I Think We're Alone Now

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I Think We're Alone Now

by RoseCallainus

Summary

Byleth never said her life was easy. Growing up as the only child in a mercenary group was hard. Growing up being the only one who could see a mysterious green-haired amnesiac was harder. But both found something in the other, and now they're determined to find out how they're connected.

Turns out Byleth isn't the only one with a secret. When her father gets recognised as the former Captain of the Knights of Seiros, only to be recruited as a professor of the Officer's Academy, she gets dragged along and enrolled as a student of the Golden Deer House. But there was something about the cute house leader that seems oddly familiar.

Claude never said his life was easy. Growing up being half-Almyran and half-Fódlan, he was hated by almost everyone he met. That was hard. But that changed when a girl from Fódlan saved his life when he was a child. Unfortunately, their friendship was cut short when the girl had to return home. He gave her a ring when they said goodbye, with promise that they would meet again.

Never in his life he imagined it would be at the academy, where he was hiding his truth. Why were the gods of fate so cruel to him? Why did it have to be here? Oh well, maybe he could use it to his advantage.

Notes
Byleth's emotions are connected with Sothis, and upon learning that fact, I couldn't help but wonder what would have happened if Byleth's emotions were unlocked at a younger age. Chances are it would have been Jeralt assigned to be the new professor (with all of his experience) while Byleth was in turn given a place at the academy (since they're around her age). But that also got me thinking... with Sothis added earlier to the equation, what else might have been different? What trouble would the duo get into while they try to uncover Sothis's memories?

All in all, the beginning will be pretty fast-paced. Each chapter for the first seven chapters-or-so, it will take place between 1169-1179, with the events of the game finally taking place around chapter eight. Also, the chapter will alternate between being centered around Byleth and Claude, since they're both the main characters in this story. Anyway, I'll stop rambling now. Please enjoy.
“Hey,” Byleth pouted slightly, “child or not, we’re still stuck together. Besides, it’s not like I’ll be a child forever. In a few years, I’ll be a teenager. Then an adult. So even if we can’t figure out everything about you right away, we’ve got plenty of time.”

“Do try to avoid getting us killed along the way.”

“I’ll do my best!”

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I Think We’re Alone Now

i. the new ordinary

Great Tree Moon

Imperial Year 1169

Everywhere she looked was engulfed in darkness: the ground, the sky, the horizon. From every direction, her eyes met nothing but pitch black.

It felt... wrong. It felt as though it wasn’t supposed to be dark. Byleth knew she hadn’t gone blind. Looking down at her hands, Byleth could see her pale skin. Every scar, every blemish, every mole. Her skin almost seemed to be luminescent, though that feeling might have been because she appeared to be the only thing around that had any sort of colour. The girl hadn’t the slightest idea why she was visible while everything else was dark. It didn’t make any sense; it shouldn’t be possible, right? This seemed like it had to be a dream. But if it was, then this was the first time in her ten-years-or-so of existence that she had one.

Unsure of what to do in her universe of darkness, Byleth took a step forward. Pleased to see that the ground was flat, she continued onwards. Though she wasn’t quite sure what she was walking on, she wasn’t too keen on touching it to find out. A small part of her feared that if she did, it would vanish from beneath her and she would fall into the abyss of blackness.

“Wait. Am I... afraid?”

She came to a sudden halt. Her eyebrows furrowed as she replayed the thought over and over. Was that what that sinking feeling in her chest was? Fear? She couldn’t recall ever feeling this before,
not even when she had fought against bandits that had attacked her father’s mercenary camp before.

Shaking the thought out of her head, she continued forward. Whatever she was feeling, she would have to deal with that later. Perhaps it was some side effect of dreaming.

After she had walked for what felt like hours, and yet no light had appeared. At this point, Byleth was beginning to panic. What if she was trapped here? She had thought it had been a dream, and yet there was always the possibility that she was dead. What if somebody had snuck into the camp and killed her?

“Hello?!”

Her voice echoed through the darkness, and Byleth frantically turned around, trying to see if she could find any sign of anyone else being there, or if she was utterly alone. She wanted Jeralt—she wanted her dad. But if she was dead, then she didn’t want him to be too. She wanted him to be alive if this is what the afterlife was.

The heavy feeling returned to her chest as she contemplated the fate of her father, and her once steady breath quickly became shaky. Instinctively, one of her hands flung to her chest to try to steady her rapidly beating heart—

Wait. What?

Surely enough, her heart was beating rapidly in her chest. But that didn’t make any sense. She didn’t have a heartbeat, a fact that she knew about herself from a young age. Something that her father had taught her how to hide from the medics of their group. Though she thought it was strange, with that look of concern that he was showing her, she knew better than to argue with it.

“Hello?!?”

Calling out one more time, Byleth shut her eyes tightly, hoping that this nightmare would end. Not even a few moments later, she felt a wetness on the side of her face. Her eyes shot open—had she been attacked? Was she bleeding?!

Wiping her cheek with the back of her palm, she let out a gasp when she saw that it was water on her hand instead of blood. She repeated the action to make sure that her eyes weren’t deceiving her, but the more she looked at it, the blurrier it became as the water ran down her face faster.

“What is happening? What is happening…”

Murmuring to herself repeatedly, Byleth dropped down to her knees, finding that she could no longer support her weight. She knew that she was crying, the girl was a lot of things, but she wasn’t stupid. However, she has no memories of ever having cried. She’s seen other people in their mercenary band cry, of course, such as when another member died. Or when they failed to protect the innocents that they had pledged to keep safe. But during all of that, Byleth never shed a single tear.

Until now.

It felt like everything that Byleth had never felt throughout all those years was just finally being released now. She felt fear, and she felt sad, and she felt…

She wasn’t sure. It was all just too overwhelming.
“Nggh... you're so loud...”

Byleth jumped at the sudden voice, her eyes scanning the area, quickly landing on the silhouette of a throne. A girl sat on top of it, who appeared to be not much older than Byleth. The girl’s green hair was held back in two ponytails as an elaborate golden headdress adorned her head like a crown.

The mysterious girl let out a yawn, stretching as Byleth examined her intricate blue and golden outfit. It was like nothing that she had ever seen before, but it was quite beautiful.

“What are you doing on the ground? Get up. Come, come.”

Byleth did as the girl instructed, picking herself up from the ground and wiping her eyes. She was grateful for the distraction, though incredibly confused as to what was happening. Sniffling, as she urged herself to stop crying, she took a few steps towards the throne.

“A child...? I thought that my eyes were deceiving me, but it seems as though I was correct. How in the world did you manage to get in here?”

“I don’t know...” Byleth informed her, unable to take her eyes away from the newcomer. “I thought I was dreaming, but I think I might be dead... am I dead?”

Byleth’s eyebrows furrowed as her comment elicited a giggle from the girl. She didn’t know what was so funny about her question; she had been genuine. She hadn’t the faintest idea of what was happening, but she had never felt so many... emotions before in her life. The only logical conclusion that she could think of was that she was dead.

“You are most certainly alive,” the green-haired girl told her, amusement lacing her voice. “As am I, if that was also a concern that plagued you.”

“Then, where are we?”

“Huh... that answer seems to elude me as much as it does you,” the girl closed her eyes for a moment in deep thought, before opening them suddenly. “Oh, how rude of me! I had utterly neglected to ask your name until this point!”

“I don’t know if I’m supposed to tell you... I heard you’re not supposed to give your name to the fae.”

“I am most certainly not a fae!” the green-haired girl proclaimed, offended. “I am... Sothis? Yes, that sounds right. My name is Sothis.”

“I’m... Byleth.”

Sitting on the floor of her tent, Byleth played with the eggs on her plate. She was in far too deep of thought to have much of an appetite. She couldn’t stop thinking about her dream from last night. The green-haired girl, Sothis, was quite peculiar. She might not have been a fae, but she certainly wasn’t a human. Despite that, there was something about her that felt familiar somehow.

Byleth was sure that it was a dream; it had to have been. After all, it happened when she was asleep. But a small part of her hoped that it wasn’t. She wasn’t sure if she should chalk it up to loneliness, or because for the first time in her life she had felt something.
Letting out a sigh, Byleth scooped up as much egg as she could on her fork and took a bite. As much as she would prefer to sit around and ponder the events that happened last night, she knew that they were heading out today, so they’d need to get the camp packed up as early as possible. Maybe the next night she would once again encounter Sothis and learn more about the mysterious individual.

After she had finished eating, she had cleaned up and packed up her things. After loading it into the wagon with everybody else’s, she began to look around the mercenary’s camp for her father.

“That’s odd…” Byleth muttered to herself, before approaching Ronan, one of the few mages that were in the group. He also doubled as her tutor when her father was away because he was one of the more educated members, despite only being in his early twenties himself. Though it was an unspoken rule that you didn’t ask about someone’s background in a mercenary group, Ronan was very open about his.

Right before Ronan joined the group a few years back, his parents died in a plague that hit the Holy Kingdom of Faerghus a few years back. Ronan was away from home at the time, attending some Officer’s Academy. However, when he returned home only to learn of both of his parent’s deaths, he entered a very dark place. However, Jeralt and his band of mercenaries ended up coming across him and saw his potential. He joined up with them and never looked back. Since then he’s become a surrogate big brother to Byleth.

“Ronan, have you seen Jeralt anywhere?”

“You know, I think he’d prefer you call him ‘Dad’ when you’re talking about him and not just to him,” the blond told her as he flipped a page in his book. Byleth shook her head slightly.

“He got drunk last night and began venting again, didn’t he?”

“Oh, yes. Big time. The last solo mission that your father went on had managed to stress him out quite a bit, so we’re taking the next few weeks off while we travel. Thanks to Alisha, we’ve got a big job lined up in Fhirdiad. Jeralt was against it at first, but with how much they’re paying us for it, he came around. We’ll be heading out as soon as the boss is up and ready to go.”

“You mean he’s still asleep?” Byleth asked, looking back towards his tent. She couldn’t help but wonder if he was okay.

“Aww, is that concern?” Ronan teased, chuckling slightly as he closed his book. “Don’t worry, your old man’s fine. He just drank a little too much last night and needed to sleep it off. You know how he gets. Anyway, there’s something I’ve wanted to talk to you about…”

Byleth raised an eyebrow at the man, having no clue what it was that he had to say.

"Last night I had gone to your tent to tell you that your father was back, but you were fast asleep. It’s to be expected, after all. You’re still young, and you need the proper amount of sleep to develop properly. Er, before I get off track… you looked like you were, well, crying. Is everything okay?”

“Huh?” Byleth whipped back towards Ronan, who was giving her a worried expression. She gave him a small smile and nodded. “I’m fine; I just had a bizarre dream.”

“Oh?” Ronan gestured for her to continue.

“I was all alone in a black abyss or something. I thought that maybe I died. That our camp was raided at night, and we were all killed. But then out of nowhere, there was this girl with green hair…” something in Byleth’s mind urged her to not go into further detail, and she let out a sigh as
she heeded the advice. “I don’t know. I’m not used to dreaming, so I think the entire thing was just overwhelming for me.”

“I see…” Ronan nodded before giving Byleth a soft smile, placing his hand on her shoulder. “Well then, why don’t we go over some books before your father wakes up?”

“Oh, uh, sure.”

It was about a week’s journey for the mercenary band to make it to Fhirdiad, which would leave them with a spare week before their assigned mission. As Jeralt explained to Byleth, they were one of several different mercenary bands hired to help guard the capital of Faerghus for a few months while King Lambert led an invasion against Sreng. Since the king was bringing several of the best guardsmen along with him, in addition to several other troops, the kingdom decided to hire some extra security during their time of absence, to avoid leaving the capital vulnerable.

Someone out there recommended Alisha, one of the highly trained mercenaries in Jeralt’s band, as one of the temporary city guards, and the kingdom was willing to pay too well for them to refuse. Not to mention that they offered an additional bonus for each head that she brought with, as long as she deemed them trustworthy enough to vouch on their behalf.

After about four days of travel, Byleth had already seen Sothis in her dreams twice. However, both of those times, Sothis was asleep, so Byleth hadn’t had much to do besides observe her. After having spent two full nights watching the girl, Byleth had absentmindedly started to draw Sothis in her books. When Byleth had her eyes closed, it was if she could see the green-haired girl no problem. However, as soon as her eyes opened, the details became blurry. The situation had Byleth perplexed.

Looking down at her notes, she had realised that she had begun sketching Sothis, so Byleth decided to try to put more effort into the drawing. So, closing her eyes, she began to draw what she saw, praying that she would be able to portray it onto the paper accurately. Unfortunately for her, Ronan had caught her, and began to give her a longwinded lecture about doodling in her schoolbooks (which Byleth argued that they weren’t technically schoolbooks since she didn’t attend school). Jeralt ended up having to step between the duo to break up their fight.

“What are you two even fighting about?!” he interrogated, and Ronan picked up Byleth’s book and handed it to Jeralt.

“We’re in the middle of lessons, and she decided that she’d rather draw than study! Though I don’t mind her slacking off now and again, this is the third day in a row that she’s blatantly ignored me!” Ronan seethed, and Byleth just crossed her arms and huffed. He was covering things that Jeralt had already taught her anyway.

“Wait, you draw now?” Jeralt turned to his child in surprised, completely ignoring Ronan’s rage. “Ro, why don’t you go eat dinner or something. Let me have a word with my child.”

Letting out a huff, the man walked towards the campfire, cursing under his breath. Jeralt just shook his head slightly, as he took a seat on the ground next to Byleth, letting out a slight huff.

“Damn, not as young as I used to be,” he smiled at Byleth, before putting the book back before her, looking down at the drawing of Sothis. “So, you drew this?”

“I will admit, you did a fairly decent job for not being much of an artist.” Sothis’s voice chimed through Byleth’s ears, causing her to jump, eyes widening in surprise. Jeralt,
misinterpreting Byleth’s shock, chuckled slightly at his daughter’s reaction before placing a gentle hand on her shoulder.

“Don’t worry; you’re not in trouble for drawing in your books. I’m just surprised, is all. I didn’t know you liked drawing.”

“I don’t. I mean…” Byleth was tripping over her words as her mind raced a million miles a minute. Did she hear Sothis? Was she genuinely hearing Sothis?! Did that mean she was here? What was happening? Was she dreaming? It certainly didn’t feel like any other time—

“Woah, there. Do try to soothe yourself before you have a panic attack. If I had known you were this weak of heart, I would have waited to converse. Regardless, I can sense your confusion. I promise that I will explain to you all that I know when we’ve got an opportunity to speak. However, that man… he’s your father, no? It would be in your best interest to respond to him before he grows more worried.” Byleth took a deep breath as she replayed Sothis’s words, before turning back to Jeralt. There would be time for her to sort things out with Sothis later, for now, she needed to ease her father.

“It’s a new thing,” Byleth decided on, “drawing, I guess. I keep seeing this girl in my dreams. I have for the past week or so. Does she seem familiar at all to you?”

“Hmm…” Jeralt studied the drawing for a moment before shaking his head slowly. “Nope, can’t say she does, sorry. Though, this is the first time I’ve heard you mention such dreams. Or, any dreams for that matter.”

“I didn’t think they were that big of a deal,” Byleth told him, secretly happy that Ronan hadn’t informed him that he had caught her crying in her sleep. “Besides, nothing that interesting has happened in them besides seeing the girl. It took me a while to even realise I was dreaming. I honestly thought that I might have been dead.”

Jeralt pulled Byleth into a side hug, planting a kiss on the top of her head.

“You’re okay, kiddo. Just remember that you can talk to me about anything, okay?” Jeralt told her gently.

“Yeah? Even in a few years when I start to, you know…”

“Uhh… maybe you should talk to Lisha about that,” Jeralt avoided eye contact, suddenly finding squirrel running along the tree branch very interesting, only to have a slight snicker sound from beside him. Jeralt's eyes widened in realisation that (since he never brought up menstruation or anything of the sort to her before) Alisha had likely already given her the talk and that Byleth was teasing him. More than that—she was laughing! Jeralt, suddenly couldn’t help but laugh along. “Oh, you little shit. You’re just full of surprises today, aren’t you?”

Sothis yawned out as soon as Byleth entered her tent a few hours later. After chatting with her dad, she had dinner and went over the lessons once again with Ronan—proving to him that she wasn’t ignoring the lessons because she didn’t care, she had simply already known the material. Now, she had finally managed to break away, back to her tent, to have a much-needed talk with Sothis. “If you would have kept me waiting for much longer, then I would have taken another nap. I think I woke too early. Or maybe I had just slept too long. It’s always hard to tell with these sorts of things.”
“What do you mean?” Byleth asked, furrowing her eyebrows. Sothis has been asleep for days since they last spoke, if anything, the girl was getting too much sleep.

“I told you my name was Sothis, and that much is true. But I just remembered that I am also known as another name: The Beginning.”

“The Beginning? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I am unsure. That’s just one of the many things evading my memory. The beginning of what? Why did I just now remember, and where are the rest of my memories? Surely, I have them, but how did I lose them? And why is it that we appear to be bound together? There are just so many questions, with so few answers to any of them.”

“What if… we worked together to try to get your memories back? It’s like you said, after all, we’re bound together. I want answers just as much as you do.”

“I suppose that might be our only choice. It doesn’t seem as though I have any impact on the physical plane. However, you are a child, after all.”

“Hey,” Byleth pouted slightly, “child or not, we’re still stuck together. Besides, it’s not like I’ll be a child forever. In a few years, I’ll be a teenager. Then an adult. So even if we can’t figure out everything about you right away, we’ve got plenty of time.”

“Do try to avoid getting us killed along the way.”

“I’ll do my best!”

The rest of the journey to Fhirdad was uneventful. With a week to kill before they were on guard duty of the capital, the mercenary band all had different ideas on what they wanted to do for fun during their short vacation. Alisha and a few of the other members headed to the blacksmith to get some of their less than desirable weapons repaired. Jeralt and most of the other mercenaries ventured to the taverns, deciding to make the most of the week of free time they had in the city. That left Byleth and Ronan to decide what to do on their own.

“It’s been some years since I’ve been in the capital,” Ronan said, letting out a fond sigh as he recalled the last happy memories he had there with his parents. “I would be happy to show you around in the next few days. However, I must get to the bookstore to purchase some new books and tomes to cover in our next curriculum. Not to mention that there were a few items that Jeralt asked me to pick up—”

“He certainly does love to hear his own voice, doesn’t he? I’m surprised you don’t fall asleep when he’s teaching you; I know I would.”

Byleth stifled a laugh at Sothis’s comment, as she couldn’t help but roll her eyes herself at Ronan’s rambles. Even though she didn’t attend school, Ronan took her studying very seriously. If being a mercenary didn’t work out for him, he would be a great professor.

“—you want to come with or check out the city on your own for a while? I don’t think we’ve been in any of the capitals since I’ve begun travelling with you almost four years ago, so if it’s at all intimidating, you’re more than welcome to join me.”

“I don’t mind exploring on my own for a while,” Byleth told the man. “Besides, I doubt that the guard will let me take watch alongside the rest of you, so I’ll have to keep myself occupied
somehow while we’re here. It’ll be for over a month, right?”

“It depends wholeheartedly on how long the battle for Sreng takes, you see—”

“That was a rhetorical question,” Byleth told Ronan, proud of herself for remembering the correct term. “I’m going to be spending a lot of time on my own while we’re here anyway, so I should probably figure out how to make the most of it, right?”

“I see your logic,” Ronan nodded. “Very well, you recall the inn that Jeralt pointed out on our way into town, right? That’s where our lodging is, so try to be back there by sundown. I’d honestly rather not go on a city-wide search for you on our first day here.”

“You worry too much,” Byleth told him, as she moved slightly to the side, showing him the sword strapped to her belt. Honestly, it looked like it was much too big for her small frame, but she could use it, and that was the critical part. “Besides, I can defend myself if anything were to go wrong. So, you go do your book stuff, and I’ll explore!”

“You’re… uncharacteristically chipper.” Ronan pointed out, causing Byleth to give him a bigger smile than she would normally.

“That’s because I’ve never been in a capital city,” Byleth admitted. Her father typically avoided passing through them because he claimed that there were way too many people that resided within. Hence, the only jobs that mercenaries could usually get were the kinds that he wasn’t willing to take. “Besides, there are probably kids my own age here. Maybe I’ll make a friend? I don’t know. Either way, it’s all new and exciting! And the mission’s pretty easy, so I don’t have to worry about losing any of you.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t realise that you felt that way. Well, please be careful, okay?” Ronan told Byleth as they said their goodbyes. As Ronan headed off towards the bookstore, Byleth turned the opposite way.

“Okay, Sothis. Does anything here seem familiar?”
Something to Say

Chapter Summary

“Claude.”

“Yes, mom.”

“Tell me again how you managed to break your leg?”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I Think We’re Alone Now

ii. something to say

Lone Moon

Imperial Year 1170

Somewhere in Almyra

“Oh look, it’s the whore and her son,” a middle-aged woman sneered. Her gaze had been directed at Queen Tiana and her son, Khalid. Though they hadn’t done anything to warrant mockery, the woman seemingly couldn’t resist partaking in it. The duo had merely been walking down the street, returning to the palace after a trip to the market. However, seeing the lack of guards around the pair, she let out a scoff as she turned to her companions. “Awfully bold of them to be travelling with no guards around, I guess that means that the King finally got sick of them. I bet he’s just waiting for something to happen to them so he can be freed from his mistake.”

“You think so?” the other woman’s eyes scanned the area around them to realise that the former was correct, there didn’t appear to be any guards escorting them. “Apparently, there was an assassination attempt on the duo earlier this month too. I don’t know if their lack of guards is supposed to be a statement or what.”

“A statement against what exactly?” the first woman’s face turned sour. “Everyone knows that people from Fódlan are weak—they’d stand no chance if anyone were to attack them. In fact, it might be better if somebody did! After all, then the King could marry an Almyran and produce reputable offspring instead of that half-breed.”

“I doubt it,” the third woman spoke up, scanning the queen up and down for any reaction on if she can hear them gossiping or not. The queen gave nothing away, however, only stopping momentarily to pick up a fruit that her son had dropped, putting it back into his basket before ruffling his hair, teasing him about having lost it in the first place. “If anything, it’s most likely a power move. Apparently, she’s from Fódlan nobility, so if he played his cards right, perhaps we
could use her to our advantage and get some of the territories from Fódlan. The only thing that Fódlan beats us in is in size. If we can flip the tables, then we’ll show just how pathetic they truly are.”

“Please, I doubt even our King would stoop so low as to marry someone from Fódlan for power. If that were the case, he would have had someone else high-ranking marry her. If you want my guess, she’s a witch and placed a love spell on him. Heh, that would be just like them. Taking the easy way out, so they don’t have to do any real work.”

“What’s the mutt doing in the training grounds?” two guards gossiped. “Everyone knows Fódlans can’t fight worth shit.”

“Maybe ‘daddy’ is finally sick of having a weak son,” the more muscular of the guards said, looking at the scrawny boy as he struggled to pull back his bowstring. His eyes flickered to his combat instructor, Nader. He couldn’t help but wonder why someone as powerful as him would agree to train someone who shared the same blood as the land he so frequently fought against, but he supposed if the King asked you to do something, you didn’t refuse.

“It’s his own fault for knocking up some Fódlan bitch,” the taller guard stated. “I bet the only reason they got married was to prevent a scandal. Imagine that, the Almyran King having a bastard son. Though, I’ve got to admit, have a bastard would be less scandalous than a half-Fódlan one. I’m surprised that she’s still here. Everyone thought she would be long gone by now.”

“Please. If my sister had the opportunity to marry a king from another land, she would jump at it in a heartbeat. Power is power, no matter where it comes from.”

From a young age, Khalid was taught to bite his tongue towards the comments directed towards him and his mother. It seemed that no matter where they went, the whispers never ceased to stop. Though no one would dare say anything during the presence of his father, the king, it seemed that when he was absent, they couldn’t help but talk. He confronted his mother about it, once, when he was younger.

“How come their lies don’t bother you?” he had asked her.

“Because that’s all they are: lies.” Tiana, his mother, assured him. The boy frowned at how used to the comments she seemed. It was as if their words no longer phased her, and although he was glad that she was able to remain happy despite it, he still knew that it wasn’t right.

“But they’re mean and wrong!” the boy argued.

“Better men have called me worse things,” was her response.

He knew that his mother was trying to reassure him, but Khalid didn’t feel any better. The young boy heard things spoken about them that no child should ever have to hear, and yet no one did anything about it. He heard it everywhere: the city, the streets, even the palace. It was something that Khalid couldn’t understand, no matter how hard he tried.

For as long as history books have recorded, there were always tensions between Almyra and Fódlan. The Almyran’s viewed the people of Fódlan as cowards, while the Fódlian’s viewed the people of Almyra as savages. Having a parent of both sides, Khalid understood that this was far from the truth. His mother was brave and kind (albeit terrifying when she wanted to be), while his father was strategic and charismatic (and the only one who could handle his mother). Knowing the
truth about his parents, he refused to believe the assumptions about them. Though, the prince couldn't deny being curious about how the rumours came to be. Khalid eventually came to understand that people were just afraid of what they didn’t understand, and the ignorance of those around him was causing them more harm than good. As such, Khalid refused to be uneducated on the subject and studied it much more in-depth than most boys his age would.

The two nations were more similar than they realised if they just got off their high-horses and sat down to discuss peace. Khalid's father had tried to reach out towards Fódlan, but there was only so much he could do considering most of the country had been against forming an all-out alliance with their neighbouring country. Luckily, the king was at least able to grant open trade between the two countries. It was a start, though it was a small one.

However, the idea had been a frightening one to the locals, as well as the merchants. It had gotten to the point that it became highly recommended that any merchant who travelled between the two countries have a group of guards. The reason behind this was because attacks were much likelier to happen on foreign merchants than they were local ones, whether it was due to racism or merely the opportunity to acquire foreign goods had been too irresistible for most bandits to pass up.

The more he learned, the more annoyed he got. The fact that the two nations were so close to one another yet seemed to avoid any compromise to see that they were more similar than they would admit seemed stupid to him.

He didn’t see why they couldn’t just get along. Considering his father was married to a woman from Fódlan, he would have thought that people would grow more open-minded about the country. Instead, they hated their queen, just as they hated her son. Though trade was now open, Khalid knew that there was a lot of work to be done. But it was possible to become reliable allies if only people stopped looking at their differences and started looking at their similarities.

But what did he know? He was just a child, after all, one that wasn’t taken seriously at that. He was hated just for existing. How could he ever become a king when his own country wanted him dead? After all, he could hear the guard gossip behind closed doors. He knew just what they thought of him and his mother. And these were the sorts of people who were supposed to protect his family. Luckily for him, this time his combat instructor, Nader, had caught the guards gossiping and quickly reprimanded them. However, Khalid didn’t think that was enough punishment since it happened quite frequently. And when the people who were supposed to protect you secretly hated you, it made Khalid fear for any future assassination attempts on them. If it wasn’t for Nader…

Khalid shook the thought out of his head, now wasn’t the time to focus on that. Right now, his immediate goal was to teach those guards a lesson or two. After spending as many hours studying in the library as he did, he happened to stumble upon some specific books. Though they didn’t have anything to do with Fódlan or Almyra, they did have to do with herbology. One book, in particular, was very useful, as he happened to stumble across an entry about a specific herb, one that was local to Almyra, that when grounded up, secreted an oil that led to severe itching. After acquiring the plant, he had snuck into the guards’ quarters to test out his new… experiment.

“That should do it,” he muttered to himself as he finished sprinkling the flakes in the clean undergarments of the guards. Judging by how much his hands were itching; he knew that his plan would work. That is, assuming none of them scrutinised their clothing. He did the best that he could with grinding them up, but if you looked close enough, you would still be able to see flecks of green. Then again, it would seem as though a lot of the guards at the palace had a fairly low IQ.

“That serves them right for talking crap about my mom…” Khalid muttered to himself, scratching the
itch on his hand. Those herbs were powerful; he had to admit. He almost felt bad. Almost.

“Better get out of here before I get caught,” he reminded himself, as he began heading towards the door, pausing as he heard voices outside the door in the hallway, voices that were *coming closer*. His eyes widened as he cursed under his breath, knowing that if he got caught, he would be dragged behind the horses again.

The boy swiftly turned around, his eyes scanning over the room as he tried to figure out how to get out without being caught. As he looked around, he realised he had one of two options: hide or jump out the window. He took only a moment to weigh the pro’s and the con’s in his head before his body moved towards the window. Though the fact that he was on the second floor was a huge con, the ground outside was covered in sand. Sand that would absorb the shock from his fall. That added to the fact that the consequences would be even more severe for getting caught had helped him make up his mind. Because not only would the guards realise he was the one who had pranked them but would also have a reason to look the other way should any assassins get into the palace again.

As the voices were now just outside the door, he didn’t have any more time to think. He climbed up onto the windowsill as his young mind attempted to calculate the best way to go about avoiding any severe injuries. Grabbing onto the ledge, he lowered himself down as much as he was able to, trying to put as little distance between him and the ground below. He was lucky that for a kid his age, he had a decent amount of upper body strength. He’d have to thank Nader for his harsh training sometime. Actually, scratch that. If he admitted being grateful to his unconventional training methods, then he would go harder on the boy.

Taking a moment to look down, Khalid could feel the nerves starting to kick in at what he was about to do. But it was too late for him to turn back, he knew, so he settled for taking a deep breath, before letting go of the windowsill as he braced himself for landing.

“Claude.”

“Yes, mom.”

“Tell me again how you managed to break your leg?” Tiana crossed her arms, looking down at her son. He looked up at her sheepishly, trying to ignore the fact that he was confined to his bed with a cast around his leg. Khalid scratched at his hand, which was covered in a bright red rash, as he attempted to feign innocence.

“I told you. I fell out of a tree and kind of misjudged the distance between me and the ground,” Khalid lied. “I’m sorry, I know I shouldn’t have been in a tree, but I was practising with my bow, and the string ended up snapping on my hand which caused my arrow to misfire. I thought that it had hit the tree, so I climbed up to get my arrow back. But it wasn’t there, so I got a little annoyed about climbing it for nothing. And then I fell. I mean, if anything, it’s a lesson that I need to work on my timing and my aim, right?”

“So, let me get this right.” Tiana cocked an eyebrow at her son. "You got that rash on both of your arms from getting slapped by the string, climbed a tree to get your arrow back, and got so annoyed that the arrow wasn’t in the tree that was nowhere near the archery range that you fell out of it.”

“I wasn’t practising near the archery range, I was trying to shoot a bird that pecked me, and it landed in the tree. But I think that I need more training…”

His mother shook her head, sighing, as she took a seat on the edge of the boy’s bed, brushing a lock
of his curly brown hair out of his face.

“My son, abnay, what am I to do with you?” she gave him an exasperated look, and the boy gave her a sheepish smile.

“You and dad both told me I needed to fight my own battles, so I did. And the bird just so happened to win that one.”

“You need to fight your own battles against other children, not the guards.” Khalid’s eyes widened as he opened his mouth to deny her claim, but that just caused Tiana to chuckle. “Your little lies might work on everybody else but do remember that I’m your mother—I know all.”

Khalid’s mouth still hung opened like a fish out of water as he looked at his mother with a dumbfounded look, trying to come up with a way to counter her accusations. But she didn’t get mad at the fact he lied to her, in fact, she just gave him a wink.

“I’m sorry to be the one to inform you, but you’ve got a tell when you’re lying: you bite your lip. Honestly, if you ever want to fool me, then you’ve got to work on that, Claude.”

“You know, I don’t think most parents would encourage their child to lie,” Khalid pointed out.

“Well, I think we can both agree that our situation here is a bit of a different one. Sometimes you’ve got to focus on what’s in your best interest. Not to mention, I think your broken leg is punishment enough. Now can you tell me why you put itching powder in the guard’s clothing?”

“It wasn’t itching powder—it was, err,” Khalid laughed awkwardly, realising he shouldn’t say anything to incriminate himself. Though Tiana was his mother, this was likely another lesson she was teaching him; otherwise, she wouldn’t have told him what gave him away. “It must have been the gods of fate getting their revenge. They were talking crap—”

“Claude!”

“What?! It’s not like I said shit—” the glare from his mother was enough to shut his mouth and continue his explanation. “Anyway, they were saying really bad stuff about you. And me. And Fōdlan!”

“I’m sorry that you overheard them saying that,” she gave Khalid a sad look, causing him to shake his head. She shouldn’t have to apologise for their ignorance. It wasn’t her fault she just so happened to fall in love with a man from another country. His parents made each other happy, but for some reason, everyone around them seemed deadest on destroying their happiness.

“It’s not fair! They shouldn’t hate you for where you come from! They shouldn’t hate me for just existing!” Khalid loathed the fact that he was starting to tear up, but he continued. “When I’m king someday, assuming I manage to survive that long, I want to make things better between the two countries! I don’t know how, but I will! They act like Fōdlan is such a bad place, but I know it’s not! It can’t be, you’re from there, and you’re, like, the best mom!”

“Claude, sweetie…”

“They shouldn’t make you feel bad about being from Fōdlan! And don’t you try to deny it either, because I know that you do.” The tears were now streaming from Khalid’s eyes, and he tried his best to ignore them. “I’ve noticed for years that you only call me by my Fōdlan name when we’re alone together, while everywhere else I’m Khalid. You always tell me not to be afraid of who I am, but I think you need to listen to your own advice. I-I mean, I understand why we live how we do, but I really hate that it’s that way to begin with. And I promise that I’ll make it better someday, I
have to. We’re probably not the only family like this, from both Fódlan and Almyra. And the way we’re treated… I don’t want anyone ever to have to feel this way. It’s not right!”

“Claude, Khalid, you really are a special child, you know that? You’re so wise for your age; I feel like we could all learn something from you.” Raising her hand, she wiped away the tears that were streaming down her son’s face as she rubbed circles on his back, trying to comfort the young boy. “Someday, I hope that a future where Fódlan and Almyra will unify. I just don’t think we’re there just yet, but I know that someday we will be. You’re not the only one who feels passionately about this, and I believe that one day, you’ll find others who have the same mindset as you. You are the future Claude, but remember, you’ve got to make it there. You shouldn’t put yourself in harm’s way so fast.”

“I-I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

“It’s just…” Khalid sniffled. “Why does everyone have to be so stupid?!?”

