be the first to give aid if called upon, but it would be a tricky business getting soldiers and supplies from those who were already expending men and gold on the frontlines of their own war. That was simple logic, and she did not need to be a seasoned commander or tactician to know it. "The Kingdom will be our best bet, for an initial attempt at getting what we will need to start a real rebellion... but even then..."

"Even then, the prince isn't interested in securing his own lands first, and consolidating, as would be wisest." Warin finished her sentence for her, and though they both were aware of how right he was, he took no satisfaction in the way Raine winced underneath his words. She looked positively ashamed, and he had to wonder why. It was not as if she was responsible for how Dimitri was acting now, or his sheer insanity. The prince had made it clear enough what his end goal was; the destruction of the Empire in totality... but he had no means of achieving it without warm bodies to throw at the Imperial army, and now that he had them, he would go ahead with his mad plans, regardless of anyone else's protests. He had proved that already, with his utter dismissal of the reconstruction efforts that were taking place as they spoke. "He wants to march straight to Enbarr, with this meagre little assortment of men... It's madness."

"He's not well."

"Not well? Those are the words you're going to use to describe him?" Warin had to resist the urge to shake his sister for daring to underplay the reality of what they were facing, but that hurt, shameful look on her face was a balm to his irritation. She knew she wasn't speaking plainly, but she tried to defend her student all the same on instinct alone. It was clear in the troubled look in her eyes, and while it helped him understand her motives... He could not permit her to sugarcoat things. Even if her students would do the same, he would not. Especially when he knew that Gilbert had no intentions of disobeying his liege, even if it meant running headfirst into the business end of an axe, and it made his voice sharp and unforgiving as he pointed out coldly, "You've been gone five years, and I know it's a shock to you, but you can't look at him and simply brush it off as him not "being well", Raine. I know how you feel for him, I truly do, but that's not the matter at hand. He's mad. And if you allow him to lead, he will get you, and everyone else here, killed before you can even so much as put a dent in the Empire."

"I know that." Raine answered quietly, but she felt the sting all the same even though she knew it was not a personal affront. She had tried herself to appeal to Dimitri, but had only been answered with derision. It was different than that simmering wrath that she had been met with last, when he had been so consumed with vengeance, because at least he hadn't turned that on her. Instead he had simply ignored her then, too lost in himself and his emotions, but now he was lashing out in every possible direction, and she was taking the brunt of it. It was her responsibility to do so, no matter how much it made her ache, but that cold, mocking stare of his, his cruel and flippant orders... She could not help but be hurt by it, no matter how much she wished she wasn't. "I do, Warin... I know that where he's heading will lead us all down a path we can't come back from... but I won't let it happen. Even if he decides I'm an enemy to be cut down... I won't let him kill himself, or his friends, for his vengeance."

"Should he raise his lance at you, I'll cut him down first. I don't care who he is, or what he means to the Kingdom. He doesn't get to idly threaten you without repercussions." Warin spoke through his teeth, and he felt his hands clench instinctively at the very thought. What was worse was how close to reality it seemed to be, when five years ago, five short years ago, he would have laughed at
the notion that Dimitri was capable of raising a hand to his beloved professor. But times had changed... and so had the people who had been swept along in its river. The prince could not distinguish friend from foe any longer... yet Warin had no sympathy for him, even if his sister did. "I'm here for one reason and one reason alone... and that's you. The rest of Fódlan can burn itself down to the ground, and I meant what I said when I claimed I'd turn my back on it to let it do so... but you won't let that happen without a fight. You've made your choice to fight back, so I'll throw my lot in with you... but that doesn't mean I need to give a damn about the delusional prince that's been brought up as your figurehead."

"I wish you wouldn't say things like that... If you don't want to fight, then you shouldn't be here at all. Using me as justification to stay... It's not fair. You've spent five years fighting already, and then another for the church, against your will. I don't want you fighting again, for a cause you don't care for, just because it's mine."

Raine shook her head, unable to hide her irritation at her brother's words regardless of how comforting it was to hear that he was standing beside her despite his own feelings. It hurt her to know he felt such disgust for how the world had turned out, yet she couldn't entirely deny that he had every right to have become so resentful. What had he done to earn being drawn into this war, except for being at the beck and call of the church that he could not in any feasible way escape? He had been a pawn then, and had suffered for five years because of it. She well understood why he was ready to wash his hands of things, and in all honesty, she couldn't say she didn't feel the same need, even if she could never commit herself to it.

"I don't need to love Fódlan to stay and protect it. I just need to love you. I lost you once. It won't happen again. If you're choosing to fight, then I'm fighting beside you, regardless of how I feel about this entire mess. That's all there is to it, and you can't talk me out of it." Warin dismissed her concerns bluntly, but not unkindly as he saw the sympathy in her eyes, as well as that momentary look of want flicker in and out of her seafoam-coloured irises. She was not as selfish as he was. She had learned to love, both as an individual, and in a very broad sense. She felt too much obligation to her students, to the monastery, to everyone, to ever be able to turn her back on it all and seek her own path. It didn't matter that she felt crushed by the burden that was being placed on her shoulders, and he was well aware she was stumbling under the pressure... because she only felt it right to stand underneath it. If that was the choice she had made, then he would help her take that weight. His own feelings were irrelevant. "I know full well I'm a cold-hearted bastard, and a selfish one to boot... but I won't be caught turning my back on you, or the things you love, just because my views of the world differ from yours."

They were sweet words, for her brother, but it didn't give Raine any comfort. It only made her exasperated, and she looked at him and took in the scars he was showing, both outside and in with a deep, wrenching aching in her stomach. How much had he suffered already? How much more suffering would he go through, before he was capable of living a life he wanted, free from obligations of any kind, even ones he imposed on himself? She couldn't imagine, and that only bothered her all the more. She didn't deserve that kind of loyalty. That kind of love. Not when it hurt him so much. She folded her arms over her stomach, shaking her head again as she muttered sourly, "Putting you life on the line for my views doesn't make me happy, Warin."

"Then how about I make it conditional?" Warin asked, and he had to hide a smile as his sister blinked, and looked at him with unmasked confusion and surprise. Her lack of a response only urged him further, and he rubbed the back of his neck before gesturing about to their surroundings before he explained for her wide-eyed stare, "I'll stay and fight for you, and to boot, I won't make any more remarks that you don't like... but in return, you just need to make me one promise. If you do that, then you don't need to worry about feeling unhappy because I'm here. It's a contract, not an obligation. That makes things more than fair, doesn't it?"

"That depends on the condition... but you've at least got my attention." Raine admitted, and she
looked at him with a mixture of wonder and exasperation. He was too much like their father, changing things on a dime simply because he could, and she wasn't sure if that trait was endearing or annoying, even with the stinging that accompanied that sweet familiarity. But she put that aside quickly, it was not something she was ready to face just yet, especially now of all times, and instead she crossed her arms over her stomach as she looked him over with a tilt of her head, "All right, I'll bite, Warin... What is it that you want me to promise?"

"Don't die. Make it out of this war unscathed. It's a miracle you're here today, and I'll give you that, but I don't want you needing another. I'll do my damnedest to ensure you won't. But I want to hear you promise that you'll do whatever it is it takes to survive, too." Warin answered firmly, and he watched with a slight smile as Raine clearly didn't seem ready to have heard such a thing from him of all people. She was looking at him almost as if he had grown a second head, and he bit the inside of his cheek to keep himself from smirking more broadly as he continued on clearly for her, "Give me that, and you'll have my loyalty like any good mercenary, as well as my professional silence. Unless you ask for my opinion, I won't give it. Do we have a deal?"

"You... We're mercenaries, Warin. You know full well mercenaries can't and don't make those kind of promises." Raine replied after a long, painful moment, and she ran a hand tiredly through her hair as she looked her brother up and down with both confusion and exasperation. It wasn't like him to say such things, or to go against mercenary superstition. He was a mercenary in blood and spirit, and he was exactly like his father in that. He knew better than to go against their vocation's risks... He had always known better. This was a promise she couldn't make in good faith, simply because she knew full well he could not do the same. "Especially during wartime... You know exactly how it is for us. This is most dangerous time to be a sellsword, even if it is the most profitable. Have you forgotten all of Father's lessons?"

"You're not a mercenary anymore. You can make that promise." Warin pointed out with a raised eyebrow, and Raine twitched with both surprise and uncertainty furrowing her brow as his words clearly took time to sink in. It wasn't something he wanted to point out, as it made it seem as if she was being pulled farther and farther away from their roots, but it was the one time he was willing to take full advantage of it all the same. She was not a mercenary any longer. She was hardly even a professor now. She was turning into a commander, whether or not she wished for it, and that left her free, and he explained that for her with a shrug of his shoulders, "You aren't bound by old superstitions, and you've never gave a damn about them anyway. There's nothing stopping you from making me that promise but your own paranoia. And do you really believe you're going to die on me?"

"You are utterly exasperating, do you know that?" Raine let out another long, tired breath, but she was well aware when she had been beaten. Her brother had effectively boxed her into a corner, and there was no way out of it. And, in a way... She supposed she wasn't quite as annoyed as she ought to be about it. It was just insurance, insurance he sorely needed, and he was telling her so without using the exact words. She could understand that much, and she offered a crooked smile before extending her hand as she capitulated to him, "Okay... Okay. Fine. I promise that I won't die. Or at the very least, I promise to try my best not to. If it makes you be quiet, it's worth trying."

"Good. Then we're on the same page." Warin took her hand in his for a quick, firm handshake, before he pulled her close without preamble. She laughed as he caught her effortlessly against his chest, but he didn't mind it as his arms wrapped tightly about her to hold her close. It had only been for a moment then, when he had seen her first, that he'd allowed himself to lose his composure and be the last one to take her into an embrace. Stepping aside for her students had been the right thing to do, the proper thing, but his arms had been feeling painfully empty ever since. He squeezed tightly, wary of himself and of her, but still unable to help it as he let out a bit of a pained breath, "I meant what I said, Raine. You won't be needing another miracle. I missed you. I won't let it happen
Raine returned his squeeze carefully, well aware of the trembling in his arms and knowing exactly why he couldn't be so steady despite all of his attempts to appear so. He was broken somewhere, not just battered. His five years alone had done more to him than he was ready to admit, or perhaps just willing to show, but Raine didn't need his words or expressions to know her brother. They were closer than that, even if five years had passed and left one of them stagnant and the other forced to move on ahead. She leaned into him gently, closing her eyes for his comfort and hers as she murmured, "I'm sorry that I left you alone... and I won't let that happen again, either. I promise. Wherever we go from here on out... We go together. For certain this time."

"For certain."

Chapter End Notes

AN:
It's never really addressed, how losing out on five years really effects Byleth, but I suppose that's kind of the point of them, in a way. So much of what happens to them is something they're forced to roll with before any real idea of compartmentalizing actually has time to take place. Whether it be becoming a professor, losing their father, possibly dying, and then returning, and then taking up a leadership role either under duress (Verdant Wind), or because they're just that desperately needed in order to get things done (Crimson Flower)... In Azure Moon, their position is a little more interesting, as well as precarious, as it's obvious Dimitri (to a certain point) is the one calling the shots, and Byleth takes a more of backseat with their attempts to reign him in, confront his behaviour, or attempts to invoke his empathy. While it's unspoken that Byleth is leading in a general sense, there's little question Dimitri is "in charge" when it comes to what the army will be doing, regardless of the worry and doubt his mindset and actions cause his comrades... Not to mention the sheer danger they're put in because of his single-minded desire to hunt down Edelgard.

Now, to clear some things up... I am a huge fan of Dimitri, but in no way do I excuse any of his actions, be it past, or present. He's an extremely flawed individual, capable of great cruelty to both friends and foe, and while he goes through rapid character growth (a bit too rapid, but I blame story restraints more than anything else there), it certainly doesn't excuse anything he's done. He's right to castigate himself for his behaviour and actions, and he's also right to doubt his ability to be a "good man", let alone a good ruler. His heart is certainly in the right place in the end, once his mind joins up with it, but there's no doubting he did wrong, and deserves to be called out on it rather than easily forgiven.

I don't intend to give him a free pass, nor do I intend to let his actions go without consequence. While some of his behaviours had certain consequences that led to his change of heart, I don't intend to keep all of them the same. Which I'll be changing will be my little secret for awhile, but I do want to just make it clear here and now that Raine's not going to easily forgive him, nor will the rest of the Blue Lions, when the time comes for character development to take place. This does unfortunately mean Raine's going to be having a much more difficult time with him, so expect plenty of angst in that department... Warin's getting off lucky, and I still put him through the
ringer, and there's more to come to boot. X'D

Also, just to address one last thing, I have been asked a few times about the possibility of my version of Azure Moon taking hints from Silver Snow, or even Verdant Wind... My response to this is: Yes. But I will not provide any details, and I will politely ask for no recommendations on how that should happen, why, or guesses on how I'll be going about it. The story as a whole is already mostly set in the bones, but I tend to like my bigger projects to grow on their own so I can still surprise both myself and my readers as the "details" show themselves to me as I write. So, you've your answer, and I hope it satisfies you!

Thanks as always for reading this far, and I hope to see you again in my next chapter. Things are moving a tad slow this moon (mostly to catch everyone up and smooth over that "return" that felt too rushed) but I promise I'll be getting back into the action side of things very soon. Please drop me a review should you feel the need, and I'll see you again as soon as I possibly can! Have a good one, guys!

Mood: Excited.

Listening To: "Shelter" - Porter Robinson and Madeon

~ Sky
Giving What Belongs

Chapter Summary

Genres/Rating: Romance, Friendship, Angst, Hurt/Comfort. (M)

Characters: Warin, Shamir.

Summary: It had been five years since she had last seen his face, and to say it had made her erupt with emotions had been quite the understatement. She didn't regret striking him, and he didn't seem as if he thought her wrong to do so, but it had left them with an uneasy sort of tension resting between them now as she did her best to avoid him entirely from then on. It had been with surprise, then, when he had slipped a note under her door, asking to speak to her only a handful of days later... and she had sighed with irritation before crumpling it in one hand. More parchment. It was becoming a bad habit of his. Yet... She couldn't say no. He made that impossible, and she hated that about him.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Guardian Moon

Garreg Mach Halls

Late Night

It hadn't been hard to find him. He hadn't left explicit instruction on where to meet him in that note he had slid underneath her door in the barracks, but she was still surprised he hadn't bothered to go too far. He was sitting just beyond the stables, barely a stone's throw away from the barracks, and he looked up at the sound of the gate closing behind her. It was as if he didn't care who could possibly overhear them, or see them, but she supposed he had grown beyond that since the last time they had spoken. Had it really been five years since they had sat together on a scouting mission, whiling away the time with idle chatter, or hedging bets on foolish things that didn't matter at all to either of them? It felt like that had taken place a whole lifetime ago. The thought made her feel an ache somewhere deep in her chest. A lifetime ago... How many lifetimes had she lived, then, if that was really the case?

Shamir shook away the thoughts, taking care to keep her expression absolutely neutral as she approached the mercenary that had uncharacteristically called her out. It wasn't his way, being so bold and demanding her time, and she wondered idly if that was why she had decided to meet him. He had never once made an assumption that she owed him anything. Rather, he always seemed to be too polite when it concerned her, and he took more consideration of her emotions than she did. It was a constant surprise with him, and not one she had wholly disliked, but... Times had changed since then. Five whole years. And she was just as changed as he was, as she watched the firelight of a nearby lamp illuminate that dark scar she had first noticed crossing his throat when they had seen one another again.

"I didn't think you'd come."
The words brought a wry smile to her face, despite it all. It was cold out, misting his breath when he spoke, and his face had taken on a pink tinge to prove he had been waiting for longer than she probably wanted to know for her appearance. That wasn't exactly comforting knowledge, but she shoved it ruthlessly aside for another time. She hadn't thought she would come, either, and that thought was an annoying one. She was still angry with him, still seething over the way he had been dangling out of her reach for five entire years, and that made her voice sharp as she answered him brusquely, "I didn't think I would come, either. So you best make this worth my time. I could be sleeping right now. I know you're not quite aware, but I'm really beginning to get sick of messages on parchment."

Warin winced, but he knew her criticisms were well-deserved, and he had no plans to defend himself from it. Yet... He didn't quite regret it, which he knew showed on his face all the same. How could he? He had been well aware that most would assume him dead when they'd fail to find his body in the wreckage of the monastery, and he had gone so deep into hiding that there was little chance the knights would ever find him... but he hadn't allowed it to stay that way for long. Not with the memory of her lips on his, her svelte body pressed tightly against his chest as they hid in the alcove, embracing for too short a moment before it had all gone to hell. No, leaving her to believe he was dead wasn't an option, but reaching out to the knights was not one either... His solution had been a middle-ground, and it made him rub awkwardly at his hair as he forced himself to ask, "How many of my letters did you receive?"

"Twelve. If you wrote more, they never reached me. Twelve letters in five years, and I never had an address to return a reply to." Shamir's answer came coldly, though her heart did ache a little as she thought of those twelve missives, still tucked away neatly, carefully, in her pack. She hadn't had the will to throw them away, or set them aflame like her temper had demanded. Instead, she had poured over them constantly, hating him for his vague writings of his location, his well-being and missions, and yet still feeling glad beyond measure that he wasn't dead after all. That first letter had been a lightning bolt. The rest were water on hot rocks, bringing up steam and muddling her thoughts, distracting her, and she couldn't help but ask him both semi-seriously and rhetorically, "You're a selfish arse, you know that, right?"

"I'm aware. I didn't want you to think me dead, but... I also didn't want to join you or the Knights. I decided going alone was the best way to handle things... but that just sounds like an excuse, or an attempt to justify what I did." Warin agreed with her assessment without hesitation, but he knew that was not enough. He hadn't known how many of his letters she had received, as they had been so damned difficult to send without making his survival apparent or attracting unwanted attention, but he was at least glad she had gotten some, if not all of them. It was a weight off of his shoulders, but not much of one, and he shook his head slowly as he continued with a sigh, "But that's not why I called you out to speak with you. To make excuses, or justifications. I know that I was wrong. I know that I'm a selfish bastard."

It went a little way to easing her temper, hearing him flick away his excuses and admit wholeheartedly that her accusations were true, but she still wasn't entirely sure what to make of him. He didn't look regretful, even if he did look apologetic. She doubted that if he had a chance to change things, that he would have made a different choice. It was too much like him, wanting to shoulder the burden alone and shrugging off helping hands, but she wasn't quite interested in that. She had heard the stories. How could she not? All of the knights had spoken at length about his exploits during the past five years like he was some sort of hero, or a victim... but she didn't believe him to be either as she asked him sharply, "Then what is it you want to say?"

"I want to say that I'm sorry." Warin's answer was simple and sincere, and it made Shamir take pause as she took in his expression carefully. The apology was written all over his face, and it softened those sharp navy eyes of his until they were almost liquid with warmth. He had looked at
her that same way five years ago, after he'd pulled back from that surprise kiss, and it made her stomach clench with pleasant memory. He shook his head slowly, running a hand errantly down his throat to squeeze his tunic before he continued quietly, "Call me egotistical if you wish, but... Knowing you worried over me... because of me... It's one of my worst regrets. My second being that I never mustered the courage to say something, and instead just acted, as if that would make things more clear somehow. Writing you kept me sane, in those five years, but I don't imagine it was easy on you, receiving those letters. For that... For all of it... I want to apologize to you."

"You *are* egotistical. My life didn't, and doesn't revolve around what you do." It wasn't entirely true, and she felt that in her bones as she thought of how her heart leapt every time one of those letters had found its way into her hands. Each and every time she had sworn to burn them, to rid herself of his ghost haunting her dreams and her errant thoughts, a letter would always arrive to summon up memories, and make her hesitate at the most critical of times. It was why she still had every single one she had received, and why she had punched him square in the jaw on first sight... Her life didn't revolve about him, but her thoughts certainly did, and she wasn't sure if she hated him for that, either. "I was glad to know you'd survived, but of course your stubborn arse couldn't think to reach out to anyone for help you sorely needed. And yes, I know I'm one to talk, but five years? Five years of going it alone before finally changing your course back to Garreg Mach because of a promise your sister, who we all believed to be dead, made with her students? You'd believe more in that than in the knights? In me?"

She winced as the last two words escaped her lips without thinking, and she quickly bit her lip at the harsh realization of where her anger had truly been coming from. He was quicker to trust children than he was to trust her, and that had stung, and stung deeply. He knew she wasn't truly a knight. She was mercenary, out for the paycheck and never for the religion, and it wasn't as if Rhea was there any longer to keep her bound. She had paid off her debt long ago. She was free to go wherever she liked, if she so chose. Yet she was still here, bound because of his damned letters, and the thought inflamed her temper before she could think better of it, "Every time I thought I was over it, over you, another one of your missives would get slipped into my hands by some scout you found wherever you'd been lurking, and then it'd start all over again. I couldn't leave and go searching for you, it wasn't as if you gave me nearly enough clues as to where you were, and had you wanted me with you, you'd have asked from the outset. I had no idea what you really wanted, only that you were being frustratingly vague. You're lucky I didn't shoot you on sight for that. I'd have shot anyone else."

"You'd have been in the right to. I didn't want you looking for me, and I didn't want you finding me. You're right on those accounts. But, again, that's justifying my behaviour, and I don't plan to do that. I'm only going to admit it was wrong of me to do." Warin took her lashings without another wince or show of pain, as he knew it was his obligation to do. She was still angry. That shine in her violet eyes proved it, but she was right to be. He hadn't been clear, not even in his letters, and he wondered if perhaps he should have been. Yet, that was well out of his hands now. He was not his sister. He could not rewind time. "I was selfish, and I didn't consider your feelings. I made a choice for you, instead of asking what you would do, which does make me an egotistical brat, on top of everything else. I'd say that ends tonight, but you wouldn't have much cause to believe me if I did, would you?"

"What exactly is that supposed to mean? That from now on you intend to be forthright with me?"

Shamir couldn't quite help the venom, but she took no pleasure in the way Warin looked away from her when she spoke, either. He was hurting again. Looking like a kicked puppy in sore need of comfort, but she had a little too much pride to allow for that to overwhelm her. She had been hurting, too. And as nice as his apology and self-reflection was... It wasn't enough. Not just yet. "I had assumed that was what you were doing from the beginning. If you're going to be forthright now, I'm interested in how that means things will change."
Warin was silent at her reply, and she wondered if he even had a response to give her. She was surprised then when his brow furrowed and his hands reached up to his neck to unfasten something. His movements were slow and deliberate, and she blinked in confusion as he revealed a long silver chain from underneath his tunic. She didn't have time to see what it was as his hand flicked out in an easy toss, and just as easily her own reached to catch it. His voice was calm, quiet when he finally spoke, "Here. Perhaps that will help you understand."

Shamir went still as her gloved hand opened to reveal the silver band that the chain had been holding for him. She recognized it at once, though she had only seen it once or twice on the missions she had spent alongside him. She had never asked what it was or why he held it, it wasn't her business to do so, but to have it tossed at her so casually... Her spine stiffened, and her mouth abruptly felt very dry. The gems set inside the band glittered faintly in the firelight, and she felt her heart leaping up into her throat, and she had to fight to speak around it as she questioned him, "What... exactly... is this?"

"It belonged to my mother. My father gave it to me, when she passed away when Raine was born. He told me one day to give it to someone that I cared for as much as he cared for her. That's what I'm doing." Warin's explanation came in that same calm, even tone, and he watched with a carefully neutral expression as Shamir looked down to the ring in her hand and then back up at him with surprise widening her eyes, and red beginning to creep in her face. Whatever she had expected, this clearly was not it, and it made him want to smile despite himself before he continued on with that same careful deliberation. "It's yours now, to do what you please with. You don't need to keep it, if you don't want to. Toss it in the nearest lake if you want to. I don't mind. But I hope it makes things clear to you. What I want... and how I feel."

"You truly wouldn't care if I tossed this right here and now?" Despite her words, Shamir felt her fingers closing protectively over the band to clasp it tightly. He didn't say anything lightly, and even more rarely as a jape. She already knew he meant what he said, which only made her want to grip the ring all the closer. She knew very well just how much he loved his family. How deeply he was pained by his mother's loss. To hear him say so casually that she could throw away something so precious as his last reminder of his mother didn't sit well with her at all, and it forced her to ask again for clarity she wasn't sure she really needed, "You'd let me throw it away, that easily? That simply?"

"It's yours now. You can do whatever you want with it." Warin's answer was simple and clear, and from the look of surprise on her face, he was aware she hadn't thought he would say something like that at all. But to him, it was that easy. His father had given it to him to do with as he pleased, and he had made the decision that it belonged in her hands. Nobody else's would do. The past five years had confirmed that for him. The thought of her had been torture, but it had also kept him sane when he had felt the walls closing in and the desperation and the exhaustion creeping into the corners of his vision. No one else had given him what he needed when he needed it more than her, even if he had never asked for it, or expected it. She deserved that band. Whatever she did with it after was not his concern, even if it did mean her throwing it aside. She didn't need to accept it, or everything that came along with it. That didn't matter at all to him. What was more important was that it was in her hands to do as she pleased with it. "I'll admit, it's not something I'm giving away lightly... but that doesn't mean you've an obligation to accept it. I gave it to the person I was asked to give it to. What you do with it is your choice, not mine."

It made that choking ball of anger and hurt shrink, and she had to bite her cheek to resist the urge to smile as she palmed the ring carefully close to her chest. The band was warm, even through the thin leather of her glove, and she wondered errantly how it would fit on her finger. The thought only made her sigh with the realization that she was fighting a losing battle, and had been for the past several years. He had made mistakes, but so had she. How many days had she spent,
wondering what would have been different if she had chased after him rather than remain with the knights? She shook her head slowly, idly rubbing her thumb across the edge of the band before she let out a long breath, feeling the weight of his unspoken words hanging heavily in the air, and knowing all they meant and how she felt in answer.

They'd fought together for so long... The words didn't mean much compared to the actions now. He had said all she needed to hear, and done all he'd needed to do. She knew full well how he felt and what he was trying to get across without him putting it to words. She pulled her gloves off, carefully sliding them into her jacket's pockets before slowly, carefully sliding the ring onto her finger. It was a snug fit, made for a different hand than her own, yet it didn't feel foreign at all. The weight was comforting, and it didn't feel out of place on her hand, and her smile broke free despite herself as she mused slowly, "Throwing it away seems like a waste. And it's a good fit, too... I may as well keep it."

Warin blinked, both a little surprised and unsure as he watched Shamir caress his mother's ring with a soft, intimate glint warming her violet eyes. It wasn't as if he was unhappy that she had accepted his gift, but now that she had, he still felt quite a bit at a loss. He understood that it meant she forgave him, at least on some level, and was both accepting and reciprocating, but it left him shifting his weight awkwardly from foot to foot as he watched her silently. She seemed to notice almost immediately, and her smile turned coy and her eyes playful as she crossed the distance between them with a quick, brisk step.

Unthinkingly, Warin found himself retreating at her unexpected advance until his back hit the smooth stone of the nearby alcove. His pause didn't seem to deter her. If anything, it only made her smile more broadly as she stood toe to toe with him before she reached up and feathered her fingers against his collar. He twitched, surprised at the touch, and then she was pulling at the thick fabric, forcing his head down to her level as she murmured in a musing sort of tone, "If we're going to be forthright... I've thought about that kiss just before the fighting quite a lot these past five years. You owe me interest on that."

He didn't fight her as she pulled him down and caught his lips with hers, though admittedly he wasn't entirely sure what to do when she had him so effectively turned around. The hand on his collar was tight, restraining, stifling, but he allowed for it in return for the warmth of her mouth pressing searchingly on his. She was warm, just as he remembered her being, and as she lifted one arm to curl around his neck to pull him closer... He sighed quietly as he abandoned his tension, and allowed his body to react instinctively to her.

Shamir murmured quietly against his lips as she felt his arms settling across the back of her hips, drawing her closer to his chest as his lips parted for her questing tongue. She felt bold with his ring settled on her finger, and the knowledge made her clutch his tunic all the more firmly while her free hand ran itself lazily, slowly, through those mussed navy curls he had once shared with his sister. It felt surprisingly smooth against her skin, as gentle as the way he was returning her kiss, and she sighed both with longing and pleasure as she curled herself as close as she possibly could manage.

He hadn't given her the time to savour his kiss that first time, and she planned to enjoy every single moment of this now. His grip was solid, and his body strong and lean against hers, and she nipped at his lower lip as she pushed experimentally further into his chest. His quiet little hiss was both a surprise and a thrill, as was the way his hands became strong and gripping on her body rather than clasping. His tongue fought now with hers, eager to search, explore and taste, and she groaned deep in her throat as she leaned all too eagerly into him for more. He was passionate and just as responsive, if a little clumsy, but she didn't mind it as he seized her elbow and turned her about to pin her against the wall.
Still, despite his advantage, Shamir didn't allow him to keep it for long as she broke away from his lips and allowed hers to roam across his cheek and neck. He froze for a moment, startled, and she smirked to herself as those clinging hands of his bit into her hips in a futile attempt to hold her still. She wasn't interested in it, and she sank her fingers into his hair as the others lightly caressed the skin of his collarbone as her lips traced across his scar. She spoke softly, caressing every inch of the ragged mark she could safely reach without tugging too much at his clothes, "You have to have collected a few of these... Are you going to let me look at you properly?"

"L-Look at me properly?" Warin could only echo her words back to her as he struggled to think against her assault on him. She was soft, too soft, and it made focussing incredibly difficult when her lips were caressing every inch of his throat she could reach. She touched him with expertise born of experience, while he had absolutely none to draw on, and it made him both weak and incredibly eager. He fought it all back, however, struggling for some solid grounding, and he glanced down to see her watching him with raised eyebrows and a hint of a playful smile gracing her lips. That only made his knees weaker as he continued with a ragged hitch to his voice as his blood roared in his ears as he asked with a complete lack of grace or thought, "You want me to take off my clothes?"

"In so many words, yes." Shamir was brisk, honest, and amused, but her eyes were keen as she caught the way his hands had yet to pull her back against him again. He was hesitating, though she knew it wasn't a lack of desire that caused him to do so. His panting, that wild look in his eye, as well as the more... honest reaction straining against his trousers was proof enough of that. If he needed a little more incentive, she was more than willing to give it, especially considering that burning in her veins had translated to a painful lack of patience. She wanted him, and badly. Five years of memory and dreams had done enough to erode both her patience and her pride. None of that was a matter to her now. "And I'd prefer to be out of my own, to boot, Warin."

It surprised her then when his hands shot up to grasp her wrists when she reached to pull the sleeves of her jacket down, and the red in his face likewise caught her off guard. He kept eye-contact with her despite how awkward he looked all of a sudden at her blunt honestly, and though he had grabbed her quickly to stop her from revealing more skin, his hand were gentle in their restraints. He shook his head, eyes surprisingly earnest when he explained himself hoarsely but quickly, "Wait a moment... Not... Not here, like this. It should... I mean, we should... It should be somewhere more... intimate."

Shamir blinked, momentarily caught off kilter and unsure of how to respond, but it didn't really matter as she caught the look of embarrassed earnestness written all over his face. It was the first time he had ever looked in such a way, almost boyishly, if she dared to use such a word. The realization of how important this was to him made her quick to discard her own ideas of impatience and demanding him right then and there, and she smirked up at him with a mixture of amusement and affection as she remarked gently, "Somewhere more "intimate", eh? You're a bit of a romantic, aren't you?"

"I wouldn't quite go as far as that..." Warin hesitated as he felt her hands slip from his loosening hold, but he twitched with surprise as her fingers slid down his wrists and then intertwined with his own. It was a gentle hold, comforting, and it made him both warm in the face and deep in his stomach. He swallowed noisily, his fingers tightening thoughtlessly on hers before he replied weakly, "It's just... Things like this... It's meant to be..."

"You are a romantic. That's unexpectedly cute of you." Shamir remarked with a shake of her head, but it was enough to fully cement the change in her mind at his awkward stumbling. If it was so important to him that he'd vocalize it, that only meant she had to pay him the same kindness by giving him what he wanted. How could she deny him? She stood on tiptoe, pressing a gentler kiss
to his cheek before she pulled back, eyes glinting with affectionate mischief as she explained briskly, "Two minutes. My quarters. Do not keep me waiting this time."

Warin watched as she turned on her heel and walked away without another word, and that burning in his face now had very little to do with the cold weather. She was bold. Much more bold than he was, and he wondered errantly if that was due to experience, or simple confidence in herself. Either way, it was something he still admired in her, and he had to admit she was growing all the more attractive every time he looked at her. He watched her disappear into the barracks, still looking as confident as ever when she shot him a smile over her shoulder as she went, and for a moment, he hesitated in following after her.

How long had it been, since someone had last touched him kindly? He didn't really remember. It felt like ages. But her touch was addictive, and already his entire body was trembling with the craving of her. It was a new feeling, that burning desire, and he ached all over with it. She was the only person who made him feel like that. Who made him want, with single-minded need both emotionally, and physically. It made the hesitation seem small, and easy enough to toss away as he moved to follow thoughtlessly. It wasn't time to think. He'd had five of years of that. Now was the time to act.

He found his way to her quarters without much work or time, and the door was cracked open for him in invitation. He took it without pausing, and found her sitting on the edge of her cot, counting down idly as she waited for him. Her smile when he slid inside her room was blinding, and she pounced for him the instant the door closed behind him. This time there was no hesitation, or doubt or self-reflection. Just blind desire, impatience, and that desperate need to hold a warm, comforting body against their own.

A hot flurry of movement followed, hands reaching, groping, sliding, and clothes fell to the floor carelessly as they stumbled together back towards the cot. Shamir pulling insistently, and Warin following her lead obediently and eagerly. Neither was quite certain what happened next and in what order, but somehow she ended up finding herself sitting on the edge of the cot, hands buried in his hair as he knelt down between her legs, kissing her thighs as his hands unlaced her boots, with her stockings and smallclothes following in short order. For whatever hesitation he had showed before, now it was replaced with speed and efficiency, and she gasped aloud as he parted her legs effortlessly and his calloused fingers slid in deep where she had been aching for him the most for longer than she cared to admit.

"Warin..." Her breathless moan was only proof that he was doing exactly what she wanted from him, and Warin was more then glad to follow both her lead and her signals of pleasure. Her nails pricked at his scalp as she kept a stranglehold on his hair, but he didn't mind the pressure, nor the pain. The way her legs trembled on either side of his head as his tongue swept against the source of her pleasure was enough confirmation that he was performing to her standards... yet it didn't seem enough. He wanted more. More of her taste, her moans, more of everything, and the thought spurred him to further movement without asking for permission.

Shamir bit down onto her knuckles to stop herself from crying out as Warin took a rough hold of her legs and pulled, nearly upending her in the process as he both pulled her closer and tilted her backwards for better access. He all but hooked her legs over his shoulders before returning to attending to her, and she groaned deep in her throat at the sensation of his fingers and tongue assaulting her with merciless precision. He was a quick study, following her every twitch and noise with pinpoint accuracy to improve upon his movements for her, and she arched her back for more as she wondered where he had learned all of this. She had thought him untouched, he certainly acted like he didn't know the first thing about laying with another, yet here he was, making her moan without shame and effort, when it had been quite some time since anyone had ever touched
Another lifetime, she supposed, but then again, she felt it difficult for that to matter, especially now. His fingers curled, rubbing, stroking, stretching, and she hissed as she arched and twisted in response to his movements. He read her so easily and responded so quickly, just as he always had on and off of the battlefield. It made her gasp and shudder, made her bones melt and her skin burn, and she spoke through her fingers, desperate to keep her voice in check lest she wake her neighbours in the throes of her pleasure, "Are you sure... you've never done this before...? You're too damned... good at this for that...!"

Her words made him smirk despite himself, and he paused for only a brief moment from his work to look up at her face. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes dazed, and the way her hand pressed against her mouth to stymie her voice only reminded him that she was being forced to do so because of his actions. The thought made his trousers feel even more tight, almost to the point of pain, and he lazily leaned back down to nibble at her thigh as his fingers carefully, slowly, sought to increase her pleasure in a mockery of what was meant to come after, "I've always been a good student... but you're still the only woman I've ever craved like this. Not once have I ever considered sharing a bed with someone before you."

Shamir held her breath in a desperate attempt to stymie another moan as his tongue returned to its play, roughly circling the source of her pleasure as his fingers plunged in deep without regard for her efforts. There wasn't a reply she could make to that, and even if there was, she wasn't in any sort of state to try it. He was right, he was a good student, and she was quickly losing her ability to care about anything but that sweet heat that was building between her thighs. He seemed to sense it, her tension, her breathless expectation for climax, and it only made him rougher, faster, in his drive to bring her there. He was heedless of anything else, doggedly working with single-minded precision, and her ankles locked behind his neck as her fingers scratched at his scalp to spur him on.

Warin felt her tense, heard her breath catch in a long, pained moan that abruptly became a strangled little cry as her legs locked as her orgasm roared over her body with brutal strength. It made her tremble and gasp and buck, and her vision turned white as the sound of her heart racing in her ears blocked out the world entirely from the force of it. She couldn't remember the last time she had felt this good, felt so outrageously hot and free and complete, and she nearly doubled over in her desperation to pull him closer, to feel him in her arms as she shook wildly with those lazy white-hot sparks of pleasure in the aftermath.

He turned gentle, fingers moving slowly along with her every twitch and spasm, and his tongue swirled both inside and out, draining her dry as she moaned his name and clutched at him as if he would disappear if she let go for even a moment. Her hands pulled insistently at his hair, jerking him up from his work after a few moments of the torture, and he looked up to see her staring down at him, need and desire clouding her eyes as she pulled again to force him up off of his knees and onto the bed with her. He came willingly, allowing for her weak, trembling hands to guide him on top of her, and her arms wrapped around his neck as she pulled him close, breath catching at the weight of his body resting on top of her own before she whispered huskily into his ear, "I want you... Take me properly this time... I can't wait any longer, Warin."

Warin's reply was swallowed by a groan as her hips lifted off of the bed, grinding against his erect centre with a sniper's precise movement and aim, and he grit his teeth together as he wondered how in the world she managed to do that when she looked so spent already. But she was recovering just as quickly as he had sent her over the edge, and the proof of that was in her coy, alluring smirk, and one leg effortlessly wound itself about his hips as she arched to repeat that frustratingly sweet movement of their cores pressing against each other before she continued in a silken murmur,
"That's it... You don't want to wait any longer, either, do you? Did you dream of me these past five years? I did for you, you know. And so far, reality has been so much better. I want to know exactly how good the real you feels against and inside of me. Come on... Don't make me beg."

It was his turn to hold his breath as her fingers brushed lovingly down his chest, her words making his throat tight and the coarse fabric of his trousers even tighter. Her hand slid between their thighs effortlessly, pressing tauntingly against the proof of his arousal, and unbidden his hips jerked forward to grind against her palm in a desperate search for more friction. He felt her smiling against his throat, obviously pleased by his automatic and shameless reaction to her touch, and she took her sweet time experimenting with pressure as her mouth roamed along the rapid beating of his pulse.

"Sh-Shamir... Gods..." Warin hissed as his eyes tightly closed, hips rocking without thought or care as that sly hand of hers slid past the hem of his trousers to touch him directly. The warmth of her skin on his almost undid him then and there, and he froze as he fought the pleasure with desperation. He wouldn't let her have her satisfaction that easily, not when he knew there was still so much more he wanted from her and vice versa, but his body was throbbing with a wild sort of want he didn't know how to properly restrain. He had been honest that she was the first person he'd ever allowed to touch him and touch in return, but that only made him all the more wanting to do it well, and do it right.

"At least your body is honest... That's fine. I'll get my answers out of you soon enough if you won't tell me." Shamir promised with deadly sincerity, and her smile was both coy and dangerous as her free hand sought the hem of his tunic and pulled while the other wrapped about the length of him to stroke him experimentally. His shuddering gasp was reward enough of its own, and she took full advantage of those shaking arms of his to push him off of her and onto his back so she could take control now. He didn't fight her, either too swept up in the pleasure or more than willing to give her what she wanted when she demanded it, and she rewarded him with a long, wicked lick along the length of his scar on his throat in answer.

Warin shuddered, hands grasping at the sheets underneath him as she pulled his shirt up deftly with her free hand while her other stroked and squeezed at him with playful sadism. She was familiarizing herself with him quickly, listening to his noises and watching his body's reactions to her touch to know exactly where and how to touch him to get the best reactions, and he was helpless to stop her as his shirt joined the rest of the clothing that had littered her floor. He felt her pause, and he looked up to take in her suddenly narrowed eyes as they flickered across his chest for the first time.

The scar on his throat extended down underneath the neckline of his shirt, down past his collarbone before it disappeared into a thin line somewhere not too far from his heart. It was a long and wicked wound, likely made with a sword or lance, but it was hardly the only one to mar his tanned skin. His torso was a masterpiece of muscle and scarring, from magical burns that had made their way past his chainmail to small, triangular marks of arrowheads finding their targets in his flesh. It was too much to take in all at once, to put to count as she surveyed him with a seasoned eye of a mercenary, and she felt her heart ache as she reached to caress the nearest scar, a broad axe-wound that had nicked the left side of his stomach, "You really have been fighting for your life these past five years... Look at you... You're an absolute mess."

The pain in her voice made his eyes narrow in return, and he reached for her cheek without thinking as she continued to stare down at him with that piercing, aching look in her eyes. She twitched as his fingers brushed her skin, and it took a moment before she could tear her eyes away from his scarred patchwork of a torso and back to his face, and he pulled at her gently, carefully, to urge her to lay back down against him. She came slowly, hesitantly, but she came all the same for
him, and he brushed his fingers tenderly through her dark hair as he muttered against her ear reassuringly, "I'm still alive."

"You go nowhere without me from today on. Absolutely nowhere." Shamir's voice was harsh and cool, demanding and brooking no argument, and Warin wasn't sure whether he even could make a case for himself as she straddled him in one smooth movement. She grasped roughly at his shoulders, jerking him upright before her hands pulled at his trousers, loosening his belt and pulling them roughly down. She grasped his face then, holding his eyes with hers as they spat violet fire, and she pressed her body as close as it could come without taking him inside of herself when she growled, "Do you understand me? No more letters. No more hiding away. No more making decisions on your own. You stay beside me from now on. You love me here, with me, and not from a distance. If you can't swear to that, then this ends here, right now. I won't go losing you to your own pigheadedness. I can't do it twice, damn you."

Warin wasn't sure if her fervency or her anger surprised him more, but he did know that it made him ache in a way none of his scars ever could manage. His arms wrapped tightly around her, pulling her closer for a firm, comforting embrace, and he felt her tense only for a moment before she allowed herself to accept it. She nuzzled his neck, burrowing in deeply into his hold until there simply was no way for her to get closer, and he spoke slowly, quietly into her hair as his arms squeezed in answer, "I can promise to never go anywhere without you. I can promise to do my damnedest to get out of this war alive. But I won't do it unless you give me that same promise. Vows, or marriage... I can't give you that, not until all of it's over, but anything else you demand of me, you can have. All of me is already yours anyway. I love you."

Shamir felt herself let out a shaky breath at those huskily whispered words, and her chest tightened until it became hard to breathe. At his core he was a mercenary, just as she was, and they both knew the risks they were taking by daring to become intimate in the most dangerous of times. No tomorrow was ever guaranteed, especially in wartime, and that came double for those who made their livelihoods in battle. He couldn't promise her a future, not in good conscience, and she couldn't accept such a promise even if he was willing to laugh and disregard the odds that were tilted so far against them. He knew better. So did she. But he could give her everything else, and he was happy to do so. She had thought she knew that already, but to hear him say the words... It made her shake her head and wish that such cold pragmatism didn't have to be the code they followed.

Strong, unyielding hands pushed him down suddenly, but Warin didn't object or fight at her decision to put him solidly on his back. He stared up at her wordlessly, forcing his eyes not to linger on her lush curves, or those pert, full breasts his hands were aching to grasp again. He fixed his gaze on her face, taking in the torn emotions and the desire running rampant behind them all, and she braced her hands on his chest, keeping him firmly pinned down and refusing to let him even think about trying to rise. She shook her head when she saw the questioning look rising in his eyes, and she spoke firmly, deliberately as she shifted her hips, reminding him of what they had put unthinkingly on pause, "Enough talk. I want you. Now. You can whisper all the sweet nothings you want afterwards."

"Whatever you say." Warin knew to pick his battles, and he was well aware it was long past time trying to fight with her. He had no desire to anyway. She was still stronger and fiercer than he was, and he doubted that was about to change. She could have whatever she wanted of him. He'd give it to her gladly. She deserved it, and more for all she had already put up with from him. If it went even a tiny ways into helping her forgive him, helping her feel better, than it was all the more reason for him to comply with her wishes, regardless of what they were. "I'm yours, Shamir."

"I'll be damned if you ever belong to anyone else after I'm through with you..." Shamir ground out
between gritted teeth as she reached between them again to stroke him, and his immediate response of hissing and arching his back only proved that despite the pause, his body was still all too ready for hers. It made her want to smile despite the initial flare of jealousy and sympathy, and she wondered when she had become the possessive sort. Perhaps his earnestness was the source. Saying so bluntly she was the first and only woman to stir him... It almost, almost made her regret that she could not give him the same, but those years before him had been precious to her in their own ways. She could not return to how she was before him... but everything now, and in the future, were his for the taking. That would have to be enough. And she already knew, as his hips jerked against her palm and her name came hot and husky on his tongue, that he would never be selfish enough to demand more, even if he wanted to.

She was slow and deliberate with him, easing herself down to take him in deep where she ached most for him, and she couldn't suppress a low, satisfied moan from escaping her lips as he fought to stay still underneath her direction. His hands reached instinctively to grasp her hips, holding her steady, and she bit her lower lip as she took a moment to savour the feeling of him inside of her. His hands were trembling from the effort he was putting in to keep himself still, and it made her laugh breathlessly as she moved experimentally, earning a surprised hiss, followed by a low, almost wounded-sounding groan. His eyes were tightly closed, jaw taut and body tense, and she licked her lips before leaning down across his chest to whisper into his ear, "Move with me."

Warin was eager to obey at her demand, sitting up underneath her as his hips surged forwards without his consent. Her responding moan as she grasped at his shoulders to anchor herself to him was all he needed to know his instincts would serve him well from here on out, and he followed their direction without hesitation. She was hot and pliant in his hands, bending with his every movement and seeking more of him like he would disappear should her hands leave him for even a moment. It was an unnecessary worry. He had no plans to leave her again... Especially when they were like this.

Hot, heavy kisses muffled their noises as they moved together with single-minded desperation and want, and Shamir felt her nails rake across his back as he moved hard and fast from below for her. Every movement she made was met with one of his own as he quickly learned how to respond to her desires and wants, and his grip on her waist was almost tight enough to be bruising as he began to move her with him for a chance to go deeper and harder. It made her groan deep in her throat at his aggression, his desire for her, and she felt her nails sinking into his shoulders as she clung to him for some semblance of steadiness. He was too fast on his feet for her to keep up with, but she didn't dislike it. It only made her burn more for him and what he could do to her, and she had no intentions of letting him go for the rest of the night.

His mouth travelled south along her neck, leaving marks she'd have difficulty covering up in the morning, but Shamir found it increasingly difficult to care about such paltry consequences. Those rough, scarred hands of his were roaming her body, familiarizing themselves with her every last inch as his hips continued that sharp, harsh pacing, and her own were not remiss in returning the favour. She wanted to feel all of him, too, to map out every single scar with her fingers and burn the sensation of his body against and inside of hers until it was all she knew in the heat of the moment. Here, in her bed and behind the locked door, no one was there to see or to judge, and the outside world was a thing of fiction. Here, in his arms and in that moment, they were the only two creatures in the entirety of the world.

"Gods... I can't..." Warin's voice came ragged and broken against her ear, his movements more ragged and desperate, and she smiled into his hair as his fingers bit into her waist to pull her harder into his movements. He was frantic, searching for that release that was dangling just beyond his grasp, and she moved eagerly with him to help him find it. That desperate, hoarse note in his voice, made solely because of her suffused her with a rich sort of pride and pleasure, only further proving...
she had become possessive of him without her knowing. Her name echoed in her room from his panting lips, shameless and pleasured and yet still wanting more as his teeth scored her shoulder when he tried to muffle himself with the last bit of sense he had left.

It was more than enough for both of them as his hips bucked without restraint, and her nails sank in deep enough into his skin to draw blood as she bit her lip to stop herself from crying out from the force of her orgasm. Her body shook wildly in his arms, grinding against his every wild, jagged thrust as he lost himself to those same white-hot sparks of pleasure, and his climax followed her own with a long, drawn-out snarl of her name that reverberated deep into her chest and made her legs lock all the more fiercely about his hips in thoughtless abandon.

It seemed to take forever for the trembling to subside and for their shaking hands to release one another, and Shamir muffled a groan as she rolled weakly off of him and into the sheets of her cot. She lay on her back, shivering and panting for breath as those lazy sparks of pleasure from the aftershocks made her limbs twitch as she heard Warin collapsing beside her with similar satisfied exhaustion. She was content to close her eyes and ride out the waves, to enjoy every moment of the lingering heat and electricity as her hand grasped blindly for his, but the moment didn't last as that rough, ragged breathing next to her didn't subside as she had expected it to as the seconds lazily ticked by into minutes.

Instead, it grew worse. Choking, gasping, and abruptly pulling her out of her dazed, tired state and back to attention as she realized that her satisfaction wasn't being shared whatsoever. She sat up in one smooth movement as her eyes flew open to see Warin on his side, one hand grasping at his chest as if his heart was somehow trying to burst its way past his ribs and he was desperately trying to keep it inside of his body somehow. His face had paled and his eyes were wide with panic, and each breath he took was a desperate, gasping gulp of air as if he was drowning. His body was no longer trembling but shaking, and he gripped blindly at the sheets, his spine stiff and muscles tense and bulging as he fought against the adrenaline and tried in vain to somehow steady himself. Instinct took over as she recognized the signs of unhinged fear and panic, and Shamir was quick to gather the shaking man into her arms and hold him close as his breathing worsened into choking coughs. She had seen it before on the battlefield, too many a time in all of her years of fighting and war. It wasn't an unnatural sight to her, though she had never expected Warin of all people to devolve into it, especially after sharing something so intimate. Yet, that didn't matter as she curled her arms about his neck to cradle him to her chest, reacting on sheer instinct as she whispered into his hair as she felt his tense body and ragged breath on her skin, "Breathe... It's all right... Just breathe, Warin..."

It seemed to take a lifetime, a painful, cold, tense lifetime as Warin's body slowly began to relax and his lungs found the ability to take in air properly again. He didn't move, didn't lift his head or even dare to let go of the balled wad of sheets in his white-knuckled fist as Shamir's hand ran soothingly, tenderly through his sweat-slicked hair as she continued to hold him close. His heart was hammering wildly in his throat, still reacting to that completely insane surge of terror that had taken a brutal hold of him when he had found himself unable to breathe properly, and he felt the fear fading to be replaced with a cold stone of shame settling hard in his stomach instead.

"Relax." Shamir's voice came quiet and soft somewhere from above him as she felt his tension returning even as his breathing settled, but for the life of him he couldn't force his head up to look at her. He had no idea what had happened. One moment had been nothing but bliss, filling his head with white noise and pleasure as he succumbed to his climax, and then the next had been a blind panic that he couldn't rationalize no matter how hard he tried. It had been hard to breathe, to reign himself back in once the pleasure had ebbed away, and then his body had kicked in the adrenaline, as if he was on the battlefield again and not in her room, in her bed, and in her arms.
His body felt overwhelmingly hot, yet his extremities were frozen, and still Warin's mind spun wildly with both confusion and anger. What had happened? He didn't understand it. He knew full well where he was and what he had been doing, and yet for some brief, insane moment he had seen blood, felt hard steel sliding into skin, and had lost complete track of everything in an instant. It made no sense. He had never felt that before, and it left him both reeling with exhaustion and confusion, as well as an overwhelming sense of shame. Weakly he tried to push himself out of the warm, soft arms cradling him, but they tightened at once at his movement and refused to let him rise. He turned his head away from her, eyes lowered and voice almost hoarse as he tried to speak, "L-Let go... It's fine..."

"You're as bad a liar as your sister is. Stop fighting. Just relax." Shamir's hold tightened warningly as he struggled against her for another moment, but she admitted she felt no satisfaction when he finally gave up and leaned into her embrace tiredly. It was only exhaustion that made him cede to her and not better sense, and she felt her chest aching as she understood exactly what it was he had just experienced, and why. Her hand was gentle as it continued to comb through his hair as she cradled him close, and she shook her head before she sighed and asked in a softer, more intimate voice, "When was the last time you had a proper chance to rest?"

Warin was silent as he felt her question pierce through his defences and leave him weak and exhausted in her arms. She leaned backwards, taking him with her as she went, and he made no effort to fight as he lay on her chest and listened to the sound of her heart beating. It was comforting, her warmth and that gentle, purring reminder of her being alive, and he bit down on the inside of his cheek for a long moment before he could answer her with complete honesty. It made him ache, in more ways than one, but he owed her the truth even if he didn't want to speak it, let alone acknowledge it. He closed his eyes, pressing his face against her shoulder as he answered in a quiet, hoarse mutter, "Not since the day my father died."

Though she had expected the answer, it still surprised the sniper with the sudden lance of hurt that broke her heart as she held Warin just a little tighter in response. It made sense. For almost five years and a handful of moons, he had been fighting without end, worrying constantly for his life or for his sister's, and never once having a chance to breathe. His body was on the verge of collapse, and his mind was faring no better. It made sense that at the first sign of safety, of actual complete calm and contentment, that everything he had been bottling up in order to continue to survive had come flooding out all at once. She fought not to tighten her hold, to not injury his pride any further by looking as if she was coddling him, but she still was aching from the effort of holding her arms still rather than curling up protectively about him. She wondered if he even was aware of what it meant, breaking down only with her there to witness it, after five entire years of holding steady, but she quickly decided it didn't matter if he didn't know. She did, which meant she could take action on it, and she intended to do so immediately. "Move your things here. You can start sleeping in my quarters."

"What?"

"You, resting properly. That starts tonight, along with everything else." Shamir repeated herself curtly, and she almost appreciated the confused look in his eyes as he looked at her in bemusement. She almost didn't mind it, as it meant he wasn't about to argue, but she still was aching from the effort of holding her arms still rather than curling up protectively about him. She wondered if he even was aware of what it meant, breaking down only with her there to witness it, after five entire years of holding steady, but she quickly decided it didn't matter if he didn't know. She did, which meant she could take action on it, and she intended to do so immediately. "Move your things here. You can start sleeping in my quarters."

Warin blinked several times, unsure if he had heard her properly, but he knew better than to question her when she spoke so brusquely, even if it was about such a topic. He had been doing little more than blundering after her lead, but she hadn't seemed disappointed with it. If anything, she seemed happy, and she still was wearing his mother's ring on her hand. That alone told him it was foolish to second-guess anything she said, but he couldn't help but smile wryly at the
knowledge that her idea of going all in truly meant tossing everything in without a single regard of anything else. He reached idly for her hand as she kept her arms wrapped snugly about his shoulders, and he ran a careful finger over her own to feel the gemstones on the warm band she was sporting before he asked quietly, "You want me to just move in with you, then?"

"I said I intended to collect on the interest you owed me. I may as well start now." Shamir answered with a shrug, and she watched as he offered a small, crooked smile at her in answer. He had hesitated, but it hadn't been for long. He was inexperienced, that much was true, but he was also earnest. He meant everything he said and did. He couldn't promise her marriage, and she would not ask for it, but this much wasn't too much right now. At least, she didn't believe it was, after so long, and after what they'd shared. There was no reason in delaying anything, when their next day was always a gamble. She saw no point in it, if he was agreeable to the idea, at least. "Unless you'd rather move more slowly?"

"No... I've moved slowly enough, I think..." Warin shook his head at her willingness to give him a chance to escape if he wanted it, and he reached to stroke her cheek as she watched him with those sharp, searching eyes that missed nothing every time they looked at him. He appreciated the generosity, but it was unneeded. He had already given her everything he had to give... Ceding to her request to simply share her bed was nothing in comparison. And as weak as he still felt, her arms were gentle and gave him comfort he wouldn't ever ask for, but she was always so willing to give. It made him sigh, and he reached down as best as his still faintly trembling hand could manage to find a hold of the blankets to bring up to drape across their bodies before he continued quietly, "I want to be with you... Just like this, for as long as you'll let me. I've wasted enough time already."

Shamir was quiet as she felt him nuzzle her shoulder, his hand moving gently down her arm as he took in a deep breath and then let it out as his body began to relax again. He moved slightly to take his weight from her without moving from her grasp, careful to cover her with the blankets as he moved, and she bit the inside of her cheek to hide her smile at his mindfulness. Everything he did was automatic despite it being new, his instincts to care and protect showing through despite the years of self-preservation that had made him so guarded and so vulnerable. Five years had gone by, and he was scarred and battered... but he was still the same man who had pushed her into the alcove to steal a kiss, hiding her away from the world at large in case she rejected him and wanted no one to know what he'd done.

Her eyes flickered to her pack that was nestled in the corner of her room, still carrying every single one of the letters she had received from him, and she smiled slightly as she mused over his choice of words as she lay curled up next to him, feeling his arm draped over her middle as he nuzzled her shoulder again gently. It had been a hard five years, but now... Considering it wasted time almost seemed offensive. It was true, she wished it could be changed still, that he hadn't made the choices he had, and she had changed her own, but... It had led them here, all the same. Could she really call that wasted time? She sighed as she pulled at his shoulder, sliding herself closer to nestle into his chest as she ducked her head under his chin before murmuring into his neck, "Calling it a "waste" seems too strong a word."

Warin didn't answer right away as he felt her deliberately snuggle all the closer into his arms until she could not possibly get more snug, and his arms wrapped thoughtlessly about her to hold her tight in place. She slid her legs through his, entwining their bodies all the more underneath the covers, and reminding him just how good it felt to have a warm, soft body pressed against his own. She was safe. She was contentment. And he felt his chest aching with that painful wonder that hadn't stopped plaguing him for the better part of six years since he'd first realized how much he loved her. It was a bittersweet pain, just as his father had always said it would be, and he cherished it as he kissed the top of her head and replied quietly, softly, "If you say so."
AN:

Heheh, I meant it when I said I'd be leaping right for that M rating. I'm pretty bad at that, and I am sorry, but it'd just been bottled up for so long, and I wanted to write it so bad..! And yet, this one took awhile for me to get around to finalizing. Warin was being exceptionally difficult, as he always is, but it was very important to me to make sure I got everything I wanted to written down concerning where he was, both physically and mentally after his five years in self-imposed isolation. That kind of thing does not do good things to your psyche, and it is intentional that Warin is Dimitri's foil in that. Both in their experiences, and how they react with said experiences. That, of course, is not to say that one is better than the other, because that's not how it works. You can't compare pain and suffering on a scale. Everybody feels it differently, and reacts to it differently. But they are meant to represent two sides to grief and pain and isolation, and I hope I managed to convey that well enough despite the difficulties.

There is so much more to follow, and I do apologize for the long break in between works. My fiance came down for a visit, and Christmas is coming, and she brought Pokemon Sword and Shield with her. We spent the entirety of her time playing and learning the new game, and we had a lot of fun (as well as did a lot of cursing and ranting) about it. But here's not the place to talk about Dexit and the majority of things the new games will inevitably bring up. I'm already writing about a contentious game. No need for two fandoms to come after my neck with pitchforks!

Also, just as a notice, there will be more smuts in this collection, and not all of them will be around the two main pairings of Raine/Dimitri and Warin/Shamir. Mind, they likely will not be written out in as much detail and more alluded to or written in a fade-to-black kind of style, but there certainly will be mentions of other couples and their goings-on in the monastery! Because you cannot tell me with a straight face that some of the students are totally in each other's beds after a long five years of war. I won't believe it, even if canon says marriage always took place after everything was said and done. Because sure, marriage happened after, but I'm damn certain they didn't all wait in terms of bedroom activities! XD

Anywhosit, as always, I am so happy to have had your attention this far, and I hope you enjoyed what you read as much as I enjoyed writing it! Please drop me a review should you feel the need, and I hope to see you again in the next chapter! Please have a good one!

Mood: Slightly Tired.

Listening To: "Chandelier" - Sia

~ Sky
Broken Roads

Chapter Summary

Genres/Rating: Friendship, Conflict, Ideals, Angst. (T)

Characters: Raine, Dorothea, Dimitri.

Summary: The last thing Raine had expected after their first brush with Imperial forces was to see a former Black Eagle come without fanfare into the walls of Garreg Mach, especially after five years on the run, but the war had proved that the divides had run deeper than she had initially thought. Who was she to turn away a plea for help, regardless of where it came from? The charity however would prove divisive, but that, too, was something she was quickly learning to handle, regardless of how much it pained her to do so. She was the commander now... and commanding came with conflict more often than it came with peace.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Pegasus Moon

Garreg Mach Gardens

Afternoon

"Here. It isn't much, but you've come all this way... I hope I remembered the right flavour." Raine spoke quietly, politely, as she set down the still-steaming kettle on the tabletop, avoiding the steam as she did so before she poured the water into the two waiting cups in front of her. She never had gotten used to the concept of making a good tea, but good-manners had demanded that she at least try her hand for her guest. She knew it had to look foolish, especially considering the fact that their few resources meant such trivial things like tea leaves were practically a luxury at the moment, but she was determined to not show weakness, or that she and her small band were lacking in any sort of capacity. Pragmatism and pride demanded it, even if she was well aware that the woman sitting in front of her would probably be the last person in the whole of Garreg Mach to begin to scold her for it despite the fact that she surely had noticed it on her way there.

"Don't worry so much, Professor. You've been more than hospitable, especially considering the circumstances. Tea isn't important." Dorothea shook her head and tried to hide a little laugh as she accepted Raine's clumsy attempts at hospitality, but she took the tea gratefully anyway to warm her hands as the former professor of the Blue Lions took a seat across from her after pouring her own cup of tea. The smell of the familiar leaves was comforting and relaxing after such a long stint of travel, especially considering how long she had gone without such small comforts, and she knew it showed as she leaned back in her seat to add with a hint of a playful smile, "But I'm grateful all the same for it... It's been ages."

"I imagine... You left the Empire only a year into the war, didn't you? These past handful of years must have been difficult for you, more than most." Raine mused as she turned her gaze away from Dorothea and to the sound of laughing children that was echoing throughout the gardens just to her
left. She still was having difficulty grasping what she was seeing and what she had been told when Dorothea had arrived, unannounced and unexpected just a handful of days after Garreg Mach's brush with the first of the Empire's forces. Word had spread too quickly for her liking of their doings there, and they had fully expected that sooner rather than later they would be fighting for their lives once again at the foot of the monastery, but clever tactics, years of fighting, and righteous anger had left them victorious, even if the aftermath had left a sour, ugly taste in their mouths.

Raine shuddered reflexively. She hadn't wanted it, hadn't wished for it, but there had been little choice left to her when she had realized with a drop in her stomach that the enemy commander would suffer if she permitted Dimitri to continue with his insane idea of enacting justice on his opponent. A quick, merciful death had been all she could do for the poor, pleading man at Dimitri's feet, and she could only hope that constant vigilance, and curt, unyielding commands would keep the prince of Faerghus at a heel from now on. The war already was going to leave behind a pile of corpses for the living to contend with once it was over, and Raine had no intention of allowing torture to be added to the long list of crimes that would be committed in tearing down Edelgard's empire. Not when she was the one put in charge of seeing it to fruition, regardless of what Dimitri wanted.

It had made her hesitant, then, when Dorothea had come calling shortly after the remains of the battle had been swept away, asking for her by name, and Raine had been quick to leave her present duties to go and meet her in person without letting anyone else know of the circumstances. It was risky for her to be here uninvited and unexpected, especially considering Dimitri's mental state, but she wasn't about to turn the former Black Eagle away on something as foolish as that. The monastery needed every helping hand it could possibly get, and even if Dorothea was not there to offer aid, it was still not in her to just leave the singer in the cold without hearing her case, if she had one to make.

And it had been with surprise that Raine had realized she indeed had a case to make, as the singer had not returned to Garreg Mach alone. Following her like a flock of ducklings had been a group of almost half a dozen young children, and Raine had only been able to stare, mouth partially agape at the sight of Dorothea herding them along with a maternal smile and a kind, if firm, look in her eye as she told them to shush and allow for the adults to speak. She had been taking in orphans ever since her flight from the Empire a year into the war, and had settled relatively close to her former academy before she had heard whispers of an occupying force taking up arms in the once-abandoned monastery. She had known at once what it meant and what was happening, and she had dropped everything to leave the small hamlet she had settled in to see it for herself and with her wards to request their aid in sheltering those she was having difficulty caring for on her own after so many years.

After a few minutes of shock at the revelation, Raine had moved quickly to solve the problem that had been so unceremoniously tossed upon her shoulders. She was only glad that the word of the Kingdom's forces rallying in Garreg Mach had brought back more than those searching for help, as many of the displaced priests and nuns from the initial invasion had come rushing back to attend to the place of worship and provide much-needed aid for the rebellion in Rhea's name. One of those nuns was now shepherding Dorothea's children with all of the patience of a saint, allowing now for Raine and Dorothea to sit in relative quiet and privacy to speak at length. They were a rowdy bunch, running here and there all over the gardens, but their laughter was a balm to all who were present to hear it, and it was obvious in everyone's smiles that the sight of such innocence after such a gruesome battle only the week before was exactly what they had needed in their lives.

Dorothea could see this clearly as she watched Raine watching her wards with a distant, numb sort of look in her seafoam-coloured eyes, and it made her wince with both guilt and sympathy. She
hadn't expected to enter into her old place of learning to find the woman everyone had thought dead after the invasion of Garreg Mach, but the whispers that had reached even her small, out-of-the-way haven had been unmistakable. The professor had somehow survived all these years, and was now spearheading a rebellion against the Empire, and what more, had the future king of Faerghus with her. She was a walking miracle even if she looked more tired and worn than a shining example of the goddess' will as she had been branded, and it made her smile wanly as she corrected Raine idly, "Leaving the Empire wasn't difficult, really... It was what came after that proved difficult. Finding a way to be useful... To do something amidst all the fighting that wasn't fighting, but could still be of some good... That was difficult."

"Taking in displaced children is certainly one way to do good, Dorothea. I wouldn't discount your efforts simply because you aren't fighting." Raine sharply turned her attention back to Dorothea, hearing her wariness, her guilt, without much need to look in further. It was obvious that the young woman in front of her was scarred and worn by the war, even if she had hung up her sword and fled the conflict rather than try to stay and fight. She had seen enough damage in the initial invasion and immediately afterwards to know she was no soldier, and to try and be one would only destroy her if she chose such a route. She had not lasted a year in the charade before it had become too much, but Raine was not about to judge her for that. Not at all. "Rather, I'd say it's a much more honourable pursuit... What you do will have more impact than any swinging of a sword ever will. Those children of yours will remember you and your kindness... That will last much longer than a war will."

Dorothea smiled, but she admitted that the words rung rather hollow even if she knew the praise was genuine. It was not in Raine's way to speak falsehoods just to soothe a damaged ego, and she was a poor liar anyway, but the singer admitted it just did not sit well with her. She did not regret her actions, nor did she regret her choices, but yet she still had this lingering feeling of doubt and anxiety, especially when she had realized she simply could not do it all alone. It had been desperation that had drove her to Garreg Mach's doors with her children, and she knew that she could do nothing for the charity she would be given, if it was to be given at all. She was not a soldier. She never had been. The truth of it was clear after she had seen what five years of war had done to the country and its people, and it made her sick to know all she could do was try to heal wounds that simply were beyond her skill, but needed attention nonetheless.

Children had always been a weakness of hers, especially considering her own harsh upbringing, and arriving at the idea of helping orphans left behind by the fighting had been easy once she had realized what other scars the war was leaving in its raging wake. But the task was more daunting than she had initially assumed it would be, and she was now painfully aware she was not up to the task. Not on her own. If she had been, she never would have come to Garreg Mach to beg for aid, and face the war again from the very base of the rebellion itself.

Dorothea let out a tired sigh, and she shook her head as she mused with a bittersweet little smile playing across her face as she met Raine's stare head-on and without flinching, "You're kind to say so, Professor, but I still feel like an abject coward... I don't regret my choice to leave the Empire, to leave the fighting behind, but... Everything I've done thus far... It hasn't amounted to much, in reality. I'm struggling to provide for those I've taken in already, and there are so many more children out there that are in desperate need of help... I came here to ask for aid, when I should be capable of doing it by myself. And as much as I'm glad to know that you're here and well, and fighting to end this madness... This is the last place I want to be with these children."

"I understand that... but I won't have you putting yourself in more danger by trying to scrape by alone. You and yours are welcome here, for as long as needed, until you can get back on your feet. It's what the monastery was built for, and it's what it must remember, even now." Raine dismissed Dorothea's concerns even as she understood just how deeply they ran, and she straightened her
spine as she caught the look of shock that passed abruptly through the singer's eyes. It was obviously not the answer she had expected when she had explained her plight, but Raine didn't mind that. There were more important factors at play, and she knew that better than anyone as she continued firmly, "I won't hear you argue about it, either, Dorothea. As much as you might hesitate at the idea, coming here is much better than trying to go it alone. They need safety and shelter. Garreg Mach can provide that. It may not be ideal, but it's better than any other option at the moment. The monastery was meant to be home to those in need... It must remain that way, if we're to remember what we're fighting for in the first place. Otherwise, what's the damned point?"

"Professor..." Dorothea wasn't entirely sure if she was touched, alarmed, or actually afraid as she heard Raine speak so simply of solving her problems by taking in the children under her wing without so much as a moment to consider it at length. It was a sweet gesture, and far more than Dorothea had ever expected, but she knew charity almost never came without attachments. She knew that the monastery was struggling for soldiers and resources. A simple glance about had told her that. Her wards would be used as a bargaining chip, and she had had more than enough of bloodshed. She couldn't accept the offer, no matter how good it sounded to her ears. It would be impossible to do so, and she explained that painfully as her hands began to tremble about the frail china cup, "I-I can't just accept that so easily... And you need to know that even if you do take in these children, I-

"I don't expect you to fight, Dorothea. You aren't about to be called to take up a sword, simply because you're here. I would never ask that of you." Raine cut in smoothly, anticipating the argument and not willing to wait for Dorothea to give voice to her concerns so she could soothe her fears. It made sense. The singer was wise, and jaded. She knew the world worked via exchanges of currency, and she had likely come to Garreg Mach fully expecting that any offer of charity she would be given would come with strings. But Raine didn't care for such logic, nor would she allow for the assumption to stand. She had been gifted the power of leadership, and she would not wield it unfairly, or cruelly. "Stay and mind your children, just as you would have if you had never come here. That's more than fine by me. If you do feel compelled to help somehow, then I know Professor Manuela could always use another pair of hands in the infirmary, but even that I wouldn't demand of you. You came here for looking for help. I'll give it. It should be that simple, and I will make it that simple for you."

"You really don't want me fighting?" Dorothea looked closely at the woman in front of her, struggling to find the logic even though she was desperate to grasp onto it with both hands all the same. It played in her favour, just as she had wished beyond hope that it would, but even she knew she could not just take it without question. She had seen the state of the monastery. She knew full well just how dire the rebellion's situation was, despite the professor's attempts to make it appear otherwise. She had grown up on the streets of Enbarr, and she knew desperation and hopelessness when she saw it. It was unmistakable. They needed men, supplies, morale... and yet there Raine was, turning away a potential soldier, without even a second thought. If she hadn't been the one to be turned away, she would have called it folly. It was that and that alone that made her question her aloud, despite knowing it was not truly something she could do, "Even though you know I can?"

"You were a student here once, and you're probably better than half of the soldiers we've mustered, but that doesn't mean anything when your wants are concerned. You don't want to fight. Therefore, you shouldn't. If you feel you're doing more good by focussing on giving to these children than swinging a sword or casting magic, then by all means, continue to do what you're doing." Raine's answer came firmly as she saw the doubt in Dorothea's eyes, but she felt no offence for the second-guessing. Dorothea was a keen woman despite her looks and her attitude, and she was skilled even if her stomach was not the sort for warfare. Raine would not discount those facts, but they seemed to matter little against what she knew, and what she had been told. Her decision was final, even if Dorothea would argue, and she made that perfectly clear as she continued seriously, "Forcing you
away from that and to the battlefield makes me no better than Edelgard. And yes, I am aware that she's been involuntarily conscripting soldiers to her cause. I may be new to all of this, but I'm learning as quickly as I can about this entire mess. I won't make anyone fight against their will. Not even you."