“Maybe, you’re just smarter. My sweet child… please remember that words can be your greatest weapon. Remember that, and you’ll be able to accomplish whatever you have your heart set on.”

Verdant Moon

Imperial Year 1170

Fhirdiad, The Holy Kingdom of Faerghus

Byleth will admit that she had severely underestimated the amount of time that the king would be at war with Sreng for. She had thought that it would only be for a month or two. However, it had been over a year since they had departed for battle, and she was getting… bored. Though she was thoroughly enjoying the capital, this was the longest that they’ve stayed in one place for as long as she could remember.

Byleth and Sothis explored the city from top to bottom; they even managed to sneak into the School of Sorcery (they managed to go unnoticed longer than Byleth thought before they ultimately got kicked out), only to come out emptyhanded. There was no clue about Sothis’s identity anywhere, much to both of their disappointments.

“Where should we try next?” Byleth muttered as she sat on a bench alongside one of the main streets, sketchbook in hand. After they had all met back up after their first day in the city, Jeralt presented her a sketchbook. He admitted that he didn’t buy it himself but had instead asked Ronan to pick it up for her when he went to the bookstore, but Byleth didn’t care. She was just happy that her father cared enough about her apparent interests to spend some extra coin on a gift for her. Before she had realised, she had pulled him into a tight hug, catching the man off guard. He would never have expected that sort of reaction out of her, then again, she wasn’t expecting that sort of reaction out of herself. It turns out that the girl was just full of surprises lately.

Byleth took up the hobby of drawing to make use of her new gift. Thought she would admit that she found it much more enjoyable than she had initially thought. Plus, she could position herself in several obscure locations in the city without attracting any attention during her search for anything to spark Sothis’s memory—under the implication that she was just looking for a new place to draw. Not to mention, it was a good distraction from her ever-growing emotions.
Ever since Sothis had appeared, Byleth noticed that she had stronger feelings about things. If she was eating something she liked, she felt happy. When she saw two of the mercenaries in the group had to carry a drunk Jeralt back home, she felt worried. When she saw two kids beating up a dog, she got mad. Really mad. And so, the two kids went home with broken noses (and possibly a few broken fingers), and Byleth gained an animal companion.

It wasn’t her intention to keep the dog; however, after she had bandaged it up and given it some jerky that she brought for lunch, it began following her everywhere. At first, she thought it just wanted some more food, but when she saw it again the next day, and it followed her to the bookstore with Ronan, she realised that she had made a new friend. After asking Jeralt if she could keep it, he agreed instantly, seeing just how happy it made her. And so, the mercenary band gained a new member: Astra.

The dog got its name from its black fur, which was covered in white spots. And since she had never had named anything in her life before, Byleth was stumped. She didn’t want to give it any of the names that Sothis suggested because most of her recommendations were pretty out there. Besides, Byleth wasn’t sure how she would explain how she came up with any of the names Sothis suggested. So, Byleth settled on calling the dog Astra, since the spots on the dog’s fur reminded her of the stars.

“Where do you think we should go, Astra?” Byleth asked once again, looking away from her sketchbook to scratch behind the dog’s ears. In the few months that she had the dog, he healed up quite nicely. A part of her couldn’t help but wonder if Ronan had learned some healing spells in order to assist the pooch. If she was honest, she half expected Ronan to be the one to object to having a dog around, since it could be considered a “distraction from her studies”. However, she was proven wrong when he seemed to be the most excited about the idea. Apparently, the blond man had a soft spot for dogs.

“I am beginning to think that Fhirdiad might be a dead-end in our quest to retrieve my memories,” Sothis sighed. “Alas, I suppose it is to be expected. After all, it’s the first location that we’ve been able to explore since I woke up.”

“We still haven’t explored the whole city,” Byleth reminded. It had taken her a few months to adjust to the voice in her head at first, but now it had become second nature. If something were to happen that caused Sothis to disappear, Byleth imagined that she would be very lonely. Though she knew that there was no guarantee that Sothis and her would still be together once she regained her memories, she wanted to do everything in her power to help. She had become rather close to the girl within the year they’ve been together, after all.

“If you’re referring to the palace, then I must be honest. I highly doubt that we’ll be granted access in our current state.”

“Well…” Byleth searched her memory for anywhere else they could check out. “We could try the academy again. I remember where we got caught last time, so we just need to be a bit stealthier.”

“Woof!” Astra barked as he wagged his tail, causing a smile to form on Byleth’s face as she pets the dog again.

“Though, I suppose it might be a bit harder to be stealthy with Astra with us. I wonder if Ronan would mind watching him…”

“Byleth!” a voice called from down the road, causing Byleth to turn towards the speaker.

“Ronan?”
‘Speak of the devil, and he shall appear,’ Byleth thought to herself as the man slowed his pace, stopping in front of her. He knelt down and pulled out a treat from his pocket for Astra, petting his head.

“I’ve been looking everywhere for you…” the man informed her, and she realised that he sounded a bit out of breath. She looked at him curiously.

“Really? I’m on one of the main streets; I should have been relatively easy to find.”

“Well my first thought was to check the training grounds,” Ronan admitted. “You weren’t there, though. I hope you haven’t become too rusty with your sword from us being here for so long because the army is on its way back from Sreng. We just received word.”

“What, seriously?” Byleth looked at Ronan astonished.

“Yeah, they’ll be back by nightfall. Everyone on guard duty has been invited to the palace to celebrate their homecoming. It’s supposed to double as thanks for our hard work.”

“Huh, the palace? Do… I get to come with?” Byleth felt as though she had to ask. She wasn’t allowed to participate in guard duty because of her age; however, the rest of the mercenary band had.

“Of course, dummy. Why do you think I’m telling you? Honestly, sometimes I can’t help but wonder what goes on in that head of yours.” Ronan playfully knocked on the side of Byleth’s head, causing her to pout.

“But that could have just as easily translated to ‘pack up your thing’s we’re leaving tomorrow’ with you.” Byleth deadpanned, causing Sothis to giggle.

“**Well I must admit, that’s certainly convenient. We’ll be able to know for sure if Fhirdiad’s truly a dead-end in our search or not.**”

“Well, that was the second thing I’ve come to tell you. We’ve got no reason to stick around, so once we’re paid tomorrow, we’ll be heading out. Err, chances are it’ll be in the afternoon though. You know how the others get when celebrating is involved.”

Thinking back to just how much the members of the mercenary band can drink, Byleth grimaces. She’s confident that most of them could/would drink her weight in alcohol if they were able. It’s both impressive and terrifying.

“Why don’t we just put off leaving until the day after tomorrow? We’ve been here over a year; I don’t think one more day is going to hurt anybody. Besides, it’s no fun to travel with the others when they’re all hungover. They just… complain. A lot.”

“I’m inclined to agree with you. I’ll talk with the others about it. Chances are, they’ll be thanking us for postponing leaving come tomorrow. Anyway, shall we head back for a short lesson before we head to the palace for the festivities? Today, we’ll be working on mathematics…”

Ronan continued, and Byleth just shook her head at the young man, a ghost of a smile on her lips. Some things never change.

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_Fhirdiad Castle_
Byleth was awestruck of how many people could fit into the palace. There were so many people present: the knights, the guards, the servants. And there seemed like there was enough room to spare to fit another army inside. She quickly lost sight of the other members of her mercenary group inside of the room – was this a ballroom? Her knowledge of castles and palaces was minimal, this was her first real time being inside of one. For reasons unknown to her, Jeralt had said that he was going to sit this one out. He had claimed that there were too many people present for his liking. So, he decided to keep Astra company back at the inn, though, if Byleth had to take a guess, he was likely at the tavern next door.

“This place is incredible…” she muttered to herself. “Does anything here seem familiar, Sothis?”

“Sadly, no,” Sothis informed the blue-haired girl, who let out a sigh, “but that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t try to have a good time. They’ve got music; you should go dance! Have you ever danced?”

“No, but…”

“No 'buts'! I’m confident that we’ll find something out about my past eventually, but we shouldn’t try to force it prematurely. If anything, this just confirms that I’m not from Fhirdiad, which is more than we knew before.” Sothis’s voice softened. “I appreciate what you’re doing for me, but your life is still your own. You should enjoy it; I know I would if I had a body.”

Sothis was right, and Byleth knew it, but she couldn’t help but feel guilty. Besides, she’s never been to anything like this before; she wasn’t quite sure what she was supposed to do. Still, though Sothis didn’t have a body, Byleth did. That just meant that she would have to have fun for the both of them, right? And Sothis wanted to dance, so Byleth slowly edged her way over towards the dance floor.

The dancing done was something that she had never witnessed before—not that she had much to go off, the closest thing she had seen was drunk mercenaries dancing around a campfire—but it was incredible! She watched couples spinning each other around before swapping partners, twirling and chatting, smiling and laughing. They all seemed so happy.

Letting out a soft laugh, she supposed she could see why. After all, they had just won a war. It was reason to celebrate; they were still alive, after all. However, Byleth doubted that she would be able to join in on the dance at all. After all, everyone who she’s seen thus far has been an adult. Not to mention the fact that everyone she saw on the dance floor already seemed to have a partner. She doubted that they would want a child, who didn’t know how to dance, interrupt them.

Byleth stood by the dancefloor, watching for almost half an hour without realising. She was so mesmerised by the smooth movements; she had drifted off into a daydream. Byleth wondered if she would ever be able to dance like that, and if she could, who would she dance with? She didn’t know anyone her age, so unless she wanted to dance with Ronan or her father, she wouldn’t have a partner. She supposed she could dance with her sword. That might be interesting if she could somehow combine the expressive art of dancing and sword fighting.

“Hi!” a voice chimed from Byleth’s side, causing her to jump. “Hehe, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

Looking towards the speaker, Byleth was surprised to see a girl, maybe a few years younger than herself, standing there, twirling a lock of her blonde hair in her hands with a smile on her face.
“Hi?” Byleth’s confusion caused the girl to giggle.

“Wow, Sylvain was right, you are pretty.”

“I’m sorry, what?!” Byleth was utterly lost at this point. Who is this girl, why is she speaking to Byleth and who is Sylvain and why do they think she’s pretty?!

“Oh, I should explain, right? My name’s Ingrid!” the girl curtsied to Byleth, who attempted to do it back, causing Ingrid to let out a giggle. "You're so cute!"

"Thank you?"

"Ah, I got sidetracked! I’m here with a few other kids, and we were on the other side of the room dancing. At least, we were until Sylvain saw you. He's one of my friends, by the way. Though how he saw you from all the way over there, I have no idea. I think he just has a pretty-girl-sense or something."

That had to have been the third time that Ingrid has referred to her as being 'cute' or 'pretty' and Byleth had no idea how to feel about it. No one had ever called her that before. It was weird.

"Anyway, you seemed like you were bored, so I wanted to ask if you wanted to join us!” Ingrid spared a glance back in the direction that she came from, her eyebrows furrowing a bit. "Well, actually Sylvain wanted to invite you to join us, but I was worried that he would scare you away, so I came over instead."

"Why would he scare me?" Byleth asked the girl, unsure what about him would be scary. Her mind imagined him as having sharp horns and pointy teeth, and she had to stifle a laugh.

"He’s not scary, not really," Ingrid reassured the girl, giving her a nervous smile. "I promise that he is a good person deep down, but he can be a bit funny if you don’t know him that well."

Ingrid pointed to a group standing on the opposite side of the dance floor, a reasonable distance away from everyone else. Byleth squinted, trying to make out the features of the group from over there. Ingrid was right to be confused about Sylvain had seen her, she could only make out blurs of colour. But surely enough, Byleth noticed a red blob wave back when it saw the two girls looking over.

“So, what do you say? Will you come?” Byleth's gaze returned to Ingrid. As she looked into the young girl's bright blue eyes, Byleth couldn't find it within her to deny her. However, she found herself at a loss of words when it came to accepting, so she just nodded. The blonde girl smiled brightly before grabbing Byleth's hand. “Great, come on!”

Ingrid glided through the dancefloor with ease, going as far as giving Byleth a twirl as they made their way to the others. As soon as they reached the others, Byleth could make them out clearly. The red blob had actually been a red-haired boy. Beside him stood two black-haired boys, the younger one sighed as the older one watched, amused. The final member was a blond-haired boy who looked at Byleth curiously. Ingrid clapped her hands happily.

“Mission successful!” she exclaimed, and the older black-haired boy patted her on the head, causing her to blush.

“Good job, Ingrid,” he praises, before turning to Byleth. “Sorry we stole you away, but I assure you. You’ll have much more fun here with us. Plus, it’ll get these two to shut up.”

Gesturing towards the other black-haired boy and the redhead, Byleth raises her eyebrow in
surprise. She figured one of them had to be Sylvain, but who was the other boy?

“Right, I think some introductions are in order!” Ingrid spoke up. “I already told you who I am, and this is my betrothed, Glenn.”

“Betrothed?” Byleth looked at them in confusion, the two of them were her age, and they were already engaged? Glenn couldn’t help but laugh at the expression on the bluenette’s face.

“We’re both from noble families, so our parents betrothed us when we were young. When we’re adults, we’re to be married.” Byleth nodded slowly in understanding. “I’m guessing by your reaction that you’re not from a Crest-bearing family?”

“Oh…” Byleth internally cursed, she had no idea what that meant. She recalled Ronan mentioning Crests when talking about magic before, but it didn’t sound that relevant to the lesson, so she zoned out. “Um… I’m sorry if this is a stupid question, but what’s a crest?”

“What’s a crest?!” the redhead looked at Byleth like she grew a second head, causing the girl to shift awkwardly. She couldn’t help but feel as though she said something wrong based upon the looks that they were all giving her. “Do you honestly not know what a crest is?!”

“I’m afraid not…”

“Shut up, Sylvain, it’s not that big of a deal,” the younger black-haired boy spoke up. “I’m Felix. I couldn’t help but notice you have a sword…”

“Huh?” Byleth looked down at the sword attached to her hip. Though it was still significant in size compared to her, she knew that the more that she grew, the easier it became to carry. Besides, at this point, she was well used to the weight. “Oh, yeah, my father gave it to me. Was I not supposed to bring it?”

“No, there are plenty of other people here who have weapons on them here, I just don’t see that many people our age carry one on them, especially with as much ease as you do.” Was that a compliment? Byleth couldn’t tell.

“I guess you’re right,” Byleth agreed. “I guess it can’t be helped. We travel a lot. This is the first time in my life I’ve been in one place as long as I have.”

“Oh? Is your father part of one of the mercenary groups the king hired to help guard the city while most of the knights were away?” this was the first time that the blond spoke up, and his voice was more gentle than Byleth would have guessed.

“Yeah,” Byleth hoped that they wouldn’t judge her for her upbringing since, from the sound of it, most of the group came from nobility, if not all of them.

“Interesting…” Felix mumbled, giving Byleth a curious look.

“Forgive my younger brother; he’s rather fond of weaponry. I mean, we both are, but some of us have more subtlety than others.”

“Hey, I’m subtle.”

“When it comes to admiring weaponry, you’re about as subtle as it comes to Sylvain admiring cute girls.” Ingrid teased.

“Please don’t mind them, we’ve all known each other since we were little,” the blond spoke to
Byleth, as they watch the three of them go at it. “I’m Dimitri, by the way. Just… Dimitri.”

“Well, ‘Just Dimitri’, it’s nice to meet you,” Byleth smiled at him, something that he happily returned.

“Nothing like saving the best for last, I always say,” the red-haired boy spoke up, sending a wink at Byleth.

“That’s just what you say to make yourself feel better about always coming in last place,” Felix interrupted, causing Byleth to laugh.

“Why do you hate me?” he gave Felix a pouty face, to which the black-haired boy stuck out his tongue. Rolling his eyes, he turned back towards Byleth. “Anyway, where was I? The name’s Sylvain. Now, tell me… Do you have a name, or can I call you mine?”

“I’m Byleth,” she told them, a warm smile on her face.

“Well, Byleth… do you know how to dance?” Ingrid asked the girl, who shook her head no. “Don’t worry; we can teach you! So, which one of you boys wants to be this lovely girl’s dance partner?”

“I’ve got to say, I’m impressed,” Sylvain said as he and Byleth took another step during their waltz. “However, some people might view it as rude to not even spare a glance at their dance partner.”

“Huh?” Byleth looked up from her feet to her partner. After Ingrid had suggested that one of the boys pair up with her to dance, Sylvain jumped at the opportunity. It looked as though the other two boys were about to object to Sylvain having anything to do with her, however, neither of them got a chance as Dimitri and Felix had been called away to help the latter’s father with something. Ingrid simply told Sylvain to behave, before going off with Glenn to dance. So here Byleth was, trying her best to avoid stepping on Sylvain while he taught her to dance. It has been successful thus far; however, she didn’t want to jinx it and end up stepping all over him. “Sorry, I just—”

“Heh, I’m teasing you,” Sylvain winked, causing Byleth to roll her eyes. “You don’t need to explain yourself to me. As much as I’m grateful to you for not breaking my toes, I don’t think you need to worry much. You’re a natural. It’s honestly kind of amazing.”

“You’re just saying that,” Byleth looked back to the floor again, this time not to watch her steps, but to hide the dust of pink on her cheeks.

“I’m not, though. I’ve honestly never met anybody like you.” Sylvain told her, and Byleth frowned, assuming it was another attempt at a stupid pick-up line, that is, until he continued. “Have you really never heard of Crests before?”

“I don’t think so,” Byleth told him, still avoiding looking at him. “I mean, maybe in one of my magic books. But if I ever saw anything about it, my brain didn’t register it as being important enough to remember. Is that… bad?”

“Oh, goddess no,” Sylvain responded, almost too quickly. “It’s honestly refreshing; there are way too many people who care too much about that sort of thing. My family included.”

“You make it sound like you’re not the same as the rest of them.”

“That’s because I’m not,” Sylvain gently removes one hand from her waist and places it under her chin, guiding her face to look at his, brown eyes staring intently into her own. “Have you ever had
“anyone try to kill you before?”

“Yes,” Byleth swallowed, trying not to focus at the close proximity of them, “I have.”

“So have I,” Sylvain admitted, removing his hand from her chin. Despite now having the opportunity to look away, Byleth’s gaze remained locked on Sylvain. “All for simply for having a Crest. It’s not a very fun feeling, is it?”

“I’m sorry.” There wasn’t much that Byleth could say to make the situation better, she didn’t have a Crest, so she couldn’t relate at all to the challenges that came with bearing one.

“You don’t have to apologise for something that you’ve got nothing to do with,” Sylvain told her, letting out a soft sigh. “You know, that’s probably the first time I’ve told anyone about it. Don’t think that it’s because I want your pity or anything, I just… I don’t know. I’ve just kept it secret for so long; I guess I just wanted to say it out loud to someone who might be able to understand. Not many people our age know what it’s like to fear for their lives. It makes us realise just how short it is—that it could be ripped away from us at any moment.”

“Sylvain…”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to get so depressing. Do you mind if we step outside for some air for a minute?”

“Yeah, that sounds nice…”

With that said, Sylvain and Byleth took a step onto the balcony, away from the crowd. Breathing in the cold, night air, Byleth felt instantly refreshed, and she hoped Sylvain felt the same. She couldn’t help but empathise with the boy. Though he seemed too flirty for his own good, he did appear like he had a good heart beneath it all. Turning to look at the red-haired boy, she saw him leaning against the balustrade, his eyes closed, taking in the fresh, night-time air.

“Hey, are you alright?” Byleth enquired. She didn’t mean to pry into his business since they had just met hours before, but she couldn’t help but be concerned. Maybe it’s because she’s never been around anyone her age before, or because they both have had attempts made on their lives. It’s a traumatic experience, she will admit. For her, it was a given, since she grew up in a band of mercenaries who typically dealt with less-than-pleasant people. But for him, it must have been a completely different scenario.

“Yeah, never better,” Sylvain flashed Byleth a smile, and she could tell in an instant that it was fake. Tentatively moving her hand, she placed it onto his and gave it a gentle squeeze. “I’m sorry, I just got a bit overwhelmed there.”

“I know what you mean,” Byleth assured. “When you start remembering certain things, bad things, the last thing you want is to be surrounded by people. Feels like everything starts closing in and everyone’s eyes are on you, even if they’re not…”

“Then you just want to leave, hide, completely avoid showing your face to the world for a while until you’re okay again. Or at least, okay enough to convince everyone else.” Sylvain let out another sigh and ran his hand through his hair (the one Byleth wasn’t holding). “Why am I telling you all of this? I barely even know you…”

“I think it’s because you barely know me,” Byleth stated, continuing her train of thought out loud. “It’s easier to open up to strangers because they don’t have any sort of… expectations of you. With your friends, you probably don’t want them to think of you differently, right? Well, with
strangers, when you say goodbye, chances are it’ll be your last goodbye.”

Sylvain looked at Byleth with an indecipherable look on his face, causing the girl to remove her hand from his own as she fiddled with the hem of her shirt awkwardly.

“I’m sorry, I’m not very good at this, am I? I don’t actually have any friends besides the members of my father’s mercenary group, and the youngest one there’s at least twice my age. And while I’m not typically one who confides in strangers, I do find it easier to speak with you and the others than the other members of my group. Which, I’m sorry if I shouldn’t since I’m a commoner and you all are nobility. I’m still not completely sure how that all works and I—”

Byleth is cut off by something warm against her lips, and it takes her a moment to realise that Sylvain is kissing her. His lips her pressed gently against her own, and she could feel his hot breath mingle with her own. Byleth’s first thought was to push away; however, she couldn’t bring herself to do it. Oddly enough, it felt… nice. And without thinking, Byleth kissed him back.

It only lasted for a few moments, before they both pulled away, the colour of their cheeks rivalling Sylvain’s hair.

“I’m sorry, that, um, that was the first thing that I thought of.” Sylvain apologised, scratching the back of his neck awkwardly.

“I, uh, didn’t mind…”

“Good. But you believe me when I say that, none of us care if you’re noble or not.” He reached over and grabbed her hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze, much like she did for him. He smiled at her gently. This time, the smile was real, and not forced like it was just a short while ago. “And you’re probably right; it is easier open up to you about this than Dimitri or Felix. However, friend or stranger… I hope that this isn’t our last goodbye.”

“I’m sorry.” Byleth gave him a sad smile. “But we don’t have a reason to stay in Fhirdiad anymore though, now that the knights are back, we’ll be gone in a few days.”

“Oh,” Sylvain frowned, seeming genuinely disappointed. “Well, I guess we should make the most of tonight then.”

Taking a step back, Sylvain bowed to her as he held out his hand.

“May I have this dance, milady?” Byleth couldn’t help but let out a giggle as she grabbed his hand as he led her back inside. However, she couldn’t help but thinking back to the stolen kiss out on the balcony, causing her smile to widen. She thought back to what Sylvain had said earlier, how life could be ripped away from them at any moment. She likely would never see the boy again after that night, so she was happy to have this memory with him.

She was happy to have this memory of the boy who stole her first kiss.

Chapter End Notes

Edited 08/05/2020

This chapter was brought to you by: 'Something To Say' by The Great Gable
Yeah, I wasn't anticipating that ending either. I just started writing and let the story go where it wanted, and that's where it chose to go. Hope you enjoyed it, regardless.

Please, let me know your thoughts ^^ and Happy (belated) Valentine's Day.
One of Those Nights

Chapter Summary

“If you’re not from Ordelia, I don’t get why you care about what we’re doing.” Ana spat towards the child, who simply cocked her head.

“And what’s that?”

“None of your damn business!”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I Think We’re Alone Now

iii. one of those nights

Harpstring Moon

Imperial Year 1174

Eastern Hyrm Mountains

“Are you sure that it is a wise decision for you to be out here on your own?”

With a roll of her eyes, the young girl continued onwards, being guided by only her intuition as she delved deeper into the mountains. She instinctively tightened her grip on the hilt of her sword as a reminder to herself that she was armed and would be able to handle most things that came her way. She’s come a long way over the years, and she was confident in her fighting ability against most enemies.

“You were the one who wanted to come here, Sothis,” she reminded, coming to an abrupt halt as she heard a rustle in the foliage up ahead. Unsheathing her sword, she held it in front of her, the moonlight reflecting off the cold metal as it readied for an attack. Both girls were silent as Byleth held her stance, ready for anything to come out at her. After a few minutes of waiting in anticipation, it had become clear that whatever had made the noise wasn’t an attacker, and Byleth reunited her sword to its sheath. “Must have been the wind…”

“I do hope you’re right. I can’t shake this feeling that something bad is going to happen here, or perhaps it already has. I may not be getting any concrete memories, but I am getting feelings. And the feelings that are coming to me, I’m afraid to say, are not positive ones.”

“That’s something to go off of at least.”

“Perhaps, but I still think that being here is a bad idea. I thought that if we came, it would
be with your group. Or at the very least, in the daylight. You are at a clear disadvantage for any obstacles we might encounter."

“I couldn’t sleep,” Byleth replied simply, softly shrugging as she continued forwards. Brushing past a low tree-branch, she made sure to use her dagger to create a notch on the trunk directly beneath. To the untrained eye, it would just look like a defect in the wood; however, it was a technique that Byleth had been taught to avoid getting lost.

“Need I remind you that you are a child! And a foolish one at that!"

“Ouch, love you too, Sothis.”

“Don’t give me that! You know that I wouldn’t be like this if I didn’t care, and I would rather us avoid any unnecessary risks. We would have been fine coming when there’s daylight. But nights are dangerous to be lost in the mountains.”

“But I’m not lost,” Byleth pointed out, as she made another notch. “Plus, you heard my dad; we’re leaving for the Leicester Alliance as soon as the sun’s up. So, this might be our only chance to investigate the Hyrm Mountains. You want answers about who you are, don’t you? And this is the first lead we’ve had in, what, four years? Five?”

“But we should try to stay realistic,” Sothis reminded, “if nothing’s triggered my memories thus far, maybe they’re just destined to be forever lost.”

“I refuse to believe that,” Byleth responded without hesitation. She didn’t want to give up, and she knew that deep down, Sothis didn’t either. She understood that it might seem like a lost cause—they’ve travelled all over Fódlan by this point, from the Holy Kingdom of Faerghus to the Adrestrian Empire, and now they were making their way towards the Leicester Alliance—but she refused to quit. There were still so many places undiscovered, so many places that might hold a key into unlocking Sothis’s memories. Sothis was more than just Byleth’s best friend; she was a part of her. And she refused just to sit back, knowing her friend was suffering.

“You are an odd one; I will give you that,” Sothis let out a sigh, knowing that arguing any longer would be pointless with a child as stubborn as Byleth. “Just be cautious. Remember, my life is intertwined with yours. I would rather not have it be abruptly ended because you acted stupidly.”

“Hey, have a little faith. I haven’t gotten us killed yet.”

“Just don’t let your confidence lead to cockiness,” Sothis reminded, causing Byleth to roll her eyes. She was only in her early teens (probably), yet she could take down men that were twice her size—she was sure that her confidence wasn’t misplaced. When you’re in the midst of combat, you must trust yourself and your sword, since a moment of hesitation could lead to death. She didn’t know why Sothis had so much uncertainty when it came to Byleth’s fighting. She could only assume that Sothis wasn’t a swordsman in her lifetime, or else she would have known that basic rule.

Deciding to end the conversation at that, Byleth focused her attention on delving deeper into the forest. She wasn’t entirely sure what she was looking for, but she figured that she’d know it when she saw it. Byleth assumed that it would be something magical since that was the only thing that she could think of that had the potential to bond two souls together like she and Sothis were. Their connection was one of the biggest mysteries that the two had faced, and something told Byleth that it was all somehow connected.
Letting out a soft sigh, she massaged her temples. She should focus more on the investigation itself rather than contemplating the reasons why she was investigating. So instead of getting lost in her thoughts, she should focus on the area around them, if Sothis got strong enough feelings from where they were at, maybe Byleth would be affected as well. At the very least, it didn’t hurt to try.

Closing her eyes, Byleth tried to take in the world around her from a sense other than visual. She breathed in the scent of moist soil and pine trees, as her ears tuned into the sound of crickets chirping and voices in the distance.

Wait, voices in the distance?!

Byleth found her feet frozen to the ground as her eyes flung open at the realisation that she was no longer alone; that two voices were being carried along by the wind past her. Though she had been prepared to cross paths with wolves or other hostile creatures, she didn’t anticipate coming across anyone human in the mountains other than someone from her mercenary group.

‘And I’m nowhere near the camp…’ Byleth reminded herself. She had been purposely travelling away from her camp since she wandered off to avoid getting caught sneaking off, so there was no way that anybody else from her group would have gotten ahead of her.

Her mind flickered through several possibilities of who it could be that was speaking up ahead, every one further increasing her anxiety. She didn’t see any towns in the mountains marked on the maps, so it was much more likely that it was bandits. However, because of the distinct lack of towns, the mountains were a terrible location for bandits to live, since they would only be able to rob travellers, which itself was a rare occurrence since more people prefer to travel around the mountains than directly through.

Looking back in the direction of the mercenary camp, she couldn’t help but worry for her people. Given the fact that bandit activity was so low within the mountains, she did not doubt that even her father’s men had their guard down, expecting only wild animals to give them any issue. And considering that Byleth was able to sneak off so easily, she did not doubt that someone could just as easily sneak in. She could either run back and warn them or assess the threat herself and take care of it if needed.

Taking a deep breath, she knew what she had to do. She crouched down and crept towards the speakers. Luckily, it seemed as though they weren’t expecting anybody else to be in the mountains either, as they found no reason to have their voices hushed, making pinpointing their exact location an easy task for the girl. As they came within eyesight, Byleth ducked behind a bush, before peeking through the greenery at the two figures. It was times like these that Byleth was grateful for her dark clothes, which blended her in seamlessly with the night.

Looking through the brush, she wasn’t sure what she expected to see when her eyes finally landed on the causes of her internal distress, but she was certainly not expecting to see two figures with their features obscured by bird-like masks.

Come to think of it, Byleth vaguely recalled learning about similar masks in the history books that Ronan had her read. They were typically worn back during the plague, which was supposed to keep away any miasmic scents that might contain the disease to prevent it from being spread to the doctors who were trying to treat the infected. However, if her memory served her correctly, Miasma was also a dark magic spell. So, were these guys doctors or mages?

Shit, she should really pay more attention to her reason studies.

“Byleth, do you recall the bad feelings that I have been getting? I believe that they are
originating from these people. I don’t know why, but I urge that you go back. I expect nothing good to occur in their company. You’re best of heading back to your camp where you’ll be safe—where you can help keep the others safe.”

Byleth furrowed her eyebrows at Sothis’s comment but dared not risk being overheard by responding. This just made Byleth even more curious about the masked figures, and she edged closer to them, her hand tightening on her sword. She focused on trying to make out the words that they were saying, which was a little tricky with the masks muffling their voices. However, it was but a momentarily delay, and Byleth found herself absorbed in their conversation.

“—down to only three survivors from the experiments,” Byleth was surprised to hear a feminine voice emerge from behind one of the masks; however, she found the words that left her more surprising. What experiments? “Honestly, I don’t see why we keep continuing it. From the look of things, even if any of them survive until the end, it won’t be for long. It’s useless. I don’t like doing useless things.”

“Is that actually the reason you’re so against continuing?” the second voice was male, and it sounded as though it was taunting the first rather than seriously asking her. “Or is it because it’s on children? Come on, Ana, you know it as well as I do: we have our reasons behind everything. Unless you’re just trying to find an easy out? Would you like me to tell Thales about your newfound ‘morals’? I’d honestly hate for you to cause trouble for the rest of us further down the line.”

“That’s not at all what I’m saying, and you know it, asshole. They’re dropping like flies; we need to revise our method of procedure before continuing forwards; otherwise, we will be completely out of subjects before we get it perfected. However, if you still insist on discussing my ‘feelings’ on this with Thales, then I’ll just inform him on how you slaughtered one of them for annoying you.”

“For annoying me?! That’s a fucking understatement—the little brat bit me. He needed to be shown his place.”

“Speaking of showing someone their place, it seems as though you two loud-mouths have attracted an audience.” A gasp escaped from Byleth as the new voice appeared from behind her, and luckily reflexes took over before she fully processed what was happening, because if they hadn’t, she had no doubt that the lightning bolt that was sent flying towards her would have hit. Instead, it had landed right beside her, the ground still scorched and hissing, as she swiftly readied herself into a fighting position. Byleth’s sword was gripped tightly in her hands as she narrowed her eyes at the current attacker. “Well, well, well. This one’s a fast one.”

“You idiot, you got caught.” Sothis reprimanded, worry seeping through her harsh tone.

“I’m not caught until I’m caught,” Byleth muttered, observing the masked man in front of her. He, too, had a plague mask concealing his face, while his body was adorned with a black and gold embroidered cloak. Though it looked fancy, she highly doubted that it would provide much protection from her blade. Not to mention that the fact he announced himself before attacking, he was already taking her too lightly because of her age. So, despite the battle being three-against-one, if they all continued to underestimate her, she might just stand a chance.

Launching her feet against the ground with as much strength as she could muster, she leapt towards him, hoping to take him by surprise. As she neared his body, she swung her sword in a downwards motion, slicing him diagonally across his chest. He cried out in pain as the scent of iron hit her nose, and she knew her assumption was correct: there was no armour under the cloak.
“Ow, you little bitch! You’ll pay for that!” he cursed, as he readied another spell which Byleth prepared to dodge. However, he was cut off by a plume of fire spreading in his and Byleth’s direction from one of the other two masked individuals.

Byleth screamed out in pain as she felt a column of flames hit her from behind, tossing her limply to the ground, the clothing on her back burning away as the flesh boiled and blistered from the contact with the fire.

“Shit…” hissing in pain as she moved, she shifted her head to look ahead at her previous opponent, only to find him laying limply on the ground. It seemed that he had managed to get hit head-on with the fire spell and was now laying on the forest floor a few feet away from her. Byleth bit down on her lip as she moved her arm to try to locate her sword, which had fallen onto the nearby ground when she was attacked. Trying to push both the pain and the unpleasant scent of burning flesh it to the back of her mind and she focused on regripping her sword as soon as she found it. She had to fight through the pain; if she didn’t, she would die.

“Ocellus, you fucking idiot!” Ana exclaimed, and Byleth realised that her fallen form was luckily still concealed from the duo because of the (now on fire) bush she was hidden behind before. Why did it have to be fire? “You’re not supposed to kill our allies! I mean seriously?! Ragnarok?! She’s a damn child. She doesn’t warrant one of your strongest spells. One of your simpler ones would have done the job just fine.”

“I might have gotten a bit too excited there,” the man, Ocellus, laughed maniacally from underneath his mask. His voice was getting closer to the fallen duo, and Byleth pulled her sword closer to her body as she took a deep breath, readying herself for a surprise attack. The pain was almost unbearable, but she knew that she had to power through. They had thought that Ragnarok was enough to incapacitate or kill her, but as long that she could still move, she would take every opportunity she had to fight.

As Ocellus’s dark chuckles grew ever nearer to her and his companion, she readied herself, holding her sword hilt so tightly to her body that her knuckles were going white. She wouldn’t give up. She couldn’t give up.

If he wanted her dead, then he would have to try harder than that.

“How the hell is this kid anyway? She’s not from Ordelia, is she?” She felt Ocellus’s hand tightly grip her shoulder as he moved to flip her body to identify her. She knew that this was her opportunity to take him by surprise, and as soon as she felt her body move towards him, her eyes flung open, and she swung her sword down with all her might at the arm currently he had on her.

A screech escaped his lips as his hand detached from his elbow and landed on Byleth’s lap, blood pouring out of the wound at an alarming rate. Dark eyes flickered between the blood, the hand, and the man, and Byleth scowled as she pushed the severed hand off her as she pulled herself up, before her eyes finally settling on the form of the masked man in front of her. Her face was devoid of any and all emotion, and she sized him up, determining the quickest and most efficient way to finish him off. At this point, her fight with him was purely for survival. If she didn’t kill them, they would kill her. There was no doubt in her mind.

“Fuck!” Ocellus cursed, as he stumbled back, grasping at his now amputated arm. Byleth watched him as he once again summoned fire to his hand; however, instead of aiming it at her, he instead directed it towards his bleeding arm as he cauterised the wound.

“So, you can spell cast without any verbal components? Interesting…” it certainly explained how they kept getting the jump on her, but now she knew if she saw the movement, she would be able
to anticipate the attack. Under ordinary circumstances, she would be impressive; there weren’t very many mages that had that ability. However, her mind seemed to have reverted to the constant state she was in during her youth: emotionless. Her eyes moved from the man towards the woman, Ana, standing several feet away, who hadn’t yet moved to attack. But Byleth learned her lesson; she would not forget about her as a threat.

She flicked the blood from her blade and onto the earth beneath her. She stared blankly at the two of them as if tempting them to try to come at her again. She was trying to deduce which one of them was the more significant threat at the moment: Ocellus, the fire mage, or Ana, the wild card. Though the former only had one hand remaining, she had just witnessed him summon flames to his remaining one with just a snap of his fingers. But his injury would make taking him down easier, unlike Ana, who hadn’t been injured in the slightest. Therefore, it might be a more tactical move for Byleth to attempt to wound the woman in an attempt to even out the battlefield a bit.

“Seems like Strabo was right, this kid is a fast one,” Ana spoke up, pulling Byleth from her thoughts as she took a few steps towards the girl, and Byleth’s made up her mind about her approach to the situation. “We’ll just have to see who’s faster.”

As soon as the words left Ana’s mouth, Byleth was already sprinting towards her. For being a group of mages that were able to cast without using verbal commands, they sure did speak a lot. It wasn’t exactly the most efficient strategy if they continued to announce themselves before they attacked.

As Ana readied her attack, Byleth recognised the movements as wind magic—the same kind that Ronan specialised in. Though Byleth wasn’t aware of the specifics of the attack, she did know that if she managed to avoid being in Ana’s direct path, she would likely be unharmed by the attack.

The moment that Ana moved to release her spell, Byleth, who was just a few meters away, dove to the ground and slid, her sword aimed upwards, slicing Ana’s leg as she moved past her. Letting out a loud hiss at the pain coming from the burn on her back, Byleth stood up behind Ana. Byleth’s assumption was correct: the masked woman’s attack had missed her target. Unfortunately, it seemed as though did too much damage to the woman either.

“So you’re not from Ordelia, I don’t get why you care about what we’re doing,” Ana spat towards the child, who simply cocked her head.

“And what’s that?”

“None of your damn business!” Ocellus sends another plume of fire towards the girl, which Byleth narrowly avoids. However, as Ocellus has her attention, Ana makes use of the opportunity to blast her with a gust of wind, flinging her already wounded body back several feet, onto the ground. Byleth let out a cry, landing on the burns on her back. She tried to recollect herself; however, her body was still recoiling with pain, and she found herself unable to move, no matter how much her mind screamed at her otherwise.

“Aww, looks like the poor girl’s resolve has finally run out.” Ana taunted, taking a few steps towards the girl before stomping on the arm that had once her sword. Though the sword has flung from Byleth’s grip, this action caused her to realise just how bad of a situation she found herself in. “Or perhaps the adrenaline is just finally wearing off, and you realise just how badly you fucked up. Putting you out of your misery would be mercy at this point, wouldn’t you say Ocellus? Maybe we should use her for the experiment instead, after all, she’s quite a fighter.”

“You’re crazy if you think I’m just going to let her to,” Ocellus spat as he made his way over to the girl, “you better let me finish her off, after all, it’s payback for her chopping of my damn hand.”
“Any last words?” A ball of flames formed in Ocellus’s hand and Byleth knew that fighting back was useless at this point. She mustered up the sharpest glare that she could as she stared up at him, but he seemed entirely unaffected. “No? Then die.”

As soon the words left his mouth, Ocellus launched the fireball at Byleth’s chest, and she let out a bloodcurdling scream as she saw nothing but red as the inferno consumed her, and she quickly felt her skin ablaze as she readied herself for death. But then, the impossible happened.

The fire stopped spreading, the figures stopped moving, and the injuries stopped hurting. Everything just…

STOP

And Byleth was consumed by darkness.

When sense finally came back to Byleth, she raised her hand to her chest, expecting to feel the damaged and scorched flesh beneath her hands. However, she was met with the black fabric of her shirt. Looking down, she saw that she was completely unharmed. There were no injuries; there was no blood. If she didn’t know better, she would say that she’d reverted to how she had appeared earlier that night, before the brutal fight.

“What… just happened?” Byleth found herself asking. “Am I dead?”

“’Have a little faith,’” Sothis mocked, irritation obvious in her voice as she marched towards the girl. “’I haven’t gotten us killed yet.’ Well, that streak has officially ended, young lady! If it weren’t for me, we’d be quite dead right now!”

“But we’re not…?” Byleth stated although it came out as more of a question as she looked helplessly at Sothis for an explanation. “How are we not?”

“It’s because I rewound time to before you decided to sneak out. Right now, your body is back in bed at the camp, while I pulled your consciousness into our little world, here,” Sothis gestured around them, and Byleth realised that they were in the dark throne room that they typically met up in whenever Byleth had encountered Sothis in her dreams.

“I couldn’t risk us running into those masked figures again,” she continued. “They’re much too strong for us. I told you that you were acting foolish. Not to mention… after they attacked you, you reacted differently than anything that I’ve seen in the entire time I’ve known you. It frightened me if I’m honest. I don’t know if it was because of the dire situation we found ourselves in, or what. Just know that I’m here if you ever want to talk about it.”

“I… I think I know what you mean.” Byleth didn’t know how to explain it, she was fully aware as
to what Sothis was talking about, but she hadn’t experienced something like that since she and Sothis had been bonded. Her emotions seemed to revert to her childhood state, back before Sothis was awake. She was emotionless and analytical, acting merely on strategy and the basic need for survival.

It wasn’t as though she had strong bloodlust, but in that state, she had no sympathy. She gave her opponents two options: stand down or die. So long as she survived, she didn’t care what happened to her enemies. But although she was without sympathy, she wasn’t without reason. She knew that if she had died there, then her attackers might have gone to investigate where she came from and find her entire mercenary camp while doing so.

She understood why it scared Sothis. To be honest, it kind of scared Byleth too. Considering the state that she was in during that fight, she was shocked that she hasn’t passed out from the pain. She had never been so severely injured in her life, and yet she still felt as though she could fight. She would like to think that it was the adrenaline, or that Sothis had affected her body more than she had initially thought.

But truth be told, she hadn’t the faintest idea. Byleth knew that she wouldn’t be able to explain it to Sothis, considering that she couldn’t even explain it to herself. She couldn’t even discard the possibility that their magic just had some adverse reaction on her. However, there was one thing that Byleth knew that could have been a leading factor into her to entering that state.

“I’m afraid of fire,” Byleth admitted. “I know that’s not an excuse for my actions; I don’t entirely understand them myself. But I do know that during that fight, my emotions shut down. My body and mind were moving on their own. Maybe that was like… a defence mechanism or something? I’m not quite sure, but whatever it was, was confusing.”

Not to mention the fact that as soon as their magic touched Byleth, she couldn’t hear Sothis’s voice until she was pulled back into her world. She wasn’t sure if this was coincidence or not, but she was almost too scared to ask. For all she knew, Sothis had just decided to go silent during the fight as not to distract her. She probably should have just taken Sothis’s advice and turned back. Something about those guys just wasn’t right. But she had to know.

“So, have you always been able to do this?” she found herself asking, still trying to wrap her head around what just happened. “Rewind time, I mean.”

“I have,” Sothis admitted, letting out a sigh, “though I will admit that I haven’t remembered that I could until now. I suppose we’re rather lucky that I recollected it when I did, or else we’d be ash by now.”

“I’m so sorry. You were right.” Byleth apologised, rubbing the back of her neck awkwardly. “I was too stubborn to quit, but you were right. I couldn’t hand it in the end, and I paid the consequences.”

“You need not apologise; I understand that your intentions were good. However, just please be more careful in the future. Now that I can rewind time, I might be able to help you out a bit more. But this ability is limited, so you can’t just go around putting yourself in life-or-death situations on the daily like that, alright?”

“Heh, I think you forget that I’m a mercenary, Sothis,” Byleth gave a sad smile towards the green-haired girl. She appreciated how much that Sothis cared about her, but she was never going to be somewhere that she was completely safe. If anything, after all these years, Sothis should have figured out that Byleth is a magnet for trouble. “It’s kind of in the job description. But, we’re a team, right? So, next time you tell me I’m acting stupid, I’ll listen to you.”
“You better,” Byleth would have never anticipated what Sothis was about to do next, until next thing she knew, she was in Sothis’s arms as she embraced the girl. “Or else I’ll make sure you regret it.”

Blinking in surprise, but knowing it was just Sothis’s unique way of showing her affection, Byleth raised her arms and returned the hug.

“Thank you, Sothis…”

"Byleth!"

Letting out a yawn, the girl grudgingly opened her eyes. She felt exhausted, however, as she replayed the events from the night before she let out a gasp as her hand reached for her chest, only to find the flesh unmarked. It appeared that Sothis had indeed managed to rewind the clock to the time when Byleth was waiting in bed for the opportunity to sneak out. However, she wasn’t sure if it was Sothis that had caused Byleth to lose consciousness out of fear of the girl doing something stupid, or if it was a side effect from being pulled back in time with the brutal injuries that she had received in her fight. Byleth supposed that the best solution would be to have to ask Sothis to turn back time at an occasion that wasn’t connected to any significant battle to see what sort of effect it had on Byleth.

“Byleth!” the voice called for her again, and she sat up in her bed, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. As her father walked into her tent, Astra close to his heel, she smiled at them.

“Hi, Dad,” she greeted, letting out a yawn. Her black-and-white dog barked at her, and she looked down at him. “And hello to you, Astra.”

“Ah, so you’re finally awake,” Jeralt said with a smirk on his face. “I’m not going to lie; I was half expecting us to have to toss you into the wagon as we travelled down the mountains since you seemed to be as unconscious as a… um… sloth?”

“I don’t think that’s a real expression,” Byleth informed him, raising her arms to stretch. After how much pain she had been in the night before after being subject towards multiple third-degree and fourth-degree burns, she would never complain about a muscle cramp again because it could be so much worse. Stupid fire…

“Well, you know what? It’s one now.” Byleth couldn’t help but let out a small laugh at her father, causing his smirk to widen. “Anyway, get ready. We’re heading out soon. Do you need any help packing up?”

“No, I think I got it. Where are we heading today, anyway?”

“Well, we should finally be reaching the edge of the mountains, so we’ll be going into House Ordelia territory.”

“Ordelia?” Well, that’s a name that Byleth has heard an awful lot lately. Letting out another yawn, she stood up and moved over to Astra, scratching him behind his ears. “Anyway, I think I’ve got it. Thanks, though.”

“Just try to hurry, I think that if Ronan has to spend one more night in the mountains, he might snap and kill us all with his magic mumbo-jumbo.” Letting out a hearty laugh, Jeralt left the tent, and Byleth felt a ting of pain through her heart. Another reason that last night went so bad was that she was fighting three long-range mages with nothing but a sword.
A lick on her hand pulled her out of her thoughts as she realised that Astra had stayed with her rather than follow her dad. She pulled the dog closer to her as she pets him, grateful to him for pulling her out of her thoughts.

“Hey, Sothis… what would you think about me learning magic?”

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*The County of Ordelia, Leicester Alliance*

“At last, back to civilization,” Ronan breathed out, a small smile on his face as they entered Parry, a small town at the base of the Hyrm Mountains in the territory of House Ordelia.

“I’m honestly surprised you’ve kept with us as long as you have, Blondie, considering how much you hate the outdoors.” Alisha laughed at her comrade’s obvious disdain of the wilderness. “I thought for sure you would have left within the first two weeks. I’m glad to see I was wrong.”

“Wow, seven years later and I finally manage to get a compliment from you?” Ronan faked shock. “Lisha, are you feeling alright?”

“What? Has it really been seven years?” Jeralt looked at them in surprise, before awkwardly rubbing the back of his neck. “Wow, I have lost track of time, haven’t I?”

“I mean if nothing else, the kid’s a good way to keep track of these sorts of things,” Alisha pointed out, holding a hand to her hip while turning to Byleth. “When I first met you, you were about this tall. Now you’re too my shoulder. How old are you now anyway, kid?”

Byleth blinked at the question, unsure how to answer. If she was honest, she hadn’t the faintest idea. Considering she remembered both Alisha and Ronan joining the mercenary group, she knew she was at least older than ten-years-old. But as to how much older? Well, that was a mystery in itself.

“Well…” Byleth couldn’t come up with any concrete answer, so she just shrugged. “Young enough to be called a kid, but old enough to hold a sword.”

“Don’t know you, old man?” Alisha turned to Jeralt, with a curious look on her face. Jeralt just gave her a guilty look in return, and it became evident to the others that he hadn’t the faintest idea himself.

“Why don’t we hit the shops while we’re in town?” Jeralt suggested, quickly moving to the head of the group to direct the men as to what supplies they needed. Byleth felt a bit bad for her dad. She knew just how easy it was to lose track of time when you spend your entire life travelling, so she didn’t blame him for not knowing her age. She hoped that he didn’t think he was a bad dad for not knowing.

Maybe she could look around and see if she could find another who looked about her size and ask their age? It was worth a shot, and that way, it might make Jeralt feel less guilty.

“I’m going to take a look around while you guys check out the shops,” Byleth said, turning to Ronan and Alisha. “It’s a pretty small town, right? So, I’m sure we’ll be able to find each other no problem when it’s time to leave.”

“If you’ve got any issues finding any of us, I’m sure you’ll find Blondie in either the library or the bookstore,” Alisha said, nudging Ronan in the side with a bit more force than he was expecting.
"Ouch! Honestly, Lisha, must you always be so brutish?" Ronan complained as he rubbed his side. "But she’s correct, that is more than likely where I’ll be situated. Do you need anything from there or are you still working on our current lesson books?"

"Actually, I’ve been kind of curious about reason magic," Byleth figured now was a good of a time as any to bring it up. "Wouldn’t suppose you’d be down to start including that into our courses?"

"Huh?" Ronan looked at Byleth in surprise, before his face light up. "Of course, I would be delighted! But may I ask what’s with the sudden interest?"

"Well, I’ve wanted to learn something long-range…” Byleth explained. She couldn’t tell him how she had nearly been killed by a group of mages and need to be able to learn better ways to protect herself from magic attacks, so she settled for another reason—an equally important one.

"If you wanna learn something long-range, I could always teach you how to use a bow and arrow,” Alisha offered.

"I think magic might be better,” Byleth insisted. “After all, you’ve seen some of my sword techniques. It’s a lot of acrobatics; I can’t imagine that would be very easy with a bow strapped to my back.”

“That’s fair,” Alisha agreed, recalling the last time that she fought with the girl, she frequently rolled out of the way to dodge incoming blows. “Well, if you ever change your mind, you know where to find me.”

With that settled, Byleth parted ways with the mercenary group with a promise to meet up with them in a few hours once their shopping was complete. The town itself wasn’t anything fancy, a simple stop to restock if you’re making your way from the Alliance to the Empire. Though most people preferred to avoid travelling through the mountains, there was still enough traffic to warrant a town on the outskirts. The town was honestly more at risk of being a target of bandits than anywhere within the mountains themselves. However, considering it was on a border between nations, the town supposedly had good guards to help maintain the peace, which is why Byleth found it so odd that she didn’t spot any guards during her exploration.

In fact, the reason she had wanted to explore was to meet other youths. But she hadn’t found a single child either. It was peculiar, and a bit concerning. Though the adults from the city greeted each other with a smile on their faces, she noticed that it didn’t quite reach their eyes, which more-often-than-not ended up glancing her way when they thought she wasn’t looking.

"Just what’s going on here…” she muttered.

" Byleth, I think you should return to the others…” Sothis’s voice came out a lot more gently than she was used to hearing, causing her to stop in her tracks.

“Why?"

It was not even a split second later that Byleth got the answer to the question, as she saw two masked figures walking out of a nearby shop and into an ally around the corner. Byleth felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up as she took in the sight in front of her. One of the figures glanced over towards her, and she felt her stomach drop. They stared at her for a split second, before continued onwards, following their companion. There was no doubt about it; they were wearing the same masks that the men in the mountains were wearing. Just what the hell was going on here?
Byleth’s blood ran cold, and she couldn’t wait until they were long out of Parry.

**Garland Moon**

**Imperial Year 1174**

The Dutchy of Goneril, Leicester Alliance

It didn’t take long for Byleth’s wish to come true, as the mercenary regrouped not long after she had seen the masked mages again. They had decided to leave House Ordelia territory and make their way towards the County of Gloucester, through the Dutchy of Goneril.

“Apparently, there have been bandits giving the people in Sauin Village a hard time,” Jeralt explained as they made their way along the outskirts of Fódlan’s Throat. “And they townsfolk aren’t wealthy enough to hire anybody nearby to take care of the issue. They’re desperate for help, which is why we’re going to provide it for them.”

“Hang on a sec, old man,” Alisha interrupted. “If they’re not wealthy enough to hire anybody nearby, then I doubt they’re wealthy enough to pay us for travelling all this way to deal with a bandit issue.”

“I’m aware,” Jeralt informed her, keeping his eyes on the rough terrain ahead as he rode upon his new horse. One of the previous members had decided to part ways with the group a few towns ago but had given Jeralt his precious horse, Barbary, in exchange for everything that Jeralt had done for him. “But I owe the people of Sauin Village a favour from long ago, so I can’t exactly turn them down. However, you don’t expect me to force the rest of you to work for free, do you? I got another job lined up for cash, for anybody who would rather not volunteer to help me take down some bandits.”

“Wait, are you saying what I think you’re saying?” Ronan looked at Jeralt with his eyes wide as the gears turned inside his head. “Is this why we’re travelling along Fódlan’s Throat? And why you asked if I knew any Almyran?”

“Huh, I’ve got to say, I’m surprised that it took you as long as it did for you to put two-and-two together, Ronan,” Jeralt let out a chuckle. “Usually you’re on it. Don’t tell me you’ve been distracted lately?”

He gave a knowing look between Ronan and Alisha, causing both to start defending themselves vigorously. Byleth watched from a few paces behind with amusement as Astra followed her at her heel.

“Do you have any idea what they’re talking about?” Byleth asked, looking at Astra. The question, however, was directed towards Sothis. It was another positive to having a dog, Byleth realised, that she could talk to her dog out loud much more naturally than she could to the voice in her head.

“I believe that your father is implying that Ronan and Alisha have some sort of intimate relationship of some kind,” Sothis responded, causing Byleth’s cheeks to turn pink as she made a face. She didn’t need that image in her head, but now that was the only thing that she could think of.

“Not that…” Byleth desperately tried to shake the thought from her mind. “I meant about the job. Do you think we’re crossing the border?”
Byleth didn’t know very much about Almyra at all, the most information that she had on it was the fact that is was the nation past Fódlan’s Locket. That was the extent that her knowledge went, but she would be lying if she said she wasn’t curious about the world outside of Fódlan.

“Crossing the border to where?” Out of every response that Sothis could have given Byleth, that was not the one she was anticipating.

“Wow, to think you know even less about Almyra than I do…” Byleth couldn’t help but let out a small laugh at the fact that there was someone in the world who was less informed than she was. Though, she supposed it was understandable considering Sothis’s amnesia. However, it made her even more curious. Does this confirm that Sothis is indeed from Fódlan since she knows nothing beyond the borders? Or is Sothis only so well informed on the place they live because of Byleth?

“Hey, Dad,” Byleth picked up her pace (and as a result, so did Astra) to catch up to the others. “So, what’s the job got to do with Almyra?”

“You’re curious about the job?” Jeralt’s eyebrows raised at his daughter, half expecting her to just come with him to Sauin Village. “Well, we’ve been offered to escort a group of merchants to the capital city of Almyra so that they can sell their wares without worry. The King has supposedly been trying to increase trade between the two of us. However, bandits have been making it increasingly difficult, since foreign goods are difficult to obtain, they’re quite high value.”

“Which makes them all the more tempting to take,” Byleth concluded. “High risk, high reward.”

“That’s my girl,” Jeralt praised, taking one of his hands off of his horse’s reigns to ruffle her hair, causing her to laugh.

“If it’s alright, I’d accompany the others on this job,” Jeralt’s look of shock was an apparent one, and Byleth rushed to explain herself before he flat out denied her request. “It’s just I’ve never been outside of Fódlan, not to mention that I don’t know anything about the lands beyond Fódlan other than the names. And I know that we’re mercenaries, and we go where the mission requires us, but this might be my only chance to go beyond. What are the odds we get another job like this? And I’m also really curious what it’s like.”

“As Byleth’s tutor, I also think that this would be a very educational experience for her,” Ronan came to Byleth’s defence, obviously happy the attention was brought away from Alisha and himself. “Not to mention the fact that I will be on this job and will be able to keep an eye on Byleth and her studies. Unless you would rather teach her how to apply mathematics in a practical setting such as battle?”

“Honestly, I feel like we need as much help on this job as we can get,” Alisha agreed. “You know how racist some of these bastards are; I doubt many of them will agree to come when they find out the specifics of our job. If anything, having the untainted eyes of the youth might get them to pull their heads out of their arses.”

Jeralt looked between the three of them, seeing their resolve was unwavering. He knew that Byleth never asked for much, and considering two of his most trusted comrades were going to be on this job as well; he couldn’t come up with a reasonable excuse to say no other than the fact that he was worried about his child. Letting out a deep sigh, he finally nodded his head.

“If this is what you really want to do, then I’ll allow it. But you must promise that you’ll be careful. I don’t know what I’d do if anything were to happen to you.”

“I’ll be careful, I promise,” Byleth agreed, and remembering how Sothis gained the ability to
Rewind time, she knew that she would be able to keep her promise this time.

“Then I suppose we’ll have to prepare you for Almyra once we meet up with the merchants, won’t we?” Byleth beamed up at her father as the words left his mouth, and he was glad that he said yes, if nothing else, because seeing that look on her face meant the world to him. He would do anything to keep her happy and keep her safe. But sometimes, you’ve got to choose one or the other.

Today, he chooses happiness. He just hopes that it’s the right decision.

Chapter End Notes

Edited on 08/05/2020

This chapter was brought to you by 'One of THOSE Nights' by the Cab.

For anyone who's curious about the timeline, 1174 is the year that Jeralt takes on Leonie as an apprentice. It didn't make much sense to me that she didn't seem to know much about Byleth, so I figured it made sense for Jeralt to take her on while Byleth was on a different job. Hence: Byleth's misadventure in Almyra.

As always, let me know your thoughts <3
World Away

Chapter Summary

“Oh, crap…”

“What’s wrong?” the girl got up from the ground and dusted herself off, giving the boy a look in concern. “Do you need help?”

“It’s a long story! I-I’ve got to go!” Khalid frowned as he looked around for a way to get out of the bazaar. There were a couple of barrels sitting against the wall might give him enough leverage to climb onto the roof of a nearby building. It was at times like these he was grateful that most of the Almyran architecture had been designed to have flat roofs. With his escape route decided, he nodded to himself before turning back to the Fódlan girl. “Will you be here tomorrow?”

“I will, but I—”

“Great, see you tomorrow, Blue.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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I Think We’re Alone Now

iv. world away

Garland Moon

Imperial Year 1174

Madinalmuluk, Almyra

“Watch where you’re going!”

Khalid huffed out an apology as he dodged past another bystander as he ran through the crowded street, away from his pursuer. He was hoping that he would have lost them in the crowd, but the god of luck did not seem to be on his side.

“Get back here, Khalid!” a gruff voice called after him, and he glanced back to Nader, who was closing in on him. He will admit that he might have gone a little far with his prank, but he had to test it out on somebody. However, testing it out on his combat instructor wasn’t his smartest idea, but he knew that the man would forgive him.

Eventually.

Probably after dragging the poor boy behind a horse again. Which was why Khalid was running—
to try to avoid that punishment. Especially considering that some of his… special revenge herbs got misplaced and ended up being fed to the horses by one of his family’s servants. And he would rather avoid being hauled behind a horse that was suffering from intestinal distress. The punishment was shitty enough as it was.

Slipping into an alley, Khalid knew that to avoid getting caught, he would have to be a bit more creative. Nader the Undefeated had his name for a reason, after all. But the fact that the man had never been bested in battle didn’t mean he had never been outwitted by the young boy.

Despite being the son of the king, Khalid never was one who just stayed inside the palace walls. He spent his days out and about exploring (and causing chaos) in the streets of Madinalmuluk. Because of this, Khalid knew the layout like the back of his hand. And this alleyway he was in just so happened to lead directly to the bazaar. And from there, he figured that he would have no trouble losing Nader in the busy market.

“Perfect,” Khalid couldn’t help but smirk at seeing just how many people were out that day. Though it was usually bustling with people, there were at least twice as many present, which was the perfect distraction for him to slip away.

Navigating his way through the crowd was easy enough—his silk clothes differed significantly from the canvas fabric of most of the commoners, so any visitors to the city happily stepped aside to make way for the boy. However, the locals that knew who Khalid was simply scowled at him as he passed by. He learned how to ignore it long ago, though that didn’t mean that he was happy with how estranged he was from everyone around him. Regardless, he had more important things to worry about than their hatred.

Like avoiding getting dragged behind a horse.

Honestly, it was such a brutal punishment that he tried to avoid having to follow through with it at all cost. But today he refused to falter—he would not get caught. So, he had no choice but to give his all as he manoeuvred through the shoppers. He skillfully ducked behind a merchant’s stand to avoid getting caught up in the group standing outside a pop-up-stand looking at the wares. With any luck, Nader would think he was somewhere within the mob of people and end up getting delayed long enough for Khalid to make it to safety.

But things rarely go according to plan, Khalid is cruelly reminded, as he finds himself slamming head-first into a girl who was walking behind the stall, causing them both to fall into the ground.

“Ouch…” the girl mutters, causing Khalid to pull himself off her quickly. He was about to take off again, but he couldn't help but pause to give her a swift glance over. As he did, his eyes widen at the sight of her.

It was apparent she wasn’t from Almyra at first glance. Her fair skin was flushed pink from the summer heat, and her blue locks pulled back into a ponytail. If that wasn’t proof enough, then her clothing was the final indicator that he needed. The black tunic that she wore clearly wasn’t designed for such intense temperature since the long sleeves were pushed up to her elbows, and her shorts were unevenly cut. Khalid could only assume that she had cut the legs off her trousers to try to give herself a bit more comfort in the heat. Whoever she was, he would admit she was resourceful by working with what she had.

Khalid hadn’t realised that he was staring at the girl for as long until he noticed that her lips were moving and that he could understand the words that were coming out of them, despite them not being of Almyran origin. The expression on his face must have confused her, because she quickly faltered and came to a pause, causing Khalid to realise that he had better speak up or else she would
think that he didn’t speak the common language of Fódlan, which he did. Despite only speaking to his mother and father in it, Khalid was fluent in it and honestly ecstatic that he finally might have a reason to use that skill.

“I’m sorry, can you repeat that?” Khalid asked, a smile growing on his face at his revelation.

“Wait, you understand me?” the girl was as stunned as he was, and he nodded excitedly, holding out a hand to help her up. She glanced at him, and at his hand, before taking it as he pulled her back to her feet.

“Yeah, I do! My mom’s actually from Fódlan. But this is the first time that I—” a voice calling out his name echoed in the distance caused him to stop in the middle of his sentence as he was pulled back to reality by remembering the fact that he was being chased. “Oh, crap…”

“What’s wrong?” the girl got up from the ground and dusted herself off, giving the boy a look in concern. “Do you need help?”

“It’s a long story! I—I’ve got to go!” Khalid frowned as he looked around for a way to get out of the bazaar. There were a couple of barrels sitting against the wall might give him enough leverage to climb onto the roof of a nearby building. It was at times like these he was grateful that most of the Almyran architecture had been designed to have flat roofs. With his escape route decided, he nodded to himself before turning back to the Fódlan girl. “Will you be here tomorrow?”

“I will, but I—”

“Great, see you tomorrow, Blue.”

And with that said, Khalid climbed up the barrels and pulled himself onto the roof, running off and jumping onto the next, hoping he was moving quickly enough to avoid being seen by Nader.

“What a weird boy…” Byleth muttered to herself as she glanced at the rooftop where he had vanished from. She hadn’t the slightest idea who he was, or where he went, but she would admit that he certainly knew how to make a memorable first impression.

A booming voice caught Byleth’s attention, and she turned around to see a large, angry man behind her, glaring up at the roof of the building the boy had just retreated from. Her body moved faster than her mind, and she found herself reaching for the sword at her side. She took a step towards the man, narrowing her eyes.

“Can I help you?” Byleth asked, watching the man cautiously. His attention was brought over to her as she spoke. He eyed her up and down before letting out a bark of laughter.

“Yeah, you can step aside so I can go after the little brat that went scurrying past you,” the man told her, but she didn’t budge. Instead, she unsheathed her sword and readied it.

“And if I say no?”

The man looked at her with amusement on his face, letting out another laugh before pulling out a sword of his own.

“Then we’ll see if I listen to you or not.”

After what felt like an eternity, Khalid finally stopped jumping rooftops and allowed himself to stop and rest. The sun was beginning to set, meaning that he had spent the majority of his day
fleeing from Nader.

“I win…” Khalid congratulated himself as he flopped onto his back, glancing up at the stars that were beginning to appear in the sky. His thoughts flickered back to the girl he had met in the market, wondering what she was doing in Almyra. Khalid knew that his father had been promoting trade between the two nations as a sign of good faith. But that didn’t mean that many wanted to participate in it. Most merchants viewed it as suicide since there were a lot of individuals willing to kill for their goods. Maybe times were finally changing?

Though, that still didn’t explain why the girl was there. She seemed only to be a few years older than Khalid, and he doubted that she was a merchant. Though, it was possible that it was a family business and they brought her along instead of leaving her behind. That seemed a bit like lousy parenting, though, if Khalid was honest. This was the first time he’s seen foreigners in Madinalmuluk, and he highly doubted that it was just because they hadn’t bothered trying. The more believable option is they either got killed or threatened to leave before they had even reached the capital city.

The fact that they were here at all was an anomaly, and Khalid was excited at the prospect. Perhaps this would make the Almyrans see that the people from Fódlan weren’t that bad, and vice versa. Then they might finally stop hating him for existing.

The sky was nearly black now, and Khalid debated staying there for a while longer or heading back home. He doubted that Nader was still searching for him, but he could never be too careful. Hell, maybe the prince should just avoid going home until he was sure that the horses were no longer having stomach issues. Though, if he randomly vanished, he was confident his mother would worry, track him down, and tie him to the horses herself.

He ran his hand through his messy brown hair as he stared up at the stars. Sometimes he wished that he could be up there with them. Free from all the prejudices that he faced by being both half-Fódlan and heir to the throne. He just wanted things to be simpler. He wanted everyone to get along. He wanted not to be alone anymore.

A shooting star flew through the night sky, causing a shiver to go down Khalid’s spine. The things that he wanted were also the things that he had wished for, so whether the falling star was coincidence or fate was unknown to him. But he couldn’t help but close his eyes as he wished on it, hoping that it would come true.

Sneaking back into the palace wasn’t a difficult task. Khalid knew the guard’s post and where there would be openings for him to get through. It was both convenient and worrying, with how many attempts that there had been on his life in the past, he would have thought that security would be more vigilant. However, considering the nature of most of the Almyran people, a lot chose to go for the more upfront route. Though there wasn’t any honour in attempting to assassinate the prince, there was even less in doing it from the shadows.

It was stupid if you asked Khalid, but he was grateful.

He had almost made it back to his room when he heard a throat clear behind him. He stopped in his track, before turning around slowly. With luck, it wasn’t Nader or his mother, but instead one of the night guards tasked to protect him. Needless to say, she wasn’t the best at her job.

“You’re home awfully late tonight, prince,” she scowled at him. Khalid was well used to her attitude at this point. It was bad enough when she first got assigned to him, but it just got progressively worse the more mischief he got into. He didn’t regret anything.
“And you’re awfully negligent tonight, Jasmine,” he fired back, flashing her a cheeky grin. “If I would have been an assassin, we would both probably dead by now, don’t you agree?”

“Tsk,” she ignored his statement, “where’d you get in from?”

“If you can’t figure it out yourself, then you’re not very good at your job,” without waiting for a response, Khalid walked into his bedroom and closed the door. He heard some curse words emerge beyond the other side of the door, and he couldn’t help but let out a chuckle at the guard that he had successfully pissed off. She started it, after all.