Dorothea hesitated in replying, watching that firm glint in those familiar seafoam-coloured eyes that told her of a lifetime of stubbornness that no sweet words would ever be able to overwhelm. She meant everything she said, and she would stand by it to the death. Dorothea knew that as much as she knew she needed to breathe to survive. Yet... She couldn't simply accept what was being given without further question. It felt wrong, especially with all she had seen and what she knew the leader of the rebellion was turning down, and doing so without bothering to inform her allies. She couldn't hold Raine's stare, feeling both an equal amounts of relief and shame, and instead could only stare into the depths of her tea as her fingers wrapped a little more tightly about her cup as she began quietly, "Professor... That won't be a popular sentiment, you do know that, right? What if you're called into question for taking us in? A former Black Eagle, and a handful of children all hailing from the Empire?"

"Then those saying my judgement is wrong have forgotten the larger picture. Forgotten what this monastery, what the Church of Seiros, was created to do." Raine's answer came quickly and curtly, and her eyes flashed fire as if she was daring anyone, anyone at all, to say such a thing to her face. She knew full well it was a possibility, but she didn't care. What did it matter? In the grand scheme of it all, Garreg Mach had not changed, even if the world about it was embroiled in war. It had once stood as a place of sanctuary, and more than ever, that was needed regardless of logistics and circumstance. And... Her smile was half coy, half almost downright malevolent as she added on with a shake of her head, "Rhea may no longer be here, but she did put me in charge. Putting aside the fact that it was likely the most ridiculous position to put me in, if everyone wishes for me to lead, they'll need to acknowledge the fact that my decisions will never be universally liked. If this happens to be one of them... So be it. I won't go to the grave with turning away helpless orphans on my conscience, logistics be damned."

Dorothea that silent, taking in the words and their meanings, and reminded of that moment, five long years ago, when she had sat beside Bernadetta in her quarters with Caspar and Petra, and had been told to make a choice she wanted to make, and not one she would be compelled to do. That fire in her seafoam eyes, that warmth that came from both compassion and idealism, had not flickered or dimmed even an ounce since she had seen her last. It made her both wonder and ache, for simpler times and happier moments, and for the first time in many a year... She felt both at ease, and completely safe. Here, underneathe the wings of the Blue Lion's former professor... She would always be safe if she chose to seek shelter there. She raised a hand, carefully wiping at the corners of her eyes to hide the stinging of oncoming tears as she remarked with a weak little chuckle, "Heh... You really haven't changed at all, have you...? Not even a little bit. It's really like last time we spoke... All those years ago."

"For you it was five years. For me, it's been barely more than a handful of weeks." Raine admitted with a wry smile as she felt Dorothea's words pierce into her stomach and wrench at her in painful reminder. It hurt, still, despite all of her efforts to push on through it. She had found her feet in battle, there was no hesitation on the field unless she wished for death, but that didn't mean she had found her place just yet in this strange, new world. She still felt misplaced, her five years gone and her entire being aching for all she had missed, but there was so little she could do about it. And even complaining felt trite, when she looked to how the world had suffered while she had slept on in peace and ignorance. Did she even have the right to feel sorry for herself, even if she was stumbling about half-blind in remembrance that what she had experienced was not indeed her "yesterday"?"
"I know... and you need to know those words are why I'm here today." Dorothea let out a long breath as she decided that the facts she had been presented with, as outlandish as it seemed, were indeed the truth. She wasn't about to question the details, as they were not hers to question, but Raine's honesty was refreshing, and it deserved truth of its own in answer. She looked up from her tea, now holding the other woman's gaze confidently as she offered a gentle smile before she explained, "Why a lot of us are where we are today, actually. We listened to you, you know. All of us did."

"I'm sorry?"

"I kept in contact with my classmates. Well, as best as I could, once I left the Empire... I know where most of them are. I wasn't sure if I should tell you, because of the circumstances... but you're right. You haven't changed, not a bit... and that means I can trust you with what I know." Dorothea explained with a growing smile at the look of puzzlement that crossed Raine's face at her words, and she took a moment to take a sip of her now-cooled tea to let the words fully sink in to the clearly surprised woman. She really hadn't changed. She still didn't understand how important she was, how much of an impact she could have, and did have, and it made it very difficult for Dorothea to hide her amusement as she continued on gently, "Consider it a gesture of goodwill, at the very least. You can show anyone willing to argue with you that you got something out of taking me and the children in, even if it's only information."

Raine shook her head, though there admittedly was a part of her that felt her stomach leap into her throat at the idea of knowing that the singer's classmates were not in such terrible positions as she had initially feared. She had had no way of knowing of the locations of the former Black Eagles, and Petra had admitted with honest disappointment that once she had been forced to return to Brigid, she had been isolated from all of her former classmates entirely, both from the Empire, and the Kingdom. Despite her wish to know if she was to put her sword against the children she had once known and had even had a chance of teaching, she still could not warrant using them as a gesture of goodwill for her comrades. It felt wrong, and she knew that showed clearly on her face as she began warily, slowly, "Dorothea, I don't want to use your classmates as leverage..."

"You won't be. Most of us aren't fighting. That's what I want you to know. I wasn't the only one who chose to part ways with the Empire." Dorothea dismissed the concerns as they came, offering a gentle smile as she understood Raine's concern and brushed it away in the same moment. It was all genuine, there was absolutely nothing underhanded about her desires or actions, and that made Dorothea bold, and at ease as she began without preamble, or any allowing for Raine to continue to argue, "Take Caspar, for instance. He was banished from his house because of his opinions on the war, and he and Linhardt both decided to abandon the Empire together, just as they said they would when you spoke to them all those years ago. Caspar meant it when he said he wouldn't fight for Edelgard, regardless of what it would cost him."

"I'd like to say I'm surprised, but quite honestly, I knew if anyone would be avoiding getting entangled in the Imperial army, it would certainly be Caspar..." Raine shook her head as she mused slowly on Caspar's actions, but there was no fighting the smile that curled at her lips at the knowledge that the brawler had held true to his word to refuse to fight for Edelgard regardless of the consequences. He truly held tight to his ideals of justice and right and wrong, and even after five years, he had not changed at all in that regard. It was a comforting thought, amidst all of this other darkness, but she did admit with a little laugh as she thought of that forest-haired mage who needed to be pulled or shoved along in order to do almost anything, "I'll admit, I'm just surprised he managed to take Linhardt with him, of all things. I'm glad, mind you, but I am still surprised he was motivated enough to leave."

"Oh, it was more than that. Linhardt stole a few things from his father's vault on his way out, if his
story is to be believed... He was certainly motivated to be putting the war behind him, once he saw that Caspar had no intention to stay." Dorothea chuckled, remembering those missives she had traded with the duo when she had first thought of reaching out to them upon her own departure from the Empire's territory. It had been with worry that she had received their first letters, then amusement, and then shortly after shock, but none of it was anything else but a comfort now that the passage of time had made her understand where they had been, and what they had all been forced to do in order to do what they wanted, and not what was expected of them. "But, moreso than that, before they left the Empire entirely, they made a stop at House Varley, as well as quite the ruckus... They took Bernie along with them."

"They kidnapped Bernadetta?"

Dorothea choked on a laugh at Raine's astonished exclamation, and she had to admit, at the time when she had read Linhardt's dry explanation of their "adventures" in his letters, she had had the exact same reaction. Only the letter Bernie had enclosed along with Linhardt had quashed any and all feelings she had of anger or uncertainty for the boys' actions, as it had proved that despite her initial panic, she was actually quite grateful for the chance to be out from underneath her father's thumb again. It was not exactly what she had expected, or in fact even wanted, but being in Caspar and Linhardt's company was much better than anything she had been living with before. She waved a hand, choking on her laughter as she tried to explain for the professor's wide-eyed reaction, "I wouldn't so much call it kidnapping as I would a rescue, quite honestly. Bernie didn't want to go home, even after we fled Garreg Mach before the invasion. She didn't know what she wanted to do, but she most certainly never wanted to return to her father, or to answer Edelgard's summons... But she didn't have a choice, when we had to eventually return to the Empire when the dust settled. Caspar had to know that. Why else would he bother to go there when he and Lin could have easily slipped away without notice?"

"I suppose that makes enough sense, but... I wish I could say I was surprised, but considering Caspar, he would do it, and it's not as if Linhardt is capable of restraining him once he puts his mind to something..." Raine shook her head, both with wonder and amazement, and she almost wished she could have been a fly on the wall for that particular mess. Caspar was not a man of subtlety, and if he had stormed House Varley for Bernadetta, it would have been a loud, messy, and wild affair, with poor Linhardt and Bernadetta being dragged along for his wild escapades, no matter how well-intentioned they had to be. She fought a smile, knowing it wasn't proper of her to be finding amusement in such a thing, but it was a strain to do so as she mused into her teacup in a desperate effort to not chuckle aloud, "Ah, but poor Bernadetta. That can't have been easy for her. Caspar isn't exactly a subtle man... and we both know she does not do well with being forced out of her comfort zone."

"I think she's all right. She wasn't as upset as she wanted to sound in her letters... I know that Caspar's a magnet for trouble, but he's been keeping her out of it, for whatever that's worth. She's safer with him than she is at home, or in the Empire. I know that for certain." Dorothea reassured her with a smile, and she felt just as glad as she knew Raine did with such information tucked safely away. She hadn't known what to think of it until Bernadetta had said herself that she at least was happy to be beyond the Empire's borders even if she didn't like how it was handled, and knowing that Caspar was keeping himself leashed for her sake, if for nothing else, was also a great comfort. He cared for her a great deal, enough to try to hold himself in check after his initial thoughtless charging forward, and she smiled as she admitted, "Caspar will do anything to keep her safe. He said as much to me, in his last letter before we lost contact. I don't know where they are now, but if they're together, then Bernie is safe, and far away from the fighting... That's a good weight off my shoulders."

"And what about Linhardt?"
Dorothea sighed, as she hadn't been pleased with what Linhardt had chosen to do when she had learned of it, but she knew that there was little she could do about it. Caspar and Bernadetta had been unable to persuade him to stay with them, and he had all but dropped off of the face of Fódlan without more than a single farewell letter. She trusted that he was alive and well, if only for her own sake than anything else, but it was admittedly frustrating to not know what he was doing, or why, and she knew it showed on her face as she answered slowly for Raine, "Linhardt travelled with them for a time, but he left them to go to the Alliance when they were skirting through the territory... He said he had pressing concerns there, and he wanted to handle it by himself. No matter how much arguing there was, no one could dissuade him, and he went on his way just like he always did. Caspar wasn't happy about it, but... It must have been important to Lin. From what I know, though, it doesn't have anything to do with the war. He's staying far away from the frontlines. I know it has something to do with his research, but he wouldn't tell me more, and he hasn't answered any of my letters since."

"The Alliance...? His research?" Raine furrowed her brow at the unexpected words, and she tilted her head to the side as she wracked her mind for answers to the multitude of questions this information presented to her. From all of her knowledge, which admittedly was not much, she had surmised that the majority of research into Crests had always stemmed from the Empire and their closest territories rather than the Alliance. For Linhardt to abandon his friend for his research, especially in Alliance territory of all places, was certainly a surprise, and one she could not admittedly understand. "I suppose if he wished to do research unimpeded by Edelgard's rule, the Alliance was likely the safest place for him to take refuge, in light of how fractured the Kingdom is at current... But what exactly would he be researching there that would make him choose to do it by himself?"

"I wish I knew. He stopped writing me, and Caspar didn't have any idea, either. They parted ways near House Ordelia's territory, and if they've kept contact since, I have no idea..." Dorothea shook her head slowly with a deep frown furrowing her brow, and her worry clenched her chest as she hoped that her friends had managed to keep themselves from trouble in the last few years. Keeping in regular contact was not easy even under the best of circumstances, and they all were as close to refugees as they could come now, which made things all the more difficult. She sighed as she admitted sadly, "We all did leave around the same time, but we haven't had much chance to keep in contact these past few years. We've all fled to the winds, really, and though I didn't move quite far from where I settled, Caspar and Bernadetta at the very least have if his last letter or two were any indication. Lin is Lin, and having him stop writing wasn't a surprise, but... I am hoping that somehow soon, I'll hear from Bernie again, at the very least."

An uncomfortable silence settled between the two, and Raine felt her lips pulling down into a frown at the obvious lack of mention of the one Black Eagle that she and Petra had been unable to reach when she had made an attempt to speak to them all of making choices for themselves rather than anything else. It was obvious from the pained look in Dorothea's eyes that her mind had gone to the exact same place, but what she hadn't expected to see was the look of obvious heartache written plainly across her face. The thought of that young politician was obviously a severe injury to Dorothea, and Raine hesitated to even begin to probe such a wound despite her desire to know if her worst fears were correct.

Dorothea took in a shaky breath, feeling her chest tighten and her fingers grow cold despite the heat of the cup she was still holding, and a quick look upwards at Raine's face proved she was trying desperately to hold herself back from asking about the one student that she had yet to mention. It made her smile sadly, knowing that Raine was trying to be kind for her feelings, but she knew that her own emotions didn't matter. It was important that she know the truth, that she know what was to come if she was to continue to walk this path against the Empire, and it made her swallow down that knot in her throat as she began slowly, firmly, "Ferdie... didn't leave with us, as I'm sure you've
already guessed."

"Dorothea..."

"No, please, Professor. Let me continue. I have to." Dorothea interrupted that kind, compassionate call of her name that was also an offer for her to quit while she was ahead as quickly and as firmly as her voice would manage. She knew it had shaken on his name, her heart was still broken from the last time they had shared words, if she could even call their last interaction such a thing, but her own feelings did not matter now. She took in a breath to steel herself, forcing her eyes up as she picked herself up again to begin, "He's chosen to stay with the Empire. With the Imperial forces. I tried so many times to talk him out of it. When I planned to leave, I... I begged him to come with me, but he wouldn't hear of it. He had made up his mind. He felt it was duty to continue to try to guide Edelgard onto a proper path again, befitting the Empire, befitting the throne... even if it would cost him everything. We fought... It was the last time I saw him."

Raine winced, averting her eyes as she heard that aching, wistful note in Dorothea's voice despite how valiantly the singer was trying to hide it. Her eyes had taken on an unnaturally shiny hue, proof of tears she was fighting back, but there was no use in it. Her sadness, her despair and helplessness, were on clear display for Raine. She knew that feeling, that horribly twisted feeling of watching someone she cared for pull themselves beyond her reach despite all of their efforts to keep them close and out of danger, and it was not something she wished on even her worst enemy. Dorothea was heartbroken for Ferdinand, for how their relationship had deteriorated, and she was also afraid for him and the path he was heading down. "I'm... I'm sorry, Dorothea... That couldn't have been easy for you."

"No... It wasn't. I hate the thought that the last thing we did was fight, but... I can't stop him from doing what he believes is right, just as much as he couldn't stop me from leaving." Dorothea let out a breath as her shoulders slumped despite her best efforts, and she took in another deep and shaky breath before again raising a hand to brush her eyes on the back of her sleeves. It hurt, and hurt deeply, to think that their last exchange had been so full of anger and acid and frustration, but she had had five long years to come to terms with it. Though, she had to admit to herself as she watched Raine watching her in sympathetic silence that perhaps she hadn't come to terms with it at all in reality. Perhaps she had only been pretending, putting her feelings away in a small, sealed box and hiding it somewhere she didn't have to look, if only because it just hurt too much to face it and all that came with it. "It was a decision he wanted to make, in the end... and I remember what you said, Professor. That you'd respect a decision we made because we wanted to, even if it meant that we'd one day be enemies... Ferdie chose a path that will run counter to yours... I just... I just wanted you to know that, if you were to... In the fighting..."

"Stop. Don't... It's all right. You don't need to say anything else." Raine cut her off firmly but not unkindly as she heard Dorothea's voice beginning to break, and she reached out across the table to settle a comforting hand on one of the singer's in a gentle gesture. She didn't want to think of it anymore than she knew Dorothea did. She respected Ferdinand and his single-minded devotion to his homeland and his position, and she would never think less of him for choosing to remain even when his friends departed... but it did not mean she wished to think of the day when her sword would have to clash with his because of that choice. It was unlikely, that they would end up clashing personally, but the chance was all too real, and it caused her enough distress on its own. She could hardly imagine how much it had to hurt Dorothea, coming to the conclusion that she could very well lose him to the people she had come to for help, and that knowledge made her continue brusquely, "Leave it where it is, at least for now. You've said enough for today. I'm thankful for everything you've told me, and I'll keep it close for the future... but for now, let that be the end of it. Attend to your children. Start to settle back in. See Ingrid and Petra, and try to get a little rest... You need it. I think we all do."
"Oh... Ingrid and Petra are here. I forgot that they would be... It'll be nice to see them again."
Dorothea smiled through her sniffling, pushing her emotions back down at Raine's urging despite knowing that one day, soon enough, she would be forced to unearth them again when the time came. But she understood the professor's insistence to rest, to put it aside for the moment if only to stop herself from collapsing where she sat, and she appreciated her kindness more than she could put into words as she forced out a laugh she didn't feel. "I imagine they'll be as surprised as you were, when the figure out what I've been up to for the past few years... Will you let them know when you see them that I'm here?"

"I will... and as much as I'd like to stay... I'm afraid I have my duties to attend to, and a few details to have sorted out now that you'll be here." Raine slowly pushed herself to her feet despite all of her desires to stay seated where she was and continue to drink in the old and familiar company. She hated the idea of the conflicts likely to come with her decisions, but she did not regret them in the least, and felt those familiar protective instincts flaring up again as she watched Dorothea accept her words with a still slightly tearful smile. She had only been involved in this mess for two moons, and already she felt overwhelmed and aching with all of their pain that she was witnessing, and she didn't want to think of how much more was to come in the days ahead. She needed the break almost as much as she knew Dorothea did, and she offered her a smile that didn't reach her eyes despite her best attempts as she spoke quietly, "If anything happens, or you run into any trouble, call me immediately, and I'll see it sorted. But I think you'll be fine, yes? Just relax, and make yourself at home. I promise to check in on you and yours soon."

"Thank you, Professor."

Raine accepted the thanks with a nod before she excused herself, and she felt the weight of her duties, her position, almost at once slam itself back onto her shoulders the moment she left the gardens behind and returned to the great, sprawling halls of Garreg Mach. It was just a simple conversation over tea, and yet she felt utterly spent from it, and she had to wonder at her flagging stamina. Was she truly cut out for this, if even just seeing old faces that could have been enemies brought out such a reaction in her? She wasn't truly sure, and she admitted it made her question herself more than ever, despite how much she had tried to project confidence and reassurance for someone who needed it much more than she did. 'I think I need to speak with Seteth about much more than Dorothea, when I finally catch the man...'

"So, this is how you choose to protect Garreg Mach, by allowing the rats to return to infest its walls, so soon after driving them out. Is this your idea of waging war?"

The words hit like a blow from an axe, and as much as she hated to admit it, hearing them so suddenly spoken from behind her made her leap like a scalded cat as her hand automatically shot for her belt and the handle of her blade. She wasn't sure if it was his rough, derisive tone, or the fact that his sheer size and sudden appearance from behind her had made her first involuntary reaction be panic, but Raine fought it down as best she could as she turned half on her heel to face the man who had been hiding in the shadows, eavesdropping on what she had considered to be a private conversation.

Dimitri was watching her coldly, leaning against the wall as contempt coloured his expression and that one, wild cerulean eye that was appraising her like a cat about to shred its prey to pieces for a meal. His arms were folded across his chest in an imposing stance, and the lance he held in one of his hands only proved that he had heard possibly everything, and his first and initial reaction to Dorothea's appearance had been to grab a weapon despite knowing no other details than that a former student of the Black Eagles had arrived into the walls of Garreg Mach.

Raine took all of this in without a change of expression even as her stomach tightened
uncomfortably with a mixture of anger and disappointment. She was numbly aware that none of it surprised her, and that only made her ache, but she pushed it aside without a second glance. Now was not the time to dwell on such thoughts, especially as she understood at once she was now in a very dangerous situation that she had to diffuse whether or not she was prepared for it. She stood her ground, carefully placing the mask of the Ashen Demon back onto her face as she answered Dimitri's callous words with a cool reply of her own, "Is that your opinion on allowing orphans and former classmates back into the sanctuary of the monastery, when they obviously aren't posing a threat to you or the war effort?"

"You think them incapable of a threat? Are you that divorced from the reality of this war?" Dimitri's voice dripped derision and cruelty, and his lips curled upwards into a cold, deadly smile as if he could not believe her words, or her naivety. She would welcome her enemies into her home, into their base of operations, without once considering the risk she was taking in doing so? She had fallen far farther than he had once assumed, or, she was simply that blind of the reality of the world she now was living in. It did not matter to him either way, which she truly was, but her decisions could not stand regardless of her excuses. He would not permit it. "They're vermin, all of them, and they must be exterminated. This world cannot rest until the Empire is completely obliterated."

"This world, or you? And frankly, I don't care about the latter if this is to be your reaction to an act of charity." Raine's hands twitched at her sides as she forced them down from her weapon with more effort than she wanted to admit, and she turned totally on her heel now to face Dimitri head-on. His words still disturbed her, still made her blood run cold at how desperately he was clinging to his hate and bloodlust, but the sudden plume of anger she felt was enough to combat it. And she realized somewhat dully that she was indeed truly angry with him, with his words, and it made her feel reckless, fearless, and she met his glare and returned it with one of her own as she continued sharply, "I agree that the Empire needs to be stopped, but I won't allow for you to call for the deaths of every last man, woman, and child simply because of where they had the unfortunate luck to be born. If you believe this war is going to end with the complete destruction of the Empire and all of its citizens, then I'm afraid you're going to be sorely disappointed. I won't permit it."

"You won't permit it? Do you understand just what it is you're saying? You're going to allow these vermin to continue to proliferate, even within these very walls, and do nothing to stop it?" Dimitri watched her almost with disbelief, but all too quickly he was shaking his head, his upper lip curling into something akin to a snarl, or a dismissive sort of smirk as he looked down on her words with a mocking sort of amusement. She truly was a fool, a blind, ignorant fool, and she'd be the death of them all if she continued to lead with her beliefs rather than by the simple facts of how the world had changed in her absence. "You're condemning us all to death with such foolish acts. And for what? So your so-called conscience can be appeased in the grave? Will you be appeased when the rest of us all lie cold and dead alongside you as well?"

"They're children, Dimitri! What in the blazes do you believe they'll be capable of doing to you, to anyone, simply by virtue of existing in the same world as you?!"" Raine felt herself explode, her teeth clenching until her jaw threatened to crack as she felt all of her anger rush out without control or care. She could barely believe such nonsense was spilling from his mouth, and yet she knew he was so possessed, so single-mindedly controlled by his rage and bloodlust that he had long since stopped being able to ascertain what truly was right and wrong. It made her furious as well as disgusted, and she couldn't help herself as she snarled back in his face, "Listen here and listen well. Dorothea and those children are here under the protection of the Church of Seiros, and they will be welcomed and undisturbed here. And moreover, they're under my protection. If something, anything, happens to them to cause them injury... I will find the one responsible and gut them myself, do you understand me? I don't care who they are, or what their reasoning might be. I won't stand for the murder of innocents in these walls, or outside of it. I won't fight that way. I won't
permit anyone to fight that way."

Dimitri shook his head, chuckling at her outburst and unaffected by her show of anger. It meant nothing. Less than nothing. She was too caught up in the belief of being good meaning that she would win, and he knew for a fact that simply was not true. One had to become a monster to fight monsters, and he had long ago accepted that was the way of the world. Her decisions would only bring more bloodshed and bodies, and would leave the Empire victorious in the end, if it didn't take her first. "Then you are leading us all to death, simply to appease your conscience and your blind belief that fighting a "just" war somehow makes you less of a monster than those you're taking up arms against. You will not win by behaving like such a coward."

"And you won't win simply because you're willing to stoop to their levels of depravity because you think it makes the playing field even. It doesn't, Dimitri. It just makes you more of a monster than them." The words came out like acid, burning her tongue, burning the entirety of her insides, but she did not regret speaking them for a moment. He was unmoved, unblinking in the face of her wrath, but she did not care. He had crossed a line, and she would not allow for him to cross another. She would stand in his way until he cut her down, and she knew it showed in her eyes as she continued sharply, "I won't allow your worldview to taint mine, or direct the way this war will be fought. If you wish to stain yourself in blood, then so be it. It's obviously far too late to help you now. But you will not take us all down with you in the process. If you find that too much for you to take, then learn to deal with it, or cut me down and assume command. It's your choice."

"There'll be no need for that. Soon enough, you'll find a blade lodged between your shoulders, slid there because your charity led for these vermin to take all the more advantage of you. When that day comes, you'll get no sympathy from me. Just remember that I warned you, when the flames come to take you. It's more than you deserve for being so stubbornly naive." Dimitri dismissed her challenge with a shake of his head, another cold, quiet chuckle escaping his lips as he wondered how long it would take before she would finally learn the harsh truths that she seemed so intent on avoiding and averting her eyes from. He could bide his time, and he did not need her permission to act as he wished. The Emperor would fall by his hand and his hand alone, and it all would stop when that accursed woman was dead. He had been promised that much, and he believed it wholeheartedly. He believed them wholeheartedly. He did not need her for that. He needed no one.

Raine watched without a word as he turned and left, clearly confident he was in the right and had only to wait in order for her to realize it. She didn't move until he disappeared back into the shadows of the hallway, leaving the gardens behind him as he likely went to return to the chapel where he could usually be found with his mocking silence and that cold, uncaring stare of his. It was only when he was gone that she realized she could hear the sound of a steady drip of liquid on stone somewhere near her foot, and she glanced down errantly before realizing that a small puddle of blood had formed below her shaking hands sometime without her notice.

"Damn..." Raine winced as she forced her fingers to unclench, revealing four perfect crescent-moon shaped cuts that she had punctured into her palms with her own nails. She wondered when she had balled her hands into fists, and moreover when she had gripped them down tight enough to cause herself injury. She couldn't remember feeling pain. Only anger and disgust and fright, all mixed into an ugly ball of emotion that had made her taste bile and seized her chest until it became hard to breathe. She forced out a breath, glancing down at her scored palms without really seeing the injuries, or the blood that was trickling down through her fingers and to the floor.

'Is he really that far gone...? How much of what he's saying is him, and not this damn madness that's gripped him...?' Raine wiped away the blood on her sleeves, numb to the pain in her hands and knowing she would need to wrap them quietly on her own before she sought out anyone for a meeting, or even a casual chat. Anyone with eyes would see her wounds immediately, and at least
if they were wrapped she could make excuses for how she had come by an injury on her hands. If anyone saw that she had done it to herself that would lead to questions, and she was in no mood to answer them and stir up further trouble with the truth. It only made her head spin faster and her stomach tighten painfully, and she forced in another deep, slow breath as she fought for a clear head.

It was reassuring that Dimitri had given up without much of a fight over Dorothea, as it meant he only wanted to be heard and would be more than happy to watch her fail, if that's what he believed the outcome would be. He had wanted to make a point, not so much of a threat, but she didn't regret how she had reacted. If it had put him off it was all the better, and if it had made her a fool... She didn't really care. Her appearance wasn't of importance, not against the safety of those she was taking in of her own accord, but it was a burden she was stumbling underneath all the same. She wasn't sure how much more of it she could shoulder. She felt ready to collapse every single time she tried to stand, and he was not making it any easier.

'I was fooling myself... Thinking I wasn't leaning on him, and that it was the other way around, wasn't I...?' Raine stared down at her bloody hands, not really seeing them as she bit her lower lip and felt that odd mixture of warmth and pain once again begin to suffuse her chest until breathing became difficult to do. Her throat was tight and her eyes stung, but she didn't care for any of her physical discomforts. They were far and away, distant and numb, and she let out a tired breath as she murmured to herself, "Some professor I've been... Leaning on him, grasping blindly at things I could barely comprehend, and thinking I was doing so well standing on my own two feet... Gods, I'm so damned stupid..."

Dorothea's expression was seared into her mind. Her heartbroken words ringing in her ears, and making Raine wonder if any of this pain she was feeling was even remotely similar. Her heart had never beat, and it likely never would. She did not feel her emotions in her chest, as she had learned so many others did. Instead she only felt emptiness there, as if she was still missing some vital piece of herself, while the rest of her body tried in vain to pick up the slack. Instead of a broken heart she only felt nausea and cold, and though she knew she could cry, that hardly seemed like enough. It hadn't been for her father... and it didn't feel remotely right for Dimitri, either.

Closing her eyes, Raine took in another deep breath as she forced everything down for another time, and another place. She still had duties to attend to, and none of her emotions were as important. She would return to her quarters to quickly attend to her hands, and then return to her work as she knew she had to. She had to ensure both Seteth and Gilbert were on board with her new decisions, smooth out the plans for the meeting with Rodrigue in the Valley of Torment come the moon's ending, and prepare her troops for the fighting that was sure to continue even if everything was to go to plan in the coming weeks. The burdens were growing heavier... but she wasn't ready to buckle down underneath it just yet. There was simply too much to do for that to be permitted.

"Maybe, when all of this is over... Just maybe..." Raine sighed to herself as she turned in the direction of her quarters and began to walk, and she pulled her sleeves errantly over her hands to hide them on the off chance she ended up running into a too-familiar face. She was tired... but it was nothing new. She could cling to her silly little dreams of rest and a chance for it all to be over, when it truly was, but that was a far distant idea. For now, duty was calling, and she was ever the obedient slave. There was no other choice for it, no matter how tired she was. Maybes were the sweet things of her dreams, not the reality that she knew, and she would put on a mask, hide her exhaustion, and do what what was needed until she could finally rest. She owed them that much, at the very least.
AN:

Time-skip Dimitri's an arse to write, I've realized. He's worse than Warin. At least, in his current state he really is, but who knows how that'll change when it comes for "that time" and he's simmered a little bit out of the crazy... It's difficult to capture him just right, between that bloodthirsty veneer, as well as the coldly mocking man he is when he isn't engaged in a fight. Everything but the chase for Edelgard is beneath his notice for a good while, and that includes his former friends and professor, despite those occasional pinpricks of conscience and good sense. It's interesting, because while he is clearly not well at all in terms of mental health, he is still relatively intelligent and capable of making good arguments for his own benefits, though he comes off as cold, demeaning, and completely apathetic about anything not related to his end goals.

And those end goals certainly are scary as hell, when they're looked at from a distance. His hatred isn't exclusive to Edelgard, and he expands it clearly to all in the Empire, completely casting aside the fact that the soldiers he's facing are not the men and women he should be venting his anger on. It's as clear as his first words about waging war on the Empire, that he finds them all to be guilty and therefore must be punished as a whole, and I wanted to apply that enmity, as illogical as it is, to even the most innocent that he'd end up facing if those not aligned with the Empire at present, but clearly were in the past, could come knocking on the doors of Garreg Mach.

Dorothea, as well as the rest of the Black Eagles, were fun to write about in this chapter (with the exception of Ferdinand), and going off of "Flight of the Eagles", this is the logical conclusion I've reached about where they all would be at the time of Azure Moon, at least in my own world. Dorothea splintering away to do her own thing, Caspar grabbing Bernadetta and Linhardt to join him on an adventure until Linhardt splits to do his own thing... (Can anybody guess what he's doing and why? A cookie for a right answer! XD) I really cannot see those four, in good conscience, standing beside Edelgard. Bernadetta would need cajoling in one form or another in order to not be "forced" into taking a side with her, which is where Caspar comes into play, but that's really only because I romance them together, and I have a lot of difficulty imagining he wouldn't be busting into House Varley to rescue her from her father if he's not interested in joining the Imperial army... (This is my fault for recruiting everyone, I suppose... I'm bad that way.)

However, with that said, do not expect everyone to show up at Garreg Mach as Dorothea has. Dorothea is taking the firm position of a non-combatant and she will not be taking the field for the rebellion. And no Alliance students besides Raphael, who has been recruited into the Blue Lions, will be throwing their lot in with the rebellion, either. It's simply infeasible to imagine all of the Black Eagles forming up with the Blue Lions to fight against the Empire, and so they simply will not in this work. Their lives as Empire citizens may be over during the war, but that doesn't mean they need to fight alongside the rebellion. Of course, this does make Ferdinand an interesting case, and that will be dealt with in upcoming fics... and I do also plan to mention Alliance students as it becomes appropriate, so you'll see familiar faces as we go, I promise.

Anyway! Thank you for reading through this slog of a work, as well as this incoherent author's note. I'm always thankful for your attention and kindness, and I hope you'll
drop me a review should you feel the need. I hope I'll see you again next chapter, and I hope you've a good one in the meantime!

Mood: Introspective.

Listening To: "Send Your Love" - Adele

~ Sky
**Chapter Summary**

Genres/Rating: Hurt/Comfort, Romance, Friendship. (T)

Characters: Mercedes, Felix, Warin, Rodrigue.

Summary: Wherever she went, regardless of the day's intentions, Mercedes ran into things she either was never meant to see, or troubles that needed her aid, even if it was unasked for. She was a healer born and bred, and to delay her own schedule for others came naturally to her, but sometimes she wondered if she was taking on too much of a burden. A lost orphan, her professor's scarred and misunderstood brother, and Felix's father... All in a row, all too much for her to handle by herself, yet she never shrunk away from it. She wanted to help, it was in her very blood, and when she found herself stumbling... She knew exactly who she needed to reach for.

**Chapter Notes**

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Pegasus Moon**

**Garreg Mach Halls**

**Noontime**

Mercedes was well and truly vexed as she stood at the entrance to the halls, her hands on her hips as she surveyed her surroundings thoughtfully... The problem that had been thrust on her shoulders was not exactly one she was certain she could solve, if only due to her inexperience, but she was more than willing to try to offer aid to the young woman who had come begging for it the moment she had seen her passing through on her way to the chapel. Mercedes had been glad to put aside her own obligations when she had seen the worried and fearful look on Dorothea's face, and once the situation had been explained to her, she could well understand why the former Black Eagle was so worried.

One of her children had simply disappeared and never returned from playtime for lunch with the rest of her friends, and none of the other monastery children had seen hide nor hair of her since they had all left their studies to play. Though there was no doubt she was still on monastery grounds, it didn't make Dorothea any more comfortable to know that one of her wards had wandered off somewhere. Garreg Mach was still undergoing repairs, and many of the worse areas hadn't been properly sealed off to prevent a child's curiosity and their desire to explore. It was very likely she could get herself injured if she wandered off too far, or into the wrong place, and though Dorothea had already enlisted a handful of helpers from the church, she still was asking every person who passed by to keep their eyes out.

Mercedes was glad to join in the search, as the chapel certainly was not going anywhere, nor was the goddess, and delaying her prayers to find a missing child was certainly a valid reason to put off her usual habits. Though it had been a little more difficult in wrangling Felix into the hunt, as he had been accompanying her to the chapel before his usual training exercises. The swordsman had
not been interested whatsoever in lending his hand to the search, and Mercedes had been forced to
cajole him into entertaining the idea. It wasn't surprising that he didn't much care, as it didn't
involve him personally and was cutting into his time in the training grounds, but Mercedes hadn't
been about to permit him to use either of those things as an excuse.

"She's just a little girl, Felix. She may be scared, or hurt." Mercedes tried to hide her
disappointment in hearing him brush aside the concern so callously, even if it didn't quite surprise
her. Very few things were as important to him as training, especially in these days, and usually she
was wise enough to pick her battles and permit him to do as he liked without trying to change his
mind. Now, however was not the right time to cede to good manners, especially when a child's
welfare was at stake. As much as she doubted her ability to find one little girl in the entirety of
Garreg Mach all on her own, she certainly was not about to simply brush it aside for someone else
to do. It simply was not in her nature... and she didn't believe it was truly in Felix's, either. "Surely
your training can wait just until she's found, can't it?"

"Doesn't this monastery have more important things to attend to than chasing after orphaned
children? Children, who by the way, shouldn't even be here?" Felix shook his head as his fingers
impatiently drummed a tattoo into the hilt of the sword that was hanging from his belt. His father's
gift upon his joining up with their forces was one he wanted to learn as quickly as he possibly
could, and every moment he wasn't training with it was a moment wasted. It didn't help that he still
didn't understand what his professor had been thinking, permitting a lot of orphaned children to
find shelter in Garreg Mach in the first place, but he already knew it wasn't for him to argue
against. She had made it very clear that this was one decision no one was about to argue on, and
not a soul had the courage try and debate with her after that particular challenge, and that
included him. He valued his neck more than he valued his right to speak venom whenever he felt it
pertinent.

However, his professor was not here to overhear him, and that loosened his lips. It didn't matter
that he knew full well Mercedes was completely behind her decision, either. He still saw no sense
in it, and he didn't care for the idea of "charity". There were already lives at stake, and a clear
conscience meant nothing to him if it meant taking on more risks for no gain. That sort of
behaviour wouldn't sharpen his blade properly. It only made it all the more likely for it to break,
and that showed in his voice as he muttered mostly under his breath, "It's a base for the rebellion,
not an orphanage. I don't know what the professor was thinking, accepting this lot in..."

"She was thinking that even if this was the base for the rebellion that Garreg Mach could not
afford to forget its roots. Nor could the Church of Seiros." Mercedes reminded him patiently, and
she felt her heart warm at her professor's efforts to remind the soldiers, and former students, of
what was truly at risk even as they fought what looked to be an impossible fight. The war effort was
more than just sending the able-bodied and battle-ready to the frontlines to fight... and her
professor knew it, even if others did not, or could not see that clearly. "Peace, learning, and
charity... They are all tenants of the teachings of the goddess. Even in wartime, they cannot be
forgotten."

"Peace, learning, and charity won't save your life when you're fighting." Felix pointed out with a
raised eyebrow, but his voice only held the faintest hint of his usual vitriol. It was different,
arguing with Mercedes about war, as he had come to learn quickly during their student days. She
was an idealist, and deeply devout and empathetic, which were all foreign concepts for him to act
on. At first he had considered her naive, and relatively annoying at that, but her had been drawn to
her all the same. Her warmth was comforting. Her accepting attitude, even in the face of his worst,
had stirred up guilt rather than making him feeling defensive. She had thrown herself all-too-
happily into blows meant for him in those days, simply stating it was what she wished to do, even if
she knew she was not a fighter as he was.
No, she was a healer at her core, on and off of the battlefield, which meant she needed a guardian to protect her from herself. It had been with annoyance that he had taken on that role to repay his debt, minding her on the field while he swung his sword, and now he could not feel at ease unless he was sure he knew where she was at all times during the fighting. He knew it wrong. She was capable, far more capable than she looked with both a bow and magic in hand, but she was still prone to acting first and thinking later when it came to those in need. Not so much a stupid motive, as her kindness was absolutely pure, but it made him worry sometimes that she'd lose sight of the true goal and one day earn an injury even the best of them, which had always been her, couldn't heal. It made his voice sharp, but not with anger, as he pointed out, "And as nice as it is, filling up the monastery with children who need homes, it puts a strain on our resources. Professor has to know that, but she took them all in anyway. And a former Black Eagle at that, to boot. It's like she wants the boar to lose what little mind he has left."

Mercedes winced, but decided it was best she not remark on the fact that Dimitri was vocally against the Imperial citizens taking refuge in Garreg Mach. He had been overruled, as their professor had put her foot firmly down, and with Seteth and Gilbert's support, had made any argument towards her choice moot. The orphans had been moved in, and were to be undisturbed. Dorothea would not be joining them in fighting, and instead would handle minor tasks and relief work inside of the monastery to "earn her keep". It was clear Raine didn't believe she needed to do such a thing as a refugee, but she saw the need to give Dorothea further protection from any possible assaults on her motives, and it saddened Mercedes greatly to think that acts of charity had to be scrutinized so. "The professor made her decision, and she made it very clear that she won't permit arguing over it. I doubt even His Highness will test her as she is right now... and all that aside, it still leaves a little girl lost in the monastery. Even should we debate all day, she will not disappear. I am going to find her. Will you look with me?"

"I don't have time to waste tracking children. I have to train." Felix repeated bluntly as he turned his face back towards the training grounds, but he didn't need to look at the blond beside him to know she was disappointed with him. Normally, such a thing wouldn't bother him. He'd grown quite used to being a disappointment. A second. A replacement. But Mercedes didn't look at him that way, despite their initial misunderstandings, and disappointing her left him stinging in a way no one else could manage. She made him feel guilty in a way few people could dredge up, and it both annoyed him, and left him wondering why she was so damned capable of manipulating him to her own ends without making him even consider turning on her for it. Perhaps he was a glutton for punishment. Perhaps it was training, learning to deal with people that he normally would consider foolish, but were truly wise... Or perhaps he was just too afraid to lash out and hurt her again, because that sad, meek look she wore when he turned on her in anger and spite had struck him more keenly than an arrowhead in the heart.

She was giving him that same look again, he could see it from the corner of his eye, and it irritated him. He hated when she did that, and he was glad she didn't do it often. She knew how to work him, yes, but she never pushed him beyond his level of comfort. When she had learned his father had joined their forces, she had been initially quite pleased for him, and had urged him to spend some time with the man. One curt "no" had been more than enough for her to realize she was treading on thin ice, and she had respectfully apologized and let the matter lie. It was that patience, that kindness and concern for his feelings, that made him soften, if only because he just couldn't stand seeing her look so damned upset whenever he even so much as raised his voice in anger or disgust. She thought him a good man, for reasons he couldn't fathom, but... She also made him want to be what she thought he was, if only because it wasn't a goal that had no merit to it.

"I'll look on my way to the training grounds, and I'll fill in any soldiers and knights as I go, then." Felix eventually let out the words in a sigh, and he wondered if he was going soft. The sight of her frown turning rapidly into a brilliant smile was a warming one, which heated his cheeks and made
him abruptly start walking off for his goal. He hadn't done it because she asked. He was still going to train, but he could inform a handful of people of the search as he went. That was a token effort, and enough for her, wasn't it? He was doing what she wanted. She couldn't give him that look if he agreed to that much.

Two warm hands grasped his wrist and forced him abruptly to a halt, and Felix wondered errantly at her strength as she easily pulled him back towards her. However, that proved to mean nothing as those hands changed into a pair of warm arms, squeezing his own to her chest in a facsimile of an embrace she was obviously longing to give to him. His feet abruptly grew roots, pinning him as easily in place as a lance, and his breath and his heart caught at once as he felt her brush up against his side as she stood on tiptoe to press her lips against his cheek. Her voice was gentle and sweet, somehow both a balm and a wild irritant all at once when she murmured with one last, long squeeze, "Thank you, Felix."

"I'm only doing it because it's on the way!" Felix scrambled for an explanation as she let him go and stepped back demurely, but her eyes were sparkling and her smile was broad when he glanced at her. She knew exactly what she was doing and that he was lying, but he couldn't well argue without proving her right. Again she had beaten him, and she needed no weapon to do so. He was beginning to understand why Annette had always said Mercedes was likely the most dangerous out of all of them when she was pushed, even though he had scoffed at her five years prior. This healer was more than a match for him. Far more. Perhaps that was why he found it hard to breathe around her, especially when those gentle fingers pressed against his skin. "It's nothing special, and definitely not because I care about some little girl!"

"I know, but thank you all the same, Felix." Mercedes allowed as she tried to hide her smile from growing, and she said nothing else as Felix stormed off in the direction of the training grounds without further words. He was muttering under his breath as he went, his pace much faster than normal, but it didn't stop her from seeing the tips of his ears glowing red all the same. She had to stifle a little giggle, despite herself... Normally, she wouldn't have dared to be so bold...but he was too easy to tease, and far too easy to care for. He needed a little gentleness in his life, even if he didn't want it, or thought it was necessary. She was more than happy to provide for him, when he would let her, and such moments were becoming more and more frequent now. Even though it had been war, tragedy, that had brought them together again... She couldn't say she wasn't glad to be back at Garreg Mach.

Mercedes shook her head roughly, bringing herself abruptly back to the present and out of that pleasant lingering of thought that was distracting her from the task at hand. She hadn't seen Felix since, but she knew he had kept to his word as she had seen several knights poking about while on patrol, clearly on the lookout as they went about their business. It was a happy reminder, and one that warmed her face despite it all. She knew it was selfish, indulging in her own wants like this, but she couldn't quite help herself. He needed it... and frankly, she knew she needed it, too. It simply felt better, having someone to lean on, than it felt standing alone.

'Hmm... Alone...' The thought gave her pause, and she turned about to survey her surroundings with a new, sharp eye. The priory she had spent her last few years serving in hadn't had a shortage of orphaned children, but she hadn't been in charge of their care, then. Still, she had learned a few things about the little ones who had had their families torn apart by war, and that knowledge quickly made her realize she had been going about her search in all of the wrong ways. She had been looking in populated places, where business and a constant stream of people could disguise the presence of one little girl, but that was obviously not helping. She hadn't thought from the perspective of a child. 'How often did we find one or two of those little ones hiding away in the chapel because something frightened or upset them...? It's not mischief she's getting into. It must be something else. Or someone would have found her by now...'
Turning on her heel, Mercedes turned back for the sprawling expanse of the gardens, where she knew by experience with the orphans of Remire that there were plenty of hiding places for the young and eager. The great hall and dormitories were too busy to have any good places to hide away properly, but the same couldn't be said outside of the hallways. How often had she and Annette been roped into playing hide-and-seek with the orphans, finding that those little village children were brilliant in finding the tiniest of alcoves to wedge themselves into in order to escape being found?

"Why didn't I think of that earlier...?" Mercedes murmured with annoyance as she hurried back into the daylight, casting a new eye about as she rushed along the paths towards the gazebo and tree-lined walkways. She knew though, despite herself, why she hadn't considered such an easy solution, and it made her chest ache. She had become hardened over these past few years, as much as she had tried to devote herself to healing and prayer. She had never forgotten her archery, or her magic, and when the Kingdom had fallen, she had joined the ranks of those trying to rebel for their freedom. She had fought instead of fleeing, had summoned up her courage and her training, and refused to be anything less than the soldier her professor had made her into. Those carefree days of learning were far behind her now, no matter how much she wished she could go back to them... and that experience had made her forget what a child's mind, a child's innocence, could lead to.

A small, sad smile played at her lips as she continued to cast a wary eye about herself, glancing at each alcove, at each tree, for signs of a child hiding themselves away... Her thoughts continued to run wild, despite her duties, and she wondered at her professor and her wisdom. Indeed, Mercedes realized that she had forgotten, but it was clear that their professor had not. Why else would she make such a passionate case for Dorothea and her children to be housed inside of Garreg Mach, despite the clear risk and drain on their resources? She wanted to remind her men, all of the men, of what they were really fighting for. Of what they had forgotten, in the past five years of continuous, agonizing warfare. The denizens of the Kingdom had not been the only ones to lose everything. Someone, somewhere, had lost something... and it was their duty, as rebels, as knights and priests and nuns... to remember the common good was their true goal, and not simple vengeance.

'She hasn't changed at all... It makes me really believe that she hasn't been awake for these past five years... She's just as she was, before the fall of the monastery... Sad, but understanding... Seeing everything as a whole, and no longer only what lay in front of her...' Mercedes winced, reminded of those sad, distant looks she had caught on her professor's face sometimes during their lessons when she thought her students were too busy to see her. How often had her gaze drifted out the window, pained and longing, for the graveyard where Captain Jeralt was buried? Vengeance hadn't satisfied her. It had given her nothing. She was still without her father, still empty and grieving and torn apart with guilt, and that lesson was still fresh in her mind.

'A lesson she's dearly wishing to impart on all of us, despite it all... She may be our commander now, but she still remains our professor...' Mercedes took in a deep breath as she forced her feet to still as that pain in her chest threatened to overwhelm her for a moment. It was empathy at its purest, reminding her of what her professor had lost, and was struggling with, despite her best attempts to seem otherwise. She had taken on the mantle of command, had put herself at odds with His Highness, and was doing it all without flinching or showing how unsettled she truly was... but Mercedes knew better. She was in pain, deep, true pain, and she was not asking for help when she needed it the most. She didn't want to rely on them, because she had not lived for five years in war. They had suffered enough. She could hold the burden herself.

Her eyes burned, and angrily Mercedes brushed a hand over them to stop the tears from forming before they could fall. It was not fair of her to feel such sadness, or guilt. Not when others were suffering. Was that not why she had turned to the healing arts in the first place? To stop pain? To heal hurts that others simply could not? She had failed too many times in the past... She had
promised herself she would not fail again. First with Emile, then with her professor, and Annette... Now she was determined to right her wrongs. She had repaired her relationship with her beloved friend. She had found her professor again. She would find her brother and bring him home... and she would help Felix, as much as he would allow her, because she needed to see him smile. She was tired of failure. Tired of war and pain... She needed to give love, as much as she needed to receive it.

The thought and resolve stiffened her spine, and she took in a deep, cleansing breath before she readied herself to begin again... only to find herself pausing as she caught sight of a familiar back, partially hidden by an alcove that she knew was filled with crates of supplies and the odd wandering stray cat. She hesitated as that familiar head of navy hair tilted to the side, and she bit her lower lip as curiosity got the better of her and forced her to approach in silence. It was strange to see her professor's elder brother in the gardens, and she knew for a fact he was not the type to spend his days off indulging in leisure. He was like Felix in that, preferring to train either his mind or his body in his every spare moment, and she had often found him in the library, pouring over books, if he was not on the training grounds, lance in hand and gauntlets affixed to his wrists.

Now, though, Warin was kneeling down with his back to the garden, clearly occupied by whatever it was he had found amongst the crates, and Mercedes crept closer in silence to see what it was he was doing. She halted in her tracks as she managed to sneak a glimpse over his broad shoulder, and confusion, amusement, and relief flooded her all at once as she realized he had managed to beat her out. A young girl was curled up against the far wall, sniffling and crying softly out of Warin's reach and cleverly hidden behind the crates, and she matched the exact description Dorothea had given her. The scarred mercenary had found her first, and was clearly trying to coax her out of her hiding place to rejoin the others now that he had.

Mercedes bit her lip as she felt the automatic urge to offer aid, and with great self-control she kept herself silent as she stepped to the side and instead listened intently to Warin's voice. His tone was quiet and gentle, surprisingly so, and she wondered at the kindness in his voice. He had never struck her as a rude man despite his blunt words and tone, and she had never once feared him as she knew some of her classmates did. Their professor trusted him implicitly, and had often spoken of the fact that he was a much more complicated man than he looked, and Mercedes had believed her at once. She didn't need evidence. Warin's presence in the monastery alone was enough for her. He lived and breathed for his family, for his sister, and even if his demeanour was brusque and somewhat detached... That did not mean he was devoid of kindness.

She saw that now as she listened to Warin's gently coaxing voice, speaking softly to the crying girl as he knelt at her level to make himself as non-threatening as he possibly could. He knew his appearance was intimidating, knew his scars and weaponry could frighten off a grown adult, let alone a child, and so he worked to make himself look approachable without delay. There wasn't a hint of pride in his manner whatsoever, proof that he only cared about the girl in front of him, and that showed, too, in his voice as Mercedes listened in closely to catch their conversation, "It's all right to feel upset, and sad... Being different can be difficult... but that doesn't mean you're any less than your friends."

"They said I'm ugly. And scary..."

Mercedes flinched at the tear-filled voice that replied, and she immediately remembered what Dorothea had told her about the young one's appearance. She was a victim of one of the border villages, one that had tried to resist the Empire's stranglehold when it had first begun seizing territory in the west. Like any and all of those who had opposed the Imperial troops, they had been met with ferocious and devastating force as a sign of what was to come to future territory who would not lay down their arms and join with the Empire willingly. The entirety of this girl's home...
had been burnt to ashes, and it been with quiet, painful words that Dorothea had explained that the little girl had suffered horrible burns on her hands and arms from her desperate attempts to dig herself out of her home when it had been set alight. And she had been one of the lucky ones, a survivor, but it made sense that those scars were not a point of pride for her. She was still young, and children could be cruel.

"Your hands are beautiful. Scars and all. They don't take away from you." Warin's reply came smoothly, easily, and Mercedes watched closely as the sobbing little child looked at him sharply, disbelief shining in her tear-filled eyes. It was clear she had been a victim of bullying as well as the war, and nothing Warin was saying was new to her. It had been likely Dorothea had tried similar tactics, only to have her work undone by the children forcing her out because of her disfigurements, but Warin was quick to interrupt the little one's reply as he held out his own hands to show her his scarred palms and knuckles when he spoke, "You see? I'm just like you. I have a lot of scars, too. I understand how it can look to people who don't know what it's like. They think I'm scary, and ugly, too."

Mercedes bit her lip, and wondered. Warin spoke so calmly, not permitting hurt or disappointment to colour his voice in order to not upset the girl, but it didn't make her ache any less for him. Of course he knew how his sister's students viewed him. How almost everyone had to view him. Had not almost everyone, to a man, looked at him like he was some sort of beast when he had returned to the monastery after having spent five years playing dead to avoid the Empire's hunts? He was a patchwork of scars, and bore cold, distant eyes in response to the trauma of fighting without pause for his life for all of that time, and it had made everyone wary of him. He had discarded their causes, discarded any care of the war and those it affected, because he, too, had been discarded by everyone else. He fought for his sister and her ideals and nothing else, and he didn't care who knew it, or how they judged him. He was a mercenary, no longer bound by the archbishop, and he was through with playing the charade of an obedient soldier.

Yet... There he was, hands extended to show a crying orphaned child that he understood her pain intimately in an effort to reach out to her. Kindness no one would have expected, or even dared to think him capable of. It made her chest hurt with the injustice of it all. If only his worst detractors could see him now. How dare the knights call him soulless? Incapable of loyalty, or love? They knew nothing of him. But, she supposed with a wry smile, that neither had she. She had been surprised, hadn't she, when she had first seen him. She had crept in close to listen, wanting to see how he would handle the job of calming an upset child rather than stepping in herself... She was no better.

"You're different, but that doesn't make you scary. Sometimes it's just difficult for others to understand that being different can be a good thing. You're the same as all of the other children here. You just want to make friends, don't you?" Warin continued in that same quiet and gentle voice, not moving an inch forward lest he scared the little girl further and made her decide she wanted to flee. The risk was real as she was still sniffing quietly and huddled up against the corner, but for all her crying, she was intently fixed on everything the older man was saying. Somehow his words were reaching her, and he seemed to know it as he mused in a surprisingly kind tone, "You have friends already, you know. Dorothea is very worried about you, and she's been looking for you. You're very precious to her. Your scars don't matter to her."

Another sniffle escaped the small child, and she rubbed at her yes at the mention of her caretaker and her concern. Guilt flickered across her young face, and she made a brave attempt to rub at her eyes as she sat a little taller in her hiding place. She obviously was far more bothered with knowing Dorothea was worrying over her than the bullying that had forced her away from the others, and though there was a slight hiccup to her voice, it still rang clear as a bell as she questioned furtively,
"M-Miss Dorothea is worried?"

"Very. Do you want to come with me to see her? I'm sure it'd make her happy to know you're all right." Warin extended his hand just a little farther in offer, but did not move from where he was kneeling. He watched the little girl's bright blue eyes look from his neck, face, and to his hand rapidly, and her little chin bobbed as she swallowed down either a sob or a whimper. The fear and shame was still printed all over her face, and it only worsened when she glanced down at her own scarred hands again. The scars of her burns snaked their way across her fingers and palms in large, dark swathes, disappearing beneath her sleeves in what could only be worse evidence of her former injuries. Warin disregarded them entirely, saving his gaze for her face only as he continued calmly, "You don't need to come out right away if you aren't ready, though. I can stay with you, for as long as you'd like."

Mercedes watched as the girl struggled with the offer for what felt like forever, but in the end, she nodded her small head and pushed herself awkwardly to her feet to accept Warin's hand. He pulled her easily over the crates with her permission, settling her back on her feet in one smooth movement before turning her gently back in the direction of the mess hall where Dorothea was overseeing the search. The girl however reached again for his hand, squeezing it between her own before she looked up at him with shy expectancy. Warin offered her a crooked smile before he nodded, and he allowed her to lead him away, grasping his scarred, battered hand like a lifeline as a timid, but growing, smile crossed her face in answer to his accepting hold.

Warin said nothing, merely allowing her to pull him along towards the mess hall, but his keen eyes missed nothing as he spotted Mercedes watching them from a stone's throw away. The healer felt a shameful heat rush to her face as his navy gaze pierced her through like his lance, but there wasn't a hint of judgement or anger on his as their eyes met. Instead he merely offered her a cursory nod, turning back to the young one gripping his hand as she clung to him tightly. Mercedes held her breath, not daring to move or even blink until the odd couple disappeared around the corner and towards the mess hall, and she didn't doubt Dorothea would be a bundle of happy tears and gratitude when Warin showed up with the little girl who had been the cause of such stress these past several hours.

Mercedes folded her arms about herself as she let out a breath, and she wondered errantly if anyone, save Dorothea, would believe her when she explained how the crisis of the day had managed to have been solved. She doubted anyone really would, but the thought didn't matter to her overmuch. It was clear he had done some good and was happy to have done so, and the little girl he had helped would remember him and his words for a long time to come. She chuckled quietly to herself, wondering if his little sister at the least would understand, and also be amused if she was told what her brother had been up to on his precious day off. 'She said he was kinder than he looked, and sounded... I suppose this is just more evidence of that... I think it'll be wiser to keep it to myself, for a little while. I doubt he wants anyone to know he has a soft spot for children...'

The thought made her giggle a little bit more as she turned on her heel and allowed her feet to pull her away from the gardens in a thoughtless fashion. As detached as he wished to look... Mercedes was wise in the way of men who didn't want to interact with the world at large. Warin was not nearly as singular as he wished to look, and it was obvious that his heart had plenty of room to love with. The way he looked at his sister was proof enough of that, but Mercedes had seen similar looks passing between him and a certain Dagdan sniper, when the two believed that nobody was there to see it. It was subtle to anyone else, but Mercedes was too eagle-eyed to miss anything when she wanted to watch.

And she had seen much, in the passing moons, between both her old friends and comrades. War had brought them all together for a common cause, but it had also reignited old flames and
interests, despite it all. Sylvain had become something of a buffoon whenever Ingrid was around, and to her eternal amusement, Ingrid was playing it off with a smile, and a hidden sort of glee shining deep in her eyes. Then there was Petra and Ashe, rarely apart and always finding excuses to be the ones to head into town for supplies or information, and even if Ashe was trying his best to be polite and courteous, it was quite obvious Petra's interests in him were far more intimate. Even Professors Hanneman and Manuela had seemed to soften about each other, even if their bickering had picked up in frequency. Their barbs were no longer pointed, and more often their comments came with smiles than scowls, but Mercedes wasn't about to watch those two for too long. Her friends were one thing, but she had more respect for the alumni of the monastery to put her nose into their personal affairs.

'I suppose if this war did one good thing... It brought us all back together. Even if it hadn't occurred... Maybe, we all would have come here as we promised we would, and picked off just as we left... Is that wrong of me to wish, I wonder...?' Mercedes allowed her thoughts to wander, and her fingers errantly reached to trace the polished stone walkways that she threaded her way through without much direction. It hurt, in a strangely bittersweet way, to imagine a life they could have had if Garreg Mach had not fallen, but she dearly wished for it all the same. Annette would not be in mourning with the knowledge that Dedue had lost his life in saving his king, and Dimitri would not have changed to the point where he was almost unrecognizable even to their dear professor. And their heartache was palpable, and it made Mercedes wish her powers of healing could reach past the flesh and to the spirit, even though she knew it foolish.

'I cannot return the dead to life... but I refuse to believe His Highness is yet beyond her grasp... If anyone can break through to him... It will be her. She will return him to how he used to be... I believe that. I must believe it. There's been too much heartache already... and still so much more to come. They need one another. We all do...'

The sounds of swordplay broke through her thoughts, and Mercedes realized with a bit of a jerk that she had absently found her way to the arena. She could hear Felix inside, the sounds of his exertion and his blade as clear as a bell on the silent eve, and abruptly a rush of heat flamed her face ruby. Like a moth to flame she had found her way to him again, and she bit her lower lip with both embarrassment and realization that despite how much of an annoyance she had to be to the nobleman... He continued to allow her in, time and time again, when she had need of him most.

'Heh... Who is truly helping who, I wonder...?' Mercedes paused as she looked at the heavy doors and continued to listen in silence as Felix continued his training in ignorance of her presence just outside. He had left in a huff earlier, and he had cleaved to his word to spread the news of the missing girl, so she had no real reason to bother him. Interrupting him just to let him know that the lost child had been found would be unfair if he was absorbed in his drills. She took in a deep breath as she buried her own emotions, deciding it would be best to tend to them later before she turned back south and towards the dormitories. She wouldn't be a nuisance. She had done enough of that already.

"Pardon me, milady. Are you perhaps Miss von Bartels?"

"Matritz." Mercedes found herself correcting the mistaken last name she had discarded long ago when both she and her mother had left for the church, and abandoned the Bartel name along with their noble titles. She froze however as she turned and realized who it was she was addressing, and her face almost at once returned to a bright red shade as she understood she had not been the only one to have been listening in on Felix's intensive training. Swallowing down both her embarrassment and shame at her rudeness, she quickly bowed her head as she hurriedly
apologized, "Oh, forgive me! I wasn't aware you were here, Lord Rodrigue! It's a force of a habit, you see, my mother and I changed our names many a year ago. Please excuse my rudeness."

"Please, please, there's no need for formality. And forgive me for addressing you improperly. I had thought I recognized you from my son's description, but I had forgotten your name entirely."

Rodrige's smile was easy as he waved away her apology, and Mercedes said nothing as she watched the warmth of his face closely. Despite their great differences in personality, Felix greatly resembled his father, especially when he showed his rare smile. The older lord bowed his head in return, his bearded face broadening in a warmer smile as he greeted her a little more carefully, "You are Mercedes, then, yes? The young lass my son spoke of?"

"I am." Mercedes nodded in assent, and she wondered at the fact that the lord of Fraldarius had bothered to remember her name, regardless of the fact that she and Felix had grown so close. It also made her marvel at the revelation that Felix had spoken of her to his father, especially considering the knowledge that the two of them were barely on speaking terms at the best of times. It was true that Felix had returned to his territory during the outbreak of the war, and had been fighting beside his father to defend his people from the Dukedom, but she hadn't assumed that he had ever spoken of her to him before. It made her cheeks redden and her stomach clench as she began somewhat hesitantly, awkwardly, as Rodrigue looked her over with careful, searching eyes, "I-Forgive me, but... Your son spoke of me?"

"Frequently, when we did speak, at any rate. I'm aware that he can be... boorish, at times, for lack of a better word, but he only ever spoke highly of you when he mentioned his time here at the academy. I believe you made quite an impression on him, if his eagerness to return to Garreg Mach at the date of the Millennium Festival is anything to go by." Rodrigue explained with a low chuckle, and he watched with those same sharp eyes that his son possessed as Mercedes bowed her head awkwardly in a futile attempt to hide the darkening red in her face. He was not surprised by her reaction, not with all he had pieced together over the past five years, but it amused him all the same to see it... Hadn't his son had the exact same look on his face, even when he was explaining hotly that he wasn't leaving for a "promise with a dead woman" but rather to make sure that someone didn't end up hurting themselves on the way to the monastery? It was very clear now who that someone was, and Rodrigue shook his head as he mused with another laugh, "I had been hoping to meet you, at least once, now that I and my men have joined with the rebellion's troops."

"I-I see... Felix is... a very good friend. I was glad to hear that he had been fighting alongside you, these past five years... and I was also glad to know that you were well, when Professor spoke of you and your allies joining our efforts." Mercedes chose her words carefully as she spoke, unsure of what exactly was proper to say when Felix was so close by, and his father was chatting with her so idly. It wasn't as if Felix had warned her to keep her distance from the man, and she doubted that he ever would issue such a command to her outright. He had said once and only once he wasn't interested in speaking much to him himself, and Mercedes hadn't wanted to push the issue. Now, however, she was treading on foreign territory, and she wished to both respect Felix and his father, but was unsure of how to do so as she murmured, "Felix was also relieved to see you had been doing well without him."

"I believed so, though he wouldn't ever say it aloud. My son always has much to say, but most often it is not to me. Still, that is my fault, and burden to bear as a father." Rodrigue nodded knowingly, and he watched as Mercedes bowed her head awkwardly in a futile attempt to hide the darkening red in her face. He was a stranger to her, yet she didn't hesitate to offer kind words or a smile, and he nodded to himself as he understood just how it had been her of all people who had managed to slide underneath his son's shields of sharp words, and even sharper actions. "Ah, but I forget my manners... I know that you know of me, but permit me to introduce myself. I am Lord Rodrigue, of
"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lord Rodrigue... but I'm afraid I cannot accept your thanks. Our professor took care of all of us... Anything you see in Felix is due to her influence, and not my own." Mercedes shook her head as she offered a kind smile, and she wondered just what else Felix may have said to his father to make him think she had such an impact on his son. She knew it was her professor's doing, that the former mercenary had touched all of them in their single year underneath her guidance, and she refused to take credit for her effort. All of them stood there today because of her, and because of their own iron wills. "We were blessed to have her with us, that year. And we are again blessed that she returned to us, against all odds."

"Your professor is a very singular creature, that much is true..." Rodrigue agreed with a nod, and he touched his chin thoughtfully as he wondered on the woman he had only managed to have a handful of short conversations with. She had struck him as a strong-minded young thing, brave and loyal, yet also quite kind and empathetic, and he had seen her influence easily on both his son, as well as the young prince back in their student days. Now she had acquired a harder edge, the chains of commanding were a harsh burden to bear, but she wielded them willingly, and with an iron grasp. She took to the task as naturally as anything, but her kind spirit hadn't dampened. The fact that she had demanded that the orphans from the Empire be given sanctuary within Garreg Mach had been a divisive move, yet Rodrigue could not help but agree with her when she outlined her reasoning so fiercely. "However, I believe that contributing everything to her is doing you, and the rest of your classmates, a disservice. After all, it was alone that you all made your way here, was it not? That takes courage and will that only you can draw upon from yourselves."

"But we were inspired by the courage and will of another." Mercedes pointed out with a growing smile, and she saw from Rodrigue's second nod that he wasn't entirely unwilling to discredit her argument. It felt somewhat strange, sharing what was a casual chat with a nobleman who was far ahead of her in stature and in age, but Rodrigue didn't seem to think of her as any less than himself. His tone was courteous and his demeanour friendly, as if she was simply a friend he wanted to speak freely with, and she appreciated his frank kindness. It was different from any behaviour she had ever seen from a grown nobleman, but she certainly was not about to complain even if she wasn't entirely sure how to handle herself.

"Indeed you were... but I still will say that I believe it was you who inspired Felix, for the most part." Rodrigue once again gave her his agreement, but his eyes were twinkling with a youthful sort of merriment that made Mercedes feel even more heat cresting in her cheeks. Just how much had Felix spoken of her back in his home territory? And what had he said, to make his father look at her as if he knew everything without needing to ask such intrusive questions? It didn't matter, however, as Rodrigue seemed far too polite to make such inferences directly, and instead he only continued with a thoughtful nod, "Mind you, I will indeed give the professor credit where it is due. She has done very well by the Blue Lions, and by my son. I owe her my gratitude... but I also owe Felix's friends my thanks for standing by him when things were at the most dire. It has been a difficult time for all... Which means your influence on my son warrants all the more gratitude."

"Th-Thank you for saying so, Lord Rodrigue..." Mercedes looked at her feet, unable to hold that knowing, gently amused gaze that saw right through her and made her far too embarrassed and self-aware. She knew her own heart. She always had. But seeing that someone else knew it, too, and was not judging her lacking, but rather praising her actions and the emotions that had spurred them... She wasn't entirely sure whether it flattered or horrified her. She tried her best to shove it all down, at least for the moment as she reached for a safer topic blindly and asked, "Are you here to speak with your son?"
"No... I'm afraid that would be a waste of both of our times. It is difficult to get a word in edgewise with the boy when he has a sword in hand. I was merely passing by to see if he was well."

Rodrigue's smile flickered, changing from gentle to sad and regretful, and Mercedes felt her heart throb in response to it. It was a look of a guilty and remorseful man, one who was aware he had stumbled, but also was aware that the time for forgiveness and reconciliation had long passed him by. It hurt her to see, for both him and for Felix, but she knew it was not her place to intervene. Felix had made his stance clear. She would not go against him. Thankfully, Rodrigue did not linger on the topic, but instead cast a glance about him at the knights who had resumed their post since he had last looked, and he waved a gloved hand idly as he remarked, "I had heard of a ruckus involving a lost girl, but it seems to have calmed down now. In fact, I had heard it from a passing knight, who had told me my son had informed him of the matter. I was ready to give my aid, as I had some spare time, but it seems I'm too late."

"Oh, yes... She was found, thankfully. I imagine she's with Dorothea again now, safe and sound." Mercedes fought a smile, and she thought longingly of Dorothea's commitment and her ability to love so freely and so warmly. She was a natural with her children, acting all the part as a mother hen, and Mercedes wondered if she would protest an additional hand in the work. She admitted she wanted to know more about their plights, to know more about how to lend her own aid, even if she was only a commoner and a healer, but she couldn't quite help herself. It was simply in her nature to want to provide and care for.

"Good. Those poor children don't need more fear in their lives, especially now that they are wards of the church. Your professor made a wise decision bringing them here and offering them shelter... It's a reminder of the old ways, that we've lost in our time as soldiers... Of our true goal, beyond the war..." Rodrigue remarked slowly, and Mercedes looked up to him sharply at the words that her professor had spoken when she had made the announcement of Dorothea and the orphans being welcomed refugees in the halls of Garreg Mach. She had stressed the importance of the gesture as a return of the Church's true function to give her decision weight amongst the most pragmatic, yet Rodrigue did not seem too bothered by that line of thought. His words were softer, gentler as he spoke of the children, and he shook his head as he sighed, "If, and when it ends, there will be many more of them to look after... It is wise to remember that the future we seek will not be an easy one to tread, if we find victory. Starting now is a firm reminder of the reality of this war, as well as a firm reminder to the church that the new hands on the reigns shall be much more tight."

Mercedes blinked, and this time she couldn't help herself as she turned slightly to take Rodrigue in with new eyes. She had heard the stories of the nobleman beside her. A ferocious fighter, a dear friend of the former king, and a keen tactician with a calm mind and a sharp wit. She did not know if he was devout, but she did know that he had always been welcome in the halls of Garreg Mach, and held tightly to his virtues as a knight. To hear him voice support so openly of the change of leadership within the Church of Seiros was of great interest to her, and she tilted her head slightly as she questioned as politely as she possibly could manage, "You support the professor's control of the Church of Seiros, then?"

"I am not sure I would go as far as to say that..." Rodrigue allowed after taking a long moment to drink in Mercedes' words, and appreciate her bluntness. Most would not have dared to ask him outright of his thoughts, especially of such a thing that still was a cause of great debate amongst the most devout of the church... but he supposed his position as a nobleman of the Kingdom allowed him to stand aside of those things. He chose his words carefully, understanding he was being studied, but also aware that the young woman's loyalty was to her professor first, and the church second when he spoke, "The direction she is pointing the church in is indeed one that is needed... Both pragmatically, and ideally. The church is greatly diminished with the loss of Archbishop Rhea, in both power and influence. To rebuild it from the ground up, following your professor's beliefs in charity, is not a thing anyone would really argue about in such times... but it is clear that
this is not a duty that she is taking to willingly. She is not a believer, herself, even if she was personally appointed to lead the church by the Archbishop. That alone will cause rifts, as will the shifting of power... but that may change, when Archbishop Rhea returns. It seems clear that your professor does not intend to hold onto this power when the war ends."

Mercedes was silent, and she knew that Rodrigue spoke the truth. Her professor has no desire for power, and even less for leadership. She was only doing what she had to because the burden had been forced on her shoulders, and even then, she was doing her best to spread out the weight amongst her fellow commanders to prevent her from being made into a figurehead. She had no interest in the spiritual aspects of the Church of Seiros, and was merely acting pragmatically in order to cover her empathy. She would never have sent away Dorothea even if she was not in charge, but holding the power Rhea had given her and given her an opportunity to use it to her advantage to shift the focus of the Church of Seiros in a more favourable position. It was a gamble, for certain, but it was one the professor was willing to make if it meant doing good.

Rodrigue tilted his head slightly to the side, then hid a small, wry smile as he heard the sounds of swordplay behind the great doors to the arena beginning to slow. He had spent too much time dawdling there, wondering and hesitating, as always, but he supposed it had not been too much of a waste as he again glanced to the young woman standing next to him. He had been eager to meet her, this healer that had both vexed and charmed his son, and he was grateful that he had stumbled upon the chance. Still, he could not linger, even though he wished he could. Her presence was a balm, her kind wisdom a rare sight, and he understood full well why his son was drawn to her. He offered her a half-bow, forcing calm politeness to his voice as he began regretfully, "Ah, how the hour grows late... I've kept you too long. My apologies, my lady. I imagine you had your own deeds to be attending to before I interrupted you. If you see my son, please pass along my regards, if that would not trouble you overmuch."