Khalid hadn’t realised just how tired he had been, because as soon as he laid his head down on the bed, he was fast asleep, exhausted from the events of the day. It had felt as though he had just fallen asleep when he had awoken to his mother’s voice.

“Claude, wake up, sweetie.”

“Five more minutes…” Khalid groaned, rolling over to his side.

“No can do, abnay, you need to get ready,” Tiana told him. “I already had the bath prepped for you.”

“What’s going on?” Khalid finally opened his eyes as he looked over to his mom, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

“We just got word that some merchants from Fódlan came all this way, so as a sign of good faith, your father is holding a feast to give them the proper ‘Almyran Welcome’, so you need to get ready.”

“Dad sure loves throwing feasts, doesn’t he?” Khalid sat up, stretching. Tiana laughed slightly and ruffled her son’s hair.

“Don’t pretend like you don’t enjoy every minute of it.”

“So, when are the merchants arriving?” Khalid’s mind flickered back towards the girl that he ran into yesterday, wondering if she would be among them.

“In a few hours,” Tiana told him as she moved towards the door. “If you’re not ready by then, I’ll let Nader punish you for that little prank you pulled on him yesterday. I swear you should have known better than to mess with that man’s weapons.”

“I just wanted to test out a little theory that I had on magnetism,” Khalid rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. “But if you can convince him to let it slide, then I’ll definitely be ready on time.”

“Good,” was the only response that he got as she left the room, and Khalid let out a sigh. He had butterflies in his stomach from the thought of meeting so many people Fódlan. Considering that they came to Almyra to sell their wares, they couldn’t be too bad… right?

“Are you serious?” Byleth looked at Ronan in astonishment.

“I don’t know why you find that so unbelievable,” Ronan rolled his eyes at the girl. “If you recall, we were invited to a similar event back when we were in Fhirdiad a few years back.”

Byleth’s face flushed as she recalled the celebration the army had after they had returned from the war in Sreng. It was an extremely memorial night for her because it was the first time that she had
been around kids her age, as well as the first time she had ever kissed a boy. She thought about them, now and again, thinking about how they’re doing. She wondered if she would ever see them again, and if she did, if they would even remember her.

“It’s not unbelievable, it’s just surprising,” Byleth explained. “After all, how many mercenary groups actually get invited to royal palaces.”

“You forget that most mercenary groups don’t have as virtuous of a moral compass as we do,” Ronan reminded. “Where most groups will do anything for money, we go based upon our ethics. It is commendable, you must admit.”

“I agree, but I don’t understand why this means I have to wear a dress,” Byleth looked down again at the clothes that Ronan had handed her. Though the pastel pink material was much lighter than what she had on, the concept of wearing a dress was one utterly foreign to the girl. Not that Byleth had anything against the formalwear, but she had never worn one before. Most of her clothing up until that point was comfortable and combat-ready. “We’re here on a job, aren’t we? I just don’t think that a dress is the most fitting thing to fight in.”

“Byleth,” this time it was Alisha who spoke up, and Byleth’s attention shifted towards the woman, “think of it this way. If you can master the art of fighting in clothing that others might not expect you to fight in, that will put you at a clear advantage in the battlefield. Think about it, which opponent do you think will be more challenging: the one in armour or the one in a dress?”

“The one in armour, obviously. They’re not exposed, so it’s harder to land a strike where it will hurt them.”

“Unless you use magic,” Ronan stated. “In which case they’ll be more susceptible to damage because they won’t be able to move as fast. Plus, imagine you specialize in lightning magic. Metal conducts electricity quite easily, so usually, it just takes one strong attack to kill someone in a suit of armour. There’s a reason you’ll find most mages wearing minimal armour.”

“So why do I have to wear a dress? Does it have to do with you teaching me magic?”

“You’re quick, which you’re going to need to hone when you’re casting. If you take too long to prep a spell, you’ll either be dodging an incoming attack or trying to strike down a moving target. Either way, it adds unnecessary challenge to the task at hand. Are you following me still?”

“Plus, it helps to be ready to battle no matter what you’re wearing,” Alisha added. “Don’t let being a warrior get in the way of beauty. Imagine in like ten years; you’re getting married. Your wedding day gets interrupted by monsters. Do you just stand there and look pretty, or do you fight despite what you’re wearing?”

They both had a logical point, Byleth would admit. It was a well-known fact that what Byleth lacked in size and strength, she made up for in speed and precision. When she got older, she highly doubted that she would wear heavy armour since it would just be something that would slow her down. However, despite the arguments that they made; she couldn’t help but feel as though this was just an excuse for them to get her in a dress. As if seeing her hesitation, Ronan spoke up.

“If nothing else, consider this your punishment for getting in a fight with one of the locals.”

“It wasn’t a fight!” Byleth defended, remembering her interaction with the man who was after the boy from the market. Though they did cross swords, she wouldn’t call it a fight that they had. If anything, it seemed more like a spar—a dual. He never attacked her directly, so she returned the favour. After all, her purpose was to buy time for the boy to escape. Her opponent, however, had
just seemed to be testing her capabilities with the sword.

Maybe it had something to do with the fact she was from Fódlan? Though, she didn’t think that was it—as soon as he was tired of sparring with her, he sheathed his sword, complimented her footwork and went off in the opposite direction. Though she was happy that he was no longer pursuing the boy, she’d ended up with more questions than she had answers.

“All right, you win, I’ll wear it,” Byleth said after a minute, before giving Ronan a pointed look. “But you better teach me magic that’s actually useful, okay?”

“Yes, yes. When we get back, we will determine which magic element you’re attuned to, alright?” Ronan clapped his hands. “For now, we must get ready. I would hate for us to give them a poor first impression by arriving late!”

“I’m surprised someone so bookish likes parties as much as you,” Alisha laughs, running a hand through her curly red hair. “But I suppose it’s been quite a long time since we’ve last been to one. Even if our primary objective is to protect the merchants, I don’t see why we can’t have a bit of fun while we’re there.”

“Exactly! And it’ll be nice being able to able not to have to translate all night—the queen is from Fódlan, so the entire royal family is fluent. Not to mention, I heard that they have a son around your age too, meaning that you won’t have to hang around us adults all night if you don’t want to, Byleth.”

Byleth was about to speak up and bring up the fact that she had met a few people yesterday who also spoke the same language as them but decided against it. She doubted that it would be at all relevant since she had no idea how many people were bilingual in Almyra. She could just hope that the prince was good company.

“Stand up straight, Khalid,” the king instructed his son in their native tongue, the latter of which struggled not to roll his eyes as he did what he was told. With the feast prepared, and Khalid dressed in some of his finer silks—which were a mix of bright green and yellow—they were just waiting on their guests. They went all out for this event because the king had wanted to make a good impression on the merchants so that they might return to do business again, which Khalid understood completely. He wanted to leave a good impression on them, too; however, he didn’t understand why he had to have perfect posture in order to do it. Character alone should be able to speak for itself.

Then again, Khalid’s character was known to be quite the troublemaker. So perhaps it was in his best interest to focus on trying to come off as refined. Though, both of his parents were fierce warriors, so he had no doubt they would share some less-than-appetizing battle stories at the table to impress their guests.

Oh, gods, tonight was going to be a disaster.

“My lord, your guests have arrived,” one of the guards informed the king, and Khalid could tell that he wasn’t pleased about having to pass the message. Khalid did not doubt that the number of Fódlians that were about to be in the palace unsettled the guard, and the boy was suddenly twice as excited that the merchants were here.

“Thank you for informing us, bring them in.”

They waited in awkward silence as their guests were escorted from the front gates to the reception
hall where the royal family stood in anticipation of meeting them. Khalid couldn’t help but fidget, while his father stood proudly with a smile on his face at the prospect of everything that this meeting stood for.

As the merchants flooded in, Khalid’s eyes widened when he saw a familiar blue-haired girl among them. Her gaze met his own, and he couldn’t help but smirk at the bewildered look on her face. She probably just assumed that he was just some street rat or something with how quickly he had bolted.

“Visitors,” the guard spoke in a very thick Almyran accent as he spoke to the foreigners. “May I introduce the royal family. King Sayidi, Queen Tiana, and Prince Khalid.”

The reactions of the merchants to seeing the King and Queen stood side-by-side was priceless. Khalid was aware that the fact that Almyra had a Fódlan queen was common knowledge, but it was something that most people seemed to forget about upon meeting her. Or maybe it was because his parent’s appearances were vastly different. His father was the definition of tall, dark and handsome. His bushy beard had appeared relatively unkempt compared to the many intricate braids he had adorning his head. Meanwhile, his mother was a petite woman, though her size shouldn’t fool you—she was an incredibly skilled fighter and a renowned archer. Her once fair skin was now sun-kissed and covered in freckles from spending her days under the hot Almyran sun, which paired with her golden locked, she looked almost angelic.

In terms of looks, Khalid had always been told that he took after his father. He had the same tanned skin and curly brown hair that he did. However, the boy had his mother’s bright green eyes, which he was thankful for. Though he stood out because of his eyes, he wouldn’t change them for the world. It was what connected him and his mom.

“Welcome, friends!” King Sayidi greeted, walking over to the nearest merchant and patting him on the back, nearly sending the unsuspecting merchant to the ground. “Now, who’s hungry?”

Dinner passed by surprisingly smoothly, all things considered. The only hiccup in an otherwise successful night was with the food. Most of the Fódlan merchants had not been accustomed to the Almyran dishes, so they weren’t entirely sure what they were ingesting. The majority gave their hosts the benefit of the doubt and tried a variety of dishes. However, they failed to realise just how spicy it was compared to most Fódlan meals.

Byleth couldn’t help but smile in amusement at the reactions of some of her fellow Fódlans. The faces of her companions turned bright red as tears started to form in their eyes as they dove for their drinks—determined to quench the heat burning their tongues. And then they repeat the process over-and-over to not seem disrespectful to their hosts. She had to give them props for their persistence at eating it, though.

Despite her attention being on the merchants, Byleth couldn’t help but notice that the boy from the market, Khalid, kept giving her glances from the other end of the table. Finally getting bored of watching the merchants, she turned towards the prince and raised her eyebrows at him. He gestured to the red pasta-like dish that was in front of her, causing her to inspect it. It seemed a bit soupier than most of the other dishes, with bunches of herbs and peppers mixed in with the noodles. Though it appeared to be innocent enough, she recalled that this was one of the dishes that was spicy enough to make the grown men around her start to cry, and she couldn’t help but let out a laugh.

He wanted her to try it.
She grabbed the serving spoon and slopped some of the red concoction onto her plate, before turning back towards Khalid. He nodded excitedly at her as she took a bite of it, and instantly it felt as though her mouth was on fire, however, she did her best to remain pokerfaced on as she stared back at Khalid, chewing it slowly for dramatic effect, causing the boy’s mouth to drop.

She wasn’t quite sure what she was trying to accomplish, but Byleth was fairly certain she won.

After dinner had finished and the actual celebrations began, Byleth wasn’t surprised when the young prince came running over to her.

“You’re the girl from the market!” he exclaimed, a wide smile on his face.

“And you’re the prince of Almyra,” Byleth teased, unsure if she should be speaking so improperly to a member of the royal family. He didn’t seem to mind one bit, though, so she continued. “When you said your mom was from Fódlan, this isn’t what I thought you meant. Then again, the conversation got ended way too fast.”

Khalid awkwardly laughed as he rubbed the back of his neck.

“Well, you know what they say about anticipation,” he joked. “But I’ll be honest; I didn’t expect to see you here. Or again, really. Don’t get me wrong. I’m happy you’re here. It’s just hard to believe this is real—I’ve never actually met anyone from Fódlan besides my mom.”

“Really?” Byleth raised her eyebrows at that. No wonder they were celebrating. “Well, I’ve never met a prince before, so this is a first for both of us.”

“You don’t have to treat me like a prince,” he told her. “In fact, I’d rather you didn’t. After all, you’re not from here. So, if you look at it that way, we’re both just kids. We’re equals.”

“Equals?” that was surprising to hear from anyone’s mouth, let alone a prince. “Well, if that’s what you want then I won’t argue. So, does that mean I can call you Khalid or do you want a ‘Prince’ attached to that?”

“Khalid’s great,” he said a little too fast. “I mean, I do have a Fódlan name, but that might get a little confusing, so Khalid’s fine—er, great, I mean. I said great last time, didn’t I?”

It occurred to Byleth that he was even more nervous talking to her than she was talking to him. She should have been more nervous, honestly, but she didn’t exactly see him as a big, scary, powerful prince. She saw him as the boy from the market, who was desperately fleeing from a frightening man. Who wasn’t honestly that frightening, come to think of it.

“I’m Byleth, by the way,” she remembered that she still needed to introduce herself. It was something that she was honestly quite bad at remembering to do. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Questions are free, but the answer might cost you,” Khalid teased, and Byleth couldn’t help but laugh a bit as she rolled her eyes.

“Why were you running away from that man in the market yesterday?”

“Oh? That? Well, you see... it’s a bit complicated.” Khalid bit his lip as he debated on what to tell her. As the prince contemplated, Byleth’s attention slipped from him and to the man who was walking in their direction. It was the same man that she had sparred with yesterday. The one that had been chasing Khalid through the market.

“Well, I hope it’s not too complicated because he’s coming this way.”
“Wait. What?!” Khalid whipped his head around to see the man heading towards them in full stride. He shrunk back into himself. “I’m so screwed.”

Byleth instinctively took a step-in front of Khalid, placing her hand on the hilt of her sword again as he neared.

“Relax, little spitfire. I’m not here for another fight,” he reassured, and Byleth couldn’t help but pout.

“It wasn’t a fight! It was a spar.” Regardless of what they considered it, Khalid’s eyes were wide as he stared at Byleth in amazement.

“What? You spared Nader?! When?!” The boy was utterly lost, looking between the two of them for an explanation.

“Yesterday after you ran off,” Nader said, putting a hand on both of their shoulders as he looked between the two kids with a big smile on his face, “it would seem as though the prince has found his knight in shining armour! Or rather, his mercenary in black cotton.”

“You’re a mercenary?” Khalid looked even more surprised at that revelation, and Byleth looked at Nader in confusion.

“How could you tell? I could have been a merchant.”

“I could tell the moment you pulled your sword on me. You have the heart and spirit of a warrior.” Letting out another laugh, Nader turned his attention to Khalid. “You ran into the right girl here, Khalid. I had nearly caught up with you if this one hadn’t blocked my path. When I tried to push through, she got in my way. There was no way I was getting passed her without a fight.”

“How is he telling the truth?” Khalid looked at Byleth for confirmation, and she felt her cheeks heat up as she turned her gaze away. She had no idea why Nader was telling him about this; she was just doing what she thought was right. She wasn’t looking for praise if that’s what this was supposed to be.

“She told me that if I wanted to get to you that I’d have to go through her first. I decided to put her skills to the test, but she seemed to be a worthy opponent.” Nader glanced back at Byleth. “You’re quite skilled with the sword. How long have you been practising?”

“For as long as I can remember,” she told them, her face still pink since she was not used to being the centre of attention. She shifted her gaze back to the prince in front of her. He had been looking at her like she was from another planet or something. “And I don’t think that’s exactly what I said.”

“Might as well have been,” Nader laughed. “After all, that’s what I took from the circumstances. After all, I stopped my pursuit after our ‘sparring’ didn’t I?”

“But why did you do that?” Khalid looked at Byleth as he tried to understand her actions, confusion evident on his face. “You don’t even know me, so why?”

“I don’t. But I wasn’t sure why you were being chased, but you didn’t seem like a bad person.” Now it was Khalid’s turn to blush, and Byleth couldn’t help but look at him in confusion now. Why would that embarrass him? She was just telling the truth.

Byleth concluded that she just needed to spend more time with kids her own age because she had no idea how to interact with them.
“You know, I’m Khalid’s combat instructor, but he’s never taken to the sword like that. His talent lies in archery, rather than hand-to-hand.” Nader’s comment seemed to snap Khalid out of whatever trance he was in because he huffed at the taller man.

“Please, anytime I practice any sort of melee combat with you, you down me before I even get a chance to strike. At least with the bow, I just have to hit my target.”

“There’s way more to the bow than that, and you know it. There’s no need to for you to downplay your strengths,” Nader shook his head slightly. “Regardless, the downside to being an archer is you also need to know another weapon for when enemies get too close to you. Something that I assume you know well, Byleth?”

“Yeah?” Byleth cocked an eyebrow, looking at the man in confusion. “It’s important to be prepared for anything.”

After all, that was why she was having Ronan teach her magic.

“And how long are you going to be in Madinalmuluk for?”

"Madinalmuluk?"

"Ah, you might know it as Kingstown." Because most people from across the boarder didn't know Almyran, they adapted the city name into their native tongue. However, the cities true name was Madinalmuluk among the Almyran people.

“What?” That was a weird question. “I don’t know. I guess we'll be here until the merchants finish with their business. Why?”

“Nader what are you—”

“It would seem that our dear prince isn’t too fond of my swordsmanship teachings, so I was wondering if you might be up for the task instead?” A wide smile was on Nader’s face as he looked between the two kids. Khalid instantly recognised the expression well; he was scheming. But was this payback for the prank or something else?

“I don’t know; I’m not much of an instructor. I’ve still got a lot to learn myself…” Byleth glanced between Khalid and Nader nervously. She didn’t have anything against the prince. She just wasn’t sure if she was skilled enough to teach someone something that could mean life-or-death one day.

“But that’s what makes it work out so well; you can improve your skills while you help Khalid find his own. Besides, I’m sure that you both agree that it’s important to be around others your age. So, think of this as killing two birds with one arrow.”

“If you don’t want to do it, you don’t have to,” Khalid assured Byleth. “I’m pretty sure Nader’s just trying to get out of work, after all—”

“I’ll do it. I can’t guarantee that I’ll be the best teacher, but I’ll try. Besides,” Byleth smiled at Khalid, “it’s been years since I’ve been around anybody close to my age. So, I’ll do it.”
Also I AM SO SORRY I MISSED A WEEK. I've been sick as a dog, and haven't had a chance to edit it. I'm still sick, so if you see any typo's or word errors, please let me know. Hopefully, I'll be fully recovered by next week, but just had to let you know I'm not planning on making this a habit.

Please let me know your thoughts! Especially now that Claude (well, Khalid) and Byleth have officially met.
The Dragon Princess

Chapter Summary

“The Dragon Princess? Though that title is a great honour, I am afraid I must decline.”
Byleth managed to stifle her giggles enough to pull a semi-passable frown to the ‘dragon’. “For I must admit the truth to you both: I’m not a princess, I’m an imposter.”

Chapter Notes

I'm late. I know I'm late. I'm sorry I'm late. But in my defense, a global pandemic seems like a good excuse, right?

Also, I've adjusted a few things as canon updates, for example, they confirmed that Claude's mother's name is Tiana, and that his Almyran name is Khalid. Considering I was using Kalud before, I just altered the spelling. But can I get points for being *extremely* close. No? Okay.

Anyway, I'll try to get on a more regularly updating schedule, but I can't promise it'll be weekly. I'll aim for bi-weekly though. Sorry, loves, it's been a hectic time. Stay safe! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I Think We’re Alone Now

v. the dragon princess

Blue Sea Moon

Imperial Year 1174

Outside of Madinalmuluk, Almyra

A month had passed since coming to Almyra, and the merchants weren’t anywhere close to wanting to return to Fódlan. Though almost half their wares had gotten sold, they had switched their focus on spending their time acquiring Almyran goods and discovering their purpose.

Despite it taking a while, Byleth wasn’t going to complain. In her eyes, the more time that she got to spend in the foreign country, the better. She had been able to explore the capital city and the area surrounding it quite intently. This was the second-longest she’s stayed in one place for—Fhirdiad still held the record for the longest. Though she knew that they were in two separate nations, she couldn’t help but compare the two capitals. They were vastly different—if Fhirdiad was the moon, then Madinalmuluk was the sun.
Byleth took her sketchbook with her and created several intricate drawings of things that she saw to show her father when they meet up again—from the unique architecture of the buildings to the people. She even had a few drawings of Khalid in there, not that she had any plans on showing them to the prince or her father. These were drawing that she had planned to keep.

It was Byleth’s way of keeping a memento from her adventures with him in Almyra before she would eventually have to return to Fódlan. These drawings were to remember the boy from the strange land, who became her first long-term friend. He was someone that Byleth didn’t want to forget, unlike she did with the children that she met during the after-war celebration in Fhirdiad. As much as it pained her to admit it, her memory of the event was hazy. Even though she could recall dancing with the children, as well as the red-headed flirt who had stolen her first kiss, that was about all her memory retained of the strange night. Their names, their faces, had regrettably managed to slip from her mind.

She blamed the magic lessons with Ronan. He had been giving her so many books to read and things to memorise that she didn’t have time to focus on much else. Though, with her mentor’s help, she had been making decent progress in her magical prowess. She wasn’t as far as she would like to be, however, because she had to deal with the setback of being a fire user. According to Ronan, it wasn’t possible to change what element you were attuned with unless you’re an incredibly powerful user—even Ronan himself was limited to his wind magic. Thus, Byleth was forced to come to terms with the element she so despised.

Though fire was a useful element to control, she struggled to cast anything stronger than a simple flame. Whenever she tried, she would get reminded of the night she died—the night she would have died if not for Sothis’s time-altering ability—and she ends up faltering and miscasting the spell.

Byleth had to give Ronan props for how patient he’s been with her throughout all of this. He had no clue about her misadventures in the mountains that fateful night, so he did not know her new founded fear of fire. She was trying to overcome it as fast as she could, but it was easier said than done. Though outwardly she had no scars of being burned alive, she still had the memories of it. Sothis told her that the best course of action would be to give it time, so that’s what Byleth was doing, which part of the reason as to why she was trying to keep herself as occupied as she was.

When she wasn’t exploring the capital or studying magic, she was with the prince. She had stayed true to her word at giving the prince swordsmanship lessons. During her explorations, she even found them a special place to practice, since Khalid seemed to prefer crossing swords anywhere besides the training grounds. Given the dirty looks that some of the knights gave the duo, she understood why he preferred to keep his distance.

So, Byleth took him to one of the more remote locations she discovered just past city limits, in a relatively grassy area compared to the rest of the city. The trees were plentiful, so they were protected from the harsh sunlight during the day. The first time that Byleth took Khalid there, they saw a wild wyvern flying overhead, and Khalid instantly fell in love with the area, officially dubbed the area “their spot”. Ever since then, they had been meeting up there so that she could teach Khalid swordsmanship.

Needless to say, she understood why the boy preferred archery.

To be fair, saying that Khalid was bad at swordplay would be a lie. However, he lacked the dedication and discipline that it would take to be remarkably good at it. It was incredibly clear to Byleth that Khalid was participating in the lessons because he had to, rather than wanting to. He preferred to spend the time joking and chatting with Byleth, rather than actually working on
combat. Byleth had called him out on messing around instead of practising multiple times. It had eventually reached the point that if he joked around too much, she would just lunge at him with an attack and make him defend. He called this method cruel, she called it necessary practice, because he needed to take the lessons more serious than he currently was.

This was the primary factor as to why they were together today. Because of Khalid’s lack-of-effort when it came to basic swordsmanship technique, Byleth was tasked with giving him extra lessons in the way of the sword. Though it was admittedly a task that she had given herself, she took it as seriously as an order given to her by somebody else. So, they had begun meeting up every day in their spot so that they could train together.

Despite the excessive amount of time that they spent together, Byleth found that she didn’t mind at all. She wouldn’t complain if she had to spend even more time with Khalid since she had become rather fond of the young prince. Judging by how much time he spent talking and joking with her outside of training, she was assuming that he had felt the same.

Either that or he just really hated training.

“Your reaction time isn’t fast enough,” Byleth said as she swung the wooden sword at him with all her might, sending the sword flying from his hands as he attempted to block. Astra let out a bark as the sword hit the grass by him, getting up from his place on the ground and trotting over closer to a nearby tree before laying under the shade out of the way of the two training youths. Letting out a sigh, Khalid ran his hand through his wavy locks as he looked at his displaced sword.

“I thought the purpose of you teaching me instead of Nader was so that I might actually land a hit,” Khalid crossed his arms as he turned towards Byleth, pouting slightly, “but you’re just as tough on me as he is. Honestly, I think you might be worse…”

“Sorry,” Byleth shrugged before letting out a soft laugh at the expression on Khalid’s face, “I’ve got years of experience though. Not implying that Nader doesn’t, but he probably holds back on you since he’s an adult and you’re not. But you and I are about the same size; therefore, I’m not holding back.”

“Not even a little?” Khalid practically begged.

“For you? Hmm… no.” Khalid stuck his tongue out at Byleth, an action that she returned before walking over to the fallen sword and picking it up, making her way back to Khalid, who grudgingly took it. “Would it make you feel any better if I told you that you’re improving?”

“You think?!” Khalid’s eyebrows shot up in surprise, and Byleth had to stifle another laugh. She couldn’t help but love how expressive he was around her. It was a significant contrast to how he was with others—it was as though he was two different people depending on who he was. With her, he was open, expressive, but with others, he was reserved, always hiding his true feelings, even with his family. A part of Byleth always wanted to ask what it was that made her unique, but she always stopped herself before the words could escape her mouth. Though it probably was because she didn’t care if he was half-Fódlan and half-Almyran. She shouldn’t feel special about that; it was just common decency in her eyes. “… besides, I still haven’t been able to land a single hit on you.”

“You do realise that I’m a mercenary, right?” Byleth reminded him, a small smile lingering on her lips as she looked at the boy. “A single hit could mean the difference between life-and-death for people like me. I don’t know about you, but I’d say that’s a pretty powerful motivator to give every fight your all.”
“I see. So, what you’re saying is I should pretend that you’re trying to kill me!” Now it was Byleth’s turn to pout, an action which caused Khalid to raise an eyebrow at her.

“I would never try to kill you.”

Khalid burst out laughing at Byleth’s declaration, before he put his training sword back in its sheath and ran towards Byleth, a look of joy on his face as he approached the girl. At this, Byleth gave him a questionable look, which just made him laugh harder.

“I’ve never met anyone like you before; you know that?” Khalid looked down at Byleth’s still withdrawn sword, causing her to give him a curious look as she sheathed it, causing the boys grin to widen further. “We should do something different today!”

“You’re not just saying that because you’re frustrated of me winning, are you?” Byleth teased, and Khalid shook his head.

“I’m not. Look, it’s been a month since we’ve met, right? I think that calls for a celebration, don’t you agree?”

“I mean…”

“Alright, what did you have in mind?” she asked, internally admitting defeat at continuing their training. However, seeing Khalid’s face light up as he grabbed her hand, she knew she made the right choice.

“Just trust me!” with that, Khalid pulled Byleth along after him, and she fell in step with the shorter boy. “Come on, Astra!”

The dog got up with a “woof!” as he trotted after his owner and her companion. Khalid was shocked when Byleth brought with her dog on their first training session, and she explained that Astra kept getting into the merchants’ wares and needed a break from him. The young prince immediately took a shine to the dog, so she continued bringing him with every time she went to see him.

The two youths darted through town, narrowly dodging the unfortunate pedestrians that just so happen to cross their paths, causing several of them to curse them out in their native tongue. Though the amount of Almyran Byleth knew was extremely limited, she had a strong understanding on the various curse words that were often fired at her and the prince (usually it was whenever they were together, they never seemed to be aimed at Byleth when she was alone, at least not loud enough for her to overhear). Byleth didn’t know why they were in such a hurry, but she figured that she wouldn’t bother asking. After all, Khalid seemed to be moving with a purpose — whatever that purpose may be.

It wasn’t until they had reached an open amphitheatre in the northmost part of town when they had finally stopped, both out of breath. Even Astra seemed to be having difficulties moving at that point, promptly laying down in the shade by the bleachers with a huff. Byleth pulled out her canteen, taking a large swig before pouring some into a small bowl that she carried with her for Astra. The dog was obviously grateful as he moved up from his spot and towards the water,
promptly lapping it up. She passed the canteen to Khalid, who happily took it.

“Thank you,” he said as he took a drink from it, passing it back to Byleth as they sat there on the concrete bleachers catching their breaths.

“This might be a stupid question,” Byleth started as soon as she had caught her breath, “but what are we doing here?!”

“Ah, well…” Khalid’s energy seemed to be back already because he jumped up from his seat, startling Byleth. “Do you know the purpose of an amphitheatre like this?”

“Isn’t it because of performances and stuff?” the blue-haired girl raised an eyebrow. “If that’s why we’re here, we’re pretty early. After all, nobody is here beside us.”

“You’re both correct and incorrect,” Khalid smugly replied, smirking at the girl as he held out his hand to her. She took it, and he pulled her onto her feet with shocking strength. He ran down the stairs to the circular stage in the middle of the theatre with her in tow. “You see, there is a performance, and we’re the stars! Don’t you see the audience? Don’t you hear their praises?!?”

Byleth looked up at the bleachers, which were utterly empty aside from Astra, who was once again lying in the shade. She wasn’t quite sure what Khalid was talking about, but she figured that there was no harm in playing along, right?

“Wow look at them cheer…” Byleth hesitantly spoke, turning towards Khalid, who nodded at her as he motioned for her to continue. “They love you.”

“They love us!” Khalid corrected her, turning towards the make-believe audience as he held out his arms. “Welcome, ladies and gentlemen. Come one, come all to the performance of a lifetime. This is a story about action and adventure, dragons and knights, love and death. This is a story that you will never forget!”

Byleth couldn’t help but wonder what story this was—it was certainly one that she hadn’t read. Maybe it was a local tale? No, it couldn’t be. He would be well aware that she wouldn’t know any of them. It was probably something that he was making up on the spot if she had to guess. She had no idea what she was supposed to do or say, maybe this was a bad idea, she would rather not make a fool of herself in front of her new friend.

Then again, because of Sothis, she had control over time. If she ended up messing up too badly, she could always attempt to rewind to the beginning of the performance. She still hadn’t managed to gain any practice after the incident.

“My lady,” Khalid’s voice pulled her out of her thoughts, “there have been supposed dragon sightings throughout the city. I fear an attack is inevitable!”

“A dragon…?” Byleth paused for a moment as she pondered her possible responses. She turned to Khalid, pulling the most determined look that she could. “Do we know for certain that it’s here to attack us? If it’s been spotted without killing those who saw it, it could be trying to get our attention.”

“But princess,” Byleth couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at Khalid, the prince, who had assigned the title of the princess to her. It was a play, sure, but it was still embarrassing. However, she decided that she would be better off not reading that into it. “Throughout history, it has never been recorded for a dragon to try to make peace with the humans.”

“There’s a first time for everything,” she said, sharing a firm but kind smile towards the boy. “We
should send the troops throughout the city to assist the townsfolk’s retreat in case things go bad. Meanwhile, you and I should prepare to meet with the dragon as soon as possible.”

“If that is what the princess would like, I will agree, for I am but a humble knight.” Khalid bowed down to Byleth, taking her hand and placing a chaste kiss on the back of her palm. “I will accompany you to the dragons meeting, though I can’t guarantee that the rest of the court will agree with your plan. They want to show their power off, after all.”

“Violence only leads to more violence. It’s an unending cycle, and the only way we can put an end to these dragon attacks is too severe one of the links and form a new chain. A chain of peace.” Did that analogy make sense? Byleth sure hoped that it did, she wasn’t used to speaking so… formally. However, despite this entire exchange being make-believe, Byleth did have some truth to her words.

Growing up as a mercenary, she’s been surrounded by senseless violence and death. Though she didn’t mind her profession, she hated that it had to be a thing in the first place. They were usually hired to take care of bandits that the knights didn’t deem a powerful enough threat to deal with themselves. So, they were acting as the protectors of the people. Though she wouldn’t dare say she agreed with everything that they did, she knew that they tried to do as much good as they possibly could, all things considered.

“I agree,” Khalid replied, before letting out a sigh. “I’ll inform the court. Ready yourself for our meeting, and ready yourself for a fight, just in case.”

Considering how abruptly that they had decided to put on this performance, Byleth was quite surprised by how smoothly it was running. Khalid had acted out his meeting with the court as though it was something he had done thousands of times before. Unfortunately, the meeting had ended badly, with the courts dramatically rejecting the thought of making peace with the dragon, since it had "apparently" destroyed countless villages in the kingdom before then. This knowledge seemed to be a shock to Khalid, who claimed that he had never heard anything like that. However, with the courts adamant about declaring war on the dragons, Khalid and Byleth then had to “sneak” to the meeting in secret.

“This is where we’re supposed to meet the dragon?” Byleth enquired, looking around the still empty amphitheatre in confusion, before turning back to Khalid. “Does he know about this, or are we just supposed to wait until he arrives?”

“Don’t you worry, I can summon him…” after a momentary pause, Khalid looked towards Byleth and gave her a sad smile. “I bet you’re wondering how I know how to summon dragons, right? I haven’t been entirely honest with you… I am from a tribe that worships the long-forgotten dragons. We lived together in peace and harmony when I was a child, but unfortunately that didn’t last. Everything changed when the human kingdom attacked my home. Because I was a child, my life was spared. I was taken into custody under a knight as a squire. As for the rest of my family… they were killed for trying to protect the dragons.

“You were the first to show me kindness, princess, so I am forever indebted to you. I would be willing to die for you no matter what option you chose.” Khalid bowed down to Byleth again. “I will admit that I am thankful that today you chose peace instead of war. Unfortunately, I believe that no matter what we choose, there will be a fight on our hands.”

Byleth had to remind herself that they were just playing pretend as the words passed through Khalid’s mouth. However, she couldn’t help but feel a twinge of pain strike through her heart as she looked at the sadness in Khalid’s eyes. It seemed too real to be fake, at least entirely. If it was, then the kid deserved an award of some sort because he was an incredible actor.
Khalid let out a loud whistle, causing Astra’s ears to perk up from the bleachers as he hopped down the staircase to the two on the centre stage, letting out a bark as he sat down at their feet, looking between the two with his tail wagging happily.

"The dragon has arrived!" Khalid loudly declared, bowing down the Astra. Byleth did the same.

"Oh, mighty dragon. We are here to meet with you today under the prospect of declaring peace between our two species. May the dragons and the humans coexist in peace instead of fighting like children."

Astra let out a bark at the two humans as he stood up and started chasing his tail, causing the two kids to laugh as they imagined the mighty dragon doing something as mundane as a dog.

"The dragon has agreed to your alliance," Khalid told Byleth, struggling to keep his laughter contained. "He hereby declares you as the Dragon Princess—first human to bear the title."

"The Dragon Princess? Though that title is a great honour, I am afraid I must decline." Byleth managed to stifle her giggles enough to pull a semi-passable frown to the 'dragon'. "For I must admit the truth to you both: I’m not a princess, I’m an imposter."

"What?!" Khalid feigned surprise, placing his hand over his chest. "That’s impossible, I’ve known you for years!

"You’ve known my doppelgänger," Byleth told him, looking off in the distance. "I had stumbled across the princess one day when I was at the market in town. We switched places because she was sick of living the life of a princess, and I was sick of stealing to survive. I wasn’t in any position to decline, so agreed, and I’ve been disguised as her ever since. Last I’ve heard, she became a baker in the village to the north."

"I can’t believe it," Khalid’s look of shock looked genuine, and Byleth was reminded once again that Khalid was by far the better actor of the two. She would like to think that she was doing a decent job at least. She pulled herself out of her thoughts just in time to see Khalid shake the look of surprise off his face. He knelt down and bowed down to the girl before him. "It doesn’t change my opinion of you one bit. Our princess had long since abandoned us, so as far as I am concerned, you are my princess. The Dragon Princess."

Byleth couldn’t help but feel a genuine smile creep onto her face at his words, which he happily returned. It felt as though they were having an actual moment together before Khalid broke it by pointing off into the distance, a look of horror taking over. Byleth turned towards the direction that he was indicating, only to see nothing out-of-the-ordinary.

"The court’s knights! They found us! They’re after the dragon!" Khalid exclaimed, and Byleth pulled out her sword dramatically.

"Over my dead body!" She declared as she engaged in an epic pretend sword fight against dozens of imaginary attackers, only for her and Khalid to be dramatically overpowered by their assailants. The battle ended with the duo laying on the floor—beaten, battered, and dying—as they were left to say their final goodbyes.

"It was an honour to serve you, my princess…" Khalid coughed out, “it was a shame that this is how things had to end."

"You don’t… you don’t have to keep treating me so properly," Byleth weakly replied. "I’m not your princess; I’m your friend. Though, I don’t think it matters now…"
“Of course, it does…” Khalid rolled over, letting out a mighty cry of pain as he did so before he took hold of Byleth’s hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “If I have to die, then I’m happy to have died with you by my side.”

“Me too. Until we meet again, in the next life…” Byleth and Khalid both closed their eyes, letting darkness overcome them as death took hold.

That is, until Astra hopped over to Byleth, licking her face causing her to giggle uncontrollably. Khalid sat up, looking over at Byleth confused as to why she had ruined such a dramatic moment before he burst out laughing at the scene before him.

“Well, that was fun,” he said, jumping to his feet. He turned to Byleth, holding out his hand to help her up. She accepted, and Khalid pulled her to her feet.

“Was killing us really necessary?” Byleth couldn’t help but ask.

“Yes, it made the play thousands of times more dramatic!” Khalid exclaimed, putting his hands on his hips. “After all, what’s a play without a little death and mayhem?”

“A play with a happy ending,” it was a serious reply, yet the response she got from Khalid was uncontrollable laughter, causing her to frown. “What’s so wrong with a happy ending?”

“Let’s be real; when does life ever have a happy ending?” Khalid wondered out loud, and Byleth looked at him sadly. She knew first-hand that there were rarely ever happy endings in the real world, her profession had taught her that, however, that’s what made happy endings even more special.

“You’re awfully pessimistic, aren’t you?” upon seeing the worried look that Byleth was giving him, Khalid stopped laughing as he rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly at his outburst.

“Sorry, guess the melancholy of the play was starting to get to me,” Khalid admitted. Before Byleth could get another word in, the boy lit up and grabbed Byleth by her hand once again. “I just thought of something else we could do today!”

And with that, they were off.

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**Madinalmuluk Palace**

“Are these… fireworks?” Byleth examined the cylinder in her hand, weighing it gently. It was incredibly light considering its size, though she couldn’t help but chalk that up to the fact that it appeared to have been made of a stiffened paper, with a long stick coming out from the bottom.

“Yup!” Khalid told her, taking the tube from her hand and putting it into the large wooden crate that he was carrying.

When Khalid had told Byleth that he had something else they could do, she wasn’t sure what to expect. However, this was probably one of the last things that would have crossed her mind. Yet here they were, in one of the storage rooms in the palace, stealing fireworks. Though, if she was honest, Byleth highly doubted anybody would notice that they were missing. The room was filled from top-to-bottom with the explosives. She couldn’t help but wonder the safety of everyone who resided in the castle with so many of them in one place.

“No one will care that we took these, right?”
“Nah, us Almyran’s will find an excuse to celebrate anything,” he assured her. “In fact, on this day every year there’s a small festival—not a lot of people care too much about it outside of the palace—but some of the fireworks you see here will get launched tonight. If we do get caught by anyone who cares, then we can just say that we were moving them to the designated location or whatever.”

“But if they’re lighting off fireworks tonight then why are we stealing them?”

“Because this is more fun!” Khalid replied like it was the most obvious thing in the world, picking up another explosive and putting it into the box. “Plus, I don’t really want to go to the festival tonight. I’d much rather celebrate with you.”

Byleth couldn’t help but feel her cheeks grow pink at his statement, as she turned towards another box of fireworks and searched through them, picking up a few that she hadn’t recognised yet and putting them in the box Khalid was carrying.

“What’s so special about today anyway?” she found herself asking as they continued looting.

“You ask a lot of questions, don’t you?”

“Is that really so weird?” Byleth paused her search as she turned towards Khalid, who glanced back at her when he noticed her staring. “I mean, I am from another country. Isn’t it only natural to be curious?”

“Yeah, but I always expected it to be about things relating to Almyra and it’s culture. Not about me or anything relating to me.”

“So, the celebration today has to do with you?” Byleth asked, and judging by Khalid’s silence, her guess was correct. But if he didn’t want to talk about it, then she wouldn’t pry. “You do know that the reason I ask you so many questions about you is because I’m curious about you, right? You’re an oddity that’s seemingly impossible to figure out.”

“I could say the same to you,” Khalid told her. “I’m much more curious about you than you are of me, I bet. You’re a preteen mercenary, after all. You must have had a much more interesting life than me.”

“Hmm…” on the surface, it would seem that they were in a stalemate. They both wanted to know more about one another, but neither of them wanted to be the first to give. Maybe they just didn’t view themselves as being interesting enough to be the topic of discussion? Though, that would be a lie. Byleth knew that she was particularly interesting thanks to the amnesiac spirit residing inside of her, but Sothis wasn’t something that she could just talk about. That was the main reason as to why she was always so hesitant when it came to talking about herself—she was worried she would slip up. But she knew that Khalid wouldn’t open himself up fully until she did so, so it seemed like she had no choice.

“Do you remember that thing that you say whenever I tell you that I have a question?”

“Huh? Do you mean the whole ‘questions are free, but the answer might cost you’ thing?” Khalid asked, finally turning away from the stack of fireworks in front of him.

“Yeah? You always say that, yet you never tell me what the cost is.” Byleth always found the phrase strange, but she might finally have a solution for it that made sense. “What if the cost is an answer for an answer?”

“An answer for an answer?” Khalid looked at Byleth questioningly. The girl nodded as she picked up the fireworks that she had previously put down and moved them into Khalid’s box, taking the
now full box from him and leaving the storage room, causing him to follow right on her trail.

“So, you mean if one of us asks the other a question, then we have to answer one too?” Khalid asked, falling into step with her.

“Yeah, that seems like the easiest solution, doesn’t it? I mean—wait—” Byleth came to a sudden halt. “I don’t know where we’re going.”

“Maybe I should lead,” Khalid let out a chuckle as he took the box back from Byleth and turned around, backtracking to the last corridor that they had walk past and walking down it. “So, who starts?”

“That was a question,” Byleth teased him, sticking her tongue out. “I’ll go. What is today?”

“The twenty-fourth day of the Blue Sea Moon.”

“I know that!” Byleth elbowed Khalid in his ribs, causing him to nearly drop the box. “I mean what’s so significant about this day, smartass.”

“Oh, well I doubt it’s anything that—” as Byleth moved to jab at him again, he leapt to the left to dodge her attack. “Ah, okay! Just don’t stab me with your dagger elbows! It’s my birthday, okay?!”

“It’s your birthday? And you didn’t tell me?!” Byleth crossed her arms at the young prince, who just shrugged sheepishly.

“It’s not like it’s that big of a deal anyway, the only people who care are my parents and the people they make care about it. Most of the rest of the kingdom would rather I just didn’t exist to begin with, so they don’t feel the need to celebrate it. I bet half of them are lamenting today anyway since their next king is going to be half-Fódlan.”

“Well, it’s their loss, you’re an awesome person no matter what you are,” Byleth told him, ruffling his curls as they walked. “If it’s your birthday, you need a present.”

Byleth fumbled at her belt and removed the sword that typically rested at her waist. It wasn’t anything that special—it was a silver sword that she had picked up a few months back in the Adrestian Empire. It was a bit better than the steel one she had back in the merchant camp, but it was much better than the wooden one that Khalid currently had. She held out the sword to him, who just looked back in shock.

“Happy birthday,” she said, setting it in the box of fireworks.

“I can’t take this; it’s yours!”

“You can; I have another one back at camp. Besides, it’s your fault for not telling me it was your birthday.” Byleth looked at Khalid questionably. “How old are you now, anyway?”

“I’m twelve,” Khalid told her, before glancing her way. “What about you?”

“I don’t know…” Byleth told him, fidgeting awkwardly. “My dad’s been travelling with me since I was a baby, doing mercenary work and whatnot, so he’s always been on the move. Living a life like that, you don’t keep track of dates very well.”

“So, wait—you don’t even know your birthday?” when Byleth shook her head, Khalid’s mouth dropped. “Well, you know what? Your birthday is now today!”
“Huh? It can’t be! Today’s your—”

“Do you have any proof that it’s not today?” Khalid enquired, cutting her off.

“No, but—”

“You can’t argue with me about this, By,” he told her, giving her a devious grin. “Besides, if I give my parents the excuse that I was out today spending your birthday with you, they’re more likely to forgive me from skipping out on my own birthday celebration.”

“There’s no changing your mind, is there?” Byleth sighed, defeated. They had finally left the palace walls and hadn’t been stopped by anybody yet, so she assumed they were in the clear with all the fireworks that they stole. “Where are we going?”

“Our spot,” Khalid told her. “By the way, that counted as a question. Do you like being a mercenary?”

“That’s an… odd question.” Byleth raised an eyebrow at him. “What? Considering a career change from being a prince?”

“Oh yeah, definitely.” Khalid laughed. “Pleasing the courts isn’t how I want to spend my days.”

“I knew there was a reason you made them the villains in our play!” she exclaimed, laughing along with him. “And I don’t dislike being a mercenary. I mean, I was never really given a choice in the matter. It was either joining in on the fun or sitting around on the side-lines and let everyone else take care of me my entire life. And that is one thing that I would never be able to do. Besides, compared to a lot of mercenaries, my group had pretty good morals. No price is high enough for us to cause harm to innocents, we try to protect the people as much as we can, wherever we go.”

“You’re like vigilante knights!” Khalid exclaimed, causing Byleth to give him an awkward smile.

“I guess…” she had never thought of it like that before, but she supposed he was right. Though they didn’t follow a kingdom or a goddess, she could see the similarities to them and the knights. The mercenary group just didn’t have such strict guidelines. “Do you like being a prince?”

“Not really…” Khalid admitted, his previous happy demeanour taking more of a melancholy one. “It doesn’t matter much if I like it or not; I’m their only child. As much as I wish I could just run off and ignore my responsibilities, I would always know that one day I would have to come back and take over for my father. Luckily, I don’t think my father has any plans of dying yet, so that’s not going to be for a long time yet.”

“That must be rough,” Byleth frowned. “Having your whole life planned out for you like that.”

“It’s not as bad as it sounds, all things considered, I’ve got quite a lot of freedom. Besides, I’ve got plans on exploring the world before I become king. It’s what my dad did when he was in his twenties—he went to Fódlan, and it was there where he met my mom, and they fell in love. She even decided to come back to Almyra with him. You must imagine, my grandfather was not happy. He kept going on about how my dad shouldn’t pursue my mom because she was from Fódlan. He had a lot of very negative things to say about my mother. Little did he know, she has a talent for picking up languages, so she understood everything he saw saying about her.”

“Holy crap, what did she do?” Byleth couldn’t even imagine how she would have felt if she was in the queen’s position. Judging by what she’s learned so far, a lot of Almyran’s weren’t particularly fond of people from Fódlan.
“She punched him, of course.”

“Your mom punched the king?!”

“Yup! There’s a reason she has the nickname ‘the Demon Queen’. She’s got a temper that no man can match. After her fight with my grandfather, he had managed to gain a fair amount of respect for her. Enough to give her and my father his blessing, at least.”

“That’s insane; I’m happy that worked out for her. I’ve heard similar stories that ended in exile or execution.”

“That’s what my parents’ thought was going to happen too, at least, until my grandfather started laughing. He had an odd sense of humour, so in his eyes, it was just her proving she was worthy of my father.”

They asked each other a few more questions here and there as they made their way to their spot, setting down the box of fireworks as they looked up at the setting sky. It was almost nightfall, so the go got to work setting up the fireworks to fire them off in celebration.

“You know, if we manage to light these off first, then the castle might take that as a signal that it’s time to light the others and we’ll have a great view of the firework festival.”

“And you’re sure your parents won’t be mad that you spent your entire birthday away from them?”

“Why would they be? I spend it with them every year; I’d be lucky if I got to spend this day with you ever again.”

It was sad, but the boy did have a point. They both knew that her stay in Almyra was only temporary, as soon as the merchants completed their business, she would vanish. She would be heading back to Fódlan. As much as she liked Khalid, she couldn’t stay. She had to get back to her father. Not to mention that Khalid had to continue his princely duties. The time they had left together was unclear; it could be a week, it could be in another few months. The only thing that was for certain was that the more time that they spent together, the closer they got. And the closer they got, the harder it would be to say goodbye.

Both youths knew this, and yet neither of them made any notion of trying to distance themselves. This was the first major friendship that either of them had, and they didn’t want to end it before they had to.

They watched as the sky grew darker in comfortable silence, as Byleth made her way over to the first firework of many. Using her magic, she created a small flame in her hand, glancing over to Khalid, who nodded at her. It was time.

She released the flame and lit the fuses. They both took a few steps back as the fireworks shot up into the sky, exploding into a sparking blast of light in the air above them, the smell of smoke surrounding them. And for the first time in a long time, Byleth didn’t panic at the scent. Maybe this new memory involving fire would help her eventually forget about her previous one, given enough time. She looked over at Khalid, who had a wide smile on his face as he looked up at the sky. His happiness illuminated with the lights of even more fireworks, coming from the direction of the palace. The prince had been right, their fireworks had set off a chain reaction, and now the entire sky was alit with displays of beautiful explosions.

Khalid turned towards the blue-haired girl; his smile illuminated in the darkness as he took her hand in his, giving it a gentle squeeze.
“Happy birthday, Byleth.”

“Happy birthday, Khalid.”

Chapter End Notes

Edited on 08/05/2020
Chapter Summary

“There you go! Let the fire inside of you ignite—have it fuel the flames you’re creating on the outside!” Ronan clapped his hands together in excitement as he watched his student in joy.

“I can see why you’re not usually on the front lines in a fight—you speak way too much!” Byleth told her as she used her flames to boost her into the air. “It distracts you, one wrong move and…”

Byleth hadn’t bothered using her magic to win the fight, deciding instead to use her weight as her advantage and she crashed onto Ronan, sending him falling to the ground as she pulled her sword out of her sheath and pointed it at Ronan’s neck.

“I win.”

Chapter Notes

This is part one of two.

By that I mean when this chapter reached 10,000 words and I realised I wasn't anywhere close to being done, I decided to split it in two. Therefore, part two will be out tomorrow. So (sorta) double update? Yay!!!!

Please remember to kudos and comments <3
I'm especially curious about everyone's thoughts and reactions to these next few chapters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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I Think We’re Alone Now

vi. white feathers

13th day of the Pegasus Moon

Imperial Year 1175

Merchants Camp

Madinalmuluk, Almyra
Byleth watched the snowflakes dancing in the sky as she loosened the cotton scarf around her neck, saying goodbye to the warmth it had been keeping in as she let it drop to the ground. The flames in the nearby fire had long since gone cold since no one had been tending to them. But Byleth wasn’t bothered, she was plenty warm as it was. At least, for the time being.

The crisp winter air was a sharp contrast to the hot, humid weather of the summer, which reminding Byleth of just how long she and the caravan had been in Almyra for. Though the merchants had long since sold the last of their wares, they were exceedingly interested about what the Almyrans could provide throughout the different seasons. And thus, summer became autumn, and autumn became winter. Yet they still they remained in the foreign land.

Byleth was far from stupid, despite not having had a formal education. She knew that her time was coming to a close in the country. After all, the merchants now had extensive knowledge on everything related to selling and trading in Almyra. They knew what times were best for them to come back, what to bring, and what to buy. They now had wares that Byleth had never seen before (and they hadn’t bothered explaining) that they were taking back to Fódlan. Admittedly, Byleth hadn’t thought to ask what everything was. Once upon a time, she would have. But as of late, she’s been too preoccupied.

“Eyes on me!”

Her attention was snapped back to the task at hand as she heard her opponent yell, the snowflakes changing direction as the mage before her used a spell to send a powerful blast of wind her way. She leapt up into the air, using her fire magic as a boost behind her as she pushed through the gale and towards Ronan. With how much she had been moving and casting, she did not need her scarf or the nearby fire. Not until the fight was over, at least.

Ronan had been adamant on training her in magic when she wasn’t teaching (at least attempting to teach) Khalid swordsmanship. So far, her lessons had been going far better than the young princes, but she chalked that up to having a more skilled teacher than he did. Ronan had spent the last few months teaching Byleth other ways to use magic in a fight—it didn’t have to all be offensive. So, Byleth had been learning how to use her fire spells to propel herself forwards, increasing her movement in addition to using it to defend herself.

“You’ll have to do better than that if you want to catch me off guard!” Ronan taunted, easily dodging the bolt of fire that Byleth had launched at him.

“Say what you will, it’s not like you’ve been able to land a hit on me either!” she teased, leaping back as Ronan sliced through the air in an attempt to hit her. Though he had years of experience on her, she was far more agile.

“That’s because I’m going easy on you!” as if to emphasise his point, he sent a whirlwind her way. She decided to use the gust once again to give her momentum, flying up in the air and sending another blast of fire his way, which were smothered by the strong winds. She used the momentary distraction though to nosedive towards Ronan with her fist raised.

“You’re such a fucking liar, Ronan,” Byleth declared as her fist made contact with Ronan’s shoulder, causing him to groan and stumble back. If she had been trying to injure him, she would have aimed at his face rather than his shoulder. But it was training after all.

“Language!” Ronan scolded as he rubbed his now bruised shoulder. “Need I remind you that this was supposed to be magic lessons and not fisticuffs…”

“Fisticuffs?” Byleth burst out laughing at Ronan’s choice of words. “You’re such a dork! Who
even refers to fist-fighting as ‘fisticuffs’? It’s such a stupid word!”

“You’re too young to understand,” Ronan rolled his eyes at Byleth, casting another gale at the bluenette, causing her to fly backwards and land on her back.

“Ow!” Byleth moaned, rubbing her backside as she sent Ronan a glare. “Rude.”

“Ha!” Ronan gave her a mischievous smile. “I had told you I was going easy on you!”

“Yeah? Well, you know what? So am I!” Byleth jumped back to her feet as she launched herself at Ronan, sending a blast of fire at him, which he dispensed with his wind.

“There you go! Let the fire inside of you ignite—have it fuel the flames you’re creating on the outside!” Ronan clapped his hands together in excitement as he watched his student in joy.

“I can see why you’re not usually on the front lines in a fight—you speak way too much!” Byleth told her as she used her flames to boost her into the air. “It distracts you, one wrong move and…”

Byleth hadn’t bothered using her magic to win the fight, deciding instead to use her weight as her advantage and she crashed onto Ronan, sending him falling to the ground as she pulled her sword out of her sheath and pointed it at Ronan’s neck.

“I win,” she smugly said as she withdrew her sword from Ronan, getting off him and offering him a hand to help him up.

“And the student beats the master! Exceptional job, Byleth.” Ronan praised the girl as he took her hand, getting to his feet and dusting himself off. “Now, did you notice what I did wrong?”

“You were too busy speaking to pay attention to my movements?”

“No!” Byleth gave him an amused look, causing Ronan to cough and corrected himself. “Oh, well, technically yes. But what else?”

“Not dodging?” Byleth teased, and Ronan flicked her forehead.

“I underestimated my opponent. Because you’re such a novice mage, I was expecting this encounter to be heavily weighted in my favour. However, you managed to prove me wrong. I must admit, I’ve never expected to teach you magic in any form other than theoretical—where did this sudden passion for the form come from?”

Byleth paused to think about it. The primary reason that she wanted to learn magic was after she had ‘died’ from those masked mages in the woods. The second one had been because she hadn’t had any long-range offensive capabilities, which greatly handicapped her in a ranged fight.

“Well…” how would she phrase this in a way that wouldn’t make her sound like a lunatic? “I realised I couldn’t solve all my problems with a sword alone.”

“I mean if you want to get technical, you’re not lying. It is physically impossible to solve all your problems with a sword. After all, a sword cannot do mathematics, can it?”

Byleth couldn’t help but jump at the sudden voice in her head. Though she was well used to it at this point, usually Sothis only spoke up when they were alone, rather than when Byleth was in the middle of a conversation with somebody else.

‘Sothis? Don’t scare me like that!’ she chided.
“Startling you was not my intent, I assure. However, your comment reminded me… weren’t we supposed to meet with the prince today?”

“Oh, no!” Byleth’s eyes widened as she pulled out her pocket watch, a gift Ronan had given her long ago to stop her from continually showing up late to lessons. It didn’t help, but Byleth appreciated the attempt, nonetheless.

“Byleth, are you alright?” Ronan enquired, raising his eyebrows curiously at the young girl. “You seemed in another world there.”

“I’m late!” Byleth cursed as she helped Ronan pack up their thing from lunch to take back to the main mercenary camp. Whenever they went to do magic lessons, they always went to a location a reasonable distance away from their usual camp to avoid any collateral damage.

“Pardon?”

“I was supposed to meet with the prince hours ago for swords training! I completely forgot!” Byleth explained, tossing her bag over her shoulder as she grabbed handfuls of snow to smother any hot embers that might remain in their campfire.

“Ah, so you’ve been keeping your student waiting.” Ronan put his hands on his hips as he looked Byleth up and down, shaking his head disapprovingly. Byleth stuck her tongue out at him in response, which put a smile on his face. She hadn’t realised it, but the more time she spent with the prince, the more she began to act her age. He wouldn’t admit it, but he was happy about that. “Tsk, tsk. I thought I raised you to be a better teacher than that.”

“Oh, haha,” Byleth rolled her eyes at him. “I’m not his teacher; I’ve just been training with him. And if I’m being honest, I haven’t even been doing a very good job when it comes to that.”

“What makes you say that?”

“He’s barely made any progress when it comes to fighting.” Byleth let out a sigh as she ran her hands through her blue locks, trying to figure out how to explain sword fighting to someone who’s expertise is in the art of magic. “His technique is good and all, but when it comes to actually striking, he hesitates. It doesn’t matter how good your technique is if you’re afraid to attack.”

As much as it sucked for Byleth to admit it, she wasn’t a good teacher. Either that or Khalid wasn’t a good student. Though, if she had to be honest, she would chalk it up to be an unfortunate combination of both. They’ve been in Almyra for months, yet their progress had been minimal. Learning took time; she had been aware of this from her own experiences. But every time she went had the intention of training Khalid, the boy had nearly always managed to distract her from the task at hand. So, instead of crossing swords, she more-often-than-not ended up finding herself doing random shenanigans with him.

“Everyone learns at a different pace. Need I remind you how hesitant you were when you first started training with magic?” Ronan reminded her, and she let out a sigh. She was hesitant because she was afraid of fire. But she had been working to conquer her fear and had been making gradual progress with overcoming it.

Khalid had, however, no fear of swords. At least, not one that he had ever admitted to her. If anything, it seemed like there was always something else that he would instead focus on than his sword, though Byleth wasn’t quite sure what it was. She would think that it was going beyond the castle walls, but from their very first meeting, Byleth knew that was something that Khalid did on the regular anyway.
He was a weird boy; she would give him that.

“I know, and I’m trying the best that I can to be patient with teaching. But it seems as though Khalid would rather stick with archery than sword fighting. And if that’s the case, then I wish he would just tell me rather than torture himself doing something that he hates.”

“Has it ever occurred to you that he’s just using it as an excuse to spend time with you?” Ronan asked, giving Byleth a knowing look, causing her to raise an eyebrow.

Had the thought crossed her mind? Yeah, it had. Several times, in fact. However, every time that it had crossed her mind, she had written it off as hopeful thinking. After all, you can’t be disappointed if you had no expectations in the first place.

“I don’t think that’s the case,” Byleth told her teacher, who just gave her a look of disbelief.

“Anyway, do you mind bringing this stuff back with you to the camp? I did pack it all nice and neatly for you…” Byleth gave Ronan the sweetest smile that she could muster, and the blond man sighed and ran a hand through his hair.

“You drive a hard bargain, but I suppose I have no choice to accept. After all, we wouldn’t want you to be any later than you already are. Speaking of… just how late are you?”

Looking at her pocket watch again, Byleth cursed when she saw the time.

“Very! Thanks, Ronan! You’re the best!”

“And don’t you forget it!” Ronan replied with a laugh as he watched Byleth sprint off. “Goddess, that girl is a dense one, isn’t she?”

Outside of Madinalmuluk, Almyra

By the time that Byleth had reached their spot, she was astonished by the fact that she appeared to have been the first one to have arrived, despite being nearly an hour late to training herself.

Byleth and Khalid had an unspoken rule that they would wait for at least an hour without the other before they went to search them out. Individually, they were both busy people who had more-than-once gotten delayed by various things regarding their average day-to-day life. Byleth had her lessons with Ronan, as well as helping the merchants and exploring the city (though admittedly the last one was much more fun with Khalid with her). Khalid, on the other hand, was a prince. That title alone was one that required a lot of dedication, even if it was one that he hadn’t exactly signed up for. Though they tried their best to stick on schedule, there were the occasional setbacks. It didn’t happen very much, but it wasn’t that big of an issue when it did (save for a bit of teasing).

So, for Khalid to be even later than Byleth was had been highly unusual. She hadn’t passed him at all on her journey there, and she knew the exact path that he always took to the merchant’s camp. So, unless he had ended up getting chased by a few random villagers and had to take a detour, she would have seen him.

“Has he even been here yet?” Byleth couldn’t help but ask herself, looking at the undisturbed snow on the ground. The only footsteps leading there had been her own. Unless Khalid had arrived long ago and left immediately after, there was no possibility that he had been there.

“There is always a chance that he could also be running late,” Sothis offered. “After all, from what I understand, snowfall isn’t a thing that happens very often here. The palace is, no
doubt, in utter disarray.”

“I suppose you’ve got a point,” Byleth replied, recalling having seen the Almyran street merchants in a frenzy that morning when the snow had begun to flutter downwards through the sky as they rushed to move their wares somewhere safe and dry. Though it wasn’t a very heavy snow, she knew that it was enough to cause people to panic—it was something that they weren’t used to and therefore didn’t know how to react calmly and rationally.

Taking a seat down next to their tree, Byleth decided that she would wait a bit longer to see if Khalid would show up. Hell, maybe the prince just adamantly hated the snow and refused to leave the palace. Though it was something that she highly doubted, she couldn’t rule it out as a possibility. The more probable reason, however, was that there was some sort of snowfall tradition that his parents did, and he got roped into before he could sneak away.

So many possible scenarios passed through Byleth’s head as to why the prince was late, and she could help but laugh at half of them. Reaching into her bag, she decided she should distract herself with something else for when the prince actually did show up. She would hate to admit to him the reason she was laughing was because she imagined him and his mom turning the king into a living snowman.

Byleth pulled out her journal, as well as a quill and ink. Usually, it would be her sketchbook that she pulled out. However, the journal had been a gift from the prince. He said he got it at the market from a ‘witch lady’ and that its primary purpose was to preserve memories. Khalid had given it to her a few days after her and the prince’s shared birthday. She insisted that he didn’t need to give her a present since it wasn’t her actual birthday, but he was insistent that was now officially her birthday by royal decree. Byleth tried to argue that excuse wasn’t going to work since she wasn’t a citizen of Almyra but arguing against Khalid was a lost cause at this point. If she had managed to get past the boy’s wit and charisma, she would always give in to the cute look that he would give her.

It wasn’t fair, in her opinion. But then again, when was life ever fair?

Looking at the journal, she traced her hands along the intricate grooves engraved on the cover of the book. The lines weren’t in any particular arrangement, at least, not one that she recognised. However, she found the flow of the lines very soothing when she traced her fingers along them. Opening it up, she reread the two entries that were inside of the journal for what had to be the hundredth time.

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26/7/1174

Happy Birthday, Byleth!

Sorry it’s late (and not nearly as cool as a sword!) but it’s the thought that counts... right? Plus, I figured that you could use this to help you keep a record of your AMAZING life! I got it from a witch, or at least, that’s what she claims. I’m not entirely convinced yet, so you’ll have to let me know if you discover anything strange about this journal. According to the old lady, it’s supposed to preserve your memories
or something. But… that’s also kind of the point of a journal, right? I’m a bit sceptical about the whole thing if I’m being honest. So, I bet you’re wondering “If Khalid didn’t buy into the witch’s bullshit then why did he get me this?”

Honestly, I can’t answer that in a simple way. All I know is that when I first looked at this, it reminded me of you. So, I hope this reminds you of me too.

I’ll be honest, I’m not naïve enough to think that you’ll stay in Almyra forever… I know that you’ve got people to get back to in Fódlan. And it’s going to suck when you end up leaving, but I promise you that this isn’t anything more than a “see you later” for the two of us. I want you to use this journal to write down everything that you think is cool, or interesting. You can even draw in it too! Because when we meet back up, I want to know what I missed out on.

Just don’t do anything too cool without me!

Yours always,

Khalid

3/8/1174

Dear Diary,

I’ve learned more about fire magic. I think I might be on the right track to getting over my fears.

I don’t know what to write.

She couldn’t help but sigh as she looked at her previous entry. It was awful; she knew that for a fact. But she hadn’t ever had a journal before. There was no need for one when she could express what she had felt and seen through her sketchbook. Though she supposed this was basically a glorified version of that, so it shouldn’t be too difficult in theory. And now was as good as a time as any to make a proper entry. So, she opened her jar of ink (impressed that it hadn’t frozen because of the temperature) and dipped her quill, hoping the words would come to her as she wrote.

13/2/1175

Our time in Almyra is coming to an end soon. I’ve heard the merchants talk, there isn’t much left for them here for the time being. I must admit, it will be weird to be back in Fódlan after spending so much time away. We’ve been here for about eight
months, after all. I’ve actually started picking up on some of the language, too.

I’ve got to admit, I’ll miss Khalid though… I wish I could bring him back to Fódlan with me, I have a feeling he’d love it there. But I know that’s impossible, he’s a prince. He’s supposed to be here, so I can’t steal him away no matter how much I want to.

Speaking of Khalid, he’s unusually late for our training. I’ve been sitting here for the better portion or two hours waiting for him... the sun is close to setting now. So this says that there was a pretty probable chance that people in the palace were dealing with the panic because of the snow, but something tells me that’s not it. That’s not something that would make Khalid be as late as he is... right? I shouldn’t waste any more time here; I’m going to go look for him. He’s never been this late before...

Letting out a sigh, she blew onto the paper as she pulled out her pocket watch to check the time, just how long had she been sitting here waiting for him?

“Shit,” it had been far longer than she had anticipated waiting, had she just gotten that distracted sitting there? She knew the days were shorter in winter than summer, but Khalid had never been this late before. Neither of them had been. So, she closed her journal and packed it away in her back as she pulled herself to her feet.

“I hope there’s a good reason you’re so late...” Byleth muttered to herself, slinging her bag over her shoulder. “I swear if it’s just because you forgot I’m going to pummel you, Khalid...”

Making the trek to the palace had been a rather peaceful one. The streets were quiet since most civilians were inside away from the cold. She looked up at the snow falling from the sky, letting out a small smile. Once, Khalid had asked her to describe the snow to him, since the last time that it snowed in Almyra was when he was a baby.

She told him that it was cold and wet, but he wanted to know more about it. So, she described the way that it danced through the sky like millions of tiny, white feathers. He seemed so in awe at her explanation that she couldn’t help but tell him about an old Fódlan legend. Where if you caught one of the snowflakes on your tongue, your wish would come true.

He had asked Byleth what her wish was, but she hadn’t had an answer to give him. What did she wish for? She never really had to think much about it before. There wasn’t anything that she particularly wanted nor needed. Growing up in a mercenary group, you’re always on the move. You can’t afford to have much because every time you move, there’s a chance that something could be stolen or damaged.

So, she said that her wish was for his wish to come true.

To counter that, Khalid said that his wish would be for Byleth to learn what her wish was because he knew that she had one, even if she didn’t know what it was yet.

It was a sweet memory she had with him, and she couldn’t help but scold herself for not writing something like that down in her journal. After all, it would have been far more interesting than everything she had written down so far. Though, it’s not as though she didn’t have any mementoes of the conversation.

That night, she drew Madinalmuluk in winter. But instead of snowflakes falling from the sky, it was a thousand white feathers.

Byleth was immediately pulled out of her pleasant thoughts when she arrived at the palace.
Something was wrong; something was very wrong. Though the castle usually had a few guards patrolling during the day, there were never more than two or three that the eye could see at a time. Today, there were dozens of guards stationed outside of the palace—far more than she had ever seen before when she had been there with the prince. She didn’t even know the castle had that many guards. And with the intense staredown they were giving her, she couldn’t help but be on edge.