"Oh, of course..." Mercedes shook her head to clear away her errant thoughts and brought herself back to the present, and she offered a curtsy in answer to Rodrigue's display of courtesy. She was still unsure what exactly it was this man made her feel, as she saw Felix in every inch despite their complete difference in demeanour, but she was well aware that was not something she could ever speak aloud. It was best she tread carefully regardless of his charming nature and kind words, as she was still a commoner at the end of the day, and he a distinguished knight and nobleman. The differences between them were far too vast to be bridged over a simple conversation and a connection to Felix, and she returned his smile with some effort as she replied gently, "Have a good day, Lord Rodrigue."

"And you as well, Lady Matritz. May we speak again soon. Perhaps over a cup of tea, next time." Rodrigue offered her another smile before he was turning about and making his departure back for the war room. He was well aware that the professor and Seteth were likely there again, embroiled in one of their long, serious discussions of the future of their army, as well as their next move. He had not come to Garreg Mach simply to provide and watch over the men he had given to the rebellion, and though he was not sure he was welcome, he still wished to give as much aid as they all were willing to take. It was what Lambert would have wished, and though his old friend was long gone, he had no plan to break his promise to the former king. He would take care of Dimitri, and those who valued him and were valued by him in return... Until the young prince was capable of remembering that the weight of the dead did not need to be cold and cruel.

Mercedes watched as Rodrigue left, chewing her bottom lip with a mixture of confusion and wonder at the offer he had left ringing in her ears. A cup of tea? With Felix's father? She could only imagine how outraged the swordsman would be if she dared to accept such a wild invitation. Yet, it also made her redden sharply with understanding that Rodrigue was very aware of the nature of her relationship with his son if he was making such kind overtures. It wasn't entirely an
unpleasant thought, but it was a somewhat frightening one. She hadn't been thinking to the distant future, there was no real time for that, and she wasn't entirely sure she was ready to do so, either. That day seemed too distant, and too out of her reach. There was a war to fight, before she could even begin to think of a future in peace.

"If you stand there lost in thought for any longer, someone is going to end up having to pick you up off of the ground when you inevitably get knocked over."

"Felix!" Mercedes felt herself jolt right out of her skin at the swordsman's voice suddenly speaking just behind her, but as soon as she tried to turn around, two strong hands grasped her shoulders and held her immobile with impressive ease. She struggled only for a moment, confused, but when his fingers gave a warning squeeze, she stilled her movements at once. He was not gripping down tightly enough to hurt, only enough to keep her still, and she wondered if he had overheard her conversation, and was angry about it. The thought made her wince, and she looked guiltily at the ground as she asked after a long, tense moment of silence, "Did you... overhear?"

"I've no idea what he's up to, playing nice with you, but I suppose it doesn't matter. Ever since I came back from the academy, he was incessantly nagging over the people I had met. He took a special interest in you. I guessed he'd eventually track you down when he came here." Felix's voice was flat, but there was no edge of anger to it, nor to the hands that were still holding her firmly where she stood so she could not turn and see his expression. Rather, his hands seemed to gentle, and she felt him step closer to her before he continued on in that same, errant tone of voice, "But it doesn't matter. I don't dictate who you can and can't talk to. If you want to accept the old man's invitation for a cup of tea, that's your business. Now, why are you here? Did that little orphan girl get found?"

"Yes, she did." Mercedes answered immediately, and she had to hold herself back from leaning backwards into him as she felt the front of his chest brushing against the back of her dress. He was close... Too close. It wasn't like him to allow her to be that near unless she initiated, and he rarely was the one to step up first. He seemed to be content to let her lead the pace, if there was a pace to be led, but now she felt herself floundering uncertainly. He seemed dismissive of the fact that he had overheard her talking with Rodrigue, and instead wanted to know about her initial errands, and she knew her confusion was obvious in her voice when she explained somewhat hesitantly, "I... I'm not entirely sure why I came here, to be completely frank. I was lost in thought, and before I knew it, I... had walked myself here."

"Were you looking for me?"

Mercedes closed her eyes and fought a reflexive shiver as Felix's mouth came dangerously close to her ear when he asked her bluntly what she had been doing. The heat in her face travelled south quite abruptly, only making her more aware of those strong hands on her slim shoulders, and the weight and strength of him standing behind her. He had leaned in to prevent their bodies from touching, but that didn't matter overly much. When his breath touched her earlobe, she shivered and bit her lip, and the truth came out thoughtlessly even though she knew she shouldn't, "Yes. I was looking for you."

"You're too focussed on everyone else... It's high time you focus on yourself for a change." Felix turned her abruptly about, and Mercedes came stumbling at his strength and speed despite herself. He caught her effortlessly against his chest, with one arm winding tightly, supportively, about her waist before his other arm reached upwards and his hand caught her chin. He tilted her head up, his dark, adust eyes blazing as he gripped her chin tightly before leaning down, "You came looking for me. Let me give you what you wanted."
His mouth covered hers in a harsh, fierce kiss, and Mercedes heard herself gasp before even that was being swept away as his hand caressed her cheek and then moved to tangle itself in her hair. He was rough yet gentle, holding her close to him even as his tongue parted her lips to slide in to taste, caress, and claim. Against both her better judgement and sense, she felt herself leaning into his chest, hands grasping at the front of his cloak as her eyes fluttered closed against his sudden display of passion. This was new, new for the both of them, but he didn't seem at all unnerved or off-balance. Rather, he seemed oddly impatient, and it showed as his hands grasped down tighter on her svelte form, and his breath came ragged on her lips when he finally pulled back to ask her gruffly, "Was that enough?"

"E-Enough...?" Mercedes repeated his last word dizzily, unsure of his meaning as she glanced up at him through dazed eyes. Her fingers had curled themselves tightly into his cloak, and she doubted she could release her hold on him even if she wanted to. He was holding her too tightly to make it an option anyway, which only made her wonder what he meant, and what had spurred him to act in such a manner. It wasn't entirely unlike him, he was always frank and to the point, but this kind of intimacy was still new. He had accepted her chaste kisses before, and they had happened more than once, but this was different in a very new, and very pleasant way... but still, she didn't wish to misinterpret him, or have herself misinterpreted again when she asked breathlessly, "What do you mean?"

"You keep coming around me whenever you're getting tired of all the work you do. When you get worried, when you've had enough, but don't want to look it, or show anyone else. I noticed. You want to be selfish, but you don't know how to ask. You need to learn." Felix's explanation was blunt and brusque, but the look in his eyes had softened slightly, as had the hand that was cupping her face as she looked up at him in mute wonder. Her cheeks had turned the colour of rubies and she looked somehow both ashamed and thrilled by his words, which only made him all the more confident that he had chosen the correct course of action. "Let me make it clear, and be aware I'm only going to say it once. Whenever you want something, just ask for it. I'll give it to you. Anything you want, whenever you want."

Mercedes wasn't entirely sure what she felt more, joy, or shock, to hear such words coming out of Felix's mouth. His eyes were steady, as were his hands, though there was a slight dusting of pink on his cheeks despite it all. They weren't words he was saying lightly. He wasn't the type for japes, especially ones like these, and she knew to trust his word implicitly. Yet... She pulled away, despite how eager her hands felt to reach for him and hold him tightly. She couldn't ask him for more than she had already. He had endured enough of her misplaced longings, and even if that misunderstanding was behind them... She couldn't in good faith ask for more. "That isn't necessary, Felix."

"Your answer just proves that it is. You spend so much time fretting over others that you don't bother to fret over yourself. If it weren't for me, or maybe Annette, too, you'd collapse on a daily basis. This is my attempt to start taking care of you. Properly." Felix's reply came quick and sharp, as keen as a swordstroke, and Mercedes' felt her face fall at the argument she couldn't quite deny. She knew he was right. Why else had she found herself there in the first place if he wasn't? Still... The hesitation was clear on her face, and Felix beat her to speaking as again his hand grasped her chin, but far more gently this time as he angled her face upwards so her eyes would follow and focus on his when he spoke, "You said you wanted to be near me more from now on. I didn't argue. I'm still not arguing. But if you want to keep staying near me, you need to allow me to watch out for you just as much as you watch out for everybody else. And if it makes you feel better, this isn't an offer I'm giving away freely. Stay by me. I'll take care of you. You can even be selfish every once and awhile. I don't see why you wouldn't accept. Unless you don't want me."

"I do want you!"
The moment the words slipped out, Mercedes knew she had lost. The wolfish look on Felix's face only proved it. She had stumbled so easily into his trap that she may as well have walked into it with full knowledge that it was there. Her face burnt red, but this time she felt no shame. It was impossible to, after what she had just said, and with how utterly smug Felix looked to hear her say it. His thumb brushed over her lips, still swollen from his kiss, and she looked at him silently, not about to deny it and knowing better than to even try. His expression softened as her eyes held his, gentle, warm, longing, yet almost sad... and his voice was quiet when he explained simply, "I want you, too. This is my selfishness. So be with me for awhile, Mercedes. We can look to the future when that time comes. Our future, if you want to share it."

"I didn't know you could be so much of a cheat..." Mercedes leaned forward, resting her face into his shoulder as her arms reached of their own volition to wrap tightly about him. He twitched in surprise at her movement and her words, but he didn't seem ready to protest. Rather, he seemed to be holding his breath, waiting, and she was glad to hide her smile against the warm, rough fabric of his cloak as she sighed and surrendered. He had won, again, and moreover... He was right. She wanted to be selfish, even if only a little, and if it was with him... Then it didn't feel too bad to do so. He was offering, after all. "All right, Felix... I accept... but I hope you realize your offer goes both ways. Whenever you want or need anything... I'll be here."

"I know." Felix felt her nuzzle his shoulder gently, letting out a quiet, tired sigh as she did so, but he felt no concern. Her arms were tightly wound about him, and her fingers were buried in the thick cloth of his cloak. She wasn't about to let go, no matter how guilty she may have been feeling about her acceptance of his offer. In any other circumstance, he may have enjoyed it, hearing her give way to him so honestly, but there was no room in him for that. He simply wanted to hold her for a little while, to allow her to take her time in his arms as she sorely needed. Anything else could come second. Would come second. If she would never treat herself first... He would take up the gauntlet, and gladly. He could do that much for her, when she had done so much more for him. So, he stood quiet and composed, arms cradling her svelte form close and his chin resting on her hair... It would be fine. He'd make sure of it.

Chapter End Notes

AN:

Long and rambling, and not really what I intended to do, but I am satisfied by it nonetheless. There wasn't exactly much plot here (I intended to write some, but it got lost in the shuffle) but for those looking for plot, don't worry. There's going to be a whole bunch of chapters in a row purely dedicated to it. The entire sequence with the bridge is going to span at least three chapters, and Grondor is going to be a spectacle all on its own... That bit, (the bridge, especially) is where my "changes" to the route will begin. Mind you, they will start small, and may not look like much at first glance, but I intend to make a tidal wave of Azure Moon. So much needed reworking, and since I'm on this kick, I intend to fix what I can while keeping it all in the realm of possibility. (Or believability, I guess?)

Anywhosit. Everyone who guessed Lindhart was with Lysithea gets a cookie! Congrats, you lot! Mind, it's not like it was a difficult puzzle, but still... I really wanted to make it clear that while the Black Eagles (for the majority) will not be joining with the rebellion, that they have their own lives and attachments that they are still holding onto and influencing them. Unfortunately, with my focus being on the Blue Lions, I
can't quite dive into that like I would like to beyond the odd comment. It's sadly a lot like the game itself, being locked out of the loop depending on your path, and AM is sadly one of the two routes that suffer the worst for this. (CF being the other, but that's more for lack of content and closure.)

I won't be leaving a long AN, as it's five am and I'm exhausted and in sore need of sleep. Thank you for reading this far, and I apologize for the rambling and the disjointedness of this chapter. Hopefully the next few make up for it. Drop a review should you feel the need, and have a good one! See you again soon!

Mood: Sore

Listening To: "Face My Fears" - Utada Hikaru (Kingdom Hearts 3)

~ Sky
Chapter Summary

Genres/Ratings: Hurt/Comfort, Action/Adventure, Angst. (T)

Characters: Raine, Dimitri, Dorothea, Gilbert, Ingrid, Sylvain, Annette.

Summary: The time for the attack on the Great Bridge of Myrddin had finally come. The preparations had finished, and now the men and women of the rebellion stood upon the field, awaiting the order to march and begin the battle. For a brief moment, Raine stood back quietly, listening to the tense talk of her students and allies as they understood just who it was that all stood before them in preparation to defend the bridge, and the route into the Empire with their lives. It would be a bloody battle, they all were aware of that much, but it still remained to be the first of their many steps to taking the Empire down. Their wills would have to prevail, even if their hearts would hesitate.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lone Moon

The Great Bridge of Myrddin

Early Morning

"Status report."

Shamir's curt, brusque voice was welcoming, and Raine turned to see the Dagdan sniper, with Warin at her side, ready to deliver her report on her scouting of the bridge from the previous night. They had sent their best and brightest to explore the bridge and its defences before their assault, at Warin's terse insistence, and Raine hadn't found a reason to deny them. Gilbert turned in unison with her, interest furrowing his brow, while Dimitri remained solid and silent, leaning against the wall of the bridge's entryway as his hand clasped his lance tightly in preparation for the upcoming fight. Raine nodded to Shamir, keeping her own voice brisk despite the heavy weight she had been feeling ever since they had begun the march south, "Yes?"

"The flags of Aiger and Gloucester are flying. The two eldest sons are on the field, along with an assortment of their men. Our initial assessment was right about who had been placed here." Shamir replied, and she folded her arms about her waist as she noticed the look of sympathetic pain flickering across Raine's expression at the confirmation she hadn't needed, but still was glad for. Behind her, that brown-haired singer from the Black Eagles noticeably winced, looking down at her hands, before Petra reached out to gently place a comforting hand on her shoulder. Ignoring this despite feeling a mild prickle of annoyance for Raine's decision to allow the Black Eagle to take the field, Shamir continued on as she knew it was her obligation to do, "The army we face is mostly made up of calvary, though their general is riding a wyvern. The two noblemen are directly to the west of us, via a short and small channel, but the bulk of the forces are further south covering the majority of the bridge. We've also seen Demonic Beasts amongst the men."
"And their numbers?"

"Double ours, by a rough approximation. Perhaps double and a half." Warin was the one who spoke this time, and he absentmindedly flexed his fingers as he rolled his shoulders back. His expression was calm and controlled despite the bad news he was delivering, but Raine well understood why it didn't daunt him. They had all faced much worse odds before, and he was confident in his ability, as well as the ability of the men and women they had brought alongside them to take the bridge from the Imperial forces. Still, he wasn't about to simply underestimate the soldiers they were to be fighting, and he understood the value of information better than any as he continued on, "There are two strongholds we'll need to capture to stop the flow of reinforcements from below. One will be to our immediate south. The other is guarded by the two nobles. Those strongholds should be our first priority."

"Agreed... All right. The eastern channel will require more subtlety than strength. I'll take a token force with me to handle it... Dorothea, you, Ingrid, Sylvain, and Annette alongside me should be enough for that. Go inform them and bring them here, please." Raine's mind spun quickly, and her orders came quick and efficiently. She heard no argument despite Dorothea's obvious pain and anxiety, and the younger woman was quick to hurry off back to the bulk of their forces to deliver her orders and bring the requested soldiers forward. She was not at home on the battlefield as the others were, she had put it behind her too long ago, but Raine didn't mind her jitters at the moment. Instead she turned towards Warin, continuing on smoothly, "As for the south... Warin, take the majority of our men and clear it. You're in command in my absence... but remember my orders."

"As you wish, Raine." Warin had no objections despite the look of clear dislike that passed across Dimitri's face at Raine's firm, unflinching command, and he wondered if she had spoken so directly to him to provoke such a reaction from the future king. Warin already knew Raine wished to take control of the bridge with the fewest casualties they could manage, she had told him as much when she had been outlining the bare bones of her strategy for capturing the location, yet she had made sure to voice it aloud for all to hear anyway. She was testing the limits of her authority, testing her soldiers for their obedience and loyalty, and he had to admit he was worried about how far she was pushing both herself and her men. However, he didn't allow for that to show, not yet anyway, and instead he remained calm and professional as he questioned, "Shall I muster the men?"

"Yes, and inform them of my orders. Pass along my message to Rodrigue, as well, if time permits. As for the rest of you, follow Warin and ready yourselves for what lies ahead." Raine replied firmly, and she was both glad and relieved when Warin passed her with nothing but a nod of consent, with Shamir following after him like a shadow. She wondered if they noticed that they were not nearly as subtle as they were trying to be, at least to her eyes, but that was a thought for another day as the rest of her assembled soldiers followed after the scouts to begin their preparations. She was left alone with Gilbert and Dimitri in a handful of moments, and she allowed herself a quiet breath as she mused, "More men than anticipated, along with Demonic Beasts... This will be a struggle, but it is doable."

"Double, triple, or even multiply it by the dozens... Their numbers do not matter. They will all fall here like the mad beasts they are." Dimitri spoke dismissively, and his hand tightened on the hilt of his lance almost with anticipation as his one eye slid across the battlefield that lay ahead with the hint of an icy cold smile playing about his lips. He was eager for the fighting, for the bloodshed, and it showed in both his posture and expression as his smile broadened and became more apparent. It would be as easy as exterminating rodents, especially now that he held his ancestor's Relic in his hand... This would be no battle. It would be a slaughter. "We will cleanse this bridge of them, and soon enough, all of the Empire will follow."

"The wanton slaughter you're after isn't an option here. I told you once before, I will not permit it."
Raine cut him off harshly, and her voice was cold with tightly leashed anger as she turned on him with flashing eyes and tight fists of her own. She had anticipated this, his bloodthirst and his willingness to leap into the fray with blind delight, and she had already made the preparations to keep him at a tight heel. Warin didn't have his brute strength, but Rodrigue did have the ability to force Dimitri to listen, and if he disobeyed any direct orders, Warin had already been given the explicit command to take him from the field by brute force if needed. She wouldn't permit a rampant slaughter of the enemy forces. Any soldier who offered surrender would be taken at their word, and chased away before they were killed. She had already given that order behind his back long ago. "You might think them animals, but the same isn't true for all of us."

"I doubt that. What would you do, if you saw the people who stole everything from you? If you saw them right before your eyes, living carefree lives, and feeling no guilt? Would you feel nothing? Do nothing?" Dimitri's arms crossed over his chest as he turned to face her, and he felt her glare like a hot flame piercing his skin as she returned his cold stare without once flinching away. She had found a spine somewhere since their last talk, facing up to him without fear or regret, but he doubted that she was as stern and unflinching as she wished to appear. No, he knew she was not, and he was out to prove it as he stabbed at that one weak point he knew she was still cradling all too tightly to her chest despite her lack of interest in it in her daily life, "Five years ago... Did you not deem the woman who killed Jeralt to be unforgivable? I recall that you most certainly did. You were unable to allow her to get away with her crime, and with your sword in hand, you took up the pursuit."

Raine felt her hands beginning to curl into fists as a mad wave of rage and grief washed over her at the mention of her father, but she forced her body to still. As quickly as the emotions had come, they faded, and they were replaced with something much heavier, and much more poisonous to her heart. Yet she cradled it close all the same, and her eyes found the ground rather than Dimitri's face for a moment as she allowed the truth to sink in. It was not as if she had not thought of it. She had many a long night to muse on it, on her father, and though it made her entire body ache with pain... She would not refute Dimitri's claim, and she admitted as much with a slow, sombre shake of her head, "You're right."

"Precisely my point. We're the same, you and I."

"No. You misunderstand me. You're speaking of Kronya. That isn't who I set out to kill that day. That wasn't who I was chasing with my sword in hand." Raine interrupted him as she heard that smug, self-righteous tone in his voice, and again she felt that mask, that hateful mask of the Ashen Demon falling onto her face to disguise her emotion. She pushed it aside with an anguished effort, refusing to hide the truth from him when he was daring to compare their actions. It was not the same. It was not as simple as he wished it to be, and she would not allow him to think otherwise. She didn't care that he was watching her with a furrowed brow, angry at her dismissal when it had seemed he had finally broke through, nor did she care that Gilbert was still watching their fencing of an argument in keen silence. None of that mattered whatsoever, and she spoke quietly, but clearly as she explained for the man in front of her, "I don't blame Kronya for my father's death. She isn't the one I deemed to be beyond forgiveness. That woman was myself. It wasn't about her. It never was. It was me. On being unable to forgive, yes, I will agree that we are the same. On who we blame? We couldn't be more further apart."

Dimitri halted, and his eye narrowed as Raine stood quiet but calm in front of him, without an ounce of a lie in her voice or in her expression. Her eyes were dry now despite the pain that shone in them, and the guilt was pure and unable to be denied. She spoke the truth. She didn't blame Kronya at all for the death of her father. At least, not anymore. All of that guilt and rage and loathing had been turned inwards, had been buried in her chest like a dagger that she had plunged there herself, and even he could not deny that was the truth of the matter. She hated no one but
herself for her father's death, and she had no plans of extending her rage to those outside of it. Kronya and Solon were dead, both by her hand, yet that hadn't sated her. Edelgard and Thales still lived... but she had no blame to lay at their feet, either. No, instead she blamed herself, and she would continue to do so, long after the war ended, and he knew it.

Gilbert watched closely as Dimitri's face twitched, obviously struggling to absorb her words and all that it meant when it clashed so ferociously with his own worldview. His hand was trembling on his lance, proving the depths of his disturbance, and Gilbert felt a crest of worry urge him into action. He had chosen to be a silent witness when they had begun to speak, knowing it was not his place to intercede in such a deeply personal conversation, but it was obvious that the tension between Dimitri and Raine had grown to a near breaking point. He did not want to see what would be the outcome of all of that tension breaking free, and concern forced him to speak as diplomatically as he possibly could, "Professor-"

"No, Gilbert. I don't want to hear any comforting words from you. He made the comparison, and he deserves to know he's off-base, even if he's partially correct. I stand before you as I am. A murderer, an orphan, and a woman wholly at fault for the death of her father. I have accepted this, and I will carry it to my grave, as I must." Raine again cut off the interruption she had expected, but her eyes never flickered over the tangerine-haired knight. Instead she held Dimitri's stare, taking in the troubled glint in his cerulean eye, but feeling nothing but scorn, disdain, and that pulse of sadness for all he had lost and become in her five year absence. She could do nothing but give him the harsh truth of her reality, in vain hope of making him see that his way was deeply flawed, but she had given up hope that he would listen to reason. It didn't stop her, duty forced her to speak, but she still doubted the words would penetrate his dark veil as she continued firmly, harshly, "But I will never blame those who were not there, and did not hold the dagger. My loss was my failure. I earned the punishment. The people here have not. The whole of the Empire are not my enemies, even if the soldiers standing here today are. I will not dole out judgement rashly, or without cause. Anyone who chooses to surrender, or to switch sides, or to flee, shall be given the chance at life. Because the people here did not commit the Tragedy of Duscur. Or Remire. Or the fall of Garreg Mach, or the death of my father. They are soldiers, men and women who are fighting for their homeland, or for their own survival, and they deserve a chance of redemption even if that chance has long since passed the likes of us by."

Silence followed her declaration, cold, uncomfortable and tense silence, and seeing that no one was fit to reply, Raine simply turned on her heel and left the two men behind her. She couldn't bear to stand there, feeling the weight of their stares on her shoulders, when it was taking all she had to hold up her head and not collapse where she stood from the guilt and the pain. Jeralt was dead, and though it had been five years for them... It had hardly been a handful of moons for her. His loss was still fresh in her mind, his body still warm in her arms, and she hadn't had the will or the strength to visit his grave ever since her return to Garreg Mach. How could she? When to her, he was still freshly buried, and she hadn't had those five precious years to mourn, and to begin to heal?

The scenery about her blurred, and Raine cursed as she paused in her retreat and dashed a hand angrily across her eyes. Now was not the time to be lost in emotion and crying. When this accursed battle ended, perhaps she could hole herself up in her quarters and weep for her lost years and her lost father, but that was not something she could think about now. Her students needed her to lead, and to lead well. If she allowed her emotion to overcome her better sense, she would be putting them all into an early grave. She would not allow it. Taking in several rough, deep breaths, Raine forced the grief and the pain down, shoving it into a small, ironclad box she could open later as she stiffened her spine and forced her face to wipe itself clean.

"Professor! We're here to report for duty!"
The effort came none too late as she heard Sylvain's voice calling for her over the din of her preparing men, and she hastily took in another breath before wiping her face clean on her sleeve. She turned in his direction, glancing over the following women who were at his heel. Everyone save Dorothea looked well and truly prepared for what was to come, but she could not blame the young singer for her hesitation now that she was on the battlefield. It didn't matter that she had been the one to approach her with this request. Now that the time had finally come, she was sick with uncertainty and fear, and considering who it was she was to face... Raine truly could not blame her in the slightest.

She still remembered clearly how Dorothea had approached her that day when the news had broken about the possibility of Ferdinand being on the bridge, and while she had done well in showing courage and defiance... There was still that broken undercurrent of her tossing aside her vows of pacifism. She had to take up sword and tome to be on the battlefield, even if her end goal was not to kill, but rather to save. It was one thing to face her fears in theory, another entirely to be there in person, now preparing to take a life with the weight of her weapons in hand... and it was that display of courage, courage mixed with heartache, that had made Raine eventually give in despite her better judgement.

"Is it true?"

Raine looked up from the map she had been previously pouring over at the sharp voice that had interrupted her work, and she felt little surprise as she watched Dorothea sweep into the room, completely ignoring the fact that she had a captive audience in Rodrigue and Felix as she marched over to Raine's seat in a flurry of anxious movement. The older woman carefully slid the map she had been examining with the help of Rodrigue out the way as she met Dorothea's eyes, and though she was already aware of what would bring the singer to the war room of all places, she still wasn't entirely pleased to see her. She had been dreading this particular confrontation, as she had known it was bound to happen sooner rather than later, but now that Dorothea had come to confront her... She had to admit she wasn't entirely sure she felt ready for it.

Both Rodrigue and his son were silent, expecting her to handle it as she had made it expressly clear that no one in all of Garreg Mach was to give Dorothea and her children anything but space and charity since her arrival a moon prior. It made her rankle with annoyance, especially considering Felix was never silent unless it was outright demanded of him, but she knew this was only another of many of her duties to fulfil, and it was that thought and that thought only that permitted Raine to keep her composure as she folded her hands in front of her and replied calmly as she looked up into Dorothea's anxiety-ridden face, "Is what true, Dorothea?"

"Is it true that you've ironclad confirmation of the fact that the armies of both House Gloucester and House Aiger are to be guarding the Bridge of Myrddin?"

Raine winced, and she bit the inside of her cheek to stop herself from scowling as she wondered how those two pieces of information had escaped the doors of the war room in record time. After the utter disaster that had almost gotten the lot of them killed in Ailell, Raine had made it a priority in seeing that such information concerning the rebellion's next move was to be divulged only to those she and the other handful of commanders in the rebellion deemed pertinent in the future. Yet here Dorothea was, a non-combatant and a woman who had made it personally clear she wanted as little to do with the goings on of the war effort as possible, with that information in hand and clearly upset about it. She glanced over her shoulder to the father and son behind her, but both could only look at her with a mixture of confusion and uncertainty in reply. They, at least, had not been the ones to open their mouths, and she believed them on expression alone before she turned back to the singer who had come to confront her personally.
Rubbing her temples for a moment, Raine didn't answer immediately before she sat herself up straight so that she could look Dorothea in the eye. She wouldn't lie, even if she was unhappy of the fact that the monastery's walls clearly has too many holes in it for her liking. And worse, she understood exactly why Dorothea had chosen to abandon all thoughts of decorum or keeping herself on the sidelines when she had heard exactly who it was would likely be facing down the rebellion troops at the moon's end. It couldn't be something she was digesting easily, and it made her anxiety understandable, but Raine was forced to keep a calm composure she didn't truly feel before saying quietly, politely, "Felix, Rodrigue... Can you please leave the room for a moment? I need to speak to Dorothea privately. We can continue our discussions afterwards."

Rodrigue hesitated, clearly uneasy with the order, and Felix just shook his head, muttering something under his breath as he made for the door without much argument. He knew that tone his professor was using, it was not one that brooked discussion, and he wasn't interested in trying her obviously quite frayed patience. No amount of wanting to see the resulting showdown was worth pricking his professor's temper, and he knew it wiser to step out of the way rather than argue just for his own amusement. His father clearly was not as aware of this as he was, as he did not move and instead spoke up slowly, "Professor, perhaps I-"

"You better quit while you're ahead, old man. This doesn't concern you. Let Professor deal with it." Felix called from the doorway, though he wondered why he was bothering. Even if he wasn't interested in seeing his professor have it out with Dorothea, it would be leagues more entertaining to watch her dress his father down. He supposed it was Mercedes' influence, though he didn't want to admit it. She had been badgering him constantly since his father had showed up alongside his troops to try and get along with the man, and while he had no interest in being cordial... He didn't want to hear her continuing to scold his ear off, either. It made him brusque as he waved a hand and gestured to the hallway, "She'll call you back in when she's done. Just leave it alone."

Rodrigue looked to his son, and then to the professor uncertainly as a heavy silence filled the room. There was a palpable tension that he did not quite understand, but as he looked to the angry expression on the young woman's face... He decided it was likely best he heeded his son's warnings. He was not entirely sure what it was that was going on between the two, but clearly it was a personal affair that he had no business overhearing. He did not know the leader of the rebellion well, but he did know she was obviously a woman not easily trifled with, and he had no desire to overstep his boundaries by disobeying a direct order. He nodded his head, offering a half-bow before he excused himself quietly, "Professor... I shall be waiting for your call to return."

Raine waited until both of the two nobles were gone, with the heavy click of the door shutting behind them signifying their departure before she turned back to Dorothea. She waved a hand idly, gesturing to a nearby chair in invitation for her to sit, and it took a few moments before the former Black Eagle gathered herself enough to take it. Her hands were trembling as she gripped the front of her dress and curled them into tight fists, and Raine let out a tired breath before she began quietly, "I'm not about to ask how you know what you know, but as he looked to the angry expression on the young woman's face... He decided it was likely best he heeded his son's warnings. He was not entirely sure what it was that was going on between the two, but clearly it was a personal affair that he had no business overhearing. He did not know the leader of the rebellion well, but he did know she was obviously a woman not easily trifled with, and he had no desire to overstep his boundaries by disobeying a direct order. He nodded his head, offering a half-bow before he excused himself quietly, "Professor... I shall be waiting for your call to return."

"Do you know who's leading those troops?" Dorothea's question was cutting, though she was also aware she was stepping her toe over a boundary she herself had drawn. Raine's expression was chillingly neutral, but her eyes were sharp and scanning her extremely closely. She was not sure if she was about to be reprimanded for demanding more information, especially when she really had no rights to it, but once she had heard the whispers... It had been impossible to stop herself from going straight to the professor for confirmation. She needed to know. She wouldn't be able to rest
until she did, no matter if the answer was one she wished for, or was dreading. She could not help it. "Have they seen anyone in command?"

"No, they haven't... but we can make educated guesses. Which I imagine is why you're here."

Raine's answer came slowly, quietly, and she shook her head as she reached to rub at her temples where she could feel the faintest traces of a headache beginning to make themselves known. Even if she wanted to ignore the obvious, there was no way she could. The only ones leading the forces of the two noble houses had to be the eldest sons, even if the Prime Minister of the Empire had been stripped of his title and lands five years prior. His son was still in service to the Emperor, and his loyalty rewarded him with a soldier's position, even if the powers he had wielded as a noble had been taken from him and held hostage. She didn't need the rebellion's scouts to tell her who was leading. She already knew, and she knew Dorothea had reached that same conclusion. "There's little doubt in my mind that both Lorenz and Ferdinand will be leading their men in defence of the bridge... And I understand why that must be a pressing issue for you."

"I want to come. When you take the bridge with your forces. I want to join you."

Raine had known it was coming, but she still felt her stomach sink somewhere into the floor and farther below as she looked Dorothea in the eye and saw the stubborn determination shining in her expression. She meant it, every word, but it was all the more reason for Raine to pull back and away from it even if she understood exactly where the singer was coming from. The request made sense, when she took it from a purely personal standpoint, but she could not afford to make decisions on such things. She had to be pragmatic, had to be calculating, and she shook her head as she replied bluntly, though not entirely unkindly, "Dorothea, you know that I can't allow for that. I feel for you, but if I bring you to the front, you must understand how that will look to the rest of the troops. You came here with the sole purpose of being a non-combatant. Changing your mind because a fellow classmate will be on the enemy lines... You understand how that will look to others, don't you? I might know your reasons, but the others will not. And any idea they've had of obeying my orders when it comes to leaving you and your children alone won't last if you take to the field."

"I don't care what they think of me. I need to be there. If Ferdinand is really going to face you all... I have to try one more time to convince him to lay down his sword. I must." Dorothea shook her head, eyes blazing as she understood exactly where Raine was coming from and shook it away in the next moment. Her pride, her safety... Nothing mattered in the face of what she was realizing was coming. In a short handful of weeks, the rebellion would be marching on the bridge... and she knew they would succeed in wresting it away from the Empire's control. They were stronger than they were before now, bolstered with the troops Rodrigue had provided, and their willingness to fight far outmatched any standard Imperial soldier's desire to defend the bridge. They would hold their ground and fight to the last, yes... but they would lose, all the same. She couldn't permit that to be the only route left to Ferdinand. She simply couldn't. "I may be able to get through to him this time. I have to try. What if I can persuade him to stop fighting? Isn't that better than simply killing him outright without giving him the chance to reconsider his actions up until now?"

"Dorothea, you did try. You made every effort you could, and he still chose to stay in the Empire five years ago." The words tasted like bile on her tongue, bitter and acidic and making her body shudder, but she knew she had to speak them all the same. What Dorothea was requesting of her was madness. She wanted to put herself at risk, with no guarantee of success, without thinking of the full consequences of her wish. What if she failed? What if she succeeded? Neither of those outcomes promised anything that Raine was equipped to deal with. Dorothea being present to see the death of her friend... or worse, somehow managing to convince him to lay down his sword, only to make him a traitor in the midst of a battle where the men at his back would sooner ram a lance
through his shoulders when he abandoned them for the enemy than follow his example to stand down...? She shook her head again. It was far too dangerous a hope. Far too dangerous a scenario for her to entertain. "What makes you think that now your words will get through to him?"

"I don't know!" Dorothea felt herself explode without consent or thought, and though a small part of her knew it was unjust of her to be doing so to Raine of all people, she still could not quite help herself. Too many emotions had been bottled up, and too much was being forced to go through her mind all at once. She knew she had to sound mad, and she knew she likely was, but it didn’t change the feelings of obligation and guilt that were choking their way about her chest. She shook her head hard, hands clenching until they began to tremble as she balled up the fabric of her dress in her fists as she continued, "You're right, maybe it won't help, but... I can't just sit here, knowing that you'll be marching to fight, and do nothing! Even if it's just for my own selfish sake... Even if I fail... I won't be able to live with myself if I don't try one last time!"

Raine waited for Dorothea's breathing to settle and for her temper to return, and she could tell the singer was glad for the pause as her tense body relaxed, and then her shoulders sagged. She slumped in the chair, seemingly exhausted by her outburst, but Raine admitted she didn’t so much mind taking the brunt of it. This was different than anything else she had done so far, and Dorothea's reasoning was not something she necessarily disagreed with. However, that was a personal matter and not a pragmatic one, and she knew which side had to win out on such matters.

She pressed two fingers to her temples, watching Dorothea closely before deciding to speak, and when she did, she chose her words as carefully as she possibly could. She needed to be distant, professional, yet she also didn’t want to sound cold or uncaring. It was a difficult balance to make, but she fought for it all the same as she began slowly, deliberately, "Dorothea, think of the logistics of what you're asking. First, I have to bring you onto the battlefield... and you'll be called to fight. I can't protect you, or keep you away from the bloodshed. You will be forced to take up a weapon and protect yourself, and make yourself useful for our goals. Can you fight again? Can you kill your countrymen to protect yourself, to get to Ferdinand, who will most assuredly be leading from the frontlines? And can you kill him, if he chooses to ignore your pleas, and tries to kill you, because you're standing with the forces of the rebellion? Unless all of your answers to this are yes, a yes you mean without an ounce of hesitation or uncertainty, I cannot allow you to join us. You'll be too much of a liability, and a liability is not something we can afford."

The questions were swordstrokes, but they were not cruelly spoken. The sympathy in Raine's eyes lessened her hurt, but it could not banish it entirely. She knew the professor was right to point out what she hadn’t thought of initially, yet she was somewhat surprised to find that she didn’t care as much as she had thought she would. The idea of picking up a blade again was abhorrent, but... the thought of staying behind, quiet, demure and useless, while those who housed her and her children without question fought with Ferdinand... That hurt far more. She shook her head and took in a deep breath, steeling her nerves, steeling her stomach, as she met Raine's piercing stare and replied quietly, "If my answer was yes, would you take me with you?"

Raine closed her eyes and bit the inside of her cheek to stop herself from replying on instinct and not with her better sense. It went against her natural desires to say no to such a heartfelt plea, but she was no longer a simple professor catering to the relatively harmless whims of her students. No, those days were far behind her now, even if they were still so close in her memory. She couldn’t act freely. It simply was not within her bounds to do so. Her decisions impacted many more people now, and they required approval from others in similar positions of power. She was leading, but she wasn’t leading alone, and she knew that wariness showed on her face as she answered tiredly, "You’d need to let me think it over before I could give you a concrete answer, Dorothea. At the very least, I’d have to consult with Seteth and Gilbert to have their approval. You'd likely need to make a case to them."
"Fine. If that's what it takes, I'll do it. Gladly."

"Be careful what you wish for, Dorothea... Be careful what you wish for."

That warning now was echoing in Dorothea's ears, Raine could see it clearly, but she decided it was best not to speak up as her four chosen soldiers crowded about her in anticipation for her orders. Over their heads and behind her she could see Warin mustering the rest of their forces for his assault on the southern half of the bridge, and she was glad for his steadiness before she returned her attention to her students. All of them met her eyes unflinchingly, ready and willing, and she offered them a small, tight smile at their obedience and kindness, despite the pressure of the situation they were in. Their confidence in her was a balm to her wounds, and a much-needed one, and she turned a little to point to that tight hall that Shamir had spoken of as she began without preamble, "That is our route, and our goal is just beyond that. Unfortunately, that means no mounts, Sylvain and Ingrid, and I apologize for that... but I think you understand why I prefer you on foot, yes?"

"A bottleneck... I see." Ingrid spoke first with a nod, and she tilted her head as she glanced at the winding passage that permitted entry into the depths of the bridge that served as both a means of transportation, and a fortress all on its own. It was a travel passage, one not meant to take the brunt of an invasion, and yet their professor intended to use it just for that purpose while the mass of their forces created an opportunity for their movement. The blond knight smiled knowingly, impressed as always by her professor's keen intuition, but she turned back to her all the same as she questioned, "You believe that the enemy will force their mounts through anyway?"

"Calvary has an advantage over infantry forces by sheer speed and movement, and it will be an advantage they'll be loathe to give up, especially against a small force like ours... Professor is right. On foot, we'll be able to force a bottleneck much more easily than if we were mounted." Sylvain spoke up before Raine had to, and she smiled to herself at his quick insight and the intelligence she had always known he hid under his poor charm. He was a strong student as well as a soldier, but he rarely allowed it to show since it did not benefit him in the ways he wanted. But those days were far behind him, and now he was acting as his true self, free from his former insecurities and hatred, and now determined and settled in himself as he continued with a nod, "And with Annette and Dorothea behind us, that gives us even more of an advantage... I'm all for it."

"But we aren't here to kill, remember, Sylvain? That's not why the professor chose us to come this way." Annette reminded him firmly, and though her voice was quiet and her concern apparent for her comrades, her eyes were hard with determination as she glanced to Dorothea, who had been silent since coming to fetch them. Though she knew she was not as close to the young Imperial singer as Ingrid or Petra were, her heart naturally went out to her all the same when the situation had been explained to her in as much detail as Dorothea had been willing to give. She reached out kindly, taking Dorothea's hand firmly in her own as she continued on, "We're here to convince both Ferdinand and Lorenz to lay down their arms. It might mean cleaving a way through their forces to get to them, but we aren't going to kill anyone if we can manage it. Those are Professor's orders."

"They are. But I also won't be asking you to risk your lives to carry out mercy. If you must kill to defend yourselves, then do so. This is still war, and our enemies will not have the same compunctions as we will for taking lives." Raine corrected Annette gently, and she looked to each of them to both take in their expressions, and to show her own to them in complete honesty. Ingrid was avoiding her gaze, obviously troubled, but she quickly stilled herself in a show of professional stoicism. Her future king's hatred was her hatred, but she was not blind to her orders, nor was she the type to disobey. She loved her homeland more than she valued unquestioning obedience, and even if it meant sparing an Imperial soldier to do her duty... She would do so, if the situation permitted, because she understood the cycle of revenge and bloodshed would continue if she
waged the war her king so dearly wished to wage.

Sylvain had proven himself a simpler man, wishing to only be pointed in a direction and not mull over the specifics of the situation, but his empathy would not allow him to act so casually. He felt Ingrid’s unsteadiness and her worry, and he acted naturally to provide her comfort. He reached for her shoulder, giving it a light, careful squeeze for all of a few seconds before he dropped his hand again respectfully. A battlefield was no place to be working his charm, for all the good his charm ever did him against Ingrid of all people, but he couldn't help the desire to try all the same. Annette's words rung true enough for him, the pragmatism was something he understood, but he also was well aware it would only make the fighting all the more difficult for them. It was harder for them to fight leashed than it was to fight to kill, and that was something their professor knew, yet still she had given them those orders. Whether it came from belief in their skills, or her own idealism, he wasn't quite sure, but he knew better than to argue with her now. She was wiser than him, and he respected that wisdom.

Dorothea however bowed her head, her hands tightly clasping each other as she bit her lip and remained silent. The looks that had passed between the foursome were of no comfort to her. They were battle-hardened, soldiers, and the difference between her and them was stark. Even Annette, the sweetest and kindest of the lot had seen her fair share of war, and she looked just as ready as the two knights were to throw herself headlong into battle without even a moment's hesitation. She wondered where their bravery came from, their ability to fight without regret, but she had long ago realized she was simply a different breed from them. Still, the guilt lingered, and before better sense could kick in, she found herself murmuring, "I'm very sorry... This is all because of my selfishness..."

"That's not entirely true, Dorothea." Ingrid broke in before Raine had a chance to, and both surprised and intrigued by the blond's immediate defence of her friend, the eldest of the group stepped back in silence to allow her to continue. Ingrid had the most difficulty with her orders, having suffered more than Sylvain and Annette had during the breaking of the Kingdom, and she took personal injury to all Dimitri had suffered at the Empire's hands. She had made that all expressly clear, and hadn't been afraid to voice her objections when she had first received her orders, but now her expression was calm and almost kind as she turned to Dorothea and explained gently, "It's true that you're here for Ferdinand, but Professor's orders of mercy are not only for your sake... There's pragmatism at play here, too. You weren't at the council, so you didn't hear her outlining her plans, but sparing soldiers, convincing Ferdinand and Lorenz to lay down their arms... It isn't just for your wishes, it's also for the good of the war."

"But how can that be? Even if we somehow manage to convince Ferdinand to betray the Empire... What good will it do if he joins the rebellion? His men likely won't follow him... Edelgard stripped his family of their rank and territory, as well as all of the soldiers that were once loyal to his house. The forces he commands are Imperial soldiers with no loyalty to him." Dorothea frowned as she wondered at Ingrid's confidence, and she glanced over to Sylvain and Annette in hopes of finding an answer in their expressions. Sylvain was grinning in his professor's direction, but she was shaking her head at him in exasperated amusement, while Annette returned her confused look with a comforting smile. This only served to make Dorothea more puzzled, and she wondered at what she had missed as she looked to Raine and asked, "What are you hoping to achieve?"

"A sorely needed advantage, Dorothea. Lorenz is a noble, but his loyalty has always been first and foremost to the Alliance. Just like Ferdinand with the Empire. That is why they're both here today." Ingrid explained patiently as Raine looked to her with a small nod, giving her silent permission to continue on. They had grown more secretive in their war councils now ever since the disaster in Ailell, speaking only in closely guarded quarters, and keeping word tighter to the chest than ever. But Raine clearly trusted Dorothea to be let in on the finer details she had been keeping secret even
from the likes of Dimitri and Seteth, and after having been informed of her schemes... Ingrid could well understand why. The risks were high, higher than Seteth would ever agree to, and Dimitri simply would never permit Raine to reach beyond their own forces that had already been tried and trusted to his satisfaction. She was playing a dangerous game, but the payoff, if it succeeded, was well worth it, and Ingrid knew it, and trusted in her as she explained, "If we can use that loyalty to our advantage, if we can convince them to turn their coats here and now... We'll gain an ally that gives us both a potential key to more allies, as well as an unexpected advantage for our next battle."

"An advantage for your next battle?"

"If we continue to march towards Enbarr, we'll be taken through Grondor Fields... And it's very likely Alliance forces will be coming to defend their territory, as the Imperial army marches to repel our invasion. Three armies clashing, just as it was five years ago... If we allow things to continue as they are." Raine explained with a roll of her shoulders, and her eyes flickered as she glanced over her shoulder to see the men Warin had amassed now preparing themselves for the signal for the initial rush. She had made all the calculations already, planning several steps ahead despite how many times she had been warned to look to the next battle and the next battle only so not to get distracted... But Raine refused to be so callow. Edelgard had won handily five years prior because she had been fighting a war long before they had known one was even in play. She would not have such an advantage again. It was their turn to flip the tables, and the script, on the former Flame Emperor. "I don't intend to have a replay of the Battle of the Eagle and the Lion... but more I can't say, until this fight is over. Too many factors are still in the air. But, should we succeed, and my plan plays out as I hope it does... Edelgard will find herself without the upper hand, in very short order."

Dorothea furrowed her brow, but quickly decided it was best she say nothing else. Raine didn't seem willing to discuss it further, either because she didn't trust her with the details, or because she was worried speaking her plans aloud would somehow lessen her chances. Regardless, Dorothea decided it didn't matter. She didn't want to know the details of Raine's scheming for the war... All she cared for was bringing Ferdinand back to Garreg Mach safe and sound, even if he was unwilling. She would do anything and everything to keep him alive, to bring him home, because she simply could not bear the alternative. "Very well... Forgive me for delaying us. As I said... I know that I am not as skilled as all of you, but I will do my best today for you. I owe you that and more for ceding to my selfish demands. Today, I'm a soldier once more, under your command, Professor. Any order you give... I will follow."

"I appreciate it, Dorothea. But I will try to keep you out of the fighting to the best of my ability, at least until the time comes when Ferdinand appears... For the moment, hang back, and focus on healing. Annette can handle any long-range tactics we'll be in need of. Don't push yourself past your limits, simply because you feel you must. You'll only be a liability otherwise." Raine reminded her gently, and she was glad to see that Sylvain, Ingrid, and Annette showed similar kindness and empathy with nods, a squeeze of a hand, and reassuring smiles. It was why she had chosen them for this mission and no one else, because they would all understand and obey without question, and she needed that loyalty more than anything else today.

The booming of a war horn sounding broke through the silence, and brought a grim smile to Raine's face as she heard the roar of soldiers following quickly behind as Warin and Rodrigue began their move. It was met immediately by shocked cries and angry shouts of enemy combatants racing to their posts and hurrying to engage, and it was exactly the signal she had been waiting for. Though their mission of clearing out the bridge was indeed the most important part of their entire foray, for Raine, they were simply one large distraction for her and her group. She reached for her blade, reassured by its weight and that familiar pulse of warm, quiet power that surged up her arm
from where her flesh touched the cracked hilt. She turned to her group, who watched her in expectant silence, and she nodded once in reassurance.

This was home. This was where she was at her best, regardless of everything else that troubled her or caused her grief. She felt the weight of the monastery and leadership and politics falling away, and leaving her with her old instincts of her mercenary past, and her professor's wisdom and love for her former students. Her sword was light and familiar in her hand, and her body felt spry and lithe despite her earlier exhaustion and worry. Nothing else mattered but the battle ahead, and here, she was safer than she ever could be wandering the familiar halls of Garreg Mach. She knew her renewed confidence showed in the gleam of her eyes and the way her sword rested in her hand, but she cared little for the transformation. There was work to be done, and her father's reassuring words of her being a mercenary born were echoing comfortably in her ears.

"Let us begin."

Chapter End Notes

AN:

A word of warning, that was posted once before, but must be repeated again... I hate fight scenes. I hate writing them more than anything else in the world. However, this is Fire Emblem, and a fic about Fire Emblem without fight scenes is kinda like writing about water without ever mentioning that it's wet. I get it, and I'll do it, but I will be bluntly honest with you that is not my forte, and it probably won't look very good no matter how hard I'll try on it. I apologize much in advance for the dip in quality the next chapter is going to take because of this, but please be noted that I didn't half-ass it. I worked my best on it, and I am truly and deeply sorry if it just does not stand up to my usual quality.

So, here's where things start changing up a tad in Azure Moon. I won't exactly explain what Raine's schemes are, since that takes away from the fun of the future chapters, but I'm wondering if anyone knows what she has in mind here? I will say Grondor is the biggest hint in this chapter, but what about Grondor will be left to your imaginations. There are three (but sort of two, since one point leads into the other) key points in AM that are going to be changed, as I don't intend to follow AM to the letter, and Grondor is one of the areas where most of this change is going to occur... I wonder if anyone can guess where these changes are going to occur? No prizes this time, since that means you might be able to guess at my endgame, but do try anyway! It amuses me! XD

I also need to stop staying up so late to write. Why is it that the bug always hits the worst when I'm supposed to be sleeping? I'll never understand it. My muse apparently is as nocturnal as I am, and it's super not healthy. I already have insomnia problems. I don't need to make it worse by staying up in front of a laptop and tapping away until my wrists start begging for mercy... I'm masochistic, aren't I? Oi vey... I should go to bed.

Anywhosit! Thank you as always for reading this far, and please drop me a review should you feel the need. They are my lifeblood after all, and I always feel so energized and excited to keep writing whenever I get that alert in my inbox. Every little
thing counts, you know. Even the smallest, "Good job!" makes me feel so good, and so thankful to you guys. You all keep me writing and my spirits up, you know. And I owe you all big for taking the time out of your day to read, or review, anything I work on. I hope you have a good one, and I'll see you again next chapter!

Mood: Bemused.

Listening To: "Ring Your Bell" - Kalafina (Fate Stay Night, Unlimited Blade Works ED)

~ Sky
The Way of the Noble

Chapter Summary

Genres/Ratings: Action/Adventure, Hurt/Comfort, Romance, War. (T)
Characters: Raine, Lorenz, Marianne.

Summary: Their reasons for fighting were similar even if their homelands differed greatly, but it was those similarities that proved they would clash relentlessly on the battlefield. The bonds between house and comrade, friends and lovers, and soldiers and students would all be tested on the Great Bride of Myrddin, with the single, lonely hope that some of the bloodshed could be quelled through words rather than the ringing of blades or the screech of magic.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lone Moon

The Great Bridge of Myrddin

Noontime

Whatever they had expected of House Gloucester, Raine had to admit that this had not been it. To have been halfway through the passage, easily crippling every soldier that came their way, only to be met head-on by the eldest son himself, dismounted and alone... It had given all pause in both wonder and suspicion. They all were well aware that despite his pomp and desperate attempt at charm that he was deceptively intelligent in both the way of the knight as well as the politician, and it had been with that in mind that Raine had quickly motioned for her students to stand behind her as she took the lead. Lorenz had approached them alone, with no sign of his men following, and his weapons were sheathed... for the moment. It was not an ideal time for a parley, not with the roar of the bridge in the throes of battle surrounding them, but even Raine knew the significance of Lorenz' motions deserved pause.

So she gave in to decorum as she stood between him and her students, eyes alight with both suspicion and wariness as she gripped her blade down tightly until her knuckles whitened. He stood between them and their goal at the end of the passage, but to shove him aside was out of the question. He was one of the two targets she had planned to intercept on this path, and to have him come to her was both a boon and an unfortunate turn of luck. Still, it was obvious in his demeanour he wished to speak and was waiting to see if she would do him the courtesy, or would engage him on sight. She did not sheathe her weapon, but she did motion for her four waiting soldiers to stand down before she spoke curtly, firmly in greeting, "Lorenz."

"Professor. It is quite unfortunate that all these years later, that we are to meet in such circumstances again. I am truly regretful." Lorenz answered her with a deep nod, and as Raine watched him closely, she could tell he meant every word he spoke. He was not a man prone to falsehoods, even if he did prefer to flower his language and his mannerisms until he looked like a fool. Still, now was not the time to underestimate him based on memory from five years prior, and his stance and choice to meet them unmounted was proof of it. He had confidence in himself as a
soldier, confidence born of experience and not youthful arrogance, and she was well aware he
could see her sizing him up as well as he was doing the same to her and her men. "I am, however,
glad to know that your sense of courtesy has not waned. I am grateful that you would give me this
moment to speak to you frankly. I am here alone to ask for one last courtesy, if you would be so
kind."

"And that would be?"

"A duel. Between you and I. No others. Not your students, nor my men. They are under my
command, and not that of my father's, you understand... This business between the Empire and
Alliance is not of my choosing." Lorenz explained with a deceptive sort of calm despite the quiet
wrath simmering in his eyes, and Raine cocked her head to the side as she watched him even more
closely. His anger was well-hidden, proof that he did not agree again with the methodology of the
head of his house, and it was again forcing him to deviate from all social norms he had perfected
with both hard work and natural grace. He was behaving as a nobleman, or at least his ideal of a
nobleman, even as he rejected his father's side in the war, and it showed as he continued on, "I
stand before you now as myself, with only the wish of seeing the men under my command spared
should you fell me. I am a man of the Alliance, and this civil war the Empire has begun, using my
house as a figurehead, is not at all what I wish to see befall my homeland. Duty, however, compels
me to remain at my father's side. Duty, and the risk of my life and all I love. My choices are
limited. Should I fight you, and lose, I will have fulfilled my duty."

"A clever way of abandoning the war and saving your men at the same time... I can respect that
about you, at the very least." Raine admitted with a nod, and she wondered errantly when Lorenz
had chosen to put his words into action, or if he had simply always been this way, and now was
having a chance to demonstrate that he was not all talk now that the war was raging. It saddened
her, knowing that such an honest young man was willing to put his life on the line for his ideals,
his men, and his homeland even in what could be seen as supposed treachery. Yet, that, too, was
noble in its own way. Still, she had to be pragmatic, especially as she heard the quiet, unhappy
muttering of her students behind her, "Still, what you offer, I can't give you the same. You're a wise
man. You know this bridge must fall for the sake of the rebellion. Your offer means little,
regardless of the outcome of the duel. Or have you already admitted defeat, and are hoping just to
spare your men the same fate as the rest of the Imperial troops?"

"You are a wise woman yourself... Yes, indeed. I am aware that the forces here cannot withstand
the might of your army... Defeating you in single combat, while hefty, will not change the outcome
of this battle. Even if I were to kill you, I would not last the day. Your men would execute me
summarily for my victory. You are right in saying my offer means little." Lorenz admitted it
without the bat of an eye, both surprising, and impressing Raine at his blunt honesty, and his full
understanding of the situation at hand. He was not dreaming of the best outcome. There was no
point in it. An honourable duel did not guarantee an honourable outcome. That was simply the
horrors of war that he had been forced to come to terms with, both in his days at the academy, and
on the battlefield for the last five years. Still... He needed her, needed to know she would listen and
understand, and it forced him to press with an urgency he did not wish to display, "I have told my
men of my plan, and though they are unhappy with me to say the least, they will not disobey my
orders. Still. Patience will only last so long, especially for those who are duty-bound to their lord.
So I ask you again, Professor... Will you grant me the privilege of a duel, and the promise of the
lives of my men?"

"No. I won't grant you that. If you wish for a duel, and wish for an outcome in your favour even
when you lose, then I have the right to ask the same of you." Raine's answer was quiet but not
cruel, and she almost winced as she watched Lorenz flinch and stiffen at her rejection, and her
following words. Disgust flickered across his face, and she knew she had earned his reaction, but
she kept her face smooth and devoid of emotion in answer. She couldn't permit him to see her empathy, or her wounds... He would not fight wholly if she allowed him to know how much this simple exchange was hurting her. She continued placidly, aware of the time pressing down on her shoulders and the chance quickly trying to slide through her grasping fingers, "I'll only grant you a duel if you'll concede to my demands should I win, just as you demand I should if you lose. Fair is only fair, Lorenz. I cannot waste my time without the promise of something I sorely need."

"What is it you demand, then?"

"There's no point in telling you now. Draw, and fight me. If I win, give me your word you'll give me what I ask, and I promise you the lives of your men." Raine ignored his question, and she lifted her sword to further emphasize the fact that she was done talking. She didn't let her eyes stray from him for a moment, gauging his reaction closely, and she was satisfied when she heard him let out a quiet breath, along with the softest whispers of a curse. He reached over his shoulder, sliding his lance free of his belt, and at the sight of his arming himself, she spoke curtly over her shoulder without letting him out of her sight, "Ingrid, Sylvain, Annette, Dorothea... Not a move, and not a word. You stay where you are until this ends. There will be no interference, regardless of the outcome. That is an order. Understood?"

"Understood. But that order only lasts as long as you live." Sylvain answered for them all, his voice cold and his eyes harsh and unyielding at his professor's back as she steadied herself into that familiar stance she always had when she was preparing herself for battle. He did not doubt her prowess, nor did he doubt that she was more than capable of felling Lorenz where he stood, but he also was not foolish enough to not prepare for the worst outcome. He knew Annette at the very least would never doubt her professor for an instant, but he was far more jaded... and for more pragmatic. His voice was icy as he continued, his hand gripping his lance so tightly that his hand begun to tremble. "The instant you fall, Professor, don't expect us to continue to obey you. We'll honour your promise... but that's as far as it will go. Anyone who hurts you will pay. Duel or no duel."

Raine bit the inside of her cheek to force herself not to smile, and she looked at Lorenz almost apologetically as he glanced from Sylvain and then back to her with a look of honest surprise. She could only manage a slight shrug, trying not to look pleased with the answer she had been given, especially considering how utterly morbid it was. She wondered why she felt such a way. Perhaps it was the unwavering support and belief, the loyalty and honesty, when that morning she had spat at Dimitri, who she had always considered her best student. Now the Blue Lions as a whole were rallying behind her, all providing what Dimitri no longer had the capacity to give, and it reminded her of just how good it felt to be loved. She offered Lorenz a small, sad smile before explaining weakly as her sword spun as easily in her hands as a quill in preparation, "Forgive my students, Lorenz. It seems old habits die hard."

"There's no need. You have always been a woman who inspires loyalty. It was only poor luck that you did not lead our house. I would have dearly enjoyed a chance to learn at your desk... but those days are long gone." Lorenz answered with a forced sort of cheer, and he was aware that his regret truly did run deep. He had full and honest respect for Professor Hanneman, who he knew had joined with the rebellion when it had first begun in Garreg Mach, but there was just something different about her. She was not a noble, nor was she pious, yet she commanded attention and love and obedience all the same from anyone who crossed her path. He was not sure if it was her honesty, her compassion, or her talents that had managed to charm so many, but it did not matter now. He hefted his lance easily, narrowing his eyes as he steadied himself and gave the last words he could speak before they would lock weapons, "I thank you for the opportunity to cross blades with you now... and forgive me for what I do."
No more words were needed, nor could they be given as the two sprang for one another. Raine was faster and closed the distance between them first, and it was only pure instinct that saved Lorenz from her opening slash as his lance lifted sideways to catch her blade across the middle. As quickly as she had closed she was gone, leaping away and out of his range, and with quiet anger Lorenz was reminded that she had spent the better part of her lifetime duelling with lance-wielders. She knew exactly how to fight someone with better range, and it wasn't as if her sword was incapable of tripling the reach of an average lance.

Yet... Not once did she attempt to extend her Relic as they crossed blades again. She fought him as if she was using a simple steel blade rather than the fabled Sword of the Creator, and Lorenz wondered if it was out of honour as a mercenary, or simply because she had not yet had an opening to use it. She kept out of his range, testing him time and time again with stabs and slashes that he was forced to parry or knock aside, but still she kept her sword as it was. It both angered and surprised him, that she was not fighting to her fullest capability, but he knew better than to allow either emotion to impact his work. She was a mercenary still, even after all these years, and though he would have been loathe to say it five years ago... He understood now that mercenaries had codes of conduct just as those in nobility had. They were not as different as they seemed to be, blue blood or no.

They circled warily, one probing her defences, and the other pushing aside and probing in return with expert eyes and calm. She had more years of warfare on her than he ever could imagine, and her experience showed in her emotionless face and the blunt strength of the Relic she wielded as easily as if it was a part of her own body. Again, Lorenz wondered as she swatted his lance aside yet again, refusing to allow him to close despite his best efforts. Her footwork was immaculate as he continued to push forward, and she never permitted her back to face anything other than open air. She knew his intent to corner her, it was the best way to gain an advantage, and so every push forward was met with a sidestep rather than a retreat in a never-ending dance until one of them lost patience.

At least, that had been Lorenz' thought until her blade whipped out as his lance moved forward in yet another experimental stabbing movement at her midsection. Her blade screeched as it pushed alongside his weapon, shoving it wide and exposing him, and Lorenz only barely managed to jerk backwards before the tip of her sword met the front of his chest. Instinctively his hand lurched for his belt, reaching for the tome he carried at his waist, and unbidden he felt the magic responding to his gesture. The fire spell raced from his palm without consent or thought, eager for its target, and Lorenz felt a bolt of fear as the magic exploded on contact with the sword Raine lifted at once to shield herself from it.

It happened in an instant, the smoke and cinders obscuring his opponent, and for a heart-stopping moment, Lorenz knew he had erred. He hadn't intended to bring his magic into the battle, and yet on nothing but instinct alone he had reached for it at the sight of that blade coming for his chest. A true duel did not involve anything but the weapons the two involved had chosen, and he been holding his lance when he had called for it. Using his magic was a gross breach of etiquette, and from the alarmed shouts of the students Raine had been meticulously keeping at her back... He wondered when he would feel their wrath collapsing on his head.

"Keep your head, lest you lose it, Lorenz."

Her voice came calm and almost lazily from within the smoke, and from the veil came her blade, plunging out like a lance as it extended and came deathly close to carving a hole into his shoulder. He backed away at once, watching as Raine emerged from the screen of dark smoke and falling cinders unscathed, and looking almost amused at his error. Her eyes were flinty as the blade retracted and returned to her hand, and she swung it once to clear away the remainders of his spell
before she tilted her head and glanced at the still-faintly glowing book that was strapped to his waist. An accidental cast on instinct was impressive, especially considering the weight of the spell, and she mused idly as she continued forward with a slow, careful step, "I see your studies have branched out further than simple knighthood. You've gained a good grasp of arcane arts... You're holding back. I'd advise you not to."

Lorenz twitched, uncertain of her words and watching closely as Raine continued to move forward. Now he felt himself wishing to retreat, and he wondered if it was fear, or respect for just how easily she had been able to counter a move even he had not anticipated making. He was outclassed, and outclassed in a way that defied words. She had already won the moment she had drawn her blade, and while that knowledge chilled the blood in his veins... He did not permit it to show. He was a nobleman. A knight. He could not give her fear, not while the lives of his men hung in the balance. Yet, he could not also permit her words to go unchallenged, and he replied tightly as he stood his ground, lance at the ready to repel her should she choose to use her sword once more, "A duel is not held by hiding away secret weapons."

"A war isn't won by playing fairly, either." Raine replied with an errant shrug of her shoulders, and yet her eyes remained focussed on him like a cat before its unsuspecting prey. He was the mouse between her claws, awaiting the inevitable, yet he still stood tall and ready to fight to the last. She respected him for that, especially as she saw the revelation of the gaps between them dawning in his eyes. He wasn't going to win, but he was not yet ready to yield. His honour, his loyalty to his men, would not permit such an act of disgrace or cowardice. For that, she allowed him a moment as she stopped her advance, and she nodded down to his belt as she told him flatly, "Duel me with all you have. Magic and lance. You're deprived of your mount, so you may as well make use of your remaining tools. Don't concern yourself with such paltry things like rules of engagement. You demanded this fight for the lives of your men. Use everything at your disposal if you meant a word of that."

"You shall regret saying those words, Professor..." Lorenz gritted his teeth at the stab to both his pride and his honour, and he hefted his lance in his right hand as his left pulled his tome free for use. He trusted his skills, both in magic and in fencing, and she only had her blade to count on. Here, she was at a disadvantage, even if it was slight, but her challenge could not go unanswered. She had proven she would end this battle quickly if he proved that he was holding back even a tiny bit, and he did not want such an undignified last note to be his final page in history. "Very well, then! Know the full might of the House of Gloucester!"

A barrage followed, forcing Raine onto the defensive as magic rained on her like hellfire from above at Lorenz' command. Immediately she hit the ground and rolled, dodging one fireball after another as the young nobleman forced her back and away from him with his mastery. She could do little more than dodge about, trying to keep a wary eye on his movements and failing as he sent spell after spell chasing after her like a bow shot from an arrow. He was quicker with his magic than most, having both the focus and the strength to keep up the sustained fire from all of his physical training, but even that stamina would find an end eventually. She only needed to survive the onslaught and find an opening if she wanted to end this quickly.

The fire stopped as Raine found her feet again, only to find herself momentarily blinded as a pulse of magic burst out from somewhere on her left with a reverberating thrumming noise. There was no dodging this, and Raine raised her blade as she saw the arrow of light speeding towards her as if it shot from a giant, magical crossbow. Gritting down her teeth, Raine planted her feet, and a snarl of exertion escaped her lips as she thrust forward, focussing her energy and feeling the sudden bloom of heat in her palms as the Sword of the Creator responded to her wordless command.

The blade punctured through the centre of the spell, dispersing it into flecks of light and sound with
one, sharp movement, and Lorenz' resounding shout of pain told her that her sword had found its mark. As the light slowly filtered away, Raine blinked away the dots obscuring her vision to see that the Alliance noble had taken her blade in his shoulder, and his lance now lay far from his reach as he lay slumped on the ground. Blood flowed freely from the large dent in his armour, more proof that her aim had been true, and his hand twitched as he tried in vain to find his lance, or his tome despite his wounds.

Raine said nothing as she approached him slowly, her sword retracting once more to its hilt and awaiting its master's command. Lorenz, for his credit, did not say anything either as he placed a hand over his wound, trying to stem the bloodflow from his dominant arm as he looked up at her in silent defiance. She appreciated his expression and all that it meant, as well as his acceptance of his coming fate as he refused to move from where he had fell. He could not rise without stumbling, and so he stayed where he had fallen, awaiting her, and she had to remind herself she could not smile as she came closer and spoke with dangerous calm, "You've lost. I'll spare your men, as promised... As for you-

Raine had no chance to finish her sentence as a burst of cold wind signalled the arrival of new magic, and instinct alone saved her as she leapt back just in time to escape the great upheaval of ice crystals and burst from the ground where she had been standing only seconds before. The ice magic bloomed like a deadly flower, covering the surrounding bridge in ice for a good ten metres from where it had originated, and bringing with it a freezing, screeching wind. The giant crystals pierced upwards and in all directions, as sharp as a swordpoint and as many as a small battalion, and from a distance, the caster spoke, her voice as frozen and deadly as the spell she had let loose when she had seen Raine approaching the fallen Lorenz, "That is enough, Professor... You will not come any closer."

"Marianne! What are you doing on the field?!!" Lorenz pushed against the ground at the sound of the young maiden's voice, but his bloody hands allowed him no purchase as he struggled to stand. He had no need to as the woman in question hurried forward, but rather than stoop to help him up, she instead took a defensive stance in front of him as her spell began to fade away. Her hands still glistened with those pale, icy flakes of magical energy, and her back was all he could see as he realized she fully intended to defend him from the group in front of him. He hastened to continue, pushing his back against the wall to steady his feet as he continued sharply, "Wait! Don't provoke them! Professor, wait, she does not understand! Marianne, you swore you would not take to the battlefield regardless of the consequence! You said you did not wish to fight!"

"And I still do not wish to do battle, Lorenz... but I cannot sit idly by and allow this to happen. Not after all you've done for me these past five years." Marianne did not look at him, but instead kept her gaze trained on Raine as she kept one hand lifted in warning. For her part, the professor had not made a move since her arrival, and Marianne admitted to feeling relief... It would be too easy for a woman of her calibre to cut her down, but she hadn't cared about such a thing when she had seen Lorenz on the ground, and the professor approaching him with her sword in hand. Her body had leapt into action before better thought could reign, and even though she felt her body pulse with fear... She did not waver as she spoke quietly, firmly, "I will not move."

"Hold, Marianne. I don't intend to kill him, nor do I intend to do you any harm." Raine hastened to sheathe her blade as she saw the glint of magic still stirring around the woman's wrists, and she held up her hands in a gesture of peace. As surprised as she was to see the young woman, and in such a healthy-looking state, no less, she forced herself to keep her calm and her head. Marianne had always proven a deadly mage despite her lack of a desire to fight, and that spell was enough proof that five years wherever she had been had not dulled her skills an ounce. She took a few healthy steps backwards, well aware that her words had to sound rather weak when the entire bridge was under siege, but she continued nonetheless as she held Marianne's surprisingly steely
glance, "He was the one who proposed the duel, but I never intended to take his life, even if I was to win. I don't wish to kill anyone here, if I can help it."

"What is it that you intend, then, Professor?"

"To have him return to the Alliance's fold, alongside his men, and abandon the bridge." Raine's answer came swift and clear, and from the looks of surprise on both Marianne and Lorenz's faces, she knew she now had the advantage. She reached for her belt, finding an elixir tucked away safely in her pack, and she held it forward as a peace offering as she continued on tersely, "Our fight is with the Empire, not the Alliance. And I understand full well that Lorenz is only here because his father is spearheading the civil war inside of the Alliance territory. But if you'd return to the Alliance with a message of peace to Claude from our forces, we may be able to end this war before more damage is done to both the Kingdom and Alliance territories. Those are my intentions. I want to end this war with the least amount of casualties possible. The only way I see that happening is by establishing a truce. Lorenz is the perfect man to deliver our terms to the only one capable of giving us aid."

"You'd have me return to House Reigan?" Lorenz struggled with the words as he forced himself to his feet, and Marianne was quick in whirling about to help him stand as she realized he was not about to sit quietly and be dictated to. Yet, the look on his face was not entirely one of anger, but rather of surprise and confusion. She wrapped a protective arm about his waist, lending him her shoulder, and though she knew it pained him, he leaned on her willingly as he looked over her head and to Raine in astonishment. "Your goals are lofty, Professor, but you underestimate Claude. He would sooner shoot me on sight before he would listen to a word I would have to say."

"Not if I was the one delivering the terms." Marianne spoke up quietly, and Lorenz looked to her sharply with reproach in his eyes. She shook her head to quiet him, her one arm squeezing gently about his waist before she turned to look at Raine who was regarding them closely, but not coldly. She had heard of the fighting from the men inside of the bridge, and she had dodged her guards to come outside just in time to see what she had assumed to be the end, but she understood everything now without more needing to be said. Lorenz had kept her well guarded from the war, but she knew now that time was over. The rebellion was making its move. The Empire and the Alliance would have no choice but to follow. She lifted her chin, voice calm but steady when she spoke, "I have spent the last five years being sheltered by House Gloucester after the fall of Garreg Mach. I could not return home... and I did not wish to. Lorenz has kept me safe, shielding me from the war, and offering me a safe haven when I had the most need of it. My debt to him is great. I am sorry for my actions, Professor... but I couldn't allow him to be killed here, like this, when I owe him so much."

"I understand, Marianne." Raine looked over her shoulder, to where Dorothea was standing quietly, but listening intently with narrowed, curious eyes... The story was not exactly new, even if the details were different, but it made her take pause all the same. She did not know Marianne well, a fact she had always regretted, but to see her now, standing tall and proud beside Lorenz, clearly caring deeply for him and feeling both indebted and protective... That much, she could understand and respect. It was obvious she was not making a suggestion, either, but Raine hesitated all the same, tilting her head to the side as she continued slowly, "But to ask you to go in his stead, when you've taken a passive stance in the war thus far, isn't fair to you."

"No, perhaps it isn't... but remaining passive has done more harm than any good, I think. The Goddess would be disappointed in me. It is time I acted." Marianne shook her head and stood firmly, and she felt that stab of guilt once more deep in her chest. She had chosen out of fear to hide from her adoptive family when the monastery had fallen, and it had been Lorenz who had found her and sheltered her when she had been at a loss. She had been glad to rely on him and his charity,
finding work in a chapel inside of his territory under his protection... But she had lingered too long, and did too little while Lorenz had been called to fight. She couldn't remain in sloth for any longer. Not when he had been so willing and eager to protect her with his life. She continued quietly, her voice silk and steel all at once as she explained, "If you would have Lorenz attempt to broker a truce between you and Claude... I would offer my aid to you, Professor. Lorenz is right. Claude will not trust him. But he may trust me enough to listen to your offer. I do have a little bit of sway left to me, even as neutral party."