“Tawaquf!” one of the guards exclaimed as she took a step closer, their spear aimed directly at Byleth’s chest as if they there threatening to impale her if she took a single step closer. “‘Idhkor ghardaka!”

Byleth’s understanding of Almyran was less than ideal, though she had been picking up several terms and phrases; it was mainly ones that Khalid had taught her. However, he was the main person that she had interacted with, and they spoke almost exclusively in the language of Fódlan. So, she had a minimal idea as to what the guard was saying to her. She knew, at the very least, that tawaquf meant to stop. That was at least enough for her to pause dead in her tracks and raised her hands, showing them at she was unarmed.

“I’m here for Prince Khalid.” Byleth had hoped that one of the guards there might recognise her. After all, she had been at the palace with the prince several times before. However, at the mention of his name, their stances went ridged. Though she wasn’t at all confident in her ability to speak their language, it seemed as though she would have to attempt it. She just hoped that Khalid hadn’t secretly been teaching her curses. “Err… lam yat liladribay. He didn’t come to training.”

A female guard that she hadn’t noticed before stepped to the front of the others. She raised a hand to silence the previous guard that Byleth had been speaking to (if it could even be called that). The woman looked vaguely familiar; Byleth could remember seeing the woman lecture Khalid whenever they got back a bit too late in the evening from their shenanigans, dragged him inside as she did so much to his humiliation. Though, this was the first time that Byleth had seen the woman working in the daytime, which confirmed Byleth’s suspicions. If they had a night guard working in the daytime, then there was something definitely wrong.

“Jasmine!” The first guard exclaimed, but the woman ignored him as she continued to approach Byleth, stopping right in front of the bluenette, crouching down slightly to be at the same eye-level as the girl. Byleth couldn’t help but raise an eyebrow at the action, this was the first time that the woman had acknowledged her, and she had never seen her do that to the prince.

“You’re the prince’s small friend, aren’t you?” Jasmine asked, her accent was thick, but Byleth was grateful that she at least spoke the language of Fódlan. It saved her a bit of time trying to (poorly) translate.

“Yes, I am,” Byleth confirmed, shaking her head. “Is everything alright? He’s hours late for training I thought—”

“The prince is dead,” Jasmine interrupted, and Byleth’s heart dropped into her stomach.

“I’m sorry, what?!” Byleth was hoping that Jasmine was wrong. That the woman had just gotten her words mixed up—it sometimes happens when you’re speaking a language that isn’t your native tongue. That had to be the case; there was absolutely no way that Khalid could die.

“You heard me: the prince is dead.” Jasmine’s face was a solemn one, and in that instant, Byleth knew that she was sincere. The woman had gotten down to Byleth’s level to tell her so that she would see the severity of the situation written on her face. Jasmine hadn’t gotten mistaken in translation at all; she had known exactly what she had been saying.
Byleth’s gaze flickered from the woman towards the other guards standing at the gate. They each wore a different expression: anger, guilt, sorrow, regret. Some of them held an awkward combination of them. They all had failed at their job of keeping the royal family safe—of keeping the prince safe.

And she did too.

“How…” Byleth couldn’t stop the word flowing out of her mouth, and she supposed that it was better that it was her mouth that was flowing instead of her eyes. Though, if the stinging in her eyes had any sort of indication, it wouldn’t be long until that started as well. “How did he die?”

“La yjb’an tukhbir alfatatu!” the previous guard shouted at Jasmine, who raised a hand to silence him as she turned towards him, growling something at him that Byleth didn’t quite catch, but was enough to cause him to take a step back.

“It was an assassin,” Jasmine told her, “but that is all we know. There could have been multiple. We are uncertain since no one saw or heard anything weird. He was found in the courtyard by one of the guards, but his body was cold by then.”

Byleth couldn’t believe this. Khalid was dead. No… it was worse than that… Khalid was dead, and he died alone.

That was all that it took before the dam burst behind Byleth's eyes as tears began to fall from her cheeks for her friend. There was no one there to comfort him, no one there to even attempted to save him. He had been dead for hours before anyone had even the faintest clue… before she even had the faintest clue. She had been sitting there, in their spot, like an idiot, reminiscing about him. But now, those memories were going to be all that she had of him. She should have gone to look for him right away when she noticed that he wasn’t at their spot, but instead, she sat there, waiting patiently, writing in her stupid journal!

No…, the journal wasn’t stupid. It was a gift from Khalid. It was the first and last physical gift that she had received from him. It was the only thing she had left beside her memories to prove that she had known him now that he was dead.

She knew that someday they would have to say goodbye when she had to return to Fódlan, but she was hoping that Khalid was right—that it would just be a ‘see you later’. But this… this wasn’t even a goodbye.

Death was something that she was used to in her profession as a mercenary; she had seen allies and enemies alike succumb to death’s cold grasp. But it never occurred to her that it might strike someone that she loved.

“Why are you telling me this…?” Byleth couldn’t help but ask. She wasn’t that educated on the formality of guards and their rules of conduct, but she knew that something like this was most likely supposed to be a secret until a formal announcement could be made. Which probably wouldn’t be until after they search for any trace of the one who did it, who has probably long since fled the city.

“Because the two of you were close,” Jasmine told Byleth, giving her a sad smile, placing a hand on Byleth’s shoulder, giving it a comforting squeeze. “He would want you to know. He actually would never shut up about you. Drove me crazy listening to him ramble to his mother so much. He cared about you a lot. And now I can see that the feeling was mutual.”

Khalid talked about her? She knew that they were rather close, considering she was supposed to be
his tutor with the sword, but she didn’t think that he cared enough about her to talk with his mother, the queen, about her. Maybe Ronan had been right. Perhaps he did just continue with his lessons as an excuse to spend more time with his friend. Knowing this pained her even more and made the tears fall faster.

She shouldn’t have gotten as close to the prince as she did… she should have been more focused on teaching him swordsmanship than spending time with him. She could have prevented this. His death was on her hands. Another notch to add to the belt of people who’s lives she had taken. Even if she hadn’t done it herself, it was her fault.

As if knowing exactly what Byleth was thinking, Jasmine placed her other hand on her shoulder as well and gave her a soft shake, causing the girl to snap out of the hellhole that was her mind as she looked at the woman with a tear-stained face.

“I know you were teaching him sword, but you can’t blame yourself for this. He did not have any weapons with him when we found his body. If anything, the fault is ours. As guards, we should have been more vigilant. But it is not as though we can turn back the hands of time and prevent it from happening…”

Byleth raised a bit at Jasmine’s words. They couldn’t rewind the hands of time, but Byleth could. Byleth had one thing that they didn’t: Sothis. And although the green-haired girl was still surrounded by mystery, she was a trusted ally of Byleth.

“I know what you’re thinking…” Sothis’s voice infiltrated Byleth’s train of thought, and Byleth couldn’t help but wonder if she had just gotten that predictable to Sothis or if she had accidentally been projecting her thoughts to the green-haired girl. “But we haven’t the faintest idea of the limitations to our abilities! I know you desperately want to save the prince, and I will do everything that I can to assist. However, if things don’t turn out how you hope, then I implore that you listen to the lady-guard and not blame yourself. And don’t even try to deny it because I know that you will!”

‘Either way, we have to try!’ Byleth urged. ‘I would never be able to live with myself knowing we could have done something but didn’t.’

“I know…” Sothis let out a sigh. “You’ve got a good heart; there’s no shame in that. But you tend to act before you fully think things through. Just don’t do anything rash… okay?”

With those warning words said, time slowed down until it had eventually paused, as time warped itself around the girl as everything started to go backwards.

As soon as she regained awareness of where she was and what was happening, Byleth proceeded to do something rash.

Realising that she had been sent back in time to the late morning, just before her training with Ronan had begun for the day, she prayed that she had arrived early enough to save Khalid from his fate. Swiftly getting up from her place by the campfire, she stumbled a bit, suddenly feeling lightheaded. Shit, it seemed like Sothis was right, travelling back so far did take its toll on her. Considering last time, Byleth had done it, she rewound to a time that she had been in bed and swiftly fallen asleep, she hadn’t noticed.

She shook her head as she tried to snap herself out of her daze, which caused Ronan to give her a curious look.
“Eager to start training, are we?” he asked, eyebrow raised at her. “I was personally under the impression that we were starting after lunch. And considering that the flames aren’t even high enough to cook anything on it yet, it’ll be about another hour.”

“I have to go,” was the only excuse that Byleth offered as she grabbed her sword and ran in the direction of the palace as fast as her legs would carry her.

“What the—Byleth wait!” Ronan called after her, getting to his feet, letting out a curse as she disappeared into the distance. Byleth didn’t bother to pause, or even to look back. His words didn’t even fully register in her brain. All she knew is that she couldn’t afford to delay; she had to get to Khalid as quickly as she could. She didn’t know if she would be able to rewind time any further back without harming herself in the process, so this could very well be her only shot at saving him. Her time manipulating ability was an exceptional tool, but it was a tool that she wasn’t yet proficient enough to use it to its full extent. She would have to start training with it more, even if the training itself might be over tiny insignificant things.

She needed to master it.

Byleth bolted towards the palace at speeds that she had never managed to reach before. What would ordinarily be a thirty-minute walk ended up being less than a ten-minute run. By the time that she reached the palace, she was out of breath but had forced herself to keep going. She couldn’t pause. Plus, the fact that she could actively notice that there were only a few guards around the palace meant that there was still hope in reaching Khalid in time.

The guards that Byleth passed gave a curious look her way but didn’t stop her. She was familiar with these guards—they were the usual ones she saw whenever she was around. Though considering the current situation, she was tempted to scream at them for not protecting the prince, but she knew she couldn’t afford the delay. She needed to reach Khalid as soon as she possibly could. She needed to make sure that he was okay, that he was alive.

And so, she bolted towards the courtyard as fast as she could, ignoring the burning sensation she felt in her legs. That was, after all, where Jasmine had claimed that his body had been found at. So long as his body wasn’t already there, that meant Byleth had a fighting chance when it came to saving him. And that was enough to keep her pushing through the pain. She was a force to be reckoned with, and she would make sure that Khalid’s would-be assassins would know that. They better hope that they hadn’t gotten to him before she had.

If they had… then Byleth would find out the exact limitation of her time-altering abilities. She would not rest until the prince was safe. No matter what the cost to herself was.

Chapter End Notes

Edited 08/05/2020
Red Feathers

Chapter Summary

“Holy shit,” was the only expression that Khalid had been able to formulate. She had managed to kill three enemies while he had been struggling to hold back one. No matter how much he wanted to help her out, it was clear that they were on two completely different levels when it came to experience.

“Just keep your guard up, they’re still on the rooftops,” Byleth told him, her gaze not shifting from the swordsman that Khalid had been fighting.

Chapter Notes

Part Two!
I'm VERY glad that I split into two parts, since otherwise it would have been a single chapter over 16,300 words. That's longer than Jekyll and Hyde, y'all.

Fair warning, this chapter is VIOLENT. I just hope I did the fight scene justice.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I Think We’re Alone Now

vii. red feathers

13th day of the Pegasus Moon (again)

Imperial Year 1175

Madinalmuluk Palace

Khalid couldn’t believe how much he had overslept. No one had bothered to wake him up that morning, and when he looked out the window that morning, he had instantly known why. It was snowing outside! Though it had been something that rarely happened, it had always managed to cause an uproar when it did. The last time it had snowed was when he was three, and he still hears the horror stories from his parents about that event.

Judging by the fact that absolutely nobody had bothered to awaken the prince, a task that had to be done daily because that boy was not an early bird, he had deduced that every schedule had already been thrown into shambles. Though he did appreciate the rare opportunity to sleep in, the day that he had managed to succeed in doing so had been less than ideal, considering he was supposed to meet with Byleth in just a few hours.
On the one hand, he supposed there was plenty of time yet. But on the other, he was nowhere near ready to go out in this weather. He knew that Byleth wouldn’t cancel lessons over a little snow—she was from Fódlan for god’s sake—he could only hope that he could coerce her into having a bit of fun in the snow. After all, it had been about ten years since the last time it had snowed in his home country.

Considering just how long it had last been, he knew that he didn’t have anything suitable to wear outdoors. Though he had some thicker, winter clothing, he didn’t have anything that would be quite warm enough for snow.

If Khalid had to guess, his father would have something that he could wear. He was the King of Almyra after all. Though it didn’t snow too much in their current location, Khalid knew that it did in other parts of the country. Whenever his father ventured outside of Madimalmulk, he would dress accordingly for whatever time of year it was. And since he had such a variety of clothes, Khalid was sure that he wouldn’t miss one of his thicker jackets that badly, because he doubted the tailor would be open today. After all, they needed to stitch up as many coats as they could for everyone else.

A growl from his stomach interrupted his train of thought as Khalid let out a small laugh. He had slept through breakfast, and it was nearing lunch. Though he knew that he could sneak a snack from the kitchen, he decided against it. After all, if he got caught, they’d ask why he didn’t just sit at breakfast. And if he had said that he had overslept and missed it, then no doubt it would get back to the queen, who would never let him hear the end of it. He could imagine it now:

“Good morning, sleepyhead,” she would tease, ruffling his hair. “Let me guess, you too busy dreaming of your girlfriend to want to wake up? Who would have known that it would have been a Fódlan girl who caught your attention? I guess you’re more like your father than I thought. Though, I can’t say I blame you; she is a cutie after all. Why don’t we have her become your official betrothed?”

His cheeks went pink at the idea, but that wasn’t enough to derail his train of thought. Byleth as his betrothed? Why was that the first thing that he thought his mother would suggest?

Sure, Tiana had made vague indications about it in the past to get a rise out of her son. But she had never been so… blunt. And yet, Khalid found himself not loathing the thought. In fact, it was quite the opposite. He knew that Byleth would be leaving soon… so this could be the perfect way for the two of them to reconnect when they’re older.

But would Byleth even want that?

They’ve only known each other for less than a year, after all. Plus, Byleth was a mercenary. She was able to go anywhere she desired and see anything she wanted. Unlike Khalid. Though he had a considerable amount of freedom for a prince, the basis of his life was planned out for him. After all, he was the only heir, so he was destined to become king. It wasn’t as though it was something that he could forget about, no matter how much he wanted to sometimes. If she accepted the betrothal, then she would become queen.

Then, all Byleth’s freedoms would come crashing down and become restricted like his own. And if you’re living the life of a commoner—of a mercenary—it could quickly become suffocating. Khalid wouldn’t be surprised if his mother had a hard time adapting to it at first as well and considering she was noble, that was saying something.

Letting out a soft sigh, he shook his head. He was getting way ahead of himself; the girl wasn’t even aware of his feelings towards her. There was no guarantee that she would even reciprocate
them. Though she was an outsider like him, there was no way for him to know if that meant the same to her as it did him. He highly doubted it, in any case. Though Khalid would like to believe that their friendship, that their bond, was genuine, there was always an uncertainty lingering in the back of his mind. After all, for her, this was all temporary.

Khalid knew that Byleth was destined to leave, sooner or later. He didn’t know when, but he knew that it was coming, faster than he cared to admit. She could just go off back to her homeland and forget about him if she chose to. But Khalid knew that he would never be able to forget about the blue-haired girl that changed his life.

Ruffling his curly locks as he stepped away from the window, Khalid decided that he would definitely end up being late today if he didn’t escape his own head. He got dressed, doing his best to push his thoughts to the back of his mind. He could contemplate his thoughts and feelings another time. For now, he needed to get his priorities in order.

The first thing that he needed to do was to get a jacket from his father’s wardrobe. Though in most other circumstances, Khalid would have just layered the warm clothes that he had on hand, that wasn’t an option this time. The boy had gone through a sudden growth spurt lately, so most of his clothes were a bit tight. If he had tried to layer things that were already getting a bit small, then he would no doubt be compromising his mobility. And if he couldn’t talk Byleth out of doing actual training, he would end up landing on his arse more than once. Therefore, his best bet would be to borrow one of his father’s jackets.

His parent’s chamber was located on the complete opposite side of the palace than his own. He knew that it had been designed like that for a reason. If the castle were ever under attack, then the assailant would be focused on one side, giving the guards the ability to protect the other. However, Khalid still thought it was a bullshit setup. The only real time that he ended up seeing his parents was at meals, or when his mother decided to come to visit him. His father was quite busy, so Khalid didn’t blame him for not being able to spend much time with his son.

Despite the circumstances, Khalid was still well aware that the quickest way to the other end of the palace was to pass through the courtyard.

Sparing one last glance out his bedroom window, he watched the snowfall. Even though it was cold and wet, he didn’t find himself minding that at all. He was still more than willing to walk through the open courtyard. In fact, he was more than a little excited for it. After all, if Byleth were correct in her claim that catching a snowflake on your tongue would make your wish come true, then Khalid was more than willing to give it a try. After all, he wanted to do anything he could to help Byleth realise her own wish. There had to be something that she wanted, after all.

Slipping on his shoes with vigour, he exited his room and swiftly made his way through the corridors to the courtyard, looking through any windows he passed to peek at the snow falling as he did so. It wasn’t something that he had grown up seeing, and it was simply mesmerising to watch. Though he wasn’t a massive fan of the cooler temperature, he would say that this was a fair trade-off.

As he passed another window, Khalid could have sworn that he saw a black blur in the distance outside it. Pausing to do a double-take, he took a few steps towards the windowsill; he looked out onto the horizon for any sign of what the blur was. However, he didn’t see anything that it could have been. If he hadn’t imagined it, then whatever he saw was gone now.

Khalid let out a sigh as he rubbed his eyes, cursing to himself for oversleeping. It had completely thrown him off. Sparing one final look out the window, he decided that his best course of action would be to continue his trek down the corridor. This time he opted not to go looking out any of the
window, lest he starts seeing things again. He couldn’t help but blame the snow and its hypnotic effect.

The moment that he took a step into the fresh snow of the courtyard, Khalid felt the bite of the bitter cold air, causing a shiver to run down his spine. He understood why it didn’t usually snow now—it had to be exceedingly cold for the rain to crystallise. Ignoring the chill, the best that he could, Khalid looked up at the pale grey sky as snowflakes danced and twirled through the air in a motion that also seemed to be magical. He raised his hand gently, watching the snowflakes land on him and melt the instant that they touched his warm skin.

Khalid couldn’t believe that something like this was real. He had decided then and there that watching the snowfall and standing in the snow were two completely different experiences. Seeing it through the window made it seem fictional, like the moment that he took a step outside, it would be revealed to have all been an illusion.

But now, standing in the snow, it felt otherworldly. It reminded him of what Byleth had told him: snowflakes were just thousands of white feathers falling from the sky. He had a vague image of what she had meant when she had told him that, but he couldn’t imagine that it would be so incredible. He wished that she had been there with him, enjoying the snowfall with him. It was so peaceful, so serene—

“Khalid, look out!” Byleth’s voice cut through the previous silence of the courtyard, and Khalid couldn’t help but jump in surprise as his attention flickered to where he heard the voice. The sound of metal-meeting-metal reverberated through the air as Khalid had finally located Byleth. She was standing just a few meters away from him, her back to him as her sword was extended in a high guard position, a stray dagger protruding from the ground a few feet away from her. He noticed her sharp gaze fixated on top of the roof perpendicular to them, and Khalid turned to see a black-clad figure jump down at Byleth, their sword readied to strike as soon as they hit the ground.

“But Byleth!” Khalid called out, even though Byleth was in the proper position to guard, he did not doubt that a swing with that sort of momentum would easily break through that guard and kill her.

Khalid, however, was quickly reassured that he should avoid underestimating the bluenette. Byleth had proven that she had been prepared for the attack, rolling to the side to dodge the attack narrowly. She removed one hand from her sword and aimed it at her enemy, projecting a blast of flames towards the attacker. The attack hit them square in the chest, and sending them flying backwards several feet, which presented Byleth with the perfect opportunity to get back onto her feet, prepared to launch another attack them, this time with her sword.

She hadn’t taken more than a few steps towards her target when a dagger flung with alarming speed sunk itself deep into her shoulder blade, causing her to let out a cry in pain as she whipped around, her hold on her sword not faltering. If it hadn’t been for the fact Khalid had witnessed the blade pierce her, as well as the steady flow of blood droplets dripping from her wound, staining the white of the snow beneath her, Khalid would have doubted that she had been hit. Her stance hadn’t changed in the slightest. Was this normal for her?

“There’s two of you? I should have figured…” Byleth growled, and Khalid looked at the enemy that Byleth had downed start to stir. He knew that he had to do something to help, so he reached towards his sword at his side, only for his hand to meet the air.

Fuck, he had forgotten his sword back in his room. His bow was back there as well. He briefly contemplated the probability of success if he were to run back to his chambers to grab a weapon, but he decided against it instantaneously. If they saw him running away, then he would become the immediate target. Not to mention the fact that he refused to leave Byleth alone against multiple
attackers. However, he wasn’t sure how much assistance he could provide since he was unarmed.

Or was he?

His gaze flickered over to the dagger impaled in the ground near Byleth’s feet. It had been the one that she deflected. If Khalid were able to move quickly enough, he would be able to grab the weapon order to help her. Though he had never fought with a dagger before, it was better than sitting by idle. Besides, it’s not as though he had properly fought with a sword either.

He set the plan in motion without a moment of hesitation, using the slickness of the snow to his advantage as he slides towards the dagger, diving down to grab it, swiftly jumping back to his feet as he tested the weight of the dagger in his hand. He didn’t miss the deadly look that Byleth gave him, so he gave her the cheekiest grin he could muster considering the severity of the situation.

“I couldn’t let you have all of the fun, could I?” he joked, but Byleth wasn’t having it.

“Get back inside, Khalid,” she snapped, taking Khalid by surprise. However, despite her harsh tone and her cold expression, one look into her eyes, and he could see that she was begging him to leave. “These guys are here to kill you.”

“How do you know that?” Khalid gave Byleth an odd look, a bit surprised. He would admit, it was strange that she had seemingly appeared out of nowhere to protect him at the exact same time that these guys showed up. Something told him that it wasn’t just good timing. However, she knew that Byleth wasn’t the kind of person who would team up with someone willing to kill him… right?

She was protecting him, after all, which was the exact opposite of what these guys were trying to do. Unless it were just an elaborate guise for her to gain his trust, but she wouldn’t do that to him, would she?

Byleth spared him a look that seemed to say “I’ll explain later” which was enough to pull him out of his daze. He had questions, but he had to trust her. Now wasn’t time or place for him to be doubting her.

Byleth turned back towards the new enemy, raising a hand towards them. Though Khalid was too far away to notice last time, she had some runes painted onto her hand, which almost appeared to glow as she softly muttered an incarnation. Next thing that Khalid knew, a ball of flames blasted out of her palm and towards the assailant, who was a bit more prepared for it than his companion, dodging it by running along the rooftop, avoiding her attack.

Byleth scowled as she leapt into the air as she released another blast of fire, propelling herself just a bit higher so she could land onto a nearby statue. Khalid was surprised by her technique, but he had to admit that it was smart. Otherwise, the statue would have been out of her reach. She used its height her advantage as she once again used her flames to boost herself onto the rooftop before running after the man whose dagger was impaled into her shoulder. Khalid was impressed that she hadn’t slipped due to the snow, but he supposed it was something that she had adapted to considering she was from Fódlan.

Khalid turned towards the original attacker who had finally managed to get to a standing position. Despite taking a ball of fire to the chest, they didn’t look anything more than winded. Which, considering that the fabric of their clothing had been fused to their flesh, was terrifying

“Just for the record, I won’t judge you if want to back out of the fight so you can go see a doctor about that,” Khalid offered, only for them to take a step closer towards him as they reached for their sword. “Yeah, I didn’t think that’d work…”
Khalid’s eyebrows furrowed as he tightened the grip on his dagger as he tried to strategise. He knew enough about swords and daggers to know that there was a vast difference between the two. Though, one could argue that a dagger was like a smaller version of a sword. He knew that wasn’t true, but he’d be damned if he wouldn’t pretend it was. However, judging from what he knew about his capabilities from his training with Byleth, he understood that he was better at blocking than attacking. So, he knew that his best option, for the time being, would be staying on the defensive until there was an opening.

He hoped.

However, as he watched his opponent unsheathed their sword, he felt less and less confident in his strategy. Just watching the way that they moved with their swords demonstrated that they were leagues above him when it came to swordsmanship. Khalid could feel their eyes on him, glaring, which was an impressive feat considering that he couldn’t actually see the assassins face behind their mask.

As a loud thud sounded next to the castle wall, and Khalid was relieved to see that his opponent looked over at the commotion, so he wouldn’t have to worry about being attacked as he snuck a glance over. Khalid had instantly realised that the sound was a body falling to the ground. But that wasn’t where his gaze was fixated—it was on Byleth. She was standing on the rooftop, looking down at the man she had just knocked off. Her blade was bloodied, something that in itself should have been unnerving. However, Khalid was just relieved to know that she was holding her own against their attackers.

Byleth looked unimpressed as her enemy lamely threw a dagger up at her, missing her entirely and hitting the side of the wall below her feet. She simply picked the blade from the wall and threw it towards Khalid, piercing it into the ground next to him.

“Parry!” Byleth called out to him, before turning around, looking unamused as she readied her sword. “Seriously?! How many of you are there?”

Khalid turned back to his opponent; their attention had now returned to the prince as well as they began to charge at him with their sword held high. He didn’t have a chance to grab the secondary dagger that Byleth had thrown towards him, so he had to hope that he had enough skill to manage to parry.

As the sword swung down towards him with ferocious speed, he moved to counterstrike—it’s what Byleth had said to do after all—unfortunately, he wasn’t fast enough. The blow sent his dagger flying as he withdrew his now bloodied hand.

“Shit!” Khalid cursed, as the assailant once again slashed their sword in his direction as he narrowly dodged. Over and over, they swung relentlessly; and over and over, he avoided their blade. Khalid had to think fast; it was only a matter of time before they had him pinned against a wall. As he watched their movement, trying to find a weakness, he noticed it. They seemed to favour swinging with their left hand, so if he timed his technique just right, then he might be able to get out of this situation alive.

As his attacker swung downwards at him, he once again dodged. But this time, instead of going backwards, he dodged to the left, grabbing hold of their arm as they were in the downward swinging motion, pushing it even further to the side as he slid past them, sending a sharp jab with his elbow behind their knee as he darted away.

As soon as he was a reasonable distance away, he glanced back to see them buckled to the ground, and Khalid mentally applauded himself. He couldn’t let this go to waste, so he used the opportunity
to run back to the dagger that Byleth had thrown to him, picking it up in his uninjured hand. Khalid finally had a chance to spare a glance at his wounded hand. Though he wasn’t that injured, he did have a nice gash across the back of his hand. It didn't seem too terribly deep, considering that it hadn't compromised his movement capabilities, and he knew just how lucky he had been. It did, however, look as though it was bound to scar, but he pushed the thought aside as he figured that he had more important things to worry about.

Turning back to his attacker, he readied himself to attack them. However, the plan he had begun to formulate in his mind was abruptly halted as he heard a feminine scream. Panic coerced through Khalid as he turned to the noise.

Khalid released the breath that he hadn’t realised that he had been holding as he watched Byleth jump off the rooftop, an assassin that he hadn’t seen yet was stumbling around on the roof, holding her scorched face in pain.

Byleth landed right next to the man who she had pushed off the roof just a bit ago, who still hadn’t gotten up from the ground. If Khalid had to guess from previous experience, he would say the man had broken his leg when he landed.

Grabbed her sword, Byleth raised it over the man and pierced him through the chest without hesitation. She held it there for a few seconds before she was sure that he was dead before she pulled it away and flicked off the blood. She reached down to the man’s belt as she unsheathed his sword, swiftly getting off the now dead man and running over to Khalid.

The first thing that Khalid noticed was that she looked worse for wear, and he couldn’t help but feel lucky that his only injury was on his hand. She had a large bruise above her eyebrow, and her lip was split open, not to mention the fact that her arms had several new gashes. Khalid couldn’t determine the severity of the wounds because Byleth’s shirt was made from black fabric, and she was covered in an absurd amount of blood. He hoped that most of it wasn't hers. As soon as he opened his mouth to speak, Byleth interrupted him.

“Are you okay?” she asked, and Khalid couldn’t help but give her a dumbfounded look. If anything, he should be asking her that. However, he was once again interrupted before he could speak as she placed the stolen sword in his hands, her gaze fixated on the gash on the back of her hand. Khalid pulled his hands away from her in an attempt to hide his hand. He hadn't understood why she was paying so much attention to it; she should see the shape that she was in. Byleth’s attention shifted from Khalid’s hand to the enemy that Khalid had been facing, who was struggling getting back to their feet, no doubt having tired themselves out from the repetitive swings towards the prince while they were already in such bad shape. Khalid couldn’t help but wonder how much longer until Byleth was in the same situation as the assassin—she looked even more injured than they were, and yet she showed no sign of letting up.

“I took care of three of them already,” Byleth informed Khalid, “and I’ve counted seven in total. Assuming there aren’t any more surprises, that leaves us four more to take care of.”

There was so much that Khalid wanted to say, he wanted to tell Byleth to let him help. He wanted to ask her to take it easy while he took over for a bit, even though he wasn’t nearly as skilled as her, he could at least tire them out while she regained her strength. However, the words were stuck in his throat.

“Holy shit,” was the only expression that Khalid had been able to formulate. She had managed to kill three enemies while he had been struggling to hold back one. No matter how much he wanted to help her out, it was clear that they were on two completely different levels when it came to
“Just keep your guard up, they’re still on the rooftops,” Byleth told him, her gaze not shifting from the swordsman that Khalid had been fighting. As she watched them struggle to their feet, she didn’t give them enough time to properly regain their footing before she lunged towards them, her sword low. As soon as Byleth reached them, she sent an upwards slashed towards them, they reacted quickly, raising their own sword to block. However, their stance was still off, and a ghost of a smile grazed Byleth’s face as she twisted. She used her blade to alter the direction of theirs, pushing it away from her as she gracefully dodged out of the sword’s path. Using this opportunity, she caught her opponent off guard and issued a sharp kick to their side. With a shout, they crumpled to the ground once again.

A risky move, Khalid noted. If she was even a centimetre off, then there was a chance that the blade could have hit her. But it didn’t; she had executed it with perfect precision. Byleth made sword fighting look like a dance the way she moved with the blade, like it was an extension of herself. Despite how injured she was, she had managed to move with such grace and technique.

Glancing down at his own blade, Khalid switched his hold from one hand to two, trying his best to push the pain of his injured hand to the back of his mind. If he couldn’t manage to do this, then he would have to give up all hope of being able to stand at the same level of Byleth.

Even if sword fighting wasn’t his thing, he couldn’t give up. He had to do everything that he could to help Byleth out. Khalid turned his watch towards the rooftops as Byleth took down her opponent. She had said that there were seven assassins, and if she took down this one, then that would leave three remaining.

If she was right, and they intended to kill Khalid, then they wouldn’t stop until they did. He already knew that there was no chance that they would retreat, because if they gave up now, then the chances were that they would never get another chance. No doubt that security around Khalid will be increased until they had been found and dealt with.

He couldn’t help but curse at the assassins, because of this, there was no doubt that security would be tightened until further notice even if they were all eliminated. That was always how it went whenever these sorts of things happened, and he was not looking forwards to it one bit.

As he carefully scanned the rooftops for any sign of the enemy, he noticed movement in his peripheral vision. Preparing himself, he quickly leapt back, narrowly dodged an arrow that had been aimed right where he had been standing. Looking over, he saw an archer perched up on top of the wall, reading another arrow to fire.

Khalid couldn’t believe his luck! If he could disarm the archer, then he had no doubt he would be more useful in the fight. He would be able to adequately protect Byleth, much like what she was doing for him. Or well, at the very least then he would be to cover her. However, considering that the archer had the high ground, it was going to be a difficult task to retrieve the bow without getting shot in the process. Especially considering that the only long-ranged weapon that he had was his dagger.

Wait, that’s it! A bow requires two hands in order to fire, so if he could aim just right, he might be able to render the bow useless to the archer without damaging the weapon. Taking a deep breath, he readied his dagger as he waited until the archer was just about to fire. He would have to be careful to avoid being hit though.

Throw, then dodge. Easy enough.

But his plan was instantly forgotten when he realised that it wasn’t him that the archer aimed for.
It was Byleth. As soon as he noticed the shift in the archer’s stance, Khalid turned towards the bluenette.

“Byleth!” he warned, and she glanced over just in time to witness the archer release the arrow from the bow. Knowing that she didn’t have enough time to dodge, Byleth raised her arms to protect herself, letting out a cry as the arrow penetrated her forearm. Her sword fell to the ground as she gripped her arm in pain as she looked at the arrow going through her arm. Khalid stared at Byleth in horror, having witnessed the shaft enter in her arm one side, while the other half protruded from the other side of her arm, having been an inch away from piercing her skull.

If it hadn’t been for her arm disrupting the path of the arrow, Byleth would be dead.

Khalid turned towards the archer, filled with a newfound fire, and he hurled the dagger with perfect precision at the bowman. It penetrated deep into the archer’s eye and into his skull, and Khalid watched as his body fell limply backwards. It had occurred to Khalid that he had just killed the man. He had expected to feel sorrow, to feel disturbed over the fact of taking someone’s life. However, that wasn’t what he was feeling right now. Instead, he felt angry. That man had tried to kill Byleth and nearly succeeded in his goal. But he also felt guilty—but not for killing the man. He felt guilt over being too slow. If he had acted sooner, if he hadn’t had hesitated like he did, then Byleth wouldn’t have gotten hurt. Trying to push his thoughts to the back of his mind, he turned towards Byleth, running to her as fast as he could her.

“I’m sorry,” Khalid apologised as he looked at her arm, “are you alright?!?”

“Why the hell are you apologising?” Byleth asked as she took a deep breath. She closed her eyes as she broke off the lengthier part of the arrow lodged in her arm, letting out a sharp hiss as she did. It took a few moments for her to regain her composure, as she opened her blue eyes, turning towards Khalid. But her eyes went wide as she looked at him.

No, it wasn’t him that she was looking at. It was past him. Before Khalid had the chance to process what was happening entirely, Byleth moved. She moved faster than he had ever seen her move before as she grabbed onto him as she twisted her body, switching their positions so that now he was behind her, and Khalid realised why she had been moving so urgently.