"How much sway is a little?"

"My house has supported Claude since the insurrection, so I will be seen as an ally should I return to Derdriu, and approach Claude's forces... The only problem is Claude himself." Marianne admitted, and she hated to say it aloud, but she knew there was little point in hiding the real facts. Lorenz looked away from her, grinding his teeth in audible annoyance, but she felt for him. It had been only under threat of the Empire that he had parted ways from the true Alliance he loved so dearly, but that did not mean he had any pure feelings for Claude, and how the leader of the Alliance had been dealing with the civil war raging across his territory. She continued quickly, knowing that time was of the essence for Raine and her soldiers, "He will not give you aid if you do not have anything to give him in return... As easily as it may be for me to get his ear, I will not be able to promise he will be willing to give you aid, even if he will hear me out. And I cannot even promise that much, as good my odds are, in comparison to Lorenz."

"None of that matters, so don't worry overmuch of it. Go with Lorenz and return to the safety of the allied territories... and when you get the chance, deliver one message to Claude, or whoever you can find that does have his ear." Raine instructed her just as quickly as she, too, realized that the clock was beginning to run down on them all. They needed to continue forward to the base of the bridge while Warin and the rest of their troops continued on with capturing the rest of the territory. It was imperative they arrived at Ferdinand's location before the rest of the army did, and she hated knowing she was fighting time. She looked to the soldiers behind her, and jerked her head in the direction of the hall that lay ahead before instructing them firmly, "Go on ahead for me, and draw out as many of the enemy troops as you can. Anyone flying the Gloucester flag is to be sent on ahead, off of the bridge, to meet with their lord. You know what to do."

Though Ingrid and Sylvain turned as one at their new orders, Annette could not help but pause instead. Even Dorothea seemed hesitant at being sent on ahead, but she was unwilling to speak as proof of the fact that she believed she had no right to. Annette however did not worry about such things, and voiced her concern aloud without any real hesitation as she clasped the edge of her tome tightly, worriedly, "Are you certain we should go ahead without you, Professor? Will you be all right here?"

"I won't be long behind you, Annette." Raine reassured her kindly, and she well understood Annette's hesitation. It was not as if the mage was worried about the safety of herself or her classmates. All three of them were well capable of taking care of themselves in any situation that would arise, which was exactly why Raine had hand-picked them for this particular mission. Ingrid was a brilliant lancer, and had begun to flex her muscles in the art of white magic, to complement Sylvain's growing skills in the darker arts. His strong axe would make up for anything Ingrid could not conquer herself, and Annette, with her mastery of both trees of magic, as well as her family's Relic in hand, would be more than enough to handle the rest. They did not need her as much as they believed they did. They were no longer students. "You'll find me as your shadow just when you begin to miss me. Please. Press on, and use your best judgement. Dorothea knows the flag of House Aiger. She'll guide you better than I."

Dorothea nodded encouragingly when Annette looked to her, and with one last frown, the mage
agreed silently with her orders and hurried off after Ingrid and Sylvain without complaint. She knew better than to argue, especially when they were so pressed for time, and so she simply obeyed despite her misgivings. Raine waited until all four had turned the corner and disappeared before turning back to Lorenz and Marianne, and she watched quietly for a moment in respectful silence as Marianne pressed a softly glowing hand to Lorenz' shoulder in order to seal his wound to stop the bleeding. Only when she pulled away did she finally speak up, and her voice was calm and quiet as she began, "I'm sorry to wrap the two of you into my scheming, especially considering the way your homeland is now... but I hope you believe me when I say I would never do this if the circumstances weren't dire."

"I believe you, Professor... You have taken on a monumental task, turning the tattered forces of the Kingdom towards the Empire, and it is only natural that you would need every ounce of aid you could find." Lorenz dismissed her apology with a wave of his hand, and he winced immediately at the reminder that even Marianne's healing could not completely refresh him. The scolding look she gave him as she noticed his flinch only cowed him further, and he hastily turned his head away from her glare, unsure if Raine had noticed, and not wanting to know if she had as he continued on in a hopefully more serious vein, "The Empire is the enemy of us both... and surely Claude will see that, and wish to make use of the rebellion's movements. I imagine that is your intention, with this message of yours?"

"Partially. I'm aware that Claude is motivated more by personal interest than he is the greater good... but even he knows a good opportunity when he sees one, and he's never failed to leap on it when it presents itself." Raine answered with a slight shake of her head, but she felt a pulse of misgiving despite her words all the same. Even with Warin's warnings, the truth remained that five years had passed since she had last had a chance to speak to the young leader of the Alliance. Could he have changed just as much as her students had in those five years? Could she predict him with any accuracy now, as she had back when it had only been tests of strength, wit, and academia at stake? Still... It was a risk she had no choice but to take. Their route was assured. The response of the Empire and Alliance were not in question. This was the only move she could make if she wished to change the tides. "Tell him one thing and one thing only. The Battle of the Eagle and Lion... It will take place again, unless the Deer wish to change the course of history. It's in their hands, his hands, if he wants that to happen. He'll understand without more needing to be said."

Lorenz and Marianne traded a look, both having furrowed brows as they wondered exactly at the meaning of Raine's words. They all were aware of what had taken place five years ago, but they were not privy to the knowledge that Raine clearly possessed. Whatever her plans were were clearly beyond their scope, and neither were entirely sure they wanted to know the true details of what she was hoping for. Yet, Lorenz had to take pause, despite knowing that his time to flee with Marianne and his men was growing shorter by the moment as his former students pressed onwards... He looked to Raine seriously, one hand clenching at his side as the other worked to restrain itself from reaching for Marianne to pull her protectively closer to him, "And if he chooses to not respond to your message as you hope...? Do you have plans for that outcome as well, Professor?"

"I do. I am only hoping that those plans don't need to be used." Raine answered honestly, and she felt that tiredness, that wariness, returning to try and weigh down her shoulders. She was not a politician, and every moment she spent trying to spearhead this damned rebellion, she was realizing that she wasn't much of a leader, either. It was one thing to teach, to shepherd and protect, but to plan out battle after battle, to delicately balance the power of commanding as well as the repercussions of any action she chose to make when she was being scrutinized so ferociously... She shook her head and tried to shake off the weight, too. It didn't matter here and now. She needed to act as a soldier. A mercenary. Battle was what mattered most here on the bridge, and she forced that forward as she explained, "I've tried to prepare for every possible outcome, but I'm not
Marianne looked to her sharply, not entirely sure what to make of such a comment, especially considering where they had been standing only moments ago. Yet... She also heard the truth in her voice, and had seen it already in her actions. She had spared Lorenz, and from Dorothea's appearance on the battlefield, as well as the orders she had given the former Blue Lions... She was hoping to spare Ferdinand, as well. She was playing a risky game for the sake of a handful of lives, but she was playing it all the same. Those few lives did mean everything to her, even if to the whole of things, they were rather inconsequential. Still... Marianne wanted to hear her say it aloud, to say the words, and so she asked quietly, but not unkindly, "You'd weigh our lives against the whole of the rebellion, Professor?"

"I'd weigh your lives against the whole of my schemes, yes. The rebellion will live on without my ideas. It's important that you two also live to see the end of the war, too. At least, that's my wish." Raine replied with an idle shrug, and the smallest hint of a wry smile. She was well aware of how it had to sound, and how it had to look, especially to the two before her, but she was already finished with the violence the war was causing. "I'm aware it's naive, but it's how I've chosen to go about things. You are not less important to me than my ideas of alliances and truces. If you'll be endangered helping me... I'd prefer you choose to save yourselves. That's all there is to it."

"Professor..."

"I'm sorry, but as much as I'd enjoy trading words with you, there's a battle that needs fighting, Lorenz. For now, do your duty, and perhaps someday in the future, we can speak again as friends." Raine hastened to interrupt him as she sensed his passion for eloquent speech surging through him, and as much as she did wish to be able to sit quietly and listen to him... She simply did not have the time. She shared a nod with Marianne before turning about, sword in hand and expression hardening the moment her back turned. There was still more fighting to come, and she had to steel herself for it. One phase had gone relatively smoothly, but the next would be more difficult... and she had to prepare for the worst possible outcomes, regardless of how sorely she wished she didn't.

The farewells echoed in her ears as she set off at a dead sprint after her students, her sword gripped in a white-knuckled hand as she heard the sound of fighting roaring on from all sides. She couldn't tell whose roars were whose, which side was winning and how, but she had no time to dwell on such things. She had chosen to leave the majority of the fighting in the hands of her brother and Rodrigue, and she had no choice but to trust to their skills and their decisions. Now there was only her mission, and the lives of the students still under her protection. Nothing else mattered but them.

Ahead she saw the flashes of magic, interspersed with the gleam of a lance and an axe further on ahead of the mages, and Raine smiled grimly as she put on speed as her sword pulsed with energy in her palm. They were entangled with Imperial troops, using the fortifications of the bridge exactly as she had hoped they would, and the mounted enemy units were having too much difficulty trying to force their horses into the bottleneck Ingrid and Sylvain had created. Annette and Dorothea backed them up with their spells, raining a cataclysm of wind and lightning on their opponents in equal measure, and Raine felt her blade warm as she lifted it to her shoulder. They'd done well without her so far... but no longer. She had returned for them, and their final push would be made together.
With one huge leap, Raine all but flew over the heads of her spellcasters, joining Sylvain and Ingrid in the fray, and the Sword of the Creator split both the wind and armour alike as it whipped about to scatter the men who had foolishly bunched themselves into easy targets. They fell back in alarm and confusion, unsure of themselves with this added lightning-flash joining their initial foursome of enemies, and wordlessly both professor and students used this to their advantage to push themselves further forward. Just behind their foes they could make out the end of the bridge and that last entry point where the last of the reinforcements would be pouring through, and through gritted teeth, Raine snarled out as she felt Ingrid and Sylvain taking up point on her sides, "Just a bit more...! This ends today! Push!"

It was chaos, a whirlwind of magic, weaponry, and blood, and yet Raine felt herself at complete ease in the midst of the melee. She could see the thinning of the troops ahead, could make out the flags of House Aiger still behind, and she heard Dorothea's sharp intake of breath as she, too, saw beyond the soldiers in front of her. Yet, that was all noise in the background, lost in the roar of the fighting, but in mere minutes that passed by like flashes of lightning, the fighting ebbed away as soldiers dropped, or turned to flee. The way was open now, and without hesitation or need for orders, all five pushed ahead through what had meant to be a blockade to find themselves in the wide open space of the end of the Great Bride of Myrddin.

In an instant, Raine realized that Ferdinand had played a much more conservative hand with his men, and he had proven himself wiser than his fellow soldiers, as well as the advancing force ahead of him. Flanking him stood a dozen paladins, and behind each were a battalion of archers as he sat astride his own mount, waiting and watching with wary, smouldering eyes as his fellow countrymen fell like wheat to the advancing forces from the east. Yet, despite it all as she stood at the entrance of the bottleneck she had devised, she felt no fear as she saw what the faced. The numbers were slanted against them... but that was nothing new. And Raine strode carelessly to the fore, breathing hard and flecked with dust, smoke, and blood as she greeted him in a calm, neutral voice, "Ferdinand."

"Professor. I had suspected it was you behind this... It's a pity that after so long, we must meet this way." Ferdinand returned her words almost neutrally, but the hand on his blade proved that he was not at all as calm as he wished to appear. He swept a careful eye over her men, both surprised and silently impressed that she had managed to push through both the Gloucester and Imperial forces with so few people alongside her, but it no longer mattered. He had prepared for this. His sword-arm raised, and behind him every man and woman with a bow in hand nocked their arrows, and took aim. It would be quick for them, at the very least... His voice was a roar as every archer raised their bows, releasing when he spoke as any well-oiled machine would when the trigger was pressed, and seconds later the sky itself turned dark as arrows fell like iron rain, "Archers... FIRE!"

Chapter End Notes

AN:

Only one more chapter to go for the bridge, which amuses me slightly, as I've somehow made a relatively inconsequential chapter in the AM campaign (from a storytelling perspective, anyway) turn into a trio of chapters... I still hate fighting chapters, though. This was a hell of a slog to get through... and the next one, as well as the entirety of Grondor will likely be the same. Still, I've gotta do it, and I am very determined to do it, too. I need to improve on all of my skills to become a better author, after all. I'll still enjoy the relatively "easier" scenes of peace-time and romance
and plot advancement not based on combat, though. Can't help it. It's both my forte, and what I enjoy writing most, after all!

So this is kinda my first cliffhanger... and it's been awhile since I got to write a good old-fashioned cliffie. I used to love these things, even though they got me a lot of rage back in my Gundam days. Still, it got a good chuckle out of me to finally get a chance to end a chapter on a big, "Oh shit!" moment. Especially on a fighting chapter. I guess it's my payback? You put me through writing out fight scenes, and I make you guys wonder what the hell I have planned for the next chapter? Iunno. Feel free to throw tomatoes, I guess. I'm tired. XD

I don't have much of a long AN to write, though I did drop a lot of plot here, but I'll allow you guys to discuss it rather than go through it myself. I always planned on "fixing" Grondor ever since I committed to writing a novella of Azure Moon, but how I was going to go about it fluctuated as I continued on... Here's hoping (and wondering) that I've made it both interesting, and perhaps a bit more believable than most "fix-it" fics could have.

As always, thank you for reading thus far, and please drop me a review should you feel the need. I'm grateful for your support, and I hope that you've enjoyed what I've written, and will continue to enjoy what I have planned out in the future. I hope you guys all have a good one, and I'll see you all again soon!

Mood: Sore.

Listening To: "The Racing Rats" - The Editors

~ Sky
Chapter Summary

Genres/Ratings: Action/Adventure, Hurt/Comfort, Romance, War. (T)

Characters: Raine, Dorothea, Ferdinand, Dimitri, Warin.

Summary: Their paths had diverged so vastly, to the point where it seemed their destinations would be completely opposing places despite the fact that they were still standing side by side as allies. Her way of mercy and his of death and justice could not coexist together. They had proven that already, with how frequently they had butted heads in the last handful of moons... yet, there she stood, successful while he was left drowning in doubt. What would happen, if she was right, in the end of all things? Would he stand empty and bloody, with nothing but their voices still echoing in his ears, when all was said and done? He did not know... and that disturbed him more than anything he had yet seen.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lone Moon

The Great Bridge of Myrddin

Afternoon

"Ouch... Easy there, Flayn... It really isn't as bad as it looks, you know..." Raine winced away as the emerald-haired healer zealously wrapped bandages about her forearm, but she wasn't in much of a position to fight the young girl no matter how much she really wished to. She was far too tired, feeling the weight of her injuries and the strain of the battle falling on her body now that the bridge had been claimed for the rebellion's forces, and Flayn had come after her like a wyvern in heat in order to seat her dear professor down to begin treating her wounds in the aftermath. It didn't quite help that most of their other healers were preoccupied at the moment, but Raine couldn't quite help herself as she remarked idly, "You would be better served helping out Ferdinand right about now, if you really wanted to apply some of your skills. I'm merely scraped up in comparison."

"Dorothea won't let anyone near him at the moment." Flayn replied pertly as she finished tying the edges of the bandages into a tight, intricate knot to ensure that they would not lose pressure, nor come undone as her professor rolled her sleeve back over them to hide her injuries. She didn't quite understand why her professor was so careful about hiding away her battle wounds, but she did respect the fact that it was clearly something she thought important to do. She forced herself back up, watching as Raine rolled her shoulders to work out the tension, and she continued with a slight smile curling at her lips, "She was rather firm on her decision, and so far no one has chosen to challenge her on it. Considering things, however, I cannot say I blame her."

"Nor can I. If I had a whit of skill in healing, and was in her position, I likely would have done the same." Raine agreed with a small smile, and she shook her head before casting a glance over her shoulder where the two in question currently were. Ferdinand hadn't risen from where he had fallen
during the battle, and that had almost been a full hour ago, but for his part, the Imperial noble didn't look quite as upset about his situation as he likely could have. Dorothea was tending to his wounds with both her healing magic and the basic tools of the trade, and was berating him throughout the entire process without pause. It was her right to, and, as Flayn had said, nobody had the reason, or the brass, to try and intercede.

It had been Dorothea after all who had saved her companions from the volley of arrows Ferdinand had fired upon them, and with a scorching blast of lightning, the sky had lit up and each and every missile had found itself bursting aflame in mid-air. In true operatic fashion she had revealed herself then and there, letting both Ferdinand and his men know who exactly was travelling alongside the professor and the soldiers of the rebellion. It had been a stunning move of both skill and bravado, and she had achieved exactly what she had wanted with it, much to Raine's admiration and exasperation.

"Hold!" The order was rather unnecessary, considering the shock that had filled the battlefield with the sudden spike of magic and the effortless ease that had left his attack less than useless on his opponents. Ferdinand swung his horse about, his eyes wide in shock, and the hand that had been so tightly gripping his blade had loosened until it almost clattered to the stone below in thoughtless surprise. The men behind him stirred uncertainly, but he paid them no heed as he watched with widening eyes as Dorothea stepped out boldly from behind Raine, her fingertips still faintly crackling with traces of electricity to prove she had been the one to free the storm, "Dorothea...? What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to put a stop to this madness before it costs you your life, Ferdinand." Dorothea's answer came clear and calm, though Raine noticed that despite her theatre, she couldn't quite get her hands to stop trembling as they curled into fists at her side. She strode forward and into no man's land, though Raine and her students followed her closely to provide cover, should it become necessary. Still, despite their movements, Dorothea proved her eyes were for Ferdinand and no one else, and she spoke directly to him as she continued in that same clear voice, "I want the same thing I asked of you five years ago; to stop allowing yourself to be put under Edelgard's boot, and to leave the Empire. To leave with me."

"You..." Ferdinand took pause, his brow furrowing as his eyes moved wildly over Dorothea's form, and the flanking soldiers about her. They had carved a path easily through all the men that had been blocking the eastern passage, and she had been with them the whole way. He had surmised that the professor had been the one leading the charge, as no one else had the power or tactical mind to do so, especially when his scouts had told him of the others on the lower, larger part of the bridge. She had taken one single team to do so much damage, using the majority of her forces as a diversion, and as he looked to Dorothea, he could not help but wonder... He shook his head, teeth grinding as he instead turned to glare at Raine as he demanded sharply, "Is this your scheme...? To drag her here like some hostage? I thought you above such petty tactics, Professor."

"Professor Raine brought me here against her better judgement, and because I demanded to be here today." Dorothea interrupted him curtly, and her emerald eyes flashed both defiance and anger for his accusation that Raine would dare to use her simply to force him to stand down. Such an idea was folly anyway, considering how the two of them had parted ways five years ago. What reason would Raine even have to believe that Ferdinand would deign to surrender simply because she had Dorothea as a potential hostage? The mere thought made her anger flare higher, and she snapped out in reproach, "I demanded and begged and pleaded to be here for your sake. This war... Edelgard's conquests... They've taken too many lives already. I refused to allow you to be lost to it all, too. Not without trying one more time to make you see sense."

Ferdinand said nothing, his brow furrowing as the hand on his blade tightened again in response.
to her words. Though they were the same ones she had spoken all those years ago in desperation to make him leave the Empire with her, now she was no longer speaking with sadness or fear. There was only anger now, anger that she had been forced to this point, and part of him ached for her. The last place he had thought he would see her again was on the battlefield, especially when she had so pointedly told him she was sick of all of the meaningless bloodshed, and yet there she stood... Sword and tome in hand, because of him. For him. His teeth ground down audibly even as he shook his head and muttered, "We've spoke of this before... Nothing has changed since then."

"Nothing? Nothing at all, Ferdinand?" Dorothea questioned with narrowed eyes, and she took a threatening step forward in a show of both defiance and recklessness. She heard Raine shadowing her, but she paid no attention to the professor as she instead faced Ferdinand head-on. She had only needed to spend a year, one single year inside of the Empire before she had seen too much, and she knew already from both experience and the word of her comrades to know the situation had not improved an ounce. It made her furious that he was averting his eyes, that he was clinging so furiously to his belief that he had an obligation to the homeland that had abandoned him, and all of that was in her voice as she snarled, "I've seen it all myself, and I ran away from it when Edelgard showed her true colours as a tyrant. How can you not see it yourself, unless you're intentionally averting your eyes?! The smallfolk are starving, being conscripted against their will, and dying in droves for daring to stand up for themselves! And that's only in the Empire! It's like that all over Fódlan! And you say nothing's changed?! Do you really want to support her, put your life on the line, for that kind of ruler, Ferdinand? Does your obligation to the Emperor mean looking the other way as she sets fire to everything you once swore to protect?"

Ferdinand twitched, feeling his molars grinding in a mixture of anger and shame as Dorothea’s diatribe struck him like a lance-blown to the gut. Nothing she said was false, and nothing she said wasn't anything he hadn't already considered. Yet there he stood all the same, sword in hand, astride his mount, and fighting underneath the flag of the Empire because his own territory had been stolen from him and meant less than the tapestry its banner was printed upon. He still bore the flag of his house, still clung to all that had been torn away from him... and for what? He hadn't had an answer then, and he did not have an answer now. She was not wrong. He knew that... and yet... still he could not drop his sword.

"Why are we listening to this? Put an arrow in the wench, and let's put an end to these fools."

"Agreed... I'm tired of this."

Ferdinand checked his mount at the voices of the soldiers behind him, and in one smooth pull he faced down the men who had dared to speak up so impertinently. His eyes narrowed as he cast a stern glare across his forces, picking out the most irritated and defiant of the soldiers behind him with ease. His hand tightened on both the bridle of his horse and the weapon in his hand, and his voice was a harsh, clipped snarl that had never failed to cow even the most boisterous of the men he had once commanded, "You dare speak out of turn, and further suggest killing a woman during a parley? What kind of soldiers of the Empire are you?"

"Soldiers who won't hesitate to obey the orders we're given. We serve Emperor Edelgard, not you. And she is the one who tasked us with the guarding of this bridge." The reply came from a fellow paladin, who Ferdinand turned to look at with both looming realization and a deep sinking feeling somewhere in his stomach. The words were iron and proud, firm and completely flat in their response to him. He believed every word he spoke to his "commander", and felt no fear of reprisal because of it. "We know who you are, Lord Aiger... and we were warned of you. We have explicit permission from the Emperor herself to cut you down should you even consider the idea of treachery."
Ferdinand felt as if a blade had been sunk deep in his stomach, and yet with the pain... he somehow felt absolutely no surprise. Hadn't Dorothea warned him that this could be his reward for his loyalty to his newly crowned Emperor? That after all she had done to his father, that it was more than some remote possibility that she would throw him away, too, the moment it became convenient for her? He was not an ally she cared for. He was not someone she would go to any lengths to protect. And yet, all those years ago, he had lashed out in anger, refusing to believe it because he was noble, and even without his title, his lands, his soldiers... He had been trained since birth to be the helping hand on the Emperor's shoulder, and now more than ever was that hand needed. He would stay, would do anything and everything to prove his worth and help his Emperor achieve her goals the right way, and somehow he would create some good out of all of this madness...

Now, reality had come crashing down hard, and Ferdinand was well aware of just how alone he stood amongst the soldiers that had been given to him so kindly by his Emperor to replace his own men. Still, he did not allow that thought to cow him as he sat up straighter in the saddle, his hands tightening on his weapon and bridle until they became numb. If this was to be the way of things... He would avert his eyes no longer. A quick push of his heels had his stallion moving slightly to the left, inserting both himself and his great steed in between the men behind him and Dorothea and the soldiers of the rebellion. Defiance was quietly simmering on his face as he retorted in a deceptively quiet tone, "Is that the way of things, then? You'll cut me down, for simply entreating you not to fall to violence during a simple parley? That's how far you, the Empire, has fallen?"

"There is no parley. There is no speaking to these fools. They are mad dogs to be put down, as is anyone else foolish enough to resist the Empire. The defence of this bridge is all that matters." The answer came like a blade, and in unison with his lieutenant's words, the paladin lifted his lance and hoisted it threateningly. He felt no fear. Only a simple, clean sense of justice and righteousness. He had not joined with the Imperial army because he had been forced to, but because he had been offered a chance to escape his position as a lowly farmer to find fortune, strength, and coin for himself and his family. That was the world the Emperor was building... and that the world he wished to see birthed. It didn't matter who stood in his way. They all would fall if need be in order for that wish to be fulfilled. "You will risk that mission. You must be removed. That is all."

The lance flew, but arched high, and Ferdinand's eyes caught the change of aim the moment his former soldier had adjusted his arm. His body moved before any sort of rational thought could command it to. He leapt from his horse, using all of the force he possibly could to launch himself into the way of its trajectory. The world fell away as he landed and rolled, hands outstretched and shoving in one smooth movement as the whistle of the lance rang through his ears, and then pierced in deep through his armour and shoulder. The force of the throw put him on his stomach, pain roaring through his limb and into his torso, but he cared little as he heard Dorothea's sharp, astonished cry for him somewhere a few feet ahead.

She was safe. He had gotten in the way in time, and she was safe. That was all that mattered. Even as warm blood begun to flow from the wound, and he heard a roar of wind magic suddenly sweeping the arena with the force of a hurricane... He felt nothing but a pleasant sort of warmth in the encroaching darkness. His vision had gone white momentarily with pain, but his ears still worked, and the screams of falling men and the shouts of the professor and the former Blue Lions were clear. They had not hesitated as he had, and he was glad for it. Yet somehow Dorothea's voice remained the loudest, the closest, urging him not to succumb, not to close his eyes, to hold on... but he had trouble finding the strength to grasp onto them. He was tired. So, so, tired... A little rest, knowing he had done his best, was warranted, wasn't it?

He smiled as he tasted copper on his lips, and felt the warmth of a hand in his hair. He felt strong
hands turning him over, but he could not quite tell whose hands they were. His head was lifted, gently placed in a soft, warm lap, and something calming, almost liquid was pouring across his wound and numbing most of the pain. His mind did not care, as the shock of the injury had come on too fast even if the healing had come immediately after, and he saw auburn curls, the most beautiful shade of auburn he had ever seen last as he chuckled weakly to himself, "A drone protects their queen... isn't that right, Dorothea?"

The fighting had been done in minutes, and the healing even quicker, but even Raine had to admit if anyone wished for a chance at redemption, Ferdinand had earned it in spades. She still could barely believe she had seen it happen, even though she had been right there to watch him take that spear in Dorothea's place the moment he had realized where the Imperial soldier had intended to throw it. His instincts and fast reactions had saved Dorothea, and in turn, Dorothea had saved him. Now he was conscious and receiving an earful for his recklessness, but Raine didn't doubt that things would be relatively fine between the two after a handful of days to reconnect, and allow for the tension to settle. The feelings were obviously still there, for the both of them, and it had proven stronger than the loyalty to their homelands.

"Prince Dimitri is coming."

Flayn's terse warning in her ear brought Raine abruptly away from her musing, and she carefully pulled down her sleeve even further as she automatically rose from the edge of the parapet where she had been sitting. She was exhausted from the fighting, both physically and mentally, but there was no time for her to rest if Dimitri was seeking her out. A cursory look over Flayn's head proved this was exactly what was happening, as the future king was marching towards her with a sharp, intense look on his face, and she took in a breath before speaking quietly to Flayn, "Go find Seteth, and let him know that those who best escaped injury should stay here to man the bridge, while the rest of us begin the trek back to Garreg Mach in preparation for our next move. And if you can, find my brother, and send him to me. Go on."

Flayn didn't wait for further encouragement, and Raine was glad to see her pick up her skirts and hurry out of the way without a word. As feisty as Seteth's daughter truly was, she still knew her place when she was given a true command, and she had yet to disobey her professor once. She was not about to begin now, especially when Dimitri of all people was heading her way, and Raine had to wonder if it was her fear of him, or her instincts to protect others that made her choose to flee rather than stay. She had never hesitated to pick a fight before, but Dimitri was a different beast, and even Flayn was aware that standing up to him for her professor's sake was not something that she, or Raine, wished for even on the worst of days.

Yet... Raine watched Dimitri closely as he approached her, and he only pried his gaze away from her once to look over to see Ferdinand in Dorothea's care before he was returning his eye back to her. His jaw clenched, proof of his unhappiness at the sight, yet he did not seem to want to comment on it. Instead he marched straight up to her, brow deeply furrowed, and his hands clasped tightly at his sides before he spoke without preamble and quiet, sharp intensity, "When you left with your men to the east... Reinforcements arrived from the north. Dedue led them."

Raine felt as if she had been struck in the gut, and instinctively she reached for the nearest ledge to keep herself steady at the mention of Dedue's name. His loss had hit her like a hammer blow when Dimitri had explained how the young Duscur man had died breaking his liege out of the prisons of Fhirdiad, and she had been mourning him just as she was mourning Jeralt ever since. Her pain, she knew, was only secondary to that of Dimitri's and Annette's, both who had loved him sorely, and hearing Dimitri speak his name made her entire body clench with uncertainty. She knew it foolish to doubt him, he had never been a man of japes and was certainly not one to be making them now, yet she couldn't help but ask, her voice trembling despite herself when she questioned, "Dedue is...
"Yes. He returned with men of Duscur... The same men who saved him after he risked his life to save me. He would have come himself to explain the situation, but he was... delayed. The others are greeting him at the moment." Dimitri explained in that same tense, quiet voice, and he had to look away as he watched the relief and the happiness flood over his professor's face. To her, it had to be another miracle. One of the many she had somehow managed to wrench out of the day, but that did little to dampen his anger with her actions. He had come personally because Dedue had asked him to deliver the news to his former professor, but Dimitri had planned to confront her himself regardless when he had learned of the mission she had been leading in the east without his knowledge. She had gone against everything she knew to be sane, and he could hardly believe she would dare to use his knights, his men, to attempt such a suicidal and foolish gambit.

"Saved by men of Duscur... Then it seems you've been correct all this time. Your actions five years ago paid back dividends."

Dimitri blinked, and for one brief, mad, moment, he forgot everything at the reply he had not expected to hear. For a second he was not sure of what she was speaking, or why she was smiling so gently at him, and it made his stomach tense and his entire body clench in a way he was not wholly comfortable with. But his memory was not clouded, and after the initial surprise, he understood exactly what it was she was referencing, though for the life of him, he could not understand why she seemed so pleased, or was looking at him with such kind eyes. When was the last time she had looked at him like that, anyway? It hadn't been in these past few moons. It couldn't have been, with how badly he had been treating her, even if she did deserve it...

Shaking his head to clear away the worthless thoughts, Dimitri crossed his arms over his chest as he watched her lean back tiredly against the ledge she had been sitting on while Flayn had attended to her wounds. He had initially been pleased to see her injured, to know that she had paid for her foolishness with scars, but now he felt uncomfortable with the knowledge that she was not just injured, she was clearly exhausted. Her skin was pale, and there were shadows beginning to creep underneath her normally so bright seafoam-coloured eyes. Her condition was concerning. She was a commander, meant to lead, and clearly she was flagging when she was needed most. Her foolish errands were costing her, and in turn, costing all of them, too. It made him brusque, both with anger and his inability to understand what was happening as he questioned her sharply, "What exactly do you mean, that I was correct all this time?"

"That day, when the remaining Duscur soldiers tried for a rebellion in Kingdom territory, and you and Dedue concocted that scheme to cover up your wish to save as many of the survivors as you could by saying we were simply acting as a neutral party sent by the church... We didn't save everyone, but those we did save mentioned that the people of Duscur do not forget their debts. The world you envisioned, of those of the Kingdom and those of Duscur, working side by side... You made it happen today because of your actions five years ago." Raine explained with a gentle chuckle, and she shook her head with a mixture of awed disbelief and honest happiness. Dedue was alive because of an act of mercy Dimitri had performed five years prior for him, and the significance of that did not escape her. No, indeed, it meant the absolute world to her. Even now, as he was, his actions in the past were following him, and proving him wrong in the present, and for the future. He could still change, if his actions from long ago will only now reverberating their way to him to prove his current path was wrong. "Dedue is alive because of you."

"Dedue almost died because of me." Dimitri corrected her harshly, and his eye narrowed as his anger returned with a vengeance. Those actions of his five years ago had borne unexpected fruit, and of that he couldn't argue, but it did not change the fact that when push had come to shove...
to escape his prison. He had spent those last few years mourning not just his family and Glenn, but Dedue as well, for all of the blood that had been spilled to keep a monster such as him alive. He had returned, it was true enough, but he would not permit it to happen again. No. It would never happen again. "Over and over, people die because of me. My father. My stepmother. Glenn. Countless soldiers... Then Dedue nearly joined them. His being alive is a joyful revelation, but his near death was still my fault."

"Is that how he sees it? He's joining with us, I assume, if he brought his brothers and sisters from Duscur to provide us aid. That means he wishes to continue to be by your side, and to serve as your retainer yet again, does it not?" Raine countered, but she did not rise to the bait of his anger, or his harsh words. Their heated exchange that morning, and that moment, moons ago, when she had heard him hotly whispering to himself as if he was arguing with a crowd of unseen spectres... Raine was piecing together the puzzle of what had turned him from the young, charming nobleman she had once knew, and the torn, scarred and broken man she now saw. She could not in good faith continue to meet his poison with her own. There was no need for it. He was poisoning himself, just as she was, because guilt, and the weight of the dead, was the quickest way to join them. "Are you going to turn him away, for fear of him dying? Do you think you even can, considering he came all this way of his own will? Dedue will follow you to the ends of this campaign, regardless of where that will take us. Even if you ordered him to return to his homeland, I doubt he'd obey your commands. Not now."

"If you wish to speak of obeying commands, then what is your excuse for your actions today? Two enemy generals spared, one sent back home with his men, and another taking up precious resources when he should be left rotting with the rest of his ilk... You, yourself, almost died ten times over today." Dimitri was quick to turn her words about, refusing to allow even the thought of the words she was trying to use to pierce him. He had already known sending Dedue away was impossible, and so he had simply settled for demanding a promise that Dedue would never again sacrifice his life for his own. It was not a promise easily given, but he had secured it all the same, and that would have to be enough. Yet, there Raine was, proving she was not nearly as careful with her wards despite all of her words of protection and safety, and her hypocrisy astounded him as he remarked coldly, "And not just yourself, but Ingrid, Annette, and Sylvain were also put into the crossfire for your schemes. All on the word of a former lackey of that witch. Did you succeed today, as you hoped you would? What did you gain? Seeing as you saw fit to not tell me a word of your plans before the battle, and seeing as you used my men to make your plans come to fruition, I believe I deserve to know if your risk was worth it."

"It was worth it. Dorothea was spared seeing her beloved dying at our hands, and he will never again fight for the Empire after what happened today. And as for Lorenz... Well, I admit that I will not know for some time if anything will come of that, but regardless, he did not deserve death simply for being a hostage of his father." Raine was blunt and honest with him, and there was a small hint of a smile playing about her lips as she turned to look over at where Dorothea and Ferdinand were still seated. They were talking quietly now that her healing was mostly finished, and though his one arm hung limp and useless, the other was gently clasping her shoulder, holding her to his chest, and Dorothea was not fighting his embrace at all. She was leaning into him, relief and joy and guilt all at once playing across her face, and Raine could not help but smile as she mused, "This is what we're fighting for. Not meaningless killing... but rescuing the Empire from itself. Not everyone is beholden to Edelgard. Today proved it. It means that its people still have a chance at being saved... and knowing that is worth every risk."

"The Empire's people died today for that woman. They tossed their lives away happily to do her bidding."

"The Empire's soldiers may have, but the same can't be said for the smallfolk, nor the Alliance
forces that were all but trapped into doing the Emperor's bidding due to the civil war." Raine corrected him with a shake of her head, and she noted that his voice had changed from anger at her, to a more general sense of indignance and rage. As if the fighting had not pleased him as he had thought it would, despite how eagerly he had been to use his lance to cut down every single soldier that stood in his way. She didn't doubt he had done it, that he had fought just as he wished to within Rodrigue's control, and still... He stood there, looking disturbed and unhappy, and she couldn't help but remark pointedly, "You seem displeased. Why?"

"I... do not know." Dimitri hated the fact that he truly was not sure why he was so angry with what he had witnessed, and the fact only served to make him angrier. He had gotten what he had wanted, hadn't he? Even if his professor's scheming had proven unpalatable, she had kept his soldiers alive, and the bridge was now theirs. They had won a great victory, one of many they would need in order to finally cross into Enbarr... and he knew that, just as well as she did. Being angry over their success... it made little sense to him. He had fought as he had dreamed of, crushing the Imperial army beneath his boot as he had always wished to... So why did he feel no pleasure?

It made him look to her again, sharply, intently, as her words from that morning echoed again in his head. He had been hearing her repeatedly during the battle, despite all of his attempts to drown it out with the melee. She hadn't said it in so many words, but her meaning had been clear. Vengeance had not brought her peace. Instead, it only had brought her more grief, because she had no blame to lay at the feet of the corpses she had piled up in recompense for her father. But their situations were different, weren't they? She did not hear Jeralt every night, every day, as he heard them. Their cries for vengeance, their demands on why he was alive, and why they were not... If Jeralt was haunting her, as they haunted him, perhaps it would be different. Perhaps she would think as he did. And it made him question her, despite being fully aware that after her icy reply that morning that he was broaching a topic she did not want to be discussed, "This morn, before the battle... Your claim that you feel nothing but guilt for the death of Jeralt. Is it true?"

Raine tensed unconsciously, and again she felt that plume of anger and grief and hurt, but she held it close as she examined Dimitri's face intently before she allowed an answer. There was no derision or disbelief in his voice. Rather, for the first time in a very long time, his voice was almost... calm. There was no undercurrent of angry gruffness, or superiority, or even cold apathy. There was genuine interest in his question, genuine curiosity, and it made her wonder if she had somehow managed to pierce his defences in order to make him question her so. Still... It didn't change the way her chest ached, or the way her eyes began to smart as she turned her head away so she didn't need to look at him as she replied quietly, "Putting it that way is a little too simple. There's more than guilt. There's grief, too... For you, for everyone, Jeralt passed away five years ago. To me, it's only been a handful of moons since I buried him... but, mind you, I understand that not everyone grieves the same way. Loss can always be as fresh as the day they left us, no matter how much time has passed."

"... That is true. I've forgotten that to you it hasn't been five years."

"Most have. I can't say I blame them." Raine shrugged, but she kept her eyes averted as her arms involuntarily crossed over her stomach in a protective stance. There was no anger or heat in Dimitri's voice, an unusual change for him, especially considering all that had passed between them earlier, but she could find no comfort in it. He wasn't attempting to be comforting anyway, he was merely speaking the facts, and she supposed it wasn't entirely wrong of him to think that way. It was more thoughtful than he had been since she had first seen him again, and she knew she had to count her blessings where she received them. It made her shake her head, and she ran a tired hand through her hair as she mused quietly, "Five years of constant warfare, politics, pain... I escaped that, so I suppose I ought to consider myself lucky."
Dimitri had no response for that, as he felt that disturbance again tightening his stomach and making his hands twitch uncomfortably at his side. He couldn't understand her capacity for empathy. It ran too deep, and it gave her more injury than it saved lives. Yet she didn't seem bothered by it, not overmuch anyway, even though it was clearly costing her to act as she did. He was not helping in that arena, he was well aware he was making things worse, but her care was not his concern. He had one goal, and one goal only... He was not a foolish, stumbling student any longer, childishy fumbling about with his priorities. No, those days were long behind him... So why did that look on her face make him so damned uncomfortable?

He forced himself to speak again, disliking his own confusion and inner turmoil, and he grasped blindly for a topic that would move them away from their current one. He did not need to fumble about for long, as he remembered that incident with Rodrigue that had occurred shortly after the end of the fighting, and he coughed slightly before beginning with what he hoped was an idle sort of disinterest, "There is more news from the frontlines that may intrigue you. A young girl approached a soldier after the battle, insisting she be permitted to join the rebellion... I have given my permission for her enlistment."

Raine twitched, turning to look at him with both surprise and narrowing eyes, and for a brief moment, Dimitri almost smiled in response to it. So he was still capable of catching her off guard, then. He continued idly, uninterested in any of her arguments or protests, if she was of mind to give them, "When pressed of her reasoning, she spoke of getting vengeance for her fallen brother. She's little more than a child, and will be of no use to us on the battlefield, but her desire burns hot. Considering your affinity for charity... I considered it appropriate to permit her entry into the rebellion, if only so she can make herself useful with menial tasks to take a load from the other soldiers."

"More children scarred by the war... If that is your decision, I won't go against it. On the condition she is kept off of the battlefield. I don't care how fiercely she wishes for revenge on her brother's killer. I won't have a child taking on the duties of a frontline soldier." Raine shook her head, both wondering and irritated at the decision Dimitri had made without her, but she knew better than to argue. It would only make her look a hypocrite after what she had pulled with Dorothea and with Ferdinand, and she had no interest in starting up another argument. This was the first time in moons since she had a somewhat civil conversation with the man, and it made her chest ache with the reminder of better days, gentler talks, and topics that were far and away from war and bloodshed. It made her ache and wince, and she raised her sleeve, pretending to wipe away the dust of the battlefield rather than the stinging of tears in her eyes as she continued tiredly, "Is she with Rodrigue at the moment? I'd speak to her, if she is."

"Likely."

"Good... I'll see to her personally, then. And Dedue, as well... I've missed him." Raine let out a small breath, well aware that she had to look as if she was ready to simply slump to the ground and rest wherever her head fell, but ignoring it all the same. There was always more to do, always something else calling for her attention, and she did not want to be remiss in performing her duties. She stretched her arms up above her head, wincing as her muscles protested loudly, but she ignored it as well as the burning of her battle wounds as she turned herself in the direction of the fore of the bridge where Dimitri had arrived from. She offered him one last passing glance, aware of the way he refused to meet her eyes and was still scowling at the ground, and decided wisely it was best she say nothing as she departed at a quick step.

She didn't have to go far to hear the ruckus up ahead, and she mused errantly that the bridge's length seemed so small when she was simply walking across it, rather than fighting her way through it and its soldiers. It was a hard-won victory from all she had heard, with Rodrigue and
Warin successfully pulling off everything she had hoped they would and more, and she planned to thank them both personally when she had more time, and a little more rest. They deserved it for their work, as well as keeping Dimitri in line, and she wondered what would be the best way to repay them for obeying her complicated and demanding orders.

The thoughts however were swept away at the sight of a familiar form standing tall in the middle of a small crowd, and unbidden, Raine felt her lips quirking upwards into a smile. Dedue looked so out of place, warding off happy laughter and friendly attempts at embraces and still standing so tall amongst the rest of his comrades, and the only one who seemed capable of being unable to be shook off was Annette, who had an ironclad grip on his arm. Her eyes were red-rimmed and her lips pulled into a scowl as she clung to him, and every so often despite the happy chatter, she would squeeze his arm to her chest, and he would look down at her with a mixture of awkward apology and affection.

Raine watched them silently, listening to Sylvain and Mercedes scolding him with loving laughter in their voices, chiding him for making Annette worry so much, and the words brought a flush to both of their faces despite themselves. Yet Annette still did not let go of the man, instead only clinging on tighter to him, and for his credit, Dedue made absolutely no attempt to try and pry her away. Rather, he coaxed her to sidle closer to him so her hold was not so awkward, and his eyes were gentle when she looked up at him hesitantly. It was a comforting sight, seeing one who had been mourning so ferociously finding hope and happiness out of the blue, and Raine almost felt as if she was intruding as she watched her former students catching up and laughing together as they had in the old days.

She wasn't aware of how long she stood there at a distance, content in simply watching them rather than stepping forward to join in on the din, but she felt herself sigh with contentment and relief. That bone-crushing weight of grief seemed to have lessened somewhat, seeing Dedue alive and well with her own two eyes, though he had not come out of his escapades unscathed. He was badly scarred and was carrying himself a bit too tensely, likely from old pain from his wounds, but there was genuine satisfaction on his broad face as he looked out on his comrades and saw them as happy to see him as he was to see them. Dimitri's retainer he might have been, but it did not make him any less of a Blue Lion, and he was surrounded by all who had mourned his loss, and were now earnestly celebrating his return.

"You're not going to join them?"

Warin's voice at her shoulder made her twitch with surprise, and she looked over at him to see him watching her with those same intent eyes as always. He looked as everyone else did, dirty and tired from battle, but he was holding it better than most, as he always did. Yet his question made her take pause, and she glanced from him back to her former students thoughtfully. She hadn't meant to stop and watch, yet now that she had... She wasn't entirely sure she felt ready to go join them. Annette's happy tears were a good sight for her, yet... She didn't quite feel as if she wanted her own to show, after her own episode of mourning. Especially in front of those who were counting on her strength and guidance when they needed it most. No, she could greet Dedue later and in private, when she could maintain her composure better, and she said so with a small shrug, "He looks occupied... and to be frank, I'd rather not make a scene in saying hello right now. What about you? I know you got to know him rather well over the course of the year, with how often you two were in the greenhouse. Did you welcome him home?"

"I did." Warin admitted with a small nod, and like his sister, he felt his lips quirking without his consent at the reminder. He had gotten a chance to learn of the young man from Duscur during his sister's year of teaching, and though much of the time they had spent together had been over discussing agriculture, Warin had grown to appreciate Dedue's steadiness and his quiet
compassion. Only a gentle, understanding hand was capable of raising flowers the way he could, and Warin had been more than appreciative of every act of kindness Dedue had performed in helping him show his gratitude and his mourning for his parents. "Mind you, it was little more than a greeting, but we're not men who like to talk overmuch... And your excuse is you don't want to make a scene?"

"I'm tired... I don't trust myself to be calm at the moment." Raine replied honestly, and she ran a hand once again through her hair as her body ached and groaned in every joint in painful reminder. She wanted nothing more than to throw herself down into the nearest bedroll and sleep for a few straight days, but she knew that was a selfish wish of hers. She still had business to attend to now that the fighting had died down, and though while she knew she would be amongst the men marching back to Garreg Mach, there was a great part of her that wanted to make any excuse to stay just so she could sleep a bit earlier. "I'll speak to him later, when we have a little privacy and I've had a bit of time to rest."

"You've been sleeping poorly lately." Warin noted with a tilt of his head, and his sister shifted uncomfortably beneath those eagle-sharp eyes of his. While they hadn't had a chance to sit down and really talk in the past handful of weeks, Warin didn't need conversation to know how his sister was feeling. She was tired, and she wasn't handling it all that well. Her workload was immense, and was growing larger every time the rebellion gained allies, or a victory. She had taken to skipping meals in the dining hall and instead holing herself up in her room to eat so to give her time for more work, and he was well aware he was not the only person who was noticing her flagging condition. He crossed his arms over his chest as he remarked, "The next battle is going to be one of our fiercest yet, even if your plan comes to fruition. Which it may, considering how... charitable, House Reigan has been to us at the moment. We'll be facing some of the best that the Imperial Army has to offer in Grondor. You ought to spend the next moon catching up on your sleep rather than working."

"And leave things to Seteth, Gilbert, and Rodrigue? Nothing would ever get done." Raine replied half-jokingly, but it fell relatively flat as she admitted her brother was right. She hadn't been sleeping well at all. Between the nightmares, her ever-increasing workload, and the pressure of leadership weighing on her shoulders... She was frequently exhausted, had little of an appetite, and was finding it more and more difficult to get out of her bed in the morning. She shook her head however, offering a forced half-smile as she continued, "I'll be fine, Warin. The closer this war gets to ending, the closer the time comes when I can just rest for a good long while. Mind you, I know that's a long way off, yet."

"From my knowledge, the prince intends on marching straight on to Enbarr after Grondor..." Warin remarked with a further narrowing of his eyes at Raine's words. He had expected something like this coming from her mouth, but they hadn't had a chance to truly discuss it, and so he had only had his suspicions to go on. It didn't matter that his intuition was usually correct, as he wanted to hear her say it herself before he made decisions. It wasn't his way to act otherwise. His arms folded a bit more tightly, wondering if her thoughts were following the same path as his own as he continued, "Cutting the head off of the snake, as it were. And you expect the war's end to still be a long way off?"

"This war doesn't end with Edelgard being skewered on the end of a lance." Raine answered with a shake of her head, and her eyes narrowed and her body tensed as she looked out past the bridge to the Imperial territory they soon would be crossing into. Every battle they had fought, and all that had happened during her one year tenure as a professor was still completely fresh in her mind, and it made her wary of the idea of such an easy ending to all the conflict they had experienced thus far. It was admittedly the first time she was putting such thoughts to words, but it was simply her and her brother here, and she was safe to do so with him, which made her speak freely, "There is
still Thales and his ilk to be reckoned with, once his figurehead is disposed of... And then, of course, Rhea... Once she's rescued, I intend to question her thoroughly about all of this. She knows far more than she ever told us, and the time for secrecy is long past. I want answers. About Mother, about myself, about Sothis... and she will be providing them."

"Have you told the others about this?"

"At current? No. It's difficult enough as it is trying to keep Dimitri reigned in. We should be turning north for Fhirdiad, not rushing headlong to Enbarr, but with Gilbert, Rodrigue and Seteth all backing him, I don't have much of a choice but to follow." Raine replied tiredly, and she leaned back against the nearest wall for support as she let out a long, exhausted sigh. While his current attitude and actions were beginning to show signs of promise, she doubted that Dimitri's end goal was about to change, and she knew better than to put any faith in hope. There was only the cold harshness of reality to reckon with, and the last thing she wanted was to make things more difficult by pushing when things were already so fragile. Yet..."However, if he sees sense in Enbarr once Edelgard is dead... Perhaps then it can be discussed. And if Rhea knows anything helpful, then the Kingdom's forces and Dimitri be damned, I'll go after Thales myself if I must."

"You'll have me following at your heels, so don't be concerned about going off on your own... I'm also intrigued by those pale-faced bastards." Warin's smile was grim as he reminded her of their promise to go together wherever they went from now on, but his hands itched inside of his gauntlets at the idea of finally being able to take revenge on the group who he called responsible for the disaster in Remire, and the death of his father and the students of the monastery. It would be a change of pace doing the chasing rather than the running, but he minded that very little as he mused errantly, "I imagine if you remind a sane man of the truth behind the Tragedy that perhaps he'll be willing to be led past Edelgard, once she's disposed of... At the very least, a handful of your students will be likely to follow you if you set out after Enbarr. We won't know true peace if we just allow it to end with Edelgard. Of course, this all hinges on either Edelgard herself, or Rhea, knowing and being willing to disclose information to you. You'll be more lucky with Rhea, in my opinion, but I suppose Miss Empress may surprise you in her arrogance."

"It all comes down to luck, which is more annoying than anything else in this situation... but it matters little. Once Rhea returns, she can take back command of the church, and I'll be free to do as I please. Hunting down Thales and his ilk is my only plan for the future." Raine spoke fervently, and there was that familiar glint of stubborn determination shining in her seafoam-coloured eyes again. It had been ages since Warin had seen that pure clarity, as too often these days her eyes were faded with tiredness, grief, or longing. Though they both knew that extending their weapons out for Thales after ending the Empire would mean more battle, Raine's will was clear enough. At least if she had to do it alone, she would not be burdened by command, or concern for her students and men. "It's the last thing to do."

"A heavy task, but one I don't doubt we're up to." Warin agreed with a nod, though his eyes scanned his sister closely as she absent-mindedly turned her eyes back to her students. The fondness was still there, the ferocious loyalty and urge to protect, but she still looked so incredibly worn. The chains of command had not been kind to her. Dimitri had made it even worse. Yet, even still, he hadn't heard her make a single complaint. She simply held the burden heavily on her shoulders, taking in more and more until her knees threatened to buckle under the weight... and soon, he wondered when that day would come when she finally broke. It worried him, and he tilted his head to the side as he brought the topic back around without much preamble, "When we return to the monastery, you should look into asking Professor Manuela for a sleeping draught. Perhaps that will get you back into normal routines."

"A sleeping draught? Manuela will likely take me to a tavern to drink if I asked her for that." Raine
dismissed the idea with a wave of her hand, and she was idly surprised by how much she even disliked the hypothetical she had presented for herself. In her year of teaching, the nearby tavern to the monastery had seen much traffic from her and her family as per the course of mercenaries... but since her return, she hadn't stepped a foot inside of the place. There never seemed to be enough time for such frivolities, even if some disconnected part of her did miss it. She had taken to the drink just as any mercenary had, and she had proven herself just as hardy as her father was, when he didn't overindulge purposefully, when she had finally come of age. It was one of her few guilty pleasures, but she found no joy in the thought now. A cask of ale wouldn't make her troubles go away, and the hangover the following morning would only make them worse.

"Is that so bad? How long has it been since you've sat down with a pint of good ale to end a long day?" Warin's questions were rhetorical, and he knew full well why his sister was avoiding alcohol, as well as everything else. She was secluding herself in her work, burying herself to avoid confronting the harsh realities she still was not ready to face, and Warin had difficulty in blaming her. He knew, better than any, how much loss she felt from her five year slumber. Everything that had caused the start of their changes had only happened yesterday in her mind, and she had not grown, nor had a chance to move on as they all had. It made him ache for her, for what she had lost and what she was still at risk of losing, and he reached to give her shoulder a squeeze before remarking quietly, "When this is all over, and things settle down... You and I can go for a good drink. Somewhere with perfect ale, a loud crowd, and a horrible band playing in the corner, out of tune. Just like the old days."

Raine smiled at her brother's quiet efforts to make her feel better as well as show his genuine concern, and she reached up to squeeze the hand that was resting on her shoulder appreciatively. He was reaching out the only way he knew how, but she understood him all the same. He cared for her too much, when there were so many other things he could find and hold onto now. But she knew better than to say any of that aloud, and instead only offered him a small nod, murmuring as she felt his scarred fingers squeezing her shoulder again comfortingly, "That sounds nice, Warin. Really nice... I'd like that."

Chapter End Notes

AN:

And so ends the Bridge of Myrddin saga, and on we go to Grondor. There will be a bit of a breather chapter or two in between (mostly because I really need a break from fight scenes), but then we'll be leaping right back into the action. I was saddened there wasn't much interaction between Byleth and Dedue on his return (or anyone else, for that matter) though I suppose it makes sense that most of his scenes should be with Dimitri, especially at this particular point for him in Azure Moon. Finding out that his vengeance is empty, and isn't giving him the peace he's hoping for from the ghosts that are haunting him... He's not in a good place, and it's only getting worse for him. He needs a hug pretty sorely, though he'd sooner gut you still before taking it.

As for Dedue, he will get some spotlight in the next chapter or two, as he duly deserves. I had so much going on in this chapter that it simply wasn't feasible to fit him in, but that will change soon enough. The plot is picking up, but the character development and interaction isn't going to fall by the wayside in the meantime. There's still plenty I want to explore and show, and I don't intend to ignore any of the Blue Lions for the sake of speeding up the plot. Everyone deserves their time in the
spotlight, and so everyone will get a turn in one way or another!

As for me, I need to stop writing in the middle of the early morning and get myself some sleep. I adopted a new cat, and he needs to adjust to my schedule just as much as I need to adjust to his! He's a good little boy I found at a shelter, though he's still quite kitten-ish despite his age. Apparently it's a thing with his breed, as well as his hip problems which cause him to have lesser motor control of his back legs. Despite all this though, he's a sweet young thing, and he's getting along very well with Thor at the moment. I hope the good trend continues!

As always, thank you guys for your reviews, favourites, kudos and follows, and I appreciate every single one of you for giving me and my work the time of day. You really do make my day every single time I get an alert about my stories, and it makes me so happy and so eager to continue writing for you guys. Please drop me more reviews should you feel the need, and I hope you guys have a good one in the meantime. We'll see you soon!

Mood: Amused.

Listening To: "The Sound of Silence" - Disturbed.

~ Sky
Endless Cycles

Chapter Summary

Genres/Ratings: Friendship, Angst, Hurt/Comfort, Tragedy. (T)


Summary: The scars left by war, by battle, felt easier to deal with when they carved their way deep into flesh rather than the heart, or the spirit. Both of them were well aware of that, and were glad for their physical scars and their hurts, rather than the grief of loss. It was a joy to see Dedue back in the fold, alive and well, but for every victory gained, the defeats they suffered only felt harsher, and struck closer to the soul. Could they continue on? Did they wish to? The questions had no answers. At least, no answers they wished to voice aloud.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Great Tree Moon

Garreg Mach Greenhouse

Early Morning

"Are you here for the flowers?"

Warin couldn't quite help but feel his lips turning upwards at the question from the kneeling man before him who was attending to the flowerbed as if he had never left the greenhouse. It was both strange and comforting to the mercenary to see Dedue back and in form, once again tending to the greenery as if nothing had ever changed, and Warin leaned back on the heels of his feet as he answered with honest bluntness, "I'm here for my usual, yes... but I also was wondering if I'd see you here, after everything. It's good of you to be right back at it... The greenhouse has missed your touch. I'm not as good at this whole green-thumb thing as you are."

"Nonsense." Dedue's reply was as brusque as Warin's and his hands deftly pulled away the weeds he had been removing before he glanced over the flowers that he was well aware the older man had been tending to for the past little while. Though the habit was five years old now, Dedue had not forgotten a single detail of what Warin's order usually was comprised of. He never changed it, especially once he had begun to understand the basics of gardening and had taken to the task to grow the flowers himself, and Dedue was quick and efficient as he gathered the necessary blooms for the bouquet Warin had come to make. He was careful as he arranged the dozen different flowers into a small, but respectable bouquet, and he stood just as slowly and calmly before presenting it to the older man, "I believe these are yours, then."

"They are. You remembered." Warin took the bouquet without hesitation, though he did look Dedue over carefully with a small look of surprise at the Duscur man's memory. It was not as if he had any reason to recall his usual set of flowers for the graves he so diligently tended to every weekend when he was within the monastery, yet Dedue had taken it upon himself to learn it all the
same. He was well aware now that the retainer was a keen-eyed man with a much kinder heart than his demeanour boasted, yet he couldn't help the surprise as well as the gratitude. He nodded his head as Dedue looked to him with a small smile playing across his scarred face, and remarked as a similar expression crossed his own, "Thank you. I'm sure my parents will be grateful."

"I have hope that they will be." Dedue answered with a nod of his own, and he glanced over to the flowerbeds that had not changed despite his long absence from the monastery. He didn't doubt that since the rebellion had set up camp inside of Garreg Mach that the nuns and priests, as well as the healers had gone to work in restoring the greenhouse back to its prime, as the herbs that were grown alongside the fruit and vegetables were in great need for the forces mustered inside of the monastery walls. Yet, amongst the necessities remained the small frivolities, such as the corner of the plot that Warin, and likely a few others had been using to grow flowers. "It has... been a very long time. Yet there is much that has not changed."

"Much has, too, however."

"That is also true." Dedue acknowledged with a nod, and he cast a wary glance about the greenhouse to ensure that they were alone before looking back to Warin. He, like himself, had gone through much in the past five years. He had heard all about it from his fellow students, and while he was well aware that much had likely been embellished for dramatic effect... Seeing the mercenary as he was now, Dedue didn't doubt that like His Highness, Warin had had a particularly hard time of it. It seemed to be a common theme amongst the siblings, which he had to admit displeased him. Seeing Raine again had been a boon for him, knowing she had done so much for His Highness in his absence even moreso, and yet... Part of him was decidedly not happy with her condition. Though he was well aware it was not his place, and that he had already spoken to Raine about such a thing... Warin was a different man, who saw things as they were and not as one would like them to be, and he trusted that judgement as he remarked brusquely, "Your sister is unwell."

Warin closed his eyes, taking in the remark like a swordstroke while simultaneously making no effort to deflect it. He was well aware of this, even if he had been trying his damnedest to make things easier on her. She was simply not allowing for it, and no matter what he, or anyone else did, it didn't seem to be making anything better. She seemed a shadow of her former self. A shell, almost, and she was continuing to shrink and fold in on herself with every passing day. Her claims of exhaustion were true enough, but she was not being entirely honest about the reasons. With the battle to come, his worry was growing. That same tightening feeling he had experienced five years ago, before Edelgard had revealed her treachery, had returned to warn him of some catastrophe looming on the horizon, but for the life of him, he couldn't begin to predict where it would come from, or how.

Instead, he could only let out a long breath before he opened his eyes again to look back at Dedue. The man was not a newcomer in any sense, and he knew his professor well, but he had also just re-joined his comrades, and so he was seeing everything with fresh, unbiased eyes. Warin could well imagine what he was seeing. Raine had lost weight, gained shadows underneath her eyes, and was isolating herself from her students and her fellow commanders in an attempt to bear all the burdens that had been thrown upon her shoulders. For her students now, this was not unfamiliar behaviour. For Dedue, this had to be alarming, and he acknowledged it with a slow, honest nod of his head, "I know that she is... Unfortunately, she won't allow me, or anyone else to help. What she needs more than anything is rest, but short of tying her to her bed and knocking her unconscious, I don't think anyone here is in a state to do anything for her. And to make matters worse, the closer we come to Enbarr, the worse she's becoming. And I'll be frank with you Dedue, I know full well where your loyalties lie and why, and I will not call you wrong for it... but even you must see that Dimitri is killing her slowly, like a poison, and she's taking it all willingly."
Dedue averted his eyes momentarily, but he knew better, despite instinct, to defend his liege. He knew full well that Warin was right, as he had seen it all himself on the battlefield and upon his return to Garreg Mach, and to discard it was folly. The relationship between his lord and his professor was nothing like it once was, and that was wearing terribly on her. She was longing for him, mourning for him, and he simply could not seem to see it, or was rather choosing not to. That in return only made it worse on the former mercenary, yet she had not once made an attempt to withdraw from him. She was supporting him against all of her better instincts, reigning him in where she could to keep him and his comrades safe from his own wrath, and that burden was growing too heavy for her to bear alone. He, like Warin, took in a breath before he shook his head and replied quietly, "My loyalty is to my lord... and I shall forever be his sword and shield in his time of need. His revenge is also my revenge, and for that, I shall not try to move him from his chosen path... Yet, I will not argue with what you say. I see it myself, plain as the daylight, that he is harming those about him, with Professor most of all... but I will say that on some level, even if he is not aware of it himself... He knows what he is doing to her, and it hurts him."

"As sorry as I am to say it, I don't care if he's in pain, considering the sheer number of times he's demanded Raine either kill him before he kills her for standing in his way. I won't go as far as to say he's a lost cause, even I can see there is some flickering of conscience coming back to life in him, but it's coming back too late." Warin answered coldly, and he shook his head with a mixture of disgust and anger as he forced his hand to remain light and gentle around the bouquet of flowers he had been given to lay on his parents' graves. He slowly placed his precious burden back on the stone to avoid doing harm to it, and he muttered with a grinding of his teeth, "Even if some miracle should occur, and we back the princess into a corner and slaughter her, will it be enough? Will he finally put an end to his rampage if he has her head? Will Raine be able to see the man she's been trying to bring back all these moons, or will she again be shunted aside? She's lost and drowning, Dedue. And I can't save her this time."

"I do not have the answers to those questions... and I sorely wish that I did." Dedue's answer was genuine, and the remorse and regret in his eyes was earnest as he spoke. He could see all that Warin was saying, and it had crossed his mind, as well, but he did not know what to do any better than his professor's brother did. Raine was singularly stubborn creature, and for better or for worse, she had chosen to support Dimitri, even if it was a poison to her to do so. The pain she was suffering was something she could end if she chose to, but both men knew she never would. She would sooner choose death than turn her back on the future king of Faerghus, and to their cold horror, it seemed that her body was making that choice for her. "I do not support my liege in all things... and his treatment of your sister... is one such thing. She does not deserve his ire simply for being as she is. Yet, if her voice will not reach him... Mine certainly will not, either."

"You say that so assuredly. The first and only time I saw that man react with any real emotion after all these moons is when you returned and showed yourself alive." Warin pointed out sharply, and though he winced for bringing his anger to the forefront when he had not intended at all to be combative with the one student of his sister's that he had almost been willing to call a friend... He could not quite help himself at the show of defeatism. Dedue had more influence on Dimitri than even Rodrigue, which was saying much considering how well Felix's father had been able to reign him in since his recruitment in Ailell. He knew that Dedue had to be aware of that, which only forced him to continue with a hint of growing desperation and frustration, "Why won't he listen to you if you interceded on her behalf? Or are you unwilling to do so, because he is your lord?"

"It is not that I am unwilling. If I believed my words would influence his behaviour, especially in regards to the professor, I would do so immediately. However... They will not. His Highness is in a place far beyond my reach. I know this because he is beyond her reach, as well." Dedue explained in that same quiet, terse voice, and Warin's frosty gaze only made him ache for both his lord, and his professor. He was not a well-versed man in the ways of romance, but he did know tragedy, and
pain. His lord and his professor had both known a soul-searing pain, and over that, they had bonded... Bonded to a point where Dedue had seen His Highness begin to waver in his goals in a way that he never had before. It was something only Raine was capable of doing, and he fought to explain that as he shook his head, "Those five years ago, when she was our professor, and not a commander... She reached him once, and he faltered on the path he had chosen, though she did not know it. He was hesitant, remorseful, and at a loss. She was the one to shake him then, when no other voices would have been capable of reaching him. Now, he is set in his path, and deaf and blind to all else. If she cannot reach him again... then I doubt anyone will ever be able to pierce his veil."

"That time after the incident in the Sealed Forest. I remember." Warin let out a long, tired breath, and he reached up to squeeze the bridge of his nose in a vain attempt to stymie his anger. If it would have solved anything, he would have hauled off and threw one, solid, damning punch to the young prince's face long ago, all consequences be damned. But he knew violence was not the answer, and so he had sat back on his hands, swallowing the bile and hoping beyond hope that somehow his sister would either see sense and cut her losses, or would manage yet another miracle. Neither seemed to be coming now, and he wasn't sure if that dismayed him, or angered him. Even if Edelgard was to fall in the next battle, Raine was convinced they were not close to the end, and he doubted she had the strength to continue on.

Warin turned his eyes to the flowers he had put away, and he studied the fragile, fragrant blooms with a careful, pained stare. Every flower was different. He never allowed for the same bloom to make an appearance twice in the bouquets he had brought for his mother ever since his return to Garreg Mach, and he had continued the tradition when his father had been buried with her. It was the only thing he could do for them, the only thing besides fulfil their silent wishes in protecting his sister, and now he was failing them. It made his body cold, and he squeezed harder on his nose as he admitted in a ragged breath, "I can't lose her, Dedue. She's all I have left of my family in this forsaken mess of a world, and should she die, I may as well bury myself with her. I love Shamir, more than I can put into words, but if I lose my sister, I won't have the will to carry on living. It was for her and her wishes alone that I managed to shake those five years out of myself when I first lost her, and perhaps I'll manage enough to finish what she started if she's to fall in this war... but afterwards...? Our line will just have to end. I can't carry on alone. I know that now."

Dedue was silent as he digested Warin's confession, and he wasn't entirely sure what kind of response was appropriate to give. He had known all this without Warin needing to say it, but the older man simply could not continue to bottle up his emotions, and here, in the greenhouse, he had felt safe enough to speak the truth aloud. He considered it an honour that Warin would share such things with him, especially when he held his secrets so tightly in his gauntlet-bearing fists, yet it also made him wonder. Warin was a man of action, not of words. He could speak all he wanted, but at the end of the day, it would be what he did that defined him rather than the things he said. He had proved that already, having fought for five years on his sister's behalf rather than for his own survival. He had done it once. He didn't believe he could do twice. If that were the case... Dedue could only question him with calm, concise bluntness, "What will you do, then?"

"Kill your lord if he ends up being the reason Raine dies. You're free to kill me afterwards. I'd welcome it. Raine had her vengeance on Kronya and Solon for Father, even if it did nothing for her. I'll have my vengeance for my sister, since I couldn't do anything for my father. I was hoping to crush Thales' throat myself, for all he's done behind the curtains, but I likely won't make it that far if Raine doesn't." Warin admitted with a cold, empty smile, and Dedue felt his spine stiffen even as he felt a surge of pain rush through him at the words. Raine was not the only one on the cusp of admitting defeat, and it was almost horrifying to be aware that even the most stubborn, the most outspoken of the two was willing to say so outright.
Still, as an uncomfortable silence filled the greenhouse... Warin shook his head, then stooped to retrieve his bouquet. His face had softened again from those hard, sharp edges of defiance, and turned quiet and thoughtful. He was still looking down at the flowers, ignoring Dedue's expression, though the man of Duscur had no doubt that he could still see it from the corner of his eye. He missed so little, with that sharp, intense gaze of his, even when he wasn't paying his utmost attention. Perhaps it was just his upbringing as a mercenary that did it. Regardless, Warin held the flowers to his chest, idly rubbing his thumb and forefinger against the gently cut stems as he remarked quietly, "She still has some sort of hope in her that it's not too late. I've no idea where she gets it from, but I do know it's what she believes. We may have never always agreed on things, but she's yet to make me really question her judgement. For now, I'll believe in her, and hope for the best outcome... but I'll remain prepared for the worst."

"There you are, Dedue! I've been looking all over for you!"

Warin stepped aside at Annette's excited voice breaking over anything Dedue had meant to say, and he watched with mild amusement as the much shorter tangerine-haired girl hopped her way into the greenhouse and over to Dedue without pause. She was all bright smiles at the sight of the man, ignoring Warin entirely, but the mercenary didn't much mind. He spared Dedue a parting nod, not wanting to interrupt the two despite the interruption that had been foisted upon them. He had seen their reunion back on the Great Bridge, and he still had to stop and chuckle to himself at how a girl roughly half of his size had managed to knock him clean off of his feet when she had seen him again. Never again would he doubt House Dominic's heir, and as Annette began to chatter happily to a clearly embarrassed Dedue, Warin took the chance to duck out in silence.

He was met immediately by a waiting Shamir just outside of the doors, and she raised her eyebrows at the flowers he was holding in his hand. About them refugees, soldiers, and nuns and priests were attending their business, making the docks almost seem as lively as they had once been five years ago, and Warin wondered absently if Garreg Mach would ever return to the prime it had once been when he had been a boy. He shook the thoughts aside as Shamir looked to him expectantly, and he offered a half smile before answering her unasked question, "Sorry to disappoint, but these aren't for you. Though I imagine you'd appreciate a whetstone over flowers any day anyhow. You asked what I was always up to on my weekends, and I told you that the greenhouse was my first stop. Are you still interested in finding out what I've been doing?"

"Of course I am. And don't think that just because you know my taste in gifts means you can get away with being cheeky." Shamir's answer came with a gentle jab to the ribs, but she still glanced over at his bouquet curiously. She had known he did have a bit of a green thumb, his sister had told her so when she had asked after him once when he had failed to appear for a sparring match on time, though she had to admit he still looked very strange holding flowers. His rough-and-tumble appearance just made the sight of the blooms look oddly amusing, but he had ceded to her request that morning when he had pulled himself out of bed early with the explanation that he had an errand to run. He had no reason to indulge her curiosity, but he was doing so anyway, but she still couldn't help but ask. "Where to now, then?"

"The cemetery." Warin answered easily, though he watched her hesitate for only a moment before understanding dawned in those sharp violet eyes of hers. Unease followed quickly after, proof that she wasn't entirely sure she was ready for what he was intending to do, and the thought made him smile despite himself. She hadn't known anything about his ritual, and when she had asked to be brought along to see for herself what he got up to, he hadn't thought twice about extending an invitation... but he had expected that she might not be completely comfortable with it when she realized what it was he did every weekend that he was within Garreg Mach's walls.

"Every single weekend that you're here... That's where you've been going?" Shamir already knew
the answer to be a yes, but she couldn't quite help herself from saying it aloud as she looked to Warin closely. She wasn't entirely surprised, especially considering how dearly he loved his parents, yet... He was not openly demonstrative, but still he put in effort to make sure he was paying his respects, every single weekend he could without fail, with flowers he had grown with his own hands. It made her wonder just how long he had been performing such a ritual, yet she didn't need to ask to know. She shook her head as she looked down to the blooms in his hand as she mused quietly, "Ever since you came back, then, I imagine... Did you and Jeralt do it together?"

"The first time, yes. It'd been twenty years since we'd seen her grave, so it only felt right to go together when we returned. Afterwards, we went on our own time, separately. But I made a habit of going every weekend, when I wasn't on a mission. I know Father knew." Warin answered with a small shrug, and he glanced northwards, to where now both his mother and father were resting. It still felt wrong to him, having the both of them be buried on the monastery grounds, but he knew he had no right to complain or argue. It was where his mother had spent all of her life, and there was no question it was where his father would want to be now that his own was over. They deserved to be resting together in peace, undisturbed, and he would not change that just to soothe his own hurt feelings. He returned his gaze to Shamir, who was studying him intently, and he gave her the truth as he continued, "I stopped mourning when we ran away with Raine. Instead of feeling grief, I just drowned myself in anger. I wasted twenty years hating and blaming, and not even making an attempt to make peace, or move on. I may have not come back willingly, but now that I'm here... I want to make up for those two decades I wasted. Mother loved flowers... It's the least I could do for her."

"You were mourning. Anger is just another form grief takes." Shamir corrected him firmly, and he raised his eyebrows slightly before offering a weak smile in reply instead of words. He didn't need to speak, and nor did she, but she couldn't quite help herself when he spoke so harshly of his own actions. Especially when he had been nothing but a boy robbed of his mother at such a young age. How else was he meant to react when he was facing such an intense loss? Anger was more than reasonable, as was hatred and blame. She could well understand, and she wasn't about to permit him to perform more self-flagellation. However... She still paused, eyeing the bouquet wearily before she admitted, "Still... Are you sure I should be coming? I hardly knew Jeralt."

"You don't need to go if you don't want to. I won't force you to if it makes you uncomfortable."
Warin spoke plainly, showing no disappointment or judgement at the sight of Shamir's hesitation. He could well understand it. A visit to a gravesite for a pair of people she did not know wasn't entirely fair of him to ask regardless of her obvious interest. He shrugged his shoulders errantly, gesturing the flowers in his hand as he began, "I can lay the flowers down and come back quickly enough. It wouldn't be an-

"It would. I'll go. It's important to you, isn't it?" Shamir interrupted him curtly, and her violet eyes flashed warningly at his attempt to placate her. His heart was in the right place, but she wasn't about to allow him to dictate his actions around her comfort. It wasn't fair of him to do, nor was it fair for her to be so obstinate. It wouldn't be her choice of activity for a weekend off, especially when they came so rarely... but he had been practising this ritual long before they had become involved, and now that they were... She looked away, lips pursing as a hint of pink rose into her cheeks when she spoke both quietly and somewhat grumpily, 'I'm not about to get in your way with how you do things... and if you think it's about time for me to be there with you... Then it's all the more reason for me to go, isn't it?"

Warin paused, blinking momentarily at her explanation before a smile broke across his face despite himself. She was blushing, which was a rarity outside of their bedroom, and the sight was an incredibly pleasant one. She usually was so capable of maintaining an exquisite poker face whenever they were in public, almost to the point that he himself could be surprised when she
showed affection with a quick, mischievous grope or a kiss when a moment could be stolen. It made him break his own rule of keeping things strictly inside of the bedroom, and he reached out to touch her cheek before he remarked gently, "You're blushing. It means that much to you?"

"Shut up, and let's get going before I leave you behind."

"Whatever you say."

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**Knights' Hall**

**Afternoon**

It was a golden opportunity, but not exactly one the young maiden of the Empire had expected to almost literally fall into her lap when she had slid into the Knight's Hall to fulfil the day's duties. Fast asleep and curled up on the bench in front of the fireplace was the rebellion's commander, a book laying open and forgotten in her lap, defenceless and completely lost to the rest of the world. The position couldn't be comfortable but she slept on regardless, the dark shadows under her eyes proof of the fact that it was likely not a choice she had made of her own volition, but one her body had forced upon her while she had been reading.

For a brief moment, Fleche hesitated as she looked over the woman that she had so frequently heard called "professor" rather than her given name. They had only spoken briefly back on the great bridge, when she had introduced herself and invited her formally into the rebellion's forces, and while her voice and manner had been professional then, there had been a good deal of empathy in her seafoam eyes when she had explained that they would indeed permit her to join the army... but she would not see battle no matter how much she pushed for it. In their eyes she was merely yet one of many orphans and refugees who had lost everything in the war, and though she had spoken gently of understanding her motives... She would not put a glorified child onto the frontlines regardless of her skills and her desire for battle, or for vengeance.

It had almost made Fleche scoff then, but she had held herself in, saying nothing and allowing nothing to show on her face but gratitude for the opportunity, and she had looked about at the soldiers this so-called professor was commanding and had to wonder if they were not children themselves when the war had begun five years ago. She had heard the entirety of the history behind Garreg Mach's fall from the lips of the Emperor herself, and she had no doubts in her mind that this woman was the same Ashen Demon that the Empire had once thought dead, and was now being labelled as the singularly most dangerous enemy to the Empire's goals.

Yet... Fleche wondered as she looked on at the sleeping woman, and felt her hand clenching unconsciously on the dagger she had been wearing at her waist, underneath her clothes, ever since she had stepped foot inside of the enemy's territory. This woman was not the target she had chosen, the blade she wore was destined for that monster's heart who had taken her brother from her, but still... There was no doubt she would be doing the Emperor a great service if she slit the throat of the rebellion's commander here and now, and allowed for it to fall apart on its own for lack of a leader. She had seen how the "professor" held all of them together, despite the butting of heads and differences of ideals, plans, and priorities, and she knew that without her, the rebellion would fall to pieces.

It was one thing however to kill the dastard who had tortured and killed so many of her Imperial brethren and soldiers, as he had earned his death and her revenge, but it was another entirely for her to kill a defenceless woman who was simply sleeping in front of her. She was not a soldier as Randolph had been, and killing had never been something she had been forced to do despite her many attempts at training. Randolph had kept her far and away from the war regardless of how
often she had argued of her use, and worse, the Emperor had supported his decision and enforced it whenever she had made an attempt to put her budding skills in magic to use. Instead, even there in the Empire, she had been relegated to "normal" and relatively menial tasks. She was not permitted to fight, neither here nor there, but that did not matter. She would find a way to Grondor, back into the arms of the Imperial forces, and she would put her blade deep in the back of the future King of Faerghus for his murderous ways, and taking away her beloved brother from her.

Fleche's hand tightened on the hilt of her dagger, and she bit her lower lip as she wondered if it would be wise of her to use it earlier than she had initially planned. It would be a great boon for her homeland, there was no denying it, and she would be succeeding where her brother had failed all those moons ago by cutting the feet right out from underneath the rebellion. However, there would be no doubt that if she chose the commander, her chance at getting to the monster would be negligible at best. It would not take long before her corpse would be discovered, and the security of the monastery would tighten to a stranglehold, and she didn't doubt she would be found out eventually. She wouldn't make it far in this unfamiliar territory, and the rebellion's hunters were skilled, if nothing else... She would be summarily executed if she chose the commander, and while she had already decided that death would be her comeuppance for when she killed the monster... Who was she willing to die for in order to ensure their deaths in return?

The question however was to go unanswered as the woman on the bench began to stir, and abruptly Fleche let go of her dagger to instead scramble for the cleaning supplies she had silently put to the ground as she began to struggle with the quandary she had been presented with. Cursing silently, Fleche wondered if she could make a quick escape, but she was again proven to not be quick enough on her feet as the formerly sleeping professor jerked in surprise at the sight of her, hand reaching automatically for the dagger she wore prominently on her own belt before she dropped it in realization. Her seafoam-coloured eyes cleared into wakefulness with surprising speed, and she sat up sharply, looking about to see that the two of them were the only people in the hall before her expression turned sheepish.

"Ah... I'm sorry, I must be in the way of your duties, aren't I?" The apology came smoothly from her lips, making Fleche twitch in both surprise and confusion, and she said nothing as she watched the professor stretch her obviously aching muscles before she sat herself up and smoothed out her cloak to make herself look somewhat more presentable. Her sword rested idly against her legs, further proof of her identity that she picked up without hesitation and slid easily back into place on her belt, and she smiled awkwardly at the younger girl before she noted the cleaning supplies and remarked sheepishly, "I am, I see. It's all right if you want to leave your things here. I'll handle it for you. Consider it repayment for being caught sleeping while I should be studying."

"You'd take up such menial tasks as cleaning? Aren't you the leader of the rebellion?" Fleche couldn't stop the words from slipping out, and she bit her lip the moment she spoke as she saw the surprise flicker through the professor's eyes at her question. She supposed it was impertinent of her. She had learned much in the last few weeks of being inside of Garreg Mach, and she had seen immediately that everyone gave way to the professor, and only a small, select few would dare to argue with her. The monster was one of those few, and yet the professor never seemed to be overly irritated by it. For whatever her flaws she did appear to be rather patient, but it still made Fleche wary as she knew she had overstepped. She did not want to raise suspicion, and so she quickly retreated, explaining hastily, "F-Forgive me, I'm just confused that a commander would offer to take over such menial tasks... Isn't that beneath you?"

"The monastery is a home for everyone, and it remaining in liveable conditions is a responsibility that falls to everyone, not just those who don't fight. I'm one of the many people living here. It's only suitable that I do my part to keep the monastery clean and habitable. Nothing is "beneath" me just because of my position." Raine's reply came easily, smoothly, and Fleche's brow furrowed
with a mixture of confusion and wonder at it. No commander she had ever known had debased themselves by acting like the servants underneath their employ, yet here this professor was, acting as if she was no more important than any common soldier. And she proved it as she continued idly, "Everyone has to work together in order for things to run more smoothly. From the simplest gatekeeper even to someone in charge like me. If we don't, nothing we do will ever succeed."

"That's... a different way of thinking about things, I suppose. Forgive me, but... I never heard of such things before." Fleche chose her words carefully, unsure of what she could give away as she spoke, yet feeling curiosity pulling her forward to learn more of this strange worldview. It made sense in a strange way, yet it also made her question what she had seen when she had been living in Enbarr, alongside of her brother and the Emperor. She couldn't imagine seeing the Empire's crowned heir ever debasing herself by sweeping floors. It simply was beyond imagination. "Where I was raised... The places where one was born defined your life, and the things you were meant to do. The Empire is attempting to change that now, but... No commander I had ever heard of would be caught sweeping floors."

"They're not much of a commander if they won't dirty their hands alongside of those they're leading, don't you think?" Raine's reply once again was smooth and quick, proving her wit was just as sharp as the sword that she fought with. She stood up smoothly, once more giving herself a luxurious stretch before she approached the younger girl and knelt down to pick up a rag and one of the two cleaning buckets that Fleche had brought with her into the hall. She did not ask for permission, but rather simply set to work, kneeling down at Fleche's feet to begin scrubbing at the floor as she remarked, "I've heard of the world Edelgard seeks... A world based upon merit. Where even the lowest born can rise up to the top if they've the strength or the will to manage it... It's an attractive notion."

Fleche said nothing as she wondered at the woman before her, and she quickly reminded herself that she could not simply stand around idle while the commander did her tasks for her. She likewise dropped to her knees hastily to begin to scrub the floors, mindful of where the professor had started, yet also forcing herself to listen intently to her every word. It was strange, to hear the leader of the rebellion speak positively of the country she was intending to topple, and Fleche could not help but question her, trying to remember to be cautious with both her words and attitude as she mused quietly, "Merely an attractive notion...? You don't believe her world is one that can flourish?"

"No, unfortunately. She overlooks the most basic of humanity's flaws, which would never permit her ideal world to exist for much longer than a generation or so. Human greed is a far more powerful motivator than humanity's desire for charity, or empathy." Raine answered almost sadly, and she shook her head as she put her hands to work, scrubbing the stone floor and noting idly that the harsh lye mixture that had been made for the cleaners likely was doing more harm to their hands than it was doing good for the floors. She scrubbed harder nonetheless, putting her back into the work as she knew she must if she wanted to set any sort of example before she continued quietly, "And the path she's taken to create her world... It's not a path that promises happiness. No goal that is obtained by walking a path soaked in blood is a goal worth having. Especially when that blood spilled is the blood of innocents. Those she allied with have no qualms with those they kill, or how they do it... Which means that she is a party to their sins."

There was silence as Fleche absorbed the words she had never considered before, but she did not wish to dwell overlap on them. She was not here to learn of the idealisms and thoughts behind the rebellion's movements, but she would at least admit that to hear the commander's motives for fighting was something worth listening to while she had the time. It did not mean she would ever agree, especially as she understood that it was the Emperor's world that had given her brother a chance that no other world would ever have permitted. And the "innocents" that she had spoken
of... There were no such innocents in this world, and to say otherwise was foolish naivety.

"You had said you had no family. That a monster had killed your brother, and you were seeking vengeance on him... Am I remembering things correctly?"

Fleche twitched, and her teeth almost instantly ground together as she fought down that instinctive surge of rage that filled her at the thought of the beast masquerading as a man who had killed her brother. She had known it was him on sight. There was not doubt in her mind that he had been the one to butcher her precious elder brother, just as he had butchered so many Imperial soldiers before. His hands were stained with blood, and his one good eye was mad and full of a thirst for violence that would never be quenched. To kill him would almost be a mercy. He was a mad dog without direction, fuelled by delusions and led by lies as her Emperor had told her, and she answered tersely as her hands squeezed down on the rag she was holding, "Yes... That is exactly it. I've no family, or home... and my only brother... was murdered by a monster. I want vengeance for him... and I will have it."

"I understand your drive. I lost my father in a similar fashion." Raine spoke to the ground, unable to look up as she spoke of her father, and once again feeling that pain somewhere deep in her stomach as the rest of her body tried to do the work of her heart that did not beat. She heard the young girl stop moving at her side, and from the corner of her eyes could see her looking up at her sharply with curiosity and a mixture of anger and pain, and the look almost brought a sad smile to her face. The grief was still strong for this young maiden, and she understood that well... No matter the time, grief's wounds never did seem to heal all the way, did it?

Still, the words did get her attention, and it piqued her curiosity, despite herself. Fleche could tell that she was telling the truth, that sad, pained look in her eyes was too raw to not be anything but honest. It made her turn to look at her curiously, but the professor was diligently putting her attention to the task at hand even as they spoke, if whether to avoid looking at her or simply out of professional attitude, Fleche could not tell. However, it didn't stop her from speaking slowly, hesitantly, as if she feared the answer she would receive after already hearing such blunt honesty, "Did you... find your revenge for your father?"

"Yes... and no." Raine's answer came slowly, and with it came another pained grimace that she could not quite help. She was reminded too bitterly of that conversation with Dimitri on the great bridge, and those choking, sinking feelings of guilt and self-loathing... There had been recognition in Dimitri's eyes, recognition and some sort of understanding, and knowing her emotions and words had broke through to him even a little bit had reignited her hope, but it did not make her pain any less. If anything, it only made it sharper, and she was freer with her words than she likely should have been as she answered the maiden beside her quietly, "Those who were directly responsible for his death have joined him in the ground... and it happened by my hand. Yet... I can't say that it pleased me, or gave me closure. Because, to be frank, I never blamed them for my father's death. That blame rests solely with me. If I was to have true revenge... Complete revenge... I would need to die, too."

"Why?"

"I could have saved him. When it happened... When the blade was swung... I couldn't do a thing to save him. In that moment, the full blame for his death rested solely on my shoulders." Raine answered quietly, and she shook the rag she had been using before slowly submerging it back into the bucket of soapy water. She felt Fleche's stare on her like a weight, but it was little in comparison to the other burdens she had been carrying on her shoulders until that moment. She had spoken of it already, and found it freeing, almost as much as she felt herself wishing that she could see her father again, if only to have one moment to tell him how sorry she was. "It's true, I gave
chase to the woman who held the blade, and another who helped to create the situation in the first place... and both are dead now because of my actions. But it gave me no satisfaction, nor closure. Simply because what I had forgotten in my rage was that no amount of blood I spilled would bring him back to me. Vengeance... was empty."

Fleche was silent for a moment, listening and watching with narrowed eyes as her entire body stilled with a cold sort of realization and wonder. There was some sort of truth in the words she was speaking, Fleche could admit to that much, as she doubted the woman before her would look or sound as she did if she didn't believe in what she was saying... but it did not lessen that ugly ball of heat that had turned her heart to rage and justice. She didn't care what someone else who had suffered loss felt... They did not know her or her loss, and it made her voice sharp, and almost indignant as she asked, "Are you trying to turn me away from getting revenge on the monster who killed my brother?"

"No. That would be pointless. I've learned that by now." Raine shook her head as she answered the sharp question solemnly, and she wrung out the rag she had allowed to soak before returning to her work. She knew it was pointless, yet, still she was trying to turn Dimitri away from his wild path before it brought him, or them, to an early graves. She was well aware that made her a fool, but she wasn't about to stop trying. She owed him that. This girl, on the other hand... That righteous anger and pain... No amount of gentle or harsh words would be changing her mind anytime soon.

"You've made a decision, and it's led you here already... One way or another, I imagine you'll find what you're after, somehow. I just hope that it gives you the closure you need, when that time comes. As morbid a hope as that is."

"Morbid?" Fleche repeated her words, both confused and unsure as she stopped her work entirely to continue to watch her with narrowed, puzzled eyes. She was having no luck trying to understand this woman, though she was indeed making an attempt to try. Her words were like riddles, riddles that Fleche did not understand even if they seemed simple at first glance, and the stark difference between her and the Emperor was almost too much for her to see past. At least, for all of her sharpness and intimidating qualities, the Emperor spoke her mind and spoke frankly. This "professor" didn't seem capable of the same. "Why is hoping for closure from vengeance a morbid hope?"

"Death is ugly. Vengeance is uglier. Corpses atop corpses... That's all this war has been. That's all it will continue to be, as the killing continues. Each death brings about a new cycle of vengeance. New orphans, new widows or widowers, shattered families and homes... To want revenge for that is understandable, but to find it... It only means repeating the cycle." Raine explained quietly, and she, too, paused as she looked down at her reddened hands and felt the sting of the soap burning in her skin. It almost felt pleasant, in an oddly detached sort of way, but she tried not to linger too long on that thought. She knew she was meant to be pragmatic, to not overthink, but how could she not? What Dimitri was after would cause more harm than good in the long run, even if he was still in the midst of realizing it, but the same could be said for herself and those she was leading. She was all too sharply aware of that. "When the cycle ends, it only means everyone is dead; having killed those who did the killing in return. Reconquering the lands that were conquered. For all the sagas and fairytales and legends... War and battle and vengeance remain ugly and scarring affairs. Which only makes things all the more ironic."

"How?"

"I was a mercenary before all of this began, if you can believe it. Nothing more than a simple mercenary, fighting underneath my father's command alongside my elder brother." Raine shrugged her shoulders back, hand tightening on the rag as she once more began to scrub at the floors to ignore the stinging that had set up in her fingers. It was hard to believe that her life before she had
come to Garreg Mach had happened at all sometimes, but she clung desperately to those memories. It was proof of a life before this hell, before the burdens and weights and expectations that had been shoved so unceremoniously onto her shoulders, and it was a life she sorely wished she could return to. Abandoning her students and their cause was out of the question, but it did not make her ache any less for simpler days, and she knew that showed in her voice when she mused, "Death was my occupation, and survival was one of my only goals. Being philosophical was more likely to kill me in those days than it was to do me any good. Killing was never easy, mind you, but at least as a mercenary, I never knew the faces of the ones I fought. Nowadays... Fighting strangers is almost a rarity. Those were simpler times."

An awkward silence fell amongst them, broken only by the sound of the rags scrubbing at the cold, stone floor, and Fleche did not know what to say as she worked alongside the rebellion's commander. Any doubts she had been harbouring beforehand were erased, as she now understood this woman was not the same as the monster she was hunting. She had too much empathy and kindness for that, and for that, she would be spared her vengeance. Fleche could reason that she was acting only as a woman now, seeking revenge for her brother, rather than as an Imperial soldier, and despite it all... She did not want to be a tool for the Empire's success. On the front of war's ugliness, at the very least, she could admit that the professor beside her was right. There was nothing but corpses no matter where she looked, because conquest, ideals, and war brought about nothing but pain even if the end goal was to change the world for the better.

For that and that alone, she would keep her dagger sheathed and allow for the professor to live. If she was to die in the battles ahead, it would not be by her hand, and most certainly it would not be done in cold blood. She deserved a better death, no matter what the Emperor had to say about her. She was not some "Ashen Demon". She, like herself, was just a woman who had suffered too much loss, and did not want to see more. Even if their visions differed, and they did indeed differ much... Fleche could not find it in herself to be the one to end her. They were too similar, and she doubted a chance would ever come again when she could. No... Her dagger was better served being saved for the monster, and not the commander who had gotten on her hands and knees to scrub the floor alongside her without prompting, or care.

They continued their work in silence, only ever exchanging words to swap supplies or catch a spot that was missed, and both remained lost in thought despite the menial tasks. The soap was harsh on their skin, stinging at blisters and cuts, but if either minded, they did not complain. There was no more speech to be had now, as thoughts of the war, of vengeance, of grief, filled their heads and kept their tongues firmly behind their lips. Both had lost too much. Both could not reconcile their ways of living in response to their losses. But it did not matter. The world would continue to turn regardless of their opinions, desires, and ideals, and they would be pulled along with it, for as long as time would permit them to do so. The war was still raging... and the battle of Grondor coming closer by the day. Perhaps then... An end could be found. Though now, neither was entirely sure if that end would be something they could reach with their own hands, and if it would finally satisfy them even if they did.

Chapter End Notes

AN:

It's unfortunate that Fleche never really got more out of her in Azure Moon, though I suppose that was kind of the point. Unless you played Crimson Flower to completion, Fleche's character isn't recognizable when she appears in AM, nor is her brother,
Randolph. You feel and learn for the pair more in CF by contrast, as you're meant to, but without knowing much about her, her impact in AM, while large, still feels a bit hallow. I wanted a chance to flesh her out just a tad without giving much about her actually away (considering she goes by "Maiden" in the game proper, anyway) and more importantly, have her converse with Raine before Grondor. The two have quite a bit in common despite it all, and I wanted to explore that, as well as really push the fact that Raine's not well, but she's still as sharp as a tack, and using that still heart of hers to the best of her ability.

Grondor is happening next chapter, though I admit that I am still unsure of how it'll be handled in terms of length. It isn't so much Grondor itself that I want to focus on, but more the immediate aftermath and everything that follows the next moon, but of course that doesn't mean I can just skip over the whole damn battle to get there. It's unlikely the fighting in Grondor will last three chapters as the Bridge saga did, but at least two chapters will be devoted to the battle, I'm guessing. As for everything that follows... Well, expect it to make up a few chapters (all from differing perspectives and featuring different characters) at the very least. There's a lot of ground to cover, and I want to make it smack and smack hard. The game does a good job of this in some ways, but it does fail in others, and length unfortunately is where it lacked most. Thankfully in fanfic, that isn't a problem!

I am however going to post yet another warning before I get into Grondor... and that warning is this: the path that Azure Moon takes in terms of direction in canon is about to take a vast change. This is where "my" canon of Azure Moon and the game's canon of AM will be diverging, so expect a lot of differences, some minor, some major, as the storyline continues. This, of course, also means that some characters will be changing paths as the storyline does, and that some of the other game timelines will be crossing over. If my characterizations, or any of the changes to the narrative, become a source of irritation for you... I recommend that you drop this fic now.

I know that I can't please everyone, and that I am liable to have some fans take issue with how I write certain characters, or certain scenes, or even with my writing style in general, and that is perfectly acceptable to me as no one in the world shares my exact vision, nor should they be forced to. However, unasked for criticism based on my take on characters, situations, change of storyline etc, is just plain rude and unwelcome at this point. If you dislike my story... Please stop reading it. It really is that simple. I've been in the game too long to have any patience for "constructive" criticism in the form of insults and veiled, "You just don't understand X" comments, flames, and poor reviewing manners. This may be the internet where you are free to say whatever you wish, however you wish, with complete anonymity... but I am still a human being on the other side of this screen, with opinions and feelings, too. Please be civil, respectful, and kind, as you would to anyone you'd meet IRL.

Mood: Slightly Ill.

Listening To: "Say Something" - Christina Aguilera ft A Great Big World

~ Sky
Chapter Summary

Genres/Ratings: Action/Adventure, War, Battle, Friendship. (T)

Characters: Raine, Ashe, Warin, Dimitri, Edelgard, Rodrigue.

Summary: The time for the clash had come. The three armies of the three territories were meeting again, five years later, to do battle as they once had when they were students. Nothing but pride and academia had been on the line then, but now, everything seemed to be at risk. There was no doubt the casualties would be beyond count, with the melee and the chaos that would ensue once the first salvo was fired, and all Raine could do was hope, hope beyond hope that somehow her words had reached the right ears, and the massacre to come could be averted before the blood began to flow.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Great Tree Moon

Grondor Fields

Noontime

"The conditions aren't nearly as horrible as Rodrigue and Gilbert had been concerned for... That's one small blessing for today..." Raine remarked as she cast a wary glance about the fields of Grondor, noticing that only in small patches had the dense fog of yesterday had managed to stick to the ground. It did nothing to hide the enemy troops that were approaching from the east and west, and their numbers were vast underneath both the red and yellow flags of the Empire and the Alliance. To the forces of the rebellion, who had mustered barely half of what they were seeing now, it had to look horrifying... yet Raine felt no fear, or even concern as she watched the lines forming in preparation for the battle to come.

The very air was still and tense, weighing each and every soldier down far more than any set of armour could ever manage. Death's hand was resting idly on the shoulder of every man and woman present in the fields, a grim reminder of the only permanent outcome this battle would truly have, and Raine was well aware this tension was impacting her own men. Still, she showed no sign that she was aware of that weight herself, and she cast a speculative eye about the skies where she had seen several winged messengers flitting to and fro well behind the enemy lines. More preparations for the melee to come, but that was not her chief concern.

No, instead her eyes turned to the Empire's forces, who had been on the cusp of the field when hers had marched forward, and that had been the only thing that had made her feel alarm. She heard Warin approaching on her left, instinctively feeling her unease and moving to respond to it, and she was glad for his company as she turned her head slightly to look at him as his gaze followed her own out to the forces that were beginning to spread out to further cement their lines before she remarked quietly, "They were here before we arrived... Not surprising, but still annoying. They'll
have laid traps, no doubt. Our movement forward will be stymied."

"You intend to funnel everyone west?"

"If possible... The tactics I used five years ago won't be applicable here. Trying for a pincer with our low numbers is asking for more graves to be dug back at the monastery... The more we can avoid conflict with the Alliance's forces, the better." Raine answered with a deep sigh, and she ached as she wondered why she could look back so fondly on the obvious lie that the Battle of the Eagle and Lion had been. It was preparation for Edelgard, preparation and a trial run for this exact moment, and to say Raine wished to teach her another humiliating defeat was an understatement. Yet, she also had to be cautious, as now lives were on the line, and it had been five long years since she had last had the chance to cross blades with the Emperor... or with Claude. "And with no word from Lorenz or Marianne, and that poor scout we found a day ago... Things aren't looking good for us."

"Cut the head off of one snake, and you've only the other to deal with. Claude may be well defended, but he's still an easier target to take out than the princess will be. I wouldn't mind putting him in his place for you, if you'd like." Warin offered with a grim smile, reminded of that humiliating moment after his hard search into Derdriu, only to be summarily dismissed because he had nothing to give that Claude wanted of him. He was indeed nursing a grudge over the young man's arrogance, and would be more than happy to provide his sister with an advantage that was sorely needed when she looked out over the two assembled armies before her.

"I said I wanted to avoid conflict, Warin, not start it. No Alliance soldier is going to be attacked on my watch, barring matters of self-defence. I don't care if Claude sees us as an invading force. Until he himself declares war on the Kingdom, he's to be left alone, and alive. Any possible ally is valuable. Even him." Raine reminded her brother with a trace of an annoyed sigh, and she shrugged her shoulders idly, but did not push the matter further. She understood his cold pragmatism, and she even agreed with it on a solely professional level, but she had already chosen how she would be fighting this war, and she could not change course now. Her eyes once more studied the enemy lines, taking in the soldiers and their positions, and she remarked idly with a nod as she took in the Imperial sniper manning the ballista in the central fort, "What do you think about that...? Bait?"

"Bait. And not very good bait. Who wants to be sitting in the centre of the fields in the middle of a three-way melee? Avoid it at all costs, even if it means putting our fliers at risk. Petra can manage on foot for one battle." Warin agreed with a nod of his own, and he wondered if Edelgard was simply considering them idiots, or was hoping for a repeat of all of the same tactics Raine had employed five years prior. It was true that then in the battle five years prior, Raine had made a two-pronged charge that did involve taking the central fort and keeping it in order to lay down suppressing fire with the ballista, but to employ such a strategy now was only asking for trouble. He remarked as he rolled his shoulders, flexing his fingers inside of the tight confined of his gauntlets, "I think she expects a repeat of your battle from five years ago... All the way down to your exact troop movements, if her own placement is any indication. If that's really the case, you've got another advantage on the princess."

"Possibly. She's changed as well, so I can't discount her own growth despite what we're seeing." Raine allowed, but she wanted to tread carefully even though her brother's words made sense. She had not been surprised at all to hear that the Emperor herself was leading her forces from Fort Merceus to engage the rebellion's troops, as it was exactly what she would have expected Edelgard to do, but that did not mean everything else would be so easily predicted. Edelgard was arrogant. She didn't trust anyone's judgement but her own at the end of the day, and so she had come here personally, most likely to ensure that the reports she had to have received of Dimitri and her own survival were true. She believed it could be ended here, in a three-way melee, simply because she
had the advantage of terrain and preparation. It was not a wholly inaccurate assumption, as battles had been won by less, but... To Raine, it only proved that she had not changed as much as she may have believed she had, if it was true. "She came here, which I anticipated, but... How far she's come herself since our last battle is something I don't know. Engaging her will be risky, but unavoidable."

"You're not about to set the prince on her by himself, are you?" Warin asked sarcastically, and though he did not expect an answer, the sharp, scolding look he received in reply was more than enough of one. It made him shake his head, but he had already come to terms with the fact that his sister simply would never allow for Dimitri to engage in such a fight on his own. It didn't matter if that was what he wanted, or if he would object, even violently, to her presence, as Raine was going to be there to provide aid, and there was nothing he could do about it. She wouldn't risk allowing him to lose himself to rage and get killed in the process, and the only way to prevent such a thing from happening was to be there personally. "I made my promise and I'll keep to it... but you're still an idiot."

"That's not keeping your opinions to yourself, Warin..." Raine replied with a roll of her eyes, and she once more glanced skyward as the flurry of activity from the Alliance's pegasi and wyverns seemed to be growing more erratic and frantic. It made her brow furrow, and she felt her hand inching instinctively towards her hip to grasp at the hilt of her blade. She didn't like seeing so many soldiers in the air, especially knowing that the Empire had a ballista ready and primed to shoot every single one of the fliers out of the sky if and when they were given the signal, and it only further proved she had erred in not securing enough fliers for herself. Her own soldiers had preferred steeds rather than wyverns or pegasi, and only Petra had showed a different inclination during her days of study rather than warfare.

"Professor!"

Ashe's terse voice interrupted Warin from replying with further sarcasm, and the siblings turned to him in tandem to see him with his bow in hand, strung, and an arrow dangling from his fingertips in the other. His eyes were narrowed and his face drawn and wary, but his eyes were brilliant with battle-light as proof that he was keeping his wits about him as he hurried forward to the two siblings. He pointed to the sky, but kept his voice low and tense as he informed them sharply, "Professor, I've noticed that there's a falcon knight circling close to our lines. They've made three passes, each one closer than the last... They're coming around for a fourth now. Permission to shoot them down?"

Warin turned his gaze in the direction Ashe had looked, and he saw indeed that there was a falcon knight circling about the trees, watching and studying the rebellion's lines from well up in the air. Three passes would be more than enough to have all the information they would need to draw up strategies in opposition to their enemy's forces, but a fourth pass meant much more dangerous inclinations were likely at work. He glanced to Raine, who had tilted her head up to make the same study, and he then looked to Ashe before asking him thoughtlessly, "Can you make that shot, kid?"

"Ashe can shoot the body off of a moth and leave the wings intact. He can make that shot." Raine answered for her student with complete and utter confidence, and Ashe pinked slightly under the unexpected praise. However, his professor was still looking upwards without any emotion, her seafoam-coloured eyes studying the knight he had pointed out, and she didn't look as if she was ready, or even considering, giving an order. Rather, she was taking far longer than she ever would to reach a decision to take action, which made both Ashe and Warin exchange a confused look before she was shaking her head and musing, "No... That isn't a soldier studying our lines. They're looking for something. For someone. And from the angle of their pegasus... They just found them."
Ashe reacted instinctively, bringing his bow up and beginning to notch the arrow to the string as he saw the pegasus take a steep dive, but he was stopped abruptly when Raine's hand shot out to block his aim. He looked at her in confusion, but the emotionless expression she had been wearing had turned into something approaching a smile, which only made him flounder all the worse as he watched the knight diving in close enough at range. He could pinpoint the rider drawing a bow now, still a small silhouette in the sky, but if their aim was any good, they could quite easily kill anyone they wished if they were not taken care of first. It made the hair on the back of his neck stand, and he began nervously as his professor's arm still blocked him from lifting his bow, "Professor...?"

"Not a move. Let's see what they do." Raine instructed him firmly, and she glanced about for a moment before realizing with a growing smile that she, Ashe, and her brother were the only small group assembled for a good measure of distance. The knight was coming for them specifically, and no one else. Her hand reached for her blade, but her fingers were loose on its hilt as she felt the men on either of her sides tense uncertainly. She knew that armour, and as the pegasus dived closer... She also knew that flash of pumpkin-coloured hair.

The whistle of an arrow made both Warin and Ashe jump, but Raine didn't even flinch as the projectile buried itself between her feet with a sniper's precision. The flier above rolled a wing in a salute before turning tail and heading back for the Alliance lines, and all three looked down to the arrow that had been fired with no warning, greeting, or farewell. Raine stooped to retrieve it, noting the parchment that had been tightly rolled about the arrow's body, and she mused inwardly that even with the added weight, Leonie's shot had been perfect from the back of her pegasus. She had grown greatly in her archery skills, making Raine smile somewhat sadly as she wondered what her father would think if he could see them all now, grown-up and as skilled as any soldier he could have commanded both as a mercenary, and a knight-captain.

Raine was silent as she unrolled the missive, and she heard Warin and Ashe shifting their feet to glance over her shoulder and look about her side respectively to read what she had received. The message written on the parchment was simple, consisting only of three words, along with the seal of the House Reigan to signify the genuineness of the article she held in her hands. Without a word, Raine felt a smile breaking out across her face, and the hand that had been creeping towards her sword now clenched the hilt in earnest. The weight and the anxiety that had been crushing her chest blew away like crumpled leaves in a crisp autumn wind, and she looked to Warin, a triumphant smirk curling at her lips as she remarked pointedly, "Twenty coins, and the first drink is on you when we're back at the monastery."

"When the battle is over and he hasn't turned his forces back on us, I'll think about it." Warin answered back with a shake of his head, but he also felt the beginnings of a smile cracking at his lips. The sudden, unexpected change of the tide was a welcome one, and he had to admit he had not once put any real faith in Raine's attempts to reach out to the young leader of the Alliance. To have himself proven wrong wasn't bitter or sour on his tongue at all, and he looked back to his suddenly smiling sister before asking her politely, "I assume there'll be a change of orders now, Commander? What do you want our troops to do?"

"You're taking a token force with you to the east. Bring Raphael, as well as Flayn, Seteth, Catherine, Alois, and of course Shamir. Play the goat. You know exactly how, and teach the others what I mean if they're unsure. You remember Father's lessons better than I do. Raine's orders came crisp and sharp, and Ashe involuntarily stood at attention despite the fact that he was not the one being addressed. He watched as Warin nodded in confirmation, listening intently, and his navy eyes flashing with something akin to amusement as she continued on, "If you can, find Claude, and depending on how the battle is faring, tell him what we'll need him to do. I trust your judgement, so do as you please. But, if possible, warn him to stay as far back as he can from engaging any of the
Imperial forces. We can take the brunt of their blows. Claude will be more open to negotiations if
we prove ourselves reliable here."

Ashe hesitated, eyebrows furrowing as his hand tightened on his bow, but his mouth didn't open as
he listened to the orders coming from his professor's lips. He trusted her judgement, as it had
carried him and his classmates this far already, and yet... That letter still did not look as if it meant
for as much celebration as Raine and her brother were having. As much as he understood the
goodwill they were willing to show the Alliance, especially after their aid in taking the Great
Bridge of Myrddin, he could not feel the same optimism. There was so much at risk, especially if
Claude proved he would use the advantage of exhausted and injured Kingdom troops to take the
upper hand entirely once the Imperial forces had been driven out.

Warin caught the look of worry on Ashe's face, and he nodded to him for his sister, who turned at
once to see it for herself as she finished outlining her plans for her brother. Her smile gentled,
understanding where Ashe's concern was coming from, and she addressed him quietly, but not
unkindly as she asked, "Are you concerned they may be walking into a trap, Ashe?"

"I don't want to doubt potential allies... Especially in such times when trust can be our only real
currency, yet..." Ashe hesitated once again, lowering his eyes to the ground as his left hand
tightened around the haft of his bow. He had been eager to shoot down the rider he had spotted,
wanting to do some good, yet Raine's benefit of the doubt had proven better than his own
judgement. She would not always be right. The costs if she was wrong... He shuddered
involuntarily. The bodies would be too high to count, or to bury. Yet, his professor was watching
him kindly, with some same non-judgemental eyes he remembered from five years ago when she
had promised she'd fight the Church of Seiros itself to protect him as Lonato's son, and that gave
him courage to speak, "If Claude's words prove untrue... What will we do, Professor? Do you have
a backup plan for such an occurrence?"

"I do. And that backup plan is my brother." Raine answered with a firm nod, and she looked to
Warin, who also nodded and crossed his arms over his chest with a calm, confident expression.
Ashe looked to both siblings, momentarily unsure, and she explained for him simply as she saw the
unease and confusion, "This isn't our first time having to deal with allies who may turn enemies the
moment it becomes convenient for them. This is a situation we've faced many a time in our days as
mercenaries. Playing the goat is for the Empire's sake, to draw attention and distract, and if the
Alliance does play along, we'll be able to succeed in luring out their forces for a complete rout...
However, if the Alliance proves duplicitous... Warin will cut the head from the snake, and the
Alliance's troops will either scatter, or surrender. Raphael is going because he is a friendly face to
many of the Alliance soldiers, and will inspire trust in our commitment to the truce... but Warin
and the others will not be as hesitant as he may be if they turn on them."

Ashe blinked, realizing that the others Raine had assigned to Warin's command were Knights of
Seiros and not Blue Lions, who would not have compunctions against fighting their former allies or
friends if it came down to an all-out melee. His professor was already three steps ahead, and he
immediately felt the fool for doubting her judgement. How many times had she proved since her
return that she was thinking of a long-term strategy, and not merely preparing for the next battle?
The siege of the bridge had proven that she was never just content with seeing the fight at her feet.
Her eyes were fixed on the horizon, as a true commander, and it made him duck his head in a
small, apologetic bow as he spoke quietly, "Forgive me, Professor. I shouldn't have doubted you."

"No, I much rather prefer being doubted, Ashe. There's no apology needed. My instincts may be
good, but that doesn't mean I'm not capable of making mistakes. Claude didn't promise a truce. He
merely acknowledged that he received our message. He owes us nothing, and should he and his
forces turn on our own, he has broken no oath. You're right to point that out." Raine dismissed his
apology with a flick of her wrist, and Ashe looked back up to her, his bright green eyes studying her curiously and thoughtfully. She offered him a small, affectionate smile before she continued for him, "Being prepared for the worst doesn't make you a pessimist, nor does it mean you've no faith in your leaders. You're just wary, as you should be after so much fighting. Good luck isn't often stumbled on, and should always be looked at carefully. I know you know that better than most."

"Is that what you'll be telling the others, then, when you return to revise our orders?"

"Yes. For now our strategy will involve cooperation with the Alliance, assuming that is Claude's intent... Should it not be, Warin will signal us immediately, and we'll be ready for the flow of battle to change. My brother can handle himself, and I don't doubt he can handle Claude alone, too, should the situation call for it." Raine answered, and her hand tightened on the hilt of her blade as Warin inconspicuously ducked away from the conversation, readying his gauntlets as he left to find his soldiers and brief them on the mission's change before Raine had to do so. It would save her precious time, and Raine watched him leave without comment before continuing on for Ashe, "However, as I said in the beginning... I want to focus solely on gutting the Imperial army's forces while we have the chance. Edelgard herself has taken the field, which gives us a very rare opportunity... We cannot waste it."

"But His Highness..." Ashe knew he should stop, but this time, he could not help himself. He had overheard his professor bickering with her brother, and to know she was planning on shadowing Dimitri's footsteps all the way to the Emperor herself filled him with worry. He already was aware Dimitri was in no state to be fighting such a dangerous foe alone, but he also knew he would not be happy to accept help, especially from her. Though they had not been as tense and angry around one another as they had been, to say their relationship had been repaired was not at all true. And Dimitri had made sure everyone knew that the vengeance he craved was for his hands and his hands alone. "Professor, if you get in his way..."

"It's not my well-being that concerns me, and it shouldn't concern you, either, Ashe." Raine dismissed his worries firmly, but not unkindly as she understood the track of his thoughts. She didn't want him to dwell on them, and she did not want to dwell on them, either. She knew the risks she was taking, but that was a decision for her to make, and no one else. She would be shadowing the future king, and if necessary, she would be taking vengeance out of his hands if the opportunity arose and he was found lacking in ability. His mind was clouded by rage... and as he had demonstrated five years ago, as terrifying a fighter he was, he was not as efficient as he usually could be when he allowed his anger to direct him. "Don't worry. Let's return to the others, and give them their orders. Time grows short, and the battle closer. We need every last minute we have to prepare."

"Yes, Professor."

How had she miscalculated so horribly? As the lines of battle tightened about her like a noose, Edelgard felt a cold sweat breaking out underneath the weight of her armour, and she gritted her teeth silently in anger. She could barely believe what she was seeing, yet she knew it to be the truth. Somehow, without her notice and despite her interference... the Alliance and the crumbling remnants of the Kingdom's forces had established a working truce, and together, their combined might had pinned both her and her army into a box that there was no escape from. She was losing soldiers faster than she could order reinforcements for, and there was no doubt in her mind that loss was close. Their strategy, and the playing of their roles, had been impeccable.

Just when she had thought that the forces that cursed professor had sent to the east would clash with the Alliance's men, Claude had instead personally turned directly west, engaging the Imperial
line and drawing out her defensive troops in tandem with Raine's own soldiers engaging from the north. On two fronts and like lightning she had been attacked, and she had been forced to watch with growing horror and rage at the gambit that had been played flawlessly before her eyes. When had they had the time to establish a truce? Especially with all of their messengers having been taken care of long before they could have ever reached friendly ears in the Alliance territory?

Her teeth ground down audibly, and her hand tightened on her axe until her knuckles whitened underneath her crimson gauntlets... She had been played for a fool twice now. Ferdinand's betrayal on the bridge, while expected, had still stung when she had learned that not only had he defected for the rebellion, but he done so under Dorothea's influence. Her friend had turned tail and left the Empire years ago underneath the guise of not wanting to be a soldier for the Empire, and yet there she had gone, right back into battle, to bring Ferdinand out of her command as easily as plucking a flower from a garden. It made her quiver in disgust and outrage. Failure after failure... as if that damned professor was somehow reading all of her moves ten steps in advance, and was countering them without the need to even look at her.

Edelgard took in a deep breath as she banished the anger and returned to her mask of cold rationality. She knew that was false, despite how much it felt otherwise. It was simply bad luck that the woman had not died in the raid of Garreg Mach, and it had been poor planning on her part that had led to the failure to retake the monastery, and defend the bridge. She never should have allowed Randolph to try such a mission alone and unsupported, and she never should have permitted Ferdinand to be on the front lines. If she had forced Randolph to pull back and await reinforcements, the rebellion would have been crushed before it begun. If she had kept Ferdinand in a tighter heel, the bridge would have never fallen because of his betrayal. Two critical mistakes, but mistakes she could have rectified. Now, here, in the fields where she had been so damned certain she would have victory... a third mistake had been made.

She had counted on the professor to re-enact her strategy from five years prior, to divide the lines and force her way forward through with brute strength and the enticing lure of an easy victory, and yet she had played a completely opposite hand. One Edelgard had not prepared for, despite having the advantage of territory, and preparation. All of the traps she had set, all of the men she had sent out... None of them had expected to be abruptly trapped between the lines of the Kingdom and Alliance at the same time. The chaos of battle was meant to be used to her advantage, not against her, but once more, the professor had pulled the rug out from underneath her feet.

The pincer was closing, and the lines were being broken. She had seen it, Dimitri spearheading the wave in the north, scattering her men like grains of sand in a whirlwind, with that woman close on his heels to provide cover and another sword to his race forward. Hubert had sacrificed much time and energy in delaying their advance, but once he had been forced to engage them directly, the professor had nearly cleaved him in two. In a panic of blood, fear, and knowledge that he was not permitted to die there, Hubert had been forced to withdraw, and now Edelgard found herself standing alone, readying herself with her meagre remnants of her guards who would provide no protection against the oncoming storm, and she wondered how in the world she had allowed herself to get into this damned situation.

The screeching of steel through air broke her concentration, and it was followed by an anguished bellow as a soldier in front of her took a spear to the chest. The weapon had broken right through his body as if it was merely paper and not flesh and bone, and he fell like a sack of sand to the horror of his fellow soldiers. Edelgard tightened her grip on her weapon as she watched the man responsible stalk forwards, a lion amongst the men, a cold, cruel smile gracing his blood-flecked face as he pulled the spear from the corpse as easily as he would a stuck arrowhead in a target. His one good eye blazed with a crazed cerulean light, and he was muttering quietly as he approached with slow, confident footsteps, "Stab your chest, break your neck, smash your head... I will allow
"I'm not interested in methods of dying... All that matters is that death takes place, not so much where, or how." Edelgard answered with that same quiet intensity, and her hand grew still, confident, on the handle of Amyr. This was a crazed beast, not a man, and she barely owed him the trading of words. How could one reason with a creature living full on delusion and lies? She could see no sanity in his face, and she felt not an ounce of sympathy for him as he approached and left her men scattering in his wake. Not one of them have the courage to stand up to him, but she supposed she couldn't blame them for their fright. For his madness... He was still a giant. His strength, his Crest, had made him so. They were right to be wary of him... but she was not. "I've no intention of dying today."

"And I'm sure all those you slaughtered so far have felt the same way!"

A roar seemed to sound as he threw his spear, but it hit the blade of Amyr and went far too wide to be of any consequence. Edelgard leapt from her position on the small, already crumbling fort, axe in hand as Dimitri ran to meet her. Areadbhar and Amyr met in a clash of sparks and a screech of Relic on Relic, and Edelgard felt her teeth clench as her body almost immediately gave way underneath the massive strength of the man in front of her. In pure physical strength she was far outmatched even if her weapon and armour gave her weight and closer range, but he was not thinking strategically as he pushed her back. He was craving only to sink his Relic into her head, and absolutely nothing else. He would not have it. She would not permit it.

Falling into a crouch, Edelgard allowed the sheer force of his push to carry him forward on his own as her axe lifted in unison with her movements. The edged blade caught his back as he careened past her, and his roar of pain made her smile grimly as he turned on her, face a blaze of rage and blood, and his one eye blinking madly. He wouldn't win in this state. All of his past victories had been taken with a calm head, and under the guidance of his dearly beloved professor... but now he had neither to bolster him. He was a mad dog, and he had come for her alone, likely leaving his professor far behind. He would not win as he was... and she would put him quickly out of his misery.

Amyr sang out twice more, blocking both incoming stabs of his Relic and shoving them aside, and Edelgard took the chance to close as Dimitri failed to keep her at bay. Using her axe to keep his lance firmly away from her body, the Emperor rushed forward, twisting her great weapon to the side and lifting it so the blunt side of the edge struck the lost prince full in the face. He went staggering backwards under the force of her blow, his armour saving him from the broken neck she would have otherwise inflicted on him from the power behind her hands. She swung again, knocking him further back and off balance, and his Relic went wide as he struggled to keep his feet. She had her opening, and Amyr glinted crimson in her hands and she raised it and let it fall with a roar of exertion.

A whistle sounded, followed by a sharp crack, and Edelgard felt her Relic rebound before she realized what it was that had blocked her from putting her axe directly into Dimitri's chest to cleave him in two. She whirled, seeking the source, only to freeze instinctively at the sight of the Sword of the Creator singing back to its normal size into Raine's hand as the professor walked with slow, calm surety towards her. Her seafoam-coloured eyes were cold even though her expression was deceptively calm, and Edelgard ground her teeth as she realized that she had failed again in judgement. Dimitri had left the professor behind... but that didn't mean she had allowed him to get far enough ahead.

Yet, seeing her as she was, exactly as she had looked five years ago, Edelgard felt herself hesitate. She hadn't entirely believed the words of her scouts, that the professor of the Blue Lions had
somehow survived the siege of Garreg Mach and hadn't appeared to age a day, and yet there she stood all the same. Even her clothing was the same, that dark mercenary cloak and leather guard, as if she needed nothing else to protect her from the battle waging all about her, and Edelgard wondered at what heresy, what miracle, had kept this woman alive, and seemingly unchanged after five whole years of being presumed dead to the entirety of the world.

Raine read her expression easily, and she watched from the corner of her eye as Dimitri struggled to stand, the wounds of his earlier fighting now taking a toll on top of the injuries Edelgard had inflicted on him by taking advantage of his blind rage. She had tried to keep up with him, but he was simply too strong for her speed to match, and she had lost sight of him shortly after handling Hubert. She had feared this exact situation, but she was glad she had come in time to interrupt what surely what would have been a killing blow if she had dawdled even a moment longer. She took full advantage of Edelgard's attention, knowing Dimitri would need several more moments before he would find a second wind, before speaking calmly, almost casually, "You seem surprised to see me. Did you not believe the words of your scouts from the raid on the monastery? Or from Ailell? How about from the bridge? Thrice now you must have been told I was alive... yet right now you look as if you've seen a ghost."

"Professor." Edelgard spat the word, feeling that white-hot ball of rage return in an instant to choke the sense out of her as she recalled that same piercing voice calling her a monster, and comparing her to the real heathens who were all-too willing to set the world and all of its inhabitants aflame. Still she was so ignorant, still she was so naive, and yet she spoke as if she had all the answers, and all of the wisdom needed to lead, and to oppose her. It made her hate her even more, made her wish she had been capable all of those years ago of killing her outright, but that had been then, and this was now. She had grown older and stronger in the last five years as the Emperor... The woman in front of her had not seemingly aged a day. If magic had preserved her... then those five lost years would prove her downfall. "I knew when we met that one day, one of us would kill the other... Today is the day your journey ends."

"Quiet. Save your speeches for your men. They sorely needed it today, and they'll sorely need it after. There's no grandstanding in battle. There's only the screams of the dead, dying, and the singing of weapons flying." Raine dismissed her curtly, and her blade flashed ruby in her hand as she steadied her stance, knowing full well her words would prick a fragile temper and bring full attention to her rather than the injured man behind her. So, she had not changed, even after five years. It was almost amusing, if it wasn't so damned infuriating to see... and she hefted her blade easily with one hand as she asked her quietly, "What will you scream for when it's your turn?"

"Damned fool!" Edelgard roared her curse as she leapt for her unthinkingly, and Amyr met the Sword of the Creator with a burst of energy. Yet the sword held strong, refusing to give despite the difference in size or strength, and Edelgard wondered if it was the clash of the Crests that left the weapons unable to give against each other. It would make sense, as her Crest had been implanted unnaturally, and yet the Sword of the Creator had responded to Raine, but she didn't doubt it would do the same in her hand once she had it. It was all she had needed, all she had wanted ever since she had realized where it lay and what was needed to hold it, and to see the weapon that would have made all she was doing so much easier in the hands of someone who knew so little, and cared even less... Her vision glinted crimson as she snarled, "You still know nothing!"

"Then why is it that I continue to win?" Raine did not push back against her assault, instead dodging and weaving about her swings with all the practise of her many years of combat. It was true enough that while Edelgard had gained five years of experience and training, it still was not enough to give her the upper hand. Not when she had been born with a sword in hand and put to work before she had been able to speak. Her father had taught her the way of war from the cradle, and she had taken to it like a fish to water. She lived and breathed battle, with no distractions of
politics, ideals or dreams to get in her way. She was a soldier born, with a near-full lifetime of uninterrupted battle beaten into her body and brain, and it was her lasting advantage even against those who had gained half a decade of time on her, and she knew it as she continued to taunt as she circled expertly about her opponent, "At every turn, you lose. At every turn, you stumble, fumble, and eventually tuck tail and flee from me. In five years of unimpeded conquest, where I wasn't there to meet you, you still haven't put the whole of Fódlan underneath your boot and banner. Now that I am here... What makes you think that you'll fare any better than you have without me there to keep you in check?"

The arrogance astounded her, and continued to enrage Edelgard even further. It was a grim reminder of her loss at the footsteps of Garreg Mach, and her old wounds, now scarred over, were aching in remembrance of her loss. She had been young and arrogant, too, and she had paid for it then by underestimating the professor of the Blue Lions... but now things were different. She was no longer an untrained whelp with mere dreams to fuel her. She was the Emperor, wielding Amyr as well as the Sword of Seiros, and she would not lose to this woman, who by some strange twist of fate, had been born with the Crest of Flames. She wouldn't lose. She could not lose. "Silence! You knew nothing five years ago, and you still know nothing now! You cannot defeat me! The righteous world I dream of...! It may be beyond your vision, but I will make it come true! You cannot stop me!"

"I can... and I will. I made that promise five years ago, didn't I, Flame Emperor? Or have you forgotten?" Raine asked quietly, her voice a dangerous, sibilant snarl, and without warning her dance of evasion came to an end as she closed abruptly. She used the same move of keeping her sword on her side to push Amyr away from her body to come in close without putting herself in danger of her range, and her seafoam-coloured eyes were twin pools of fire as her hand twisted her blade, a grim, evil smile breaking across her face as she repeated those words she had spoken so many lifetimes ago, "If I have to spend the rest of my life chasing you in order to put you down... So be it. Nothing will stop me. Death won't keep me from dragging you down into the grave with me. You started this war. Don't be angry with me when I end it for you!"

The Sword of the Creator pulsed crimson, charging for the ground only to ricochet and extend back up, point first, for Edelgard's throat. Only one quick shove of her axe stopped the blade-point from slicing completely through her throat, but nonetheless as Edelgard pulled back, she felt hot blood soaking through her collar in grim reminder of just how close death had brushed against her. Behind the professor she could see Dimitri recovering, his hand once again steady now on Areadbhar, and she ground her teeth as she held a hand tightly to her throat... She was outnumbered, and again, backed into a corner. The ranks of the combined forces would be closing in, and she could not hold off both the professor and the prince at once. Not without risking her life and putting it up to their lack of mercy... There was no other option left to her but retreat. Retreat, and find her victory another day.

Clenching one armoured hand about her throat, Edelgard stared hatefully at her enemy. She had been beaten today... but she knew their streak of luck would not last. It never did. The Alliance and Kingdom would never be able to hold a steady truce, and Dimitri was far too wild to lead a true rebellion. Their time, and their numbers, would dwindle, and eventually she would gain the upper hand. All it meant was a bit more patience on her part... and she could wait that little longer for the world she wanted. For the world that was needed to put things right again. Her free hand glowed black as she stymied the flow of blood from her wound with the other, and she focussed on a spot far behind her fleeing line as she snapped out a curt snarl of a farewell, "Fine... You win today... but when next we meet on the battlefield... I will have my victory!"

"Tch!" Raine snarled as her sword slashed out again, extending like a spear, but she was met with air as that same dark magic she had witnessed Solon and Kronya use once before teleported
Edelgard from the field of battle and to who-knows-where. Spitting out a curse, Raine pulled her blade back to her hand, eyes narrowing in both anger and annoyance at the flight of another cornered enemy. Once more when her back was to the wall she had chosen flight rather than stay and put her life on the line, and Raine felt her lips curling into a fearsome scowl and she muttered under her breath, "Damned coward... She can throw soldier after soldier into the way of an army of swords, lances and axes, but the moment it's her neck, she chooses to flee..."

"So she thinks she can escape... That will not be the case." Dimitri's harsh voice forced Raine away from her growling, and she turned to look at him in both confusion and surprise to see him glaring out towards the east, where the rest of the Imperial army was giving way to the force of the Alliance and the Kingdom in open flight. It was doubtless that Edelgard lay ahead, likely unable to move herself too far due to her wounds, and the sheer number at her back would prove impossible to fight through. Yet still, Dimitri stared at the only escape route that was left to the Empire, and a wild look was in his eye as he snarled out, "We failed to capture her... but I will keep pursuing. The rest of you, keep fighting. This does not end yet!"

"She's gone, Dimitri! Don't be a damned fool and throw your life away in pursuit!" Raine snapped, both angry at her own failure and at his suicidal overconfidence. Saving him once had been difficult enough, she was lagging in strength and stamina as it was, but she had managed to catch up without the use of her power, and she was glad for it. She didn't have much left in her, and she wasn't about to waste what little she had until she could rest. What was needed was a tactical retreat, not a wild flurry forward, and as she heard the hooves of Rodrigue's horse approaching, she tried to gentle her voice in hopes of reasoning with him, "Rodrigue is here. At least listen to his opinion before you go charging off."

"Your Highness! Professor! Good! We must retreat to the great bridge!" Rodrigue's voice rang out loud and clear as he checked his mount and leapt off in one smooth movement, but his brow was furrowed with concern as he approached the two who had splintered off from the pack in an effort to keep Edelgard and her chosen guard away from the bulk of their forces. He had seen Dimitri's initial charge, as well as Raine's immediate pursuit, but now was not the time to give thanks. He had word from their allies as well as the scouts, and they needed the information he had now and without delay. "The Imperial army is closing in from Fort Merceus. It seems that the Emperor kept a token force ready to cover her retreat back into safe territory. Our forces, and that of the Alliance are exhausted. We will not be able to make a second stand."

"I'll kill all of them!" Dimitri whirled on Rodrigue with a snarl, and Raine winced instinctively away from him at the mixture of rage and wild abandon in his voice and expression. His lance was bloody and his face wild, and even though Rodrigue did not flinch, seemingly unmoved by the prince's wrath, it did not stymie him for a moment. His hand was shaking on the handle of Areadbhar, more proof that he was barely holding in his desire to give chase, and it showed in his snarl of anger and wrath, "No matter how many hundreds or thousands there are! They will not stop me from crushing her skull with my bare hands!"

Rodrigue opened his mouth to argue, only to pause in surprise before his eyes narrowed in confusion as they focussed on something over Dimitri's shoulder. For a moment he ignored his prince entirely, and he spoke slowly, with a shake of his head, alerting Raine immediately to the wrong he was seeing as he remarked with a sudden, worried sharpness to his voice, "What in the world are you doing here? It's far too dangerous for you! Fall back, now! You'll be killed in an instant without a weapon, you foolish girl!"

"Heh."

It was a whirlwind, and one that neither Raine nor Rodrigue were prepared for as Fleche leapt
forward from the bushes, dagger in hand and raised. Her face was as crazed as Dimitri's, eyes blazing with wild bloodlust as her dagger fell down and pierced in deep to his shoulder. The prince staggered forward as the blow he had taken from Amyr shrieked in agony as the dagger tore it further open, and he fell hard to his knees to hear laughter, wild, unrestrained laughter from behind as the dagger twisted with cruel intent before it pulled loose for another blow, "Did I catch you off guard, your majesty?! I bet it hurts, doesn't it?! But it's nothing compared to what my brother felt! You will never be forgiven, you know! I will NEVER forgive you! You filthy, hell-bound monster...! DIE!"

Rodrigue moved as the dagger moved to fall a second time on Dimitri's unprotected back, his cloak brushing past Raine's arm, and she closed her eyes instinctively to feel the world about her freeze. She had not meant to, had not thought to, but without thought or reason, she called upon Sothis' powers and froze time as she understood what it was Rodrigue intended to do, and what Dimitri was about to allow to happen. He had let go of his lance, letting it fall in silence in the grass, and he had not moved to rise, to block, or even to face the crazed young girl who had come for his life. Instead he knelt where he had fallen, head hung low as realization clouded his one good eye, and quiet resignation took the place of where rage and vengeance had been moments before.

Raine knew Rodrigue's intent, and for one, brief moment, she looked at Felix's father and took in that determined, wildly desperate look upon his face with sympathy and pain. Dimitri was not as much of a ward as he was a son... and to lose him, to lose him without action, would be crueler than death. He was ready, he was eager to put himself in the path of that dagger, and she knew without a doubt that it would cost him his life if he were to do so. He was acting on instinct, not thought... and he would leave behind both Felix and Dimitri if she permitted him to act.

Closing her eyes again, Raine clung to the frozen image as she understood her mistake and accepted the consequences. Too many times already in this fight had she called upon Sothis' power, just as she had for her father... and this was the last of it she could muster. It was too late to turn the hand back farther to interrupt the first blow, and if she did not move, it would be far too late to stop Rodrigue from killing himself to protect Dimitri. And as for the future king... Raine was well aware he would not do a thing to save himself if Rodrigue was held back. It would take too long to draw her sword, to aim and deflect the incoming blow... but she could still move faster than her blade could, if she so chose.

A small, quiet smile played upon her face as the realization sunk in, but she felt nothing in terms of regret or remorse as her feet began to move to break the spell she had cast. The one magic she knew and had mastered, and the only one that would ever be capable of saving the lives of those she loved, regardless of the cost she had to pay to fully grasp it in all its strength. She would break a promise today, and for that she felt a twinge of guilt, but it was not enough to make her hesitate. This time was not like the last, where she had thought her brother would be alone when she fell... He had Shamir now. He would live without her. She, however... She already knew she could not without Dimitri. Time unfroze as her foot pushed forward, launching herself past Rodrigue and into the way of the blade, and she turned her back, arms outstretched and eyes closed shut in preparation for the blow. The dagger hit true, sinking deep into her cloak, her armour, and into her back with cold, deadly precision. She felt the point of it bury itself deep into her chest, prickling somewhere where metal was never meant to be, but even as the pain and the shock crested over her, she did not care. This was the way it was meant to be. This was the sacrifice that was meant to play out. She was as bloodstained as he was... but her future would not save the Kingdom. His would. And even then... That future meant little to her as an agonized gasp escaped her lips, and her legs threatened to give out from underneath her from the blow.
"Professor!"

She wasn't sure whose voice cried out, but she did hear the sudden shriek of magic, as well as the anguished scream of that young girl as she fell somewhere far behind her. Rodrigue had not wasted a moment, and for that, she was glad. Her body swayed on weakening legs, and she reached up thoughtlessly to feel blood soaking both the back and front of her cloak as she hit the dirt heavily on her knees. How far had that dagger pierced her? How deep were her wounds that she had been ignoring to press on and chase after the future king? She hadn't bothered to look. Hadn't even felt the pain. But now that's all there was, sharp, brutal agony that turned the world upside down, and turned her vision to a foggy haze. Still... That girl was dead, and Dimitri was safe. Her lips curled against her better judgement into a smile... She had succeeded. Nothing else mattered.

"No. No, no, no...! Professor...! This punishment... It wasn't for you...! Professor!"

Raine looked up, feeling her fingers growing cold and numb as she heard Dimitri's voice breaking through the dullness that had taken up place in her ears. It was coldly familiar... Quiet and stillness and pain, a broken body and the encroaching darkness, and against her will her body shivered with remembrance. She had died once, hadn't she? The memory was faint, but it was there, brought back with that dagger buried between her shoulders and reaching for her un-beating heart. Yes, she was sure she had, all those years ago... and it made her chuckle softly. Warin had called it a miracle... but that she did not have another one in her. He was right, and she knew it, and she was calm, quietly and painfully calm as she looked up into that wild, staring eye in Dimitri's face as she answered him quietly, "There's no such thing... as punishments on the battlefield, Dimitri... It's just war."

"No! Don't die! You can't die! Father, Stepmother, Glenn... They all died and left me behind... You can't join them... You can't join the ghosts who shadow my every move... Not now... Not like this... Not for me!" His voice was shaking, desperate, desolate, and it made her ache in a way the dagger could not ever hope to cause as she met that lost expression, those anguished eyes, without a flinch or a moment of hesitation. His hands twitched, aching to reach for her, yet he was frozen as he stared at her, limp, pale, and bloody, all because of him. The guilt was an axe wound, a million cuts of lances and swords and arrowheads, and his voice choked as he forced the words out, "This is my fault...! I... I'm the one who killed you... as surely as if I held the blade...!"

"You're wrong... as ever..." Raine chuckled again, closing her eyes for a long moment before her hand reached of its own volition to caress his cheek. It felt hot underneath her fingers, though whether it was from her blood, the warmth of his skin, or the coldness of her own she couldn't tell. It didn't matter. Then there was wetness, jerking her back from those warm, embracing shadows that were tugging at her body, and she looked to see the tears leaking over his face and through her fingers to streak the blood, both his and hers, down his jaw. It hurt, and though her body was rapidly losing its ability to feel, to move, she forced her words past her numbing lips to correct him, "No one ever died... for you. They died for what they believed in. For what they wanted. Your life belongs to you... just as mine belongs to me. Not the dead. Not our ghosts... Just ourselves. I'm doing this... because I want to. Because I can't fathom existing... in a world where you aren't there. Do you understand? If you hear my voice after I'm gone... If she blames you, curses you, cries for you... Don't listen. She's lying. Because right now... Right here... I'm happy, and I would do it again, and again, and again."

Voices were calling in the distance, scared, pained, alarmed... but they were fading. The entire world had gone an eerie, calming shade of grey. Her strength was fading, and she let it go without regret or hesitation. He would not be alone when she left him. Nobody would be. They had one another, they had well-trained leaders, and they had themselves to pull their strength from. She was not afraid for her students, for her fellows, her brother, or even him. They would all move on
without her. She had long ago stopped being their reason for moving forward. She could rest easy.
She could let go. And she did with a long, tired sigh, closing her eyes and letting her body collapse
to the ground.

Perhaps now... She would get a chance to see her father again.

Chapter End Notes

AN:

Nothing to say that won't cause bombs to fall, but it's what I wanted to write, so I'm happy, even if it was... I dunno, melodramatic? The next few chapters, as can likely be imagined, will be dealing with the fallout of Grondor, as well as Raine's sacrifice, so expect bucket-loads of angst, division, and arguments. There's plenty I need to deal with, and will be dealing with happily as I continue to go on writing. This, of course, is really where the Raine/Dimitri stuff begins to surface and be handled, so I'm sure that will make a few people happy, even if it's not entirely how they imagined it'd start off. Still, what can I say? I've always been a whore for angst.

Also, just in case I haven't mentioned it before... I am aware of the DLC being released soon, but unfortunately I don't intend to do anything about it for this collection in particular. I'm already quite far in as it is, and trying to write side-story pieces that simply wouldn't connect with the "canon" already built in this work would just be too much for me right now. Writing has been difficult these past few weeks, and I've no interest in trying to make it worse by speedrunning another playthrough alongside with the DLC pack. I am working through Azure Moon as I write, in order to make sure my script and details are accurate, and trying a second playthrough on top of that is too much for the moment. I apologize in advance, but the characters of the Ashen Wolves, as well as the entirety of Abyss, will not be mentioned, or treated like canon material for the rest of the series.

As always, thank you for reading so far, and I hope to see you again sometime soon. Please drop me a review should you feel the need, and I'll see you again when my next chapter is ready for you guys! Have a good one until then!

Mood: Playful.

Listening To: "Fallen Leaves" - Billy Talent

~ Sky
The Weight

Chapter Summary

Genres/Ratings: Tragedy, Angst, Hurt/Comfort, Confrontation. (T)

Characters: Warin, Dimitri, Rodrigue.

Summary: The moment the word had spread throughout the monastery that his sister's condition had finally stabilized, Warin had left the halls surrounding the infirmary and began his watch at the exits of the great monastery. His sister's health was in the hands of the healers, of Manuela, Dorothea and Mercedes, and no amount of his concern and fright would help her now. He could do nothing but fret at her side, which was a waste of both time and effort. This, however... His vigil in silence, waiting for what he knew was to come now that the worry was over, and that immediate sense of guilt and fright and shame was assuaged... Warin sat quiet and stoic in the dark and the coming rain, knowing the prince of the Kingdom would soon come his way, and he was ready, long, long ready, to finally meet him.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Harpstring Moon

Garreg Mach Stables

Late Night

Warin sat quiet on a crate, half-hidden by the edges of the stables as he listened intently to the quiet patter of the rain outside that was slowly growing in strength and speed. It was as if the monastery itself was weeping, as many of its students had been for the past several days until, finally, Professor Manuela had emerged from the infirmary, her clothes bloodstained and her expression haggard to announce that their beloved professor was finally stable from the wounds she had suffered in Grondor. Though the exact circumstances of what had happened to her had not been seen by many, the word had spread quickly when all had come to see her laying in a pool of her own blood on the ground in front of a frozen and silent Dimitri, while Rodrigue worked in a silent panic in a desperate attempt to stem the flow of blood and stop her from dying at their feet.

Mercedes had broken rank first at the sight of her beloved professor despite the initial wave of shock that had kept everyone still, and her quick thinking and immediate use of magic had likely been what had saved the woman's life. At the very least, she, with the help of Annette, had managed to stabilize Raine's condition enough to move her from Grondor, and eventually back to the safety of Garreg Mach, but it had been a tense few days since, as everyone waited in terrified silence for the healers to emerge from the infirmary with news of her condition, be it good.. or ill. The monastery's healers had done their work well, though it had left them all exhausted and sick from the effort, and now Raine lay silent and inert in one of the many infirmary cots as the magic did its work to heal her wounds.

Warin wasn't entirely sure who it was that had made the decision to put his sister into a magically-
induced coma, but he had not argued when the specifics of her treatment had been explained to him. His sister had already been on the cusp of physical and mental collapse, and her latest collection of injuries from the battle at Grondor had almost been the death of her. She needed time, time that she would not willingly take if she was permitted to be conscious, and so Mercedes, Dorothea, and Manuela had put their magic together and sunk Raine into a deep, harmless sleep that would allow for their magic to work its way entirely through her body until she was well again. They would wake her when they deemed it proper, and knowing their expertise was far beyond his own, Warin had consented when he had been asked if they could go along with their plan to heal his sister to their satisfaction.

Now... He was waiting as the fallout of the situation began to spread. There were already angry whispers in the corners of the hall, mutterings and curses, but few of them were accurate, and even fewer came from a place of knowledge. No one but Rodrigue and Dimitri had truly known what had happened in the field, and neither man was speaking. But it did not take much to put two and two together, and for her students especially, guessing at what had taken place that day was not difficult. They all knew their professor had put her life on the line for the future king of Faerghus, and had almost lost her own in the process. And when Dimitri had withdrawn from them all, refusing to leave his quarters to speak to anyone, not even to check on her condition... A flame had been lit underneath the Blue Lions, and tempers had flared all about the monastery.

Still, Warin didn't much care for them, and he was not about to wait for the mob mentality to fall upon the prince's head. He knew for a fact the prince would not wait for it either, which was why he had come outside rather than retreat to his own quarters where his bed, his belongings, and Shamir would all be to provide rest and comfort. He did not need those things, not yet at least, because one last thing had to be dealt with before he would allow for it. He knew a coward when he saw one, just as he knew a man eager to escape his sins. Dimitri was exactly that type of man after he had seen someone else spill blood for him, and it was only a matter of time now before the guilt, before the shame, spurred him into movement now that word had spread that Raine had somehow survived her trial and was only in need of time before she would be well enough again.

He crossed his arms, pressing his back against the firm oak of the stables as that horrid memory of realization played itself over and over again in his mind's eye. He had been with Claude at the time, discussing the finer details of the truce that they needed to arrange between the forces of the Alliance and the Kingdom, before he had felt that familiar icy claw close around his heart. Everything else had been forgotten in a moment, and without a word to Claude or to Shamir, he had turned on his heel and ran, following the cold and the fear, knowing already where it would lead him, but needing to see it all the same...

... and there his sister had been, face-down in a pool of her own blood with a dagger cast aside from where it had been plunged in her back as Rodrigue worked feverishly over her in a desperate attempt to save her life. He had been reduced to a mute, shaking mess, unable to react, unable to even think past the horror of what he was seeing, and he cursed himself for all he knew, and all he did not, because he had been useless when his sister had needed him most. He didn't need to see more than a frozen and shell-shocked Dimitri to know what had happened, nor did he need Rodrigue's confused questioning of how she had moved so fast, how she had reacted before he had, as he knew the whole truth. Raine had done it again, turning back the hands of time to perform a sacrifice she had sworn to never do again in order to save a man who had threatened her life more times than either of them could count.

Her broken promise hadn't mattered then, and did not matter now, and he promised himself he would deal with it when she woke and was both physically and mentally capable of having such a conversation. She would be taken to task for it later, but for now... The prince was his more pressing concern. And as he heard heavy footsteps approaching through the downpour, he knew
his patience had been rewarded. He stood smoothly from where he had been hiding, pushing aside the door to the stables before he stepped out into the rain and into the way of the prince, and he barred his path forward and out of the monastery before addressing him with a cold, curt, "Are you going somewhere, perchance, prince?"