Khalid watched in horror as a blade fell through the air. It was more like a butcher’s knife than a sword. There was no technique, no skill. The only intent behind a swing like that was death. A death that had been meant for him.

“No!”

Byleth screamed as the blade slashed into her back. Though it had been Byleth who had taken the full impact of the hit, Khalid still felt the pain echo through to him as her grip on the prince went limp as she collapsed. Khalid moved fast, wrapping his arms around her tighter and pulling her into him, sending them both tumbling to the ground. Her body was so close to his, and yet he could only feel his rapid heartbeat.

“No, no, no…” he pled as he desperately tried to find her heartbeat. Holding her now in his arms, he couldn’t help but wonder just how she had managed to keep going for as long as she was. She had been stabbed, slashed and shot and yet kept fighting to protect him. “Come on, Byleth… you can’t give up; you just can’t! I never even told you that I… I…”

“Aww, how sweet,” Byleth’s killer taunted as he raised his blade again. He was speaking in Khalid’s native tongue—Almyran—so he knew that this entire attack was more than likely the work of those who didn’t think that there should be people of Fódlan descendant in the royal
family due to their ‘inferior’ blood. “There’s nothing I love more than puppy love. Oh, wait, there is. Destroying it.”

Khalid didn’t even bother sparing the man a glance; he was far too focused on Byleth. There was no way that she was dead, she had been going on for so long, there was no way that this was the final blow. There couldn’t be.

The man didn’t care that Khalid wasn’t paying attention to him since he continued to try to push Khalid’s buttons. Both parties were far too distracted that they didn’t even notice the faint sound of barking approaching in the distance.

“You know, I can’t believe the Fódlan girl died for trash like you. Admittedly, she wasn’t a bad fighter. Hell, she managed to off most of my ‘associates’ herself, saved me some time. After we had taken care of you, I was going to kill them myself to get the bounty on your head for myself. Saved me a lot of work there, so as my thank you to her, I’ll make sure that you two reunite real soon in the afterlife.”

“Byleth!”

A voice screamed the girl’s name in horror, and it took Khalid a moment to realise that he hadn’t imagined it.

Before the killer could make another swing, a massive gale of wind collided into him and slammed him into a nearby wall. Khalid looked over as a blond man made his way through the courtyard through the man, his expression deadly as he neared the assassin, behind his eyes rested an untameable rage. Raising a hand, he sent another blast of wind into the man, slamming him even harder into the wall.

“Who the fuck are you?” the assassin coughed out, blood trickling out of his mouth. The man didn’t bother to provide him with a response as he launched another surge of magic at the man.

Khalid held Byleth’s body close to him in an attempt to shield her from the harsh winds as he fought back his tears, a battle which he had lost almost instantly. He couldn’t believe that was gone. After everything that he had witnessed her do in one day, he refused that she could die so easily. She had been so skilled, so talented. And yet here she was, lying limply in his arms. She had been so adamant in trying to protect him that she was willing to sacrifice her own life in the process. That idiot…

Khalid’s attention was brought back to the action as he heard the assassin let out a cry in pain, yet the blond man showed no sign of easing up as he continued to send burst after burst of wind magic into him, which continued long after the screams stopped. By then, the man was barely recognisable.

The mage’s breathing was ragged when he had finally stopped, turning around to Khalid and Byleth. As soon as he had gotten a good look at the man’s face, it had finally registered in the prince’s brain that he was one of the members of Byleth’s mercenary guild, Ronan, he recalled.

The man rushed over to the duo, bending over and looking at Byleth with a worried look on his face, placing his hand on her neck as he tried to steady his breathing enough to feel a pulse. It was a drastic change from his demeanour just moments before.

“S-she doesn’t have a h-heartbeat!” Khalid cried out, hoping the man could understand him despite how much he had been sobbing.
“She’s got a pulse,” Ronan exhaled, relief evident on his face. He yanked the dagger out of Byleth’s back as he carefully pulled her out of Khalid’s tight grip, laying her gently on the ground.

The mage raised his hands over her, muttering an incarnation before he placed them onto her chest. The moment his hand made contact; Khalid witnessed a faint glow appear over Byleth’s wounds, watching as the shallower ones sutured themselves back together. The light lasted for maybe ten seconds before fading away, and the man withdrew his hands. It took a few seconds longer, but Khalid noticed that Byleth’s chest began to rise and fall as she began to breathe again. It was shallow, but it was an improvement from before.

“B-But she didn’t h-have…” Khalid sniffled, rubbing his face as he looked up at Ronan. “H-how did you…?”

“Minor healing spell,” the man explained, looking down at Byleth with a soft expression, “it was enough to stabilise her, but she’ll need a lot more aid than I can offer.” Ronan pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and handed it to Khalid, who was still collapsed right besides Byleth’s unconscious form, covered in her blood. The prince looked at him questionably.

“You’re crying,” Ronan reminded him, giving him a gentle smile. The anger behind his eyes had seemingly fully dispersed itself, and now he had nothing but concern for the two youths.

“Everything’s going to be okay. But I know for a fact that when Byleth awakens, she’ll feel awful if she sees that you had been crying on her behalf. Heck, she might start crying too. And neither of us want that.”

Khalid nodded slightly, using the handkerchief to wipe his puffy eyes. Though the flow of tears had slowed down knowing that Byleth was alive, they haven’t stopped altogether.

“Prince Khalid, there’s no need to weep. Honestly, Byleth’s going to be fine, I promise. Not to mention that I sent Astra to fetch the guards to make sure there isn’t anybody else sulking around here, a fact that I find quite ironic. Do you get it? I dispatched the dog to fetch the guards.” Ronan chuckled at his pun. “I will admit, I’m relieved that I got here on time. I didn’t think that my hunch was actually right.”

“Your… hunch?”

“When Byleth suddenly ran off, I had no idea what to think,” Ronan informed him, rubbing the back of his neck. “After all, we were in the middle of getting the fire ready for lunch when she just jumped up and said that she needed to go. Before I could ask any questions, Byleth bolted. I had no idea where she went or why, but I had the inkling that whatever was wrong involved you. You’re pretty much her favourite thing in this country. It turns out, I was right. How she knew, however, is beyond my knowledge.”

“Y-you followed her because you were worried about her, didn’t you?” Khalid was relieved to know there was someone else who seemed to care about Byleth as much as he did. It made him feel better knowing that there was someone who had her back when Khalid failed to.

“Of course,” Ronan gave Khalid another grin, “she’s like a little sister to me. I’d do anything to protect her. Not to mention that Jeralt would have killed me if anything happened to his—”

Khalid had almost completely forgotten about the seventh assassin, but as he watched a dagger fly over his head and impale Ronan right between the eyes, he was cruelly reminded of the fact as he watched the man collapse before him.

He knew he should get up, no, he knew that he needed to get up. Yet, Khalid found himself
incapable of pulling himself to his feet. His brain was screaming at his body to move, yet his body was utterly unwilling to do what he commanded. His fight or flight instinct was triggered, and his body had chosen to freeze.

‘Get up!’ he screamed to himself. ‘If you don’t get up, you’ll die. If you don’t get up, she’ll die!’

It had seemed that was what it had taken for him to regain control over himself as he leapt to his feet. He struggled to ignore just how unsteady he was as he pocketed Ronan’s handkerchief. He bent over and picked up the sword that Byleth had stolen for him as he turned towards his attacker. It was the woman from the roof earlier—the one whose face had been burned by Byleth.

And she looked pissed.

Khalid tried to control how much that he was trembling as he attempted to summon all the courage that he had in him to protect Byleth. But when he recalled the state of Byleth and Ronan, two experienced mercenaries, he couldn’t help but falter.

He was going to die.

That was just a fact at this point. With the scorched woman standing in front of him, he knew that the chances of winning against her were slim to none.

At least, that’s what he thought. But the moment that he heard barking emanating from the opposite side of the courtyard, he knew that Astra had arrived. He had just hoped that the dog had alerted the guards and that they were smart enough to decode that something was amiss.

The woman turned towards the dog as if to attack, judging the ‘guard dog’ as a more severe threat than Khalid was. That was her mistake. Khalid used the distraction to his advantage. He charged at her as quickly had he could, raising his blade high and swinging down at her with all the strength that he had.

This was something the woman had obviously not anticipated. As soon as she reached for her blade to try to block, they both knew it was too late as Khalid’s blade sliced into her arm, severing it from her body. She let out an ear-shattering scream as her arm fell to the ground, along with her sword.

Khalid’s blade was still raised, ready to attack her again when the echoes of footsteps came from each of the entrances as Astra continued to howl. His eyes flickered from the woman for only an instant; he had to make sure that it wasn’t more enemies.

Sure enough, the guards had finally arrived. And as soon as they saw the blood and the bodies, they scattered. A group of them circled the one-armed woman with their swords raises as others went to the corpses, trying to determine who these people were, before running off to make sure there weren’t any more intruders.

Khalid ran to Byleth’s side, alerting a few of the guards to fetch a doctor to make sure she received the medical attention that she needed. His gaze flickered to Ronan, who laid motionless. Khalid muttered out a thank you as he knelt to Byleth’s side, taking her hand in his, rubbing circled on the back of her hand as he made a promise. It was to Byleth. It was to Ronan. It was to himself.

He promised that he wouldn’t leave her side.

Khalid couldn’t believe it had only been three days.
Three days since the attempt on Khalid’s life. Three days since Byleth was struck unconscious. Three days since Ronan lost his life. Three days since Khalid last got any sleep.

After the attack, Byleth was brought into one of the empty bedrooms while they waited for a doctor to tend her injuries. After several hours and a few hundred stitches later, the doctor had told the prince that he had done the best that he could for her injuries, now they just had to wait for her to wake up before they could assess if any permanent damage had been done.

It had been too late to save Ronan; he was dead the instant the assassin’s dagger had struck him. The members from the mercenary guild were notified of the attack the day that it had happened at the prince’s insistence. Despite the castle doing their best to keep it on the down-low until they learned everything they could from the one-armed woman about the attack, they had no choice but to give in to the boy’s request.

The mercenaries responded about how Khalid had expected, though they were upset by the news, they seemed numb to having had lost an ally and having had almost lost another. However, there was an exception to the rest of the mercenaries, a woman named Alisha.

The guard who had gone to inform the mercenary camp of the attack had gotten punched by her. It was for not doing his job better. The woman was pissed, and rightfully so. Apparently, she had been rather close to both Ronan and Byleth, so she had taken the news harder than the rest of them.

Much to the horror of the guard she had punched, Alisha had been the one who visited Byleth the most, often bringing another member of their group, an older mage who was well versed in healing magic.

Khalid and Alisha would trade stories about Byleth as they watched the mage work his magic, managing to heal most of Byleth’s smaller wounds. Her back injury was too severe for him to do that much for, so that was destined to scar. But he had at least managed to repair the muscle damage done to Byleth’s arm by the arrow. He warned that she might have to do years of physical therapy for her to retrain her muscles to be the way she was before, but she would still be able to move and use her arm.

The mage had offered to heal the wound on the back of Khalid’s hand, but he had declined the suggestion. It wasn’t severe enough to cause Khalid any issues later down the line, though it was likely to scar. Regardless, Khalid viewed it as a reminder of why he needed to get stronger, why he needed to get smarter. If he had been more prepared, he could have changed the outcome. Byleth wouldn’t be unconscious, and Ronan wouldn’t be dead.

Alisha, however, was constantly reminding the young prince to lose himself in an ocean of self-pity.

“Ronan sacrificed his life to save yours, that much is true,” she told him, “but he’s not an idiot. If he didn’t think that you weren’t worth it, then he wouldn’t have saved you. So, don’t blame yourself for his death. It was that one-armed bitch.”

Though Alisha’s words hadn’t helped him feel any better, he knew that it came from a good place.

Khalid had kept his promise. He had been by Byleth’s side ever since, waiting for her to regain consciousness. He wanted her to tell him that it was all a prank that she was okay. That Ronan was okay. But Khalid knew that wouldn’t happen. He was painfully aware that everything that happened that day was real. Hell, Khalid couldn’t stop thinking about it. He wanted to forget it all, just for a moment.
He wanted to hold Byleth’s hand in his own as he pulled her through the city. He wanted to sit on the rooftops eating pomegranates as they did in the autumn and see who could spit the seeds further (he always won, but next time he would let her be victorious for once!). He wanted to see her smile—see her laugh! He remembered how she had interacted with most of the other mercenaries, though she would spare them a smile, she barely ever laughed in their presence.

Yet when she was with him, she struggled to stop. Her laugh was his favourite thing in the world—he loved being the reason as to why she laughed. But now he was worried he would never hear her laugh again; that he would never hear her voice again. He was worried that she would never wake up again.

A sharp knock on the door pulled Khalid out of his thoughts. He turned to see his mother walking into the bedroom that Byleth had been placed in. To his surprise, Alisha came in beside her, carrying a bag with her.

“How’s the kid, runt?” Alisha asked, and Tiana laughed at the mercenary’s nicknames for the two kids.

“Look who I found when I was in town?” Tiana said, giving her son a gentle smile. Since the attack on Khalid, security on him and his mother had increased. Though it hadn’t been affecting Khalid too badly since he’s been spending nearly every moment with Byleth, his mother often did venture through the capital. He was surprised that she had brought Alisha in with her though, she hadn’t assumed that the two women have spoken.

However, judging by the fact that Alisha had punched a guard when she learned what happened to her friends, he had no doubt the women were two of a kind. But that still didn’t explain what they were doing here. They had both stopped in that day to check on him and Byleth. As though she was reading his mind, Alisha watched towards Byleth and sat the satchel she was holding at the foot of the bed.

“A few of the other merc’s have been eyeing up Byleth’s things, I figured that they were safer here than back at the camp. They’re vultures, I swear. I’ve got my eyes on mine and Ronan’s things, but the more I have to guard, the less likely I am to notice something’s missing.” Alisha rolled her eyes, and Khalid remembered that he still had Ronan’s handkerchief.

He reached into his pocket and unwrinkled it. He had washed it while the doctor had been operating on Byleth, but he had kept forgetting to return it. He offered it to Alisha, who just looked at him with an eyebrow raised high.

“What’s that?”

“Oh, it’s… it’s Ronan’s handkerchief,” Khalid couldn’t help but frown at the memory. “He gave it to me right before… you know. I-I figured that you would want to have it.”

Alisha looked at Khalid, then at the handkerchief, she reached over to Khalid’s hand and balled his hand into a fist, the handkerchief still inside his grip.

“Nah, you should keep it,” Alisha told him, giving him a sad smile. “I’m sure he’d want you to have it after all. ‘Sides, I’ve got no doubt it would just get soiled with blood if I were to keep it.” Khalid looked at Alisha in surprise, but seeing that she wasn’t retracting her word, he carefully folded it back up as he put it back into his pocket.

“Thank you,” he told her, before turning to his mother. “Any news from the woman they took prisoner?”
“No, she hasn’t spilt anything yet; however, I think I’ve almost twisted your father’s arm enough that he’ll let me have my turn to try to get her to talk,” Tiana let out a giggle as she folded her hands. “And I was just discussing with our friend here if she would like to help me persuade her into telling us what she knows.”

Khalid was right; they were two of a kind. That assassin should fear for her life, because if she doesn’t tell them what they want to know…

Well, she’s going to be missing more than just an arm.

“Khalid,” Tiana’s voice had switched to a more soothing one, as she looked down at her son gently, “when was the last time that you slept?”

Khalid didn’t know how to respond because he hadn’t gotten any sleep since everything went down three days ago. He could feel the effects of exhaustion begin to take hold of him, but he couldn’t let himself succumb to them. He had promised that he wouldn’t leave Byleth’s side, and right now, she was unconscious. He hadn’t the faintest idea when she would wake up, but he wanted to be there when she did.

“You can’t keep going on like this, abnay,” his mother shook her head at him.

“I can’t just leave her,” he told her, his voice cracking as he did so.

“So why don’t you just take a nap on the bed next to her?” Alisha nonchalantly suggested. “It’s a big bed, and both of you are pretty small. I’m sure she wouldn’t mind.”

At that suggestion, Khalid’s face went bright red, and both women began laughing as they turned to leave the room.

“Ah, to be young and in love again…” Tiana teases.

“I’m not in love!” Khalid denied, his face rivalling a tomato. Both women burst out laughing one more time as they closed the door behind them, leaving Khalid to pout. He wasn’t in love with Byleth… was he?

’Wasn’t that what you had wanted to tell her when you thought she had been dying in your arms?’ a small voice in the back of his mind reminded him. ‘Not to mention the fact you were imagining her being your betrothed. That’s not a thought you usually have about your friends.’

Khalid tried to shake the thoughts out of his head. He couldn’t be in love with her! She was leaving anyway, as much as he didn’t want to admit it, the chances that he would ever see her again were little to none, right?!

’Well, with that sort of attitude, then of course the chances are low,’ he couldn’t help but scold himself. ‘If you actively tried to see Byleth again, then I’m sure you’d be able to…’

Khalid couldn’t help but let out a groan as the emotional part of his brain argued with the logical part. He took a few steps back and plopped onto the foot of Byleth’s bed, forgetting entirely about the satchel that Alisha had sat on the bed until it had fallen off and onto the ground, the contents flying out of the bag.

“Shit,” Khalid cursed as he got up and started collecting Byleth’s items, picking up her pencils and quills first before moving onto the larger things like her books and her sketchbook. The journal that Khalid had given her had been thrown the furthest, laying askew near the door. Khalid cursed as he walked over to it, bending over to pick it up.
The journal was lying open as he went to pick it up, and he knew that he shouldn’t read it, that he should respect Byleth’s privacy and return it to her bag, but when he saw that she had an entry from the date that they were attacked, he couldn’t help but be curious. But as his eyes scanned the page, his eyebrows furrowed in confusion as he picked it up, reading it over again.

13/2/1175

Our time in Almyra is coming to an end soon. I’ve heard the merchants talk, there isn’t much left for them here for the time being. I must admit, it will be weird to be back in Fódlan after spending so much time away. We’ve been here for about eight months, after all. I’ve actually started picking up on some of the language, too.

I’ve got to admit, I’ll miss Khalid though… I wish I could bring him back to Fódlan with me, I have a feeling he’d love it there. But I know that’s impossible, he’s a prince. He’s supposed to be here, so I can’t steal him away no matter how much I want to.

Speaking of Khalid, he’s unusually late for our training. I’ve been sitting here for the better portion or two hours waiting for him… the sun is close to setting now. Sothis says that there was a pretty probable chance that people in the palace were dealing with the panic because of the snow, but something tells me that’s not it. That’s not something that would make Khalid be as late as he is… right? I shouldn’t waste any more time here; I’m going to go look for him. He’s never been this late before…

As much as Khalid’s heart fluttered at the second paragraph, that wasn’t what had caught his attention. It was the last paragraph that he found so peculiar.

She had been waiting for him until the sun was setting? That didn’t make any sense—it had been late morning when she had arrived at the palace. Not to mention that she had been unconscious during the usual time that they would have training, being tended to by the doctor. Khalid couldn’t help but wonder if she had the date wrong?

No, that couldn’t have been it. That day had been the only day that it had snowed. Not to mention the fact that Khalid had never been late enough to training that Byleth had to look for him before. So, what was with this weird journal entry? And who the hell was Sothis?

“What are you doing?”

He barely heard it, but as soon he realised who was speaking, his heart dropped. He turned towards the bed, seeing a pained Byleth attempting to sit up, her attention on Khalid. He looked down at the journal and then back at her. He had to know what this journal entry meant.

“What happened on the thirteenth?” Khalid asked her, taking a step towards her. She looked at him curiously, before gesturing down at herself, wincing a bit as she did so.

“I feel like I should be asking you that,” she had joked, but Khalid didn’t laugh. He handed her the journal, and she looked down at the entry that had him completely puzzled. As she read it over, her own expression dropped as her eyebrows furrowed. “What? But that’s impossible… that hadn’t happened yet…”
“What hadn’t happened yet, Byleth?” Khalid asked her, and she pursed her lips, looking as though she was in an internal debate with herself.

“You died, Khalid.”

Chapter End Notes

Edited on 08/05/2020

I do love some good foreshadowing.

But I am sorry about Ronan, I really am.

This actually wasn't how I intended to end this chapter, it was going to be with Byleth waking up and Tiana teasing her and Khalid about 'young love', but with the addition of the magic journal, I couldn't resist.

We'll probably have one or two more chapters before we begin the canon story. Yay!

As always, please let me know your thoughts.
“So, does that mean that we’re never going to see each other again?” tears started
streaming down Khalid’s cheeks, and Byleth felt her eyes start to water as well.

“I don’t know…”

Byleth didn’t have the heart to tell him that she was almost certain that their paths
wouldn’t cross again. After all, she doubted that Jeralt would send any more of his
mercenaries to Almyra after what happened to Rohan. And because Khalid was a
prince, if he ever were to be in Fódlan, he would likely be confined to the capital cities
for various diplomatic meetings. The odds that the two would see each other again was
little-to-none. Not to mention the fact that Byleth and her mercenary band moved
around so much, it would be impossible to keep in touch with one another through
letters.

It was in this instant, and this instant alone, that Byleth hated the fact that Khalid was
Almyran.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay with this chapter! I’ve been a bit preoccupied finishing up what I
needed to for this year at uni, then I realised just how close this story was to
combining with canon, so I checked my saved file, only to realise that I accidentally
saved over my New Game+ file with my Blue Lion Route, so I’ve been trying to beat
that route to redo the Golden Deer route.

Anyway, Happy Pride Month! Hope everyone is staying safe, between Covid-19,
police brutality and the world just being one mega shit show.

Just remember kids, BLM and ACAB. Stay safe out there!

edit: the Almyran Capital name has been changed to Madinalmuluk

See the end of the chapter for more notes

_____________________________________________________________________________________

I Think We’re Alone Now

viii. one day more

_____________________________________________________________________________________

16th day of the Pegasus Moon

Imperial Year 1175
“You died, Khalid,” Byleth regretted her words as soon as they left her mouth, but she knew that there was no getting out of this situation without telling Khalid the truth. She just hoped that he would believe her, despite how impossible it sounded.

“I’m sorry, what?” Khalid’s expression shifted from one of confusion to one of concern as he cursed under his breath in his native tongue. He took a step closer towards Byleth as he placed a hand on her forehead, feeling her temperature. The girl’s hand flew up and grabbed his wrist, pulling it away from her forehead and to her lap. Doing so made her acutely aware of the fact she was wearing nothing but bandages and a thin shift dress; however, Byleth pushed her embarrassment to the back of her mind. She linked her fingers with his own, giving his hand a gentle squeeze. Her eyes flicked back at Khalid’s form as she eyed him up and down. Other than some bandages wrapped around his opposite hand, he had appeared to have come out of the fight relatively unscathed. Unlike before.

She had lost count of how many times she had to rewind time in the battle to save Khalid, who seemed to have a knack for getting himself killed. It didn’t help that the assassins had kept coming at them—Byleth hadn’t had the faintest idea as to where they had all came from—but every time that she had managed to kill one, it had seemed as though another one had arrived in their place.

From the small amount of Almyran that she knew, Byleth had pieced together that the assailants were being paid to kill the prince. But that was as much information that she had managed to discover, despite the number of times that she had been forced to relive the battle. She had no clue about who had organised the attack, assuming that somebody had to begin with. There was also the possibility that there were multiple people who learned about the hit and decided to take advantage of the snow to attack. They hadn’t been wearing uniforms of any sort after all. However, that didn’t mean much considering that Byleth’s mercenary group didn’t either.

“I know it sounds insane, Khalid, but I need you to listen. Please.”

Khalid’s green eyes stared into Byleth’s blue ones as though he was looking directly into her soul. Byleth didn’t look away though. Considering the fact that she hadn’t fully awoken until he already had the journal, there was no way that she could attempt to hide the truth. Though she knew a lie would be more believable, she didn’t want to lie to him. No, she couldn’t lie to him. Not after everything that happened.

After a minute, Khalid let out a soft nod as he sat down on the bed next to Byleth, his hand still interlocked with hers. She wasn’t sure if he believed her or not, but she was relieved to know that he would at least hear her out.

“A few years ago, I met a girl in my dreams, her name is Sothis.” Khalid bit his lip as he reached over for Byleth’s journal with his free hand, wincing slightly as he flipped the journal open. When he reached her latest entry, he paused to scan over the page again. As soon as his eyes landed on Sothis’s name, his gaze shifted back to her, quirking an eyebrow at her as he sat the book down once again.

“In your dreams, huh?”

“The first time I ever met her was in my dreams. I was trapped in a void and couldn’t escape, and I was terrified out of my mind. Which was odd, to say the least. Before I met her, I hadn’t really shown any sort of emotion. But something about our meeting had seemed to connect the missing link inside of me because, after that, I had started to feel things.”
Byleth bit her lip as she thought back to when she had first met Sothis. Looking back now, she realised that she had been missing more than just her emotions before she had first interacted with the green-haired girl. She had also been missing several of her memories from before that point. She was vaguely aware of the things that had happened around her, but the details were incredibly hazy. Though Byleth still had no idea just how the two of them were connected, she knew that their connection was vital towards one another for various reasons.

“After that night, it didn’t take long for me to start hearing her in the daytime as well,” Byleth continued, looking over at Khalid in an attempt to gauge his reaction; however, he just looked more confused than anything else. “Somehow, she and I are bonded together. We’re not sure how or why. Actually, she doesn’t really know much about herself aside from her name.”

“So, if I’ve got this right, you’ve got a voice inside of your head?” Byleth knew that Khalid hadn’t had any ill intention regarding his question; however, that didn’t stop Sothis from taking offence.

“How dare he! I am much more than a voice inside of your head! After all, if it had not been for our intervention, he would be quite dead! I thought princes were supposed to have manners! Hmph!” Byleth glanced down at Khalid’s hand and began tracing the lines in his palm in order to suppress the eye roll that she wanted to direct at Sothis.

“She’s a bit upset about the fact you’re referring to her as a ‘voice’; however, you’re not far off. Nonetheless, Sothis is also the reason why you’re still alive—why I’m still alive.” Byleth bit her cheek slightly as she realised just how bad of an idea this was.

“A few months before I met you, I was attacked by a few masked mages in the Eastern Hyrm Mountains. I was stupid and wandered off by myself, I was hoping that I could find anything that could help spark Sothis’s memory.” Byleth couldn’t help but flinch as she thought back to the incident that happened that fateful night. “And I did, eventually. When I was lying on the forest floor, burning to death. I was positive I was going to die.”

Byleth felt Khalid’s body go rigid, and she looked up from his palm to his face, giving his hand a gentle squeeze. She raised her other hand and cupped Khalid’s cheek, forcing him to look at her face as she offered him a reassuring smile.

“And for a moment I thought I did. Everything around me froze, and I was surrounded by a veil of darkness. But it turned out that I was wrong. During my moment of need, Sothis regained a memory. She remembered that she could alter the flow of time, so she brought me back to the night before I had wandered off. I woke up the next morning with all memories of the night before but none of the injuries.

“It was a miracle that I had survived that night; if it hadn’t been for her, I would be a charred corpse in the middle of the mountains. But I hadn’t had an opportunity to test out our new time-altering ability since then. At least, I hadn’t until the other night. When you didn’t come to training, I got worried and headed to the palace…”

Byleth found herself struggling to hold Khalid’s gaze any longer, and she released her hand from his cheek, looking down to his hand once again as she began to draw circles into his callused skin.

“They told me that you had been killed,” Byleth bit down on her lip as the memories came flooding back to her. “No, not killed… murdered. And I knew that I couldn’t just let you die, so I had Sothis rewind time to that morning.”

Byleth knew that what she was saying sounded utterly insane. She knew that there were plenty of ways that Khalid could react to what she had been telling him, both good and bad. But when
Khalid let out a sad laugh, she wasn’t sure how to take it.

“As awesome as it’d be if you could control time, that’s impossible,” Khalid carefully told her, shaking his head. “Besides, this really isn’t something that you should be joking about, considering what happened—”

“I’m not joking.” Byleth insisted, tightening her grip on Khalid’s hand as she stared at him. Her eyes pleaded with him to believe her. He had too! After all, she saw the journal entry. There was no possible way that she could just fake something like that.

‘Wait! That’s it!’ Byleth released Khalid’s hand from her grip as she picked up the journal, holding it out for Khalid to take. “Write something! I’ll prove it!”

Though he looked uncertain, Khalid took the journal from Byleth. Flipping through the pages, he let out a sigh as though he didn’t know if he wanted to humour the girl or not. However, when she saw him reach over for a quill and ink, Byleth knew that she had won.

“What am I even supposed to write?” Khalid asked as he dipped the quill into the ink.

“Anything that you want,” Byleth told him, “something that you think would convince you that I’m telling the truth.”

“So, in other words, write only something that I would know, right?” at Byleth’s frantic nods, Khalid let out a sigh as he ran a hand through his hair. “I know you know some spoken Almyran, but what about written?”

“I know that it’s all squiggles,” Byleth told him, “but that’s about as far as my knowledge goes.” At her comment, Khalid stifled a chuckle as he wrote into the journal, right below her previous journal entry.

His gaze lingered hesitantly on the page for a few moments his initial entry, before he shook his head, signing his name as he signed his name and handed the journal back to Byleth, the page still wet from the fresh ink.

“How what?” Khalid asked the bluenette, who simply blew onto the page in an attempt to dry the ink faster. After a minute, as soon as Byleth was satisfied that the ink wouldn’t smudge, she closed the journal and looked at the boy.

“Ready Sothis?”

“Please don’t overdo it, a few minutes should be more than enough,” Sothis advised, as everything around them paused as it started to rewind.

”?sihtoS ydaeR“

".yob eht ta dekool dna lanruoj eht desolc ehs ,egdums t’ndluow kni eht taht deifsitas saw htelyB sa noos sa ,etunim a retfA .retsaf kni eht yrd ot tpmetta na ni egap eht otno welb ylpmis ohw ,etteneulb eht deksa dilahK ”?tahw woN“

".kni hserf eht morf tew llits egap eht ,htelyB ot kcab lanruoj eht dednah dna eman sih dengis eh sa eman sih gningis ,daeh sih koohs eh erofeb ,yrtne laittini sih stnemom wef a rof egap eht no ylinatiseh deregnil ezag siH

".yrtne lanruoj suoiwerp reh woleb thgir ,lanruoj eht otni etorw eh sa elkcuhc a delfits dilahK ,tnemmoc reh tA ”.seog egdelwonk ym sa raf sa tuoba s’taht tub“ .mih dlot htelyB ”.selggiuqs lla
Though he was quite concerned about the state of the Byleth’s mind, Khalid took the journal from her. He wasn’t sure what it was that compelled him to humour the girl, but he complied. There was no way that she was telling the truth, right? Time travel was impossible; it was something that existed in worlds of fantasy. Despite there being several different types of magic throughout the world, none of them had come anything close to being able to alter the flow of time. Then again, Byleth wasn’t much of a prankster. Her sense of humour varied between dry, dark, and bad puns. So, there were two options: she was either telling the truth or had gone insane from the last battle.

Sparing one final look at Byleth, he flipped open the journal as he let out a sigh as he had skimmed over the first few logs in the journal, eventually flickering to the one from three days ago. However, as soon as his eyes landed on it, his heart dropped. There was a new entry written right beneath it. His eyebrows furrowed as he looked closer at the journal as he recognised the handwriting as his own.

16/02/1175

إذا كنت على حق، سأخبرك بما يعنيه هذا.
أحبك أكثر مما تخيل
الأمير خالد Prince Khalid

“No way…” Khalid exhaled as he looked closer at the text written before him. The scent of ink was emanating from the page was almost overwhelming, and he instantly knew that it was fresh. His eyes scanned over the page repeatedly as though they might vanish as soon as he removed his gaze from them. He couldn’t believe it; she had been telling the truth.

Khalid turned towards Byleth, who was now slouched over with her hand on her head. Before he could do anything for her, she shook her head slightly as she collected herself. She removed her hand from her head and leaned forward to look at the journal in front of them. She cocked her head to the side as she read over the journal. Khalid had to fight the urge to pull the book away from her.

“What does it say?” Byleth asked the prince, who released a breath that he hadn’t realised he had been holding. The fact that she couldn’t read it had been a major relief to him. Though, he hadn’t had the faintest clue as to what had prompted him to write it in the first place.
“It’s just a dumb note to myself,” Khalid lied, reading over the line again, “reminding me why I should trust you.”

Byleth quirked her eyebrow at his comment but remained silent. If she had any sign that she knew that he had lied to her, she didn’t reveal it. Khalid had made sure that he showed no sign of his tell; he hadn’t bit down on his lip or done anything to indicate that he had been dishonest. Though if he was honest, it wasn’t a total lie. It was a reminder as to why he should trust her. But the words itself meant something entirely different.

He had no idea why he had chosen to write what he did; however, it was impossible to deny the fact that it had indeed been him to write it. It was in his own handwriting, after all. And in those words, lay a promise, a promise that he swore he would tell Byleth. Someday.

“So, you really can control time, huh?”

“To a certain extent,” Byleth informed. “I’m still trying to figure out how it works if I’m honest. It’s something that I need to start practising with, but between training with you and Ronan, I haven’t had the time.”

Khalid’s stomach lurched at her comment, and looking at her thoughtful expression, he knew that she hadn’t had a clue about Ronan’s fate. That meant that he had to tell her…

“What do you remember about the fight against the assassins the other night?” Khalid enquired, and Byleth closed her eyes as she drifted through her memories. He had to know if she had known if Ronan had been there with them or not.

“They just kept coming. Even on the last attempt, I wasn’t certain if there were any more than seven. They were merciless.” Byleth opened her eyes and looked at Khalid with glossy eyes. “They didn’t hesitate to kill. I watched you die over and over again, but I refused to give up on saving you.”

“You did all of that for me?” Khalid asked, and Byleth slowly nodded. He noticed that her gaze drifted down towards his bandaged hand, so he held it out towards her and flexed it. Though it still hurt, it was bearable. “This is the worst injury that I received, thankfully. You saved my life. You and Ronan…” At the mention of Ronan, Byleth’s face contorted into one of confusion.

“What does Ronan have to do with this?”

And there it was, the dreaded question. Khalid swallowed a lump in his throat as he contemplated all of the possible ways that he could tell her what had happened. There was no easy way to tell someone that somebody they care about is dead; however, there was no way that he could proceed without telling her.

“After you took the blow that was meant for me,” Khalid could feel his voice growing shaky, so he tightened his grip on Byleth’s hand, “Ronan appeared and saved the two of us. However, we had forgotten about the last one, the last assassin.”

Byleth’s eyes went wide as she started putting two-and-two together, and she began shaking her head in denial. “No…”

“You might have saved me, but Ronan saved you,” Khalid took a sharp breath. “No, he saved us. If he hadn’t arrived when he did, we’d be… but instead…”

“Ronan’s dead,” Byleth concluded, and Khalid solemnly nodded. At the confirmation, her glossy eyes had begun to fill with tears, and she threw herself into Khalid’s chest. He was surprised at the
sudden action, but he wrapped his arms around her as he began to rub circles into her back as he attempted to comfort her.

“It’s all my fault,” she sobbed out, “it’s all my fault. If I hadn’t moved so recklessly, I could have saved him. I could have saved you both…”

“You didn’t know,” Khalid reassured her. “It’s not your fault, he knew the danger. You did everything that you could, you can’t blame yourself for this.”

“W-what if I can’t stop it?” Byleth said it so quietly that Khalid almost didn’t hear. “What if I can’t save a life without sacrificing another?”

Khalid had no idea how to respond to Byleth because of the fact that he had no idea if that was the case or just an unfortunate coincidence. He was grateful to be alive, but was his life spared at the cost of another? Khalid decided to push the thought from his mind or else he would have an existential crisis, which was something that he did not want to deal with. So instead, he settled with focusing his attention on comforting the sobbing girl in his arms.

Byleth had awoken in Khalid’s arms the next morning as the events of yesterday came rushing back to her. After he had informed her that Ronan had been killed during the attack, she had sobbed in his arms for hours on end until they had both fallen asleep.

After carefully wiggling herself out of Khalid’s grip as to not disturb the boy’s much-needed slumber, she sat up at the edge of the bed. Her back injury was throbbing, but she had been injured enough times before to know it was no longer severe. Though the pain was intense, she was aware that it had been healed enough in order to avoid ripping open from such a simple movement. However, it might be a few weeks and several healing sessions later before she can properly swing a sword.

In contrast to her pain she felt physically, she felt quite numb emotionally. Byleth had spent more time crying last night than she had in her entire life. She had reached the point where she wondered if she had any more tears to shed or if she had used up her lifetime supply then and there. As a mercenary, she knew that death was inevitable. In fact, it was highly likely in their career field. She had witnessed several of the members of their mercenary group die before. However, this was the first time that somebody she cared about had died, excluding Khalid since she had succeeded in her attempts to save him.

At least, that was the first person that she remembered caring about permanently dying. She did have a mother, once upon a time. Though Jeralt had dodged nearly every question that Byleth had asked about the woman, she had enough knowledge to piece together that she was no longer of this world. She wondered how her father would react to the news about Ronan. He had lost people before, but Byleth was worried. Ronan was as much as a son to Jeralt as he was a brother to her. Though he hadn’t been biologically related to either of them, he had become a part of their family, nonetheless.

Planting her feet onto the cold floor beneath her, Byleth took a deep breath as she prepared to stand up. Though she had nowhere to go in particular, she wanted to test to see how well she was faring with her injuries. She had been wounded quite deeply in several parts of her body, and despite the fact it’s been magically healed, she was aware of the fact that it was not perfect. She needed to test the waters slowly.

She put a hand onto the bed for support as she began to shift her weight to her feet as she straightened her legs. Though she was a bit unsteady from having been unconscious the past few
days, she thankfully felt no pain in the lower half of her body. Byleth knew she should be grateful, considering that meant that her mobility wouldn’t be compromised. But she still felt numb.

Byleth didn’t like this feeling. It felt so familiar, and yet it was so alien. She knew this was how she had continuously felt before she had met Sothis, and she did not wish to return to that state. With a plea, she reached out for Sothis in her mind.

“Do not fret, child, I am right here,” Sothis’s voice rang throughout Byleth’s head. “The concern you have about my whereabouts proves that you are not in a completely indifferent mindset. You have been through a lot in the past few days, it is only natural for you to be emotionally exhausted. Trust me, there is nothing the matter with you.”

Byleth nodded her head slowly as she took in Sothis’s words, taking a deep breath to collect herself. She was right, if she had fully reverted towards the state she had been in before meeting Sothis, she wouldn’t feel so much concern about not being able to feel.

“Ronan’s dead,” Byleth told her.

“Yes, I heard,” though she couldn’t see her face, she knew that Sothis was frowning. “I was quite fond of him, I will admit. But you must not blame yourself for what had happened to him. I do not know how many times I must remind you that you are not to blame for each unfortunate event to happen. However, I will continue to do so until it sinks in.”

“Thanks, Sothis. I—”

Before Byleth could get another word out, a sharp knock on the door pulled her attention away from the conversation she was having. Her eyebrows furrowed, Byleth glanced back at the sleeping prince, who did not even stir at the sound. Letting out a sigh in relief, Byleth turned towards the door, taking a cautious step towards it. However, the moment she released her grip from the bed, her knees buckled underneath her. Byleth collapsed face-first onto the floor, not having been able to get her hands up in time to stop her fall. A hiss escaped from her lips as she felt a surge of pain course throughout her back. With a slam, the door flew open, and she saw a familiar figure in the door holding out a bow towards her.

“Alisha?” Byleth croaked out, pushing herself onto her knees as she tried to focus on the woman in front of her, rather than the pain she felt.

“Holy shit,” Alisha cursed, putting down her bow as she ran towards Byleth, picking her up and putting her back onto the bed. “You shouldn’t be moving yet, kid. You took a serious blow.”

“Really? I hadn’t noticed,” Byleth muttered, looking down at her knees. She didn’t trust herself to look Alisha in the eye—she was the reason why Ronan was dead, after all. Though she didn’t know the exact relationship between Alisha and Ronan, she knew that they were more than just friends.

“Hey, look at me,” Alisha commanded, much to Byleth’s surprise. Biting down on her lip, Byleth hesitantly looked up at the woman. “I’ve been where you are right now. Have I ever told you of my life before I joined up with Jeralt?”

Byleth shook her head. “You never spoke of your past.”

“Yeah, well there’s a reason for that,” Alisha let out a bitter laugh as she sat down on the foot of the bed. “You remember that year we were in Fhirdiad? It’s ‘cause I knew the knights. Trained with most of them at some point or the other too.
“I might not look it, but I’m from a noble house myself: Gideon.” Byleth was surprised by this information, Alisha never struck her as a noble type. In fact, the woman rarely had anything nice to say about them. Though, this revelation might explain why she was so against the concept of nobility. “Though, growing up was an absolute bore if I’m honest. I was born without a crest, the only one out of us five who didn’t have one. Guess I was the family disappointment since day one.”

“You’re not a disappointment though,” Byleth tried to argue, causing Alisha to give her a sad grin, shaking her head.

“Try telling that to my parents. I rebelled against them since I was old enough to understand the concept of rebelling. It got so bad; you wouldn’t even believe. I ended up running off with this squire when I was fourteen, and my parent’s about had a heart attack. Still don’t know why though, it’s not like they ever really cared about me.” Alisha let out a bark of laughter as though something just occurred to her.

“What?” Byleth was utterly lost. She glanced back to Khalid, who was still sleeping soundly. Letting out a sigh of relief, she turned back to Alisha.

“I think I just realised why they freaked out so much. The squire’s name was Cassandra.” At Byleth’s look of confusion, the woman went on to explain. “Cassandra was my girlfriend. I think they don’t think they realised that it was possible for somebody to like both men and women.”

“Oh, that’s stupid,” Byleth deadpanned. She couldn’t understand why somebody would view that as an issue. Shouldn’t people just be allowed to like who they like?

“It is, isn’t it?” Alisha agreed. “We were together for about three years. In that time, I went on to become a squire myself. I enjoyed fighting, and I wanted to protect the people I cared about. Cassandra had a younger brother, John, who loved to train alongside us. He was a sweet kid; had the brightest pair of blue eyes I’ve ever seen.

“Anyway, we were out camping in the woods one night. I was the one on watch. I don’t remember what happened next… if I dozed off or if I was just distracted. But the next thing I knew, there were like ten bandits at our camp. I don’t know where they came from, or why they chose to pick a fight with us. We were just kids.

“Cassandra was busy taking down the attackers while John and I defended the camp. One of them slipped in through the back or something, and I didn’t notice until it was too late. John did, however, and he tried to stop them. But he just had a training sword, and the thief had a real one… John didn’t stand a chance.” Alisha took a deep breath as her hands balled into fists as she recalled the memory.

“I blamed myself for what happened to him. If I had just noticed the bandit just a few seconds sooner, things might have ended up differently. Cassandra said that she didn’t blame me, but whenever I saw this far away look in her eye, I knew she was thinking about him. I knew how much she missed him, and I knew it was my fault.” Alisha’s voice cracked slightly at her confession. “So, I ran. And I just kept running.”

Byleth stared at Alisha in shock as the woman ran a hand through her light-brown hair. In the years that Byleth had known the woman, she had never seen the woman look vulnerable. And yet here she was, sitting in front of her, telling her all about all that she’s lost.

“I don’t know how long I ran until I ended up crashing into Jeralt and the rest of ‘em. And you pretty much know the rest from there.” Alisha let out a long sigh as she reflected on her memories.
after being a part of the mercenary band. “You know, when I heard that a knight from Faerghus recommended us to help guard the city while they were at war with Sreng, I half expected it to be Cassandra. I think that a part of me hoped that it was. Maybe that was why I was so insistent we took the job in the first place. But it wasn’t her…”

“What would you have done if it was?” Byleth couldn’t help but ask.

“I don’t know… apologised for starters. I owe Cassandra that much, at least.” As Byleth went to open her mouth to apologise, Alisha’s eyes locked with hers, and Byleth found her mouth snapping shut. “But not for what happened to her brother. I came to term a long time ago that she was telling the truth—she never blamed me. I just blamed myself so much that I was convinced she did too. No, I would apologise for running from her rather than being honest.”

“I—”

“What happened to Ronan wasn’t your fault, I need you to realise that,” Alisha’s voice was firm, leaving no room for argument. “Most of those bounty hunters were highly skilled; you’re lucky to be alive yourself.”

“So, they were bounty hunters…” Byleth muttered. “But why did they team up? I don’t think any of them had any intention of sharing the money with the other.”

“That’s because they were all hired by the same person,” Alisha informed her. “Their boss knew that they would have the greatest chance of attacking during the middle of a snowstorm. They hired each of them under the guise that they were the only one, needless to say, they were all in for a shock to figure out that they weren’t.”

“So, they made a temporary alliance until they accomplished their goal…” Byleth deduced, and Alisha nodded.

“Then they planned on backstabbing one-another to claim the kill for themselves,” Alisha stood up, stretching. “It took a while, but we were finally able to get the assassin to cough up the information that we wanted. That’s part of the reason why I came.”

“What was the other part?”

“To see if you were alright,” Alisha gave Byleth a gentle smile. “Astra misses you, after all.” Byleth was quite sure that Astra wasn’t the only one who missed her, but she decided to keep that comment to herself. After all, it took a lot for Alisha to open up to Byleth about her past after all these years. So, she settled with a: “I missed him too.”

Alisha opened her mouth but closed it as she noticed Khalid stir slightly on the other side of the bed. He moved slightly closer to Byleth, before once again returning to a still sleep. The brunette woman cocked an eyebrow, acting as if she just now noticed Khalid in the bed.

“The prince is finally asleep? How’d you manage that?” Alisha teased, and Byleth just shrugged.

“I didn’t do anything.”

“Queen Tiana has been trying to get him to sleep for the past three days, but each attempt has been in vain,” Alisha crossed her arms as she shook her head slightly. “I still don’t understand how someone can say no to her so easily, especially her own son. After seeing what she did to that assassin, I can see how she gained the nickname the Demon Queen. That woman can be terrifying when she wants to be. She’s already sent off some of her men in order to try to track down the
mastermind, it’s only a matter of time until their found.”

At this, Byleth perked up. “What happens now? Are we going to track down the one who organised this entire thing?”

“We are, but not you.”

“But I’m—”

“—still injured from taking a sword to the back,” Alisha interrupted. Byleth pouted slightly as she opened up her mouth to argue. “You need to focus on healing. The merchants are ready to go back any day now, but they can’t go anywhere without their escort. And we can’t go anywhere without you. And even with daily healing sessions, it’s still going to be a week or two before you’re well enough to travel long distances.”

“This isn’t fair!” Byleth exclaimed, clenching her fists so tightly her knuckles were turning white, and her nails were starting to dig into her palms. “I want to help! After all, I was there when they attacked! I fought them! I know how they fight—”

“You know how a bunch of hired bounty hunters fight,” Alisha spat back. “And no offence, kid, but even that didn’t exactly turn out well, did it.”

Alisha let out a sigh as she ran her hand through her hair once again. “Look, I know you’re upset about what happened to you and about what happened to Ronan. I know you’re upset about what almost happened to Khalid too. But if you fight when you’re fuelled by nothing but rage and the desire for revenge, there’s only one way it’ll end, and it’s not pretty. Trust me.”

Without another word, the woman turned to the door and exited, closing the door behind her with a bit more force than necessary. Byleth, still fuming, took a deep breath. She knew that she wasn’t in any shape to fight—she didn’t even have enough strength to walk right now, for crying out loud. But that didn’t make the fire inside her extinguish any.

Byleth didn’t understand what happened; she was fine until Alisha mentioned the fact that they’re so close to finding the one who caused all of this. The person who was responsible for killing Ronan. For killing Khalid. For almost killing her.

She knew that she should be happy that they were so close to bringing justice to that bastard, but she wasn’t. Byleth knew that it was selfish, but she wanted to finish this herself. She wanted to avenge Ronan and make sure that Khalid would stay safe after they left. It just didn’t feel right to her having someone else do it.

Byleth was pulled out of her thoughts by a warm hand taking hold of her own as she looked over at Khalid, his eyes still closed as he laid beside her. She was sure that he was awake, though she wasn’t sure when he woke up. However, if he still wanted to pretend to be asleep, she wouldn’t question it. Taking yet another deep breath, she directed her focus on the heat of Khalid’s hand, rather than her emotions. She was more upset at herself than at anybody in particular.

Byleth wasn’t sure how long she was sitting there, focusing on nothing but Khalid’s hand, but she found herself calming down. She relaxed her hands so that they were no longer fists before she locked her fingers with Khalid’s, carefully laying down. The bluenette turned to face Khalid as she committed his face to her memory. Alisha said that they would be leaving as soon as she got well enough to travel, meaning that she wouldn’t have much longer with the prince.

“Khalid…” his name left her lips without meaning to, and she watched the prince’s eyes flutter
open as the green orbs gazed into her blue ones. Byleth had to fight back a smile at the fact that was all it took to get his attention, and all of her past anger had dissipated. “You’re awake.”

“Yeah,” he admitted, though they both knew it wasn’t as though he could deny it.

“How much of that did you hear?” Byleth asked, and Khalid gave her a sheepish look.

“Most of it…”

“So, you know what’s going to happen once I recover…”

“You’re leaving,” Khalid and Byleth both knew that this day was coming sooner or later. But being confronted with the knowledge that it was going to be happening in just a few weeks was a terrifying thought.

“It would seem so…”

“Do you have to go?” Khalid asks her, his eyes pleading. “You could stay here with me. This room’s almost always empty anyway… it could be yours if you want.”

“I wish I could,” Byleth gave Khalid a sad smile, “but I can’t. I have to get back to my dad. He’s the only family that I have.” At that, Khalid let out a defeated sigh. He knew how much her father meant to her, so he knew why she wanted to go back.

“If you can’t stay here, then I wish I could go with you,” Khalid muttered, causing Byleth to flick his forehead.

“No, you don’t,” she told him. “I’m a mercenary; you’re a prince. I know you didn’t get to choose your role, but I didn’t either. We’re two completely different people, we both have way different lifestyles. It’s not like either of us can just up and leave them, either. Your country needs you, and my father needs me.”

“So, does that mean that we’re never going to see each other again?” tears started streaming down Khalid’s cheeks, and Byleth felt her eyes start to water as well.

“I don’t know…”

Byleth didn’t have the heart to tell him that she was almost certain that their paths wouldn’t cross again. After all, she doubted that Jeralt would send any more of his mercenaries to Almyra after what happened to Ronan. And because Khalid was a prince, if he ever were to be in Fódlan, he would likely be confined to the capital cities for various diplomatic meetings. The odds that the two would see each other again was little-to-none. Not to mention the fact that Byleth and her mercenary band moved around so much, it would be impossible to keep in touch with one another through letters.

It was in this instant, and this instant alone, that Byleth hated the fact that Khalid was Almyran.

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Lone Moon

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Two weeks passed by in the blink of an eye, and the next thing that Byleth knew it was time to leave. True to Alisha’s word, the perpetrator behind the attack on Khalid was located just days after she told Byleth. The queen dispatched several of her guards alongside Alisha and the rest of the mercenaries to take out the threat. Before they left, Alisha brought Astra to the palace so that
the merchants wouldn’t be troubled with keeping an eye on the dog while the majority of the mercenaries were away. There were multiple casualties, but Alisha and the guards came out victorious in the end.

Byleth was still upset that she wasn’t allowed to go with them. The only reason she consented to stay back was the fact she had just regained enough strength to walk by the time that they had gone on their mission. Byleth knew it was for the best she stayed behind, but she still had hoped that she could have done something.

Khalid and Byleth had spent nearly every waking moment together before she had to go. Though they were both confined to the palace (Khalid because of tightened security and Byleth because of her regularly scheduled healing sessions), they tried to make the most of the rest of their time together. However, the day before Byleth and the rest of the mercenaries were scheduled to leave, she saw no sign of the prince.

Byleth spent most of her day trying to find the prince. Even Astra was having no luck tracking down the prince, though he got distracted by everybody who passed the duo. Byleth resorted to trying to ask others about the prince, hoping that one of them would have some sort of clue as to where he was. However, every servant and guard that she asked about his location had just shrugged her off, saying that they didn’t know. Byleth found it odd—after the attack, everyone had been keeping tabs on the boy to make sure that he was safe. She couldn’t help but wonder if everyone had decided to relax after the chief criminal behind his attack had been executed.

Regardless, Byleth was worried and began searching in more and more unlikely places in the palace, much to several of the servant’s annoyance.

“And what on earth is causing you to run around my castle so frantically?” Byleth jumped at the sudden voice, whipping around to look at the golden-haired woman who gave Byleth an amused grin.

“Queen Tiana,” Byleth greeted, “I’m sorry if I seemed frantic, I was just—”

“Looking for my son, correct?” Byleth nodded, causing Tiana’s smile to widen. “I thought so. I’m afraid that I’ll have to be the one to inform you that my son is out today.”

“What?” Byleth was shocked at the fact that Khalid was outside of the castle. “Is that even safe?”

Though she knew that the two of them spent plenty of time together outside of the castle walls before, with such a recent attack, shouldn’t everyone have their guards up in case there were any copycats?

“But worry,” Tiana’s voice snapped Byleth out of her panic. “He’s not alone; he’s got some of my best guards with him. He was just so insistent over the fact that he needed to go out into the city today that I couldn’t say no.”

“That’s good,” Byleth let out a sigh in relief as the older woman gauged her reaction, looking the young girl up and down. Realising that she was under the queen’s scrutiny, Byleth shifted her weight from one foot to the other nervously. “Is everything alright, ma’am?”

“What are your thoughts on my son?”

Byleth’s eyebrows furrowed as she looked at the queen in confusion, unsure why the woman was asking her. Surely, she was well aware that they were friends at this point, wasn’t she? I mean after all; she’s witnessed the two of them together before now. Then again, Byleth was pretty sure this
was the first time that she was alone with the queen.

Byleth couldn’t help but wonder if she had done something that would cause her to lose favour with the queen. Was Tiana asking what her thoughts on Khalid were to see if she had some ulterior motive with him? Did the woman genuinely think that she would use her friendship with Khalid for her own gain?

“Khalid is…”

Khalid was a lot of things. He was brave and charismatic, never one to sit by and let Byleth do something on her own. He accompanied her with her chores whenever he could when they weren’t training, before eventually dragging her off so the two of them could have an adventure of their own. He was also mischievous and smart. A lot of their exploits involved breaking some sort of rule or getting into some kind of trouble, which he almost always seemed to manage to get them out of (except the one time that she managed to convince one of the guards not to drag them behind a horse. Byleth’s still not entirely sure how she managed to do that!) But most of all; he was her best friend. She would do anything for him.

“Khalid is precious to me,” Byleth wasn’t sure how else to describe it. Perhaps ‘important’ would be a better word, but that seemed a bit like an understatement to describe what Khalid meant to her. Alisha was someone that Byleth would consider important to her. But for some reason, comparing Alisha to Khalid felt unfair. Because although Alisha was important, Khalid just felt… more important.

Byleth couldn’t pinpoint exactly why that was; she knew it wasn’t because of his status—frankly, Byleth often forgot the fact that he was a prince while she was just a commoner. He’s never treated her any lesser because of their rankings. Was it because of the fact he was one of the only people she’s gotten close to that was around her age?

“I see,” Tiana stated as she continued to stare at Byleth as if searching for something that she hadn’t said. After a moment, Tiana’s expression brightened, as though she had finally spotted whatever it was that she had been looking for. “He’s precious to you, is he?”

“Yes?” Byleth nodded slowly, confusion etching her features.

“So, I guess one could say that you care about him quite a bit,” Tiana continued, giving Byleth a knowing look. “You know, my son is quite fond of you. I’ve never seen him so eager to please somebody before. It’s quite refreshing to see someone see Khalid for who he is, rather than what he is. A prince. Half-Fódlan. Half-Almyran. It would seem that no matter who interacts with my son, they go into it having some preconceived view of who he is. But not you. Why is that?”

“I don’t know?” Byleth had no idea what the queen was trying to get out of her, but she decided to attempt to humour the woman, nonetheless. She had been letting Byleth and Astra stay in the palace for the past few weeks, after all. “It would be wrong to judge him. If you judge a book on its cover alone, you’re a fool.”

People were just like sketchbooks. The inside is always different than how the cover portrays. It could be made from a beat-up leather or be encased in gold, but what matters is the artwork on the inside. Art is what people pour their hearts and souls into; it’s what reflects their most inner self. And if you ignore a sketchbook because of what it appears to be on the outside, you could be missing some of the most beautiful artwork you’d ever have the chance to see.

“Besides,” Byleth continued, “he’s never judged me.”
Tiana gave the blue-haired girl a gentle smile as she asked one more question: “Do you love him?”

Byleth felt her stomach drop as her cheeks began to heat up at the implication of Tiana’s words. Before she could open her mouth the stutter out some coherent reply, the woman raised her hand as she shook her head, telling the girl that she needn’t speak. However, once again, judging by Tiana’s expression, she already got her answer.

“You may return to your room; I’ll let Khalid know you were looking for him when he gets back,” letting out a soft laugh, Tiana walked down the corridor past Byleth, before turning back one last time. “To be honest, I wasn’t expecting any sort of response to the last question; I just wanted to see your reaction. Needless to say, I wasn’t disappointed.”

The woman continued down the hallway, leaving a red-faced Byleth standing there dumbfounded.

Byleth paced in her room for the next three hours, trying to dissect her conversation with Queen Tiana. Especially the very last comment that the woman said.

“To be honest, I wasn’t expecting any sort of response to the last question; I just wanted to see your reaction,” Byleth repeated, “I wasn’t disappointed?’ What the hell does that even mean?”

Byleth groaned as she ran her hand through her hair. The sound of her voice caused Astra’s ears to perk up as he looked over at her from the bed, letting out a soft yelp as if he were trying to respond. Byleth let out another loud groan as she plopped herself onto the bed next to Astra, burying her face in the dog’s fur.

When the queen asks you if you’re in love with the prince, her son, your answer should be: “We’re just friends, your majesty.” But instead, Byleth’s answer was to go bright red and braindead.

“What the hell is wrong with me?!” Byleth shouted, grateful for the fact that Astra’s black and white coat was muffling her voice. She couldn’t understand why she froze when she was asked that. Was it because the queen made her nervous? Or was it the fact she was staring at her so intently? Byleth had no idea, and it was driving her crazy.

“Are you alright?” a voice coming from the door caused Byleth to shoot up from her dog-pillow, grateful that she was finally able to do that without any pain. The prince stood in the doorway, giving Byleth a look of both concern and amusement. It was a special look, one that only Khalid was able to pull off.

“I’m fine,” Byleth lied. “I was just bored, really bored. I can understand why you used to sneak out so much now, this castle’s pretty boring when you’re on your own.”

“Oh yeah,” Khalid nodded, offering the girl a sheepish grin. “Sorry for disappearing without saying anything, I had to go get something. My mom told me that you were looking for me all day…”

“Oh, did she?” Byleth could feel her cheeks warm-up, though she wasn’t entirely sure why. “I was worried, nobody knew where you were.”

“Yeah…” Khalid just shrugged, the sheepish grin not dropping from his face. “I figured it was better to keep it on the down-low.”

Byleth was surprised to hear that, considering that apparently meant that the down-low even excluded her from knowing, Byleth and Khalid told each other nearly everything. Hell, he even knew one of her biggest secrets now.
“Where did you go, anyway?” Byleth figured there was no harm in asking him where he spent the day. If it had been any other day, Byleth wouldn’t have minded his absence. However, he knew that it was their last day together. She was heading out with the others tomorrow morning.

“The market,” Khalid told her, walking over to Astra as he sat down and pet the dog. “I got you something.”

“You got Astra something?” Byleth teased as she sat down on the other side of the dog, causing the boy to laugh as he flicked her on the forehead, causing the girl to swat his hand away as she laughed. Though the pain from the attack was still fresh, it was slowly starting to subside, and the two were beginning to fall back into their regular dynamic.

Actually, if Byleth was being honest to herself, they seemed to be even closer than they were before. She wasn’t sure if it why that was. If it were because they realised just what lengths, they would go for one another or if it was because Khalid had finally learned her secret. He finally knew about Sothis and her ability to rewind time; it something that she had never been able to speak to anybody about before now.

“No, By, I got you something,” Khalid stressed, a massive grin on his face. If she didn’t know better, she would hardly guess that it was her last day with the boy.

“You didn’t have to do that,” she told him. Though she knew that the boy was a prince, she still felt guilty accepting something from him without giving him something in return.

“I know. I wanted to.”

“I could refuse it, you know.”

“I know, but you won’t.”

The two of them sat in a comfortable silence as they pet Astra (who was basking in the attention) before Byleth spoke up again. “What is it?”

“I’m not going to tell you,” Khalid told her, causing the girl to give him a playful pout.

“You do realise I leave tomorrow, right?” she reminded. Had he forgotten?

“I know,” a look of sadness flashed in his eyes, but it was quickly gone as Khalid bumped her shoulder with his own. “This is my excuse to get you to come and say a proper goodbye.”

“I don’t like goodbyes,” Byleth told him. Endings were too sad, in her opinion. Even if they were happy endings, that meant that the story was complete. And the characters that you read about and fell in love with would be meeting their conclusion, only to eventually be forgotten about in time.

“I know.” Byleth and Khalid once had a long conversation about endings and goodbyes before. Although Byleth was half expecting Khalid to be on her side about hating endings, he wasn’t. He was actually a big fan of stories that had happy endings, because in real life, most people didn’t get one. So, when he was able to read about that rare event, it gave him hope that one day, he might be able to get a happy ending as well.

“You’d be insane to think that I would be willing to leave without saying anything to you, though,” she told the boy. Khalid stopped petting Astra as he turned to her, holding his pinkie out.

“Promise me that you’ll stop by tomorrow morning,” he said, and Byleth nodded. She held out her own pinkie and locked it with his, shaking their hands up and down.
The next morning, Byleth made good on her promise as she set out to find the prince. It took her longer than she expected to find the prince, but that was mostly because the prince was waiting on the palace rooftop for her. He was sitting on the top of the palace wall as he looked upon the city in the distance. She was thankful for the fact that the palace had stairs that lead to the rooftop because Astra had been right on her heel the entire time she searched for the boy.

“Interesting place to wait,” Byleth remarked after she finally managed to find Khalid, who simply gave her a smile in return as Astra ran over to him, nuzzling his face into the boy’s hand.

“I didn’t want to be somewhere that we’d get interrupted,” he admitted. “At least when it comes time for you to leave, it’ll take them a bit before they find you.”

“Ah, so that’s your mysterious motive behind picking this spot,” Byleth teased.

“You’ve caught me,” Khalid held up his hands in mock surrender as Byleth sat down beside him. It was early in the morning, and the city had yet to come alive. Everybody had just now started to get up and moving, but it would be a few hours before the streets were bustling.

“I’m going to miss it here,” Byleth found herself saying as she looked out onto the horizon, before looking over at Khalid. “I’m going to miss you.”

“Me too,” he said, as the two of them shared a sorrowful smile. “Do you remember what you said a few weeks ago? After you woke up?”

“You’re going to have to enlighten me,” Byleth informed him. “I’ve said a lot of stuff since I woke up.”

“You said that you weren’t sure if we would ever see each other ever again,” Khalid told her. “I couldn’t stop thinking about that. This has by far been the best year of my life, and that’s all because of you.”

“You’re giving me too much credit.”

“Am I though?” Khalid asked. “You were the first person besides my parents to give me the time of day, to treat me like I’m a person instead of a half-breed, or a prince.” Byleth’s mind flashed back to the conversation she had with Tiana the previous day, and her cheeks flushed pink as she remembered the nature of Tiana’s last question.

“I’m sure you’ll meet somebody else who will see things the same way that I do,” Byleth assured, though she wasn’t sure who it was that she was assuring; Khalid or herself.

“But they won’t be you,” Khalid said, as he reached into his pocket and pulled out a silver chain. On the very end of the chain, rested a silver ring with three sapphires aligned on it. Khalid looked at it for a few seconds longer, before holding the chain out towards her. “That’s why I wanted you to have this.”

At that revelation, Byleth felt her face go bright red. However, remembering what happened yesterday with his mother, she sputtered out a response. “Why??”

It wasn’t as though she wasn’t flattered—she was! And that would certainly explain why his mother was asking her so many questions the other day. But they were kids! She knew that it was typically for nobles to become betrothed as kids, but typically it was because of crests or for
political reasons!

“Well, rings symbolise a promise, right?” not trusting herself to speak, Byleth settled for giving a weak nod. “And I wanted to do something more concrete than a pinkie promise, and I know how much you hate endings.

“So, this isn’t an ending; this isn’t a goodbye!” Khalid turned towards Byleth, and she saw a fire burning in his eyes as he told her this. “This ring is my promise to you that we will meet again! That we might have to say goodbye for now, but it won’t be forever. We will find each other again in the future when we’re older. And we’ll figure out a way where we won’t have to say goodbye again.”

Byleth couldn’t help but feel a load off her chest as she realised the true reason that Khalid was giving her a ring, and she couldn’t help but feel a smile creep onto her face about the sweetness of his declaration. She threw herself into him as she pulled him into a tight embrace.

“I promise,” she told him, and she felt him lift her hair as he carefully fastened the necklace around her neck. “This won’t be goodbye; you mean too much to me for this to be a forever goodbye.”

She felt wetness on her cheeks, and she realised that she had started crying. She buried her head into Khalid’s shoulder as he did the same to her. If she had to guess, the boy was letting himself cry as well. They stayed like that for what felt like hours, but was in all actuality around twenty minutes, before finally releasing one another.

“You didn’t have to get me anything; you could have just told me that—”

“I wanted to though,” Khalid gave Byleth a gentle smile. “I saw this a few weeks before everything went down, and it matched your eyes. It seemed like it was made for you.”

“But I don’t have anything for you to hold onto for when we meet again,” Byleth gave Khalid a guilty look. “I need to give you something…”

“You don’t need to—” a loud bark interrupted their conversation as Astra jumped onto his feet, looking between the two of them, wagging his tail. With another yelp, he walked over to Khalid and sat down by his side, looking over at Byleth expectantly.

“Astra—”

“Byleth no—” A loud bark cut Khalid off as Byleth gave the prince a sad smile.

“I’m not giving him to you forever,” she told him as she reached over and petted Astra between the ears. “I fully expect you to return him to me when we meet again.”

“But he’s your dog!” Khalid tried to argue, but Byleth shook her head.

“He’s been as much your dog as he’s been mine since we’ve met,” she told him. “Besides, look at him. He wants to stay with you.” Byleth planted a kiss on the top of Astra’s head as she whispered how much of a good dog he was and that he better take good care of Khalid while she’s away.

Rising to her feet, Byleth took one final look at the view of Madinalmuluk from the palace. She let out a sigh as she looked at Khalid and Astra, the former following her lead and standing up.

“I suppose, I should get my things and meet up with Alisha before she sends a search party,” Byleth told the prince, reaching for the ring around her neck as she ran her fingers along the jewels that adorned it. “I really do hate goodbyes…’”
“It’s a good thing that this isn’t goodbye then,” Khalid attempted to muster up the best smile that he could, but the red eyes and tear-stained cheeks were evidence enough that it was a forced one.

“Well, I should…” Byleth gestured towards the stairwell, and he nodded. Each step that she took down the stairs made her feel as though she was going down a path of no return. She supposed that in a way, she was. Although she was happy that she would be able to see Jeralt again, she was more distressed about not being able to see Khalid. At least it wouldn’t be forever.

Hopefully.

As soon as she stepped out of the stairwell, she heard Khalid shouting after her as he ran down with Astra, yelling that she had forgotten something. When she turned to face him to tell him that he must be mistaken, he put his hand beneath her chin as he planted a quick kiss on her cheek before running away with a black and white speckled dog chasing after him. Byleth was frozen, staring in the direction that Khalid had run off to as she placed her hand on her cheek. She hadn’t imagined that… right? Tiana’s words once again echoed in her brain.

“Do you love him?”

Byleth let out a sigh, shaking her head as she sent one last look in Khalid’s direction before turning towards her room to go collect her things before meeting up with Alisha.

Did she love Khalid?

Yeah, she just might.

Chapter End Notes

I do hope this chapter was worth the wait. Let me know your thoughts, as always!

Also, I wonder if anybody caught the little Easter egg that I hid in this chapter.

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