"Get out of my way."

Warin's lips quirked into a cold, cruel smile at the order he had no intention of following, and he stood tall, arms crossed over his chest as he did not move an inch. He didn't care for the man's harsh, commanding tone, nor did he fear the broad, blood-stained Hero's Relic he carried and wielded with such ease and strength. They were trifles and trinkets, marks of a noble's bloodline and Crest, and they were worthless to a man like him. He met Dimitri's unflinching stare with his own, feeling the itch on his thumbs to press the triggers on his gauntlets, but the time for violence hadn't yet come, and he put a tight leash on his anger as he instead continued on in a deceptively calm voice, "I think not. Where exactly are you heading to? Enbarr? Are you hoping some suicidal charge straight into the Imperial capital will somehow appease the dead?"

"Silence. You have no idea of what you speak of." Dimitri's tone was as sharp as the lance he held in his trembling right hand, but yet Warin showed not an ounce of fear in reply to him. Rather, he showed nothing but a seething sort of contempt, and Dimitri felt his own temper eager to rise to the challenge. It had always been him, his professor's beloved brother, who had showed him no respect, no fear, nothing but scorn and hatred ever since he had returned to Garreg Mach, and Dimitri had to wonder how long it had been that he had been waiting for this confrontation, and if he was going to savour it now that the time had come. "Death is the end. No matter how much lingering regret a person has, after death, they are powerless. They cannot even wish for revenge, let alone seek it out. Hatred... Regret... Those burdens fall onto the shoulders of the living."

"And?" Warin tilted his head, not bothering to disguise his contempt to the words he knew had shaken Dimitri to his soul. They had no effect on him. Death had been a way of life since he had been a child, and he did not feel the weight of regret or remorse as Dimitri spoke of. It was true enough his mother's death had drove him mad as a boy, had been a nagging poison in his chest for the majority of his life, but even he had not permitted her death to drive him to lose sight of what he had in his reach now. To focus only on the dead, to ignore the living, was simple folly. "If the dead are dead, and cannot even wish for revenge, what in the seven hells are you attempting to accomplish now? They don't hate. They don't regret. They're dead. What was it you told Rodrigue... Using your lips to put words into the mouths of the dead... Is that not what you're doing with your actions? They're an excuse for your hatred and your own regret and remorse. What you do, you do for yourself, not for them."

"That's the logic of the living, and it is meaningless. You know nothing. Those who died with lingering regret and remorse... They cling to me. They will never release their hold on me. So I shall continue down this path. It is too late for me to stop." Dimitri brushed aside the words that pierced him like the cold of the rain, but he could not meet that solid navy stare that also pierced him through like a swordstroke. Unlike Felix, unlike Rodrigue, Warin was as much of a beast as he was, and he was unafraid of him and his madness. He would stand toe to toe with him, with none of his sister's gentleness or her attempts to understand, and he had no time for him or his venom. He needed to continue on. To move forward... He did not know what else he could do with himself if he did not. "Where I go, and what I do... It does not concern you. Move aside... You shall be moved if you will not."

"The logic of the living is meaningless, is it? So my sister's actions have no weight on you? Was her sacrifice meaningless too, simply because she lived?" Warin felt a plume of rage make itself known deep in his stomach, and his hands tightened until his fingers became numb as he fought
against all sense to unsheathe the blades on his gauntlets and strike a blow for the man in front of him. He could hardly believe the words he was hearing, even though he knew full well this is what he had been preparing himself for. Dimitri was beyond his reason and his reach, but it did not mean that he would permit him to leave so easily, and especially unchallenged. He forced his face into Dimitri's view, his lips curled back into a scowl of scorn as he continued acidly, "So then, she failed. Again. Just as she's been failing ever since you dragged your arse back here, spouting suicidal nonsense of vengeance and ghosts and regrets. If she had died in Grondor, perhaps you'd be hearing her voice now, calling you for the fool you are, because the voices of the living hold no sway over you. Is that the way of it?"

"You dare-"

"Oh yes, princeling, I dare. I dare do things no one else will because they either fear you, or hate you too much to try and reason with you. My sister loved you, and so she enabled you, but I have no such feelings in me." Warin snarled, and as Dimitri stepped forward threateningly, Warin met him step for step. His hands were trembling now at his side as he held back the urge to start swinging, but it was becoming more and more difficult to restrain himself when Dimitri met his words with such disdain and dismissal. "Don't you look at me with rage in your eye for my sister. As if you care. As if you feel anything for her. She lives, does she not? You don't care for the living. You've said so many a time. The only thing that sways you is the dead. Raine still breathes... so you don't care for her. Tell me otherwise, princeling. Tell me you care for her. Tell me her words or actions reached you, when everything you've done, and everything I've seen, tells me it's not so. Tell me, damn you, or I'll do the princess' job for you and let you see all of those beloved corpses of yours that you cannot wait to join! You won't need to travel to Enbarr to die, I'll end you right where you stand!"

"Enough, the two of you!"

Rodrigue's voice broke through just as Dimitri's twitching hands began to raise his lance, and he strode forward fearless at place himself between the two young men before violence could break out. He knew both were strong and stubborn soldiers, and the last thing they needed when their only calming voice of reason was in no condition to leash them was a fight to break out. Both looked enraged enough to fight to the death, though despite the topic at hand, he almost could not blame them. Still, he interceded as he knew he must when he had first heard their raised voices not far from the Knights' Hall, and he spoke firmly, fiercely as he looked to both of them, "That is more than enough. You will solve nothing through this endless argument of yours, and even less through violence. What matters most at the moment is Raine's well-being. Knowing the two of you are at each other's throats... How would she react if she could see you now?"

Dimitri looked away in silence, but Warin instead looked sharply to Rodrigue in reproach at hearing his sister's name on the man's lips. It did not help that he knew what Rodrigue did not, that his sister had taken his place in defending Dimitri and in doing so had likely spared his life as well as his lord's, but he knew that was not information he could lightly tell. Yet... He also knew Rodrigue was wise, and he had sensed something off had happened in Grondor. He had expected to be the one to die in Dimitri's place, and Raine's intervention had stunned and caught him off guard. He knew, instinctively at the very least, that he owed Raine more than Dimitri's life. It was that and that alone that gave Warin pause, but his voice was still cold and sharp as he replied, "I know my sister well enough, Rodrigue, and I haven't lost my sense yet. But you know the same can't be said for him. Talk sense into the fool, before I, or someone else, loses patience and decides to beat it into him."

Rodrigue shook his head as he watched Warin stalk off without another word, but a dark, saddened part of him was well aware that the young mercenary was speaking the truth. He had heard the
dark mutters, and seen the accusatory glances... The embers of anger were smouldering in the fellow Blue Lions, and it would not be long before it turned into a full fledged flame if something was not done to quell it. Yet, a sidelong glance at Dimitri, who was still looking away, hands tightly clenched and trembling slightly in the rain proved that the young prince was not beyond all sense, but merely grappling with things that he was simply not ready to face. But the time for patience, for kindness had run its course. "Dimitri..."

"She nearly died for a sin I committed... Nearly joined all of the others... because I was just like that girl. What do I do, Rodrigue? Simply permit it? I cannot. She should have never stood in the way of that blade. She should have allowed me to die." Dimitri shook his head, his voice weak and wary, and he looked up into the clouds to allow the rain to wash over his face. The cold stung, hitting him like a thousand icy arrowheads, but he appreciated the pain that it caused on his yet to be healed battle wounds, as well as his old, long-since-healed scars. It was only further evidence of his guilt, of his monstrosity, and yet his professor had deemed him fit to live. "In those five years, she did not haunt me like the others... I never knew why, but I thought it was simply a matter of time, and was resigned to it. Now... I cannot do a thing, Rodrigue. Not for her, not for Father, Stepmother, or Glenn... I am useless... I... I am lost."

"It is not a matter of permitting her actions, Dimitri. You do not have the right to decide what she does or does not do with her life." Rodrigue spoke quietly but gently, understanding the pain that was seeping through the young man's very bones, and aching himself for him... but he knew now was not the time to show his sympathy. It was not what Dimitri needed to hear, not yet, and he was not in any place to give it. He, himself, had been saved by Raine's quick thinking and her near godlike instincts... and her words, the last words she had thought she was going to say... He shook his head, and continued on firmly, "And... She was right, Dimitri. What she did. What all have done... They were choices that were made for themselves, and not for you. I know that to feel that, to hear that, cannot sit will with you... but it is the truth. And if that hurts you... If that is unacceptable to you... Then you cannot continue on the path you are on. All that will do is dishonour the choices they made, and their sacrifices."

Dimitri closed his eye, allowing the rain to wash harder across his face and hide the stinging of the tears that only his good eye could now weep. He understood what Rodrigue said was indeed the truth, but it did not help him digest that angry clench of pain from deep inside of his stomach. He had frozen with horror at seeing his professor so terribly wounded, and had almost broken when she declared she was glad to be in such a state if it meant him living. If continuing on as he was meant that she would do it again... He shuddered reflexively. "My hands, Rodrigue... They're stained red. I've taken so many lives... I am indeed a monster, and yet... Someone like her claims she can't live in a world without someone like me...? I do not have a right to live. I do not have a right to be free... Do I?"

"You've punished yourself enough, Your Highness." Rodrigue reached out, settling a kind hand on the prince's shoulder and delivering a small, careful squeeze. He felt Dimitri tremble, for all of his strength and his build, he was trembling like a young boy about to burst into tears, and his chest ached fiercely for the son of his best friend and all he had lost, and all he had done. Yet, that had been fate's cruel hand forcing him, at least for the last five years, and for that... Rodrigue refused to render judgement. He continued calmly, refusing to remove his hand and keeping a close, careful eye on his ward as he spoke, "What you seek isn't vengeance... It is repentance. You acknowledge your sins. You will hold them close for the remainder of your life, and allow them to guide your hands in the future... but if you wish to be the man that your father was, that your father wished you to be... You cannot give up on life. You cannot condemn yourself to death, and to the flames just yet. You must find a reason to live. A reason to continue on for yourself."

"A reason to live...?" Dimitri repeated the words slowly, unsure of their taste on his tongue, and he
shook his head slowly as his mind automatically tried to discard them. Could he find a reason, after all he had done? Did he even deserve a reason, considering who and what he had become? He did not believe so, regardless of what Rodrigue said... but still he hesitated in saying so. He could still feel that cold, bloody hand on his cheek, and see that gentle, tender smile on the back of his eyelids and emblazoned in his mind's eye whenever he tried to sleep. It had been haunting him ever since he had returned from Grondor, and he had no doubt it would haunt him for the remainder of his life. Why had she spoken so kindly to him? Why had she chosen to give up her life in exchange for his? He couldn't understand it. He didn't wish to. It simply caused him too much pain. "I don't know if I can, Rodrigue. I do not know... if I should."

"If you cannot find a reason for yourself, my prince... Find a reason for another. Find something, or someone, who will drive you to move forward if your own self is not enough for you." Rodrigue pushed gently, firmly, as he felt Dimitri's resolve again beginning to waver. He could see that pain, that anguish written all over the young man's face, and it stirred him, but he knew he was not permitted to spell it out for him. It had to be a decision Dimitri made for himself, on his own, or else it would be meaningless. "You do not need to do so now, it may take time for you yet, but in the end... It is something you must do if you wish to retread your steps and forge on a new path. You must find a reason to continue moving forward... A reason to continue to live."

Dimitri said nothing in response, unsure if he could put anything he thought or felt to words even if he tried. A reason to live...? It sounded so foreign. So utterly ridiculous. He had no right to live. He knew this already... but there again was Raine and Rodrigue urging him otherwise, and he was so tired, so broken, that he no longer knew if he had the strength of will to continue to resist them. When she had gone so far to save him... Would it not be an insult to her actions, to her, if he chose to do anything but live? His hands tightened at his sides, cold and wet from the rain, and for a brief, mad moment, a memory of a better time, a warmer time flickered through his head. The smell of a fresh, spring rain, the feeling of a warm, soft body cradled in his arms underneath the bright sunlight... It had been a lifetime ago since he had carried her out of the Sealed Forest and back to the safety of the monastery after her transformation because of the Goddess' intervention. It had been a lifetime ago that he had looked down at her, curled up in peaceful sleep against his chest and felt himself wavering from his goals, simply because his concern for her well-being was becoming too much for him to bear. He had chosen then to overlook it, to overlook her, but that day, those memories, had been a balm to him as much as they had been a curse... and he did not think he had the strength to make the same mistake twice.

'If I hadn't... I had chosen her, over revenge... Would these last six years have happened? Would we have lost her, had I not been so consumed with revenge over all else...?' The questions were salt on open wounds, making him wince and grimace with pain, but he knew it was all well-deserved. He could not know the answers, but some wild, manic part of him wished it would have been so. That he had been only one different choice away from an entirely different future, a different past, and his entire body ached with a pain that had nothing to do with his wounds.

"If I cannot... find a reason for myself... Is it selfish... to choose to find a reason... in another?"

Rodrigue watched Dimitri's face turn back towards the monastery, his hand loose on his weapon, and his body sagging tiredly in the rain. He was so far beyond him, his spirit and his mind having travelled back unbidden to the infirmary, and despite it all... Rodrigue felt his lips curling into a small, sad smile. There was no hope in Dimitri's voice, but he did not expect to hear any. He was drowning still, and likely would continue to drown for much, much longer, yet... His hand was finally breaching the surface in an attempt to find something, anything, to cling to so he could pull himself out. "That is your choice to make... just as it will be their choice in accepting, or rejecting you, Your Highness. We cannot know until an attempt is made, at the very least."
"No... An attempt... is beyond me yet..." Dimitri shook his head slowly as he cast aside the thought, as warm, as comforting as it first appeared. He did not deserve to think of such things yet. He still was not sure he deserved to consider it at all. There was more to do, before he could entertain selfishness, regardless of what Rodrigue was pushing upon him. He forced his eye away from the walls of the infirmary, from where he knew she was sleeping unaware, and instead back to Rodrigue. It was difficult to continue to speak, difficult to hold himself in check when he was so damned tired, but he did not have the luxury to be so. "I have more to do instead here... Here, and in the Kingdom. I have neglected my duties for too long... If I am to even consider... a life beyond myself... I must first put myself to task of righting my many, many wrongs."

"You will return to Fhirdiad?" Rodrigue questioned despite himself, and for the first time in many moons, he felt his heart lifting in relief and joy rather than sinking with despair and concern. Whatever he had expected from intervening between Dimitri and Warin, this had been the last thing to come of it, but he knew he could not question him overmuch, lest he change the still faltering prince's mind. It was still a massive change of their current course, and it would likely cause division, but... Rodrigue would not lie in saying it was something he had been longing to hear ever since he had responded to the request for the rebellion's troops.

"The Kingdom must be retaken, and this so-called Dukedom crushed... The people need freedom from the clutches of the Empire. Their suffering will not end with the taking of Enbarr." Dimitri answered quietly, and he shook his head with slow deliberation as he wondered how that simple fact had eluded him for so long. Or had he always known it, and had instead chosen to overlook it because the simplicity of Edelgard's death was much more attractive to him than the bigger picture at hand? He didn't know. He didn't wish to know. But to act... He could do that much now. He had to do that much, if he wished to take even one step away from the path he was currently treading. "The snake that I wish to kill has more than one head... Even if I were to remove one head in Enbarr... That still leaves one in Fhirdiad. And another in the Alliance... My priorities must shift... The Kingdom must be freed, as well as the Alliance. Then, and only then, should we return our steps to the Empire."

"Is that the course of action you have decided upon then, Your Highness?"

"It is the course of action that should have been taken from the beginning." Dimitri answered the question wearily, and he well recalled the bitter argument that had ensued when he cast aside the thought of returning to Fhirdiad to free it from the Dukedom before turning for the Empire. The choice had divided his companions sharply, and the few who had supported a straight march to Enbarr had not done so because they wished for revenge. He knew this well. It was not as if someone like Mercedes would ever endorse leaving behind the poor and weak for something like vengeance. Raine had fought him the hardest, only ceding to him when she had realized that no amount of talking sense, or appealing to his love for his homeland would sway him. No, instead she had only been met with cold, biting remarks that she of all people should be siding with him for Rhea's sake, and he flinched at the very thought. When had his professor ever shown anything even remotely resembling love for the church? She was not devout. She only cared because she had been forced to, having been thrown unceremoniously into a position of leadership she had never asked for, nor wanted, and she had never made it look otherwise.

Rodrigue did not voice his agreement, though he could tell from the quiet, thoughtful look on the young prince's face that it was not entirely the Kingdom that was driving his thoughts. He bit the inside of his cheek to stop a smile from forming, before he gestured for the hall not too far away from them. The rain was growing worse, and as much as he understood his lord's desire to remain in the storm, to allow it to clear his head... He did not wish to see him join his professor in the infirmary from illness. Dimitri said nothing, but followed his lead all the same, and Rodrigue spoke thoughtfully as they ducked out from the downpour, "The capital will be well fortified...
Cornelia shall have seen to that. If we wish to retake it... We will need a sharp, surgical strike. It is thankfully something that can be done with minimum risk at the moment, considering the outcome of Grondor has left the armies of the Empire in disarray."

"What do you mean?"

"Ah, yes, you would not be aware..." Rodrigue paused, remembering that while he, Gilbert and Seteth had been left with the bulk of work that usually they would have left to the professor, Dimitri had not at all been in any state to be keeping abreast of such news. He had no idea of what the victory at Grondor, despite their own personal sacrifices in order to secure it, had won them all. He shook off his coat, laying it across a nearby chair before he beckoned for Dimitri to join him at the table, and he explained as he took a seat, "Forgive me, and allow me to update you on our current progress, Your Highness. While, initially, it can seem to others that the battle at Grondor could seem to be a loss, the truth is much more to our advantage. The Emperor escaped our clutches, true, but she and her retinue of soldiers have retreated back to the safety of Enbarr. They are consolidating after their sound defeat, and are especially wary now that the rebellion troops have established a working truce with the forces of the Alliance."

Dimitri took in the information silently, following Rodrigue's lead as he, too, shed his sodden cloak to hang it to dry before he sat down beside him. The map on the table before them had not been changed to reflect their current circumstances as it likely had in the war room, but Rodrigue had made a wise choice in keeping him far and away from it. It was too close to the infirmary, to where the others likely were either still gathered, or passing by on rotation, and it was far more than unwise to even think of approaching the area as he was now. It was safer to have this discussion here, but he did admit some of what Rodrigue said startled him, and he looked sharply to the older man as he questioned with a fair degree of surprise, "The truce will hold?"

"If the information that was provided by Warin's men was accurate, then yes, the truce will indeed hold." Rodrigue answered with a firm nod, though he did admit silently that it had not been easy to secure such a promise from the Alliance's young lord. The mayhem that had followed so quickly after the end of the battle had almost made it impossible for a talk to even take place, and only Warin's near-threatening of Claude had forced the man to return with them to the Great Bridge for further talks in Raine's absence. He had made it expressly clear he wished to speak to her and her alone of such matters, but with her condition as it was... Rodrigue continued carefully, knowing he had to choose his words wisely lest he prick his majesty's temper, "It was not... easy, for the promise to be secured, as I am sure you can imagine. Claude is a notoriously difficult man to negotiate with, especially when he has little interest in speaking with middlemen. However, with Raine being incapable of speaking for the rebellion at the time, he had no choice but to either accept Warin as her replacement or return back to the Alliance empty-handed. However, as with the Emperor, Claude sustained injuries and losses of his own, and he, too, had to turn homeward. He will call for our aid when it is needed, and we shall be expected to give it when the time comes. I imagine however, that like us, he will be attempting to burn the Empire's influence out from the Alliance entirely, but the time for him is not yet ripe for such a bold move, especially with the state he and his troops are in as of current."

Dimitri shook his head, both with wonder, and with a heady mixture of appreciation and awe at his professor's actions. He had thrown aside the very idea of working alongside the Alliance based of distrust of Claude alone, and yet Raine had managed to do what had to have seemed impossible, and without the aid of anyone that could have helped increase her odds. She had done it in open defiance of him, and he doubted that after his own display of mistrust that she had reached out to anyone else in order to find aid. It simply wasn't her way. She was too stubborn to be cowed, too jaded to trust figures of authority with their own machinations to attend to... but still she had done what he doubted anyone else ever could have if they had been in her place. "She truly performed a
miracle... How did she manage to secure a working truce with the Alliance from underneath all of our noses? Were you aware of her plans, Rodrigue?"

"Heavens no... She likely was well aware she would be taken to task if she had openly voiced her plans to the rest of the generals at the war table, as ridiculous as it now looks." Rodrigue shook his head, smiling with both a mixture of shame, and pride for the youth and her sheer stubbornness and brass. She was no noble, and her actions proved it. She cared not a whit for social decorum even if she was expected to lead both the rebellion and the church, and her every action had angered *someone* in one way or another since she had returned to take up the mantle that had been thrust so unceremoniously on her shoulders. "From my knowledge now, which was only given to me because she herself could not do so... She had been planning this coup long since before our attempt to take the Great Bridge, and she entrusted this knowledge with only five people."

"Her brother, no doubt... And Sylvain, Ingrid, Annette, and Dorothea. Of course... She used sparing Lorenz and Ferdinand in the battle as an excuse to hide her true motives... Our scouts never made it to the Alliance territory due to the Imperial army. But she had planned ahead for that, and used Lorenz instead to act as a proxy... Brilliant." Dimitri shook his head, both deeply amused and ashamed at his professor's ingenuity. She had only been forced to act underhandedly because he had made it so, but still, even when it was his wrath she risked... She had done so anyway, because she had known it was for the greater good. His shame ran deep, but he had to admit, his awe for her was beginning to run even deeper. She had only been forced to act underhandedly because he had made it so, but still, even when it was his wrath she risked... She had done so anyway, because she had known it was for the greater good. His shame ran deep, but he had to admit, his awe for her was beginning to run even deeper. How many more miracles could she accomplish, if she was permitted full reign? It likely would be more than he could even imagine. "Edelgard was lucky... Had she not been so focussed on my own well-being... Professor may have well ended the war in Grondor, then and there herself. We underestimated her. No... I underestimated her."

"No, Dimitri, I believe the fault lies wholly with us all. Otherwise, she would have reached out to all of us for aid rather than choosing to work in secret." Rodrigue spoke kindly but not dishonestly, and his eyes flickered with both humour and sadness to know that the woman they had forced to lead had never once been truly trusted by all of them all this time. She had been torn too many ways, trying to please too many people and their wants, and rarely had a choice she made gone unchallenged, regardless of how small, or large it had been. The burden of leadership had not been kind to her. It made perfect sense that instead of confiding, or trusting, in her generals that she had turned to her students when she had needed aid. Only they had ever shown her complete trust and faith, and it was what she needed if she wanted to have her schemes succeed for all of their betterment. "With Seteth pushing for the good of the church, and Gilbert pushing solely for your sake, and myself as an apparently "neutral" third party... It's little wonder she fell back on those she knew would have no ulterior motives, or reason to disagree based on differing loyalties. That is not something she should have been forced into doing, which is something we can all take the blame for. We owe her much for what happened in Grondor... All of us do."

"Which makes me wonder if any will listen to me, when it comes to changing course." Dimitri admitted with a slow, painful shake of his head as he stared absently at the map in front of him. Sylvain, Ingrid, and Annette had proven already where their priorities, and loyalties now lay. They had chosen their professor rather than him, and he could understand their allegiance and bore them no ill will... but it also made him wary of the fact that if and when he attempted to step into her shoes to command, even if he was choosing to do what most had argued for in the very beginning... "She led these men all of this time. Not me. They have no reason to follow my orders, and even less to trust me now. Outside of blind loyalty to a liege, which means less than nothing, I'm afraid that when the time comes... I will not have any support."

"This is true. You will likely have a reception of cold mistrust when you air your change of heart... but that is a trial you must go through to prove yourself honest, and worthy of a second chance." Rodrigue hated to speak so coldly and painfully of what his majesty was to go through, but he
knew it was important to be honest. He would not be like Gilbert and allow his failure in protecting Lambert to cloud his judgement. If he wished to cleave to his word, he would need to be both stern and kind, rather than enabling. It was a thin rope to walk, even more difficult to see, let alone navigate, but he would do his best all the same, and so he continued on firmly, "You will earn back the trust of your comrades with both your words and your actions. Explain your plans. Your motivations. You must be honest, even if it hurts you... No, especially if it will cause you harm. They will rally about you, if given time to forgive, and if they are able to see that you will not betray their trust."

"You think it that simple, Rodrigue?" Dimitri almost chuckled, but the laugh was hallow and bitter. That hatred in Warin's eyes, and the venom that had dripped from his tongue... It had been all too real, and all too well-deserved. It was true, Warin was Raine's only family left in the world, and it was his duty to protect her... but he was no fool. That loyalty and love was not for Warin and Warin alone. All of the Blue Lions, at one time or another, had been given reason to feel exactly as Warin did for their professor. Her treatment at his hands had already fostered mistrust and discomfort. What had happened in Grondor was a sin that went far beyond the pale. If he received no forgiveness... He had no right to complain, or be surprised. "Warin's sentiments will not be his alone... At the very least, her chosen trio of knights will be the last to show me sympathy, and the first to object to my leadership."

"And they will be right to, do you not think so?" Rodrigue did not need an answer, as he could see it clearly painted across Dimitri's face, and it gave him relief to know he was not about to be argued with. Dimitri's shame ran deep, but with it came self-awareness, and that was something he deeply needed if he was to continue forward. There were many harsh truths his liege would be facing in the coming days, but it would all be necessary trials for him, and Rodrigue firmly believed they would make him a better man, and a better king, when all was said and done. "The shoes you hope to fill are large, even for you... but fill them you must, as no one else can do so. While we have confirmation now that your professor will make an eventual recovery... We do not know how long it will take before she will return to her duties. It is up to you to walk her path for her now."

"Heh... And that alone sounds even more insurmountable than anything you have laid out in front of me so far..." Again, Dimitri's laughter was hallow, but his one, good eye was no longer dim. The challenge he faced was not one he believed he could conquer, not alone, but he knew he had to make those first steps without guidance or support. He would only be branded a coward, and rightfully so, if he did not try to stand alone under the weight of his sins. More than anything, when she woke, he wanted her to see a world changed... A world where she was no longer struggling under the burdens he had cast aside for her to carry for him. "But it is what it is... And I will do so to the best of my ability. If I didn't... I would never be able to face her again."

Rodrigue was silent as he watched Dimitri stare quietly at the map ahead of him, clearly not seeing it and lost deep in thought, and he could not help but wonder. Felix had spoken more of himself than anyone else when he had been back in his territory, barring the passing mention of how deeply he wanted to take Sylvain to task for one thing or another, but the one thing he had mentioned, and had mentioned with seriousness was that he had found one person, and one person only who was capable of "chaining the boar". In all his time at the academy, he hadn't believed it was possible, that someone could keep Dimitri at a firm heel, and yet he had spoken with confidence that their new professor, unpolished and unprofessional as she was... had the capacity to leash Lambert's son in a way no one else had managed. Rodrigue had not understood what Felix had meant then, but as he looked to Dimitri now, he was beginning to.

'Felix called it chaining... He was young and naive, then. Would he call what Miss Matritz has done to him chaining as well, I wonder...?" Rodrigue sat up a little more firmly in his chair, wincing
despite himself as he knew this was a dangerous topic to broach, but it was one that he needed to speak of before he could allow Dimitri his privacy. It was the one thing that was now separating him from the rest of his comrades, if only because it was unspoken and not acted upon, but the man he had reconnected with several moons prior was not the one sitting across from him now. He could not be kind. He had to be frank, even if meant pulling at wounds that simply were not ready to begin to heal. He kept his voice calm and measured, but his eyes were sharp as they studied Dimitri closely, "Your Highness... Your reason... The "another", you spoke of... Is it her, Dimitri? Is she the one who drives you? Is it she who will be the one to give you reason to live?"

"Whether or not she is, Rodrigue... I do not believe it matters now. There are other things... More pressing things... That must be attended to first." Dimitri shook his head slowly as he refused to answer, though he knew it foolish to dodge the question anyway. Rodrigue would see right through him, just as he always had, but he still could not give voice to the truth. Not yet. It simply was not the time. Admitting it now meant nothing. Not until he had taken steps away from who he had been, and what he had done. His sins would haunt him for a lifetime, and after death, the flames would welcome him as he knew they must. No amount of redemption would cleanse him, and he would accept that fact without a fight. Yet... If he was to even entertain the thought of happiness, of peace... He wanted to have something tangible, something real, to give to her first. It did not matter if she never accepted him. It did not matter if she never forgave him. But he would change, and he would ease her burdens... because it was all he could do to prove that his words were not empty. "Until that time comes... I would ask you to not speak of this again, Rodrigue."

"Of course, Your Highness. Forgive my impertinence." Rodrigue nodded and accepted the request without hesitation, but still he felt his heart aching. His prince was still so young, but so scarred and embittered. His fatalism had trapped him for almost nine long years now, and it would take time, time and a gentle hand, before he would be able to lift his head with any even remote semblance of pride. Perhaps when she woke, she would return to the task she had set for herself, but there was always the chance that she would not. She had done more than anyone else would have ever done, and it would not be wrong of her to wash her hands if she so chose now. He knew it as well as Dimitri did, which more than explained his hesitancy, and his unwillingness to have even the slightest iota of hope. Yet... His actions, and his words still betrayed him, just as they had betrayed her, the first time they had spoken at length. 'But your hope is not unfounded... You may be surprised yet, my prince... And for the sakes of the both of you, I will hope for that exact outcome...'"

Chapter End Notes

AN:

My biggest issue with Rodrigue was his untimely death, as well as the catalyst that his death served. Despite it helping massively with the shipping goggles when it comes to Dimitri/Byleth, the entire "talk in the rain" scene lacked the punch it needed because Byleth simply is not Rodrigue. Byleth is not someone who knows, intimately, just who Dimitri is, and what he has suffered and lost. As open and as kind as Byleth is for Dimitri, in that moment, kindness is not what he needs. As much as his character growth relies upon this scene, as well as the others that follow (and came before), Dimitri coming to these conclusions on his own are hard to swallow. He is still reeling from grief, and despite being told to "find a reason to live", he simply is in no mental state to do so without harder pressing that Byleth simply doesn't deliver.
An argument can be made however that Raine is not Byleth, and therefore should be capable of giving that swift and stern guidance... Or Warin, at the very least could do so, but that isn't how I wanted Dimitri's growth to be facilitated. (It doesn't help that Warin would sooner gut Dimitri at this moment than provide a helping hand anyway...) Rodrigue deserved better than what he got in Azure Moon, and therefore I refuse to allow him to have to die simply to be kickstart Dimitri's character arc. I have never liked the "stuffing in the fridge" type tropes, and Rodrigue is a good character who deserved more screen time, and a chance to really interact and guide Dimitri both during his manic phase, and in his more calm, reserved, and repenting phase. Having Byleth be his sole guide is too much of a burden to put on the both of them, and Byleth was under more than enough stress as it was without cause or care for their mental health. And to be frank, the less said about Gilbert as an advisor, the better.

This, of course, also leads into what will be a "problem" to face in the next chapter (or chapters)... The acceptance of Dimitri's change of heart. A common complaint for AM, which I share, just to be completely honest, is that Dimitri's arc came about too quickly, and with far too much acceptance. Felix's anger was a momentary comment that was brushed aside too quickly, and while AM is longer than CF, it still misses a lot of heavier moments in lieu of rushing through the campaign. Of course, now that my version of AM is off the rails... Creative freedom means I get to address a lot of the finer points that were glossed over, or simply never brought up.

Regardless, I intend to continue on, but we'll likely be staying in Harpstring Moon for at least three more chapters before moving on to the next bit. There's a lot to cover, both plot-wise and for character development, and we're all aware that's where I shine more than in combat scenes. So, until next time...! I thank you as always for reading, please drop a review should you feel the need, and I'll see you again soon!

Mood: Homesick.

Listening To: "The Ballad of Mona Lisa" - Panic At The Disco

~ Sky
Words to Be Spoken

Chapter Summary

Genres/Ratings: Friendship, Hurt/Comfort, Family, Romance, Angst. (M)

Characters: Ingrid, Sylvain, Ashe, Petra, Felix, Dimitri.

Summary: It had been only a week since their return from Grondor, but much had changed already in those seven days. Ingrid had seen it all, eagle-eyed and tense, and so many conflicting feelings ran through both her heart and mind as she wondered at it all. To see her future king returning to reason should have been a joy, but it brought her nothing but a harsh feeling of emptiness and anger. And to look around at her comrades, and see their expressions mirroring her own... It was a harsh vindication. Loss had come too close for them, far too close, and now all of them were dealing with it the only way they knew how. They all could be dead tomorrow, and that was a lesson they had thought had already been drilled tightly into them... but apparently it was not. Nobody had expected their dear professor to brush again with death. What did it mean for the rest of them...? What did it mean for the things they still were not saying, in hopes of an "after" the end of a war they may not survive?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Harpstring Moon

Garreg Mach Infirmary

Noon

"It's been so hectic, Professor... I doubt you'd be approving, if you could see us all right now, but... I think, for the first time in many moons, everyone is finally being honest with themselves..." Ingrid's voice was quiet as she sat on the single chair that had been placed beside her professor's bed, and she watched with soft, worried eyes as her professor slept on beside her, completely numb to the outside world due to the sheer amount of magic that had been poured into her flagging body to keep her asleep. She hadn't agreed at first with the decision that Professor Manuela, Mercedes and Dorothea had come to when they had chosen this route in healing the beloved woman, but as she sat close to her and examined her closely now... Ingrid had to admit that they had been right in choosing to keep Raine unconscious until her body was well and truly on its way to a proper recovery.

Her professor had lost weight, and become quite thin. She had hidden it well with her cloak and clothes in the past several moons, making herself seem as healthy as ever, but now without most of her usual wear, it was quite obvious to see. Her body, also, was a mess of scars. When she had first been disrobed off of the battlefield, there hadn't been a single soul who hadn't recoiled in alarm to see just how many wounds she had been hiding underneath tight layers of bandaging and fabric. It was as if she had been purposefully avoiding the healers ever since she had returned to them during the Millennium Festival and was treating her own wounds by herself, and for the life of her, Ingrid couldn't understand why she would have been doing such a foolish thing. Her professor was a wise
woman, and one who knew her strengths and weaknesses, and yet she had not been taking even an iota of care of herself to the point where nobody had even noticed until her condition had been dragged out into the open without her consent.

Though the dagger wound in her back at been the chief concern during her healing, the rest of her body was likewise a mess of wounds and insufficient care, and only time and magic would be of any help to her now. With the combined efforts of the monastery's best healers, and a good amount of time, they promised that once Raine woke, she would be near her best condition if she were to be left alone during the process. That, of course, had been the only thing that not a single one of the Blue Lions could agree to, and ever since she had been committed to the infirmary, there had been an unofficial rotation of visitors streaming constantly from her new quarters to ensure her rest was being uninterrupted, as well as to ease their selfish worries.

Ingrid had taken her turn now, though she admitted she wasn't entirely sure why. She felt impatient, restless, and for the life of her, she did not quite understand what it was that was making her feel this way. She had thought she had given voice to all of her opinions earlier that week, when her king had finally come out of hiding to approach his former classmates, and had been met with a response no one had likely ever expected when he had offered his apologies, as well as a change in plans that had been the hopes of most there from the very start.

"I wish to apologize. To all of you. I have dragged you all down this dark path with me, and have caused untold suffering all along the way... I cannot tell you how sorry I am for my behaviour. For my actions. There is no apology I could offer that would ever be sufficient... but these words are all I have. These words, and a promise that I will no longer chase down the path of vengeance. I intend to turn our course to Fhirdiad... To take back the Kingdom, as I should have done from the very beginning. I ask of you to join me one last time to do so... Though I know, to ask anything of you now, is not within my right to do. Not until I have apologized a thousand times over, and proven myself capable, and trustworthy again to you all."

"No."

All turned in surprise at the voice who had spoken first, and Ingrid wasn't sure whether she was more alarmed, or confused, to see that it was Sylvain and not Felix who had been the one to break the silence after Dimitri had given his apologies, and professed his change of heart and mind. Had they been waiting for someone to reject him, because no one else was brave enough to do so? It wasn't as if any of them had managed to speak more than a handful of sentences to the man since his return several moons prior without being met with derision, dismissal, or outright threats. Now, a new, unnerving silence fell at Sylvain's rejection, and all eyes turned to him in quiet, uneasy confusion, including those of their lord, as they waited. He was not the type to simply say one word and leave, all of them knew this of him by now, but for the life of them all, no one could guess what was in his mind as they looked to him to continue.

The crimson-haired knight didn't move from where he was standing, leaning on a nearby pillar with his arms crossed, but his usual calm and carefree expression had changed to something darker, and far more serious. His eyes were narrowed and his brow deeply furrowed, and though his posture remained lax, his voice was as sharp as a dagger when he continued after a full minute of uneasy, shaken silence, "That's nice and all, Your Majesty... but no. I'm not following you another step forward, regardless of where you've decided it's time to go. Even if it is back to Fhirdiad. I, for one, am finished with this, as well as with you. An apology isn't enough to make up for everything you've done. And not just to us, but to the professor, too. We're your knights and noblemen, and we're expected by code and by blood to obey and follow you wherever you go, and put up with whatever you say and however you act... and so far, I've been willing to do it, because it meant an end to the Empire, and hopefully restoration of the Kingdom. But you know who wasn't
tied down to you by bloodlines and oaths and fealty? The professor. And look at where she is now. I'm not taking one more step forward under your command."

"Sylvain-"

"No. He's right. I'm through with this, too." Felix spoke now, cutting off Annette sharply as he, too, turned the weight of his glare onto Dimitri. That righteous indignance that he had been sitting on for far too long at both his father's and Raine insistence now had been given word to by someone else, and that was more than enough permission for him to add his voice to Sylvain's complete dismissal of the boar. He felt it, too, that harsh, cold anger and blame for what his professor had suffered for this mad prince's sake, and though he knew it would earn him the ire of his father, and very likely his friends and Mercedes, he did not care. It needed to be said, and so he spoke too, his voice cold and venomous as he continued, "Take a good look around you, boar, and tell me what you see. You're sorry you've dragged us down with you, and expect that to be enough to make up for all you've been doing these past few moons? All your threats, all your derision, all your madness, as if it's easily brushed aside by something as simple as an apology? I don't care if you've come to your senses. Frankly, I'll believe you're sane when you're cold and dead, if you want the simple truth of it. I won't follow you a step further either. I'd prefer to be run through. You've caused enough collateral damage. I won't be another corpse left rotting on the battlefield because you couldn't sate your bloodlust."

"She didn't trust you to listen to reason, and she fell back on us because of it. What does that speak to your leadership, Your Highness? Or the leadership of anyone here? She's been the only sane one here from the very start, and look at what she had to resort to in order to keep us alive."
Sylvain picked up immediately from where Felix left, and he dropped his arms as he stepped up to his full height, and his eyes were blazing with quiet wrath as he turned on his king. He hadn't truly believed it at first, when his professor, who valued Dimitri above all else, had spoken of going behind his back for a chance of a truce with the Alliance, but her pleading, and her honesty, had swayed him into promising to aid her in her schemes. She, after all, had been the only one from the very beginning to look out for all of them as a whole, rather than see them as an army of warm bodies to throw at the enemy until one or the other fell. He had overheard the exchanges between the two of them. Who amongst them hadn't at one point or another? And he knew, just as well as Felix did, that it had shaken their trust in their lord to the very core.

"Keeping secrets from everyone she should have been able to trust, simply because no one but her was willing to openly risk your wrath, even if it meant getting people killed... That's what she had to do in order to keep us alive. We never asked for that, but that's what it came down to in the end, because you were too blind. Comrades? Friends? We weren't even cattle to you." Sylvain's words were lances, cutting in deep and piercing through the words that he knew were honest enough, but simply did not cut it for him. It didn't matter if his lord meant every word he said, and he did not doubt that he did... It just simply was not enough to make up for the last several moons of war, of tension, and of ugliness that they had been forced through since his return. "You told her outright that you'd use us all, down to the dust of our bones, to get what you wanted. Felix is right. No apology is going to cut it. You want to prove yourself a real leader? You want us to follow you without question as we did with her? Act like she did, and put us first. Otherwise, my axe is better served elsewhere. I'll return home myself to fight for Fhirdiad. I won't do it here. Not any longer."

Ingrid looked away, unable to bear that look of seething anger burning on Sylvain's face, but some wild, mad part of her was glad to hear him speak those words. She did not have the courage to do the same, even if she agreed with him, and she knew it. Her childhood dreams had twisted her about too much, had made her too eager and willing to serve even if she knew in the darkest depths of her soul that any sacrifice she made would mean absolutely nothing to the lord she was pledged to. And while she knew her lord was honest, that he meant every word he was saying and was
making no attempt to justify his behaviour, or urge for their forgiveness... She shook her head as she finally spoke, too, "I'm sorry, Your Highness... but I agree with Sylvain and Felix. I can't give you my lance, even if you offer a thousand apologies for what has happened. I can't... continue to fight alongside you when I cannot trust you to care if any of us, if even just one of us, were to fall in battle. My heart won't allow it. If I'm to fight... I will do so alongside my friends and family, back in the Kingdom. I will not do it here."

Dimitri was quiet as their words struck like arrows, but he took it all without complaint, as he knew he must. It hurt, hurt beyond words to hear the voices of his three closest friends striking him down and turning their backs to him, but it did not make them wrong. They were all perfectly right in their words and their choices. He had given them no reason to trust him, and even less to forgive him. He was well aware of his sins, and had fully expected this reaction... yet... It made his chest ache all the same when he forced out the words he knew he had to speak, "If that is your choice... Then you are free of me. I will not hold a single one of you to this campaign, or to my rule or command. I am as you say. Unfit to trust, or to lead... and it is only through action that I be able to prove myself either of those things. But to ask you to stay until that time comes, if it is to ever come, is not something I will do. If your hearts and minds are set... Then go, and defend the Kingdom as your will commands it. I will not stop you. I will only wish you well."

"You're all just going to leave?!" Ashe's voice came as an explosion, startling everyone in the room, including Dimitri, and the young archer looked to his friends with raw fury burning alongside grief in his bright green eyes. He was glaring not at Dimitri however, but rather at Ingrid, Sylvain and Felix, and his voice was both sharp with accusation and with betrayal as he slammed his fist down to the table in an uncharacteristic show of indignant rage, "How dare you?! I won't just simply forgive His Majesty just as any of you won't, but you'd leave this rebellion entirely behind you?! You'd leave the professor behind you?! What did we even come here for in the first place if this is how it's going to end?! If you abandon the rebellion, you are abandoning the professor! Can you do that, Sylvain? Felix? Ingrid? Can you abandon her after all she's done for us? Are you all truly that selfish?"

Sylvain twitched, his hands tightening at his sides at the unexpected tirade, but it hit him as keenly as any arrow that Ashe could shoot all the same, which he knew had been the sniper's intent. He hadn't thought that far ahead, hadn't considered what the implications would mean if he chose to return to the Kingdom, but clearly someone else had not allowed for their anger to cloud their judgement wholly. He turned his face to the ground, both ashamed and cowed, and he wondered at how Ashe could manage to hold onto his heart, even when he, too, was sharing their anger and mistrust of their lord and liege. It was something he had to respect, and something he did respect, about his friend, even if he didn't understand how he was capable of doing it.

A cursory look at both Ingrid and Felix proved that his words had struck them just as hard, as Felix was now glaring at Dimitri again as if he could place all the blame solely onto his head rather than admit he had spoken without thought. Ingrid had lowered her head entirely, her hands clasped tightly in front of her as she bit her lower lip in a desperate attempt to keep her eyes from watering and overflowing. They all had spoken without thinking, and Ashe had called their bluffs with sharp reproach... It was a smart move from their best sniper, and obviously one no one had expected to see, or to hear.

There was a lingering silence, full of both shame and anger, but it was broken when Petra stood up from the chair she had been quietly sitting in ever since the partial council had begun. She stood elegantly, stepping about the table and to Ashe's side, and wordlessly she raised a hand to reach over to cover his still-trembling fist that he had slammed onto the table. Her adjust eyes were kind and sympathetic as they traded a look, but it was only for a moment before she cast her quickly sharpening eyes over the rest of them. She spoke in a deceptively quiet tone, her fingers curled
gently over Ashe's hand even as she stood tall and proud and apart from them all as a former Black Eagle, and the future queen of Brigid, "I am not of Faerghus... Therefore, perhaps, it is not right of me to speak. My homeland, Brigid, is not of matter to you, or to this war, just as Faerghus, and Fhirdiad, are of no matter to me. But I have come when I was summoned, as all the Blue Lions did. We came for the professor. To leave her now... It will not be done. I will not allow it. This war means more than the Kingdom and Empire. It means more than the Alliance and Brigid. Who do we fight for? Why do we fight? If answers cannot be found to those questions... Decisions should not be made today."

Ingrid let out a long, tired breath, and she glanced down to the woman who was laying face-down at her knees in her cot, having not moved of her own will ever since she had taken that dagger in the back for Dimitri back in the fields of Grondor, and she wondered why she was bothering to regale an unconscious woman with this tale when she couldn't hear it, or respond to it. Perhaps it just made her feel better to speak of it all aloud after a long week of awkward, tense, and shameful silence, and for that, she knew she owed Petra much. The young queen of Brigid had broken through the anger to bring the discussion back to the main point everyone had forgotten, and Ingrid mused with a sad little smile, "I think Petra saved us all from making a hasty decision we all would have regretted that day... She reminded us of what this mess had really come down to. It wasn't about the Kingdom... It really wasn't even about His Highness... It was about you, Professor... If she had kept silent, had just let us fight amongst ourselves... Who knows what could have happened. We're lucky that she was there... We're lucky that you brought her here, to the Blue Lions, to remind us of the world outside of our own."

There was only silence as her answer, and Ingrid felt that surge of restlessness returning as she looked down helplessly at her professor. How many times had the woman "dropped by" under the pretext of having some errand to run, and allowed for her to rant about such inane and useless things during their academy days? She could hardly remember the count, and she doubted she really wanted to. It had become their little secret, dodging their duties to catch up and simply gossip over tea and scones, usually with Dorothea, Mercedes, Annette or Petra serving as a third party for their entertainment. Those had been better days, more wishful days, and Ingrid felt that pang of loss deep in her heart as she watched her professor's still face painfully.

"Oh? Ingrid, my dear, I didn't realize you were here visiting. Usually this is when Ashe would be up and about on guard duty."

Dorothea's voice snapped her abruptly from her reverie, reminding her sharply that despite all her desire and thought to be alone to talk and vent, that she truly had always been at risk of being interrupted. The infirmary doors did not close as a rule, and healers were constantly coming and going, even if the professor's stay there warranted a little more security than was usually permitted. Yet there stood Dorothea all the same, her arms full of new supplies of bandages and salve, her wide, emerald eyes blinking in honest, but friendly surprise at seeing Ingrid there. Flushing in shame, Ingrid leapt to her feet, but was wholly ignored as Dorothea went about restocking the shelves as she had been ordered to do when the supplies had arrived at Manuela's office. She had grown quite used to the stream of visitors that the professor was constantly receiving, and she had even begun to make a game of seeing if they were adhering to a schedule on purpose, or had just fallen into one by sheer accident. So far she was leaning more towards the latter, but Ingrid's appearance was making her second-guess. Still, she knew it wasn't entirely her business, and so she continued her work organizing before she spoke apologetically, "I'm sorry to say however, my dear, that you can't stay for much longer... Professor needs her bandages changed, and there are no guests during healing. You're welcome to return in an hour or so, though."
"N-No, I... I think I've... been here long enough..." Ingrid stammered in reply, and she looked back to her unconscious professor with both curiosity and shame. She had come there to talk, had she not? She was sure that she had... and yet she felt nothing in being summarily dismissed. Nothing but that gentle pulse of worry for her professor's well-being, and that she knew was normal. Everything else however continued to be strange, and she bit her lower lip as she shook her head and wondered why she still felt so damned restless and ill at ease. Usually a talk with her professor always made her feel better... but the older woman was no longer capable of giving her advice. Was that the reason she felt so unfulfilled?

"Ingrid? Are you feeling all right?" Dorothea paused in her work, turning to look at the blond knight sharply as she heard that little catch in her voice. Ingrid avoided her gaze like a guilty child, and it made the singer click her tongue with both amusement and exasperation. Her friend had never really been one to talk earnestly about her feelings, but it was clear that she was troubled by something, and it obviously was not the woman she had come to visit. Raine's condition was as stable as it could possibly be now, and it was merely a waiting game for the magic to run its course through her body before she could be allowed to wake. Seeing however that the troubled look Ingrid was wearing was not at all created from concern made her soften, and she left her tasks to sit down on the nearest empty cot before she spoke more gently, "Come on now, Ingrid. Talk to me. What is it that's troubling you?"

"I'm not... troubled, per say, I just... I came here to talk to the professor, as we used to, but... I'm afraid it didn't... make me feel any better." Ingrid admitted with an awkward shake of her head, and she felt absolutely foolish the moment the words left her mouth. Of course it hadn't made her feel any better. Her professor was unconscious, and there was absolutely no talk to be had with a woman in the midst of a healing coma. She wasn't even sure why she was bothering to continue this line of conversation. It was only making her look like worse of a fool than she felt. "I've been... restless these past few days. I thought perhaps a good vent would ease things, but... It hasn't."

"It has been a stressful few weeks, hasn't it...? I can understand that much." Dorothea agreed with a small, sage nod, but she did not rise from where she had sat, and instead only continued to study Ingrid as closely as she could. The young knight looked on edge, as if she was on the verge of bolting for somewhere like a frightened rabbit, or a mouse, and Dorothea was not sure she was comfortable with the change in her attitude. Ingrid had always struck her as a confident, no-nonsense woman, and even the worst of situations had never seemed to make her this uncomfortable. Whatever was troubling her was certainly more than a stressful few weeks, even if those few weeks were stretching the very definition of the word "stressful".

"Dorothea, when you feel restless... When you're frustrated, or unsure of things... What do you do to feel better?"

Dorothea blinked, surprised by the question, and doubly so for the advice that Ingrid had never once asked of her in all of their time of knowing one another. Their ways of life could not have been more different, and Ingrid had always made it clear she had little interest in the things Dorothea enjoyed. She had never taken such things personally, each woman to their own after all, but to have routine suddenly twisted about on its head... It made her take pause, and study the blond in front of her with even more care and curiosity. At the very least, she knew she owed her friend an honest answer, and so she gave her one without much preamble, "When I find myself frustrated, or restless, or unsure of things... I talk to Ferdinand. He has a... very uncanny way of making me feel... balanced again, I suppose."

"You talk to Ferdinand... I see..." Ingrid felt her hope falling flat at the answer that did nothing for her, though it did admittedly give her insight into how Dorothea had proved herself so calm and in control ever since the taking of the Great Bridge of Myrddin. Not once since Ferdinand's return had
she looked as if she was in over her head, not even when the professor had been brought back to Garreg Mach in such a horrible state, and Ingrid had to wonder just how much Dorothea was relying on the former Imperial noble for balance if this was how his presence in the monastery was effecting her. The words however also made her take pause in remembrance, and for a moment she shoved aside all of her own feelings as she thought of the injuries that had kept him from joining the field in Grondor, "H-How is he, by the way? His arm? Has any progress been made?"

"I'm afraid not... His arm is ruined. He won't be lancing ever again. That spear... It crushed something in his shoulder when he took it, and no amount of healing can seem to fix it. His range of motion has mostly returned, but... He won't be fighting ever again as he once did. It simply causes him too much pain." Dorothea's answer was quiet, and she sighed with sympathy on the man's behalf when she had learned of why he was having so much trouble healing in comparison to the others who had been brought back from the bridge. Whatever had happened to his body had proved to be irreversible, and while he had took it in stride, saying it was a sacrifice well made and one he would have made again for her sake... Dorothea smiled sadly as she mused, "He isn't stewing in the loss, which I suppose is something, but... He feels guilty for not being there in Grondor, for the professor, I think. He won't say it aloud, because he knows his guilt means little in comparison to how you all feel, but I know him. He's angry he couldn't help her, after all she did for him."

"That's a foolish thought. He was hurt protecting you. Professor would never want him hurting himself further just to repay a debt." Ingrid said firmly, and she was glad to see Dorothea nodding in agreement the moment the words left her mouth. She felt for Ferdinand, and she understood exactly where his thoughts had come from and how they had led him to such a conclusion, but she could not support him on such a train of thought. Her professor would never have permitted it had she been awake to hear it. She had been the one to ban him from taking to the field in Grondor due to his injuries, and had told him outright he had fought enough already. He was home now with Dorothea, and that was far more important to her than having another able-bodied man on the battlefield... which unfortunately was not something Ferdinand even was.

"It is, and I think he knows that... but all the same, one can't change how they feel. Ferdinand is a knight, just as you are. His desires to repay debts, and to prove his worth and loyalty are just a bit too strong for his good sense." Dorothea replied with a gentle chuckle, and the warmth in her eyes made Ingrid both draw back respectfully, as well as feel a punch somewhere deep in the chest where pain had no right to be. The young singer leaned back on her hands, glancing up at the ceiling for a moment before she once again turned her eyes to Ingrid thoughtfully. While she did appreciate hearing her ask after Ferdinand, and with genuine concern... She could also tell that it was not exactly what she had wanted to ask for. And it brought a small, knowing smile to her face as she remarked gently, "But, again... When I feel out of sorts, I go speak to Ferdie, and more often than not, I feel much better afterwards. I think you, however... Are in the wrong room, and speaking to the wrong person."

Ingrid said nothing as Dorothea's words hit a bit too close to home, and she bit her lower lip as she wondered how in the world she could reply to such a thing without giving herself entirely away. It was true, she was looking for someone to talk to, but the way that Dorothea was looking at her... It made her cheeks begin to redden despite herself, and she wanted to both curse and flee all at once. Her body however refused to let her do so, it would be undignified, and no doubt Dorothea would hound her for weeks if she did, and the former Black Eagle proved it as she cut straight to the point with a catlike grin, "Oh, Ingrid, don't tell me you haven't made things official with Sylvain yet."

"O-O-Official?! What is there to make official?!!" Any semblance there had been of professionalism, or remaining at ease and well above Dorothea's barbs flew out the window at the mention of Sylvain, and Ingrid nearly tripped over herself when she shot back to her feet.
Dorothea's snort of amusement was of no help, and Ingrid felt her ears burning a hot shade of crimson despite all of her attempts to control her inner temperature. It, of course, was all to no avail and she knew it, but she couldn't quite help it. No one was this blunt with her. No one but Dorothea, and even now she still was completely incapable of handling it. "There isn't anything between Sylvain and I! We're friends! Old friends, but friends!"

"Oh no, you haven't...! Oh, Ingrid, what *are* you doing with yourself?" Dorothea sighed as Ingrid vehemently denied her words, and she rested her chin in her hand as she fought her smile as well as her internal disappointment. Part of her could well understand, it just was not in Ingrid's breeding to chase after her heart's desires, but the other did not care a whit for such an excuse. She had seen the way her friend looked at him, and more importantly, how he looked at her. The attraction between the two was obvious, even moreso from his side, and yet they were just dancing about one another, without the intent of locking eyes, or even daring to brush hands. "You do realize that now is the perfect time for it, yes? And that you wouldn't be the first couple to take advantage of the situation? Why, just three days ago, I saw Ashe and Petra necking not five feet down the hall!"

"They were what?!"

"You know exactly what I mean. And it was very cute, even if it wasn't any of my business seeing it. But it was also most importantly understandable." Dorothea ignored Ingrid's flat surprise with a flick of her wrist, and she reminded herself to apologize to Petra sometime later for spilling the beans on something she was rather sure the young queen of Brigid might not be entirely ready to make public regardless of how she felt about the Kingdom sniper. Looking up at her friend, who was still looking at her as if she had just had a bucket of ice water dumped over her head, Dorothea crossed her legs before explaining with surprising seriousness, "Think a little, Ingrid, my dear... With what happened to the professor... All of us are again being reminded of just how short life is... How close death always is when taking to the battlefield becomes the norm. Out of all of us, who expected it would be the professor laying here right now, and not someone, anyone, else? It's a grim reminder of what war is, and what we are constantly at risk of losing. When one looks at life knowing those things... Why bother to wait for the "right time" or the "right place"? Especially when there may never be a right "time" or "place"? We could all be dead tomorrow. No one wishes to miss out on what small happinesses we may have, right now, simply because we were adhering to some foolish societal expectation of how courting is supposed to be done. There's no point in such things. And you of all people should know that even better than I."

Ingrid winced, though she knew she had no right to at Dorothea's assertion, as pointed as it may have been. She *did* know that life was short, and she had learned that lesson quite cruelly in her youth with Glenn. She still did not know to this day if she had loved him, but she had cared for him and admired him, and his loss had been a swordstroke to the heart. One day, he had been alive and a knight and everything she had ever aspired to be, and the next he had been dead. Death had no mercy for the living, and no care for their schedules, or concerns. If there was something she wanted, it was her own duty to take it with her own hands before it was snatched away. She knew that. She knew that she knew that. And yet... She hesitated as her stomach shrunk painfully in on itself and made her turn away, her lips curled into a frown as she pulled instinctively at her sleeve, "Th-That's... But... It isn't... that simple..."

"Why? Because the two of you are friends?"

"No, it's because..." Ingrid faltered, and felt her stomach clench even more painfully than before as she struggled to find the words. She had tried to talk herself into this so many times that all of Dorothea's arguments were ones she likely could repeat verbatim, and yet when she wished to say it aloud... She never could quite manage to do so. There was too much pain, pain and a mixture of guilt and shame that kept her lips sealed, and she could not help it no matter what she did. Yet,
Dorothea was watching her kindly now, without judgement or mirth, just a simply, sisterly sort of kindness, and Ingrid felt the words come loose despite herself, "I lost Glenn when I was so young, and I never knew, I still don't know, what it was I felt for him when he died. I cared for him, but was that love? I don't know. But I do know that when I was grieving, when I was at my worst... Sylvain never left me. He never stopped worrying over me, caring for me, or being his usual self, because he knew it would bring me out of the dark. And I... I know I love Sylvain for that, even if he's... difficult. Extraordinarily difficult. But how do I say that to him and... not make him feel as if he's simply second place to Glenn?"

"You say so. It isn't as difficult as you're making it to be in your head, Ingrid." Dorothea scolded her gently, and she smiled up at her friend despite the way she was looking at her with such helpless fear in her eyes. That alone was enough for her to understand, to understand and sympathize with, and she stood, too, before reaching out to gently take her friend's hand and squeeze it comfortingly. It was always too easy to get caught up in the thoughts and the feelings before saying the words, and she understood that well. She had felt the same, before she had simply allowed herself to be honest with Ferdinand. Everything else had flowed so smoothly afterwards. So naturally. And she knew without a doubt it would be the same for Ingrid if she was willing to take the leap of faith and try. Still... She didn't want to leave her scared, nor did she want to belittle her for being so, and she consoled her kindly as she continued, "And Sylvain may be... special... but he isn't the fool he wishes everyone to see him as. Even if you think he would concern himself with being a second... If you know he isn't, all you need to do is say so, and he would believe you. It's as easy as saying the words, Ingrid. As easy, and as difficult, I guess I should say, actually."

"As easy, and as difficult..." Ingrid echoed, and she felt her body sag underneath the weight and her exhaustion. She felt as if she had been walking along a path of nails in her bare feet, though Dorothea's words did do something to help alleviate her concerns, even if they couldn't solve it. That was a burden for her shoulders and her shoulders alone... and it made her pinch the bridge of her nose as she let out a long, tired breath... She wouldn't be permitted to dally any longer. Not when Dorothea now knew. She would be hounded for moons if she allowed things to remain as they were, and that thought frightened her far more than confronting Sylvain did. And with that smile she was wearing as she watched her expectantly... Ingrid waved a hand as she turned her feet in the direction of the hall, speaking over her shoulder as she allowed the rush of adrenaline and desire to escape dictate her actions, "Fine! You'll get what you want, and then you can stop hounding me, do we agree?!!"

"Oh my lovely Ingrid, if you think this was hounding, you have no idea what I'm truly capable of of!"

Dorothea's voice was haunting in Ingrid's ears as she left the infirmary behind, but she allowed the flow of blood in her body to command her movements before better thought, or fear, could stop her in her tracks. She knew the path to his quarters easily, too many moons of tracking him down for a scolding had made it impossible for her to forget, and she took the stairs two at a time for the noble's hall. Unlike in their student days, now all the doors were shut, with several rooms having even been barred off if only because the memory of who had once inhabited those dorms had proven to be too much for the others. She couldn't admit she felt bad for it, though she knew the reminder would one day become too poisonous for even the most stalwart of them.

Still, as she marched herself down to Sylvain's quarters, and saw his shut door... A tiny part of her began to recoil. There was a very real possibility he was not alone in that room, and could she manage herself if that proved to be true? Ever since his return, she had seen his philandering ways almost come to a complete halt, but she had chosen to believe it was merely the seriousness of their circumstances that had put a halt to his worse behaviour... Was it anything else? Could she hinge
all of her hopes on Dorothea asserting that their attraction was certainly mutual, and not that his stumbling and fumbling before had been nothing but his way of showing concern for her?

The second thoughts were choking, and she savagely shoved them aside for another time. If she was to be proven wrong, then that would be that... but she would at least unburden her own conscience, if only to save herself those long, restless nights. She rapped hard on the door, both aware simultaneously that she had to sound more urgent than things were, and as strong a likelihood as there could be that he was with company... He also could simply not be there at all. Ingrid bit her lip, trying to control her breathing, and wondering if perhaps she had again let her stubbornness overwhelm her good sense. She really hadn't needed to storm off in such a rush, but Dorothea had been needling so incessantly... Gods. She was about to make a complete and utter fool of herself, wasn't she?

The door swung open almost a moment later, with a dishevelled-looking Sylvain blinking his eyes owlishly as he glanced around furtively before realizing it was only Ingrid who was standing in front of his door. He took a moment to smooth down his hair, his other hand unclenching on the doorknob as he took a breath, and then glanced around a second time. It was clear he had just been woken up from a nap, as his clothes were haphazardly tossed on as if he had been rushing to get up in case of some sort of alarm, but he didn't allow for himself to look entirely relieved as he finally looked back to Ingrid and asked, voice poorly concealing a yawn as he did so, "Ingrid...? Is something the matter? What's with the ramming? If something's on fire, I'm not about to be much help until you let me get my gear."

"Can I come in? I want to talk to you."

The request surprised him and brought him fully awake, as it usually wasn't her way to ask for permission before she went ahead and did whatever it was she had come to do. She never had been one to have much patience for things like personal space, as he knew Bernadetta could attest to, yet there she was, asking for permission, and of something she never had bothered to do before when it concerned him. How many times had she tracked him down to his quarters to give him an earful for one transgression or another she had been forced to clean up for him? His quarters had never been off limits to her before, strict rules about gender separation or no. She simply didn't care enough to adhere to such silly rules if she had a good reason to be tanning his hide.

The thought made him pause, but only for a moment as he opened the door wider to allow her entry without a word. Though he was well aware he had been the reason there was so much tension with the monastery as of late, he was sure that wasn't the reason Ingrid had interrupted his nap. She had been just as at fault for that as he had, and she knew it just as well as he did. But for the life of him, he couldn't think of what else he could have done to warrant one of her many scolding tirades. He had been on his best behaviour lately, or, well, at least what he could confirm as his best behaviour, and he couldn't imagine what he might have been up to to warrant a scolding, and it put him on the defensive almost immediately as he closed the door behind her and began hesitantly, "Hey, Ingrid, before you start, I want to just say I promise I've been up to absolutely nothing disgraceful lately, and-"

"Be quiet, Sylvain." Ingrid turned on him before she could lose her nerve, and she reached to grasp the front of his rumpled tunic before she pulled him close and interrupted any further arguing by pressing her mouth to his. He went stock still the moment her lips touched his own, and she swore she could feel him holding his breath as the seconds ticked by like minutes without even a hint of a response. Never mind a return to her kiss, her old friend wasn't even daring to breathe as she held him tightly in place, and the feeling of rejection came like a harsh stroke of a lance to take her feet out from under her.
All better sense told her to push him away and leave, immediately, but she couldn't quite find the strength in her limbs to do so. Rather, her hands gripped down tighter on his shoulders, keenly aware of how his were hanging useless and without movement at his own sides. It stung, but she accepted it as she knew she had to, but she wouldn't allow herself the easy way out. Instead, she simply wrapped her arms as best she could around him, hiding her face in his shoulder so he wouldn't see the sting of tears in her eyes when she murmured raggedly against his neck, "I love you. I... I wanted to say that I love you, all right? A-After what happened to the professor... After what happened to Glenn, I... I know that life is just too damned short to wait for the things that are truly important to me. That could have been you or I laying in our own blood in Grondor. Or on any other battlefield we've fought on. And I don't want it to be in that moment that I get a chance to say how I feel, or lose that chance entirely. That's... That's what I was doing. You're my best friend, but you're also... just so important to me, Sylvain. I had to do something about it."

A beat of painful, awkward silence followed, making Ingrid wonder if perhaps it would have been better if she had made a quick exit rather than force out an explanation, before she heard him let out a deep, quiet breath against her ear. His arms raised slowly, carefully to wrap about her svelte form, and he squeezed her close as one hand rested gently on her hip and the other came to smoothly caress the top of her head. He was quiet for another moment or two, and this time Ingrid was aware she was the one holding her breath now before he sighed into her hair, "This... is usually the part when I wake up from my favourite dream. Sorry, but you need to give me a second to just... let this sink in that it's real. It... It is real, right? You're not just... playing some really cruel joke on me right now? I wouldn't be angry if you did. I'm pretty sure I've earned a lot of cruelty with how you've been playing nursemaid after me ever since we were kids."

Ingrid wasn't quite sure what hurt worse, the disbelief in his voice, or the shaky way he spoke of deserving any sort of cruelty from her for all of his actions in the past. It only made her tighten her grip all the more fiercely, and she pushed herself as far into his arms as she could manage, relishing both the strength in his, as well as that familiar warmth that enveloped her when he answered in kind without hesitating for even a moment. She could feel a hot tear trickling down her cheek, and she hoped to the gods he wouldn't feel it as she answered in a ragged mutter, "Why would I ever joke about something like this...? I mean it, Sylvain... You're... You're the most important person in my life, and I couldn't handle keeping that to myself anymore. I was so restless and anxious, and... the only thing that ever makes me feel better, that ever reminds me that it's all right to smile, even in these days... is you. How could I not love you?"

"Do you want me to ruin the moment and give you a list of reasons why you really shouldn't? Because I can give you a list of reasons why you really shouldn't." Sylvain's returning jape fell flat, but the arms that were squeezing tightly about her waist refused to slacken, let alone even imagine releasing her. He nuzzled her neck gently, his breath warm and uneven on her skin, and unbidden she felt herself tremble at the foreign, but not particularly uncomfortable sensation. She could feel the ghost of his lips, pulling up into that annoyingly charming smile she hated and loved, but he did not move forward, didn't dare to press as he simply held her close and continued quietly, "Look, you just surprised me there, but... Don't doubt... that I don't feel the same about you, okay...? Because I do. I honestly and truly do."

Despite all her best efforts, Ingrid felt herself snifflle as that tightly coiled ball of hurt and rejection and fear melted away into pleasant and relieved warmth, and she cursed herself as Sylvain momentarily stiffened against her in surprise. He didn't let her go, however, but rather gave her another warm squeeze before he was slowly, carefully, leading her to sit down with him on the edge of his bed. He urged her quietly when she initially hesitated, and that warm grip on her arm didn't help her self-restraint an ounce. After a moment or two, Ingrid found herself curled up neatly against his side, face pressed into his shoulder as he kept one arm wrapped around her waist, while the other of his hands was covering hers as it gripped at the hem of his tunic to keep him firmly in
place.

Sylvain reached slowly, hesitantly for her face, and his thumb was careful as it brushed away one of the tears she hadn't managed to wipe away on her sleeve. She held still for him, savouring the feeling of his warm, callused palm cradling her cheek. He was gentle even if he was somewhat hesitant with her, and she appreciated his kindness as she was well aware he was far more experienced than she was when it came to things like physical intimacy. His thumb brushed again across her cheek, and his brow furrowed as he muttered, more to himself than to her, "I hate it when I make you cry..."

"You don't make me cry..." Ingrid shook her head, nudging him gently as she looked up to see him watching her with one sardonically raised eyebrow. The disbelief was written clear across his face, and she let out a tired, irritated breath as she realized this wasn't about to be as "natural" as Dorothea had promised it would be. She tightened her hold on his tunic, eyes narrowing in response before she reiterated firmly, "No, I mean it, Sylvain. You don't make me cry. You've worried me, disappointed me, made me outrageously furious more times than I can count... but not once have you ever made me cry. Not even when we were children, and you were at your worst. You've never once made me cry. And fretting over you doesn't count. That's a habit at this point, and not one I'm inclined to be breaking anytime soon, either."

"You mean that?" Sylvain found himself asking before he could think better of it, and this time she was the one to give him a withering look, and he immediately pulled a face as he understood his error. She was always blunt, and always honest. She would never lie to spare his feelings. Especially not now. He raised his free hand in a sign of supplication, bowing his head as he quickly began to backtrack, "You mean that. Of course you mean that... I'm sorry. It's just... This is... It's a lot. Not that I'm upset, or that I'm unhappy or anything... I just... figured you didn't... Or you wouldn't, anyway... see me in this kind of way. We've been friends for most of our lives. You know me better than I do. So I guess, I'm just... at a loss about why. Why me? Why me and not someone... leagues better?"

"Isn't it obvious? You just said so yourself why." Ingrid's tone softened at his questioning, at the show of hesitance and self-doubt, and it made her smile sadly at how little he truly thought of himself. She had known he had always felt this way, that he had never really had the confidence that he projected simply because he had a Crest, but that didn't matter to her. He was true to himself and his beliefs, even if some of those beliefs had been abhorrent, but he also had proven he was willing to change his thoughts when he was granted new perspective. She knew him well... but the reverse was also true, and she ran a comforting hand across his cheek as she explained gently, "We've been friends ever since we were children. No one knows you better than I do... and no one knows me better than you. You've seen me at my worst... and you were there for me then. You stood by me, even when I tried everything to push you away... and when I finally started to come out of the dark... I know you acted up only to keep my focus off of my grief, and onto something else. Everything you did when we were younger... You did it for me. You just never said so."

"Like I said a long time ago... It hurt seeing you hurt, and not being able to do anything about it. Raising a ruckus, and making you chase me around... It seemed like it was the only way to keep you from... just slipping back down sometimes." Sylvain didn't argue her points, though he wondered errantly just exactly when she had begun to see through him and allowed for his behaviour to continue. She could have easily nipped it in the bud from the start, he would have never allowed himself to be such a nuisance that he became an honest burden to her, but she never had tried earnestly to stop him. Not until his mischief had grown far out of control, and had turned worrisome and malicious, rather than something as simple as a distraction. That was his own fault and he knew it, and owned it, but it didn't stop him from idly reaching for her hand, curling his fingers errantly about hers as he continued quietly, "Seeing you now, compared to back then...
"Nearly slugging your...? Oh." Ingrid reddened as the memory came back with little prompting, and she wasn't entirely sure if she felt ashamed, concerned, or maybe even slightly amused to hear that her punching him into a hay bale had been the trigger for his realization. It had not been one of her finest moments, and she still cringed slightly whenever she thought of it, but he had been at such a loss of what to do. He was hurting over Miklan, she had known that he was, but he refused to let anyone see it, let alone even try to give him comfort. Her anger had boiled over at his repeated jokes and dodges, and eventually she had struck him in both frustration and hurt... but he had come chasing after her later that day with an honest apology in his eye, and a soft, quiet admittance of being in pain, too. She rubbed at her nose, embarrassed as she admitted weakly, "I... could have handled that much better... You didn't deserve to be lashed out at like that..."

"No, I did. And you know the worst thing? It... It was the professor who made me see that, too." Sylvain felt a small, wry smile curl at his lips, and he raised Ingrid's hand to his mouth, carefully pressing a kiss to her knuckles as she turned to look at him with surprise. It had been obvious to everyone in the early moons of their schooling that he and their professor had not gotten along whatsoever, and it had even become a point of contention between him and his lord, at the worst of it... Yet, to everyone else, suddenly things between them had changed on a dime. Sylvain had reigned in his lack of respect, and Raine had seemed to be gaining more confidence in both herself and her duties. He doubted anyone knew that the two were correlated, and he had said nothing when asked, if only to keep her secrets in confidence... but he would keep nothing from Ingrid. "No, it's true... After you slugged me, she came over to check on me. I was still so much of a bastard to her, then, too... but she didn't mind it. She let me rant and snarl and hurl all that venom at her until I was spent... and she reminded me that if someone like her was seeing how much pain I was in, I was an idiot for thinking that my friends couldn't see it, either. That was back before she really felt like she was a good teacher, so she was pretty hard on herself while she was trying to make me see sense... It made me realize I wasn't just acting the bastard anymore... I really was one, if this was the way people reacted to me. And nobody deserved to be torn down because of me, especially when all they wanted to do was help."

Ingrid smiled gently as Sylvain kissed tenderly at her hand, nuzzling her fingers and holding them gently in between his own. He didn't seem to be aware he was doing it, but every breath on her skin made her shiver, and she reached to return his favour by running her free hand's fingers through his tousled crimson mane when she replied softly, "She's always been very good at that... Making people see things from other perspectives. She chalked it up to the fact that it was her mercenary upbringing, and that she was so far and away from nobility... She just didn't realize yet that she was more empathetic than she thought. She always cared about us, even if we were foisted on her unwillingly. She just didn't know how to show it properly, that's all... Just like you, I guess. Small wonder you didn't get along well until you grew up a little."

"Until I grew up a little? Come on, that's harsh. I've grown up plenty these last five years!" Sylvain mimicked the look of a hurt puppy despite the glint of humour sparking in his eyes, and the hands that had been gently clasping about her waist suddenly became tickling. His fingers danced along her ribs in playful menace, refusing to let her get a word in edgewise before she fell to laughter in the midst of an attempt of scolding. He laughed with her, feeling the weight of the war, of the past several moons melting away. This was how easy it had been, before they had been handed weapons, when they were young and able to be children, and Sylvain revelled in it as his fingers skittered across her waist and hips, tickling everywhere he could reach as she laughed and squirmed in a desperate, and futile, attempt to get away from him.

It was a mad rush of hands and laughter and pushing and shoving for several moments before
either of them realized what position they had gotten themselves into. Sylvain was the first to pause and hesitate as he looked at Ingrid laying sprawled across his cot, her face flushed, eyes glittering with affectionate amusement, and her chest heaving for breath as he leaned over her to keep her trapped for more torture. The fey mood of childhood amusement however was gone, and he was well aware of just what sort of reaction he was having to her now, and almost on instinct he began to raise himself up from the bed, face reddening in tandem with hers when he mumbled awkwardly, "S-Sorry, I didn't mean to go-

"It's all right." Gentle hands caught his face before he could escape too far, and they wound tenderly about his shoulders to pull him back down and almost completely atop of her. He heard her shaky little breath as his chest flattened against her own, and he twitched as her fingers ran with lazy, errant purpose through his still rumpled crimson hair. She nuzzled his shoulder again, tightening her grip only slightly before she turned her head, her lips brushing against his earlobe when she murmured in a warm, silken voice, "Don't stop."

Sylvain wished he could have said his better sense overrode his instinct, but there was little he could do against the feel of her warm body pressing so intimately against his own. His head turned, lips seeking her own, and she murmured with pleasure the moment they touched. Her hold on him tightened even further as her lips parted for his questing tongue, and he groaned quietly somewhere deep his throat at the foreign but so familiar smell and taste of her. Fresh hay, and marzipan, her favourite sweet for both herself and her horses, and each time she shifted underneath him, he pressed closer and closer, pinning her all the more firmly between the thin mattress of his cot and his own body. She was soft, ridiculously soft, and his hands began to wander across those forbidden curves of hers that he'd been aching to touch and keeping himself far and away from despite every ample opportunity he had been granted both on and off of the field of battle.

"Mmm..." Her soft little purr of satisfaction was more than enough of an acceptance for him to continue, and she deepened his kiss eagerly, her own hands joining in his search as they wandered lazily across the broad expanse of his back and farther below. Her legs stirred, that restlessness returning with that familiar plume of heat deep within, and she was both surprised and secretly pleased when with one expert movement he slid himself between them to push her further down so she could better appreciate his sudden weight. A moan she couldn't quite stifle escaped as her hips arched thoughtlessly upwards, seeking more of him in impatient want, and she was surprised, and a little disappointed when he abruptly pulled away when her hands began to tug instinctively at his tunic.

"Wait a second... I just..." Sylvain sat up abruptly, pushing himself with his hands to get off of her but not entirely pulling himself away or out of her reach. His brow was furrowed, his eyes darkened with trouble and hesitation, and he glanced about the room like he was searching for words before he could look back at her laying down in his bed, clothes and hair rumpled, eyes hungry, and her lips swollen from their hungry trading of deep and deeper kisses. She looked beautiful, and it made every inch of him ache with want of her, but he swallowed down the lump in his throat and cleared it before he spoke again, trying his best to be firm and ignore the sight in front of him that had haunted him dreams for longer than he wanted to admit, "Can you just... answer me one thing? If... If we hadn't gone to war. If we'd graduated, set off, and just lived out our lives like we were supposed to... Would this have happened? Would you still... have chosen me? If the war, if the death, wasn't always hanging over our shoulders... Would things have still worked out this way?"

Ingrid watched him closely, at first unsure why he was again hesitating and pulling back before his words sank in like stones in water. It wasn't his worry that she was rejecting him, nor was it the concern of being second to Glenn... He knew better, just as Dorothea had said he would. Rather, his concern was for her, not for himself, and she could read it in his eyes, even if they were doing
everything he possibly could to avoid looking at her. It made her smile with fond exasperation, and she reached for his cheek, turning his head back in her direction before she answered him quietly, firmly, "It would have. Maybe it might have taken a little longer, but I know that it would have, Sylvain. I would have always chosen you. You aren't taking advantage of me. It's true I'm afraid, afraid of losing you, of being lost, but... It's also true that I love you. But if you feel like it's too soon, or too quick, that's all right. I can wait until you're more sure of things. I did... come on a little strong."

"Just a little. And that's usually my territory." Sylvain agreed with a wry smile, but he appreciated her kindness, and her patience. She really was a saint... but he knew for himself that he wasn't. Even now, his fingers were itching with the urge to touch her, to pull apart her clothes and get to her skin, to make her moan again, louder and this time with his name on her lips... He shook his head, reaching for her chin as he leaned back down, caressing the curve of her lip when he muttered half-seriously, "But waiting... I don't think I've got the self-restraint for that. You don't come into a man's room uninvited, then start kissing him and expect nothing to happen after. Especially a man like me. If you let me continue... You won't be leaving until tomorrow morning. Are you all right with that?"

His left hand had slid down her side, stroking with the strength of a whisper as he lifted her leg and again slipped so easily in between to lay across her again. She inhaled sharply at the sensation of his weight on her body, of his strong hands caressing and stroking her through her clothes, and she wondered why he'd dare to ask. He had more practise with this than she did, and even if he wasn't doing it consciously, every movement he made was instinctual and seductive, and it drew her in with or without her consent. She was aching, on fire, and she didn't care about the consequences any longer. What was the point of it all, when tomorrow, or the next day, neither of them could be there to experience this again?

Her leg lifted of its own volition, sliding across his waist to pull him down, and his hiss of astonished pleasure as his erect centre came into direct contact with her core only made her burn all the hotter. She raised her hips, grinding against him instinctively, and this time he gasped her name as his right hand tightened thoughtlessly on her thigh. His eyes were shut, teeth grit and face almost as red as his hair... and Ingrid felt a surge of confidence that was both wholly unfamiliar, and completely right. This was what she could do to him as a woman, this was her feminine wiles that Dorothea had always gone on about, and she reminded herself to thank her friend later as she arched even further, craving that delicious friction as her mouth grazed his chin before she whispered raggedly, "I don't want to leave at all, Sylvain... Make me yours, and I'll make you mine in return."

Fire burst behind his eyes, and he smirked at her despite his tightened jaw. He leaned down, nuzzling across her neck as his hands moved with rapid speed and precision to unbutton her blouse before she could think twice about it. His lips and teeth dragged across her skin, eliciting breathless, startled moans, and through it all her hips twitched and jerked against his own, making him burn and ache and want with thoughtless abandon. She had asked for it. She wanted him, and by the Goddess herself, he wanted her, just as badly. He sank his teeth into her neck, delighting in her loud, shameless groan as her fingernails scraped at his scalp, and he pulled her blouse open as one hand slid inside to cup and caress her pert breasts. Her hardened nipple grazed his palm, eliciting another breathless groan from her lips, and he smirked, incapable of helping himself... She was new to this, to carnal wants and the wild pleasures a body was capable of feeling when another touched them... but he had all night to teach her. His tongue laved over the spot where he had bitten her, a reminder of what was to come and a reminder of what they'd done, and he glanced up to her once more, chest heaving even as he began shrugging out of his tunic, "Don't regret this in the morning, Ingrid... You'll break my heart."
"I won't, Sylvain. I promise." Ingrid closed her eyes, allowing her body to sink into the pleasure of his rough, callused hands, his lips, his teeth, and the feeling of his hot skin caressing her own as layers of clothing were shed like snakeskin and thrown carelessly aside to the floor. She could admit, five years ago, she never would have ever dared to entertain the thought of being with her old friend like this... but now? Now every touch, new as it was, was warm and familiar, and more than anything, it felt absolutely right. This was Sylvain, her best friend and her oldest partner, and there was no one she trusted more, or cared more deeply for. This was right. This was how things were meant to be. Her mouth found his again, and she groaned as his tongue slid against hers, caressing and tasting and milking out sounds she didn't know she had been capable of making. Yet he was still gentle, and she smiled as her fingers combed again this his hair... Regret this? Never. If anything... "If I get to wake up to you in the morning... I'll be the happiest woman alive. Love me, Sylvain. Love me and make me forget everything but you."

"I can do that for you, Ingrid..."

"Nnm...!"

Chapter End Notes

AN:

I promised there'd be smuttish stuff for the other Blue Lions, and I held up my promise. Mind, this won't be the only, or the last of little "incidents" between the couples I have going on, but it is just the first instance of it. Provoked, of course, by that "fear of war/fear of death" that is constantly hanging over the heads of the soldiers fighting, but it doesn't make the relationship any less real, or the desire any less honest. Of course, Sylvain being Sylvain, and Ingrid being Ingrid... I wanted to have that gentle hesitancy, the concern, and the friendship be just as important as the romance, and the more "fun" bits. My only apology is that it didn't go all the way, but I was hitting ten pages, and my wrists were starting to hurt. X'D

As for the top half of this chapter... I meant it when I said that I wanted things in AM to be harder, and more realistic, for Dimitri. With it being Raine, and not Rodrigue who "bit the bullet" for him, the reaction is bound to be more violent and angry than it would be if it had just been Felix's father. And even then, Felix had very little to say to Dimitri as it was, which was disheartening, considering he never really hated Rodrigue, but was still in the midst of grieving for his brother, and using his grief as a whip to keep people at bay. With Raine however, acting as a moral compass and one of the only "sane men" about, the reaction should have been explosive.

Now, as for where the story goes from here... Dimitri has a redemption arc to earn, but how I'm going about that will admittedly be a bit... Well, who knows. It's difficult to go from here, considering I have to play the chapter (sometimes multiple times) as I write my fics. That means I've held off on certain paralogues, and haven't done as much grinding as I'd have liked to do in order to get certain things done within a good timeframe. So, the next few chapters may be a little off-kilter, but they are what they are!

As always, thank you for taking the time to read, and I hope you enjoyed what you got. I'll see you again later, with a new chapter and more fun stuff to follow. Have a
good one, till we see each other again!

PS: As of writing (or on the day of release, let's be honest), I have finished Cindered Shadows... and, I've made an executive decision that none of it will be included in my canon for plenty of reasons. It's unfortunate, since the lore in the side story was great to find, and the battles were fun (if a bit overly gimmicky), but the characters didn't shine very well in their own story, and it's not really possible for me to insert them into my canon at this point. And, to be honest... I don't want to. I have my own backstory concerning Raine and Warin's mother, and while I am aware that the side-story is "canon"... It simply isn't "my" canon. But that is what fanfiction is for. I only apologize for any fans of the Ashen Wolves, as none of the side-story, and none of the characters there will be making an appearance in my work anytime soon. This note is just to make everyone completely aware that from this point on, the DLC will have no impact whatsoever on Azure Moon: Cerulean Tears, and the story will continue on as if it does not exist.

Mood: Anxious.

Listening To: "World So Cold" - 12 Stones

~ Sky
**Binding Chains**

Chapter Summary

Genres/Ratings: Hurt/Comfort, Angst, Romance, Introspection. (T)

Characters: Dimitri, Raine.

Summary: It had been a long several weeks, stepping into her shoes and pulling the burdens she had once borne onto his shoulders. He knew himself a strong man, it wasn't arrogance to say so, but even he felt his knees creak ominously when he tried to foist the weight entirely upon himself. How had she managed to do it without collapse from the beginning? How had she gone on so long, with so little support? He wasn't sure, but he did know he would carry the weight, and get rid of it, so that when she awoke... She would no longer ever have to concern herself with shouldering anything alone. Even if she did not want him... He would be there, silent and in the shadows, repaying his debt a piece at a time because it was the only thing he knew he could do.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Harpstring Moon**

**Garreg Mach Infirmaries**

**Night**

It was one thing, in the midst of forests and villages and wilderness, to hide his presence and everything about himself to sneak about, undetected and prepared like a predator about to ambush his unsuspecting prey... but it was another entirely for the future king of Faerghus to try to mask his presence in the halls of Garreg Mach. His sheer size made him stick out like a sore thumb no matter what it was he did, and so he had condemned himself to waiting, waiting until the setting of the sun and the closure of the infirmary before he had allowed himself to slip up onto the higher floors, using the shadow and sleep of the world about him to cover his footfall before he found his way to the one room he had not seen, let alone visited, since its sole occupant had been sequestered there since the Battle at Grondor.

It had been three weeks now that she had been underneath the healing coma that Manuela, Dorothea and Mercedes had devised, but they had come with promises in recent days that soon she would be permitted to wake, and then be discharged back to her own quarters. Her body was healing nicely underneath the combination of their magic, and their confidence in her condition had done much to lift the spirits of all in the monastery. Life was simply not the same without their professor, and each of the Blue Lions was feeling it sorely. The rebellion, too, had begun to flag, but with gritted teeth and a steel spine, Dimitri had taken up his professor's fallen mantle and begun to do everything he had neglected.

It had not been easy, but he had not suspected it would be. The men had been hesitant to follow him, and rightfully so, but he had gritted his teeth and buckled down all the same. He supposed he had been lucky with the surprise visit of Caspar and Bernadetta travelling through Garreg Mach.
territory, as they had presented a strange set of opportunities that he had been permitted to leap upon to show his better judgement, as well as his desire to change. The two had heard of the defeat of the Empire in Grondor, and though they both had made it clear they had no intent on staying to join with the rebellion, when they had also been informed of the professor's condition, they had volunteered to stay to provide extra hands, at least for a small duration before their travels would continue.

The doors to the infirmary were closed, and with as little sound as possible, Dimitri opened the door to slide inside of the still room. He had seen all three of the best healers leaving for their rooms for the night, and had waited until most of the monastery would be sleeping before he had risked travelling up here. Even their small councils were no longer being held in the war room, but rather had been relegated to the Knight's Hall, as Dimitri had seen it best to avoid temptation by coming too close to the infirmary. His self-restraint had lasted him three weeks, three weeks of long nights, longer days, politics and battle and work, and he was beginning to grow weary... He wondered if that was what had finally made him crack, and break the oath he'd sworn to wait until she was well and conscious again before showing his face anywhere near her.

Now, with the flicker of a candle in hand, Dimitri almost held his breath as he sidled as quietly as he could about the curtain that had been drawn around the only occupied cot in the room. The sight of her was an axe to the stomach after so long, and he ground his teeth down to stop himself from making any noise as he forced himself to take a good, long look at the unconscious woman in the cot before him. She was asleep on her stomach, her head carefully supported by two pillows, and her clothes neatly folded up and settled on a nearby desk. They had been thoroughly washed, the bloodstains from her wounds in Grondor completely disappeared now, and the only remnants of her wounds were the bandages that peeked out from under the blanket that had been draped so gently over her body. He had to turn his stare away as he realized with a bit of a lurch in his stomach that she was wearing nothing below the neck but the bandages that had been tied around her chest, and while he realized this was likely more pragmatism than anything, the heat in his face reminded him that he still was standing less than a foot next to a half-naked woman, and he owed her more respect than to stare like a stricken schoolboy just because he could see the peek of her pale, smooth skin.

He returned his gaze to the desk where her things had been placed, and he noted with some amusement that her weapons had also been lined up and carefully set aside with her clothes. The dagger she always wore at her waist was still in its sheath and belt, and the Sword of the Creator lay in its sheath alongside it, as well as a pair of gauntlets much like the style of her brother's, but clearly lacking the blades. He wondered idly who had been the one with the courage to take the sword from her belt, and he could only imagine her brother having the lack of care to handle a Relic that was beyond him, and everyone else, in a horrifying fashion when it came to power. There had been a debate of where the sword should go with its master incapacitated and Dimitri had been both amused and annoyed to know that it had ended with Warin declaring it had to stay with her, and any attempt to remove it "for its own safety" was clearly a sign of mistrust of the men and women in the monastery.

It had been a sound argument, though clearly one Seteth had not expected Warin of all people to make, and he had yielded after a moment or two. It helped that the infirmary was only left unmanned during the late night hours, and there were more than enough patrolling guards to put anyone's mind at ease about someone skulking about their professor in the middle of the night. Warin's point had been a sharp one, as well as a cold reminder, that Seteth had been willing to put more security in place for the Sword of the Creator and not the woman who wielded it, if he was willing to leave her unguarded in the infirmary while she healed. Seteth had relented at that, with the only exception of adding another patrol to the night watch, which had initially been an annoyance to Dimitri's plans, until the word of her recovery had put everyone in such a good mood
that security had lessened in the past several days.

Quietly, Dimitri let himself sink down into the nearby chair as he again looked over her sparse collection of belongings. Her clothes, her weapons, and nothing else... Not even a single piece of jewellery, or a bit or bauble any woman would usually have. It was a cold reminder of how closed off she still was, how little she seemed to want or even need, though he knew now her choice of withdrawing from him had been a wise one. He could still remember that glimpse he had had of her quarters after returning her there after the mess that had occurred in the Sealed Forest, and it had surprised and saddened him to see her place of living to be so sparse. She had so little in the way of personal belongings, preferring to stack books from the library beside her well-worn desk, as well as a small collection of whetstones for her weaponry maintenance... yet, her only weapons were her blades, as she proved herself a staunch swordsman, though she did have some proficiency in hand-to-hand, as her brother and father had likely taught her when she was young.

She slept on beside him, oblivious to him and the world entire, and he watched her in thoughtful, pained silence... It was true that she looked healthier, having been underneath the care of three of Fódlan's best healers, but to see her so unnaturally still did his heart no favours. To call her sleeping seemed wrong when she did not twitch or move like one would usually in their sleep. Instead she simply lay still as a statue, her breathing calm and regular, but otherwise showing no signs of life. Her pallor had returned to its usual colour, and the shadows that had been creeping underneath her eyes were gone. The weight she had lost had not yet returned, leaving her thinner than he remembered, but Mercedes had reassured those worried that it would not take long for her to put it back on once she woke and returned to her usual lifestyle.

Yet... Her usual lifestyle had become the problem, though no one had really had the courage to say so even if the thought was in everyone's eyes. She was overburdened, and though there was aid to be had, she simply could not, or would not take it. Dimitri had to wonder if it had been that thought that had softened the cold first-impression he had been met with when he had made it clear he would be taking over for her in the interim. He had taken on all the burdens that had previously her own, and though he'd stumbled, had faltered... He had still stood and took it all without a word of complaint.

Training had been seen to, as had the finer details of the plan to lay siege to Fhirdiad, and every day he joined the new recruits, as well as his old comrades, out on the field in practise bouts and meals as he saw to working himself back into the core of the rebellion's lifestyle. There was wariness, and there was a fair bit of hostility, but Dimitri knew to take it all in stride. He had no other choice, if he was to truly win back any of their favour, and he took any battle that was offered, and left when it was made clearly known that he was not wanted. It was a dangerous game to play, a difficult line to walk... but he would walk it all the same.

A whisper of a breeze blew by his cheek, brushing his bangs across the right side of his face and reminding him of one of the other many changes that had taken place in the past several weeks. It had been Mercedes’ idea, the changing of his hair, and after hearing her argument that a good, new look would make him both feel refreshed as well as give him something new to present to the others... Dimitri had seen little reason not to give her suggestion a try. Now the front half of his hair was pulled back into a small, messy ponytail, somewhat resembling how Felix preferred his hair, with the rest now confined underneath the thick, black strap of his eyepatch band. It left the right side of his bangs free to tickle at his cheek on occasion, but with Mercedes' seal of approval, Dimitri had hesitantly chosen to work with what he had been given. At the very least, a change to his appearance, which he already knew to be intimidating, couldn't hurt him further.

"It's been... strange... All of this. Even the smallest things, the most... inconsequential of things... They do make an impact, even if that impact is small, in and of itself..." Dimitri found himself
speaking without thinking, and he leaned forward on his knees, raising his hands to rest his chin on his knuckles as he looked down quietly at the sleeping woman before him. His chest felt lighter, somehow less constricting as he allowed his words to flow, and he wondered if it was because he hadn't allowed himself to speak of it yet, or simply because it was her when he muttered, "Who would have known something as simple as a change of hair could make someone look at me differently... Would you laugh, I wonder, if you could see me now? Beforehand, nothing mattered. Nothing but revenge... Now, to think I’d be caring for my appearance, in concern of how it would make others view me... To you, I imagine that must be ludicrous... Or perhaps, it's... more close to how things once were... Long, long ago."

It had been five long, long years of running, hunting, pain and anger and suffering... Five long years of swearing vengeance, becoming a beast, and living as a monster... And it made that year beforehand, that single, warm, quiet year of tutelage underneath her patient, kind hand seem all the more distant, and yet somehow also so very, very bright. So bright that it hurt him sometimes to look directly at it and recall all he had shoved aside in the name of revenge, and all he had lost and suffered. Perhaps that was why he had buried it so deeply, had closed his eyes to the light and delved into the dark, but he still could not entirely be sure.

"A few of our comrades say that I've returned to how I once was... It is... difficult to accept those words, knowing how untrue they are. What I was... is what I am. Nothing has truly changed, except for how I now see things. I'm not certain that is enough to say that I, myself, have changed." Dimitri confessed these words quietly, speaking more into his knuckles than to the open room, and he closed his eye, wondering why he couldn't bear to look upon that still, silent form when he knew it would hold no judgement for what he said. It was not as if she could hear, but he spoke to her nonetheless. He had to. A font somewhere inside of him had been sprung open, forcing thoughts and words he had thought he would take to the grave with him spewing forth, and only here, only in her presence, could he find safety to let them loose. "I do not know how to address them... or if I should. Would it only makes things more difficult? Or would my honesty assuage their worries? Dedue argues the former, which I admit, seems accurate... And things have already been so difficult. But... That is penance. If cleansing oneself of sins was easy... This world would be full of saints."

He looked to her again, watching the rhythmic rise and fall of her chest in time with her breathing, and again felt that pulse of guilt and pain deep in his chest. That difficulty... That burden... It only fell to him now because he had ignored it. How long had she carried that weight? How long had she soldiered on through the difficulties, without making a word of complaint to anyone? She did not deserve such a life. Such burdens... Yet they were burdens she took on all the same, and he let out a long, wounded breath, "I owe you... more than I can put into words... and the apologies I wish to say to you... They are beyond count. All of this... is my doing. From the very beginning, I've been a weight upon your shoulders. Unasked for, unlooked for, yet something you took up all of the same. Since the first day we met, outside of Remire... You've never had a single choice in anything, since that day, have you? Everything was decided for you, without your consent, without your input, and along you went, because you believed it best to do as you were told. You never asked for my burdens to be yours. Yet you took them anyway."

Again his eyes closed, and he remembered that day outside of the Sealed Forest, when he had teetered, when he had fumbled, and when he had turned his back on her. Carrying her in his arms, knowing she depended on him and needed him, and yet... Still, he had chosen another path. A path without her. His teeth ground down impulsively, and his hands tightened until his knuckles turned white. The flow of rage and self-loathing burnt hot, but beneath it was cold shame, shame and disappointment and wistfulness, and it turned his voice mournful as he continued regretfully, "Despite all that you did for me until then... Despite how much you put into knowing me, helping me, guiding me... I abandoned you that day. I chose my path of revenge, rather than a path of
potential healing. The thought of you burnt me. Terrified me. It made so many things I had clung to until that moment seem small, and insignificant. What did the dead matter, compared to you? What did anything matter, compared to you? I had felt it before, that day when Captain Jeralt lost his life, and I thought it may have been you... and the world stopped for me, just for a moment. If you were dead... The world could fall away without consequence... and the thought of that, the thought you, upending everything I had lived for until that moment... I wouldn't allow it."

More pain. His hands were aching, and he looked to them without truly seeing them to notice he had clenched down until his nails had pressed bruises into his skin. He didn't doubt they would last days, but he didn't mind. They were trivial compared to the ache in his chest, and the aching in his temples. It was all memory, memory and heartache he had worked so hard to erase, but it had never truly gone away. Instead it had simmered beneath the surface all of these years, in horrific nightmares and wild, insane fantasy, and he let out another breath as he forced himself to lean back, to loosen his posture and relax himself as he muttered raggedly, "And then... you were gone. Lost to the siege... and I was imprisoned shortly after. I dreamt of you rescuing me. Returning from the grave to break me free, and when you never appeared... Tch... I was foolish. To spurn you, and then wish for you to save me... I was selfish, too. You were dead and gone, then... and even when I found freedom, you were the one shackle I couldn't cut away. Was it regret? Was it longing? Anger...? I wish I knew. Even now... I cannot tell you what it was I felt all these years for you. It all became so jumbled together, so mixed and muddled until I didn't know whether I hated you, or loved you."

A bitter chuckle escaped his lips, and he knew full well the truth despite his questions. It simply felt too freeing to stop himself from speaking, even though the honest truth was still something he was afraid to speak. It was shame now that held his tongue, shame and a deep, cold sense of horror, but it was something he knew he had to face. She had never haunted him as the others had. He had supposed it would only be a matter of time before her ghost joined the others, joined Glenn, his father and his stepmother, but that time had never came. Instead, she had haunted him when he slept... In dreams and nightmares and fantasies that were both a balm, and the sharpest of wounds or deadliest of poisons. He had been but a boy when he had met her, but it had not made her any less beautiful to him... and as a man... As a man, she made him more of a beast than any of his deeds ever could.

He shuddered reflexively, and swallowed the knot that had formed in his throat with great effort. He reached over silently, plucking the blanket from her and carefully, slowly, pulling it farther up until not a shred of her skin could be seen. It both shamed and embarrassed him, knowing that even the barest sight of her torso was enough to stir him, even when she was like this, but there was no denying his body's reaction. Still, even after all this time, he wanted her. Even in the worst throes of his madness, that hadn't changed. The nightmares had persisted, had chiselled away at his conscience and whispered in his ear that he was indeed a monster for thinking of her as he did, for creating these images in his mind that made him wake throbbing, panting, and aching with want and self-hatred long after the fog of sleep and dreams had released him.

"Everything I do now... It is spurred by you. The greater good is the end goal, and it's what should drive me more than anything, but... I know that in the end... All I wish for more than anything is to see you smile again as you used to. Even if it isn't me that brings that look back to your face, that in the end, is my dearest wish." Dimitri ran a hand tiredly through his hair, and his hands settled on his knees as he watched her, closely, carefully, and forced himself not to reach for her. Her hand had felt so cold on his skin that day in Grondor, warm and slick with her own blood, but her flesh had been that of ice... and more than anything, he wanted to touch her hand again, feel her warmth, and remind himself that she was, indeed, alive.

The action of course was beyond question. He was crossing more than enough boundaries by
simply being there, and he would not cross more. He was selfish enough to give himself this, but he would take no more from her, even if it would be a balm, and a boost he sorely needed. She had given enough without him there to provide for her, and to take when she was in no position to give consent... That was heresy. Yet, it didn't stop him from speaking to her, giving himself an outlet he had not had until that moment, and he knew his selfishness ran deeper than he wanted to admit. He was being hypocritical, yet... What other options did he really have?

"So much has been done these past three weeks... I wonder if you would have approved of my actions... I... I tried to act as you would. Tried to think as you would... but I am... unsure if I would have met your standards..." Dimitri admitted quietly, and a wry, awkward smile curled at his lips as he wondered why, even now, he was seeking her approval like he was still her bumbling and unsure student. She had awed him as a boy, with her skill and talent and experience despite how few years she had on him, and even now... She still continued to make him shrink back from her in surprise and wonder. Was it simply because of how he felt for her, or was she truly that good? Perhaps it was a mixture. He could not tell. But he continued all the same, feeling his tension releasing, feeling himself lighten as he told her of the happenings she had missed in her sleep, "In the end, I think... It was Petra that provided me with that one stepping stone I needed the most to show my intent, and to prove I was at least worth putting faith in again for one more try. And to have that chance given to me by Petra of all people, who has no stake in this war, in the Kingdom's affairs... You were right to bring her into the fold of the Blue Lions. To show us of a world beyond Faerghus. She has made us all wiser... and she has been much kinder to me than I have deserved."

Petra had spoken to him bluntly of the precarious position Brigid had been in since the beginning to the Empire's start of conquest, but until now, they had been able to balance themselves into a strange place of neutrality. The defeat at Grondor had the Empire scrambling for allies and men from wherever they could take them, and Brigid was ripe with fresh soldiers, and still, in name, a vassal state to the Empire. With her grandfather as leader because of her youth, Petra had been free to leave Brigid to answer the call of the promise they had all made, but now he requested his granddaughter's aid... and Petra had asked for Dimitri's in return.

"To think, my first foray to the field after Grondor would be not Fhirdiad, not Enbarr, but Brigid... Had you told me this moons ago, I would have called you a fool. Yet... There I went, all the same..." Dimitri mused quietly, thinking of that strong, quiet, but sincere intensity that had inflamed Petra's adust eyes when she had come to him, not as a comrade but as another future ruler with the request to help free her homeland from the Empire, and amass sorely needed troops for the rebellion's next move... He was not sure if her bravery had impressed him, or had cowed him. She was a ruler in training, unlike his fellow nobles, with an entire country to shoulder, and she carried the burden far better than he ever could. She spoke plainly and factually, that with or without him she would be returning to Brigid to meet the Empire's forces head-on to protect her homeland... but he would not permit her to do so. "I don't believe I was wrong to go with her... No, it was the right thing to do, but... I admit, selfishly, I was glad for the opportunity to show my mettle, and my honesty. Perhaps that's why she told me from the start. She did not need my permission to return home. She certainly did not need my blessing, either... She could have rallied a group of men all on her own, and I know the entirety of our class would have leapt at the chance to give her aid, yet she came to me all the same... I owe her much for how things have gone, since then... Taking back Brigid, ensuring her homeland's safety and well-being... It was right, and it... it gave me the chance I had been seeking."

The battle had been a hard one, but he had not allowed Petra to fight it alone, despite her insistence that if he was not of mind to give her aid, she would not judge him poorly. She had pragmatic opinions of the fighting between the Kingdom and the Empire, knowing that Brigid needed to step out of the shadows in order to join either as a commanding, respected country of its own rather than a vassal state... and either side would have granted her this opportunity. Yet, she had also admitted
it was loyalty to Raine and to the Blue Lions that had made her answer the call to the promise first, and pragmatism for Brigid's best interests second... and while she was here, fighting alongside the rebellion... She would be a Blue Lion first, and a queen-to-be second. That thought had goaded him more than anything else into pledging himself to her cause, and he had taken to the field alongside her, ready, willing and determined to prove his words were not empty... and grateful, painfully grateful, that she would allow for it after the way she had said so plainly that the end of the Kingdom was of no consequence to her if it did not impact her homeland.

"With Brigid secured, and protected, we have added more men to our army... and Petra has thrown her support wholly behind me. I do not deserve it, but she has called it a simple choice. If I were to risk life and limb for her homeland, even if it was of benefit to myself and our fight... Then she saw no reason to not give her loyalty to me, as she gave to you." Dimitri wondered at the woman's confidence, as well as her ability to cut aside details and nuance to get to the heart of the matter, but he appreciated her and her simple wisdom deeply. She was a stalwart ally, and one he considered himself lucky to have on his side. She would have been a ferocious enemy otherwise, and he did not want to imagine how the circumstances could have changed, had they never been comrades to begin with. The thought made him smile wryly, and he almost chuckled as he mused softly, "If I am lucky, then I must admit I consider Ashe to be blessed. He threw his support behind her without question, and she was not remiss in showing her gratitude to him rather... openly. She took him with her to meet her grandfather, despite all objections he raised, and he raised many... The Kingdom will miss him, when he eventually goes to Brigid, but if he is to find his dream and happiness there... It will be of no consequence to us."

He had wondered at first, when it had all began and how he had missed it, but stepping back from the shadows and looking at things with new eyes had opened his mind to the reality of all that was going on with his old friends and comrades. He had missed it simply because he could not bear to look at it. It was easier to ignore the small, desperate grabs for happiness and peace that his friends were snatching for themselves in the midst of the war than it was to see them and feel glad for them, as it only was a sharp reminder of what he did not have, and what, deep down, he sorely wanted. Envy had made him as much of a monster as revenge had, but at least now, he could say honestly, that he no longer felt those dark pangs of jealousy for the things he saw. Instead there was only happiness, true and deep happiness, because he knew how precious those moments could be, and what strength could be derived from it when all seemed grim and dark.

"You had said at the great bridge, that this was what we were fighting for. I had pretended not to understand... but I knew what you meant. Seeing Ferdinand and Dorothea... I knew. How could I not? It was that very thing that drove me mad in the first place... and you knew it, too." Dimitri sighed, both with guilt and regret, but his lips were still slightly upturned with a painful sort of amusement and happiness... He felt for his comrades, and he shared their joy and their comfort, even if it was only from afar. It was soothing to see, happiness and love blooming amongst the bloodstained fields of battle, but that too, was also the way of war. Life was short already. Battle made it shorter. To seize happiness where it could be taken, regardless of the consequence, of the duration of that happiness... That was natural human selfishness... and he did not wish to deny them a moment of it, or think it useless. He knew better, and would act accordingly, as he knew she wanted him to. "You knew, and were seeking to stop it before it could even begin, regardless of what it cost you. How many lives have you saved? How much happiness can we directly trace back to your doings...? The chains of command have been cruel to you, but you have not allowed them to make you cruel in return... It's that aspect of you that has allowed you to make former enemies into your most staunch of allies."

Ferdinand had approached him already to beg for a place to be put, whether on the battlefield or no, so he could repay his debts... and in another lifetime, Dimitri knew he would have thrown him from the monastery, or killed him outright because of his former allegiance. Now...? All he could
feel was shame, shame and a deep sense of mourning for the desperation Ferdinand had showed to him at his lowest. He was a broken man, no longer capable of fighting, but still so desperate to pay back the woman who had led him home instead of striking him down when she had stood as his enemy. His life, and his happiness, he owed directly to Raine. The fact that he could do nothing now to support her, that he couldn't wield a lance in her name... It broke him, and Dimitri knew just how deeply that guilt had to run.

"Ferdinand is a good man. A loyal, patriotic man... He has been done a grave wrong, and he has done many wrongs in return, but... I cannot say that he was misguided. It would be hypocritical. At the very least, for him, all he ever wished was for the good of his homeland, and when he knew it had gone too far, he was ready to throw down his weapon in disgust... Saving him from himself was the right choice to make... but I wonder if you thought beyond that..." Dimitri let out another low breath, and he glanced to the ceiling thoughtfully. Ferdinand had presented a unique opportunity to him, to them all, as a former noble of high esteem in the Empire, and though Edelgard had stripped him and his family of their titles and land... He still, by blood, was someone with massive power and influence inside of their enemy's country. "He has said that though his days as a soldier are over, he is still a noble... and he hopes, someday and somehow, when Edelgard and her taint have been washed from the Empire that perhaps reforms can be made for his homeland. He is not ignorant to the fact that this war will tear down the Empire... but he still hopes for it to be rebuilt. And that... That is not a thought I have given much time to. Is it a possibility? Can the Empire be reformed and rebuilt, if this war is won...? Have you thought of such things already? Have you hoped for them?"

She didn't answer, but Dimitri did not need her to. He knew her well enough to know it had to have at least crossed her mind, with how she had spoken so fiercely of the fact that the Emperor was not the Empire entire, regardless of how it had to have looked to him. There were soldiers and smallfolk alike being crushed underneath the boot of Edelgard's rule, and to first free them, it meant cutting off the head of the snake... but what was to be done of the remnants left behind afterwards? He was not a conqueror, regardless of what his wishes had once been. He had given no thought or energy to what would come afterwards. Such thoughts had never even occurred to him... but he knew the same could not be said of her.

"Despite what you said to us as students, to look at the battle ahead and never beyond the horizon of it... You cannot practise what you preach now as a commander. You have never been looking at the battle at your feet. You've been ten steps ahead, of both all of us, and of her... and now, you leave me wondering if you've been even farther into the future, planning for the end, and what lays even beyond that." The thought made him chuckle ruefully, but it also left him with a bittersweet sort of understanding. Her exhaustion made far more sense when he looked to her in this light, rather than in the other. She was never simply looking to the present. She couldn't afford to do so, not when she knew her enemy would not be content to do the same. So she changed her ways, her methods, to match and get ahead... and get ahead she had, if the battle in Grondor had proven anything. "A truce with the Alliance, built right under our noses... and a possible foothold into the Empire, to establish peace and hope of rebuilding and reformation, when the war ends... Not only have you put the future of Faerghus onto your shoulders, but the entirety of Fódlan, too... and you spoke nothing of it to anyone. Forgive me."

A conflicted sense of satisfaction and anger burnt inside of his chest and made his eye smart, and he wondered at the outrage he was feeling on her behalf. It was something he was only realizing and therefore only coming to grips with, but it made him understand Warin's anger and hatred in a far more intimate way now. The mercenary had claimed, without a hint of deceit, that he cared not for the continent and its squabbles, and would sooner watch it burn than risk his neck to put out the fires it itself had lit... and he could understand now why he felt that way. All of his life, too, had been a path dictated for him by his father, and by the fear of the Church of Seiros, and only now
was he free of those bonds. Yet he stayed, stayed because he had given himself one chain and one chain only to abide by, and that chain was his sister. And his sister... His sister was wrapped from head to toe in chains, and not one of those chains could she remove of her own volition.

No, instead they had been wrapped around her, choking and strangling and weighing her down until she could barely crawl underneath the weight of it all. But crawled on she did, because she knew no other way of life, and Dimitri burned for her in indignance even if she would not, or could not do so for herself. The church had robbed her of her family, and then had forced a burden she was completely unprepared for onto her shoulders. She had lost five years, only to return and once again have a mantle she did not want shoved into her hands, and not one soul had tried to make it easier for her since. It made him hate himself, himself and the Church for what they were forcing her to do, and he admitted that in a ragged breath, "Archbishop Rhea called you "chosen" by the Goddess... but what has that given you, really...? What blessing has she bestowed on you, in return for all she's demanded? Was this how Saint Seiros felt, when she led her army against Nemesis? Burdens upon burdens... Aching for freedom... because she did not want what the Goddess had demanded of her? Is that why, in Grondor... you looked so peaceful... because you believed it was finally over?"

The words burnt on his tongue, bit deep into his soul, but he had seen what no one else had in that dimming light in her seafoam-green eyes that day. The relief that she showed was not only for his safety. It was one fact he had absolute confidence in. Despite the pain of her wounds, despite the obvious suffering she was enduring... She had smiled, not only for him, but also for herself. He had felt that wanting before, he still felt that wanting even now, but never had he had the strength or the will to act upon it. No, he had reasoned that when the time came, it would come at the sword of someone he had wronged, of someone he had indirectly harmed on his own bloody path, and then he would see the flames take him for all of his sins. But even then, he knew, he would feel relief for the end to have finally come to claim him. That same feeling he had seen on her face that day, even if it tortured him to admit it, and it made his hands clench on his knees as he asked, "Did you wish for death that badly, Professor...? Did we... Did I... force you so tightly into a corner that death would be a relief for you?"

No answer came, but he did not need, nor truly want to have one. Either kind, a denial or an admittance would break him when he already knew the truth. He could only hope no one else would know, that no one else would guess, lest that guilt spread like a plague amongst the men and the Blue Lions. Already they were wilting, coming to grips with the fact that again they had all failed her in their own ways, and he was not sure this failure was something they could live with. It was taking too much from all of them to rally again without her, which only made him ache all the more fiercely. She was truly the glue that held them all together, and without her... There really was no one else capable of filling her shoes, regardless of how they tried.

Dimitri took in a deep, shuddery breath, and reminded himself of why he had come. There was still more for him to tell, more for him to ruminate on, and to spend his precious minutes in a cycle of self-loathing and guilt would do him no good. It was true he would find no counsel from an unconscious woman, but he did not want counsel. He simply wished to speak aloud for once, with no judgement, with no one to either build him up or tear him down. Only she could give him that, and he reached blindly, forcing his voice to steady as he thought for the mission looming on the dawn of the morrow, "Tomorrow... We march out for the Sealed Forest. Caspar came by alarming news of the Death Knight's presence there, as well as a handful of soldiers... Bernadetta only barely managed to keep him from charging out himself then and there... but what worries me more is Mercedes' reaction. She seems just as eager as Caspar to meet the Death Knight again, but she won't speak to anyone on why... To leave them there as they are is out of the question, but I admit, I hesitate on what to do with Mercedes... It isn't as if I have the authority to tell her she cannot go. I have not yet tried to make such a command, nor do I wish to... but I worry for her, all the same.
Since the reports, she has not been herself. Even Felix is showing concern."

In the end, Dimitri was already aware that he would likely allow Mercedes to head out along with them to confront the Death Knight and his men, and to try to stop her would be a useless endeavour. She was twice as stubborn as any mule when the mood took her, and she was the one person he did not wish to test the temper of. He had been lucky enough with her aid already. It had been unlooked for but still given readily, but he knew better than to assume it meant forgiveness. After all, who had been the one to stay beside their professor since the moment she had seen her wounded? What she had seen and done in the past several weeks had given her intimate knowledge of Raine's condition... and if she blamed him, which he did not doubt she did... She was holding it tightly to her chest in order to preserve the peace.

"I wonder of their goal, being so close to Garreg Mach, after the defeat in Grondor... It makes little sense to me, and I admit I cannot see the Death Knight being here underneath Edelgard's orders... He has been a ferocious foe each and every time we met him on the field, and to lose him in this manner would be foolish..." Dimitri mused quietly, and he thought of how odd it had felt, and how uncertain it had made him, to hear Warin agree with him when he had been speaking of this opinion beforehand when the news had first broke. Warin's hostility had not ebbed since that day in the rain by the stables, yet in place of his sister, he attended every war meeting, and gave his opinion without pause or care for how his presence looked to the others. Some accepted him without question, viewing him as their professor's equal, but Dimitri was aware that Gilbert did not hold him in the same esteem, and Seteth was still wary of him. Their agreement however on the Death Knight's behaviour had united the table for once though, and he continued with a slow shake of his head, "Guessing at his motives however does not change the threat he poses... and to strike him down now would be another sorely needed boon, if it is manageable... He cannot be left to his own devices, so close to the monastery... He, and his, will be routed with extreme prejudice... and perhaps we will learn something of him, and the men that follow him. From the reports of the scouts, they are not Imperial troops, but soldiers of another league entirely... Perhaps men underneath Thales' command, if your brother's guess is accurate..."

It was too much to speculate on with the little information they had, but Dimitri would admit that at least it had real merit. Had they not, time and time again, seen these darkly-garbed soldiers and mages, interspersed with the Imperial forces at every turn? When reinforcements had arrived in Grondor, Rodrigue had spoken of the fact that only half of their numbers had been flying a flag of the Empire, with the other showing no colours of any sort. While it was true they worked in tandem, they was a clear divide between them nonetheless... and more and more, Dimitri was realizing that where these dark-robes appeared, Demonic Beasts always were quick to follow. The Death Knight's appearance matched this pattern, so the odds were high that perhaps he was acting out of step with the wishes of the Imperial army... but that only rose questions of who he served, why, and what his motives were for breaking the illusion of his being a faithful servant of the Emperor.

"Tomorrow, perhaps we will find answers... If we do not, I cannot say it will be a loss. They must be driven from our territory to ensure the safety of our men, and the surrounding villages... Only with that can we leave Garreg Mach for Fhirdiad, at the end of the moon... I would not dare risk a march of our forces so far from the monastery otherwise." The call for the capitol was strong, incredibly strong, but Dimitri knew he had to weigh his desires to show himself trustworthy to natural prudence. Taking the best with him for a strike to the Dukedom meant leaving the monastery undermanned, even with their bolstered numbers, and the knowledge that the Empire was still in complete disarray was only a small comfort. But it meant the window was closing with each day they delayed, and the pressure was a tight, unrelenting grip.

"Rodrigue assures me my concern is unneeded. Though Grondor has not been taken formally by
any territory, we still hold the Great Bridge... and the Alliance has sent a small force to aid us in
keeping it well-manned. A token of goodwill, Claude had called it... Wrestled from him nearly at
lance-point, no doubt, if Warin is to be believed... " Dimitri sighed and ran a hand tiredly through
his hair again, and he wondered at what other difficulties would arise from the Alliance leader. He
had been firm in wanting to deal with Raine and Raine only, but that had been out of the question
then. Dimitri knew full well when word of her recovery reached his ears that the request for
favours would come pouring in... and they could not be ignored after what had occurred in
Grondor. After all, despite Raine's best efforts, the Alliance forces had taken nearly as much
damage as the Imperial army, and their need would be great if they, too, planned to take the war to
the home-front, before turning their attention to driving out the remnants of the Empire's grip on
their territory. "Yet, for all his willingness to fight alongside us in Grondor, I suppose he is only
looking out for his best interests. To keep his own men stationed on the bridge keeps the Alliance's
troops aware of both the Empire and rebellion's movements... He is wary of us, and he has his
rights to be. Grondor was a stroke of good fortune. Such things rarely occur twice. If we wish to
prove ourselves allies of merit, it is best we work alongside one another now, and not later."

Which only led to the one question that had been whispered about, but not yet spoken of aloud,
even at the war councils... Once the Alliance had stability, as the Kingdom would... Would they
turn their men to Enbarr, or allow for the Empire and Kingdom to fight the rest of the war out?
There was no doubt that a two-pronged attack upon the capitol would have the most chance of
success, but to make any such request of the Alliance was not something Dimitri could do. Claude
had already made it clear any negotiation that would take place about truces and treaties would
only be something he would consider if Raine was the one to speak with him, and Dimitri had no
intention of trying to take her place on such unsteady ground. It did not matter that it seemed a
matter of simple mathematics. Claude had his own worries to concern himself with, and if he had
no interest in aiding the rebellion further, that was not a position that could be challenged by the
likes of him. Not when only two moons prior, he had not considered the idea of a truce with the
Alliance at all.

His eyelids felt heavy, and his body was aching both with the pain of his still-healing wounds, and
the reminder that more battle was to come with the dawn. He could not stay without risking falling
asleep in the chair he sat in, and with great difficulty, Dimitri forced himself back to his feet. The
last thing he needed, that anyone needed, was knowing he had snuck into the infirmary to see her
alone and in the depths of the night. Any goodwill he had scraped and clawed for would disappear
in an instant, and it would be well deserved.

Still... For a moment, Dimitri lingered at her side as he watched her closely... Longingly. Her hand
peeked out from the corner of the blanket, small, and pale... and without thought, he stooped to
reach and brush his fingers along the back of it. Her skin was warm, a jarring change from that day
in Grondor, and unbidden, a sigh of relief escaped him. Her hand felt soft, softer than a hand that
had been holding a sword for the majority of its life had any right to be... and it felt incredibly
fragile underneath his own. Was it his Crest's strength that made it seem so, or simply the fact that
she was still laying unconscious? He could not tell, and he did not want to. His fingertips traced the
shape of her knuckles, lingering on her own fingers before he sighed softly, "You've saved me with
these hands more times than I can count... Guided me, led me through the dark, and pulled me
unceremoniously back into the light when I was sure it was the end... I'd be a liar if I said I didn't
want to hold onto your hands for the rest of my days, and keep them warm for the rest of your life.
Warm, safe, and clean of the blood you'd have to spill on my account... When you wake... I will tell
you everything. And when you reject me... I'll stay your guardian in the shadows, until the day
comes when someone better than I can finally give you the happiness you deserve... but I won't
forget. I wont forget... and I will never stop loving you. I swear it."
AN:

As uneventful as a piece this is, I still had to write it to really showcase all that's gone on, how hard it's been, and how difficult life really is for the rebellion without their professor there to be guiding them. In every route, it's made explicitly clear that any success that is gained really is owed to Byleth. Even in CF, when the Imperial army has everything it needs to continue on forward... They still stall out at the timeskip because they are simply that handicapped by Byleth's absence. (And their successes are even fewer than in all routes where Edelgard is not your chosen lord, which is even more darkly humourous, depending on your take of things.) Having a Byleth be taken out mid-game, even if only for a little while, I imagine creates a similar amount of chaos considering the sheer weight they're carrying as leader of the rebellion, regardless of whether or not they took that leadership willingly, or had it shoved unceremoniously onto them.

Of course, in AM, it's pretty damn clear Raine is struggling underneath something she didn't sign up for, and it's really only being noticed now because of her extreme measures in keeping Dimitri safe. Her idea however of how well they could continue without her sadly is not a realistic one. Dimitri's proven himself less than trustworthy, and to gain back the respect and faith of his men, he needs both time and opportunity to do so, and that is both in short supply. (Hence the mentions of some paralogues, which would give him those chances.) And that is something clearly lacking in AM, a good, strong arc of rebuilding Dimitri back up from the ground, but I can understand time constraints. Thankfully, fanfiction is a great cure for it, as I like to say.

Raine however will be recovering from being out of action next chapter, so no more worries for her. Still, I can imagine you guys can guess where she'll be thrown next, being up and about now. Any predictions on how it will go, or the rating it will deserve? I'm wondering at your guesses! And how about the plot? What do you think I'm leading up to, if I haven't been clear enough on it? Or, perhaps, what do you hope I'm leading up to? Any feedback would be nice, as always!

PS: Warin and Raine's chat is coming, but unfortunately it's still a few chapters out, as the next two chapters are Dimitri/Raine centric. However, I haven't forgotten about him, and he will be having a serious sit-down with his sister, but timing is sadly everything, and I can't cover too many topics per chapter, or push everything into one moon. His moment with Raine will be taking place after Fhirdiad's capture, so I'll beg for patience as I continue on writing! Thanks for the understanding!

Anyway, it's time for me to sign off and go back to sleep, as per usual. Thank you so much for reading this far, and I hope you have a good one. Please leave a review should you feel the need, and I'll see you again soon!

Mood: Sore.

Listening To: "Living in the Shadows" - Matthew Perryman Jones (Love, Death and Robots)

~ Sky
Truth and Scars

Chapter Summary

Genres/Ratings: Romance, Hurt/Comfort, Angst, Introspective. (T)

Characters: Raine, Dimitri.

Summary: Waking up in the infirmary had been an unpleasant surprise for her, especially with her back burning from the still-healing scar of the dagger-wound she had received in Grondor. What had followed in her three-week-long absence from leadership however had proven a better sort of shock, though she still remained guarded at all the news that was trickled to her by word of mouth from her healers. It would take several more days before she was discharged formally, several days of visits and well-wishes and excited and relieved smiles that made her feel a liar to answer with one of her own across her face... but she could wait until she was sequestered in her own room to be honest with herself. At the very least there, in privacy, she could sigh and rest in peace. A turn to Fhirdiad was good news... but the continued absence of the "reformed" Dimitri was a worry. She would chase after him eventually, as she knew she had to, but asking for one more night of quiet couldn't be too much, could it?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Harpstring Moon

Dormitories (Professor's Quarters)

Twilight

Raine glanced over her shoulder as she sat on the edge of her bed, looking at her reflection silently as her fingertips grazed that gently throbbing patch of skin that had seen more magic than the rest of her body likely had even after her many years of battle. She had denied the first offer she had been given of seeing the wound that had taken her out of the action for three long weeks when she had first woken up in the infirmary several days ago, and though she didn't regret her choice... She had to admit, she wasn't entirely sure if what she was looking at was a pleasant, or an unpleasant sight. It was not the worst kind of scar she could have had from a stab wound, and she knew her body was a mess of them, as was the way of any mercenary... but it had been a grave wound, and one that had caused all sorts of chaos from the moment it had been inflicted on her in the fields of Grondor.

The dagger had come close to killing her. Too close... Yet the scar it left wasn't as bad as the condition she had been in afterwards. It was a rough, jagged mark in her shoulderblade, right overtop of her heart and carving in downwards, but otherwise there was no real sign of outer damage. All of the injury had been inside, with the blood loss and the shock and her already flagging body, or at least, that was how Mercedes had explained it to her when she had been conscious enough to hear the details. The wounds she had been ignoring during the battle had done worse to her body overall than that single stab in the back, but it had been enough in the end to
bring her down. She had already been on the verge of collapse, physically and mentally... That last wound had been the final straw.

Raine sighed as she twisted herself slightly further to get a better look, though she wasn't entirely sure why she wanted one. She had accumulated many scars over the years. Lance wounds, arrowheads that she had been forced to dig out with a dagger, slashing axe and sword injuries... and hidden under bandages and tonics and magic they had all healed, and eventually faded until she couldn't really even remember where most of them had come from. This one however she doubted would be falling under that category anytime soon, but she knew better than to really care. Personal appearance had never been important to her. A scar was just a scar. She was only happy that her sword-arm was still functional.

Still, her fingertips brushed with careful, hesitant interest over the raised and darkly reddened skin... There was little pain left in it, after all of the healing that had been forced into her body. It ached more than anything, but even that was little and rather easy to ignore. What was worse was the grogginess, the weight of her body being active again after having been in a coma for three weeks, but she had known better than to complain about that. Manuela, Dorothea and Mercedes had all looked as ill as she had felt on waking, and learning they had spent the better part of three weeks looking after her ceaselessly... No, complaining was out of the question. It would be far too selfish, and childish, to complain.

Instead, for the following several days, Raine had played the part of a perfect patient until she had been discharged. She had rested, taken her medications and remedies, and done whatever she had been told without a word of argument. She hadn't asked after anyone, not after being told the mission in Grondor had been a success and all had come out alive, but unfortunately, the hope of not being asked after hadn't lasted very long. As soon as word had spread that she was awake, the stream of visitors and well-wishers had started... and no amount of scolding from any of her healers could keep the crowd at bay.

It had been difficult, pasting a smile over her face when she had greeted her students and fellow generals, but she had somehow managed it despite how tired and irritated she had felt at first. Thankfully Mercedes had at least managed to enforce a "greet and go" rule that left her undisturbed after the initial hubbub, and for that she knew she owed Mercedes a great deal. Now, discharged with only the caveat that she keep from the training fields for at least another day or two... Raine was permitted to be well and truly alone, and she both basked in the silence, and bristled with unease in it.

How long would she be given, before she would be thrust back into leadership? She wasn't quite sure, especially with the news that Dimitri had apparently turned over a new leaf during her absence. It was obvious he still didn't have the full support of the rebellion, but he had made strides, and those strides were being recognized. At the very least, the majority of the Blue Lions seemed convinced that his change of heart was real, and they were all onboard for his next move into Fhirdiad. She, at least, also agreed with that, and was happy to hear that he was turning from Enbarr and back homewards... but it still did not make her any more comfortable with all she had missed out on, and all that was still to come.

A near takeover in Brigid by the desperate Imperial army, an encounter with the Death Knight far too close to Garreg Mach, along with the knowledge that the man underneath that skeletal helmet was Mercedes' brother... Raine shivered. She would have preferred to have been there, for Petra and Mercedes both, but there was no helping it now. The Death Knight had fled, though he had left his sister a Hero's Relic as some morbid sort of parting gift, and Caspar and Bernadetta would soon be leaving the monastery as well. She had been glad to see the two in good health and good spirits, and hadn't begrudged them their decision to continue to wander and avoid the worst of the war as
best they could... Bernadetta wanted nothing to do with the conflict, and Caspar was ceding to her wishes, as best as he was able. When the Empire finally fell, perhaps a return home would be in their future, but that was something they weren't speaking of aloud, and Raine didn't blame them for a moment.

Another shiver sent goosebumps racing up and down her skin, and Raine sighed as she glanced about idly for her shirt and cloak. She had removed all of her bandaging and clothing to inspect herself fully in the privacy in her room, but sitting topless in the dormitories for nearly an hour on end, inspecting her scar and falling into thought wasn't doing her still-recovering body any favours. She still quite at risk for getting sick again, and with the strict diet that was to follow her recovery plan of rest and lesser duties, Raine was well aware she was not quite yet out of the woods.

They had called her a mess of a patient, and Raine had been forced to bite the inside of her cheek to stop herself from making dark japes that she doubted any single one of her healers would have appreciated. She had known she was a mess, and she had simply lacked the energy or the will to care or do anything about it. Her lost weight, the multitude of ill-cared for injuries, the lack of sleep that had made her weak in both the mind and body... She knew full well she was not healthy, and she also knew full well she was on her way to careening headlong off a cliff if she continued as she was. The problem was that she simply did not have it in her to care.

There were too many other things that were taking precedence, and anything even remotely personal had to be shoved aside if she wanted to deal with it all. There was no real help to be gained from her "advisors", and most of what she did, she did alone, or in secrecy. There was training to be seen to, rations to be dealt out, supplies to be gained, alliances and truces to be maintained, and missions upon missions upon missions to prepare for. And that wasn't even beginning to delve into the finer details of keeping her soldiers supplied with weapons and intelligence, while simultaneously lying through her teeth to her advisors of her real doings with her students in between the heavy burdens of battle. It was enough to drive anyone with any real experience mad and to exhaustion, and she had none of the experience needed to be obeyed, or even taken remotely seriously on her best days. For all of the leadership they wished for her to do... She certainly wasn't getting an iota of respect for it.

At the very least, the apologies Seteth, Gilbert, and Rodrigue had all given to her in the infirmary had been something she had enjoyed taking, even though it had irritated her beyond belief to be hearing it now of all times. She had been forced to prove herself worthy by way of subterfuge, long after the mantle of leading had been placed on her shoulders, before they really would consider her ideas to have merit. If it hadn't been for Manuela, enraged on her behalf and kicking the lot of them from the infirmary personally, Raine would have likely taken her sword in hand herself and beaten the lot of the men over the head with it until someone restrained her. Not a one of them had come by for a second visit, and she hoped they would keep their distance for awhile longer until seeing any of them didn't fill her with the rabid desire to punch the lot of them straight in the mouth.

Three loud knocks on the door brought her from her reverie, and Raine looked over her shoulder to it before letting out a long, tired sigh. No one had come to see her since she had left the infirmary, and she doubted anyone was foolish enough to try and speak to her in her own quarters now that she had been banished to them. The healers had made themselves perfectly clear that while she was awake she was still not better, and if everyone wished for a full recovery, they would be best leaving her alone as much as physically possible. When she returned of her own will they could bombard her as they wished, but that was still a few days coming. The only one likely to ignore those orders was her brother, and he had only visited her once in the infirmary, with a nod and all the information he knew she wanted before he had left her alone to heal and to rest. To say she appreciated his kindness was an understatement, and if he wished to visit her now... She couldn't very well turn him away.
"Come on in, Warin. The door is unlocked, so no point in standing out in the cold on ceremony."
Raine called idly over her shoulder as she reached for the nearest shirt on hand and stood, stretching her muscles carefully as that throbbing set up again almost at once at her movement. Her back was still firmly to the door as she began to pull the fabric down, and she heard the heavy wood opening quietly, before suddenly slamming shut with a loudly exclaimed oath made in a voice that was most assuredly not her brother's.

Leaping like a scalded cat, Raine forced the shirt down well past its stretching point in a desperate attempt to get it somewhere near her knees, and she backed into the corner of her room with both a mixture of horror and shame. The door was shut and she was alone again, but that didn't matter. She knew that voice, and she knew exactly what he had seen in his error of opening the door at her instruction. He likely hadn't heard her call for her brother, and only for permission to enter, and she couldn't entirely blame him for that... yet, as heat burnt in both her ears and her shoulder... Raine hesitated as she wondered what in the seven hells she was supposed to do next after realizing Dimitri had walked in on her, likely having seen her half-undressed before cursing and quickly making an exit so not to make a scene.

'Too late for that...!' Raine mused with a bitter shake of her head, and she took in several deep breaths to calm the racing thoughts in her head and find control of herself again. She had been thinking of him, of tracking him down for a long-needed and long-coming talk, but she hadn't expected he would beat her to it. If anything, she had assumed he was avoiding her. He hadn't appeared amongst the many who had come to visit, and from her knowledge, even when she had been unconscious, Dimitri had been giving the entire building the infirmary was in a huge berth, and had even taken to holding the war councils in the Knight's Hall, rather than the war room. She wasn't sure whether his avoidance was purposeful, or if he was being chased away from her by the others, but she honestly hadn't had the energy to wonder over it too much. Any news she had heard from the mouths of others had been good, which she was glad for, but she wouldn't believe anything until she saw it for herself. She simply hadn't been ready yet for that, and had promised once she was feeling stronger, she would get to it as soon as she could.

"Clearly, not even you give a damn about what I'm ready for, so why make him wait?" Raine addressed the corner of her room where Sothis has once always resided with an acidic bite to her voice that she regretted almost at once, but she was running quickly both out of options, and of patience. Nothing had gone her way since she had woken up to her father's call in Remire more than five years prior, and her streak was simply continuing on as it had always done. There was little to do but follow along like the puppet she was, and it both made her mouth taste sour as well as turned her hands into fists at her side as she sidestepped about her bed and marched to the door to open it. She was tired, tired and annoyed, and saw little point in delaying the inevitable. If he was still there, she could at least get it all over with now before she was driven to drinking out of pure spite for whatever could be called "luck". If he had turned tail and run, like a sensible creature, she could at least hold onto a semblance of her dignity for another night.

The door swung open, revealing him to still be standing there, half-turned away and face hidden in the shadows, and she idly made a mental note to thank the Goddess when she saw her again for whatever sick sense of humour she had for playing this joke on her so soon after her discharge. There was nothing but a quiet thrall of anger burning somewhere deep in her stomach, and it made her reckless, reckless and sharp as she demanded without preamble, patience, or an ounce of empathy, "What? What in the seven hells do you want with me this late at night? If you've a bone to pick with me, can it not wait until morning? I'm tired. I'm sore. And if you haven't yet caught on, I'm also really not in the mood to be putting up with yet another one of you blue-blooded, arrogant bastards scraping and clawing at my door for advice you never seem to want to heed. Whatever it is you want, make it quick, before I decide Grondor really would have made for a lovely grave."
For a moment, Dimitri had absolutely no response as the river of pure venom flooded out of his professor's mouth and directly poured onto him. Whatever it had been that he expected, this reaction certainly had not been it, even if he knew somewhere deep in his mind that it was most certainly not uncalled for. It had been quite some time since he had heard her speak so harshly, so honestly, but from the tired, burnt-out look in her eyes, he knew she found no joy in it. She was not her brother, after all, and her empathy had always far outweighed her own selfishness... yet these words came freely, and he had to wonder for a mad moment if perhaps she had been the one to teach Warin how to speak, and not the other way around.

Silence stretched for a mad few heartbeats as Dimitri scrambled to find an answer to her vitriol. He had come too soon, he knew that now, but there was no rectifying that. If he tucked tail, apologized and fled, there would never be another chance for him. She would see him as a coward, and he would be rightfully branded one for the rest of his days. It was not ideal, but what was? There was simply nothing ideal about any of this. He could do nothing but soldier forward now. It was all he had left. He spoke quietly, forcing his dry mouth to find and speak the words as those cool, empty seafoam-coloured eyes glared at him in the faint candlelight, "F... Forgive me, I... I apologize. I wished to speak to you, about a... myriad of things, but... if you don't wish to see anyone, then it can wait. It isn't... nearly that important."

There was more silence as Dimitri focussed his stare firmly on his boots, awaiting a cold command to leave that he intended to follow without complaint or defiance, and he was surprised when a long, exhausted sigh escaped the lips of the woman before him instead. She was no longer looking at him, but rather had also averted her own eyes, and her expression was no longer alight with wrath, but rather drawn and tired, as he remembered it having being for the last several moons. With one little outburst everything seemed to have been taken out of her, and she leaned heavily on the doorframe as she asked with only a small trace of disbelief to colour her tone, "It's not that important? After three long weeks of running yourself about the monastery, everywhere but the one place where I was in a desperate effort to avoid breathing the same air as me, you march yourself up to my door in the middle of the night, and now it isn't important? I'm a poor liar, but you're proving yourself worse. What is it that you want?"

The words were barbed, but her tone was tired and wary, and it left Dimitri fumbling again for a proper answer. How did she manage to switch masks so quickly? That anger had been indignant and sharp and righteous, but now she was reigning it all back in, and proving herself too tired to continue with it even if it still had to be burning somewhere deep within her. He knew it had to be, as an anger that potent didn't just simply disappear after a single outburst, but... She had always proven him wrong before. He clenched and unclenched his hands, unsure of how to proceed, and he could only give her the truth as he shook his head and repeated quietly, honestly, "I only... want to speak with you. Not of the war, or... anything that pertains to it... Not even as two soldiers. Just... you and I. If you would be willing."

More silence followed, and Dimitri could feel her stare on him, keen and searching as she hesitated in answering him. He could feel her trying to find if he had an ulterior motive, if his current show of politeness was merely a mask, but he could do nothing but stand and wait and be judged. He had already promised himself before he had come to her door that whatever she said, whatever she demanded of him, would be exactly how he acted from this day forward, and his plans had not changed regardless of his initial reception. Still, it did little to comfort him when he heard her let out another long-suffering sigh when she replied quietly, "Fine. Come inside, then. I don't have anything to offer you right now, considering the hour, but I doubt that really matters."

Dimitri waited until she stepped in first to offer him entry, and quietly, hesitantly, he took the steps into her quarters and allowed her to shut the door behind him. For a moment however, he did and said nothing as he cast a glance about his surroundings with a fair degree of surprise. The last time
he had been in her quarters, it had been depressingly sparse... Now, it almost seemed as if it belonged to someone else. Her desk was the same as ever, cluttered with books and papers and maps, with her cloak hanging haphazardly over the chair, and yet... Everything else had changed, and left him wondering.

A small bookshelf had been built beside her desk, and it was full of titles he recognized from home. He had little doubt that Ashe and Ingrid had helped her with such a collection, though on closer inspection, he could also make out names that hailed from Brigid, and even Imperial and Alliance territory. Her collection of whetstones was still where it had been last, though one stone had been removed from the pile to be placed on the top of her bookshelf. It didn't look anything different from the others besides the fact that it had not yet been used, but the placement proved she had no intent of putting it to her sword. As if it had been a gift of some sort, and she wanted to keep it somewhere safe and out of the way. A folded up chessboard was also hidden underneath the paperwork on her desk, another gift, he assumed, and he noticed a mirror hanging on the wall, by her bed, where he knew one hadn't been there beforehand. All things he had never seen the last time he had been there, and all things, small and insignificant as they were, that somehow made the room seem so much more full than it had once been.

Raine, not seeming to notice his preoccupation, took her cloak from her chair and instead folded it neatly before placing it on the corner of her cot. She sat down beside it, silently offering him the chair at her desk, as she ran a tired hand over her face and through her hair. Her bandages had already been discarded into the wastebin, and she hadn't left anything else out of place, so she didn't concern herself with how her quarters had to look. She knew it was a mess, especially after having spent so many weeks using it as both a place to hide and her only workspace, but she was too tired to care. She did, however, notice as Dimitri took a seat at her desk that he looked rather different than when she had last taken a good look at him, and she remarked with a raised eyebrow, "Are you copying Felix purposefully, or is that just a style in Faerghus?"

"Ah... No, this was... a suggestion from Mercedes. When I first... tried to take over your duties, she told me that perhaps a fresh start also required a different... look, I think her words were. I didn't have anything to lose by trying, and as of now, it seems to be going over well." Dimitri explained with a hint of embarrassment, and he pulled somewhat awkwardly at his bangs as he realized with a strange pang that Raine had not seen him at all since falling in Grondor, and much of what he had done, or what he was doing, had to still be a mystery to her. She had likely heard enough from her near-constant stream of visitors since her awakening, but it had been some time, quite some time, since they had last truly spoken. He could not count that stolen night in the infirmary while she had slept, and he would not count it, but the realization that she was seeing him "anew" for the first time made his chest ache.

But was she, he wondered? She was keeping a healthy distance from him as she always had since they had reunited those few moons ago, as if she fully expected him to explode in a wrath if she said or did the wrong thing. She had invited him into her quarters, but she still had the entirety of her room between the two of them, and that distance felt like miles. Was she afraid of him? He had given her every right to be, if that was the case. But to ask such a thing... It was beyond him, and it kept him quiet as he watched her watching him with raised eyebrows, and only the faintest hint of a smile playing about her lips. She was shaking her head, perhaps in amusement of Mercedes' actions and his own willingness to play along with them, and she remarked idly as he continued to watch her silently, "It's different, I'll grant you that much. Though it certainly does say "Mercedes". She would be the one to suggest something like that to you. I suppose I'm more surprised that you obliged her, than anything else."

"I've... made many concessions, these past few weeks. Filling your shoes is not an easy task... but it was one I chose to do. Anything that would make it easier was something I could not just turn
Dimitri answered honestly, and he watched as she tilted her head, eyes narrowing slightly in thought, but she offered no reply. She did not need to, not as her gaze swept over him sharply, and he wondered just what she had been told, and how much of it had painted him poorly. If he had done that badly of a job, he certainly deserved to have it all laid out at her feet, but he honestly was not sure if he had or not. No one had spoken of it to him, but they had followed him. He supposed it could have been easy, thinking that obedience was approval, and he worked to keep his arms at his sides rather than folding them defensively in front of himself as he continued on, "I'm sure that you have been told that I... made an attempt to lead, in your absence. I cannot honestly say if I did any good. I can only hope I did no harm... It was challenging, taking over your mantle. I admit I don't know how you did it, or do it. But I can say with absolute confidence that I am aware I did not lighten your load... and I wish to apologize for that."

"I've heard of your doings... Everyone kept me relatively abreast of what's happened here in my... absence." Raine acknowledged him with a small nod, and she watched him with some bemusement. He was sitting quietly, almost... timidly, in her chair as he watched and waited for her words. If it wasn't so completely opposite of her last image of him before she had been put into a coma, she almost would have compared him to a whipped dog, looking for scraps at the hand of an abusive master. There was no arrogance to him any longer. Not even a shred of confidence. His body language spoke of a small, frightened man who was expecting reproach, expecting anger, and it confused her almost as much as it made her want to question just what else had happened in these past few weeks that she wasn't being told. It made her hesitant, too, unsure of what to say, or how to say it, and so she simply stuck to honesty as she admitted, "The things I've heard have... mostly been in your favour. No one has said you aren't making an effort to change. Arguments are abound on if it's enough, or if you're doing well of it, but I'll be honest in admitting I won't make a judgement one way or another until I see it myself. I don't like relying on word of mouth from others."

Dimitri said nothing for a moment, biting back thanks he knew he had no right to say. She had not yet judged him, after all. She was only acknowledging she had heard from both parties, and was waiting to see things with her own eyes before she would make a call one way or another. It was more than he deserved, but he also knew it was simply how she was. Still... That guilt burnt like a flame in his gut, and he had to turn his head away. Looking at her was painful. Remembering those cutting words of his friends, of her brother, was painful. He had taken it all to heart, had tried to make his own words apply through his actions, but it had only been a small pitance of time since he had taken up her mantle. He had nothing of true substance to give to her. Nothing but an admittance that he had tried, and he had not tried for long. What was three weeks? She had been under the yoke for moons. It was nothing in comparison. "The conflict in Brigid, as well as the affair with the Death Knight... Both were moments where I had a chance of sorts to prove my words were not empty, and... I can only hope that I acted as you would have in solving both. I... did not wish to act in any other manner. I have been... extremely fortunate to have been granted a second chance. I cannot squander it. I will not squander it. But to prove that, I must act... To act, I must have opportunity. And to be frank... Having an opportunity, where lives must be lost and more fighting is the only outcome... Is not something I wish to wish for."

"That's not at all like the Dimitri I knew in Grondor. You've changed quite a bit to be saying those words." Raine remarked with narrowed eyes, and she realized at once why she was feeling so uncomfortable and wary of him. Nothing about him was familiar. From his demeanour, down to his words, not a thing about him was something she recognized from the past few moons. The man she had met with after her awakening had been desperate for bloodshed, had been wild for the head of his enemy, and now... She shook her head slowly in confusion. If she hadn't already seen the others, a good part of her would have asked if she was still in coma, and dreaming. This was not the
Dimitri she had grown to step about, and be cautious of. This was someone else entirely. It made her blunt, perhaps a bit too blunt, but she couldn't deny it as she shook her head again and mused, "If I wasn't sure I was awake, part of me would be asking if I was dreaming. What was it that made you change like this?"

Dimitri was silent as her question went over his head like a bucket of ice water, and he could not find a suitable reply. He supposed it was fair of her to ask, to want to know, and yet... How could she not already see the answer? If no one else had said anything, he supposed perhaps that could be why, but even then it seemed ludicrous. She couldn't be jesting with him. She wasn't the type. Not like this. And it made him frown deeply, and look at her with genuine concern and confusion as he questioned her in response, "You... Are you asking that in jest? Or do you not remember what happened in Grondor?"

"I remember well what happened. That girl... That damned girl I spoke to, leapt out of the bushes while we all were arguing, and took a dagger to you. She almost killed you. And to think, I had been helping that brat with her chores, just two weeks beforehand..." Raine answered flippantly, and she waved a hand as she dismissed his confused and concerned look without much fanfare. Her memory was just fine, despite all of the healing magic that had made her slow and groggy. It would be a memory seared into her mind for years and years to come, and she didn't doubt that for a moment. But it still did not answer her question of what had prompted him to change so suddenly, and she explained that bluntly, "But I remember Grondor perfectly. I remember acting before Rodrigue, and taking his place in front of you. I remember the dagger striking, and I remember thinking that my luck had finally run out. But that still doesn't explain anything. Isn't that the exact scenario you predicted would befall me for my charity? That I'd be stabbed in the back by someone I tried to do well by? I'm not certain why that would spur you to change your outlook. All that happened that day was that you were proven right."

"You nearly died saving my life, and... all you think is that I was proven right?" The words were disgusting on his tongue, and yet Dimitri forced himself to swallow it as he stared at her, uncomprehending and feeling that ball of rage working desperately to make its way up from his stomach. How could she speak so carelessly of her life? Of the impact she had on him? He couldn't see her reasoning, though some mad, wild part of him knew exactly what it was she was speaking of. He remembered full well that he had told her where her charity would lead her, but what had happened in Grondor was nothing like the situation he had spoken of then. And even if it had been... His hands trembled as they grabbed at his knees in a desperate attempt to regain his control. He could not lose his temper with her, simply because she had grown cynical... Simply because she didn't care. It made him plead, desperate to think she was simply misunderstanding, or lying, just to twist the knife in, as that was far more of an acceptable answer than true ignorance, "Please, tell me that you're lying. That this is just some sort of cruel jape. You cannot truly believe that. You cannot honestly believe that."

"Why not?" Raine's question pierced him like a swordstroke, but her eyes were keen as she examined him closely. He was angry, but desperately attempting to reign himself in... and she wondered why. He had never been hesitant to let loose his temper on her before, and she bore it all as stoically as she could. He was trying even to change that, and for the life of her, she couldn't understand why he was so deeply angered by her words and actions. If he wouldn't explain himself fully... Why did she owe him the same? She challenged him coolly, tilting her head to the side as she pointed out none too gently, "It is what you believed, and you said so many a time... If I agree with you now, why does it anger you so much? You won't tell me what changed you, so why do I owe you any explanation on if my opinion has changed or not, either?"

"Because you nearly died for me, damn you! How could that not change me?!!" Dimitri felt himself exploding out of the chair as his restraint shattered, and though a great part of him winced as his
temper took hold... He could not help himself. She wasn't that blind. He couldn't believe she was. All those moons of trickery, of allowing herself to be his personal target, of trying everything and anything she could to help him fulfil his goals while keeping the amount of blood being shed to a minimum, regardless of what it cost her... She knew better. She had to know better. Or he had done her more of a cruelty than he could ever have imagined, and that only made his anger burn hotter.

He had gotten a good look of her back in that brief moment before he had slammed the door shut again, and the image was seared into his mind and would remain there for whatever pithy excuse of a lifetime he would have left to him. That scar, arcing across her shoulderblade in a dark, crimson reminder of what she had been willing to give for him... A monster, a wretch, and yet she still saw nothing there that warranted a change in him? She had to be lying, or something, somewhere, deep within her had finally broken underneath all of his abuse. And even if that was the case, even if it was true that her cynicism, her flippancy with her own life was his fault... It could not remain that way. He couldn't permit it. He *would not* permit it. If it was a crack he had drilled into her, then it was one he would fill, and he would do so without delay, and with full prejudice.

His body was trembling with wrath, his hands curled so tightly at his sides that his fingers had lost their feeling, but he couldn't shake away the outrage in exchange for calm. It was impossible. Not when she spoke so damn callously of what she had done. He knew it made him a fool, that he was simply retracing his steps once again back into the shadows, but his words left his lips long before better thought could reign his emotions in, "You took a dagger meant for me, and told me it was what you wanted! You put your life on the line for a wretch of a man like me, and smiled as you did it! And you think that would do *nothing* to me?! That I'd call you a fool and simply move on?! If you thought that little of me, I could at least accept that, I could even understand and condone it, but then you just leave me wondering why you would bother to save me at all! Did you mean what you said that day, or was it a comforting lie to make letting you go easier?! Which is it?!

The sudden outburst made her jump, but the words rained in like hot arrowheads, piercing through her unconcerned veil and making her wince each time they struck flesh. He had not moved from where he had stood, but he did not need to in order to look imposing and ferocious as he trembled with indignant rage. His cerulean eye was blazing, but it was a sane blaze, and it made her stomach shrink in on itself as she forced herself to look away from his glare. He was asking her questions that she had no answer to. At least, not answers that she wanted to say aloud. Letting him die was out of the question. There had never been an option where she simply stood by, and allowed what she had seen about to happen simply happen. Her conscience would never have allowed it. And as useless a heart as she had... It would have never allowed for it, either.

Raine wrapped her arms about herself tightly, wishing she hadn't opened that damn door if this was how the night was going to go, but it was far too late for her to turn back the hands of time. And she simply did not have the energy to call upon that power with the damaged state she was in. She could barely lift her blade without her muscles protesting after three solid weeks of disuse. All she could do was sit, small and pathetic on the edge of her bed as she was cornered and without escape, and only the truth would give her freedom, even if it was not a freedom she wanted. She spoke softly, quietly, unable to keep her voice from trembling as she forced the words out against all of her better judgement and sense, "...I... I couldn't just... stand by and... do nothing. I couldn't let you, or Rodrigue die out there that day. I... I never would have forgiven myself if I allowed something to happen simply happen. Her conscience would never have allowed it. And as useless a heart as she had... It would have never allowed for it, either.

"Why?" The retort came sharply, but his voice had dropped from that furious shout to something more resembling a low, fierce growl. He was staring at her still, piercing her through as if he had thrown his lance straight into her chest, and she could neither look up or move underneath the weight of it. He was intimidating as he was... but this? This was something else entirely that
frightened her, and it had nothing to do with the idea of physical harm. He did not move from where he had stood, but he did not need to, and he pressed further, unhesitating, merciless as he repeated himself in a deceptively slow voice, "Why would you have never forgiven yourself if you'd allowed justice to take its course? Sparing Rodrigue, that I can understand. He did nothing to deserve a blade. If you were merely holding him back, that would have been one thing... but you didn't. You leapt forward. You inserted yourself between her and I, and it nearly killed you. Why? After everything I've done to you... Everything I forced on you... Why would you still save me?"

Raine closed her eyes, biting her lower lip as the question fell like a lash, cutting through shields she had spent long moons putting up about herself in defence against the hurt. His rejection, his anger, his derision... All of it had cut much more deeply than any dagger ever could have. To feel steel in her back had been nothing compared to how much she had wanted to break down and cry after he had tormented her over the death of her father. But still, she had clung to him. Clung to a foolhardy belief that he could and would one day return to being the man she knew he was. Now, knowing he was turning in that direction, knowing it was her influence, and having him demand to understand the reason she had stood by him, when anyone with a lick of sense would have left him to die... How could she answer? What words could she possibly say to explain? She was at a loss, just as much as he was, and she hated herself for knowing the words, but not being able to say them.

The silence stretched between them, and Dimitri closed his eye as he turned his head, accepting that he would get no answer... and accepting that he had no right to one, no matter how he felt. If she wished to keep her secrets... He had no choice but to respect her wishes. It did not matter how it made him feel. All the outrage on her behalf had done nothing but make her shrink back and away from him, and it gutted him to see it. Three weeks had done nothing to change him. He was still as much of a beast as he had been before she had risked everything to save him... and he wondered bitterly if it was still a sin for him to wish for death. Anything would be preferable to this. To her sitting on the edge of her bed, small, shivering, and scared because he demanded answers from her that she simply did not want to give.

The anger gave way to shame, cold and quiet and heavy, and he forced his hands to unclench and his tense body to relax. It was not what he had hoped for, what he had wished for... but he knew he hadn't deserved any sort of happy ending. This was what had become of them, because of him, and he would take full responsibility for it. It was all he could do now. Salvaging whatever there was left was impossible... and he would come to terms with that, and mourn for it, alone. She had been dragged through enough. He would not be a thorn in her side any longer. He had done enough damage... He had made enough mistakes, and she had paid the price too many times for them. He turned for the door, weighted and cold, and he spoke quietly, his voice ragged, exhausted, as he explained, "I came tonight with the intent of trying... to make amends to you. But I realize that time has long since come and gone. I won't beg for your forgiveness. I'm well beyond it, and I know this. From tomorrow forward... Just treat me as you would any other soldier. I will follow your orders. I will do as you ask... and I will keep my distance from you, as much as I can until this war is over. You'll see no more of me. I can give you that much in apology for all I've put you through until now."

"Wait a moment, you can't-" Raine stood abruptly at the words that cut through the veil of fright, only to bring about a whole new round of adrenaline that forced her into movement before she could think twice of it. That defeated, self-loathing tone had no hint of malice in it. It was simple truth that he had committed himself to, and the very idea that from tomorrow forward, he would simply lose himself in the crowd of the many faces of soldiers she led... She shook her head savagely from side to side. What would have been the damned point of doing anything at all, if this was how it was to end? Her body moved without her input, refusing to permit it, refusing to permit him to cut himself away, and before she could think twice of it, she was at his side, grasping at his
arm and dragging him back about to face her. He looked to her in surprise, unsure and confused, but she didn't care. Fear was moving her again before better thought could control her body, and it demanded she show what she couldn't say. If her lips wouldn't use words... There were other ways to get what she needed to be said out into the open.

Dimitri jerked as she pulled roughly at the front of his cloak, and he wondered just how ill she was if she could manage enough strength to manhandle him so easily, but any and all thoughts fled his head like a wyvern free of its saddle as she yanked his head down and covered his mouth with her own. His feet grew roots as his entire body froze in stone, and for a moment, he wondered if he had somehow managed to land himself into a dream. It couldn't be real. Not after everything. It was another bout of fantasy, spurred by too-long denied affection and lust, and he was forgetting the cruelty of reality. Nothing else made sense. Those warm lips on his weren't real. Neither were the slim, soft arms that curled themselves around his neck, pulling him closer, urging him to answer. It wasn't real. It couldn't be real.

The fresh, clean scent of a clear spring rain filled his head, and her skin was warm as her fingers brushed along the nape of his neck. She was soft, impossibly soft as she pressed herself flush into his chest, and that combined with the rest of it simply chased better sense clear from his head. He had always, without fail, been at the mercy of his dreams, and if this was to prove to be one, he would not shake it away. He couldn't. He reached in tandem, arms curling slowly, carefully about her to pull her closer as his lips moved gently against hers in assent. If this was what she wanted of him... She could have it. She could have all of him, in any form she wished, if it would give her peace, or happiness. Even if it was fleeting, even if she would leave him cold and alone when she realized her error, it didn't matter. Anything was a fair price to pay, even if it was just to indulge her a momentary wish.

A soft, quiet murmur of pleasure followed his answer, and those hands of hers turned clinging, urging, as she melted against the front of his chest. His body responded instinctively, one arm tightening about her hips as the other lifted, his hand lightly, gently, tracing the contour of her spine. His fingers brushed gently through the fabric, sliding errantly and thoughtlessly to the side, and he heard her inhale sharply before her body shuddered at the unintentional friction of her scar rubbing against the thick, scratchy fabric of her shirt. He stopped almost immediately, his own breath catching as he felt her momentarily freeze, and his voice was ragged as he whispered roughly against her panting mouth, "Did I hurt you...?"

"It's just a little sensitive..." Raine admitted breathlessly, but her body ached far more than just her shoulder as she leaned against the front of him for support. Her legs felt weak, and her head was light. Every touch sent a spark of electricity coursing through her body, making her skin bloom with foreign heat that was all too quickly making her dizzy, and she wondered why she felt so sensitive. She was used to pain, used to discomfort, but physical pleasure was new, and she was far too easily persuaded by it. Just a simple moment of kissing and a stroke along her spine already had her weak and breathless, and she wondered if it was because it was so new, or because it was him that made her so easily trapped. Her fingers curled about the front of his cloak to keep him where he was as she sensed his intent to pull away, and she brushed her lips longingly against the corner of his mouth when she murmured, "Don't stop yet..."

For a moment, Dimitri considered obeying, and every inch of him ached to ignore better sense and act just as she wanted him to do. Another half of him however resisted viciously, reminded of the fact that he had no come here with any intention but speaking to her, and this was well over the line of what anyone would ever deem acceptable. It didn't matter that she was melting. It didn't matter that he wanted her beyond all reason. Someone had to cling to their better sense, and he forced himself to withdraw, if only slightly. She tried to follow, murmuring unhappily, but he carefully lifted his arm, reaching to cup her cheek and hold it to keep the distance before he spoke in a voice
"Do you not want me?"

The plaintive question cut like a knife, and he groaned as his arms buckled automatically about her to pull her in close for a tight, reassuring embrace. He had no idea where she came up with such wild thoughts, especially considering how quickly he had forgotten his main goal of escape only to be tethered entirely to the ground the moment she had kissed him. The mere idea of turning her away... He'd sooner die. But he fought for better sense, for control, if only for a few more moments as he squeezed her close and whispered against the top of her head, "Don't be daft... As if I could manage to resist you, if you meant to take me... Of course I want you. But that isn't why I'm asking you to wait... I just... I need to hear you say the words. I can't... Not in good faith... I can't touch you again if you don't say the words. You can understand why, can't you...? I need to hear you say it... I need to know that for once... You're acting because you want to, and not because you feel you must."

Raine closed her eyes as she rested her forehead against his chest, allowing his words, his concerns, to begin to soothe that myriad of hurts that had been slowly but surely strangling her over the past several moons. It wasn't enough, not yet, but it was a start, and it was a start she had not thought she would be lucky enough to get. She let out a sigh as she stood quiet and secure in those firm, strong arms of his, and she was absently aware that for the first time in quite some time, perhaps longer than she could remember... She felt almost at peace. Almost. His request was not unfair, and it made more than enough sense that he asked it considering where they had been before and where he was now trying to go... but... He didn't know what he was asking for. Not wholly.

Gently, Raine pushed him away, though her hands were careful in making sure he understood it was not a rejection, but merely a silent request for room. He gave it to her without question even though his brow furrowed slightly, watching her with close, careful concern. She turned a little, back towards her bed, and she took his hand in her own before leading him there to sit with her. He followed, wordless and obedient, and she was both glad for his patience, as well as aching for his kindness. He didn't yet know... and she couldn't give him what he wanted without divulging more.

She reached with her free hand, sliding it underneath her pillow to find the tattered, worn book she had thought she had lost when she gone missing those five years prior. Warin had returned it to her, explaining he had come back to the monastery long after the Empire had abandoned it to find if it had survived the raiding and ruin, and he had kept it on him ever since. The diary had seen better days, but it was still intact, and her brother had refused to keep it when she had returned to all of them. He reasoned it belonged to her, and after a small argument, she had taken it back into her custody. Now, she pulled it out and into her lap, her fingers brushing gently across its cracked spine before she asked Dimitri quietly, "Do you know what this is?"

"Your father's diary... I remember you reading it in his office, shortly after..." Dimitri answered just as quietly, and the hand that was holding his tightened in search of comfort that he was ready and glad to give. She didn't look up, but rather just stared down sadly at the scratched leather casing, and he ached to see the sorrow and the grief in her eyes. She had reminded him on the bridge that she had only lost him several moons ago, not five years as it had been for everyone else, and he could see now just how fresh that loss truly was. It made him wonder, wonder of things he knew he could not yet ask when that grief was still so near, but he held her hand all the same when he asked instead of more gentler topics, "You kept it all this time? It survived the fall of the monastery?"

"Warin went back for it. After the Empire had their fill of destroying the monastery... He went back and combed through the ruins. I was dead and gone to him, so he wasn't there for me, but he
knew I didn't keep it on me in battle. I was too afraid to have it ruined. He went searching and found it in my quarters. He kept it with him during his exile... and he gave it back to me when we reunit(ed here.) Raine explained with a small, sad smile, and still she wondered at her brother's heart, and his idiocy. Of course he would have turned back for something as simple as their father's journal, risking his neck for something he didn't truly need... but she knew better than to truly judge him. He had been in mourning then, too. And their father's journal was the last thing, the only thing, he had to remember both Jeralt and her by in those cruel years. "I've read it... so many times since it was left to me... and I learned quite a lot. Not just about my father, but about my mother, about the church... and also about myself. Father kept many secrets, and he had good reason to keep them... But I promised myself that if I... If I were to ever be... close... to someone... I wouldn't keep those secrets to myself. It wouldn't be right of me to do."

Dimitri wasn't sure how to reply to that, and he looked slowly from the journal in her lap, and to the quiet, sombre look on her face. Her words concerned him, but likely not in the way she was thinking. He turned his hand over underneath hers, his fingers reaching to cover her smaller one in his before he delivered a calm, tight squeeze. He hadn't had the chance to know the former knight-captain in the way he would have liked to. But what little he did know... He had always liked, and had always admired. Jeralt was a strong man, devout to his family and to his men, both in his mercenary troupe and under his command as knight-captain, but there had never been a doubt that all he did, all he had ever done, had always been for his children. Even if it had extended to keeping secrets... Dimitri began slowly, quietly as he watched Raine bite her lower lip as she struggled with her thoughts, "Professor..."

"Raine." The correction came swiftly, but with incredible gentleness, and Dimitri felt a heat surge both north and south from his stomach as those bewitching seafoam-green eyes pierced him through like a lance. Her voice was tender, as was the way her fingers were brushing against his as they let their hands remain tightly clasped. He heard himself swallow audibly, unable to reply, and her smile was half parts affectionate, half catlike in amusement as she explained almost pertly, "If you and I are to be as I'd like us to be... You can't call me by anything else but my name. I know it might be an adjustment, but... That is one thing I won't be budging on. Anything else can be open to negotiation but that."

"Gods, but you're a temptress..." Dimitri almost growled, but with effort, great effort, he forced himself to remain seated and relaxed next to her. Hearing her say such things aloud, so boldly and honestly... It took every ounce of self-control he had not to push her flat onto the bed and forget all else. Did she know what weight her words had? If she did, she was torturing him, and enjoying every last moment of it. If she wasn't... Then she was going to learn very quickly just how easily he could be wrapped about her little finger. Already he was a willing slave... If she said much more, he would soon be a willing, and happy one. He swallowed that knot in his throat down, hoping beyond hope his more... physical reactions were hidden by his trousers and his cloak, but it didn't stop his voice from remaining husky when he answered her, "As you wish... Raine."

Raine took a moment as a delicious shiver curled its way lazily up her spine at the sound of her given name leaving his lips, and she, too, had to remind herself that any and all of her wants had to remain second to the matter at hand. But she did want him, and that fact was not in dispute for either of them now. She looked back down to the journal in her lap, hoping that the burning in her face would subside soon enough, as she gathered herself before beginning quietly, slowly, "It's... a long story, so I'll attempt to keep it brief for you, but... I think the context is just as important as the facts I want you to know... And, before you ask... Father entrusted this to me, so what I share, and who I share it with is a choice I get to make. I know he wouldn't be angry with me for it."

"If that's what you wish, I won't argue. You knew your father better than I... but... If I might ask one question...?" Dimitri hated to interrupt her, especially when he saw how difficult it already was
just to be speaking of her father, let alone the myriad of things he may have written in his diary... but he could not help it. She was putting so much importance of reading him into these secrets that her family had kept, and for the life of him, he couldn't quite understand why. He had already known and accepted that the Eisner family simply had their reasons to have lived as they did, and he had long ago stopped questioning it. It was not his right to know, nor was it his business. Whatever small details Warin had seen fit to share with him then, when he had been young and more trustworthy, had been his to divulge, and they had never been asked for. He couldn't lie, and say that her actions now weren't discomforting. "Why are you so intent... on telling me this now?"

"You want me to say words to you that... I just can't say unless you know these things about me. About my family. I know that doesn't make sense yet, but... It's for my own peace of mind." Raine answered honestly, but she shifted uncomfortably next to him, all the same. They weren't secrets she kept gladly. They weren't secrets she wanted to share with anyone, either. But he had asked her to give him honesty, to give him reassurance, but she simply could not, unless she gave him the whole truth first. And... She smiled sadly, feeling that phantom pain again somewhere deep within as the rest of her body ached to compensate for what could not work before she added in a murmur, "And... It's in case you choose to reject me, once you know the truth. I won't... bind you to me in any sort of way... without you knowing everything first. Because in the end, once you know everything... You very well may wish to. And if you do, I won't blame you. But... I promised these secrets... deserved to be told before something happened."

Dimitri bristled unconsciously, hating that sad look on her face, and moreover, the way she spoke so quietly, so assuredly of the idea that he could wish to reject her on the basis of her family's secrets. If anyone was in the place, and had the right to do the rejecting, it was her. He knew full well who he was and what he had done, and still she clung to his hand like a lifeline. He would abide by any of her wishes, to stay or to go, but he couldn't fathom a situation where he would simply leave unless she ordered it of him. He knew it was selfish. He didn't deserve her, nor the happiness or the peace she could give him... but for her wants, he would do anything. To hear her say he'd leave... He shook his head slowly, his hand tightening about hers as he told her quietly, intensely, "Nothing you could say to me, barring an order to go, would be capable of making even think of leaving you. Until the time comes when you've had enough of me and want me gone... I intend to be your shadow, your sword, and your shield."

"I appreciate that, Dimitri... but you shouldn't make promises like that, when you don't know everything." Raine shook her head even if the comfort was warming, and idle, but experienced fingers flipped the diary in her lap open, rustling through the pages with ease to find the entry she wanted, and needed, to begin with. She didn't need to look up to see his expression, dark, intent, and certain, and while a small, selfish part of her was honestly happy to see that... She knew it wasn't fair of her to take it from him. He had the right to know everything, if he truly was willing to commit to her as she wanted to commit to him. And she would keep no secrets from him. "I'll tell you, and once I'm finished... You can make a choice of your own, and I won't hold anything against you. I do this because if I were you... I'd want to know. I can't say what I would do, but... I would want to know. Is that fair enough?"

"If that's how you wish for things... Then I will not argue." Dimitri eventually allowed the words to pass his lips, but the tasted incredibly bitter on his tongue as he spoke them. He still did not understand her fatalism, her quiet acceptance of him leaving her if he so chose, but... He had been in enough battles by now, and had been cowed enough, to know this was a fight he could not win. More than anything, he wanted to respect her wishes, to ensure she knew he was putting her desires and needs before his own. It was high time that someone beyond her brother started doing so, and even if he was too late... He would still do all he could, from her side, or the shadows.

"All right... Then, let's begin here, with this entry... " Raine ducked her head as her fingers gently
ran over the long-dried ink and the crinkled parchment paper her father had written upon. Still, after so many long years of it being buried by her father, then hidden under rubble, and carried about in her brother's rucksack as he wandered to and fro across the continent, it still held up as well as any of the texts she could find the library of the monastery. She hoped to keep it like that, regardless of the impossibility of the task. It was all she had of him, after all... and she did not want to lose it twice. She began quietly, softly, knowing Dimitri was close enough to hear, and feeling that familiar ache of bittersweet pain as her voice blended with the memory of her father's in her quiet room, "'Day 20, of the Horsebow Moon. All is cloudy. I can't believe she's dead.'..."

Chapter End Notes

AN:

Don't worry, this is only part of the "reconciliation" bits between Raine and Dimitri! I'm not cutting anything out, especially any fun, juicy bits, but this chapter has run on long, and I don't really do thirteen-pagers anymore seeing as it's both physically painful on me, and usually kind of boring for my readers. I'm keeping things relatively smooth and to the point, and the upcoming part, of more "truths" coming to light between a relatively calmer Raine and Dimitri, is incredibly important to focus on. It deserves its own chapter, and so it will have one. Unfortunately, it does mean a longer pause on the "action" bits, as well as the central plot of AM, but I promise there's still plenty of that to be had. After all, AM is no longer AM. At least, not in this iteration that I'm writing!

It's kind of unfortunate, but also understandable, that Jeralt's diary really never got any more play than it did in the game on Byleth's discovery of it. While it gives giant hints for later doings in certain playthroughs (Silver Snow), it's not really used much as a medium to explore Byleth as a character, nor does it ever really get "shared" with through the other lords, or love interests (barring Claude, who harasses you into a non-standard, But Thou Must! gameplay bullshit of allowing him to take it from you) but even with that, not much is ever said or done about the things Jeralt writes about. There's tidbits remarking on his relationship with his wife, but little precious else is ever revealed or talked about, which, to me, is a huge waste. A paralogue could have easily been written about it, perhaps finding your mother's favourite flowers in a distant area and your class willingly taking up the search with you to help alleviate your grief, etc etc... But, alas.

Regardless, to me, and to Raine, I find it very important to continue to reflect on Jeralt, as well as the secrets that were kept, the reasons those secrets were kept, and the backstory, (however incomplete it might be at the time) that is all Raine knows of her family, and her own existence. While the whole truth will eventually come out, I am not dangling Raine/Dimitri in front of myself and everyone else until that point in the story. It's simply unfair, and not quite realistic considering all things. But that's just me, who thoroughly enjoyed being married in-game in Awakening/Fates, and feeling the stakes rising because of "getting out alive together" rather than, "if we both survive, we can enjoy a good future". The concept of grabbing happiness, however small and however brief while you can in the midst of wartime is one I wholeheartedly believe in, and I really don't think these kids didn't have similar ideas of their own.

Anyway, that's it for me for the moment, as I've been sick, and am having a hard time
continuing to look at computer screens for extended periods of times. Hopefully it all passes soon enough, so I can get on with things. Believe it or not, I am actually really looking forward to Fhirdiad, as well as Arianrhod quickly after, so I want to keep bulldozing along! Thanks as always for continuing to read, and please drop me a review if you feel the need. Have a good one, until the next time!

Mood: Sick.

Listening To: "Endless War" - Within Temptation

~ Sky
Freedom and Secrets

Chapter Summary

Genres/Ratings: Romance, Hurt/Comfort, Angst. (M)

Characters: Raine, Dimitri.

Summary: It was dangerous, laying everything out on the line, but it was the right thing to do, regardless of how utterly terrifying it was. She had made the promise that no one would suffer for her secrets, no one would be betrayed by finding out only after it was too late, and she was ready, willing, and safe in the knowledge that he could leave, and she would watch him go if and when he chose to reject her. It was only right. It was only fair. No one deserved to think they could love her, when she wasn't even human.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Harpstring Moon

Dormitories (Professor's Quarters)

Midnight

Raine wasn't entirely sure how long she read aloud from her father's journal, telling Dimitri of all her father had known and suspected in her early years, and the things he had discovered and worried over in tandem. Dimitri, for his credit, sat silent and unmoving throughout it all, drinking in her words with a slightly narrowed eye and a relatively quiet expression that gave away nothing. It felt like ages had passed by the time Raine permitted herself to close the journal, reaching the end of what she felt was pertinent to share from her father's point of view, and her muscles ached with tension she desperately needed to release from sitting so still next to the taller blond man the entire time as she read.

Slowly, she slid her hand free from underneath his, wondering at the warmth and comfort he had given to her through such a simple touch, and she carefully pushed herself to her feet. He didn't follow her as she stepped away from him and towards the back of her room, and she glanced at herself absently in the corner of her mirror, hating the seafoam-coloured eyes that stared back at her when she glimpsed her reflection. So much change... All unasked for. It made her quiver with self-loathing and disgust, and instinctively her arms wrapped about herself as she took in a breath and continued, now completely on her own, "After Father passed... After what happened in the Sealed Forest... Things began to fall together more cleanly. Warin and I spoke for a very long time, trying to wring the truth out of what small details we knew, and there was so little to go on... But, after everything, I've come to several conclusions that I feel relatively safe in declaring fact."

"And those things are?"

Hearing his steady voice should have brought her comfort, but she felt nothing but unease as she heard him rising from the bed to stand with her. He didn't approach, and she was grateful for that
as she hugged herself tighter about the waist protectively. She turned her eyes to the floor, not willing to risk catching a glimpse of his expression after everything she had told him. He had to know already what she was coming to, he had to understand what she was now... but she understood saying it herself was what she had to do. She took in another deep breath, wishing it would calm her nerves when she only felt more and more tightly coiled, tightly wrapped, as she began shakily, "The first is that for some reason, Rhea is is why I am as I am. She's laid this path before me as if she knew exactly how it would happen... and I want to know why, and how she did it. The second... is that my Crest is unnatural, and not a product of my bloodline. Perhaps my body and the Crest are correlated somehow. I can't say, but I do know that however I came to have it, it was not something as simple as being born with it. And third... Taking both the first and second facts into consideration, as well as my lack of a heartbeat, my powers, my "miracles", as some might call them... I am not actually truly alive. I... I am not human."

"You aren't human?" Dimitri repeated the words slowly, eye narrowing as he watched Raine duck her head down, tightening her hold on herself as if she was desperately attempting to keep herself together somehow. He had heard the tremble in her voice, and he could see her body quivering, though why, he was not sure. It was much to take in, even more to believe, but to this point, he had not doubted her. Hearing it all in Jeralt's own words had only cemented the facts that the Eisner family had faced much tragedy, far too soon in their young lives, and that tragedy, and the suspicion that the Church had played a hand in it all, had been the reason for their secrecy, and their tightly knit bond. It all made perfect sense, and Warin's own words, as well as what he himself had seen, gave him more than enough reason to believe her. This, however... This did not sit right with him, and he was not afraid to say so in a firm, cutting voice, "I don't believe that for a moment."

"You don't? After all you've heard?" Raine demanded, and she turned on her heel, tilting her head back to return the glare Dimitri was now giving her. She could read the belief in his eye, that he had taken her entire story to heart and thought it truth, but calling herself inhuman seemed to be the one thing he would not call a fact. It was too much like her brother's declaration, too accepting without thinking things through, and though she wished it could be comforting, all she felt was a sense of indignation. Why did they continue to avert their eyes to the facts? To make her feel better? It made no sense, and it did her no comfort, and she let that show as she rounded on him, her voice sharp and accusatory, "Someone walking about without a heartbeat, with the powers of a Goddess, is still somehow human to you? I can wield a weapon no one should be able to wield. A Relic that has no Crest Stone. I've died, and somehow lived to tell the tale without a single trace of the wounds that killed me. I remember what happened before I lost those five years. I didn't vanish into the ether... I died that day at Garreg Mach, and still, you say I'm human? No human can do these things. I am not human."

"Then are those tears on your cheeks a lie?"

The question cut her abruptly to the quick, making her take pause as she raised a hand to realize she had indeed began to cry without realizing it in her angry tirade. Her body was aching with emotion, hate, anger, hurt, grief, self-loathing, and it was desperate for an outlet that her still heart simply could not provide. She brushed her hand angrily against her eyes, scraping away the tears, only to find her wrists caught in Dimitri's gentle hold before she could finish the job. He stopped her before she could speak, his hands firm, yet still incredibly careful as they held her wrists when he spoke in a similar, tender, tone, "And what of your smile, that day after we rescued Flayn from the Death Knight? Or the laughter we shared, during the celebratory feast with the Black Eagles and Golden Deer, once we finished with the match in Grondor? And when you mourned your father, both then, and now... Were all of those emotions a lie? Can you feel those things you've showed me, time and time again? Because if you can... Then you are human."
Raine turned her head away, biting her cheek as she wished she could tell him he was wrong, but the firmness in his voice was as strong as the hardest steel. He believed every word he spoke, and nothing she said, no matter how plaintively she said it, would ever make him think otherwise. She tugged vainly, trying to pull away from his hold to at least escape the humiliation of standing in tears in front of him, but he didn't release her. Rather, he settled one of his larger hands over her wrists, grasping them both easily before he raised his own to brush his thumb carefully over her cheek for her. She didn't move, holding her breath as he slowly, tenderly wiped away the tears as they came, and she heard him chuckle quietly to himself before he spoke again, stepping forward to come closer as he asked further, "And now you're red again because of my touch... Is that also a lie? You feel things, Raine. You may have never been the best at expressing that, but you have always had those emotions in you. They were simply buried, and needed aid in coming to the surface. And as for your powers, and your lack of a heartbeat, and your Relic... Even the mystery of your lost five years... I care nothing for any of those things. You still bleed. You still breathe, eat, laugh and cry, just as anyone else does. That makes you human to me."

Strong, unyielding arms tugged her forward, and Raine went willingly as a sob choked in her throat despite her best efforts to stymie it. There was quiet acceptance in every single one of his words, gentle truth and firm belief saturating his tone until it, too, joined the ache that was her entire body, and the arms that wrapped her up in a firm embrace were a stinging but welcome balm. He cradled her close to his chest, nuzzling the top of her hair as he squeezed her waist tenderly, and his voice was rough, ragged with pain for her as he felt her tears falling into the front of his tunic, "Whatever it was Rhea did to you may have changed you... but it did not make you a monster... and moreover, even if it did... I can't say with honest truth that it would bother me. I know it selfish to say, but... You exist, here and now, as you are because of her influence. And that simple fact... You, existing... saved me more times than I can count. Even if the worst of your fears ever came to be true, even if I'm proven a liar and you are something more than human, it won't matter to me. Because you still are you... and you still are the woman who guided me, protected me, and saved me, over and over again. My beloved professor... and my reason for living."

Dimitri felt her collapse into his arms, her breath shaking with pained, broken sobs, and he steadied her easily. Slowly, carefully, he guided her back to her bed, sitting down with her and gathering her into his arms so she could cry her fill into his chest. She clung to him like a lifeline, fingers digging into his cloak to keep him near, and he grit his teeth as he fought with his emotions. There was so much to feel, so much to process, and then there was her... Battered, bruised and broken by all she had been holding close in terror of being rejected should the truth ever escape her lips. His heart burnt with anger on her behalf, and he understood well now why Warin held such open contempt for the Archbishop and the church. If it was true, that Rhea had somehow had a hand in their mother's death, and in Raine's condition... He would join in turning his weapon towards the Church of Seiros in vengeance should their paths turn in such a direction. To see Raine reduced to this, a mess of tears and fear like a lost child, questioning her humanity, her right to exist... No. It was unforgivable, and he would more than happily stand shoulder to shoulder with her brother when the time came to wrench answers, wrench the truth, out of Rhea's grasp when she was found and rescued. It was not permitted. No one had a right to cause such harm, to instil such fear in anyone... but especially not in her.

The guilt returned again, tempered with sympathy and sadness as he cradled her close in his lap, nuzzling her hair and allowing her to cry. Every single sob was a swordstroke, but he knew she did not need comforting words. She simply needed a chance to release it, to release everything, in safety and in privacy. For too long she had been holding herself in, from herself, her comrades, her brother, and now that the dam had burst, he doubted it would be quick to ebb. But that was not a concern for him. He could wait a lifetime, sitting silently and holding her tightly, if it would give her even a modicum of peace and relief. It was the very least he could do, when she had broken that
darn because of him, for him, in some misguided, twisted belief that he had to know all because he cared for her.

Dimitri still did not understand why she feared his rejection, but he supposed he never would be able to comprehend it. Turning her away was impossible. To be told to leave was one thing, a thing he would do readily and willingly, but to go of his own accord now... It could not be done. No matter what she told him, no matter what she did, he would never leave. He couldn't. He was as selfish as she was, needing her, craving her, like a starving man only inches away from sustenance after so long in agonizing hunger. If it was a test, to see if he would flee, he supposed he had passed it... though he knew it wasn't. It was last ditch attempt to save him, save him from what he didn't know, but he knew her soul well enough to guess that much. She wanted him to know what she thought of herself, what she believed to be the truth, if only to spare him from being tied down to a "monster".

The thought made him tighten his hold, though he was weary as he did so lest he apply too much strength as the anger returned with a vengeance. A monster. Inhuman. Hearing such words falling from her lips... Applying such things to someone like her... It was impossible. He could understand her fear, being different was indeed reason to be wary and uncomfortable and even frightened, but it was no reason to call herself inhuman. There was an explanation for why she was as she was, he was confident in that... and even if the explanation was unsavoury, he had already decided it didn't matter. No monster saved lives simply because it was the right thing to do. No monster loved freely, fought to defend their comrades, and shed blood for the things they loved. Humans did those things. A heartbeat wasn't necessary to make her human. Her emotions, her actions, her ideals... Those were enough. They were more than enough.

He held her until her sobs tapered off, until her breathing steadied, and waited patiently as she began to reassemble herself in his arms. He did not mind the wait, and only continued to hold her close, willing to release at once should she ask, but content to let her know he had no intentions of doing so until that moment came. She sniffled once or twice, raising her hands to brush away the remnants of moisture in her eyes, and after what felt like an eternity, she finally looked up at him sheepishly. Colour had returned to her face, pinking it with embarrassment and shame, and her eyes wouldn't lift entirely to his face as she began quietly, her voice still somewhat pinched from her outburst, "I'm sorry... I didn't mean to break down like that..."

"I don't mind." Dimitri answered honestly, and he watched as the shade of pink in her face turned to a deeper red in response. It brought a faint smile to his face, and he reached carefully, his thumb brushing against her cheekbone before reaching to cup her face. She leaned into his caress almost immediately, turning her face so her lips touched his wrist, and he wiped away the last traces of her tears with his thumb before he continued quietly, "You've nothing to apologize for... It was long overdue. I'm only grateful I was here to help you."

Raine reached for his hand, squeezing it tightly as she nuzzled into his palm and allowed a long, shaky breath to finally leave her. It all felt... strangely soothing. The weights she had been carrying, one by one, were slipping off of her shoulders and reminding her of what it felt like to stand tall and unburdened. Her chest still ached and her eyes still smarted, but... Sitting quietly in her quarters, curled up in his lap and feeling the warmth of his skin on hers made everything else going on outside seem small and distant. She wouldn't have dared try to imagine such a thing several moons ago, and she still was struggling to believe it was real now. But his skin was real, the heavy scent of sandalwood and steel filled her head and made her thoughts scatter, and she sighed again as she closed her eyes and held his hand more firmly to her face, "I love you."

Dimitri allowed the words to go through him as keenly as a blade, and he held his breath for a moment as he wondered if the dream would finally shatter. It usually always did here, when she
spoke those words to him, and yet... Nothing changed. He still sat with her cradled in his arms, feeling her skin on his and relishing in every moment of it, and he wondered what luck he had, and how undeserving he was of it as his left arm squeezed just a little more firmly about her waist. He needed to remind himself that she was real, that when he woke again on the morrow, that it wouldn't slip through his fingers like all of the other dreams and nightmares had before.

Gently, Dimitri pulled her closer, and was silently glad when she came without complaint or struggle. Rather, she seemed eager to close the distance, sitting up so she could properly move into a better-fitting position between his knees. Her arms wrapped about his torso, barely able to close around the width of him, but she didn't care as she buried her face in his neck. For his part, he had no difficulty at all in enclosing her in his embrace, ducking his head against her hair to return her sigh, quiet, relaxed and comforted as they sat in silence together for a few long moments. He wanted to feel her, wanted to savour the sensation of her resting safe and secure in his arms, and her every little breath on his skin was a sinful little delight he wanted to never stop.

It was odd comfort, but comfort she knew she needed all the same as Raine allowed for the silence to stretch out between them. It had been like this before, she remembered. Times after long sparring sessions, or those quiet, frank discussions that kept them long past classroom hours when they would just simply sit together, side by side, and allow a calm quiet to fill the room, or the arena long after they should have parted. She had missed those days. Missed those times, when even at her worst and most insecure, he was there to make her smile, to help her forget, even though she had known he was suffering with demons of his own. Though they had never allowed themselves to forget their places, a professor and a student, Raine knew better now than to deny what she had felt for him, and how much she had come to rely on his steady presence. She had missed him, and missed him sorely. *This* was the Dimitri she had known and loved, and realizing he had returned to her, because of her... She buried her face further against his skin to hide the renewed stinging in her eyes. 'Gods, I'm a fool...'

"Raine?"

His quiet, concerned call of her name was more than enough to dismiss any notions of hiding and pretending, and she wondered if she had erred in pressing the issue that he could no longer call her "professor". The sound of her given name on his tongue did things to her body and mind that it truly shouldn't, and even now, she felt an unbidden shiver sent goosebumps erupting across her skin in a foreign, but very pleasant reaction she had no control over. She shook her head a little to ward off his worry, but she didn't let him go as she murmured into his neck, "I'm just... trying to take all of this in... I missed you. The real you... I didn't realize how much until now. I did my best to stand on my own two feet, but really, all those years ago, I was always leaning on you for support. Having you beside me became something I took for granted... Being unable to be near you all these moons, despite my best efforts... It was... the hardest thing I've had to do. I worried over you so much... This feels unreal. Good, and comforting, and everything I could ever ask for, but... still unreal."

"I can say the same... That it feels like I'm dreaming." Dimitri agreed with a slow nod, and he soothingly ran his hand down her hair and back, rubbing in slow, small circles as he felt the warm wetness of a stray tear trickle down his throat. It made him ache, hearing her speak openly and honestly of how hard it had been on her all these moons, but he knew he had to accept it. He had been nothing short of a monster to her, and he still had no idea why she had clung so hard to him, and for so long. It had saved him, he knew it had, but he still had difficulty understanding the why, even if she had clearly said so now. He didn't deserve it. Didn't deserve her. And he pressed a slow, careful kiss to the top of her head before admitting quietly, "But you... You know that... what I was... that is also me. Saying that how I am now is the "real" me... That's an easy excuse for me to take advantage of wiggling away from my behaviour. I was a beast. I still am. I may be trying to
divert my course, but it doesn't change what brought me here... and as sorry as I am for all of it, every last moment... I need to take claim over it, just as much."

"You're going to continue to punish yourself for this for a long time, aren't you?" The question didn't need an answer, as Raine could see it written clearly all across his face when she pulled back just enough to get a good look at him. The regret was honest and raw, as was the mournful note in his voice, and she wished she could heal him as easily as magic had healed her. But that was beyond her grasp, and she knew time was the only tonic he had. Time, and support, which thankfully she could give, even if he would be resistant to it at first. Still, she was stubborn, and she reached to touch his face as she mused quietly, "If that's how you want it to be, that's all right, I guess... but I won't be leaving you, no matter what it is you say of yourself. Nor will I be sending you away. I can't. I need you too much to be without you again. So long as this path is the one you intend to stay on... I'll walk beside you for the rest of my life."

"This is the path I wish to walk... and I appreciate your willingness to share it with me." Dimitri answered honestly, and he took her hand in his to bring it to his mouth for a gentle kiss to her fingers. It still felt small and frail in his own, but it was no longer freezing to the touch, and he relished in that fact as he brought it between his own to hold it tightly. His thumbs rubbed circles across her knuckles, appreciating the smooth warmth of her pale skin, and he was loathe to let go for any reason... Though he was reminded, it wasn't his hand to hold, regardless of what she said, or how many times she said it. "Still, I... It seems as if I'm asking for all from you, and having so little to give in return. I still haven't proven myself... I still need to do so much more. Taking back Fhirdiad is only the first step of many... Will it be enough? Will ending this war be enough...? I doubt it will be. There will be so much more to do after... Though, I realize it's ridiculous of me to be complaining to you. You've thought of all of this already."

"That's giving me more credit than I'm due for... I've had to plan for multiple outcomes, that's simply how being in command works. I haven't thought of everything." Raine disagreed with a shake of her head and a rueful smile, but Dimitri merely looked at her with raised eyebrows as well as a crooked, almost boyish-looking smile in reproach. It brought heat flushing back into her cheeks, and unbidden she rubbed at her nose, turning her head away from him as she repeated firmly, "It's true! I had no idea that things at Grondor would go our way... That was a gamble I took, and it was only luck that pulled us through. Lorenz and Marianne could have been intercepted, or killed, long before they reached Derdriu, or any friendly ears... and Claude could very well have refused to hear our plea for a truce, and taken full advantage of us when we were at our weakest. And we still don't know how things will go once, and if, we manage to achieve true unity between the Kingdom and Alliance. There are still too many variables."

"There are indeed... but you shouldn't be thinking of such things right now." Dimitri cut her off gently before she could retreat too far into her thoughts and plans and schemes, and he squeezed her hand in tender reproach when she looked up at him with both confusion and a hint of embarrassment. He continued quietly, lowering his head to touch his nose to her own before muttering, "You've been overworking yourself... There's a reason you were put into sleep for so long. All of those burdens on your shoulders... You won't be carrying them alone any longer. Most of the weight you held was meant for me. I'll be relieving you of it, from today on. Though, that isn't to say I will not need you. Nothing could be farther from the truth... But I still intend to take up the role that was meant for me. Both in command, and, one day, as the king I was meant to be."

"You'll tire yourself out if you take on too many burdens too quickly... but I suppose I shouldn't be saying that in my state, should I?" Raine asked with another rueful smile, and unbidden, she leaned into Dimitri's chest as she allowed her body to relax. He was comfortable, far more comfortable than her pillows and blankets, and she sought instinctively and unthinkingly for him and the comfort he gave simply by being there. She was tired. She had been tired for moons on end... and
she could still feel the lingering traces, in the fog in the corners of her mind, and the weakness in her limbs. "I'll be glad for the help... but I don't intend to let you do it all on your own, either. I may need a few more days of rest before I'm back to my usual self, but once I am, I will be joining you all at the head of the table as I once did."

"I know better than to argue, and I will also not lie and say your presence hasn't been missed. You're a strong voice, and one that all listen to... Amongst ourselves, we just fall into squabbles, like little schoolchildren. Even now, when our academy days are long behind us, you still are our professor, and we need you sorely to keep us all in line." Dimitri admitted with a trace of a chuckle, and he thought of the long, fruitless meetings he had held in the Knights' Hall, and how regardless of his attempts, rarely could he manage to exert authority as she could. So flawlessly she commanded their attention and obedience, even of her elders and supposed betters, and he shook his head as he mused, "Your brother has stepped up valiantly in your absence, and his level-headedness is much appreciated... Though, unfortunately, he frightens half of the lot of them, and angers the other half with his rough speaking. But no one doubts his experience, so his voice holds as much weight as yours does when he speaks... and it helps that he has most of the old guard, and your father's troops, firmly behind him. I must admit, sometimes I find it shocking that he was passed over as Knight-Captain."

Raine hid a smile and shook her head, knowing full well Warin's attitude and lack of loyalty to Rhea was exactly why he had been passed over for such a position, but she was glad still to know his voice was being respected in her absence. He was a strong leader, to those who had known him previously, and those who had worked with him throughout his time in amongst the knights. His strength was almost without equal, his experience was vast, and his ability to keep a calm head, and sense incoming disaster made him a perfect candidate for leadership... but not underneath the yoke of the Church of Seiros. "He would have never accepted the position had it been offered. Alois is a stronger candidate by far compared to him. Besides, the ones who would have supported Warin would have loyalty only to him, not to the Knights of Seiros... Something I'm sure both Rhea and Seteth were well aware of. He frightens them because he won't be cowed into submission. Or rather, because he can't be cowed. It's been like that for as long as we've been together. He cares only about people as they are as people... Nobility, Crests, stature, religion, or wealth... None of that matters to him, so he doesn't think of it when he looks at you. He sees only you, and he judges only that. I believe that Rhea was truly frightened of him... She had every right to be."

"Do you worry what will happen when Rhea is found?"

"If Warin will hurt her? No. He's not stupid, as much as he's angry... but he will be demanding the truth from her. As will I." Raine shook away the question with a flick of her wrist, though she well understood why Dimitri would ask it. It was a fair concern, after all she had told him and all he now knew, and she didn't blame him for being wary of her brother. Anyone else would be, and most already were out of sheer instinct. Still, she admitted with a bitter sigh as she ran a hand thoughtlessly through her hair, and then down to rest errantly on her chest, "She's hid too many secrets, for far too long... No more. We need her knowledge, and she has no authority with which to cow us now. When she's found, she will be answering our questions. What we do with that information... Well, that depends on what we're given, and how she gives it."

Dimitri was quiet, absorbing both her words and watching how her hand plucked idly at her shirt, directly over her heart. He wondered if she knew what she was doing or why, and it brought his curiosity, that ugly, burning, bitter curiosity rearing back to the surface. He believed her when she said her heart didn't beat, she had no reason to lie to him, and yet... It puzzled him how she still had a pulse, how she still could move, act, and react with her heart laying still inside of her chest. Was it as simple as the power of her Crest forcing her body into function? He didn't know, and he doubted he ever would. It was well beyond the scope of his understanding, and something far more
into the reach of myths and ancient history. Still... He reached out again, gently settling his hand over hers before he began quietly, slowly, "Raine... If I might be so bold to ask...?"

"You want to feel for yourself, don't you?" Raine finished his question before he could ask it, and she felt an awkward and bitter smile curling at her lips despite herself. She turned her head so he wouldn't have to see her expression, and she wondered why she felt feverish... She had expected this. It was one thing for him to feel her pulse, but it was another entirely for him to feel her lack of a heartbeat for himself... and she owed him the chance to feel it so he understood exactly what it was that she was. Words alone were not enough. And she settled her hand on top of his, holding it down before she murmured softly, 'I'll let you, but... Just, don't... stare, okay? It's... embarrassing enough as it is, having to show you, as necessary as I know it is. This will be the first time that... anyone put their hands on me like this."

"If you don't wish for me to touch you..."

"It's fine. Don't make me lose my nerve." Raine interrupted him brusquely, knowing her courage was rapidly dwindling and that she needed to act before she decided she didn't wish for this after all. She had prepared for it, showing proof, but it still made her body hot and her face red as she took his hand and guided it underneath her shirt. He held himself completely still, allowing for her to do all of the work to make it less awkward for her, and she both appreciated and hated it as she fussed for a moment, and then settled his hand under her breast and over her heart. She flattened his palm over her skin, pressing down to allow him to feel the nothingness he'd need to feel to confirm her words, and she held her breath despite herself to keep herself from bolting up from the bed. His hand was hot on her skin, large and callused and deliciously firm, and it made her ache wondering how it would feel to have him touching her elsewhere, with more strength and purpose.

Dimitri narrowed his eye, focussing all of his concentration into his hand as it lay across her bare chest to feel... absolutely nothing. She was sitting still as a statue, her cheeks burning crimson as she held her breath, and yet... Her heart didn't pound as his did inside of his chest. He could feel it thrumming in his ears, arousal spiking despite himself, and he swallowed down the knot in his throat in a desperate attempt to quell it. He wanted to focus only on the absence of her heartbeat, and yet... Her skin was soft, yielding underneath his fingertips and beckoning for more of his touch, and only the tightest of reigns he could manage stopped him from sliding his palm downwards to follow. But his control wasn't absolute, and he proved it as his head lowered against the back of her neck, and he whispered raggedly as he felt her momentarily tense, before relaxing with a ragged breath of her own, "You're still so warm... Have you always been...?"

"I don't... I don't know..." Raine admitted with a shiver as his breath scorched her throat, and unbidden her head tilted to the side to give him more room to nuzzle. He took it almost at once, his lips brushing longingly across her neck and collarbone, and she bit her lip to stop herself from hissing in surprise. His hand followed suit, fingertips tentatively dragging across her skin in a whisper of a caress to reach across her chest before clasping her opposite breast in his palm. She hissed as his callused skin dragged across her sensitive flesh, rubbing against her pert nipple and making her gasp aloud with a mixture of pleasure and shock. It was all foreign, all new, and yet it still felt so absurdly welcome and good. It made her forget her shyness, her awkwardness, and instead changed it all to a yearning hunger she knew, but hadn't ever embraced before.

"Raine... May I...?" It was a low, growled question as Dimitri's mouth dragged across her throat and to her ear, and his fingers grasped and groped, rolling that sensitive peak to hear her gasp again in pleasure. She was burning underneath his hands, her body quivering against his chest as she leaned back to further grant him access to her body. His trousers were painfully tight, his heart hammering in his ears as he ached for relief, relief and that harsh, unrelenting desire to satisfy all of those urges those dreams and nightmares had left him with ever since they had first begun to
haunt him years ago. Still, he held himself back from taking more, fighting to keep the animal in control as his teeth grazed against her earlobe, "If you say no... I'll stop... I can stop... if you don't wish for this..."

The promise made her shudder all the way to her very bones, and her head turned unbidden, lips searching... He rewarded her immediately despite his words, his mouth pressing down against hers with furious, desperate passion. His tongue plundered her gasping mouth, his right hand tightening its hold on her breast while his left reached up, tangling in her hair to tilt her head further back so he could deepen the kiss easily. She groaned deep in her throat, chest constricting as his fingers curled into his sleeve to ensure his hold on her chest as every inch of her throbbed in want. To ask him to stop now would almost be as painful as taking that dagger in the back again, and she whispered as they parted for a gasp of air, "No... Don't stop... I want this. I want you."

As if to prove it, Raine reached down of her own accord, pulling her shirt up and over her head before he could find a word to say in reply. Dimitri groaned at the sight of her bare skin, that eager, desperate look in her eye, and immediately he was crashing his mouth against hers again for a long, hungry kiss before she could properly turn about. It didn't matter. He didn't want to wait, either.

His hands moved of their own will, reaching, grasping, searching, and she groaned and twisted in his arms, eagerly granting him access to wherever he wished and twitching and shivering each time his callused skin brushed new territory he was so hungry to claim. She wasn't entirely sure where this frenzy had come from, what had taken either of them over, but it didn't matter. Too much had been pent up between them. Want, longing, lust... She could call it whatever she wished. It still made them desperate, made them wild, and she was more than happy to throw better sense and thought to the wind.

"You, too... Take it off..." Her words were the only thing capable of penetrating that hazy fog in his brain, and Dimitri only hesitated for a moment before obeying. Taking his hands off of her was hell, robbing himself of that smooth, silken feel of her skin, and he clumsily, hastily pulled his tunic off and threw it thoughtlessly off of the cot. The spare moment gave him a chance to see her, bent forward in between his legs, shoulders heaving from her panting and giving him a quick, but long enough glimpse of her back that he hadn't taken pause to see before in his haste earlier that night.

She was scarred, though not nearly as badly as he was from her lifetime of warfare and mercenary work. The most prominent of her old wounds was her newest, the long, ragged mark over her shoulderblade and heart, which stood out in a dark, shiny maroon against the creamy tint of her skin. The others were small and almost easy to ignore in comparison, small nicks of missed hits, barely anything to note when he glanced down at himself. He was a ragged mess of scar tissue himself, with his armour's dents, nicks, and patching all covering up the wounds it had failed to protect him from. And that was before he counted the marks of the Tragedy of Duscur, the burns on his back and upper shoulders from the regicide he had only barely managed to survive as a boy.

His pause was too long, making Raine turn her head to glance at him questioningly, and he shook his head before leaning down to capture her lips in a soft, gentle kiss. He pulled her slowly upright again, brushing his mouth gently, tenderly along her collarbone as his hands wrapped snugly about her waist to unbuckle her belt to gain access to her trousers. She hissed softly, squirming slightly with both impatience and hunger, only to freeze as she felt his lips dragging down her neck and to her shoulder. He was soft, hesitant as he hovered just over the place where her scar began, and his voice was ragged when he whispered, "Let me... make you forget... Tell me at once... if I hurt you..."

"Mmn...!" His fingers slid past the hemline of her smallclothes, probing, searching, stroking as his lips fell gently on her scar, and she heard rather than felt herself moan at the twinge of pain that
was accompanied by a white-hot flash of pleasure. He was gentle, absurdly gentle as he found that hot, wet entrance and slid his fingers in, and she bucked thoughtlessly, grinding her hips forward into his palm as his tongue flicked out to cover the length of her scar. She knew he was restraining himself, desperately trying to find a medium between too soft and too hard for fear of hurting her accidentally due to his strength, but she didn't have the presence of mind to try and scold him for it. It felt too good.

Dimitri grit his teeth at the sensation of her body reacting so eagerly to him, and only that warning, that ceaseless shriek of a warning of letting go even for a moment forced him to restrict himself. She was not a sewing needle, or even an iron lance... With his bare hands, he could cause her more harm than he ever wished if he dared to forget himself, even for a moment. He couldn't take out his wants on her unrestrained, no matter how much either of them would wish for it. It would only lead to her hurting, and that he would never allow. Never again.

He nipped at her pulse point, marvelling at how there, at least, he could indeed feel the flow of her blood under her skin even if his hands could not capture the sensation of her heartbeat. Her low, pinched moan of pleasure only tightened his groin, and he bent her over onto her hands and knees, reaching to delve his fingers deeper as his mouth once again travelled across her back. He watched her hands grasp at the bedsheets, felt her thighs trembling about his arm, and despite himself... He smirked with arrogant pride. Those sounds she made were for him. Because of him. The way she looked, panting, trembling, flushed from head to toe... Also because of him. No one would ever know she could make those noises, could look like this... No one but him.

His thumb brushed across that sensitive bundle of nerves that were the source of her pleasure, and he heard her cry out before she gritted her teeth audibly in a desperate attempt to control her voice. It almost made him laugh as he sat up on his knees behind her, pressing himself down across her bare back so she could feel his skin on hers as he continued to pleasure her. His fingers moved in a slow, deep mockery of what was to come as his teeth dragged across the nape of her neck and back to her earlobe, whispering thoughtlessly as the gasps and moans she made drowned his mind in a haze of lust, "By the flames, I've wanted you like this for so long... Too long. Even when we first met... You were the most beautiful creature I'd ever laid my eyes on... I wanted you, right from the beginning... You've haunted me for so long... Hearing your voice now... Feeling you... I'll never be able to get enough."

"D-Dimitri..." Raine groaned as her knuckles whitened as she grasped desperately at the bedsheets to try and find an anchor to hold herself against him. He was growing rougher, his breathing turning deeper, harsher in her ear, though she wasn't sure if he was aware of it or not. She felt no pain, not even discomfort as he grasped her waist to steady her against his movements, and hearing those words being growled into her ear only made her want him all the more. If he was being honest, then he had been the first to know, but that was flattery she dearly enjoyed hearing. She knew herself when she had fallen for him, though it had taken hindsight for her to realize just what those feelings that had been stirring in her chest, but to say it as openly as he did... She wasn't sure she had the courage.

Dimitri watched her left arm shudder, threatening to buckle in keeping her upright as she fought to lengthen the pleasure and stave off her climax, and he halted his movements almost immediately as he understood her weakness was making itself known again. She whimpered with dismay as his fingers quit their torture and then withdrew, but he was quick to soothe her as he leaned backwards, taking her with him and removing all the weight on her arms as he whispered huskily against her neck, "You still aren't fully recovered... It'll be easier on you if it's like this..."

Slow, firm hands easily lifted her off of her knees with all the ease of picking up a book, and Raine wasn't sure if she was more aroused or startled by just how strong he was to be able to manipulate
her body so easily. In one smooth movement she had gone from sitting up on her knees to now straddling his waist, and she bit her lips as she felt his arousal straining against his trousers to graze against her core. Her hips moved thoughtlessly for more friction, eliciting a sharp groan from the man underneath her, and she bit her lip, taking a moment now that she had it to study him as he held her, loose but close as he stared up at her with hunger written plain across his face.

No matter where her hands landed on his torso they found a scar of some sort, from that X shaped wound that mimicked the cerulean filling his ebony armour boasted, to many other hints of battles won, lost, or barely survived over his last five years. It was with a mix of pain and bittersweet experience that she could name each weapon that had given him each scar, and her fingers were gentle, soothing as she stroked over each as she took advantage of the change of position to touch him. Burn scars, long faded but still noticeable decorated his shoulder and travelled farther across his back, likely from the attack in Duscur territory, and she leaned down against him, her lips touching his shoulder when she murmured, "I love you... Touch me, Dimitri. Make me feel whole again... You're the only one who can..."

Stifling a groan, Dimitri watched as Raine shed her trousers and smallclothes in one, smooth, elegant movement before she pulled at his buckle to release him from his own restraints. He watched, panting and grasping tightly at the mattress as she pulled the offending garments down for him, obviously pleased to be doing him any sort of service after all he had already done to her. She straddled him again the moment their clothes hit the floor, pressing every inch of her bare skin to his as her arms wrapped around his neck, and his hands rose to her waist, holding her still when she began to lift herself up on her knees in preparation. She looked to him quizzically, her seafoam-coloured eyes wanting and curious and dazed all somehow at once, and he reached to touch her lower lip, stroking it with his thumb before he whispered raggedly, "Do you want this...? Do you truly want me?"

Raine felt both a mixture of exasperation and bittersweet affection at his hesitation, his uncertainty, even after everything that had already happened between them. Part of her couldn't believe he still needed the reassurance, but the other was well aware it was necessary. He was afraid... Afraid and hurt and desperate, and to him, everything was as fragile as glass in those powerful hands of his. Herself included. It didn't matter how far they had already gone, or what words they had traded... He still needed to know, needed to hear her say the words. It was as endearing as it was painful, and she cupped his cheeks, her fingers caressing his skin and his bangs as she embraced him wholly as she asked in a soft murmur, "You're asking me this even now...? You have to know the answer already..."

"I can't... give you anything but myself... and as I am... That's less than nothing. You're hedging all of your bets on me somehow managing to succeed where all I've ever done is fail." Dimitri's words came harsh and haggard, and though his entire body was shrieking to forget the words, forget his better sense... He still clung to it with all the strength and sanity he had left to him. It didn't matter how soft and hot she felt against him. It didn't matter how her voice had done things to him that even his dreams has failed to do after five long years of near-constant torment. He couldn't in good faith proceed... Not yet. It choked him, made his voice crack even as his hands trembled on her waist to ensure she did not move, "I will give you everything you ask... Whenever, however you ask of it of me... Even if it's just to be a slave to your whims for the rest of my life, to leave in the morning and come back every night, I'd do it happily for you... but what do you get in return? What promise can I make, that you can trust in, when I haven't proven anything yet?"

It hurt, hearing him speak so lowly of himself even though a great part of her new it was right of him to. He hadn't yet done anything of true substance. A battle in Brigid, and a battle to secure the safety of Garreg Mach simply were not enough to redeem him. She knew it just as well as he did. Still... She didn't want it to matter. He had suffered long enough. He had been punishing himself
for long enough. To hear him say so willingly he would be her slave and do so happily, if that was all she wished from him... She understood that level of self-hatred, of unwillingness to believe he deserved anything but the scraps off of the floor, but she wouldn't allow it to consume him again. She wrapped her arms about him to hug him close, well aware he wouldn't permit her to do more than that when they were so close, and so on the verge, but she ignored it as she asked him plainly, "Can you promise that you'll love me?"

"I can promise you that, but..."

"That's all I want, Dimitri. I just want you to love me," Raine interrupted him before he could once more drag himself back down, and she leaned back on her knees, staring at him as her fingers twined themselves lovingly in his thick, shaggy blond mane. His one cerulean eye watched her longingly, want and hunger and adoration all mixing into a desperate, woeful expression, and she pulled him gently forward, allowing their lips to brush in the faintest of kisses as her body pressed flush into his, "I don't need anything else for this moment... Just you loving me. If you do, and you promise to continue, then... I'm already yours. Take me. Because every moment I have to wait is torture... I need you."

"As you wish..." Dimitri whispered as her mouth covered his again in a deep, hungry kiss that gave everything, and held back absolutely nothing. His skin felt as if it was aflame all over again as her naked body slid against his own, searching, urging, and his hands slid down along her sides, resting on her hips to direct her movements. He watched as she bit her lower lip in expectation, seafoam-coloured eyes half-lidded with pleasure, and he was slow, painfully slow as he lowered her onto him. Both of them groaned in unison as she sheathed herself on him, her nails pricking at the back of his neck as his fingers gripped down instinctively into her skin as she took him to the brink in one, long, smooth movement. He grit his teeth, resisting the urge to buck up into her as she moaned and twisted on top of him, taking him in and calling his name until their bodies fit together like two lost pieces of a puzzle. He spoke hoarsely, fighting with the last bit of his sanity as he felt her breath on his tongue as her mouth urged for his kiss as he repeated his earlier warning, "Tell me immediately... if I start to hurt you..."

Any response was swallowed by another long, deep kiss as he began to move, slow, shakily and he restrained her far too strongly for her to move of her own volition. She understood his fears fighting with his desires, his want to ravish her at war with his worry of hurting her if he lost control, and for the moment, she ceded to him. It wasn't as if she had the strength to fight him, and those tightly-gripping hands were scalding on her flesh as much as they gave her pleasure as he held her still for his movements. His tongue plundered her mouth as she wrapped her arms tighter around his neck, milking out more sounds she hadn't known she was capable of making as his hips rocked beneath her own.

"Raine..." He breathed her name against her throat as her head fell back when they parted for a gasp of air, and he found his rhythm as her legs wrapped themselves as best they could around his waist. She was tight and hot and wet, and the pleasure was near-blinding as he pushed in deeper with every thrust of his hips. Her moans were music, more beautiful than anything the choir in the chapel could ever manage to make, and his mouth burnt a path down her chest, seeking where his hands had been before as he hissed into her skin, "All those nights in the cold... Dreaming of you like this... Over and over... And you feel so much better in my hands now... I'll never be able to let you go now that I've had a taste of you...

"Aah...!" Raine bit down hard on her lower lip to stifle her sounds as Dimitri's mouth went on the offensive, kissing, licking, suckling at her sensitive skin with wild abandon. It was a different sensation than his hands, hotter, wetter, but the shivers it drew were all the more sweet for it. It made her tense and twitch, twisting helplessly in his hands as he switched from one taut nipple to
the next, lavishing it with all the attention he could muster between his ever deepening thrusts. Then his right hand lifted, his knuckles dragging along her side before his hand affixed itself onto the breast his mouth was not currently occupied by, and she whimpered into his hair as her hips bucked instinctively, "Dimitri, please...!"

It was a helpless endeavour, restraining himself from her when his hands wanted to be all over her body at once despite all better sense arguing to the contrary. He leaned her back against the bed, winding her legs about his hips and pushing in deeper, and her resounding cry of his name only told him he had chosen wisely to cede to his instincts. He was on fire, both with pleasure and with lust, and he slammed forward again, taking advantage of their position to reach even deeper when her back arched and her ankles locked behind his hips. It released something primal, something dark and twisted and bestial inside of him, and his teeth dragged on her nipple as he growled out thoughtlessly, "That's it... Louder... Scream my name... Just like you did in all of my dreams. Loud enough so the whole of the monastery hears you. You belong to me... You're mine, Raine..."

Raine felt her nails scratching down his back as she gripped down onto him like a lifeline, anchoring herself so she could move in time with each of his thrusts. He hit so deep that it was almost painful, but if anything was truly hurting, her mind could no longer register it. There was only him, the scent, taste and feel of his body on hers, inside of hers, and it wiped everything else away cleanly. His words pierced her through like arrows, making her twist helplessly underneath him, and her legs trembled as she gasped out his name in answer to his demand. There was no denying him. Not when her own dreams had been as vivid, been as haunting... She wanted him with a passion bordering on the insane. She wouldn't be sated until she had him. Every last inch. Yet, there was also that twisting, aching, throbbing feeling deep within that warned her she couldn't take much more of this, no matter how much she still was craving him. Her body was reaching its limit, the pleasure arcing more and more wildly through her nerves until only barely coherent whimpers and moans peppered her every breath. He was so deliciously heavy and hard, making her cot shake with the force of his movements, but she had long since ceased to care about the thuds, or the volume of their noises. And his groans, his snarls that met her own whenever she cried his name... Something was spiking, making her tighten her hold on him fiercely as she gasped against his searching mouth, "Dimitri... I c-can't...!"

"Say my name..." Dimitri repeated hoarsely, clutching her face with one hand as the other held her waist and pinned her firmly to the bed as his hips slammed against her own again and again. Her cheeks were flushed, eyes dazed and lips swollen from his kisses, but still it wasn't enough. Not just yet. He could feel it too, that tightening, the shudder, and his tongue traced her lower lip, milking another ragged moan of his name from her throat as he whispered, "We'll end this together, Raine... Call my name...!"

"Aah...! Dimitri!" Nails broke skin, and Raine heard herself crying out in blissful agony as that something deep within her body snapped when his teeth fell onto her neck as his back arched and her body gave way to a wild spasm. White-hot fingers of pleasure curled themselves around her spine, making her deaf, blind, and numb to everything but the feeling of his body shaking with hers as he joined her climax with his own. She felt herself tense for one long moment, holding that bittersweet cresting surge for all it was worth before the strength was sucked from every muscle in her body and left her exhausted, limp, and breathless beneath him.

She heard him groan, felt his breath heaving through his chest as he nearly collapsed on top of her as a similar weakness tore through him as his end found him. His arm was trembling beside her on her thin mattress as he rested the majority of his weight on it, and when he made to pull away, she dug her nails back into his shoulders unthinkingly. He paused, uncertain, and she clung tighter, unsure of why but feeling that throbbing need all the same deep in her chest and stinging in her
eyes when she whispered into his neck, "No... Don't leave me... Stay..."

Gentle hands lifted her slightly, giving him just enough room to roll to the side without dislodging himself from her grip, and she was glad for it as she curled herself as snugly as she possibly could against him. Her legs intertwined with his, trapping him against her and refusing to let go, and from the arms that snaked their way about her body in return, she knew he was in no hurry to let her go, either. His heart was hammering against her cheek in his chest, and his breath was heavy in her hair, but nothing mattered more than the soft, wondering tone in his voice when he whispered, "I love you... More than anything... I love you..."

Raine felt his hand moving along her side and then somewhere behind her over the edge of the cot, searching... and then a warm weight covered her a moment later. She blinked in surprise, realizing he had the foresight to cover her trembling body with his cloak, seeing as the blankets were far too twisted underneath their bodies to be pulled out for any use. It was heavy but shockingly warm, and suffused with his scent as he cradled her close, while their breathing slowly began to regulate. She nuzzled his shoulder, lips errantly pressing against a scar within her reach, and his hands rubbed large, soft circles into her back in answer.

"Will you... stay with me tonight...?"

The question slipped out against her will, but the moment it left her lips, Raine had no regret in asking it. She looked up at him, taking in the sweat-slicked strands of blond hair stuck to his flushed face, and the way his one good eye stared at her as if she held the entire world in her hands. His hold on her gentled for a moment before it became stronger again, more purposeful, and he drew her closer and into a tight, firm embrace. He nuzzled the top of her head, feathering gentle kisses all across the crown of her hair before he muttered back hoarsely, "Tonight, and every other night you ask of me... I'm yours, my beloved. Do with me what you will... I will never leave your side again."

Chapter End Notes

AN:

And after a few chapters of build-up... There's the Raine/Dimitri smut! It's been the Raine/Dimitri show as of late, (but hey, they deserved their time in the limelight) but things will be getting back on track soon with Fhirdiad. There's still more ground I want and need to cover, but I'll be doing so as I go, so please, don't worry. I will get to where I wanna as soon as I can! And there is indeed more couples to be showing up and getting more love as the writing continues, including more Warin and Shamir in the future. This version of AM is setting up to be longer than the canon version (to nobody's surprise), but I hope I've made it entertaining thus far, and not so much of a slog!

I'm finally getting over a nasty infection, and the antibiotics have made me almost as sick as the infection did. I'm off my sleep cycle, but I'm slowly getting back into the rhythm of being human. This month has been tough, but I think I'm over the worst of it thus far. I just need a few more nights of good, normal sleep, and I'll probably be as good as new. The rough part of writing is that it really makes me work nocturnal hours rather than human ones, so I'm tucking in at six am when I should just be tossing about and trying not to wake up... It's a curse, but I want to finish my chapter, dammit!
My penchant for long author's notes seems to have flown out the window along with my sleep schedule, so, I'll just repeat my usual spiel. Thanks for reading this far, and please drop me a review should you feel the need. I thank you so much for your time and appreciation, and I hope you have a good one until we see each other again with my next chapter! See you all soon!

Mood: Slaphappy.

Listening To: "Piece By Piece" - P!nk

~ Sky

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